

HOW AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION UNDERMINES SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC NORMS

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Abstract Does affective polarization—the tendency to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively—undermine support for democratic norms? We argue that it does, through two mechanisms. First, in an age of elite polarization, norms have been *politicized*. This leads affectively polarized partisans to oppose particular constitutional protections when their party is in power but support them when their party is out of power, via a cue-taking mechanism. Second, affective polarization may generate *biases* that motivate voters to restrict the other party’s rights. Using nationally representative surveys, we find strong support for the cue-taking argument. In 2019, with a Republican administration in power, affectively polarized Republicans opposed constitutional protections while affectively polarized Democrats supported them. The reverse was true in 2012 during a Democratic administration. The findings have important, albeit troubling, implications for American democracy, as affective polarization undermines support for basic democratic principles.

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A strong belief in democracy has always been a core component of the American creed (de Tocqueville [1835] 1945), a finding supported by decades of empirical work (Almond and Verba 1963; Norris 2011). While Americans still support democracy in the abstract, scholars have recently sounded alarm bells about the decline in support for democratic norms (Carey et al. 2019; Bartels 2020): “the ‘fundamental values’ or ‘rules of the game’ considered essential for constitutional government” (McClosky 1964, p. 362). If these norms erode, then there is a serious risk of democratic backsliding or even failure (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Lieberman et al. 2019). What explains the erosion of support for these core principles?

We argue that affective polarization—the tendency to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively (Iyengar and Westwood 2015, p. 691)—vitiates support for democratic norms through two mechanisms. First, elites in positions of power signal displeasure with norms limiting that power (e.g., checks and balances). This causes affectively polarized partisans to react based on whether or not their party is in power. Second, affective polarization may generate biases against the out-party that leads partisans from both parties to oppose norms requiring the fair treatment of all points of view (e.g., norms of political tolerance).

We test these hypotheses with representative national surveys, and find strong support for the politicization mechanism. In 2019, with a Republican in the White House, affectively polarized Republicans opposed constitutional protections while affectively polarized Democrats supported them. The reverse was true in 2012 during a Democratic administration. Overall, the results have troubling normative implications, as individuals view foundational democratic principles as political fodder rather than as core bedrocks of our system.

Democratic Norms and Affective Polarization

While few scholars question the importance of democratic norms, there is less agreement about how to measure support for them. Some rely on questions that ask about the importance of living in a democracy (e.g., Norris 2011), while others ask about applications, such as whether a voter would support a candidate who violates a particular norm (e.g., Graham and Svobik 2020). The first approach is problematic due to strong social desirability biases. The second approach more closely matches the theoretical construct; however, generalization beyond the particular application can be difficult.

We take a middle ground and focus on support for two broad types of democratic norms identified by earlier scholars. The first type captures people’s beliefs about *constitutional protections* (McClosky 1964; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). This entails an endorsement of separation of powers, checks and balances, and a rejection of authoritarian tendencies. The second type of

norm is *political tolerance*, or the belief that all citizens, including adversaries, deserve equal rights (Mouffe 2000; Gutmann and Thompson 2012). This entails support for political voice and equality, even for those with whom we disagree or find objectionable. Such rights include voting, speech, and protest (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007; Carey et al. 2019). Both sets of norms should garner widespread support, reflecting their centrality to the American system of government.

These norms should trump partisan considerations since they constitute the underlying coordinating mechanism that governs partisan competition (Graham and Svolik 2020) and make democracy self-reinforcing (Weingast 1997). Yet, concerns about partisan considerations have become paramount thanks to an unprecedented rise in affective polarization over the last quarter century: partisans today dislike and distrust the other party at remarkably high levels (Iyengar et al. 2019). Thus far, evidence on affective polarization affecting norms is mixed. For example, Westwood, Peterson, and Lelkes (2019) report that affectively polarized partisans are more apt to want to investigate the other party for corruption, but no more likely to endorse using tear gas on a group of protesters from the other side. Graham and Svolik (2020) find that strong partisans, in particular, prefer candidates from their own party even if they violate norms such as electoral fairness, checks and balances, and/or civil liberties.

