

# Sounding the Alarm: Transgressing Democratic Norms and the Effects of Political Pushback \*

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## Abstract

Citizens do not experience norm erosion by their leaders in a political vacuum. In modern democracies any norm transgression by a leader is always interpreted and mediated for the public by other political elites. Yet, basic empirical questions about whether, and under what conditions, elite pushback against such norm erosion makes a difference among the broader public remain wide open. Drawing on a novel survey experiment conducted during the final months of the Trump administration, this study fills an important gap by identifying the conditions under which congressional opposition proves effective. In line with the literature on presidential unilateralism, we find that bi-partisan congressional pushback does lower public support for the president's actions, particularly among the president's base of supporters. By contrast, we find no evidence that either parties' reputation suffers from pushback, nor that purely partisan pushback moves the needle for the public.

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# Introduction

The emerging scholarship on democratic norms is sobering. In countries as diverse as Venezuela, Turkey, Poland, and the United States, citizens routinely claim they support a wide array of democratic norms, yet vote for politicians who openly flout them. Numerous survey experiments confirm that, when faced with a choice over candidates, respondents are often far more loyal to party than to democracy (Graham and Svulik, 2020; Carey et al., 2020; Chiopris, Nalepa and Vanberg, 2021; Davis, Goidel and Zhao, 2021; Svulik, 2018). Indeed, under some treatment conditions, candidates who trounce such norms may be considered attractive precisely because of their willingness to defy them (Hahl, Kim and Zuckerman Sivan, 2018). In other instances, citizens may simply abandon their commitment to certain norms. For example, as Clayton et al. (2021) show, repeated exposure to Trump’s claims that the 2020 election was fraudulent undermined support among Republican respondents for the core democratic norm that losers must accept electoral outcomes peacefully.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, citizens do not experience norm erosion by their leaders in a political vacuum. In modern democracies any norm transgression by a leader is always interpreted and mediated for the public by other political elites. The history of the last century abounds with cautionary tales of party elites enabling would-be autocrats, putting “party over country” merely in order to shore up their own declining political fortunes (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Ben-Ghiat and Cannon, 2020). Meanwhile, opposition parties often appear stuck in their own impossible dilemma: By either refusing to respect norms themselves, or failing to retaliate in kind, opposition leaders frequently end up inadvertently playing straight into an emerging autocrat’s hands (Gamboa, 2017; Luo and Przeworski, 2019a; Fishkin and Pozen, 2018; Helmke, Kroeger and Paine, 2021). Although scholars have made important headway toward understanding the motivations and constraints propelling political elites’ strategic interactions, basic empirical questions about whether, and under what conditions, elite pushback against norm erosion

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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the effects of unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud on electoral legitimacy following the 2018 U.S. midterm elections see Berlinski et al. (2020)

*could* actually make a difference among the broader public remain wide open.

Despite the seeming inevitability of pushback failures suggested by many conventional post-mortem accounts, an important strand of the political science literature in American politics reminds us that congressional pushback against the executive has long had substantial impact on public opinion. Observational and experimental studies have shown that congressional criticism of presidential unilateralism meaningfully alters the public's willingness to support presidential decisions on matters of foreign (Berinsky, 2009; Howell and Pevehouse, 2007; Kriner and Shen, 2014) and domestic policy alike (Christenson and Kriner, 2017).

Bringing this literature to bear on the study of democratic norms, the central questions we seek to answer in our study are 1) whether congressional pushback influences the public's perceptions about a president's decision to transgress basic democratic norms; and, 2) to what extent, if any, do political elites themselves suffer a public cost or enjoy a public benefit from deciding to counter such norm violations?

To answer these questions, we conducted a novel survey experiment that considers how respondents react to partisan and bi-partisan pushback against President Donald Trump's firing of former Inspector General Michael Atkinson, the career official whose report effectively unleashed the first impeachment of the former president. The following is a summary of our key findings:

- **Partisan pushback is pointless.** We find no evidence that partisan pushback by the opposition party has any demonstrable effect on public perceptions of presidential norm violations. Respondents identifying as Democratic and Republican alike remain heavily polarized and wholly unswayed by criticism of the former President's actions when it is levelled solely by Democratic legislators.
- **Bi-partisan pushback makes a difference for Republican respondents.** By contrast, our results show that bi-partisan legislative pushback does effectively undermine public support for the president's norm-busting actions, specifically among Republican respondents.

- **Republicans aren't always punished by the base.** Contrary to the popular narrative that the Republican party necessarily must pay dearly for any disloyalty to the former president, we find no experimental support for the supposition that such pushback is particularly costly, at least in terms of public opinion about the party. In fact, Republican pushback appears to help the party gain some credibility, particularly among Democratic respondents.

Given the timing of our experiment (roughly six weeks before the 2020 election), the first finding is not particularly surprising. Democratic respondents' views of the former president had long been at the floor; and, as we describe below, there are few theoretical reasons to imagine that Republican respondents would be moved by purely partisan opposition from Democratic members of Congress to the president. Yet, the fact that opinions about Trump were so polarized and cemented by the time we conducted our study makes our second finding –that bipartisan pushback does matter– all the more remarkable. It suggests that even under conditions in which the public has long been exposed to a leaders' norms transgressions, elite pushback could and did make a difference among Trump's supporters. Meanwhile, our third finding about party reputation extends to presidential norm-breaking the basic insight that, although bipartisanship may still be costly for individual members of Congress, it can serve to breakdown respondent's negative stereotypes of parties themselves, particularly among opposition respondents (cf. [Paris 2017](#)).

The remainder of the article lays out the theoretical framework that undergirds our experiment, describes the details of our research design, and elaborates our findings. We conclude with a broader discussion of how our study fits within the growing literature on the dynamics of democratic norm erosion and resilience.

## **The Logic of Indirect Accountability: Theory and Hypotheses**

Whereas much of the literature on elites and democratic erosion focuses on the failure

of party leaders to hold presidents accountable by formal institutional means, Americanist scholars of presidential power have long argued that inter-branch checks on executives may be most effective when they operate indirectly (Mayhew, 2000). For example, in the arena of war-making and foreign policy, the U.S. Congress has little ability to directly counter unilateral executive actions, but it can limit the executive's powers by influencing public opinion (Zaller et al., 1992; Kriner, 2018; Howell and Pevehouse, 2007; Berinsky, 2009; Christenson and Kriner, 2017). In this line of research, horizontal and vertical accountability are thus mutually inter-dependent: Congress constrains the president by reducing her public support; the public's ability to withdraw public support from the president hinges on the cues it receives from Congress, as well as other elites. We refer to this as indirect accountability.

There are good *prime facie* reasons to imagine that the same logic that makes the unilateralism account of indirect accountability plausible also carries over into the realm of political norms. Like foreign policy decisions, for example, executive violations of political norms are especially challenging for Congress to police formally. Indeed, by their very definition, norm violations do not entail any obvious break with the formal rules or laws (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004; Azari and Smith, 2012). Thus, it is difficult, if not impossible, for legislators to use formal institutional means to punish presidents who dare to shred such norms. Sounding the alarm for the public may simply be the best, and only, action that legislators can take.

As well, the literature on presidential unilateralism argues that the public is especially reliant on elites cues in low information settings (Zaller et al., 1992). In the case of democratic norms, and particularly the sorts of norms that we examine in our experiment, the public may be well aware of the president's specific actions, but is quite unlikely to have the level of specialized knowledge of past presidential actions that would be essential to judge whether such actions amount to norm violations, nor why, precisely, such violations matter.

Not all congressional cues are created equal, however. As is well known, political pushback against the president is found to be most effective among the public when it

is bi-partisan (Zaller et al., 1992; Berinsky, 2009; although see Christenson and Kriner, 2017.) Although the broader question of public preferences for bipartisanship is an area of on-going research (e.g. see Harbridge and Malhotra 2011, Harbridge, Malhotra and Harrison 2014, Paris 2017), the underlying intuition for this empirical regularity appears relatively straightforward: Because such pushback is necessarily costly for co-partisans and inherently advantageous for members of the opposition party, bi-partisan criticism of presidential actions carries a far more informative signal than purely partisan attacks (Kriner, 2018).

Dziuda and Howell (2020) offer basic microfoundations for analyzing precisely this sort of information problem that plagues inter-branch accountability once partisan interests are at play. In their novel model of the production of presidential scandals, parties with opposition preferences tradeoff the reputational concerns of suppressing (in the case of co-partisans) or fabricating (in the case of the opposition) information about presidential wrong-doing against the costs and benefits of collaborating with the current government. In addition to confirming that the public updates negatively on the president only when both parties charge him with misconduct, they show that purely partisan allegations ultimately hurt both parties' reputations, and, paradoxically, can sometimes help the president<sup>2</sup> Conversely, both parties gain reputationally only if they counter the president together.

