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TEXT 1



Can you ‘undo’ political polarization? Left and right might be closer than we think, study finds

University of California, Berkeley, research shows people are committed to protecting democratic institutions despite differences

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You know that uncle whose political takes threaten to turn family gatherings into food fights? Don’t decline his Thanksgiving invitation just yet. When it comes to support for democracy, left and right in America are much closer than you might think.

As a historic US election approaches, both sides see each other as working to upend democracy. But it’s our assumptions about our political opponents – rather than their actual views – that drive polarization, according to new research. And if Democrats want to prove to voters on the fence that they’re acting in good faith, they might want to consider a surprising “grand gesture”.

The findings are featured in a megastudy published by the journal *Science* that tested 25 methods sourced from 400 people studying and working in politics to see which showed the most promise for preserving democracy and curbing political animosity. One, developed by scholars at the University of California, Berkeley, rose to the top.

The idea came from an observation that Alia Braley, a PhD candidate who previously studied pro-democracy movements under autocracies, observed during the Trump administration: would-be authoritarians get supporters to tolerate democratic backsliding by convincing them that the other side is transgressing democratic norms.

“I wanted to find out how we can undo that,” Braley said.

In search of answers, Braley – together with the political science professor Gabriel Lenz and colleagues at MIT – created a simple program in which a cartoon asks participants questions about how their political opponents view democracy and corrects false assumptions. “It’s an iterative, dopamine-producing, cartoon-enhanced experience,” she said, explaining that she modeled it off of the addictive language-learning app, Duolingo.

To reduce bias, the survey did not use the word “democracy” in any of its questions. Otherwise, people might have felt “social pressure to vocalize support for democracy”, Braley said. Instead, it asked participants about tangible democratic institutions, like voting collection methods and freedom of the press.

One question asked self-identified Republicans whether they thought Democrats supported putting fewer polling stations in Republican areas. Most people responded affirmatively – that, yes, they believed Democrats were for such a measure. Then, the program shared data showing no Democratic support for reducing polls in Republican districts.

Another asked whether participants would be willing to jointly commit with a political opponent never to vote for an anti-democratic candidate. Republicans and Democrats alike eagerly said yes, Braley said.

After finishing the seven-question survey, many participants had changed how they viewed their political opponents' support for democracy – with their scores of how undemocratic they saw the other side falling by an average of 50% – and expressed relief at those newfound realizations. They appeared to dehumanize the other side less, and they expressed a greater sense of warmth towards and desire to cooperate with those in the other party. "People seem to be very welcoming of this information," Braley said.

And the participants themselves appeared to have become more supportive of democracy (by about 30%, according to Lenz) and resistant to measures that might subvert it because the other side was seen as less of an existential threat. Braley has termed that dynamic – in which citizens who believe in democracy are willing to upset democratic institutions if it blocks the other side's supposedly antidemocratic efforts – the 'subversion dilemma'. The January 6 insurrection – when supporters of the Republican candidate, believing Democrats had committed election fraud, violently attacked the Capitol to stop the certification of the results – is one illustrative example of how this dynamic can play out. Similarly, in Venezuela, people who express love for democracy continue to vote for authoritarian Nicolás Maduro.

By "fighting to the death" to preserve democracy, Braley explains, citizens in fact create the conditions for democracy's demise.

The work speaks to a wider investment being made at the University of California, Berkeley, to study ways citizens and leaders can fend off threats to democracy. This fall, the university launched the Berkeley Center for American Democracy to bring together scholars examining the forces challenging democratic norms and institutions in the US.

The center's director, David Broockman, a political science professor who has researched topics ranging from canvassing techniques to the effects of partisan media, lauds the initiative's focus on "practical solutions" to prevent democracy's unraveling. The center's first projects will dig into questions like whether primary elections contribute to polarization and how accurately constituents' priorities are reflected in the feedback politicians receive.

Already, its scholars are collaborating with the US House of Representatives to ensure that their findings drive meaningful change. "We're not just doing research for its own sake," Broockman said in a press release.

Practical solutions are also at the core of Braley and Lenz's findings.

Lenz says that to move the needle in next week's election, Democratic politicians and organizers need to stop pointing the finger at Republicans for trying to undermine democratic institutions. Instead, he says, they should explicitly state their commitment to democratic practices and show that they aren't trying to use those institutions against Trump unfairly. That's because actions that can be perceived as irregular in any way – like proposals to expand the supreme court, court cases

against a candidate, or threats of impeachment – are going to be seen as a threat to democracy by the other side.

With that dynamic in mind, Lenz suggested that Biden consider a radical move to demonstrate to voters on the fence that the Democrats aren't going after Trump for political gain, like offering Trump a full pardon before 5 November 5.

"You need a dramatic grand gesture," Lenz said.

On a much smaller scale – back at the Thanksgiving table, for instance – people can reframe their interactions with political rivals in their personal lives. "Volunteer pro-democracy statements," said Lenz. "Get the message out there. Reach out to Republican family members and tell them how deeply committed you are to democracy and democratic institutions."

But having these conversations takes some effort. People need to give those with whom they have seemingly unbridgeable disagreements the benefit of the doubt, which the current political ecosystem has not trained those on either side to do.

For Democrats, Lenz said, that means throwing away assumptions that anyone who votes Republican is a bad actor. "A lot of Democrats are assuming Republicans support Trump precisely *because* he's an authoritarian," he said. "[But] they're tolerating Trump *despite* liking democracy."

Braley takes comfort in that revelation. She says the data indicate that, regardless of what the voters say on 5 November, most people in the US aren't intent on destroying the country. "We know that the vast majority of people in America support the democratic norms that are holding the country together," she said.

"That gives me a sense of resilience."