These scholars focus on whether citizens are willing to put their commitment to democratic ideals into action. Graham and Svolik (2020) find they clearly are not. Here, we step back in a more abstract direction to gauge support for core principles. If we find that citizens support even these broad principles—let alone actions to protect them—it would be particularly troubling. Additionally, we focus (in our main analyses) on *affective* polarization, along the lines of Lelkes and Westwood (2017), but in contrast to Graham and Svolik (2020), who look at partisan, policy, and candidate extremity.

We theorize that affective polarization can influence support for democratic norms via two related mechanisms. First, especially for norms about limits on executive power, we argue that affective polarization shapes support for norms via politicization and cue-taking. Elites in power—especially the president—push against democratic norms precisely because these norms tie their hands and limit their power. The opposing party, in contrast, will support these norms, as they would prefer that the president's power be limited (especially in the contemporary era of elite polarization).¹ So, voters receive a clear partisan cue about whether to support such norms based on

1. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) make clear, in earlier eras in American politics, party was a less clear dividing line in politics, and so this argument may not travel back in time. Our argument is designed to apply to the current era of highly polarized national (elite) politics.

which party controls the White House: support them when the opposing party has the presidency, but not when one's own party does.

Affective polarization heightens the power of such cues (Druckman et al. 2021). Affectively polarized partisans feel a need to signal their partisan identity, distinguishing themselves from the other party. This leads to directional motivated cognition and more partisan cue-taking (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012; Lelkes 2018). When a Republican is in the White House, the more affectively polarized Republican voters are, the less they will support democratic norms, particularly those concerning constitutional protections that limit executive power. For Democratic voters, however, the opposite is true: the higher their levels of affective polarization, the stronger their support for democratic norms (and specifically constitutional protections). The opposite pattern would hold during a Democratic administration, where it would be affectively polarized Democrats who reject norms and affectively polarized Republicans who support them. This reflects the *politicization* of norms stemming from elite rhetoric.

Such concerns have risen to the fore under recent administrations. Many have noted that President Trump, during his term, “acts as if [institutions] are bona fide only to the extent that they deliver results consistent with his needs, an assumption that makes him the arbiter of institutional legitimacy” (Jamieson and Taussig 2017, pp. 635–36; also see Cottrell, Herron, and Westwood 2018).² Conversely, during President Obama's term, Republicans argued that his administration, and the Democratic Party more broadly, violated these norms by criticizing the Supreme Court during the State of the Union, eliminating the filibuster for judicial appointments, and using executive action to reform immigration. Whether these actions are norm violations or legitimate uses of executive power likely depends on whether you support the goals of the party in power. Hence, if the affectively polarized engage in motivated cognition, then norms are not about fundamental principles, but are rules that only apply to the other party.

For norms about political tolerance, we expect affectively polarized members of *both* parties to express less support regardless of who holds the White House. Affective polarization stimulates partisan biases in a variety of contexts (Iyengar et al. 2019), and causes individuals to see the other party as a threat (Pew Research Center 2019). As a result, affectively polarized members of both parties will want to limit the other party's ability to vote, speak freely, and protest (because allowing it would allow them to potentially seize the reins of power, and with that, potentially implement their dangerous agenda). We therefore expect that as affective polarization increases,

2. The cues from the Democratic Party have not been as explicit *per se*, but we would expect affectively polarized Democrats to observe Trump and other Republicans and do the opposite (Nicholson 2012).

partisans will be less likely to support norms related to extending equal rights toward opposing partisans—that is, partisan bias may lead to political intolerance.