Applying this theoretical framework to examine the effects of political pushback against presidential norm violations, we propose the following four pre-registered testable hypotheses:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This occurs whenever voters' prior beliefs that the politician has misbehaved are sufficiently high. Under such conditions, the aligned party has an incentive not to suppress information; hence, if the voter observes only a partisan scandal, she updates positively on the president's innocence (Dziuda and Howell 2020: 21-2.)

<sup>3</sup> Note that the order of the hypotheses presented here differs from that in our Pre-Analysis Plan (See Appendix C). We have also slightly modified H3 and H4 as follows. In our original pre-analysis plan, both hypotheses were stated in terms of heterogeneous effects. For H3 we posited that the effects would be limited to supporters of the president. For H4 we posited that only the president's party would benefit from bi-partisan pushback. Here, we frame the hypotheses in terms of all respondents, but below we also explore heterogeneous effects among Republican and Democratic respondents

- **H1 Bipartisan Reinforcement:** Bipartisan pushback increases respondents' negative perceptions of the President.
- **H2 Partisan Reputation:** Partisan pushback increases respondents' negative perceptions of both parties.
- **H3 Partisan Backlash:** Opposition partisan pushback increases respondents' positive perceptions of the President.
- **H4 Bipartisan Reputation:** Bipartisan pushback increases respondents' positive perceptions of both parties.

Alternatively, if standard institutional source credibility arguments are right (Kriner and Schickler, 2016), then partisan congressional pushback should be sufficient for altering public perceptions of the president's behavior among both co-partisan supporters and opposition supporters (cf Christenson and Kriner 2017). Hence:

- **H5 Partisan Reinforcement Institutional:**<sup>4</sup> Opposition partisan pushback increases respondents' negative perceptions of the President.

If, however, the implications of the broader framing literature apply such that source credibility itself hinges on partisanship, then partisan pushback should have purely congenial effects, only lowering Democrats' views of the president, such that:

- **H6 Partisan Reinforcement Framing:** Opposition partisan pushback increases respondents' negative perceptions of the President, but only among respondents who support the opposition party.

Finally, drawing on the polarization literature, we might instead imagine that even if respondents value bipartisanship in the abstract, they may still want their representatives to act in a strictly partisan fashion (Harbridge and Malhotra, 2011). Certainly, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that any perceived disloyalty to Trump

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<sup>4</sup> Note that this is the only hypothesis that was not pre-registered.

has been severely punished both by Trump himself, as well as by his supporters.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as Azari (2020) has noted, by the end of Trump’s term the true norm-breakers were those politicians within the GOP who did not support the former president’s transgressions. Thus, partly contrary to H4, we might instead expect that:

- **H7 Bipartisan Backlash:** Bipartisan pushback increases respondents’ negative perceptions of the President’s party among co-partisan respondents.

## Empirical Context: Oversight and Accountability Under the Trump Administration

Given how many norms Trump violated throughout his presidency and how baked in opinions about the former president’s actions were by his last six months in office, asking voters to consider real politicians and real events presents a particularly difficult case for our supposition that bi-partisan pushback against norm violations can make a difference. Methodologically, we sought to focus on presidential norm violation that satisfied two potentially competing criteria. On the one hand, we wanted to select an event that had, in fact, elicited both partisan and co-partisan pushback as a meaningful norm violation. On the other hand, we also wanted to avoid choosing a norm violation that was so highly publicized and salient that respondents would have already fully made up their minds about it, thus making it impossible to detect any observable treatment effects.

President Trump’s decision in April 2020 to fire Michael Atkinson satisfies both criteria.<sup>6</sup> Atkinson had served as the Inspector General of the intelligence community, and

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<sup>5</sup> Epstein, Reid J. and Lisa Lerer. “Rejecting Biden’s Win, Rising Republican Attack Legitimacy of Elections.” *New York Times*. June 7, 2021. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/07/us/politics/republican-election-fraud-claims.html>

<sup>6</sup> In terms of the relative importance and normalcy of Trump’s actions vis a vis Atkinson specifically, political science experts ranked the event as slightly more important and abnormal than Attorney General William Barr’s refusal to obey subpoenas over the un-redacted Mueller report and slightly less important and abnormal than Trump accusing Congressman Adam Schiff of treason over the impeachment trial (See “Bright Line Watch Wave 10.” March 2020. [http://brightlinewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BLW\\_Wave\\_10\\_Standard\\_Experts.pdf](http://brightlinewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BLW_Wave_10_Standard_Experts.pdf)).



was the person who had alerted congress of the whistle-blower complaint that led to Trump’s first impeachment. Importantly for our purposes, presidents clearly do have the legal authority to fire inspectors general, who are officially executive appointees and thus serve at the pleasure of the president. But, in the decades since these governmental watchdog positions were created, the norm has been that presidents respect the independence of such officials as non-partisan professionals, who tend to remain in their posts across multiple administrations.

In the last year of his presidency, however, Trump shattered this norm and fired a total of five inspectors general, thus earning rebuke from members of Congress across the political spectrum.<sup>7</sup>The fact that the Atkinson firing also coincided with the early days of the coronavirus pandemic partly meant that the firings did not dominate headlines for long, thus minimizing the likelihood that respondents would, beyond their normal and considerable partisan biases, have formed strong independent opinions about the specific actions taken by Trump against the former inspector general.

## Experimental Design: Varying Political Pushback

We fielded our on-line survey experiment between September 14 to September 25, 2020 with Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Because Mechanical Turk respondents tend to skew liberal (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz, 2012), we used a screening question about partisan affiliation to recruit a roughly balanced sample of subjects who self-identified as Democrats (and Democratic leaners) and Republicans (and Republican leaners).<sup>8</sup> Our final survey population contains 2,325 Democrats and 2,001 Republican voters.<sup>9</sup>

Employing a standard between-subjects design, all respondents were randomly assigned to one of three groups: control, partisan treatment, and bi-partisan treatment.

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<sup>7</sup> Kirby, Jen. “Trump’s purge of inspectors general, explained.” *Vox*. May 2020. <https://www.vox.com/2020/5/28/21265799/inspectors-general-trump-linick-atkinson>.

<sup>8</sup> To block users who use VPS/VPN and individuals with IP addresses outside of the United States from participating in the survey and suspicious IP addresses, we used the Cloud Research platform. We also eliminated participants that completed the survey too quickly (Kennedy et al., 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Our power analysis calculates that we have 91% power to detect an effect equal to roughly 0.04 with a significance level at 95% for our sample size (see Appendix C)

The specific elite pushback treatments we apply were taken from actual reactions (statements or tweets) made by Democratic and Republican members of congress reported in the media, which we edited and anonymized. Given the nature of our study, the substance of both the partisan opposition and bipartisan opposition treatments refer explicitly to concerns about the impact of the norm violation on democracy. Specifically, all groups were asked to read the following control statement about President Trump's decision to fire Inspector General, Michael Atkinson. A third received no further information about the firing, another third received the partisan treatment, and the final third received the bi-partisan treatment.

Table 1: Treatment Language

Control	<p><b><i>Trump Fires Michael Atkinson, Intelligence IG Who Told Congress About Ukraine Phone Call.</i></b>          WASHINGTON –President Trump has fired Michael Atkinson, the inspector general for the U.S. intelligence community who alerted Congress to concerns about a Trump phone call with the president of Ukraine—a matter that led to the president’s impeachment last year. Trump formally notified the intelligence committees of both the Senate and House in a letter that he “no longer” has the fullest confidence in Atkinson and would nominate a replacement “at a later time”. Trump has the authority to fire presidential appointees. However, past presidents have never fired an inspector general who had been investigating the president’s own conduct.</p>
Partisan Treatment	<p><b><i>Trump Fires Michael Atkinson, Intelligence IG Who Told Congress About Ukraine Phone Call.</i></b>          [Control statement]          Democrats criticized the president’s decision. One Democratic member of Congress stated “Inspectors general should only be removed for reasons related to their performance to help preserve their independence. A general lack of confidence simply is not sufficient detail to satisfy Congress.” Another Democratic member of Congress stated that the decision was “a blatant attempt by the president to gut the independence of the intelligence community and retaliate against those who dare to expose presidential wrongdoing. It would have chilling effect against all willing to speak truth to power.”</p>
Bipartisan Treatment	<p><b><i>Trump Fires Michael Atkinson, Intelligence IG Who Told Congress About Ukraine Phone Call.</i></b>          [Control statement]          Both Republicans and Democrats criticized the president’s decision. One Republican member of Congress stated “Inspectors general should only be removed for reasons related to their performance to help preserve their independence. A general lack of confidence simply is not sufficient detail to satisfy Congress.” Meanwhile, a Democratic member of Congress stated that the decision was “a blatant attempt by the president to gut the independence of the intelligence community and retaliate against those who dare to expose presidential wrongdoing. It would have chilling effect against all willing to speak truth to power.”</p>

Post-treatment we employed a series of questions to measure respondents’ perceptions of the president and both political parties. To evaluate our hypotheses about the effects of political pushback on public opinion about the president, we use a 4-point scale to examine how respondents ranked the appropriateness of the president’s actions, as well as how important they regarded the norm violation, and how they evaluated the president’s overall respect to democracy.<sup>10</sup> To test our hypotheses about the effects of political pushback on public opinion about the Democratic and Republican parties, we employ a 4-point scale to consider how much trust respondents place in each party, as well as evaluations about the accuracy of the information provided by each political party.<sup>11</sup>

Table 2 summarizes the expected differences between the control condition and the two treatments conditions according to each of our seven hypotheses.

