Incumbent-Opposition Narratives and Voters' Approval of Democratic Violations

Mathias Stenner Falkvist

Incumbent-Opposition Narratives and Voters' Approval of Democratic Violations

PhD Dissertation

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Acknowledgements

Pursuing a PhD is a wild privilege, with almost infinite freedom to study what you consider important. While this freedom is at times dizzying, confusing, and difficult, it is also life-affirming and fulfilling. I do not mean to suggest that all PhD studies are fun and positive experiences. For one, academics are faced with much more criticism, rejection, and temporary contracts than most other jobs. I simply mean that the freedoms in the academic career produce a way of living that can be bountiful. In navigating this freedom, I have learned a lot. This is no accident. Rather, it is because of the time my colleagues have generously invested in me. Prior scholars have established these weird institutions that allow junior scholars to become independent scholars in their own right. Think about how strange it is to round up forty busy, smart, and senior people every couple of weeks to spend a few hours reading, listening, and providing advice to a junior scholar. No other company or institution does this, and to that and to the scholars who maintain it by participating, I am immensely grateful.

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Mathias Falkvist
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Preface

This report summarizes the PhD dissertation *Incumbent-Opposition Narratives and Voters' Approval of Democratic Violations*, which consists of this summary report and the four single-authored research articles listed below. The summary report presents the main theoretical arguments, methodological considerations, core findings, and implications for democratic defense. The individual articles contain a more detailed account of individual theories, methods, data, and analysis. Paper A, Paper B, Paper C, and Paper D refer to the articles throughout the summary report.

- **Paper A:** Are Democrats Too Obsessed with Democracy? *Working Paper*
- **Paper B:** Incumbent–Opposition Asymmetry in the Framing of Democratic Transgressions. Conditionally accepted by the *British Journal of Political Science*.
- **Paper C:** Are Opposition Parties Perceived as "Crying Wolf" During Democratic Backsliding? *Under Review*
- **Paper D:** Isolated Incident or an Attack on Democracy? Evidence from Trump's California National Guard Deployment. *Under Review*

Chapter 1
Introduction

During the Cold War, democratic breakdowns often occurred through fire-blazing coups in which a democratically elected government was ousted, and its members were sometimes brutally executed (Bermeo, 2016; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019; Waldner & Lust, 2018). In contrast, today's democratic backsliding is often a dynamic process in which democratic institutions erode slowly over many years, often in the absence of violence (Chiopris et al., 2025; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019; Wunsch and Blanchard, 2023; Yeung, 2025; see also Skaaning, 2020). This erosion occurs with a sort of quasi-consent from citizens as backsliding leaders are elected over multiple terms in competitive elections (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Wunsch et al., 2025).

Democracy's slower demise affords opposition parties and other political actors an opportunity to persuade voters to support them and to withdraw support from the backsliding leader. Winning elections against a backsliding incumbent is one of the most straightforward ways to defend modern democracies. Bringing democratic-minded parties into government can abruptly halt backsliding and may allow them to implement the structural reforms needed to ensure democracy's long-term survival (Capoccia, 2026). Although there is a risk that backsliding returns, ousting backsliding leaders is a good first step toward preserving democracy. To ensure that opposition parties are best suited to act upon this newfound opportunity, this dissertation examines how opposition parties effectively navagate the politics of backsliding. Specifically, the disseration examines how narratives by autocrazting incumbents and opposition parties affect citezens support of democratic violations.

The dissertation's starting point is that democracy is of *some* normative value. Countless volumes have debated the value of democracy (see, e.g., Dahl, 1989, 1998), and it is not the goal of this dissertation to settle that debate. Two justifications are nonetheless worth stating. First, democracy can be justified by its intrinsic value. All humans hold equal dignity and should, therefore, be allowed a say in politics. Sec-

ond, democracy may be justified on instrumental grounds, implying that democracies tend to produce better outcomes than their alternatives. The latter is an empirical claim in need of empirical scrutiny (see Doucette, 2025; Gerring et al., 2022), whereas the former is moral. Together, they warrant the dissertation's focus on democratic defense.

The literature on democratic backsliding is vast. Much work has been devoted to understanding the phenomenon itself (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Waldner & Lust, 2018), its causes (Broockman et al., 2023; Frederiksen, 2022a, 2024; Graham & Svolik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023; Wunsch et al., 2025), and how specific actors may defend democracy (Bauer, 2024a, 2024b; Capoccia, 2007; Clayton & Willer, 2023; Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Dias et al., 2024; Frederiksen, 2025b; Gamboa, 2017, 2023; Tomini et al., 2023; van Lit & Meijers, 2025; Voelkel et al., 2024; Wuttke et al., 2023). One vital component of democratic backsliding that remains much less well understood is the bread and butter aspects of its politics (although see Bor and Mazepus, 2026; Capoccia, 2026; Hobolt and Osnabrügge, 2025; Laebens and Ślarzyński, 2025).

In specific, one important aspect of democratic backsliding is largely neglected in current research: how political actors strategize and persuade citizens to support or withdraw support from democratic violations. Essentially, this dissertation seeks to understand the narratives about democratic transgressions and how they affect approval of democratic violations. The dissertation investigates both narratives about the democratic violations themselves (Paper A and B) and reputation narratives about the incumbent (Paper D) and opposition parties (Paper C). Narratives refer to how citizens organize and understand ideas about democratic violations, those who commit them, and those who oppose them. In turn, the dissertation focuses on how three key actors in backsliding interact: a) the incumbent with autocratic ambitions, b) democratic-minded opposition parties, and c) citizens. Politics that unfolds beyond the purview of public opinion is therefore out of scope, although many contributions have already been made there (Bauer, 2024a, 2024b; Gamboa, 2023; Kaufman et al., 2025; Kelemen, 2023, 2025).

Political actors' narratives are likely crucial to citizens' approval of undemocratic actions. While the theoretical reasons provided in the following paragraph, an example is likely more persuasive. Let's consider the historical case of Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), which this dissertation returns to multiple times. In 1937, FDR attempted to pack the U.S Supreme Court, a clear violation of liberal democracy. The plan was deeply contested, and even Vice President John Nance Garner opposed

it. The background was obvious, as the conservative Supreme Court had repeatedly struck down New Deal legislation vital to working Americans during the Great Depression. FDR suggested the court couldn't handle the current workload, and more justices would ensure they could. Additionally, FDR had just won the 1936 presidential race handily, showing a democratic mandate. Whether this court packing is seen as a way to give FDR more executive power or as a way to give working-class Americans jobs, or both, is likely to matter for how much citizens approve of the actions (also see Cella et al., 2026; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley, 1997). Yet, narratives are often contested and contingent, as political actors seek to establish their preferred narrative (Chong & Druckman, 2010, 2013; Druckman, 2009; Druckman et al., 2010).

Theoretically, political actors are both the perpetrators of backsliding and the defenders of democracy. As such, they are in a unique position to convey backsliding to citizens. In part, these actors themselves are what the fight is about. At the same time, politics is notably *political*. Parties are not neutral arbiters of democracy, neither as violators nor as custodians. They have significant stakes in how democracy works and in how citizens perceive violations of it. As a result, it is not obvious how citizens respond to conflicts over democratic violations despite the potential for substantive effects. Alas, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to the ways in which traditional democratic politics may defend democracy. The literature's strong assumption about the value of democracy does not seem to translate into a corresponding assumption that democratic-minded parties are able to persuade citizens to defend it. Even among those who value democracy, there appears to be little faith in its ability to sustain itself. Yet precisely this aspect of democratic defense has become ever more pivotal in an era of slower democratic erosion in which the scope for persuasion is greater. This dissertation therefore addresses the following research question: *How do incumbent and opposition parties' narratives affect voters' approval of democratic violations?*

Outline of the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of this summary report and four self-contained but mutually related articles. The summary report includes chapters on the theoretical framework, overarching methodological considerations, the main findings of each article, and the implications of those findings. Each article additionally provides a richer theoretical framework, its own methodological considerations, and a discussion of its findings. Table 1.1

provides an overview of the articles that, together with this summary, make up the dissertation.

Table 1.1: Overview of the Articles in the Dissertation

	Short title	**Title**	**Status**
Paper A	*Positioning*	Are Democrats Too Obsessed with Democracy?	*Working Paper*
Paper B	*Framing*	Incumbent–Opposition Asymmetry in the Framing of Democratic Transgressions	Conditionally accepted in the *British Journal of Political Science*
Paper C	*Crying Wolf*	Are Opposition Parties Perceived as "Crying Wolf" During Democratic Backsliding?	*Under Review*
Paper D	*Isolated Incident*	Isolated Incident or an Attack on Democracy? Evidence from Trump's California National Guard Deployment	*Under Review*

Paper A takes up the initial question of whether democratic-minded parties should even focus on democracy when facing a political challenger with autocratic tendencies. While it may seem obvious that defending democracy entails campaigning for democracy, the article argues that we have theoretical reasons to expect otherwise. On the one hand, citizens tend to prefer democracy, and positioning as the party of liberal democracy may mobilize voters. On the other hand, positioning on democracy elevates its salience, risking the relegation of other issues that voters may care about. Democratic-minded parties may, therefore, do themselves a disservice by positioning themselves on behalf of democracy. Using a multimethod approach in the United States, the article shows that Democrats increased the salience of democracy once Donald Trump became the Republican nominee in 2016. However, across three survey experiments, Democrats' appeals to policy and democracy appear equally effective at making voters withdraw support from autocratic incumbents. These findings imply that parties are neither penalized for positioning on democracy during autocratization nor incur an opportunity cost for doing so.

Paper B addresses the question of whether opposition parties can shape the narrative surrounding a democratic transgression. Across four experiments in the United States with varying sources of treatment material, the article shows that incumbents can increase voters' approval of democratic transgressions. Yet once a transgression has been justified by

an incumbent, opposition parties appear unable, or barely able, to make a dent in this heightened approval. This is interpreted as incumbents enjoying a substantial advantage over the opposition in shaping the narrative around democratic transgressions. In short, there is an incumbent–opposition asymmetry in the framing of democratic transgressions.

Paper C addresses whether democratic-minded opposition parties should confront initial attempts by incumbents to violate democracy in the early stages of democratic backsliding. On the one hand, they may confront initial violations in the hope of challenging autocratic incumbents before they accumulate power, for example over the media or the courts. On the other hand, opposition parties may hold off for fear of being perceived as *the boy who cried wolf*. Using a sequential experimental design in the United States, this article demonstrates that opposition parties challenging initial transgressions as undemocratic are not perceived to be crying wolf and indeed boost early defection from the autocratic incumbent. This implies that truly democratic-minded opposition parties need not fear backlash for confronting early democratic violations.

Paper D addresses whether voters perceive incumbents' democratic transgressions as an attack on democracy or as an isolated incident. If voters perceive violations as interconnected, their resistance to one action may spill over into resistance to other violations. Because democracy is an interconnected system of governance in which each part upholds the others, one perspective holds that voters will perceive transgressions as attacks on democracy. However, previous research on dynamic constraint shows that voters who update one attitude tend not to update related attitudes. This perspective holds that voters view transgressions as isolated incidents instead. By leveraging cross-sectional survey responses collected three months prior to and just after Trump's federalization and deployment of the California National Guard to quell protests, the article shows that voters become less likely to approve of generic protest suppression but that this shift does not extend to other undemocratic actions.

The remainder of the summary is structured as follows. Chapter 2 introduces the dissertation's overarching theoretical framework and concepts. Chapter 3 discusses methodological considerations, including the focus on the United States as a case and the use of different types of survey experiments. Chapter 4 presents the main findings of the dissertation. Chapter 5 discusses the implications of those findings.

Chapter 2
Theoretical Framework

This chapter outlines the overarching theoretical framework of the dissertation in two sections. The first section defines concepts relevant to all individual articles. Specifically, reflections on definitions for parties, democratic-minded parties, opposition parties, democracy, democratic backsliding, and citizens' approval are provided. The second part of the chapter provides a general account of why we should care about parties and how they can affect the outcomes of backsliding. While there is much more meso-level theory found in this dissertation, this is confined to each article. Here, only the overarching outlines that bind the dissertation together are presented.

