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New study highlights importance of democratic norms and learning about the other party

When legislators understand their opponents better, they may be less likely to usurp democracy

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For the past few years, American democracy has been perceived as backsliding. Politicians' refusal to accept election results despite a lack of evidence of fraud, the violence at the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, and state-level restrictions on voting access and aggressive gerrymandering are all signs of democracy in crisis.

A new Northwestern-led study, however, suggests that the full picture may not be as dire as it seems — but highlights the importance of democratic norms and learning about other party's beliefs. Specifically, the research suggests that when state legislators learn that the views of voters from the other party are less extreme than they anticipated, they are less likely to endorse antidemocratic actions.

The results were published today, May 30, in the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2301836120) (<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2301836120>), by a team of political scientists and sociologists from multiple universities. James Druckman, the Payson S. Wild Professor of Political Science at Northwestern, was a co-principal investigator on the study, which forms part of the larger Strengthening Democracy Project.

The researchers' survey involved 534 state legislators from both parties, finding that the average legislator is actually less hostile toward the other party than the general public (64.2 vs 71.3 on a zero to 100 scale where higher scores indicate hostility), less supportive of undemocratic practices (11.2 vs 26.4) and less supportive of partisan violence (3.8 vs 10.9).

Furthermore, while state legislators tended to have fairly accurate ideas about voters in their own parties' levels of hostility to the other party and support for undemocratic practices and partisan violence, they tended to overestimate the opposing party's voters' levels of support for these same things.

"Increasing partisan discord is definitely a challenge for democratic functioning; that should be worrisome," Druckman said. "But I don't necessarily think that we are on an unavoidable path to the complete erosion of democracy. It's still possible that things could stabilize."

A subgroup of surveyed legislators who received accurate information about the opposing party's voters' actual (more moderate) views after reporting what they thought those views might be subsequently changed some of their own views.

Once this group of legislators learned that voters from the opposing party supported undemocratic practices less than they had anticipated, they self-reported lower support for these practices. This was true for both Democrats and Republicans.

State legislators perform key functions from drawing voting districts to holding power over the way elections are conducted, so their role in maintaining American democracy is fundamental.

Overall, the results emphasize that misperceptions of members of the other party as having more animus and being more undemocratic than they actually are can create a vicious cycle that degrades democracy by potentially escalating the appetite for undemocratic activity

that keeps the other party from power, the authors wrote.

Conversely, more accurate bipartisan information can lead to less undemocratic attitudes and, potentially, actions among legislators.

Druckman noted that the study had a few limitations. Though legislators from virtually all state legislatures and both major parties were invited to participate — and the sample was appropriately balanced in size between Democrats and Republicans, male and female respondents, and states with and without term limits — it's difficult to say whether the legislators who chose to participate may have been somewhat more pro-democracy, or less extreme, than their caucuses as a whole.

For example, it's possible that some far-right legislators with extreme anti-democratic views may have declined to participate, since some evidence suggests that those partisans have lower trust and willingness to participate in political surveys.

Additionally, there are some states — including closely divided ones like North Carolina and Wisconsin — where democratic norms have eroded, gerrymandering is extreme and other severely antidemocratic actions have already taken place. The study doesn't look granularly at the state level to see whether hyper-partisanship in these places might be “moving the goalposts” of what is perceived as acceptable there or nationally, Druckman said.

Nevertheless, given that the legislators who received accurate information about the average opposing-party voters' views changed some of their views to be less antidemocratic upon finding that they were overestimating the threat to their power posed by the other party, the study still emphasizes that norms and dialogue are key to maintaining a functioning democracy.

Druckman speculated that state legislatures which are full-time, in which no one party has a supermajority (meaning it can ignore the will of the minority party and perhaps even the governor) might better facilitate cross-partisan dialogue and professionalism, which can lead to contact and esteem between people in government.

Ultimately, individuals can make a difference just by working together proactively at a baseline level, Druckman said, to promote democratic norms.

“In Utah, the two candidates for governor in 2020 came together and did an ad where they said that they would mutually respect the outcome of the election, regardless of what it was. So, they sent a pretty strong bipartisan message about respecting democracy,” he said. “That's a very positive approach.”

Other authors of the study “[Correcting misperceptions of out-partisans decreases American legislators' support for undemocratic practices](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2301836120) ([/https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2301836120](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2301836120))” include Suji Kang, James Chu, Michael N. Stagnaro, Jan G. Voelkel, Joseph S. Mernyk, Sophia L. Pink, Chrystal Redekopp, David G. Rand, and Robb Willer.

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