Table 2: Evaluation of the Norm Violation Anticipated Effects

	All Respondents		Dem. Respondents		Rep. Respondents	
	Partisan	Bipartisan	Partisan	Bipartisan	Partisan	Bipartisan
Opinion of President	H3 (+) H5 (-)	H1 (-)	H6 (-)			
Opinion of Democratic Party	H2 (-)	H4 (+)				
Opinion of Republican Party	H2 (-)	H4 (+)				H7 (-)

Notes: T1 and T2 are the partisan and bipartisan treatments, respectively.

Starting with the anticipated impact of the partisan treatment on public opinion

<sup>10</sup> The original scale in the survey is based on a question which asks respondents to how much they thought the firing of the Inspector General was appropriate or inappropriate on a 4-point scale, from entirely appropriate to entirely inappropriate. For the analysis, the scale was flipped to have appropriateness be equal to 4.

<sup>11</sup> We combine two measures of trust into a composite trust measure based on a 7-point scale (Cronbach’s alpha 0.91 and .90 for trust towards Democratic Party and Republican Party members in congress, respectively). The original scale in the survey is based on a question which asks respondents to how much they trust the respective parties, from a great deal to none at all. For the analysis, each scale was flipped to have high levels of trust be equal to 4.

about the president’s actions, we anticipate a positive effect from the signaling model (H3). Conversely, we anticipate that partisan pushback has a negative effect (H5) for all respondents if standard source credibility arguments are operative, or a negative effect on co-partisans (H6) if source credibility depends more on the perceived legitimacy of partisan rather than institutional cues. The bi-partisan treatment condition, per the signaling model, should instead produce a negative effect for all respondents (H1). Although, as we discuss below, in the particular context that we are investigating, there are good reasons to imagine that this may only manifest empirically through heterogeneous or politically congenial effects.

Turning to the expected effects of the treatments on public opinion about the two parties, the signaling model anticipates that the partisan pushback will reduce trust in both parties (H2), whereas bi-partisan pushback will increase trust in both parties (H4). Finally, if Trump’s base simply punishes any Republican elite pushback against the former president, then we should instead see party effects manifest heterogeneously among Republican respondents (H7).

## Results

Given the experimental nature of our research design, we present difference-in-means test results throughout the main text. To address the possibility of false positive findings given the multiple outcome measures for each treatment, we apply a Bonferroni correction to each of the models. We also replicate our substantive findings using an ordered logit specification of our main results (see Appendix A).

### 0.1 Perceptions of the President

Starting with presenting simple means on each of our outcome variables, our results reveal stark differences by respondents’ partisanship. Not surprisingly, Republicans rank the appropriateness of Trump’s firing of Atkinson and his overall respect to democracy much higher (between a 1.4 and 1.6 point difference on the 4 point scale) than do

Democratic respondents. Although the differences are less dramatic, Democrats also tend to rank the importance of the norm violation higher than Republicans rank it (0.46 point difference).

Table 3: Means and Standard Deviations

Outcome	Observations	Mean	Std. Dev.
<i>All Voters</i>			
Appropriateness	3,639	2.091	1.059
Respect	3,639	2.133	1.174
Importance	3,639	3.060	0.909
Trust (D)	3,639	3.900	1.857
Trust (R)	3,639	3.372	1.905
<i>Democratic Voters</i>			
Appropriateness	1,920	1.428	0.725
Respect	1,920	1.375	0.751
Importance	1,920	3.278	0.910
Trust (D)	1,920	4.763	1.348
Trust (R)	1,920	2.273	1.432
<i>Republican Voters</i>			
Appropriateness	1,719	2.832	0.864
Respect	1,719	2.980	0.962
Importance	1,719	2.816	0.844
Trust (D)	1,719	2.937	1.873
Trust (R)	1,719	4.600	1.593

Such baseline differences mean that, when it comes to evaluating our core hypotheses about public perceptions of the president, detecting certain treatment effects becomes especially difficult. Specifically, if Democratic respondents' views of President Trump are already effectively at the floor (e.g. 1.43 on a 4 point scale for appropriateness and 1.38 on a 4 point scale for respect), it may be challenging to detect any overall treatment effects per H1 and H5. In these two cases, we would thus expect that if any treatments effects exist, they would manifest heterogeneously by lowering only Republicans respondent's evaluations of the former president.

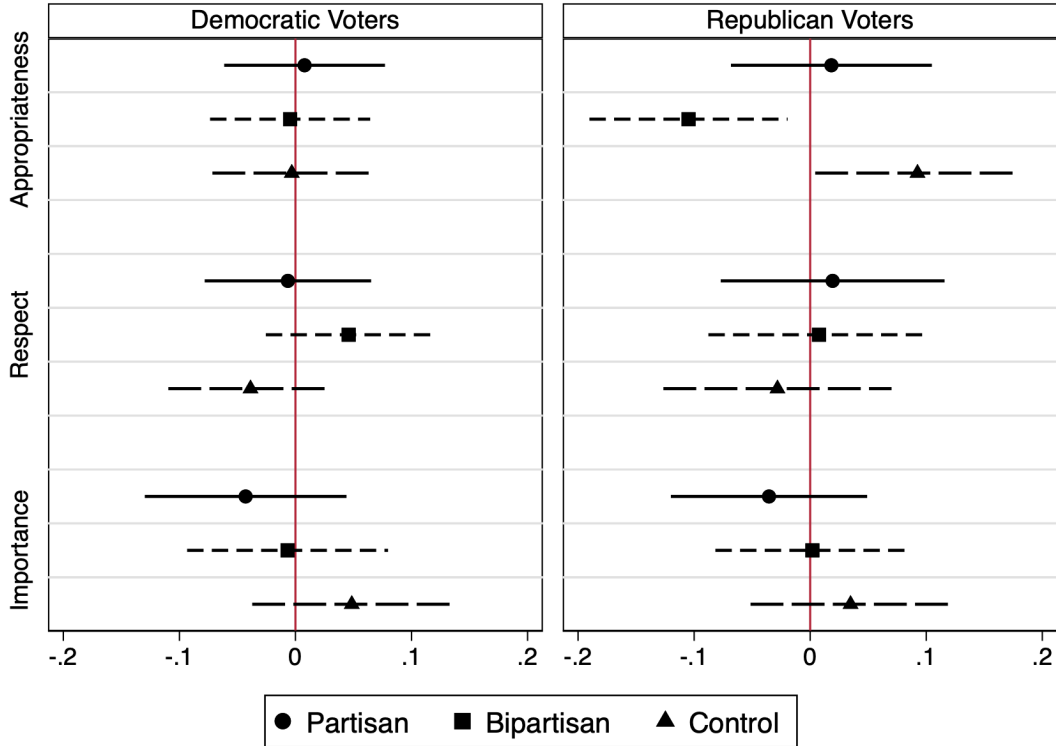
Table 4: Perceptions of the President

	All Respondents			Democratic Respondents			Republican Respondents		
	(Control)	(Partisan)	(Bipartisan)	(Control)	(Partisan)	(Bipartisan)	(Control)	(Partisan)	(Bipartisan)
Appropriateness	2.085 (0.030)	2.110 (0.030)	2.078 (0.030)	1.426 (0.027)	1.433 (0.029)	1.425 (0.030)	2.896 (0.036)	2.844 (0.035)	2.764* (0.037)
Importance	3.099 (0.026)	3.030 (0.026)	3.051 (0.026)	3.310 (0.035)	3.249 (0.036)	3.274 (0.036)	2.840 (0.036)	2.792 (0.036)	2.817 (0.034)
Respect	2.073 (0.033)	2.149 (0.034)	2.176 (0.034)	1.350 (0.028)	1.371 (0.030)	1.406 (0.032)	2.961 (0.041)	2.993 (0.039)	2.985 (0.041)
Observations	1,194	1,203	1,242	658	626	636	536	577	606

With respect to H1, this is precisely what we find, at least for the outcome measure related to appropriateness. Our first hypothesis that only bi-partisan pushback provides a credible signal to voters about norm-breaking behavior is indeed borne out empirically, but only among Republican respondents. Perceived appropriateness decreases by about 2 percentage points among all respondents when norm violating behavior is met with pushback from both the opposition and the president’s own party, while it decreases by nearly 10 percentage points among just Republican voters, as seen in Figure 1.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> All of the outcome variables are re-scaled to between 0 to 1, so in our case the effect size of 0.026 corresponds to 2.6 percentage points.