Democracy, Democratic Backsliding, and Democratic Defense

Any dissertation on democratic backsliding needs some definition of democracy in order to ground a definition of democratic backsliding (Waldner & Lust, 2018). Regrettably, democracy may be one of the most debated concepts in the political science literature (see, e.g., Dahl, 1998; Møller and Skaaning, 2013; Schedler, 2002). In part, the debate stems from democracy's uniquely positive connotations (Gallie, 1955), which lead scholars to attach personal normative beliefs to the definitional question, or as Przeworski (1999) put it, "...democracy has become an altar on which everyone hangs his or her favorite ex voto."

Przeworski (1999) and Przeworski et al. (2000) favor a minimalist concept or rather suggest that defending even minimal democracy is normatively desirable. A minimalist conception tends to revolve around competitive elections as the only criterion (Boix et al., 2013; Møller & Skaaning, 2013; Przeworski et al., 2000) and disregards civil liberties, electoral fairness, universal suffrage, and the rule of law. Instead, the relation of these components to democracy is treated as an empirical question (Teorell et al., 2019). However, there is reason to conceptualize

democracy more broadly because certain freedoms, for example freedom of expression, and principles such as universal suffrage are what make competitive elections meaningful (Diamond, 2002). Following this reasoning, this dissertation adopts the concept of *liberal democracy* in which democracy comprises inclusive competitive elections with high integrity, civil liberties, and the rule of law (Møller & Skaaning, 2013). In practice, the aspect of the rule of law addressed in this dissertation is checks and balances (though see Møller and Skaaning, 2012; Skaaning, 2010).

According to this definition of democracy, democratic violations are those that undermine electoral fairness, civil liberties, the rule of law, or any combination of these. The dissertation thus relies on a relatively fine-grained conception of democracy. For example, gerrymandering or the banning of protests is considered a violation of democracy even if citizens still have suffrage. Democratic backsliding, in turn, is defined as *a sustained deterioration of the qualities of democratic governance*. This definition is similar to the one provided by Waldner and Lust (2018), though it adds that backsliding entails a sustained deterioration. Democratic backsliding is typically a dynamic process through which democratic institutions erode over a period spanning multiple election cycles (Bermeo, 2016; Chiopris et al., 2025; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Svolik, 2019; Yeung, 2025). Throughout the dissertation, the terms *democratic erosion* and *autocratization* are used interchangeably with democratic backsliding. Although a formal definition is in order, the pragmatic approach taken by Waldner and Lust (2018) is the most illuminating and thus deserves to be quoted at length:

> We take a pragmatic approach to the definition of backsliding. Importantly, we understand backsliding as potentially occurring through a discontinuous series of incremental actions, not a one-time *coup de grâce*. Backsliding makes elections less competitive without entirely undermining the electoral mechanism; it restricts participation without explicitly abolishing norms of universal franchise seen as constitutive of contemporary democracy; and it loosens constraints of accountability by eroding norms of answerability and punishment, where answerability refers to the obligation of officials to publicize and justify their actions, and punishment refers to the capacity of either citizens or alternative governing agencies to impose negative consequences for undesirable actions or violations of sanctioned procedures.

Lastly, this dissertation relies on the concept of democratic defense. Democratic defense refers to *actions taken to protect the qualities of democratic governance*. Democratic defense can be conducted in many ways, for example by obstructing an autocrat's legislative agenda or by having the supreme court strike down violations, and by many actors, such as bureaucrats (Bauer, 2024a, 2024b), scholars (Voelkel et al., 2024), co-partisans (Hobolt & Osnabrügge, 2025), or civil society (Tomini et al., 2023). Yet this dissertation focuses on one particular kind of democratic defense, namely party-led democratic defense that attempts to persuade citizens to withdraw support from an autocrat. This sort of democratic defense has become more important as democracy erodes more slowly than in prior decades (Bermeo, 2016; Svolik, 2019). Additionally, it has normative appeal, viewed through a democratic lens, to place the fate of democracy in the hands of citizens and politicians alike.

Political Parties and Elites

Political parties are both the perpetrators of backsliding and the actors that formally oppose it (Druckman, 2024; Tomini et al., 2023). Yet in practice, a political entrepreneur often carries out backsliding with the support of a political party. In a sense, a backsliding party may therefore more allow it to happen than actively encourage it. In the United States, for example, Republican legislators did not tend to express markedly undemocratic attitudes prior to the MAGA movement. The term *incumbent* is, therefore, used instead of *party* (unless otherwise specified) to refer to an undemocratic but elected executive at both the national and subnational levels. While the term is useful for setting up a dichotomy between a backsliding leader and opposition parties, matters are often more complicated as norm-eroding leaders may never have held office or may move in and out of it (Capoccia, 2026). Donald Trump, for instance, was out of office between 2021 and 2025 and thus not an incumbent, yet he remained a backsliding leader. The dissertation nonetheless focuses on incumbents because they can harm democracy most directly.

The dissertation deploys two terms for those who defend democracy: *opposition parties* and *democratic-minded opposition parties*. Both terms are used throughout the text, and they are mostly interchangeable. Both refer to parties that (1) oppose democratic backsliding and (2) are in opposition to the incumbent. The second criterion is not strictly necessary. We may imagine a party that opposes democratic backsliding while remaining in coalition with the autocratic incumbent, and criticism from such parties is likely to be considerably more persuasive to

voters (Hobolt & Osnabrügge, 2025). In practice, however, once erosion begins, a coalition marked by fundamental disagreement about the polity would be difficult to maintain. Israel, for example, has a highly fragmented party system, but in response to both erosion and the wars in Gaza, Lebanon and Iran, it has coalesced around two blocs divided over the future of the polity. More practically, all studies in this dissertation focus on the United States, where the two-party system means that opposing democratic backsliding by an incumbent necessarily entails being in opposition.

Opposition parties are treated as unitary actors throughout the dissertation. While this simplification is helpful when conducting experiments, opposition parties can be fragmented in the real world. I discuss this choice and its potential implications in Chapter 5.

In some parts of the dissertation, such as *Crying Wolf*, it is specified that democratic-minded opposition parties have genuine normative goals of defending democracy and behave accordingly. For most of the dissertation, however, the normative goals of opposition parties are not crucial to the conclusions. Opposition parties may, for example, defend democracy for self-interested reasons, such as being able to win future elections (Przeworski, 1999).

Lastly, it should be noted that throughout the dissertation, the term party refers to the elite members of a party, most often the legislative group (national and subnational) and key strategic actors. This means that the term party does not refer to rank-and-file members or grassroots parts of it. Thus, when the term opposition party is used, I refer to elite members from a party opposing backsliding.

Previous Work on Opposition Parties During Backsliding

Important prior work on how opposition parties affect the outcomes of democratic backsliding warrants discussion. Most notably, work by Gamboa (2017, 2022, 2023) has shown how important opposition actors can be in halting backsliding (see also Capoccia, 2026; Cleary and Öztürk, 2022; Helms, 2023; Laebens and Ślarzyński, 2025; Samet, 2025; Somer et al., 2021; Tomini et al., 2023; van Lit et al., 2024). This work has been vital both in theorizing how macro-level explanations of backsliding are conditioned by opposition parties and in recognizing the agency of opposition actors.

While this research has been fruitful and important, I argue that it has two shortcomings. First, most of it builds on single-country case studies or large-N cross-country analyses. As a result, this research is best suited

to explaining macro-level trends and less well suited to explaining their microfoundations. Second, and relatedly, many of these explanations lack causal rigor. For example, an important claim in Cleary and Öztürk (2022) and Gamboa (2017, 2022, 2023) is that opposition parties with radical goals, such as removing an autocratic incumbent before the end of their term, are less successful than those with moderate goals, such as halting erosion. Moderate goals are held to succeed because they deny the incumbent a pretext for removing the opposition. In essence, moderate opposition parties *live to fight another day*, while radical ones do not. The case studies are persuasive, yet it remains unclear whether confounding factors explain both opposition responses and backsliding outcomes. Opposition parties might, for instance, be more likely to adopt radical goals when the incumbent is highly popular, and incumbent popularity may itself explain erosion outcomes. This warrants an additional focus on causal rigor.

In contrast, this dissertation is squarely focused on causal rigor and on establishing one of the microfoundations of backsliding, namely citizens' approval. While much previous work implies effects on public opinion (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2022), it does not chiefly deal with public opinion, and it often does not draw on public opinion data at all (an exception being Laebens and Ślarzyński, 2025). The mechanisms hypothesized in previous work also extend beyond public opinion, for example by examining how opposition goals shape responses from the international system (Gamboa, 2023). This dissertation therefore provides microfoundations for how opposition behavior affects public opinion during backsliding, which prior work has largely left unaddressed. Moreover, unlike previous research, the dissertation relies on designs that enable causal inference, using both experiments and quasi-experiments.[1] I argue that this constitutes a notable contribution to the literature on backsliding more broadly and to the literature on opposition to backsliding more specifically.

Citizens' Approval of Violations

The outcome of interest remains the same throughout the dissertation. All articles examine citizens' approval of democratic transgressions. Throughout the dissertation, terms such as *withdrawing support* and *sanc-*

[1] While this carries obvious advantages relative to previous research, the dissertation faces limitations of generalizability that cross-country case studies are less subject to (though see Aronow and Samii, 2016; Samii, 2016). This aspect of the dissertation is discussed further in Chapter 3.

tioning undemocratic behavior are used to denote instances in which citizens become less likely to approve of undemocratic actions or of the incumbent who carries them out, for example in response to a treatment. Approval is thus the metric through which public opinion toward democratic violations is studied.

A brief note is warranted on why studying public opinion toward democratic violations is important. Democratic backsliding, unlike a military coup, is a dynamic process usually spanning multiple election cycles (Bermeo, 2016; Chiopris et al., 2025; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Svolik, 2019; Yeung, 2025). Citizens therefore retain the remarkable option of voting out the autocrat, which often, though not always, means supporting the opposition (Svolik, 2023). In this summary report, the term *quasi-consent* is used for this dynamic, i.e., for citizens continuing to vote for an incumbent who has committed multiple democratic violations. Citizens consent to autocratic actions in the sense that even while disapproving of them, they weigh them less heavily than other political considerations (Frederiksen, 2022a, 2024; Graham & Svolik, 2020).

The Politics of Democratic Backsliding

In this section, the overarching theoretical framework for this dissertation is laid out. Each article contains substantive elaboration on each element of the theoretical framework. However, they are interconnected in the framework regarding how narratives affect citizens' approval of democratic violations. Specifically, this dissertation focuses on two aspects: 1) narratives about the democratic violations (Papers A and B) and 2) the narratives about the incumbent and opposition parties (Papers C and D). To avoid confusion, the term reputation is used for the latter narrative. As suggested in the introduction, narratives refer to how citizens organize and understand ideas about democratic violations, those who commit them, and those who oppose them (also see Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). As I shall argue, these aspects enhance our understanding of public opinion toward democratic transgressions.

Previous work on public opinion on democratic violations can be incredibly crudely described as showing that voters prefer democracy (Holliday et al., 2024; Kaftan, 2024a; Svolik, 2023; Wuttke et al., 2022) but that they are willing to trade off democracy for other political currencies such as partisanship, policy, and competence (Aarslew, 2023b; Carey et al., 2022; Frederiksen, 2022a, 2024; Graham and Svolik, 2020; Grossman et al., 2022; Saikkonen and Christensen, 2023; Svolik, 2019; also see Krishnarajan, 2023). This dissertation goes beyond these political

currencies, which are often treated as static (although see Aarslew, 2026; van Noort, 2023), and instead focuses on how decisions by political elites affect voters' approval of democratic violations. In turn, this dissertation largely adopts an agency-based perspective (Capoccia, 2026; Cleary & Öztürk, 2022).