DATA AND MEASURES

We begin by testing these ideas using an online survey with a representative sample of Americans ($N = 2,815$) taken from July 9, 2019, to July 25, 2019, with the Bovitz Forthright panel (see [Supplementary Material section 1](#)).³ The survey included demographic and political measures, as well as standard measures of affective polarization ([Druckman and Levendusky 2019](#)): (1) feeling thermometer scales of the parties that range from feeling very cold (0) to very warm (100), (2) trait ratings of the parties (such as intelligence and selfishness), (3) a partisan trust measure, and (4) social distance measures (e.g., how upset a respondent would be if his/her child married someone from one of the parties). We scaled and aggregated the affective polarization items into one measure, following the conventional approach of taking the difference between in-party affect and out-party affect (e.g., [Lelkes and Westwood 2017](#)) ($\alpha = 0.83$): 1 indicates the strongest preference for one's own party compared to the opposing party (i.e., the largest difference in in-party and out-party affect) and 0 the weakest preference (see [Supplementary Material section 2](#) for all question wording).

To measure support for democratic norms, we asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement, on a five-point scale, with a set of items tapping our two dimensions of norms: constitutional protections and political tolerance. We structured the items to avoid directly cueing partisanship and to evoke the explicit trade-offs inherent in these norms. Additionally, to avoid acquiescence bias, disagreement indicates support for the norm on four out of eight items. We recoded all items such that 5 indicates the highest level of norm support and 1 the lowest level of norm support. [Table 1](#) displays the wording for each item, along with their means and standard deviations. We provide further discussion, the full distribution of each item, and correlations between items in [Supplementary Material section 3](#).⁴

Results

To assess whether affective polarization affects support for democratic norms, we regress each norm on an indicator for Republican partisanship,

3. This sample size excludes pure independents, who lack a direct partisan out-group and hence are typically excluded in studies such as ours (see, e.g., [Druckman and Levendusky 2019](#)).

4. The items do not seem to map on to two dimensions (of the types of norms); we thus conduct analyses treating each norm item separately. This allows us to be more transparent about differences across items.

Table 1. Items used to measure support for democratic norms

Norm	Wording	Mean	Standard deviation
<i>Constitutional protections</i>			
Get Things Done	I do not mind a politician's methods if he or she manages to get the right things done.*	2.84	1.25
Checks and Balances	The executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government should keep one another from having too much power.	4.29	0.96
Executive Power	When the country is in great danger, it is often necessary for political leaders to act boldly, even if this means overstepping the usual processes of government decision-making.*	2.77	1.24
Respect for Institutions	It is important that the government treats other institutions with respect, such as news organizations, religious communities, scientific groups, or business associations.	4.21	0.99
<i>Political tolerance</i>			
Misinformed Voting	People should be allowed to vote even if they are badly misinformed on basic facts about politics.	3.53	1.23
Opponents Get Voice	People who hate my way of life should still have a chance to talk in a public forum.	4.09	1.01
Political Equality	We have to teach children that all people are created equal but almost everyone knows that some are inherently better than others.*	3.17	1.31
Prevent Protests	Some protests need to be prevented or stopped, even if they are completely peaceful.*	3.59	1.33

NOTE.—Cell entries give the items used to measure democratic norms. Asterisk (*) indicates that disagreement with the item indicated support for the norm.

the affective polarization measure, and the interaction of the two to capture heterogeneous effects by party, as our politicization hypothesis suggests. We also include a series of control variables shown to affect norm support in prior work: political knowledge (the sum of the number of factual questions people answered correctly, from 0 to 5), policy conservatism, education, race, gender, and religion (e.g., McClosky 1964; Nie, June, and Stehlik-Barry 1996; Norris 2011; Arikan and Bloom 2019). The policy conservatism item comes from eight public policy questions and ensures that any effects we find reflect affective, rather than ideological, polarization ($\alpha = 0.81$) (see [Supplementary Material section 2](#)).⁵ We present the results in [table 2](#).