Figure 1: Perceptions of the President



To get a better sense of the substantive effects of bipartisan pushback among Republican respondents, we examine the proportion of participants who described the president’s action as *Appropriate* or *Somewhat Appropriate*. The proportion of Republican voters who reported that the president’s action was at least somewhat appropriate was about 69% in the control group. This number falls by 7 percentage points to 62% for Republican voters that received the bipartisan pushback treatment, an effect size that is roughly similar to the extant literature on congressional pushback against executive unilateralism.<sup>13</sup>

However, our results also suggest that such treatment effects do not extend to attitudes about the importance of the norm violations itself, nor do they appear to scale up to perceptions about the President’s broader respect for democracy. In other words,

<sup>13</sup> For example, [Kriner \(2018\)](#) shows that in a survey experiment about foreign policy under President Trump, the proportion of voters who supported the airstrike on Syrian targets decreased by 8% following an opposition cue from Congress.



bi-partisan pushback may matter, but perhaps only with regards to a president’s specific actions.

Conversely, there is no support (either among all respondents, nor among specific partisan groups) for the implication that purely partisan pushback damages the president (H5), or that it improves (H3) evaluations of the president. In other words, contra both the signaling model and the elite cues model, purely partisan pushback neither seems to hurt, nor particularly to help, the opposition’s ability to shape public perceptions. Likewise, we find no support for the more limited notion that partisan pushback shapes co-partisan attitudes (per H6), although this null result again may be largely due to floor effects.

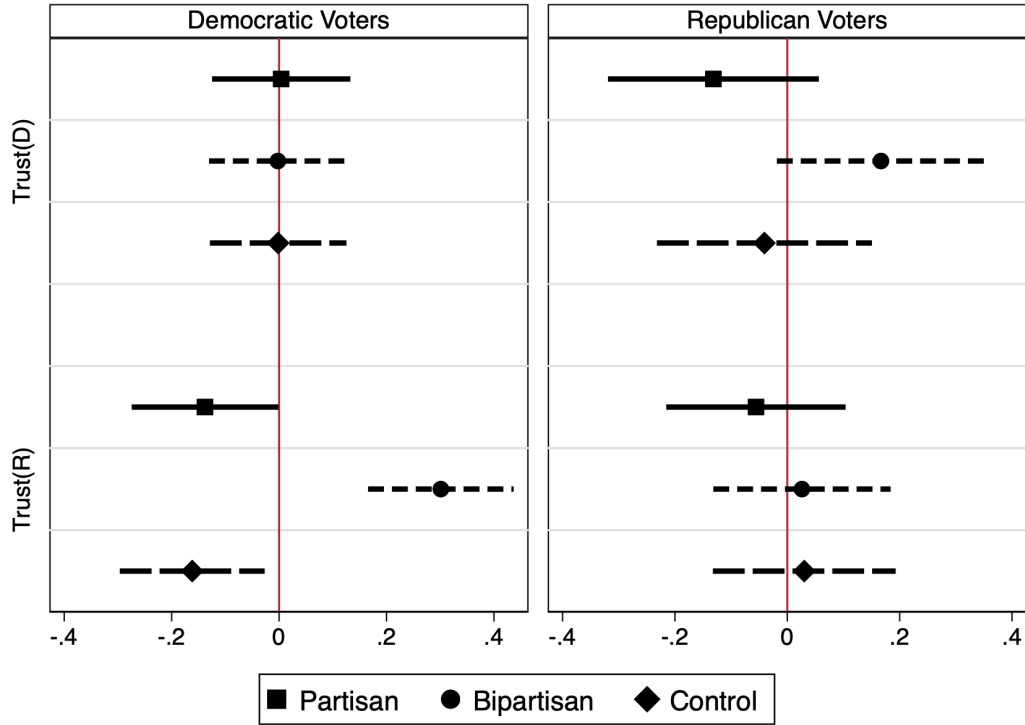
## 0.2 Perceptions of Parties

Turning to respondents’ perceptions of the political parties, we find no support for the proposition that purely partisan pushback (treatment 1) negatively impacts both parties reputationally (H2). In terms of the signaling framework, then, it seems that neither Democratic nor Republican respondents impose a cost on parties for potentially fabricating or suppressing information (cf [Dziuda and Howell 2020](#)). Nor, however, do Republican respondents appear to punish co-partisans for pushing back against the former president (H7).

Table 5: Perceptions of Parties

	All Respondents			Democratic Respondents			Republican Respondents		
	(Control)	(Partisan)	(Bipartisan)	(Control)	(Partisan)	(Bipartisan)	(Control)	(Partisan)	(Bipartisan)
Opinion of Dem. Party	3.930 (0.038)	3.846 (0.054)	3.924 (0.053)	4.761 (0.052)	4.765 (0.054)	4.761 (0.054)	2.909 (0.079)	2.849 (0.078)	3.045** (0.077)
Opinion of Rep. Party	3.268 (0.032)	3.323 (0.055)	3.519* (0.053)	2.167 (0.054)	2.181* (0.057)	2.475* (0.058)	4.619 (0.069)	4.562 (0.066)	4.616 (0.065)
Observations	1,194	1,203	1,242	658	626	636	536	577	606

Figure 2: Evaluation of Trust



Indeed, per H4, the only treatment effects we uncover from bi-partisan pushback are positive. Specifically, bipartisan pushback increases trust for the president’s party overall, but particularly among Democratic voters, as seen in Table 5 and Figure 2. Thus, the proportion of Democratic respondents who report a great deal or a fair amount of trust in the Republican party increases from around 13 percent under the control group to 18 percent under the bipartisan treatment.

Of course, such findings do not necessarily imply that GOP pushback against the former president would have been a boon for the party. After all, even after witnessing bipartisan pushback, our results show that more than four-fifths of Democrats still had little to no confidence in the GOP. And, as we discuss further below, any positive reputational effects accruing to the party more generally would still need to be balanced against any GOP congressperson’s own electoral fortunes.

## Discussion

This paper offers a novel survey experiment to assess the effectiveness of partisan and bipartisan opposition to presidential norm violations. Conducted during the final months of Donald Trump’s tumultuous presidency, the empirical context provides an especially difficult test of the thesis that such elite pushback matters. As numerous scholars and pundits have noted, by the end of the Trump administration, the president had already committed hundreds of norm violations—both big and small—and party polarization stood at the highest level since the Civil War. Thus, to the extent that the public was already firmly dug in in terms of supporting or opposing President Trump’s transgressive behaviors, the fact that we uncover any treatment effects from congressional pushback against the former president is remarkable.

Similar to extant studies of presidential unilateralism, we find evidence that bipartisan opposition does make a difference. Specifically, when members of congress from both parties opposed the president’s decisions to fire the former Inspector General, Republican respondents’ updated negatively on the appropriateness of the president’s actions. As such, our study provides the first causal support for the view that, had the GOP made more of an effort to buck the former president during his time in office, it could have indeed limited public support for the president’s refusal to adhere to basic democratic norms.

Yet, several caveats apply. Importantly, we find no evidence that bi-partisan pushback changed minds about either the importance of the norm in question, nor about President Trump’s overall respect for democracy. For critics of the former leader, this is both bad and good news. On the one hand, in line with other studies on the effects of elite rhetoric about norms (cf. Clayton et al., 2021), the effects of such exposure on public opinion are circumscribed to the specific norm in question. In this case sowing doubts about the rectitude about a leader’s actions among his supporters did not necessarily aggregate up into doubts about the general fitness of the leader to serve.

On the other hand, from the standpoint of co-partisan elites, this suggests that

pushback may also be less costly than it might appear. Whereas we find that congenial opposition can help curb co-partisan support for their leader’s action, it appears to run little risk of displacing overall faith in the leader. In this way, bi-partisan pushback may act more as a scalpel to help co-partisan elites cut their leader down to size, rather than an axe that threatens to fell the party leader altogether. As well, we find little evidence that this sort of co-partisan pushback is necessarily costly for the party’s reputation among the base. Roughly consistent with game theoretic analyses of the sort of credibility source problem that plagues situations in which parties have opposing interests to falsely hide or highlight a leader’s misdeeds, we find partial support for the view that both parties, in fact, earn a slight reputational benefit for jointly pushing back.