So why might voters respond to narratives and reputations of incumbents and opposition parties? First, democratic violations are not some action taken in a vacuum. Instead, they are shrouded in arguments about their merit or lack thereof. Returning to the example of FDR attempting to stack the United States Supreme Court in 1937, it was to implement parts of the New Deal that had been struck down by the courts. In this way, a democracy violation is rarely solely a violation of democracy; it also includes some reason for doing so, i.e., there is a narrative about violations of democracy, and these narratives are likely to matter for voters' approval of the action.

On the micro-level, we can draw on the extensive literature on framing effects in politics and suggest that narratives about democratic violations do matter for voter approval (Cella et al., 2026; Chong & Druckman, 2007a, 2007b, 2013; Druckman, 2001, 2009; McCarthy, 2023; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Narratives around an issue matter because they shape how voters understand it, and thus are paramount to their support for it. If voters perceive court stacking to be about saving the New Deal from scrupulous, conservative judges, they are proberly more likely to support it than if it were about enhancing the power of FDR.

Second, voters may take account of the reputation of incumbents and opposition actors. Informed by incumbents' and opposition parties' previous actions, voters may update their perceived credibility of the actors on democratic violations (see Druckman, 2001). For example, voters may assess the incumbents' previous democratic violations or how the opposition responded to another democratic violation when evaluating a new violation. In turn, the voters change how they assess subsequent violations because of the reputation of the incumbent and opposition. For example, if members of the opposition party have a reputation for being self-serving, voters may dislike them as people, but also consider their alarm of democratic backsliding less persuasive (Bøggild, 2016; Fernandez-Vazquez, 2019).

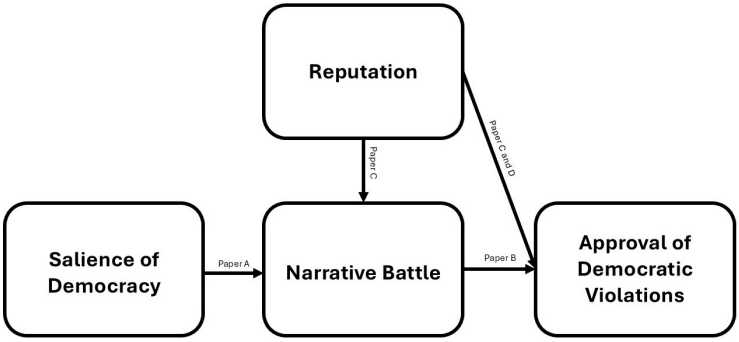


Figure 2.1: Theoretical Framework of Dissertation

Narratives Over Democratic Violations

As defined above, this dissertation conceptualizes democratic backsliding as *a process* (Chiopris et al., 2025; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Waldner & Lust, 2018; Yeung, 2025). The process begins when an incumbent commits or proposes an initial violation of democracy, though subsequent violations are also necessary for it to be considered backsliding. Within a consolidated democracy, *democracy is the only game in town* (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Therefore, the issue is often not very salient in such settings prior to any violation (although see Frederiksen, 2022b; Kaftan, 2024b). Here, the democratic-minded opposition faces its first important strategic decision: whether or not to advance a narrative about democracy. While violations are likely to receive media attention, as I argue in *Positioning*, opposition parties are uniquely well placed to increase the salience of democracy as an issue, for better or worse. If opposition parties do not communicate about democratic violations, media attention will likely fade over time, but if they do engage, they create conflict. Moreover, this conflict will be one at the level of the polity, and it is therefore likely to attract additional media attention and further raise the salience of democracy. The opposition parties' first strategic decision is thus whether or not to compete on the issue of democracy.

Incumbents do not have the same opportunity to increase the salience of democracy even though they are the perpetrators. Realistically, when incumbents carry out an undemocratic action, they can either frame the violation as justified (see Gessler and Kaftan, 2025; McCarthy, 2023;

van Lit and Meijers, 2025; Wunsch, 2025) or stay silent. Control over whether democracy becomes a site of open conflict, and over the salience that follows from it, therefore rests largely with the opposition parties.

While opposition parties have the opportunity to increase the salience of democracy, it is not clear that they should. Voters tend to prefer democracy, and holding an advantage on a salient issue is electorally beneficial (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Petrocik, 1996). Yet raising the salience of one issue necessarily lowers the salience of others. If those other issues are more electorally advantageous, chasing democracy becomes a costly distraction. Therefore, the first action the opposition must take when facing democratic violations is to determine whether the salience of democracy is useful for ousting the incumbent, a question scrutinized further in *Positioning*. This first question is essentially about whether to let *the democracy genie out of the bottle* or to keep the narrative focused on more traditional issues such as healthcare, inflation, and immigration.

Once the genie is out, it may be hard to contain, and each violation acquires a narrative of its own. Consider Donald Trump's suppression of protests in California and the attempt to do the same in Portland through the federalization of the respective state National Guards. Trump colorfully argued that these deployments were necessary to maintain peace and order, whereas the opposition argued both that the protests had been peaceful and that suppressing protest is undemocratic. Once backsliding is underway and conflict between the opposition and the incumbent is in full swing, incumbents seek to justify their actions, and opposition parties seek to persuade voters that democratic violations are undesirable. Political elites, in short, fight over the narrative of democratic violations. In *Framing*, I show that this process involves a litany of decisions by both incumbents and the opposition.

Incumbents must determine how to justify something that is often unpopular among voters (Albertus & Grossman, 2021; Holliday et al., 2024; Kaftan, 2024a; Wuttke et al., 2022). In *Framing*, three categories of justification are suggested (see Table 2.1, also see the full Table in Appendix F of *Framing*). Incumbents may argue that (1) an action is not, in fact, undemocratic (the democratic principle); (2) the violation is needed to serve some other legitimate goal (the appropriateness principle); or (3) those who oppose the action are illegitimate themselves (the animosity principle).

Table 2.1: Real World Examples of Theoretical Dimensions

Democratic Principle	Appropriateness Principle	Animosity Principle
Appeal to majority (Kaczyński): "...If we are to have a democratic state of law, no state authority, including the Constitutional Tribunal, can disregard legislation (TVN24, 2016).	**Appeal to policy concern (Orbán):** "...Today, we voted to ban gatherings that violate child protection laws. In Hungary, a child's right to healthy physical, mental, intellectual, and moral development comes first. We won't let woke ideology endanger our kids" (Orbán, 2025)	**Appeal to undemocratic opposition (Trump)**: "Democrats are becoming increasingly totalitarian" (Egan, 2019).

In addition, *Framing* posits that opposition parties can either attempt to refute the incumbent's justification, which is effective if voters discount it, or propose an alternative perspective, which is effective if it activates different values through which to understand the democratic violation. Both incumbents and opposition thus have notable agency in how they attempt to shape the narrative around democratic transgressions.

Attempts to shape the narrative are in large part the bread and butter of the public politics of democratic backsliding. Almost all democratic transgressions are contested in public, and this contestation persists throughout the period of backsliding rather than being confined to its early stages. Narrative battles are therefore ever-present, during both early and later violations of democracy. Importantly, these battles are likely to influence public opinion because how an issue is understood by voters strongly shapes their approval of it (Cella et al., 2026; Chong & Druckman, 2007a, 2013; Druckman, 2001, 2009; Gessler & Kaftan, 2025; Hansen, 2007; McCarthy, 2023; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997; Sniderman & Theriault, 2018).

How Early Decisions Affect Subsequent Approval of Democratic Violations Via Reputation

It is argued in *Positioning* that opposition parties play a critical role in making democracy a salient issue in the sense that democracy rarely becomes salient before opposition parties get involved. This dissertation likewise argues that actions taken by incumbents and opposition parties

in the early stages of backsliding can substantially affect the approval of subsequent actions. This is because not only do specific violations have a narrative, but so do those who speak about the violation. Specifically, this dissertation broadly suggests that incumbents' and opposition parties' early actions affect subsequent approval via their democratic reputation or credentials.

Incumbents' early actions may affect voters' approval of subsequent actions if those actions are perceived as part of an attack on democracy. If each small violation is instead perceived as an isolated incident, it is unlikely to affect the approval of future actions. Backsliding consists of many small violations that voters sanction to some degree (Aarslew, 2023b, 2026; Frederiksen, 2024; Graham & Svolik, 2020; Saikkonen & Christensen, 2023; Svolik, 2023; van Noort, 2023). If disapproval of one violation spilled over onto subsequent ones, the cumulative effect may be potent enough to protect democracy. Essentially, this study examines how early undemocratic actions by incumbents affect subsequent undemocratic action, which can be seen as a sort of reputation effect by the incumbent.

In *Isolated Incident*, I propose two competing expectations. On the one hand, spillover is plausible, given that democracy is an interconnected system of governance. On the other hand, previous literature on attitudinal change suggests that changes in one attitude do not carry over to related attitudes (Coppock & Green, 2022; Hopkins & Mummolo, 2017). If spillover does occur, incumbents' early violations will shape voters' approval of subsequent democratic violations.

In a similar vein, early decisions by democratic-minded opposition parties are also theorized to affect the approval of subsequent democratic violations. Specifically, in *Crying Wolf*, it is argued that the way opposition parties respond to early violations can influence both their reputation on the issue of democracy and the effectiveness of their subsequent actions.

During an incumbent's initial violations of democratic norms, neither citizens nor opposition parties can be certain whether the incumbent is truly an autocrat (see Chiopris et al., 2025; Cleary and Öztürk, 2022; Hinterleitner and Sager, 2023; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, 2014) simply because enough evidence for such a conclusion has not yet accumulated. Since the incumbent's democratic credentials remain uncertain, opposition parties may be wary of calling the incumbent autocratic for fear of getting a reputation as the boy who cried wolf (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2023; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019; Miller, 2021; Pérez-Liñán, 2007) or as invoking democracy's positive connotations in a self-serving man-

ner (Bøggild, 2016; Gallie, 1955). Opposition parties may, therefore, fear that calling the incumbent autocratic too early will cost them credibility when subsequent violations occur.

Yet, as argued by Capoccia (2026), the early stages of backsliding are also when the incumbent is weakest. Incumbents have not yet taken control of media institutions, election rules, or the courts. Therefore, it may be preferable to fight the incumbent on neutral grounds as long as opposition parties do not suffer a reputational cost.

Chapter 3
Methods

This chapter will focus on the overarching methodological considerations of this dissertation. While the dissertation employs a diverse set of methodological approaches, they are all quantitative, variance-based approaches, mostly set up to estimate causal effects. Due to this diversity, this chapter does not cover all relevant methodological considerations. For example, in *Positioning*, an LLM is used to code congressional texts. This LLM coding is not covered in this chapter but is extensively covered in the written material of *Positioning*. Instead, this chapter covers three important aspects of the dissertation. First, the usage of survey experiments and different kinds of survey experiments are discussed. Second, the case selection of the United States, its effects on the dissertation, and its generalizability are discussed. Although other countries are referenced throughout the dissertation, all studies have been conducted within the United States. Lastly, a discussion on the measurement of the outcome variables of most of the studies is presented, particularly how approval of undemocratic actions can be a useful metric for public opinion.