The first four columns of [table 2](#) show the results for support for the constitutional protection items. Most importantly, it shows that affective polarization has a pronounced effect on support for democratic norms. As we expected, via the cue-taking mechanism (during a Republican administration in 2019), affectively polarized Democrats exhibit substantially more support for norms governing the rules of the game (i.e., there is a statistically significant main effect of affective polarization on support for norms). This includes rejecting authoritarian tendencies (“getting things done,” $p = 0.074$ for a two-tailed test), “checks and balances” between the three branches of government ($p = 0.002$), checks on executive decision-making (“executive power,” $p = 0.002$), and protecting the private sphere from government encroachment (“respect for institutions,” $p = 0.002$).

We also see that affectively polarized Republicans move in the opposite direction when it comes to this set of norms; the interaction between affective polarization and Republican partisanship is negative, statistically significant, and roughly double the size of the coefficient for Democrats for items measuring rejecting authoritarian tendencies ($p = 0.018$), executive power ($p = 0.000$), and respect for institutions ($p = 0.002$). The one exception to this pattern for Republicans is on the checks and balances item, for which the negative effect does not eliminate the overall positive impact of affective polarization, also falling short of statistical significance ($p = 0.652$). This may reflect Republican elite cues signaling support for checks and balances during the period of divided government (with Democrats controlling the House of Representatives). Overall, we see consistent support for the partisan cue-taking mechanism for norms about constitutional procedure—and most importantly, clear evidence that affective polarization shapes beliefs about fundamental democratic norms, even when not applied to particular cases.

When we turn to the four items measuring political tolerance—the latter four columns of [table 2](#)—we do not find support for the bias hypothesis that affective polarization leads members of both parties to oppose norms about extending equal rights to opposing partisans. For “misinformed vote” and

5. Our results are similar if we instead use a single-item self-placement ideology measure.

Table 2. Effects of affective polarization on support for each democratic norm measure

	Get things done	Checks & balances	Exec. Power	Respect for institutions	Misinformed vote	Opponents get voice	Political equality	Prevent protest
Republican	0.146 (0.193) p = 0.452	0.007 (0.142) p = 0.960	0.616 (0.190) p = 0.002	0.243 (0.147) p = 0.099	-0.023 (0.194) p = 0.906	0.161 (0.157) p = 0.307	0.537 (0.200) p = 0.008	0.365 (0.201) p = 0.071
Affective polarization	0.369 (0.206) p = 0.074	0.490 (0.151) p = 0.002	0.651 (0.202) p = 0.002	0.498 (0.157) p = 0.002	0.250 (0.207) p = 0.227	-0.104 (0.168) p = 0.537	0.471 (0.214) p = 0.028	0.608 (0.215) p = 0.005
Republican * Affective polarization	-0.867 (0.363) p = 0.018	-0.120 (0.267) p = 0.652	-1.786 (0.357) p = 0.000	-0.879 (0.276) p = 0.002	-0.479 (0.364) p = 0.189	-0.237 (0.296) p = 0.424	-1.159 (0.376) p = 0.003	-0.784 (0.378) p = 0.039
Political knowledge	0.104 (0.017) p = 0.000	0.186 (0.013) p = 0.000	0.084 (0.017) p = 0.000	0.092 (0.013) p = 0.000	0.082 (0.017) p = 0.000	0.125 (0.014) p = 0.000	0.175 (0.018) p = 0.000	0.218 (0.018) p = 0.000
Conservatism	-0.448 (0.141) p = 0.002	-0.648 (0.103) p = 0.000	-0.551 (0.138) p = 0.000	-1.136 (0.107) p = 0.000	-0.250 (0.141) p = 0.076	-0.358 (0.115) p = 0.002	-1.001 (0.146) p = 0.000	-0.862 (0.147) p = 0.000
Education	0.052 (0.017) p = 0.003	0.019 (0.013) p = 0.128	0.004 (0.017) p = 0.819	0.021 (0.013) p = 0.112	0.047 (0.017) p = 0.008	0.001 (0.014) p = 0.955	-0.014 (0.018) p = 0.432	0.005 (0.018) p = 0.784
Non-Hispanic White	0.189 (0.053) p = 0.000	0.118 (0.039) p = 0.003	0.164 (0.052) p = 0.002	0.041 (0.040) p = 0.308	0.130 (0.053) p = 0.014	0.202 (0.043) p = 0.000	0.182 (0.055) p = 0.001	0.063 (0.055) p = 0.256