Of course, because our study is intentionally limited to one relatively low-profile norm violation, it is not clear the extent to which our findings generalize to other sorts of norm violations. In the post 2020 election period, for example, we know that the grip of the “big lie” among Republican respondents has not loosened in the slightest, even as some Republican elites have dared to pushback. Indeed, conjoint experimental evidence suggests that hypothetical candidates who counter the big lie suffer quite a robust electoral penalty for doing so.<sup>14</sup> Future research, however, could certainly adopt our research design to gauge whether being reminded of the limited GOP pushback that has occurred has any discernible causal effect on respondent’s attitudes about the legitimacy of the election, as well as about the credibility of the party more generally. If our null results about trust in the Republican party do generalize, however, this would only serve to further underscore the stark collective action problem faced by current GOP elites over putting their own political futures at risk to salvage the broader appeal of their party.

Finally, when it comes to preserving democratic norms, our study confirms that purely partisan pushback is largely ineffective. At least in the polarized context we

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<sup>14</sup> “Bright Line Watch Wave 10.” January-February 2021. [http://brightlinewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/BLW\\_wave\\_14\\_experts.pdf](http://brightlinewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/BLW_wave_14_experts.pdf). See also “Bright Line Watch Wave 10.” June 2021. [http://brightlinewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/expertwave15\\_codebook.pdf](http://brightlinewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/expertwave15_codebook.pdf)

examine, Democratic respondents were already sufficiently suspicious of Trump's actions that pushback by Democratic elites did little to further lower their opinion of the president. Among Republican respondents, the net effect was also essentially neutral. Certainly, Republicans did not update positively on the president. And neither group of respondents reacted by punishing the opposition for potentially acting in ways that served its own interests (indeed, contra some of the theoretical propositions we explored, we discovered a very slightly uptick in trust for the Democratic party among Republicans under the first treatment condition). All of this suggests that if the goal of the opposition is to influence the public and peel supporters away from the president, the only option is to bring at least some members of the president's party on board.

Given source credibility arguments, such conclusions are not particularly surprising, but they do help to highlight an additional potential dilemma for parties facing democratic erosion. Assuming that egregious norm violations by a leader elicit stronger responses by the opposition—think January 6th, then ultimately it may prove more costly for presidential co-partisans to pushback precisely in instances where it is most needed. As such, it may be the lower profile norm violations, such as the one that we have explored in this article, that stand the best chance of producing bi-partisan opposition. If this is right, then democratic resistance and norm preservation efforts, much like the process of democratic erosion itself, will likely proceed piecemeal.

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# Appendix A

## 0.3 Sample Demographics

As expected, our sample is younger, more educated and more white than the general population. Women are also over-represented in the sample compared to men.

Table 6: Sample Demographics

		All Respondents	Democrats	Republicans
Age category	18 - 24	8.3%	7.2%	3.8%
	25 - 34	34.9%	37.0%	30.8%
	35 - 44	26.9%	27.0%	28.3%
	45 - 54	16.4%	14.2%	21.3%
	55 - 64	9.4%	10.2%	10.8%
	65+	4.1%	4.5%	4.9%
College category	Bachelor's degree	43.0%	46.9%	45.4%
	Graduate degree	19.8%	21.9%	21.6%
	High school degree or less	8.7%	6.0%	6.9%
	Some college/associate	28.4%	27.8%	26.01%
Race	Non-white	23.2%	24.64%	19.4%
	White	76.8%	75.4%	80.6%
Gender	Female	55.4%	58.2%	51.4%
	Male	44.2%	41.0%	48.6%
	Other	0.4%	0.8%	0.0%
Presidential Approval	Approver	43.2%	10.5%	16.6%
	Disapprover	56.8%	89.5%	83.4%
Party	Democratic	53.7%	100%	0%
	Republican	46.3%	0%	100%

Table 7: Sample Demographics by Treatment Groups

	All Voters			Democratic Voters			Republican Voters		
	Control	Partisan	Bipartisan	Control	Partisan	Bipartisan	Control	Partisan	Bipartisan
<i>Age category</i>									
18 - 24	5.8	5.6	5.5	7.8	7.7	6.1	3.4	3.3	4.8
25 - 34	36.0	32.2	34.1	38.5	35.0	37.4	33.0	29.1	30.5
35 - 44	27.6	29.3	26.0	26.1	29.4	25.5	29.3	29.3	26.6
45 - 54	15.3	17.9	19.3	12.6	12.1	17.8	18.7	24.1	21.0
55 - 64	10.2	10.5	10.7	10.3	11.0	9.1	10.1	9.9	12.4
65+	5.0	4.6	4.4	4.7	4.8	4.0	5.6	4.3	4.8
<i>College category</i>									
Bachelor's	47.2	46.0	43.9	47.9	47.9	41.8	46.5	43.9	46.0
Graduate	19.3	21.8	24.1	17.9	21.6	26.3	21.1	22.0	21.8
High school or less	6.0	6.8	6.6	6.2	5.6	6.3	5.6	8.0	6.9
Some college/associates	27.5	25.4	25.5	28.0	24.9	25.6	26.9	26.0	25.3
<i>Race</i>									
Non-white	23.2	21.5	21.8	26.3	23.8	23.7	19.4	19.1	19.8
White	76.8	78.5	78.2	73.7	76.2	76.3	80.6	80.9	80.2
<i>Gender</i>									
Female	58.2	53.8	54.4	61.1	57.4	58.5	54.7	49.9	50.0
Male	41.8	46.2	45.7	38.9	42.7	41.5	45.3	50.1	50.0
Presidential Approval									
Approver	57.9	53.5	53.9	91.6	89.1	87.6	16.4	14.7	18.5
Disapprover	42.1	46.6	46.1	8.4	10.9	12.4	83.6	85.3	81.5
<i>Party</i>									
Democratic	55.1	52.0	51.2	100.0	100.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Republican	44.9	48.0	48.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

# 1 Means and Standard Deviations

Table 8: Means and Standard Deviations by Treatment Groups

	Control			Partisan			Bipartisan		
	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.
<i>All Voters</i>									
Appropriateness	1,194	2.085	1.053	1,203	2.110	1.056	1,242	2.078	1.069
Respect	1,194	2.073	1.154	1,203	2.149	1.168	1,242	2.176	1.197
Importance	1,194	3.099	0.898	1,203	3.030	0.917	1,242	3.051	0.912
Trust (D)	1,194	3.930	1.829	1,203	3.846	1.879	1,242	3.924	1.861
Trust (R)	1,194	3.268	1.922	1,203	3.323	1.916	1,242	3.519	1.869
<i>Democratic Voters</i>									
Appropriateness	658	1.426	0.699	626	1.433	0.733	636	1.425	0.746
Respect	658	1.350	0.713	626	1.371	0.744	636	1.406	0.795
Importance	658	3.310	0.890	626	3.249	0.913	636	3.274	0.928
Trust (D)	658	4.761	1.332	626	4.765	1.348	636	4.761	1.366
Trust (R)	658	2.167	1.388	626	2.181	1.434	636	2.475	1.456
<i>Republican Voters</i>									
Appropriateness	536	2.896	0.825	577	2.844	0.839	606	2.764	0.916
Respect	536	2.961	0.955	577	2.993	0.932	606	2.985	0.998
Importance	536	2.840	0.839	577	2.792	0.861	606	2.817	0.834
Trust (D)	536	2.909	1.840	577	2.849	1.866	606	3.045	1.907
Trust (R)	536	4.619	1.598	577	4.562	1.583	606	4.616	1.610

## 2 Ordered Logit

Table 9: Ordered Logit - President

	All Voters			Democratic Voters			Republican Voters		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
Appropriateness	-0.010 (0.064)	0.053 (0.064)	-0.042 (0.064)	-0.083 (0.150)	0.150 (0.149)	-0.072 (0.153)	0.254** (0.108)	-0.024 (0.106)	-0.221** (0.106)
Importance	0.120* (0.065)	-0.092 (0.064)	-0.027 (0.064)	0.149 (0.151)	-0.081 (0.148)	-0.065 (0.151)	0.061 (0.108)	-0.067 (0.106)	0.008 (0.104)
Respect	-0.137** (0.034)	0.042 (0.064)	0.094 (0.064)	-0.272* (0.153)	0.143 (0.149)	0.124 (0.153)	-0.047 (0.077)	-0.016 (0.104)	0.061 (0.104)
Observations	3,639	3,639	3,639	670	670	670	1,370	1,370	1,370

Notes: Models 1, 2, and 3 are based on the control, partisan, and bipartisan treatments, respectively.