Survey Experiments and Topic Sampling

All articles in this dissertation, except *Isolated Incident*, contain at least one survey experiment. The dissertation employs a range of designs, including vignette approaches, topic sampling, and sequential designs. The main goal of using a survey experiment nonetheless remains the same across all of them, namely to randomize treatment and thereby overcome the fundamental challenge of selection bias (Angrist & Pischke, 2008). Randomly assigning respondents to different kinds of incumbent or opposition behavior allows us to estimate the causal effects of that behavior. Because experimentation is so central to the scientific method, it has become normalized and often goes unremarked, but its ability to uncover causal effects remains a major boon. For all their merits, ex-

Table 3.1: Overview of Dissertation Papers and Studies

	Description	Designs & Studies	Survey Outcomes
Paper A	A multimethod study of the Democratic Party examines whether it is electorally effective to focus on democracy.	• LLM-based coding of congressional speeches (2001–2024) • Democratic legislators' X-tweets content analysis • Vignette experiment • Topic-sampled experiment • Survey media choice task	• Vote choice • Approval of a Democratic candidate • Approval of a Republican candidate • Media consumption choice
Paper B	Four experiments examine whether opposition parties can shape the narrative over democratic transgressions.	• Two topic-sampled survey experiments • Two vignette survey experiments • Media analysis	• Approval of undemocratic action • Perceived salience of undemocratic action
Paper C	A sequential vignette design examines whether opposition parties are penalized for characterizing early democratic violations as undemocratic.	• Sequential vignette experiment	• Recall of copartisan governor • Approval of undemocratic action • Open-ended text
Paper D	A natural experiment with pre–post surveys examines whether violations against democracy are perceived as isolated incidents or as attacks on democracy.	• Natural experiment with two cross-sectional samples (data from Paper B)	• Approval of undemocratic action

periments and survey experiments in particular face other kinds of challenges. Three that are relevant to this dissertation are discussed here: 1) realism and internal validity, 2) external validity, and 3) the attentiveness of survey respondents.

First, for experiments to correctly uncover the causal effect of a given variable, the treatment material must manipulate that variable and not other relevant variables (Dafoe et al., 2018; Fong & Grimmer, 2023; Mutz, 2021). While this might appear straightforward, it often is not. In *Framing*, for example, the experiments attempt to mimic how incumbents and opposition parties shape narratives over democratic violations in the real world. While it is possible to manipulate the words that respondents read, modern political communication is dynamic and often involves simultaneous messaging and sustained campaigning. This cannot be part of the experiment, and we cannot determine how its absence affects the results. Consequently, while *Framing* manipulates perhaps the most important aspect of how parties shape narratives over transgressions, i.e., what they say about them, other aspects are held constant. Manipulating only some aspects is a necessary trade-off when conducting well-powered experiments.

A common critique of survey experiments is that they are not realistic. This is an easy charge to level as such experiments often present simple vignettes of some sterile, undemocratic action with little context. However, whether or not an experiment is *mundanely realistic* matters little, whereas *experimental realism* matters a great deal (Druckman, 2022). Experimental realism refers to the extent to which participants engage seriously with the treatment, and respondents who find a treatment very strange may fail to do so. Many of the experiments in this dissertation therefore use subtle undemocratic actions that respondents could plausibly encounter in the real world, which ensures that the actions are not dismissed as too implausible to warrant careful consideration. The goal of this decision has little to do with mundane realism and everything to do with experimental realism.

Second, in *Positioning* and *Framing*, a topic-sampled vignette design is implemented to enhance external validity (see Blumenau and Lauderdale, 2024a, 2024b; Clifford and Rainey, 2025; Clifford et al., 2023; Fong and Grimmer, 2023; Landy et al., 2020; Simonsohn et al., 2025; Skytte, 2025; Tappin, 2022). Topic sampling refers to the practice of sampling treatments from a larger set of potential treatments (Brunswik, 1956; Clifford & Rainey, 2024). External validity refers to how findings generalize beyond a specific study (Druckman, 2022; Findley et al., 2021), and topic sampling primarily enhances external validity with re-

spect to treatment construction (Egami & Hartman, 2023). The intuition is that an effect that holds across multiple kinds of treatment is more generalizable than one estimated from a single treatment.

In *Framing*, this is achieved by analyzing previous instances of narrative battles over democratic violations and collecting a sample of frames. Topic sampling is not applied directly here because the sampled frames were adjusted to fit the vignette format. They are, therefore, referred to in the article as parallel experiments, though the underlying intuition about external validity remains similar. In *Positioning*, a topic-sampled experiment is fully implemented, which entails randomly sampling treatments from a list of tweets by Democratic federal legislators about Trump's undemocratic actions. In *Crying Wolf*, the complexity of the sequential design did not permit topic sampling without a potential loss of power.

Third, political science and other disciplines have come to rely heavily on survey responses, which is likely to have increased non-response and lowered attentiveness (Leeper, 2019; Westwood, 2025). All surveys used in this dissertation drew on paid respondents, either from YouGov (Papers A and D) or from Prolific (Papers B and C). Paying respondents for their time is the more ethically sustainable practice given the increase in surveys. There is, however, a risk that participants are unrepresentative of the general public and that participants speed through the survey in order to maximize payment by completing additional surveys. The first concern is readily addressed as research on the subject shows that even where differences between samples exist, responses to treatment tend not to differ (Coppock, 2019; Coppock & McClellan, 2019; Mullinix et al., 2015). The latter is more complicated. A simple pre-treatment attention check is used in all surveys in the dissertation. To balance ethical and research considerations, the check was deliberately not overly demanding and mostly served to remove egregious speeding. Even so, the presence of an attention check, together with the fact that other researchers also rely on them, likely makes respondents more cautious about rushing. In addition, *Crying Wolf* contained a factual manipulation check (Kane & Barabas, 2019). Lastly, all surveys were kept under ten minutes to avoid respondents becoming disengaged. While the attentiveness of survey respondents is always an open question, this dissertation has followed best practices that balance ethical and research considerations.

The United States as a Case

All studies have been conducted with the United States as a case. This has several evident advantages. First, US democracy attracts considerable scholarly and public attention as it is among the oldest and most powerful democracies in the world. Essentially, the US is interesting. Second, it allows for better inter-study comparisons. Third, my familiarity with the language, culture, and political system improves the quality of the studies. However, the US has a number of peculiarities that might affect inference and are worth discussing.

First, the US has been a consolidated democracy, which is associated with democratic resilience (Cornell et al., 2017; Przeworski et al., 1996; Svolik, 2013; Treisman, 2023). American voters do appear to care about democracy in that they sanction undemocratic actions, even if they do so less than one might hope (Aarslew, 2026; Carey et al., 2022; Eady et al., 2023; Frederiksen, 2024; Graham & Svolik, 2020; Holliday et al., 2024). Additionally, voters do rationalize policy-congruent undemocratic actions as democratic, something they would be unlikely to do if they placed no value on democracy (R. L. Claassen & Ensley, 2016; Krishnarajan, 2023). That voters have some intrinsic concern for democracy matters as communication about democracy might otherwise be moot. Inference to other contexts therefore requires that citizens hold a preference for democracy, which is likely to be present in other democracies and strongest in consolidated ones (also see C. Claassen, 2020).

Additionally, the US has the highest nominal GDP of any country. In short, it's the richest country in the world. The link between economic development and democracy has been discussed extensively (Acemoglu et al., 2001, 2019; Boix & Stokes, 2003; Lipset, 1959). However, it suffices to say that being a richer country likely enhances democratic resilience. However, democracy is contested in several medium- to high-income countries, such as Italy, Poland, and Hungary, and democratic norms are also challenged in Sweden and Germany. As such, we should still expect some generalizability to other relevant countries. However, whether the lessons in this dissertation apply to lower parts of the income spectrum in countries such as Tanzania or India is less clear.

Second, the US has a two-party system (see Frederiksen, 2025a). This is useful for the dissertation's experiments as it reduces the number of variables in play. It avoids, for example, situations that may arise in multiparty systems, where opposition to an undemocratic incumbent may come from within the incumbent's own bloc. Such a reduction in com-

plexity is particularly useful for experimental approaches, whose goal is to isolate the variables of interest (Druckman, 2022).

For this dissertation, the most consequential feature of the two-party system is that voters usually hold a partisan identity or lean (Campbell et al., 1980; Finkel et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019). Voters have some attachment to both the incumbent and the opposition party, and voters who prefer the incumbent therefore lack access to democracy-based criticism from an ideologically aligned party, which would be available in a multiparty system (see also Hobolt and Osnabrügge, 2025). Respondents who like an incumbent are likely to dislike the opposition and vice versa (see Table 3.2). This may mean either that opposition critiques are less likely to be effective because voters discount out-partisan sources for rational or irrational reasons (Christensen, 2022, 2023; Little, 2025), or that opposition critiques are redundant because out-partisan respondents already disapprove of the incumbent (floor effects). Across studies, however, this dissertation tends to find that partisans react very similarly to treatment and finds no evidence of floor effects.[2] Despite negligible differences in treatment effects, there are large differences in intercepts simply because in-partisans are more supportive of incumbents' democratic transgressions than out-partisans are (Aarslew, 2023b, 2026; Simonovits et al., 2022). This is also in line with previous work on political attitudes (Coppock, 2023) and on support for undemocratic politicians (Frederiksen, 2024). The findings therefore appear to generalize to multiparty systems, with the scope condition that critiques come from a party not ideologically aligned with the incumbent. For example, limited generalization likely applies to the Tisza Party's success in Hungary, which is a splinter of Fidesz.

Third, the US has a presidential system, which means that the incumbent has a certain plebiscitarian legitimacy (Linz, 1990). In a sense, this might overstate the power of incumbents' democratic narratives and reputation. Similarly, in *Framing*, governors' narratives have a larger effect than the opposition's. However, democratic politics in a parliamentary system also requires either no majority against the incumbent (negative parliamentarism) or a majority for the incumbent (positive parliamentarism). Especially, positive parliamentarism thus also ensures a certain level of plebiscitarian legitimacy, though negative parliamentarism less so. This means that when generalizing to negative parliamentarism, slightly more caution is warranted. This limitation is likely small, given

[2]The one slight departure from this pattern is Experiment 1 in *Positioning*, where treatment effects do differ across partisanship.

Table 3.2: Partisan Configurations in a Two-Party System

	Republican incumbent	**Democratic incumbent**
Republican respondents	Inparty transgressor *AND* Outparty opposition	Outparty transgressor *AND* Inparty opposition
Democratic respondents	Outparty transgressor *AND* Inparty opposition	Inparty transgressor *AND* Outparty opposition

that all democratically elected governments enjoy some plebiscitarian legitimacy.

Fourth, the US has much weaker parties than most other countries. This allows outside candidates such as Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders[3] to realistically compete for major party nominations. This means that party leadership has a hard time reigning in extremists, including their democratic violations. Parties in countries such as the United Kingdom and Poland appear much stronger. This matters especially for narratives that require the entire party to be on board. For example, as argued in *Positioning* and *Crying Wolf*, parties may want to hold off bringing up democracy until later stages of backsliding. Here, having a strong party likely enhances opposition parties' ability to stay on message. While parties are weaker in the United States than elsewhere, it is unlikely to undermine generalization, as parties are treated as unitary actors throughout the dissertation and in the survey experiments. Thus, the estimated treatment effects are likely the same, though opposition parties elsewhere may be more able to practice restraint.

Fifth, the US is notably polarized, particularly in affective terms (Dias & Lelkes, 2022; Druckman & Levy, 2022; Finkel et al., 2020; Hare & Poole, 2014; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019), and some scholars have suggested that polarization deepens democratic backsliding and increases voters' approval of democratic violations (Gessler & Wunsch, 2025; Kingzette et al., 2021; Somer et al., 2021; Svolik, 2019). However, the relationship between polarization and support for democratic violations has been found to be tenuous and, for affective polariza-

[3]Sanders has been an independent for much of his career, but still sought the Democratic nomination for president in 2016 and 2020.

tion specifically, close to null (Broockman et al., 2023; Dias et al., 2024; Druckman et al., 2023; Voelkel et al., 2023). Furthermore, polarization is by no means a solely US phenomenon. Backsliding countries such as Turkey and Venezuela are and have been polarized, and even in countries without substantiel backsliding, such as France, polarization is high (see Svolik, 2019). If polarization does affect generalization to other contexts, the effect appears limited, and broad generalization likely holds.

All democratic politics has incumbent and opposition parties that compete over the narrative, which likely matters for citizens' approval of democratic violations. Yet, several institutional and structural factors differ in the US from those in many other democracies. Highlighting the most crucial, I suggest that critiques from ideologically aligned parties are likely more effective (see also Hobolt and Osnabrügge, 2025), and also caution against generalizing to countries where voters put limited intrinsic value on democracy.

Are Undemocratic Actions Specific to Trump?