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Get things done	Checks & balances	Exec. Power	Respect for institutions	Misinformed vote	Opponents get voice	Political equality	Prevent protest
Female	0.043 (0.047)	-0.012 (0.035)	0.018 (0.046)	-0.007 (0.036)	-0.083 (0.047)	0.001 (0.038)	0.101 (0.049)	0.048 (0.049)
Religion: Protestant	p = 0.361 0.116 (0.070)	p = 0.731 0.160 (0.051)	p = 0.696 -0.220 (0.069)	p = 0.853 0.117 (0.053)	p = 0.078 0.148 (0.070)	p = 0.988 0.099 (0.057)	p = 0.039 0.040 (0.073)	p = 0.330 0.083 (0.073)
Religion: Catholic	p = 0.100 -0.103 (0.070)	p = 0.002 0.051 (0.052)	p = 0.002 -0.142 (0.069)	p = 0.029 -0.006 (0.054)	p = 0.035 -0.022 (0.071)	p = 0.084 -0.009 (0.057)	p = 0.579 -0.172 (0.073)	p = 0.256 -0.022 (0.073)
Religion: Jewish	p = 0.145 -0.032 (0.135)	p = 0.324 0.085 (0.099)	p = 0.041 -0.068 (0.132)	p = 0.906 -0.095 (0.103)	p = 0.757 0.095 (0.135)	p = 0.882 -0.126 (0.110)	p = 0.019 -0.404 (0.140)	p = 0.766 -0.214 (0.141)
Religion: none	p = 0.811 0.164 (0.067)	p = 0.394 0.131 (0.049)	p = 0.610 0.156 (0.066)	p = 0.355 -0.108 (0.051)	p = 0.482 -0.151 (0.068)	p = 0.252 -0.032 (0.055)	p = 0.004 0.006 (0.070)	p = 0.128 0.252 (0.070)
Constant	p = 0.016 2.156 (0.168)	p = 0.009 3.399 (0.124)	p = 0.019 2.343 (0.165)	p = 0.035 4.015 (0.128)	p = 0.026 3.086 (0.169)	p = 0.566 3.682 (0.137)	p = 0.933 2.622 (0.175)	p = 0.000 2.673 (0.176)
Observations	2,800	2,800	2,800	2,800	2,800	2,800	2,800	2,800
R ²	0.074	0.154	0.093	0.140	0.041	0.058	0.100	0.117

NOTE.—Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. p-values are two-tailed tests.

“opponents get voice,” we find no significant relationship between affective polarization and norm support. Interestingly, on the other two political tolerance items—“political equality” and “prevent protest”—we find a pattern that confirms the politicization hypothesis (as with the constitutional protections). For Democrats, affective polarization increases support for these norms ($p = 0.028$; $p = 0.005$), while for Republicans affective polarization decreases support ($p = 0.003$; $p = 0.039$). Thus, even norms that ostensibly have been less of a focus in elite rhetoric still reflect a cueing dynamic (for further discussion and analyses, see [Supplementary Material section 4](#)). These results suggest that cue-taking, rather than general partisan bias, is more likely to explain the link between affective polarization and support for democratic norms.