Table 10: Ordered Logit – Perception of Parties

	All Voters			Democratic Voters			Republican Voters		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
Opinion of Dem. Party	0.043 (0.062)	-0.074 (0.062)	0.030 (0.062)	-0.035 (0.146)	0.010 (0.143)	0.024 (0.147)	-0.045 (0.104)	-0.100 (0.102)	0.140 (0.101)
Opinion of Rep. Party	-0.157** (0.063)	-0.071 (0.062)	0.220*** (0.061)	-0.201 (0.148)	-0.082 (0.145)	0.284* (0.147)	-0.016 (0.104)	-0.053 (0.101)	0.067 (0.101)
Observations	3,639	3,639	3,639	670	670	670	1,370	1,370	1,370

Notes: Models 1, 2, and 3 are based on the control, partisan, and bipartisan treatments, respectively.

## Appendix B: Survey Instrument

### Informed Consent Form

#### Survey on American Democracy

You are invited to participate in a web-based online survey on political preferences and attitudes about political leaders. This study is being conducted by [Anonymous]. We thank you for your attention and your responses. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be first asked to complete a few questions to determine your eligibility that will take about 1 minute to complete. If you are eligible for participating in the second part of the survey, you will continue to the second part, which will take about 5-8 minutes to complete. The first part of the survey will ask you questions about your party preferences. The second part of the survey will ask questions about your political knowledge, and demographics and you will be asked to read a short newspaper article and share your opinion. Please read the article carefully. Later in the survey, we will check to make sure that people have read the article. You will be paid 10 cents for the first part of the survey and 75 cents for the second part as a bonus per HIT via the Mechanical Turk interface. No direct payments will be sent from the University of Rochester research team. If researchers make a decision to manually reject your responses, you will not receive the payment. You can not take this survey more than once. Your participation is voluntary and you may decline the survey or withdraw at any time. You will receive payment for participating through MTurk. To receive payment you will have to enter your MTurk ID at the beginning of the survey. No information that identifies you will be collected or retained by the researchers, and all of the information we collect will be stored securely. However, any online interaction carries some risk of being accessed. Please contact the Research Subjects Review Board at the University of Rochester with any questions or concerns.

Do you consent to participate in the survey?

- Yes, I consent
- No, I don't consent

Did you vote in the 2016 Presidential Election?

- Yes
- No

Who did you vote for in the 2016 Presidential Election?

- Donald Trump
- Hillary Clinton
- Gary Johnson
- Jill Stein
- Other
- Rather not say

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or something else?

- Republican
- Democrat

Independent

Other

No preference

Would you call yourself a strong Republican or a not very strong Republican?

Strong

Not very strong

Would you call yourself a strong Democrat or a not very strong Democrat?

Strong

Not very strong

Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?

Republican

Democratic

Neither

Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as President?

Strongly approve

Somewhat approve

Somewhat disapprove

Strongly disapprove

When it comes to politics, would you describe yourself as liberal, conservative, or neither liberal nor conservative?

Very conservative

Somewhat conservative

Slightly conservative

Moderate; middle of the road

Slightly liberal

Somewhat liberal

Very liberal

Generally, how interested are you in politics?

Not at all interested

Not very interested

Somewhat interested

Very interested

Please read the news article on the following screen very carefully. You'll be asked to answer several short questions about the event described in the article.

Trump Fires Michael Atkinson, Intelligence IG Who Told Congress About Ukraine Phone Call

WASHINGTON –President Trump has fired Michael Atkinson, the inspector general for the U.S. intelligence community who alerted Congress to concerns about a Trump phone call with the president of Ukraine—a matter that led to the president's impeachment last year. Trump formally notified the intelligence committees of both the Senate and House in a letter that he “no longer” has the fullest confidence in Atkinson and

would nominate a replacement “at a later time”. Trump has the authority to fire presidential appointees. However, past presidents have never fired an inspector general who had been investigating the president’s own conduct.

#### Trump Fires Michael Atkinson, Intelligence IG Who Told Congress About Ukraine Phone Call

WASHINGTON –President Trump has fired Michael Atkinson, the inspector general for the U.S. intelligence community who alerted Congress to concerns about a Trump phone call with the president of Ukraine—a matter that led to the president’s impeachment last year. Trump formally notified the intelligence committees of both the Senate and House in a letter that he “no longer” has the fullest confidence in Atkinson and would nominate a replacement “at a later time”. Trump has the authority to fire presidential appointees. However, past presidents have never fired an inspector general who had been investigating the president’s own conduct. Democrats criticized the president’s decision. One Democratic member of Congress stated “Inspectors general should only be removed for reasons related to their performance to help preserve their independence. A general lack of confidence simply is not sufficient detail to satisfy Congress”. Another Democratic member of Congress stated that the decision was “a blatant attempt by the president to gut the independence of the intelligence community and retaliate against those who dare to expose presidential wrongdoing. It would have chilling effect against all willing to speak truth to power.”

#### Trump Fires Michael Atkinson, Intelligence IG Who Told Congress About Ukraine Phone Call

WASHINGTON –President Trump has fired Michael Atkinson, the inspector general for the U.S. intelligence community who alerted Congress to concerns about a Trump phone call with the president of Ukraine—a matter that led to the president’s impeachment last year. Trump formally notified the intelligence committees of both the Senate and House in a letter that he “no longer” has the fullest confidence in Atkinson and would nominate a replacement “at a later time”. Trump has the authority to fire presidential appointees. However, past presidents have never fired an inspector general who had been investigating the president’s own conduct. Both Republicans and Democrats criticized the president’s decision. One Republican member of Congress stated “Inspectors general should only be removed for reasons related to their performance to help preserve their independence. A general lack of confidence simply is not sufficient detail to satisfy Congress”. Meanwhile, a Democratic member of Congress stated that the decision was “a blatant attempt by the president to gut the independence of the intelligence community and retaliate against those who dare to expose presidential wrongdoing. It would have chilling effect against all willing to speak truth to power.”

Do you think it was appropriate or inappropriate for the president to fire Inspector General Atkinson?

- o Entirely Appropriate
- o Mostly Appropriate
- o Mostly Inappropriate
- o Entirely Inappropriate

In your opinion, how important was the president's decision to fire Inspector General Atkinson?

- Unimportant
- Mostly Unimportant
- Mostly Important
- Important

How much confidence, if any, do you have in the Democratic members of Congress to act in the best interests of the public?

- A great deal
- A fair amount
- A little
- None at all

How much do you trust the accuracy of the information that you get about the government from the Democratic members of Congress?

- A great deal
- A fair amount
- A little
- Not at all

How much confidence, if any, do you have in the Republican members of Congress to act in the best interests of the public?

- A great deal
- A fair amount
- A little
- None at all

How much do you trust the accuracy of the information that you get about the government from the Republican members of Congress?

- A great deal
- A fair amount
- A little
- Not at all

How much respect do you think Donald Trump has for this country's democratic institutions and traditions?

- A great deal
- A fair amount
- A little
- None at all

Now, we are interested in how this news article made you feel. For each of the following emotions, please tell us whether the events described in the news article made you feel that way extremely, very, somewhat, slightly, or not at all.

- Extremely Very Somewhat Slightly Not at all
- Angry
- Outraged
- Disgusted



Afraid o o o o o

Anxious o o o o o

For each of the following emotions, please tell us whether the events described in the news article made you feel that way extremely, very, somewhat, slightly, or not at all.

Extremely Very Somewhat Slightly Not at all

Nervous o o o o o

Hopeful o o o o o

Enthusiastic o o o o o

Proud o o o o o

We are also interested in which social platforms people use most often. There are many popular social media platforms that one can choose from. To show that you have read this question, regardless of your real use, please only select the social media platform that starts with the letter 'W'. What would you say is the social media platform you use most often? Please check all that apply.

- Twitter
- Facebook
- Whatsapp
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- None of the above

Below you will be given a number of questions about your political knowledge. Many people don't know the answers to these questions, but it is helpful for us if you answer, even if you're not sure what the correct answer is. It is important to us that you do NOT use outside sources like the Internet to search for the correct answer.

How many times can an individual be elected President of the United States under current laws?

- Once
- Twice
- Four times
- Unlimited number of terms
- Don't know

How many U.S. Senators are there from each state?

- Once

- Two
- Four
- Depends on which state
- Don't know

For how many years is a member of the United States House of Representatives elected - that is, how many years are there in one full term of office for a U.S. House member?

- Two years
- Four years
- Six years
- Eight years
- For life
- Don't know

Did you look up any of the answers? It is important that you answer honestly, you will not get penalized for looking up the answers.

- Yes, I looked up the answers
- No, I did not look up the answers

Now we would like to ask some general questions about you.  
How old are you?