Generalization and external validity are not solely a matter of country-to-country generalization (Clifford & Rainey, 2025; Egami & Hartman, 2023; Findley et al., 2021; Yarkoni, 2022). A further constraint on generalization in this dissertation is whether the democratic violations studied are specific to President Donald Trump. Trump has clearly committed democratic violations on an unprecedented scale, to such an extent that V-Dem no longer categorizes the US as a liberal democracy (God et al., 2026). If the violations themselves, their particular forms, or the ways in which they are communicated were specific to Trump, only cautious generalization to future violations would be warranted. However, both the violations and the forms of communication studied here are largely of the subtler kind that has recurred throughout US history (Grimmer & Hersh, 2024; Grumbach, 2023). Gerrymandering, used as an example in several of the experiments, is a prominent case in point. While it is a persistent low-level threat to democratic quality, it has been part of the American political landscape for more than two centuries. As such, the findings of the dissertation are not necessarily dependent on Trump's presidency simply because the experiments do not rely heavily on his particular actions.[4]

While the democratic violations investigated in this dissertation have been commonplace throughout much of American history, the Trump pe-

[4]One important caveat is Experiment 2 in *Positioning*, which relies directly on actions taken by Trump.

riod differs in the salience of democracy. Aspects of democracy have certainly been prominent in earlier periods, such as during the civil rights movement or under FDR's executive aggrandizement, but such high salience is the exception rather than the norm. It is, however, more common during democratic backsliding, irrespective of who the backsliding leader is. In this sense, the findings are less specific to Trump than to the process of backsliding in the US.

Comparing Treatment Effects

Throughout the dissertation, I compare the effects of different kinds of treatment with one another, not solely with the control condition. For example, *Positioning* compares the effects of opposition appeals to either policy or democracy in critiquing an autocratic incumbent. This approach is important to the dissertation because many of its questions turn on what constitutes *effective* opposition behavior. Answering them requires knowing whether one type of opposition behavior makes voters disapprove of undemocratic actions more than another does. Such comparisons require more than inspecting coefficient sizes side by side, and they are often notably power-intensive (Gelman & Stern, 2006). Monetary and ethical constraints (Leeper, 2019) make it infeasible, however, to collect samples large enough to compare treatment effects to the decimal place. While sample sizes in the dissertation tend to be substantial, detecting differences in effect sizes of, say, 0.02 is not always possible (see Appendix C in *Framing*).

In practice, this matters less than it might first appear. First, differences as small as 0.02 are unlikely to be meaningful in the grand scheme of democratic backsliding (though see Broockman and Kalla, 2023). Therefore, the relevant question is not which opposition strategy is technically most effective but whether some strategies are *obviously* more effective than others. Second, steps are taken to maximize power, for example by having respondents complete multiple rounds of an experiment as in *Positioning* and *Framing*. In sum, this dissertation conducts many comparisons of treatment effects, with the goal not of obtaining an exact measure of the difference between them but of testing whether one form of opposition behavior is clearly more effective than others.

Approval as a Metric for Public Opinion

Throughout the dissertation, approval of undemocratic action is measured, and in all articles but *Crying Wolf*, it is the primary outcome. Approval is a useful measure because it is fine-grained. This is an advantage relative to measures that require voters to make more drastic decisions, such as switching their vote away from their own party (Aarslew, 2026). Many articles in the democratic backsliding literature rely explicitly on measures in which respondents must support an out-partisan candidate in order to sanction undemocratic behavior (Frederiksen, 2024; Graham & Svolik, 2020). Yet this may set too high a hurdle for opposition parties (see Aarslew, 2026; Svolik, 2023). Measuring approval of undemocratic actions is thus advantageous because it registers more gradual shifts. The fine-grained nature of the measure does, however, make it all the more sobering when no treatment effects are observed, given that approval should be comparatively malleable (as in *Framing*).

Chapter 4
Main Findings

This chapter summarizes the main findings of the dissertation and how those conclusions were reached. The first section shows that opposition parties are unlikely to be penalized for competing on democracy with an autocratic incumbent. The second section shows that incumbents have a much larger effect on the narrative about democratic violations than opposition parties do. The third section shows that opposition parties are not perceived as the boy who cried wolf when they critique an incumbent's early violations of democracy. The fourth section shows that voters perceive violations of democracy as isolated incidents rather than as attacks on democracy.

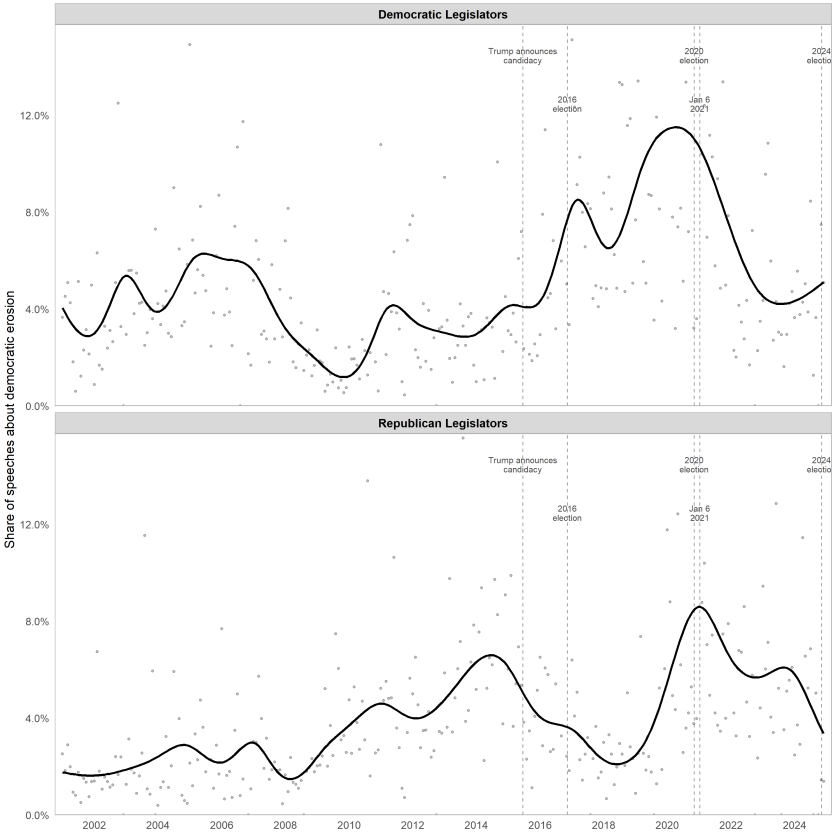
Should Opposition Parties Compete on Democracy?

First, it is important to answer whether opposition parties should compete on democracy as an issue at all. On the one hand, voters tend to prefer democracy (Aarslew, 2026; Holliday et al., 2024; Kaftan, 2024a; Wuttke et al., 2022), even if they are willing to trade it off against other considerations (Frederiksen, 2024; Graham & Svolik, 2020). Democracy therefore looks like a winning issue. On the other hand, competing on democracy raises the salience of that issue and relegates others that voters may care about. Democracy is also an essentially contested concept, and opposition parties are unlikely to be seen as neutral arbiters by the incumbent's copartisans (Gallie, 1955; Krishnarajan, 2023). As shown in *Positioning*, many Democratic-aligned commentators and legislators explicitly warned against losing touch with other issues for the sake of democracy. That this was a public debate among Democratic-aligned commentators suggests its real-world importance.

To address this question, I conducted a multimethod study of the Democratic Party in the United States. First, using LLM prompting, I analyzed congressional speeches from 2001–2024 and found that Democrats sharply increased the number of speeches they gave about democratic

erosion in response to the Republican Party's nomination of Trump for president. While congressional speeches are only one form of communication, they likely serve as a proxy for other kinds of political communication. The records are also kept meticulously, which means there is little risk of sampling bias. Republicans, meanwhile, increased their speeches about democratic erosion only in the run-up to the 2020 election, likely because of their focus on election integrity.

Figure 4.1: Share of Congressional Speeches Focused on Democratic Erosion



Notes: The upper panel shows the average number of monthly speeches by democratic legislators on democratic erosion, while the lower panel shows the average number of monthly speeches by republican legislators on democratic erosion. The line is a generalized additive model with k=25.

While the congressional record shows a clear temporal trend toward more attention to democratic erosion, it provides no information on variation in how Democratic federal legislators responded to particular transgressions, in part because speeches about erosion can be broad and difficult to link to specific violations.[5] Data from X was, therefore, collected for Democratic legislators during specific time periods in which Donald Trump is known to have committed a democratic violation. From these periods, a corpus of 1,236 tweets identified as concerning Trump's democratic violations was assembled (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Selected Cases of Democratic Transgressions

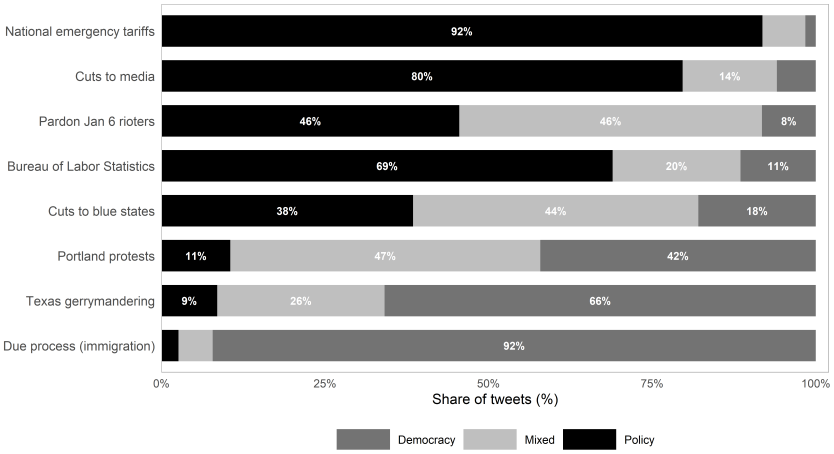
Democratic Violation	**Aspect of Democracy**	**Time Period**
Texas gerrymandering	Electoral fairness	Aug. 01, 2025 – Aug. 20, 2025
Pardon Jan 6 rioters	Electoral fairness	Jan. 20, 2025 – Jan. 23, 2025
Ignore due process of immigrants	Civil liberties	Apr. 10, 2025 – Apr. 20, 2025
Portland protest suppression	Civil liberties	Oct. 04, 2025 – Oct. 07, 2025
Cuts to non-partisan media	Checks and balances	Jul. 03, 2025 – Jul. 19, 2025
Firing of head of Labor Statistics	Checks and balances	Aug. 01, 2025 – Aug. 04, 2025
Cuts solely to blue states	Checks and balances	Oct. 01, 2025 – Oct. 07, 2025
National emergency tarrifs	Checks and balances	Apr. 02, 2025 – Apr. 10, 2025

By hand-coding these tweets, I show that Democrats responded to Trump's democratic violations by emphasizing both the policy and the democracy aspects of those violations. When Trump pardoned the January 6 rioters, for example, roughly half the tweets addressed the rioters' violence, crime, and anti-police sentiment, and only a small share dealt exclusively with democracy. Tweets about other violations, such

[5] Congressional sessions may take place some time after a violation has occurred, which makes it difficult to determine which transgression a legislator is responding to. Some speeches also refer only broadly to Trump's undermining of democratic norms.

as the lack of due process in the deportation of Kilmar Ábrego García, were almost entirely focused on democracy. While there is a clear tendency to frame the most severe or unambiguous violations as threats to democracy, the variation in how Democratic legislators frame violations is surprising nonetheless.

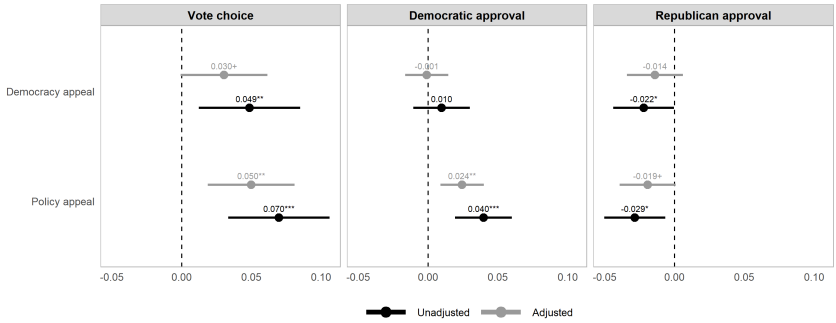
Figure 4.2: Share of Tweets Focused on Democracy, Policy, or Both by Democratic Legislators



Notes: Each bar shows the share of tweets on that issue focused on democracy, policy, or a mix.