ROBUSTNESS TESTS

If our theory of cue-taking is accurate, then we should observe affective polarization having a greater effect among partisans who have more exposure to partisan cues. We follow other work by using our political knowledge measure as a proxy for exposure—knowledgeable people are more likely to know the parties’ positions ([Price and Zaller 1993](#); [Kahan 2015](#)). [Figure 1](#) below shows how political knowledge conditions the effect of affective polarization on support for democratic norms (for low/medium/high levels of political knowledge; see [Supplementary Material section 5](#) for regressions).

We find that knowledge moves in the expected direction for the constitutional protection items. Among the highly knowledgeable, affective polarization makes Democrats (Republicans) tend to be more (less) likely to support those norms. The only exception is the checks and balances item, as knowledgeable partisans always have high support for this norm, regardless of party. We find less consistent evidence on the political tolerance items, even for the two for which we previously found strong cue effects (i.e., political equality and preventing protests). This may reflect that attitudes on these norms reflect spillover of political issue debates (e.g., equality) that saturate the political environment, rather than acute elite stances on these norms (as of 2019).

We also explore whether these patterns emerge under a different presidential administration (i.e., the Democratic Obama administration). In 2012, the American Panel Survey⁶ asked respondents whether they agree that “The government should have some ability to bend the law in order to solve pressing social and political problems,” a question quite similar to our “get things done” and “executive power” items. Unfortunately, the survey does not include a direct measure of affective polarization, but we use partisan strength

6. For more details on this study, including sampling details, see <https://wc.wustl.edu/american-panel-survey>.

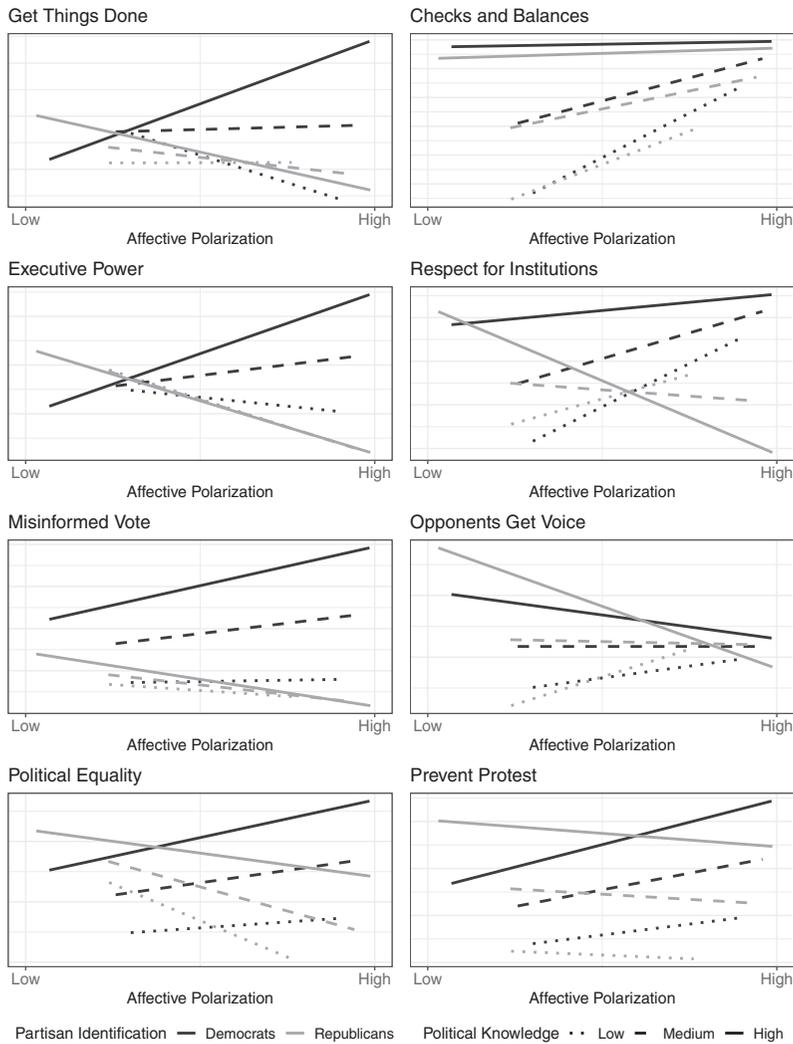


Figure 1. The party-conditioned relationship between affective polarization and support for democratic norms at low, medium, and high levels of political knowledge (1, 3, and 5 knowledge questions answered correctly).

as a proxy, as the affectively polarized are typically strong partisans (Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan 2018).