- Under 18
- 18 - 24
- 25 - 34
- 35 - 44
- 45 - 54
- 55 - 64
- 65 - 74
- 75 - 84

- 85 or older

What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- Less than high school degree
- High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED)
- Some college but no degree
- Associate degree in college (2-year)
- Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)
- Master's degree
- Doctoral degree
- Professional degree (JD, MD)

Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Other

Are you of Spanish or Hispanic origin or descent?

- Yes
- No

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other

Prior to this survey, had you read or heard about the event described in the article?

- Yes
- No

Prior to this survey, had you read or heard about recent firings of other inspectors general?

- Yes
- No

## Appendix C: Pre-Analysis Plan (August 2020)

In competitive democracies political norm violations rarely occur in a vacuum; nor do citizens experience them as such. Rather, transgressions are constantly being mediated for the public by political elites across the political spectrum. Political elites matter in this context precisely because what constitutes a political norm violation is not always clear: they require additional, specialized knowledge to interpret compared with other political actions about which the general public might have more information (Clayton et al., 2021). Given this, there are strong a priori reasons to believe that elite cues can heavily influence citizens' assessment of which actions taken by leaders constitute a political norm violation and how such assessments are likely to affect voters' perceptions of leaders and parties alike. To date, however, there has been little systematic analysis of the role that political elites play in mediating citizens' reactions to leaders who flout democratic norms. Our proposed research seeks to fill this gap.

Whereas much of the current literature on the problem of democratic backsliding focuses directly on citizens' values and their willingness to defend democracy against would-be autocratic leaders (Foa and Mounk, 2016; Carey et al., 2019; Svolik, 2019, 2020; Chiopris, Nalepa and Vanberg, 2021), our proposal shifts the focus to encompass the political opposition's role in shaping citizens' perceptions and reactions to such norm violations. Specifically, we concentrate on exploring three sets of related, but distinct, questions:

- When is pushback against a leader's bid to erode democratic norms most effective?
- Does partisan pushback succeed in altering the public's perceptions about an aggrandizing president, or does it tend to backfire and rebound to the leader's benefit and hurt the party that sounded the alarm?
- Is bipartisan political pushback necessarily a more effective strategy for sanctioning leaders who violates democratic norms?

The proposal developed here is empirical, but rooted in a broader theoretical project that aims to elucidate the strategic calculus behind political pushback to executive aggrandizement (also see Gamboa (2017); Luo and Przeworski (2019a,b)). In particular, our findings will help to ground key assumptions about the relative costs to party elites across the political spectrum for challenging a leaders' attempts to transgress key democratic norms. This is a vital step in developing a theory of how checks and balances operates under polarization, and thus understanding the extent to which pushback succeeds or fails in halting democratic erosion. Below, we draw on a diverse set of literatures in political behavior, social psychology, and game theory to distill a series of plausible testable implications about the varying effects of elite pushback. The second part of the proposal develops a novel survey experiment designed to evaluate and to adjudicate among these alternative hypotheses.

## Framing, Backlash, and Reputation

There is substantial evidence that the effectiveness of elite cues generally depends on polarization and partisanship. The framing literature in American politics consistently finds that individuals are generally more responsive to narratives offered by their preferred party in forming their issue positions, especially in low-information environments and when parties are polarized on an issue (Bullock 2011, Druckman 2015). Previous studies suggest that source credibility matters even for factual beliefs (Nyhan et al 2017, Druckman et al 2019), as individuals are more likely to disregard information coming from an untrusted source and more likely to trust their preferred party. Party cues affect subjective judgments about a range of other outcomes, from the state of the economy (Bisgaard et al 2018) to evaluations of candidate quality and performance while in office (Mummolo et al 2018 & Donovan et al 2019). However, the influence of co-partisan elites is not unlimited: research has also found that individuals rely on the party elite's opinion less when the policy distance between the voter and the party elites grows (Peterson 2019).

Applied to the problem of democratic backsliding, the upshot of the framing literature is that partisan pushback against a leader who violates democratic norms will be effective, but that such effects will likely be largely confined to citizens who are already favorably disposed to the source of the opposition. In other words, in the polarized context of contemporary American politics a charge made by a Democratic congresswoman that President Trump has violated a political norm will disproportionately help to convince citizens who are already identified as Democrats that the President has committed a transgression.

As well, findings from social psychology on third-party reactions to justice and mistreatment, indicate that out-group elite expressions of incivility or threats to legally sanction a politician on the basis that they violated certain norms can evoke feelings of status threat among the supporters of the politician (Terman 2019). Applying these lessons to a polarized democracy, this literature suggests that partisan opposition pushback may thus not only fail to convince a leader's supporters that she should be sanctioned, but actually serve to produce a backlash of increased support for the leader who violates norms. If this is operative in current American politics, we would expect that pushback from Democrats would backfire among Republican supporters, such that they would be less inclined to see Trump's actions in a negative light precisely because pushback is coming from the opposition party.

There are also good reasons to suspect that the effects of partisan pushback may extend beyond citizens' perception of the president's behavior and to perceptions about the parties themselves. In a recent discussion of political norms, [Azari \(2020\)](#) argues co-partisan pushback is essentially now a form of norm-breaking in itself and, hence, implies that any pushback against Trump is especially risky for Republican elites.

Game theory provides a somewhat different perspective on the potential costs of pushback to both parties. Cheap talk models, in particular, teach us that because parties have opposing electoral incentives to fabricate (in the case of the opposition)

or suppress (in the case of co-partisans) information about a leader, then voters should update negatively about both parties' reputations whenever they act according to their partisan interests. For example, in their signaling model of the production of political scandals, Dzuida and Howell (2020) deduce that both parties will suffer reputation costs from partisan scandals (scandals in which only the opposition alleges wrong-doing), whereas the president's reputation suffers only when allegations against her are made by both parties.

Taken together, the literature thus identifies six potential sets of relationships between the type of elite pushback (partisan or bi-partisan) and different citizens' perceptions of the President, the President's party, and the opposition party.

- ***Partisan Reinforcement.*** Opposition partisan pushback increases citizens' negative perceptions of the President among citizens who support the opposition party.
- ***Partisan Backlash.*** Opposition partisan pushback increases citizens' positive perceptions of the President among citizens who support the opposition party.
- ***Partisan Reputation:*** Partisan pushback increases citizens' negative perceptions of both parties
- ***Bipartisan Backlash:*** Bipartisan pushback increases citizens' negative perceptions of the President's party among citizens who support the President.
- ***Bipartisan Reinforcement:*** Bipartisan pushback increases citizens' negative perceptions of the President.
- ***Bipartisan Reputation:*** Bipartisan pushback increases citizens' positive perceptions of the President's party.

In the appendix, we also include an additional set of auxiliary hypotheses about heterogeneous effects by strength of partisanship, political knowledge and presidential approval alongside with effects on emotions.

## Experiment Design

Below, we elaborate a series of testable hypotheses and propose a survey experiment to explore the extent to which different reputation costs map on to elite pushback against democratic norm violations. Specifically, we propose to randomly expose respondents to either a partisan pushback treatment (Treatment 1) or a bi-partisan pushback treatment (Treatment 2) and to compare perceptions of the President and the parties among different partisan groups of respondents.

To test these hypotheses, we design a survey experiment rooted in real world political events drawn from the news headlines; We use a between-subjects design in which no elite pushback constitutes the control group and the two treatments randomly assign the elite

condemnation cue, with partisan pushback (i.e. the Democratic Party members only) as the first treatment, and bipartisan pushback as the second treatment.

Individuals are randomly assigned to one of the two treatment and one control groups and we plan to ask each subject to evaluate only one norm violation to avoid potential spillover effects across multiple norm violations and partisan cues (separate, but related research by Clayton et al. (2021) focuses on how successive norm violation affect an individual's perceptions about the politician and threat norms pose to democracy). Note that our design thus allows us to isolate the specific effects we are interested in exploring but may also decrease the external validity of the experiment, as subjects in the real world are likely observing multiple norm violations and multiple forms of political pushback. Respondents will also be asked the same battery of post-treatment questions about demographics, political opinions, and political knowledge (see Appendix). In the remaining sections, we discuss 1) our selection criteria for the type of political norm violation we propose, 2) the post-treatment outcome variables that we will use to assess our hypotheses 3) the specific hypotheses that we plan to evaluate, and 4) the methodological details of implementing our research design.

The norm violation will be presented as a shortened version of an actual news article about a norm violation by President Trump. The elite condemnation treatments will be reported tweets by congress members, which will be edited and anonymized versions of actual tweets from elected representatives from the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Given the nature of our study, partisan opposition and bipartisan opposition treatment refer to political elites voicing concerns about how presidential behavior impacts democracy. For the sake of realism, the partisan opposition treatment only includes reference to democratic concerns but uses an alarming tone as is typical of the real tweets.