To estimate the causal effects of Democrats focusing on either policy or democracy, I rely on a vignette experiment and a topic-sampled experiment. The sample was recruited from Prolific, with deliberate oversampling of Republicans. The vignette experiment attempts to decouple policy and democracy by presenting respondents with a fictitious Republican governor who undermines democracy in pursuit of a policy goal. This makes it possible to manipulate whether the Democratic candidate emphasizes the policy aspect or the democracy aspect when appealing to voters (see Table 4.2 for an example). There are three conditions: control, democracy appeal, and policy appeal. Respondents in the control condition see only the action taken by the Republican governor, whereas those in the two appeal conditions also see a response from the Democratic candidate. Three outcomes were measured after the vignettes: vote choice (indicating a vote for the Democratic candidate), approval

Figure 4.3: Estimated Effects of Treatment in Vignette Experiment



Notes: Coefficient points denote the difference between the control group and the policy appeal and democracy appeal treatments on three outcomes rescaled to a 0–1 scale. Horizontal lines represent 95% confidence intervals. The leftmost panel shows the effect on voting for the Democratic candidate. The middle panel shows the effect on the approval of the Democratic candidate. The rightmost panel shows the effect on the approval of the Republican candidate. Black dots are unadjusted treatment effects. Gray dots show adjusted treatment effects, adjusting for pre-treatment feelings toward the Democratic Party and healthcare spending preference. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, + $p < 0.10$.

of the Democratic candidate, and approval of the Republican governor. Each was rescaled from 0–1 for easier interpretation. Effects were estimated using OLS regression, and both adjusted and unadjusted estimates are reported.

The results of the experiment are shown in Figure 4.3. Both democracy and policy appeals increase Democratic vote intention by 3–7 percentage points, which is a substantial change. The policy appeal coefficients are slightly larger, but the difference is negligible and not statistically significant. A similar pattern holds for the two secondary outcomes. Both appeals decrease approval of the Republican governor, again with a slightly larger decrease for policy appeals. Policy appeals also increase approval of the Democratic candidate, whereas democracy appeals have no consistent effect. In sum, both democracy appeals and policy appeals make voters more likely to withdraw support from the Republican governor, with only small differences in effect size.

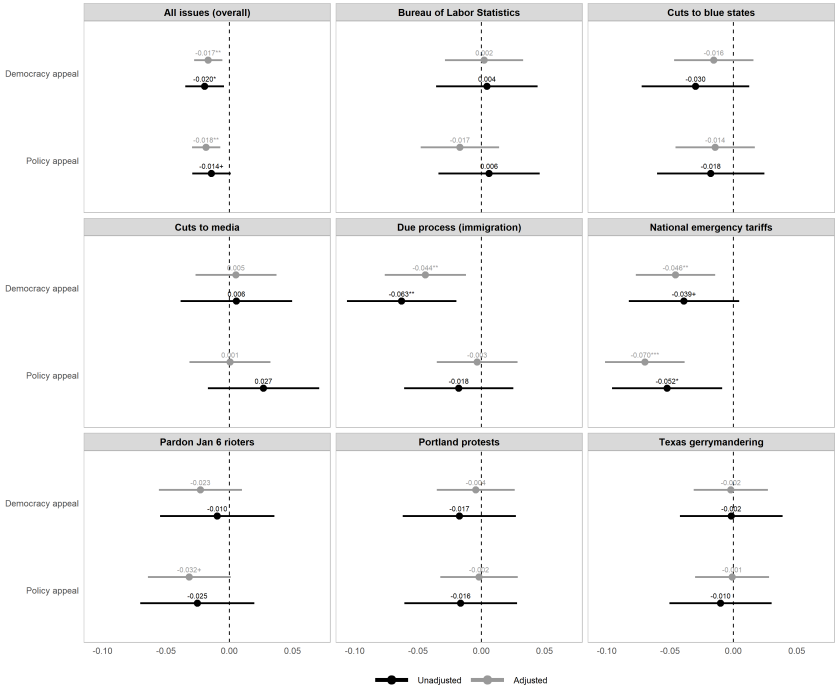
A topic-sampled experiment was administered in the same survey immediately after the vignette. It presents respondents with a short description of undemocratic actions taken by Trump, namely the same actions shown in Table 4.1. For each action, five democracy appeals and five pol-

Table 4.2: Examples of Treatment Stimuli of the Vignette Experiment

Treatment Condition	Description
	Imagine that elections for Governor were held next month. The race is between the sitting Republican Governor, who believes we need to reduce state taxes and be tougher on crime, and a Democratic candidate who believes we should increase healthcare spending and make abortion legal in most cases.
Control	The election has recently become controversial as the Republican Governor has restricted all public gatherings following a string of large-scale peaceful protests in the State Capital. The protesters gathered to voice their dissatisfaction with the economic conditions after an official report showed declining jobs and wages in the state. The Governor later stated that the actions were necessary to get the state back to work.
Democracy Appeal	[*Same preamble as control*] In response, the Democratic candidate has stated that the Republican Governor is not a responsible executive. We need a Governor who works for us and **tolerates the constitutionally protected right to protest**. The most important thing for normal people is **a vibrant democracy**; everything else follows from that.
Policy Appeal	[*Same preamble as control*] In response, the Democratic candidate has stated that the Republican Governor is not a responsible executive. We need a Governor who works for us and **can create a strong economy**. The most important thing for normal people is **to earn a living wage**; everything else follows from that.

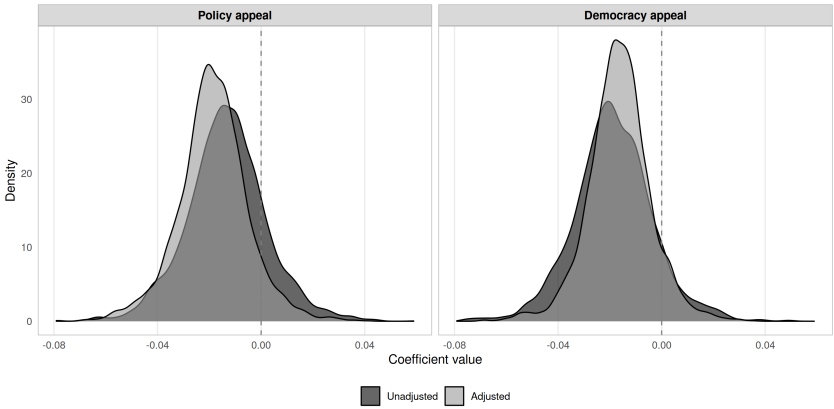
icy appeals drawn from the corpus of legislators' tweets serve as the pool of treatments. Each respondent evaluated three of Trump's actions and was asked how much they approved of each (rescaled 0–1). The treatment conditions are the same as in the vignette experiment. I use both a Bayesian and a frequentist estimator, following Clifford and Rainey (2024).

Figure 4.4: Estimated Effects of Treatment in Topic-Sampled Experiment



Notes: Coefficient points denote the difference between the control group and the policy appeal and democracy appeal treatments' approval rescaled to a 0–1 scale. Horizontal lines represent 95% confidence intervals. The upper leftmost panel pools all eight issues into the same model, while the rest reflect individual issues. Black dots are unadjusted treatment effects. Gray dots show adjusted treatment effects, adjusting for party ID, pre-treatment feelings toward the Democratic Party, sex, employment status, and healthcare spending preference.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, + $p < 0.10$.

Figure 4.5: Bayesian Estimate of Effects of Treatment in Topic-Sampled Experiment



Notes: Distributions reflect a Bayesian model estimating the distributions of treatment effects. Black distributions are unadjusted treatment effects. Gray distributions show adjusted treatment effects, adjusting for party ID, pre-treatment feelings toward the Democratic Party, sex, employment status, and healthcare spending preference.

The findings closely resemble those of the vignette experiment. Both policy and democracy appeals produce small negative effects on approval of Trump's democratic violations. The main difference between the two experiments is that the effects are smaller in the topic-sampled one, likely because of pre-treatment exposure and voters' crystallized opinions of Trump. The effects nonetheless suggest that persuasion remains possible even if the effects are small (Coppock, 2023). The article further shows that the results are not driven by partisan effects, stimulus selection, or floor effects.

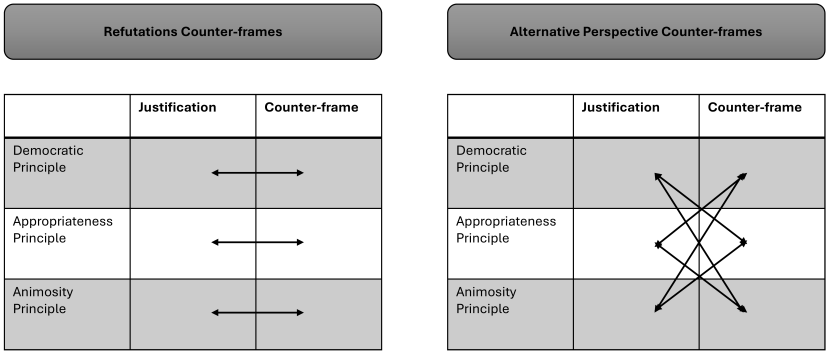
In summary, the results of *Positioning* suggest that opposition parties are not penalized for increasing the salience of democracy. Appeals to policy and appeals to democracy seem to induce withdrawal of support from an undemocratic incumbent to about the same extent. While democratic-minded opposition parties can raise the salience of democracy with little fear of backlash, doing so is no more effective than appealing to policy. As such, democratic-minded opposition parties should weigh their specific contexts before committing to a democracy-based strategy.

Who Controls the Narrative Over Democratic Violations?

Knowing that opposition parties are, at the very least, not penalized for pursuing a democratic critique allows for further investigation into how incumbents and opposition parties attempt to shape the narrative around democratic violations. *Framing* studies this question through four survey experiments in the United States.

As argued in the theoretical chapter, incumbents may justify their violations by arguing that (1) an action is not in fact undemocratic (the democratic principle), (2) the violation is needed to serve some other legitimate goal (the appropriateness principle), or (3) those who oppose the action are themselves illegitimate (the animosity principle). Opposition parties may in turn (1) attempt to refute the incumbent's justification on its own terms or (2) propose an alternative perspective through which to understand the democratic violation. The operationalization of refutation and alternative perspective counter-frames is shown in Figure 4.6.

Figure 4.6: Operationalization of Refutation and Alternative Perspective Counter-Frames



The four experiments in *Framing* are closely related and share the same four treatment conditions shown in Table 4.3. This treatment structure helps isolate the effects of incumbents justifying their democratic violations and the effects of opposition parties offering a refutation or alternative perspective counter-frame, *given* that the incumbent has already justified the violation. The latter point is important as no condition criticizes the incumbent independently of a prior justification (see van Lit and Meijers, 2025). While incumbents sometimes remain silent about their

Table 4.3: Overview of Treatment Condition

Condition	Description	Percentage of n
Pure control	Receive only undemocratic action	10%
Framed control	Receive framed undemocratic action	20%
Refutation counter-frame	Receive framed undemocratic action and aligned counter-frame	35%
Alternative perspective counter-frame	Receive framed undemocratic action and non-aligned counter-frame	35%

Table 4.4: Overview of Studies

Study	Description	Data collection	N	Obs
Study 1a	Parallel vignette experiment with sampled treatment	June/July 2025	5257	20267
Study 1b	Vignette experiment	June/July 2025	5257	5257
Study 2a	Parallel vignette experiment with sampled treatment	March 2025	5306	20538
Study 2b	Vignette experiment	March 2025	5306	5306

democratic violations, the opposition's capacity to shape the narrative matters most where it can overcome an incumbent's justification.