Two things stand out in the analysis of this item (see [Supplementary Material section 6](#)). First, a bivariate analysis shows that 65 percent of Republicans are supportive of the norm, compared to 43 percent of

Democrats. Second, we find that Republicans become more supportive of the norm ($p = 0.008$) as partisan extremity increases; there is no similar effect among Democrats ($p = 0.413$). Overall, this confirms our basic theoretical story, since the 2012 cues were reversed from those in 2019, with the Democrats holding the presidency and the Senate but not the House. Partisans support constitutional protection norms when the other party holds the reins of power, but not when their own party does.

We also reanalyze data from [Lelkes and Westwood \(2017\)](#), where they examine whether affective polarization (using a thermometer item), in 2013, influences the propensity for partisans to endorse the use of tear gas on members of the opposing party who are peacefully protesting.⁷ We find analogous results to our protest measure. Affective polarization significantly increases the likelihood of Republicans endorsing the use of tear gas (i.e., decreasing their support for the norm, $p = 0.005$); in contrast, affective polarization decreases the likelihood that Democrats endorse the use of tear gas (i.e., increasing their support for the norm), though this result is statistically insignificant ($p = 0.145$); see [Supplementary Material section 7](#) for details. Consistent with our results about political knowledge, it seems as if the political tolerance norms have a consistent partisan slant, perhaps reflecting that protests historically have been more of a Democratic tactic (e.g., [Gillion and Soule 2018](#), pp. 1654–55). This suggests that these tolerance norms (and their underlying mechanisms) may require additional investigation, though we leave that task for future work.

Our robustness tests make clear that democratic norms are far from universally endorsed principles. Support depends on circumstance, and more importantly, the level of affective polarization among the public. In that sense, increased affective polarization may contribute to selective support of norms, making them political footballs rather than bedrock principles.

Conclusion

The decline in support for democratic norms and the rise in affective polarization constitute two of the most notable trends in American politics in the twenty-first century. We examine the relationship between the two, focusing on abstracted principles that, in theory, should be universally accepted by all citizens. That we find clear evidence of the politicization of norms is even more troubling than prior work, as our findings show that affective polarization colors even the basic ideals underlying our constitutional system.

The polarization around norms harkens back to classic works by [Dahl \(1956\)](#), [Lipset \(1960\)](#), and others who warn about the ways in which

7. We condition on party à la our other analysis, which was beyond the scope of the original author's focus.

cleavages can undermine democratic governance, though none of them foresaw, in that era of partisan quiescence, that partisanship would become such a divide. Indeed, if public support for norms is an important check on elites (Weingast 1997), then this suggests that, in an era of polarization, only the opposing party plays that role. Our findings offer a troubling development reminiscent of work demonstrating the polarization of political trust, with its ensuing negative consequences for democratic governance (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015).

We hope our work stimulates more investigation into the politicization of norms. This would include isolating the psychological mechanism of cue-taking (e.g., Connors 2020), further unpacking the disparate dynamics behind constitutional protections and political tolerance norms, and studying the over-time evolution of norm support. Democratic norms have become enmeshed with partisan politics. Tracking that relationship and identifying ways to disentangle the two is a crucial issue for those who hope to limit democratic backsliding.

Data Availability Statement

REPLICATION DATA AND DOCUMENTATION are available at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CSM2LK>.

Supplementary Material

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL may be found in the online version of this article: <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab029>.

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