We seek to balance two selection criteria in choosing a specific norm violation. On the one hand, we need to choose an action taken by President Trump that has received both partisan and bipartisan pushback as a meaningful norm violation. At the same time, we also want to avoid using a norm violation event that is so highly publicized and polarized that respondents have already fully made up their minds, and thus any effects of elite pushback risk being too small to detect with the current set-up.

In the survey vignette included in the appendix, we thus use the firing of Inspector General Michael Atkinson by President Trump early April 2020. In addition to its relevance to broader issues about executive aggrandizement and the president's on-going attempts to erode checks and balances, it drew opposition from both sides of the aisle; yet it was not as widely publicized as other norm violation events by Trump, especially since it coincided with the initial days of the coronavirus epidemic.

Post-treatment, we will measure all subjects' evaluations of the norm violation, perceived importance of the event, and individuals' evaluation as to president's respect to democracy as well as two sets of measures of trust towards political parties. All outcome variables will be measures on a standard Likert 4-point scale and we will randomize the order of these questions:



- Q1 Evaluation of norm violations by the president: Do you think it is appropriate or inappropriate for the president to fire Inspector General Atkinson?... (Entirely Appropriate, Mostly Appropriate, Mostly Inappropriate, Entirely Inappropriate)
- Q2 How much respect do you think Donald Trump has for this country's democratic institutions and traditions?... (A great deal, A fair amount, A little, None at all)
- Q3 How important do you think was the president's decision to fire Inspector General Atkinson?... (Important, Mostly Important, Somewhat Important, Unimportant)

We use two measures of trust towards political parties: general levels of trust toward party members in Congress and trust in the accuracy of the information provided by the party members:

- Q4a. How much do you trust the accuracy of the information that you get about the government from the Democratic members of Congress?... (A great deal, A fair amount, A little, Not at all)
- Q4b. How much do you trust the accuracy of the information that you get about the government from the Republican members of Congress?... (A great deal, A fair amount, A little, Not at all)
- Q5a. How much confidence, if any, do you have in the Democratic members of Congress to act in the best interests of the public?... (A great deal, A fair amount, A little, None at all)
- Q5b. How much confidence, if any, do you have in the Democratic members of Congress to act in the best interests of the public? (A great deal, A fair amount, A little, None at all)

As such the experiment design tests the hypotheses by comparing following groups: (All predictions are within partisan group (Democrats or Republicans) and compared to : 1- control, 2- partisan, 3- bipartisan). For the first three outcomes, Appropriateness/Importance/Respect to democracy, the hypotheses discussed map to our outcome variables and treatment groups as follows:

### ***Partisan Reinforcement***

- H1A. Opposition partisan pushback increases citizens' perceptions that the President has committed a norm violation among Democratic voters
- H1B. Opposition partisan pushback increases citizens' perceptions that among Democratic voters
- H1C. Opposition partisan pushback increases citizens' perceptions that the President's commitment to democratic principles is not strong among Democratic voters

Thus we expect to find among Democratic respondents:

- (1)  $\text{appropriateness\_control} > \text{appropriateness\_partisan}$
- (2)  $\text{importance\_control} < \text{importance\_partisan}$
- (3)  $\text{respect\_control} > \text{respect\_partisan}$

### ***Partisan Backlash***

- H2A. Opposition partisan pushback decreases citizens' perceptions that President's action is inappropriate among Republican voters
- H2B. Opposition partisan pushback decreases citizens' perceptions that President's action is important among Republican voters
- H2C. Opposition partisan pushback decreases citizens' perceptions that President's commitment to democratic principles is not strong among Republican voters

Thus we expect to find among Republican respondents:

- (1)  $\text{appropriateness\_control} < \text{appropriateness\_partisan}$
- (2)  $\text{importance\_control} > \text{importance\_partisan}$
- (3)  $\text{respect\_control} < \text{respect\_partisan}$

### ***Bipartisan Reinforcement***

- H5A. Bipartisan pushback increases citizens' perceptions that President's action is inappropriate among Republicans and Democrats
- H5B. Bipartisan pushback increases the perceived significance of president's decision among Republicans and Democrats
- H5C. Bipartisan pushback increases citizens' perceptions that President's commitment to democratic principles is not strong among Republicans and Democrats

Thus we expect to find, for both Republican and Democratic respondents :

- (1)  $\text{appropriateness\_control} > \text{appropriateness\_bipartisan}$
- (2)  $\text{importance\_control} < \text{importance\_bipartisan}$

(3)  $\text{respect\_control} > \text{respect\_bipartisan}$

As discussed above, we have two alternative predictions about the effect of opposition to presidential transgression on trust in the parties in the congress. If trust operates through purely information channels, we expect trust in parties to decrease when there is one-sided opposition and trust in president's party to increase if there is bipartisan opposition. So we expect the following to hold:

### *Partisan Reinforcement*

- H4. Trust in the Democratic Party and the Republican Party suffers when there is partisan pushback among Republican and Democratic voters
- H5. Bipartisan pushback increases trust for the president's party among Republican and among Democratic voters

Thus we expect to find, for both Republican and Democratic respondents :

- (1)  $\text{trust\_dem\_control} > \text{trust\_dem\_partisan}$
- (2)  $\text{trust\_rep\_control} > \text{trust\_rep\_partisan}$
- (3)  $\text{trust\_dem\_control} < \text{trust\_dem\_partisan}$
- (4)  $\text{trust\_rep\_control} < \text{trust\_rep\_partisan}$

Alternatively, if voters care about party loyalty and partisan interests, we expect voter trust in president's party to decrease following bipartisan opposition: ***Bipartisan***

### *Backlash*

- H3. Bipartisan pushback decreases citizens' trust in the Republican Party among Republican voters

Thus we expect to find among Republican respondents :

- (2)  $\text{trust\_rep\_control} < \text{trust\_rep\_bipartisan}$

## Sample Size & Power Calculation

Since we are only interested in effects by partisanship, we plan on recruiting equally-sized groups of subjects with partisan affiliation as Democrats (and Democratic leaners), Republicans (and Republican leaners). For each group, we measure 5 main outcome variables (appropriateness, importance, respect to democracy, trust in Democratic Party and trust in the Republican Party) with one control and two treatment groups (no cue/partisan cue/bipartisan cue).

Since we do not have any strong expectations about the effect of elite opposition on independents' attitude, we effectively end up with 14 hypotheses for the effects of elite cues on policy support and evaluation of the president. The effects size of partisan cues are previously found to be around 3%-43% on policy support by co-partisans (Bullock 2019). We estimate the effect size to be on the conservative side of the spectrum at 5%. To simplify the analysis, we assume that this effect is uniform across all groups and treatments although we acknowledge that this is an unrealistic assumption.

For the standard deviation of the first outcome, as a best approximation, we use the standard deviation in responses to executive power transgression questions from Brightline Survey Wave 9, which is around .95 for each partisan group. To get an estimate for standard deviation for trust towards each party, we use standard deviations from the survey that is a part of "What do we measure when we measure affective polarization?" (Druckman & Levendusky 2019). For the respect to democracy measure, we use a standard deviation of responses to the same question from March 2018 Pew survey. As we currently don't have any relevant references for importance variable, we plan to obtain an approximate guess in our pilot study. For now we assume the standard deviation for importance equals the average of the standard deviations of all other outcome variables. Standard deviations range between .73 and 1.

To calculate the minimum sample size necessary, We first use traditional power analysis for each partisan group and treatment arm. We take the largest standard deviation, and assume symmetrical effects for importance and democratic respect variables, in order to attain 0.8 power with  $\alpha = 0.05$ , using a one-sided test, the minimum sample size necessary is  $698 * 6 = 4188$ .

As stated above, the above sample size calculation might be larger than required and once we conduct the pilot, we will re-run the power calculations using the updated standard deviation estimates from the pilot, so the sample size can be adjusted down or up although the estimate about expected effect size will still be set at 5%.

The survey is expected to take about 12 minutes and we plan to pay the subjects slightly more than a third of the average hourly rate is expected of cost around \$1. We would need about 300 subjects (50 people per partisan group/treatment arm) for the pilot, to get an accurate estimate for the standard deviation of the outcome variables.

For recruitment, we plan to use MTurk and will use several strategies to increase the quality of the sample. We will block users that use VPS/VPN and individuals with IP addresses outside of the United States from participating in the survey. To access a list of suspicious IP addresses, we will use IP hub (Kennedy et al 2019).

## **Estimation procedures**

To calculate the conditional average treatment effect for each partisan group, we calculate the difference of means t-test in reported appropriateness, salience and trust measures for each partisan group separately. To analyze additional hypotheses with interaction variables, we use linear regression with robust standard errors.