The experiments are reported as Studies 1a, 1b, 2a, and 2b (see Table 4.4). Studies 1a and 2a are nearly identical to one another, as are Studies 1b and 2b. All four measure approval of a democratic violation after treatment (rescaled from 0–1). Studies 1a and 2a use treatments constructed from a media analysis of comparable previous democratic violations (see Table 4.5 for an example), whereas Studies 1b and 2b use fictitious treatments. Studies 1a and 2a examine six undemocratic actions and draw on a wide range of frames and counter-frames to enhance external validity, yielding a total of 516 unique vignettes.

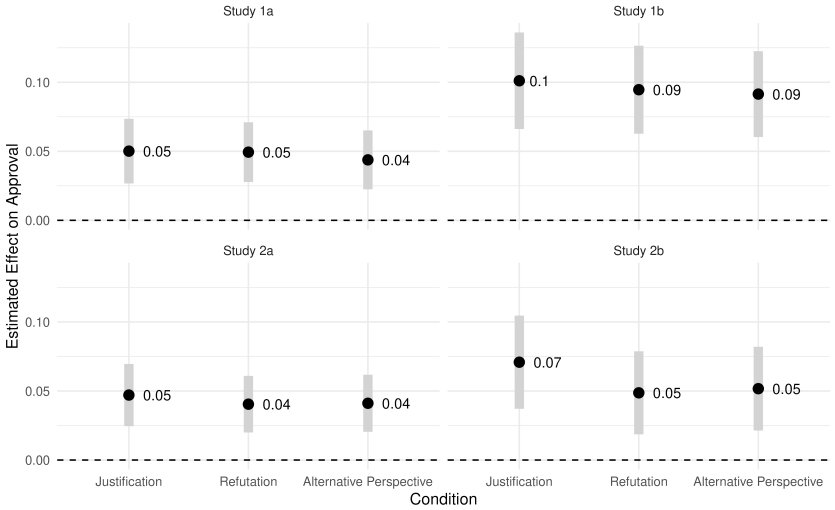
The results of the experiments are surprisingly consistent. First, an incumbent's justification makes voters more likely to approve of the undemocratic action by roughly 5–10 percentage points on the approval

Table 4.5: Full Example of Treatment

Pure control	In this scenario, the [Democratic/Republican] Governor has restricted all assembly in public spaces in response to a string of [right-wing/left-wing] protests. Some people, like the [transgressor's] Party, favor this action, while others, like the [non-transgressor's] Party, are opposed.
Framed control	In this scenario, the [Democratic/Republican] Governor has restricted all assembly in public spaces in response to a string of [right-wing/left-wing] protests. Some people, like the [transgressor's] Party, favor this action, while others, like the [non-transgressor's] Party, are opposed. A spokesperson from the [transgressor's] Party has said, "An individual right to speech is not necessarily a right to continuously be out in the street and protest."
Refutation counter-frame	[*Same preamble as framed control*] A spokesperson from the [non-transgressor's] Party has said, "Free speech and assembly warrants that we must allow everyone to assemble and protest as long as they do so within the legal scope."
Alternative perspective counter-frame	[*Same preamble as framed control*] A spokesperson from the [non-transgressor's] Party has said, "I fear the situation will be less safe if we disallow protest and legitimize their resentment. We provide fuel for the fire if we refuse them."

scale. This largely replicates previous findings (see Bessen, 2024; Cella et al., 2026; Gessler and Kaftan, 2025; McCarthy, 2023; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley, 1997). Second, providing respondents with counter-frames does not offset the effect of the incumbent's justification (see Figure 4.7). *Framing* therefore reports that once an incumbent has justified a democratic violation, opposition parties cannot make a meaningful dent in voters' approval at conventional levels of statistical significance. A one-sided t-test does detect a modest effect in Study 2b at $p < 0.10$, but even there, the opposition offsets only a fraction of the large effect produced by the incumbent. These findings are interpreted as evidence of an asymmetry between incumbents' and opposition parties' ability to frame democratic transgressions. The article further shows that the results are largely not driven by partisan effects, stimulus selection, alternative specifications, effects on salience, first-mover effects, or conventional incumbency advantages.

Figure 4.7: Effect of Incumbent Justification and Opposition Counter-Frames



Notes: Coefficient points denote the difference between the pure control group and the justification, refutation, and alternative perspective treatments as percentage of the approval scale. Gray lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

In summary, the four experiments consistently show that incumbents have greater leverage over the narrative surrounding democratic violations than opposition parties do, which amounts to a clear asymmetry in the framing of democratic transgressions. This holds even in a setting where the outcome should be comparatively malleable since respondents are asked only whether they approve of the violation rather than to act on that judgment. The result is bad news for the opposition's ability to hold the incumbent accountable. Narratives over democratic transgressions are the bread and butter of the politics of democratic backsliding, yet the opposition's capacity to shape them is surprisingly and consistently limited.

Early Opposition Actions, Crying Wolf, and Credibility

Crying Wolf examines whether opposition parties' early reactions to democratic violations affect their credibility when subsequent violations occur. On the one hand, it is useful to challenge an autocratic incumbent before they amass executive power, for example over the media (Capoccia, 2026; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). On the other hand, opposition parties may fear being perceived as the boy who cried wolf if they react to early violations, thus losing credibility on subsequent ones (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2023; Miller, 2021; Pérez-Liñán, 2007). Answering this question offers more concrete guidance to opposition parties facing an autocratic incumbent.

Crying Wolf speaks to the unfolding nature of democratic backsliding. The argument is that in the early stages of backsliding, an incumbent's democratic credentials remain contested as it is unclear whether initial violations are defensible as isolated events or constitute a pattern of autocratic behavior (Capoccia, 2007; Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán, 2014; Somer et al., 2022). Identifying a pattern requires more than one piece of information, and determining that backsliding is underway likewise requires more than one democratic violation (Waldner & Lust, 2018). Voters plausibly reason in a similar way (Chiopris et al., 2025; Yeung, 2025) and may, therefore, need to observe multiple violations before concluding that an incumbent is autocratic. If opposition parties denounce initial violations as undemocratic before such a pattern has been established, they may appear to be invoking democracy merely to win votes and may lose credibility when subsequent violations occur. Where the democracy label is perceived as purely self-serving, invoking it is likely to be self-defeating as voters dislike politicians who act too self-interested (Bøggild, 2016).

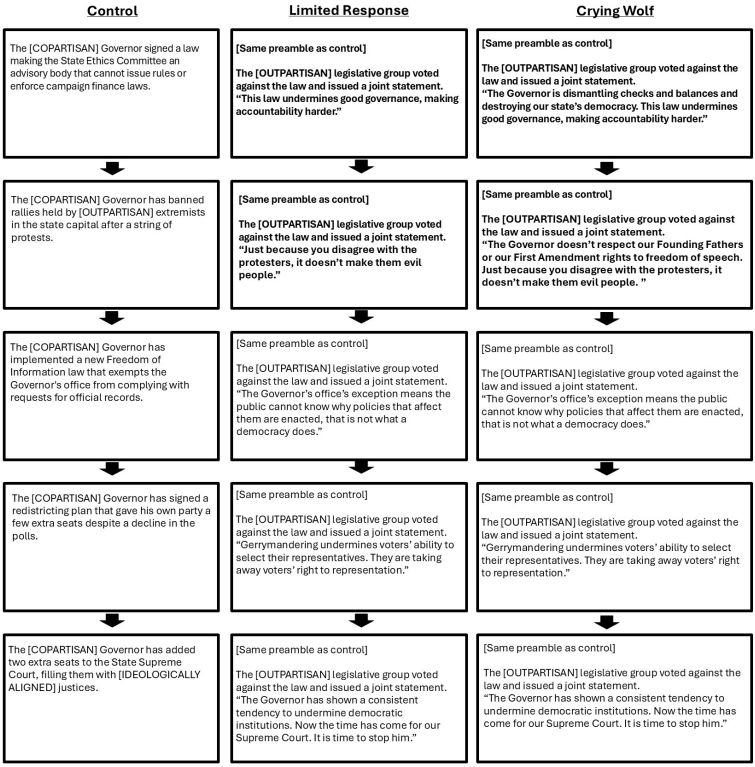
To test this, I follow the recall election design of Yeung (2025) in which respondents may remove a sitting copartisan governor whose policy positions align with their own after each round of undemocratic actions, with five such actions in total. This mimics the sequential nature of democratic backsliding, though it is, of course, far removed from real backsliding unfolding over years. Prior to treatment, participants are reminded of the recall institution.

> In the United States, a recall election is a procedure that allows voters to remove an elected official from office before their term ends. Historically, both Democratic and Republican governors have been recalled and removed from office.
>
> Many states have recall elections. In these states, the governor could face more than one recall election while in office. That is, even if they survive an initial recall, they may still face other recall elections in the future.
>
> Now, imagine that after the 2026 elections, a [COPARTISAN] governor has been elected running on a platform of [ALLIGNED POLICY]. Would you like to recall the [COPARTISAN] governor?

Participants are then randomly assigned to one of three conditions: 1) control, 2) crying wolf opposition, or 3) limited response opposition. Respondents in the control condition observe only the undemocratic actions, with no mention of the opposition party. Those in the crying wolf and limited response conditions additionally receive a statement from an opposition party opposed to the governor. For example, if the governor is a Republican, the opposition is the Democratic Party in the legislature. Importantly, the two treatment conditions differ only in the first and second rounds. In these rounds, the crying wolf condition immediately characterizes the actions as violations of democracy, whereas the limited response condition objects to the actions as undermining accountability and good governance without using strongly democracy-laden language (see also Figure 4.8). In actions 3–5, the two conditions are identical as both emphasize the governor's undemocratic conduct.

The data generated by this process can be treated as a form of survival data in which respondents withdraw their support from an autocratic government (Yeung, 2025). The analysis therefore relies on Cox regression, a standard method for modeling survival data (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones, 2004), and the article reports additional robustness checks using OLS regression. Cox regression models describe hazard rates, where

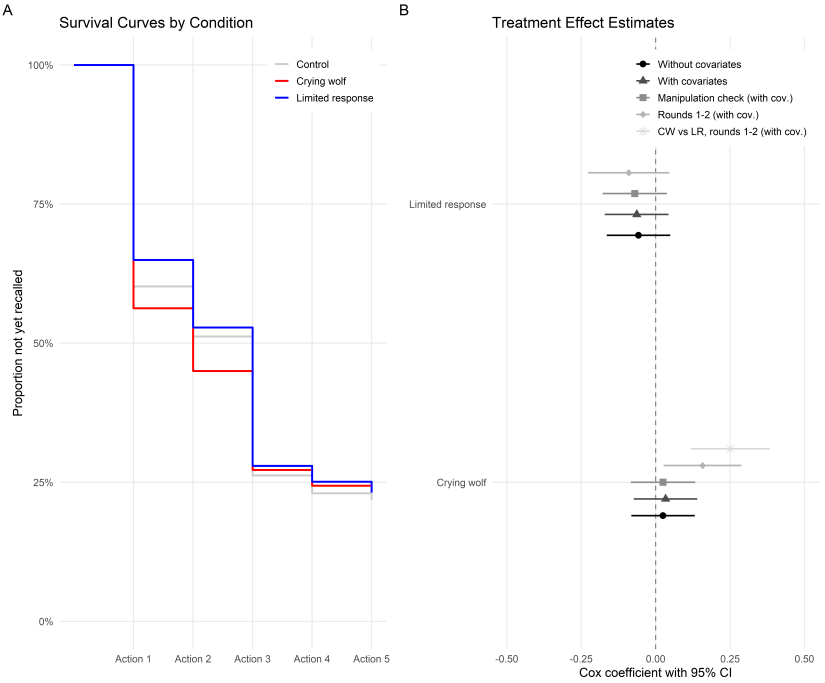
Figure 4.8: Treatment Material



positive coefficients indicate a higher probability of defection from the autocratic governor and negative coefficients a lower probability. Kaplan-Meier curves are presented to describe the probability of the incumbent's survival across the five actions.

The results, presented in Figure 4.9, show no long-term effects of treatment. In both the control and the treatment conditions, 25% of respondents never withdraw their support from the governor. There is thus little support for the notion that opposition parties are perceived as crying wolf when they critique initial violations of democracy.

Figure 4.9: Kaplan-Meier Curves and Cox Regression Estimates



Notes: Panel A (left panel) shows Kaplan-Meier curves by treatment conditions. Panel B (right panel) shows coefficient points denoting the Cox regression effects with 95% confidence intervals using Efron to handle ties. For covariate-adjusted models, they include party of governor, party of respondents, age, and employment status. CW vs. LR is comparing crying wolf to the limited response.

Zooming in on actions 1 and 2 where the treatments differ, a difference in recall does emerge. The limited response condition yields a lower probability of defection than the control, whereas the crying wolf condition yields a higher one. Confining the estimation to the first two rounds shows a statistically significant positive effect for the crying wolf condition relative to the control, but no effect for the limited response. Comparing the two treatment conditions directly likewise reveals a substantial positive effect of the crying wolf condition. While there are no long-term effects of treatment, opposition parties appear able to accelerate defection from an autocratic incumbent by invoking democracy early. The article also shows that these findings are not attributable to partisan dynamics.

Even in the absence of long-term treatment effects, accelerating defection in response to an initial violation is likely more valuable than the experiment can capture. During real-world backsliding, incumbents may seize control of the institutions that enable the public to sanction autocratic behavior. For example, both gerrymandering and the capture of media outlets limit the public's capacity to hold an incumbent accountable. Earlier defection may, therefore, result in less erosion, which in turn preserves the public's ability to sanction backsliding.

Isolated Incident or an Attack on Democracy?

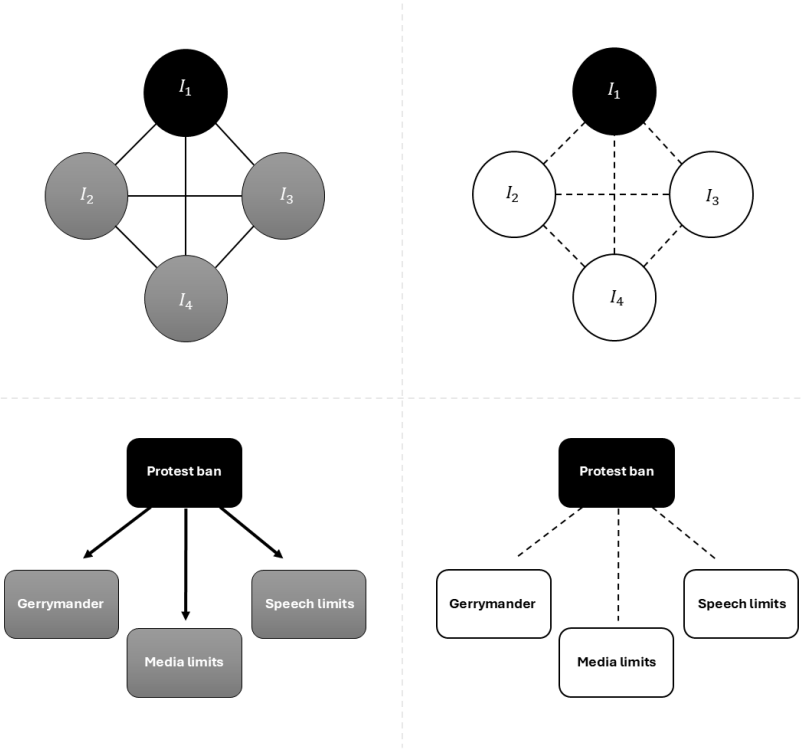
Isolated Incident examines whether voters perceive democratic violations as isolated incidents or as attacks on democracy. Specifically, I ask whether backlash against one undemocratic action spills over into related democracy attitudes. This matters a great deal because if voters perceive violations as attacks on democracy, we should expect public backlash to accumulate with each new violation, producing a self-reinforcing cycle of resistance to autocracy.

Empirically, we have observed that voters who observe democratic violations tend to withdraw support from the perpetrating incumbent, action, or party (Aarslew, 2026; Carey et al., 2022; Eady et al., 2023; Frederiksen, 2024; Graham & Svolik, 2020; Saikkonen & Christensen, 2023; Svolik, 2023). This suggests that observing undemocratic actions leads to changes in *the relevant* democracy attitude. However, whether it extends to *related attitudes* remains unclear. Theoretically, democracy is an interconnected system in which each part upholds the others. Courts, for example, tend to uphold voting rights. Citizens are also observed at times mobilizing for the sake of democracy as in the No Kings protests. We might, therefore, expect a change in a voter's attitude toward one

democratic violation to spill over into their attitudes toward others (see Figure 4.10).

However, prior research on dynamic constraint, which concerns how changes in one attitude affect related attitudes, tends to find modest or null effects (Converse, 1964; Coppock & Green, 2022; Hopkins & Mummolo, 2017; Peffley & Hurwitz, 1992). This research points instead toward the expectation that voters' attitudes do not spill over.

Figure 4.10: Theoretical and Operationalized Model of Dynamic Coinstraint



Notes: Full nodes exhibit spillover effects, whereas dotted nodes show no effect on related beliefs. The upper panels show the theoretical construct dynamic constraint (for formalization, see Coppock and Green, 2022). The lower panels show the operationalizations in this article.

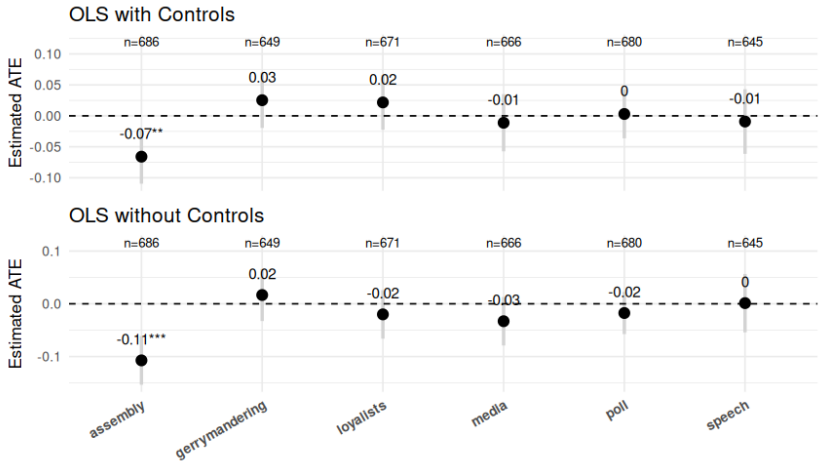
Studying this question is methodologically challenging (Coppock & Green, 2022). The data must (a) measure multiple attitudes of different aspects of democracy in order to assess spillover onto related attitudes and (b) capture a substantial external shock to one democracy attitude. I address these challenges by reusing data collected for *Framing*. Because the two data collections took place three months apart, spanning the period in which Trump suppressed a large-scale protest in California through the federalized California National Guard, the setting can be modeled as a natural experiment. The data are also well suited to the question because the experiment measured six democracy attitudes through support for fictitious vignettes, one of which concerns protest suppression specifically (see Table 4.6). Only the control condition is used so as to avoid interference from the framing treatment. The analysis is, therefore, restricted to respondents who saw only the base vignettes shown in Table 4.6.

OLS is used to estimate differences in approval of the undemocratic vignettes between respondents surveyed after Trump's protest suppression (second wave) and those surveyed before it (first wave). Approval of the undemocratic actions is thus treated as a democracy attitude. The article additionally reports a difference-in-differences estimator, used solely as a robustness check.

Table 4.6: Overview of Scenarios

Strategic poll closure (electoral fairness)	In this scenario, the [Democrats/Republicans] have passed a law closing several polling stations in areas that primarily vote for the [Republicans/Democrats]. Some people, like the [transgressor's] Party, favor this action, while others, like the [non-transgressor's] Party, are opposed.
Gerrymandering (electoral fairness)	In this scenario, the [Democrats/Republicans] have passed a new redistricting map that gives them 5 extra seats despite a decline in the polls. Some people, like the [transgressor's] Party, favor this action, while others, like the [non-transgressor's] Party, are opposed.
Restriction on assembly (civil liberties)	In this scenario, the [Democratic/Republican] Governor has restricted all assembly in public spaces in response to a string of [right-wing/left-wing] protests. Some people, like the [transgressor's] Party, favor this action, while others, like the [non-transgressor's] Party, are opposed.
Restriction on freedom of speech (civil liberties)	In this scenario, the [Democrats/Republicans] have established a Disinformation Board headed by a [Democratic/Republican] Party member that is authorized to penalize any individual who is considered to spread misinformation on social media. Some people, like the [transgressor's] Party, favor this action, while others, like the [non-transgressor's] Party, are opposed.
Media restrictions (checks and balances)	In this scenario, the [Democrats/Republicans] have passed a new law permitting the prosecution of journalists who refuse to disclose anonymous sources. Some people, like the [transgressor's] Party, favor this action, while others, like the [non-transgressor's] Party, are opposed.
Loyalist in non-partisan positions (checks and balances)	In this scenario, the [Democratic/Republican] Secretary of State has solely appointed [Democratic/Republican] members to the State Election Board which runs the state and federal elections, breaking with the election board's history of non-partisanship. Some people, like the [transgressor's] Party, favor this action, while others, like the [non-transgressor's] Party, are opposed.

Figure 4.11: OLS Reggression by Undemocratic Action



Notes: The coefficient denotes the estimated percentage point difference in approval between each survey wave. The upper panel includes controls, whereas the lower panel does not. Bars are 95% confidence intervals. + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

The findings show that respondents in the second data collection were significantly and substantially more likely to disapprove of fictitious protest suppression than those in the first. This appears to replicate previous findings that citizens sanction undemocratic behavior, both real (Eady et al., 2023; Svolik, 2023) and hypothetical (Aarslew, 2023b, 2026; Frederiksen, 2024; Graham & Svolik, 2020; Saikkonen & Christensen, 2023). As a novel contribution, however, I show that Trump's protest suppression in California did not shift related attitudes toward democracy, such as attitudes toward gerrymandering. This suggests that a change in one democracy attitude does not produce corresponding changes in related ones or, put differently, that voters perceive democratic violations as isolated incidents rather than as attacks on democracy.

Chapter 5
Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter revisits the dissertation's research question: *How do incumbent and opposition parties' narratives affect voters' approval of democratic violations?* The chapter begins by showing how the findings answer this question. The limitations of the dissertation are then discussed. Lastly, more general reflections and implications for effective democratic defense are drawn out.

What Have We Learned?

Both incumbents and opposition parties attempt to move citizens toward approval or disapproval of democratic violations. Yet they do so in different ways and with different effects. Their effects are also contingent on the other side's actions, and studying either incumbents or opposition parties in isolation risks producing misleading conclusions. The politics of democratic backsliding is a dynamic, unfolding process in which incumbents and especially opposition parties have considerable agency.

Autocratic incumbents attempt to frame their democratic violations as desirable to citizens. As shown in *Framing*, doing so substantially increases approval of the violation in question, and incumbents exert a much larger influence on the narrative surrounding democratic violations than opposition parties do. As shown in *Isolated Incident*, democratic violations are, nonetheless, met with declining approval among citizens. However, *Isolated Incident* also shows that citizens lower their approval only of the action in question and do not treat the violation as part of a broader attack on democracy. Indeed, this suggests that an incumbent with a reputation for democratic violations may not be penalized more for future violations than ones without such a reputation.

Opposition parties affect the politics of backsliding in fundamental ways. First, as shown in *Positioning*, opposition parties are the main actors making democracy a salient issue during backsliding. This is, of course, made possible by incumbents' violations, yet it is largely the

opposition that renders the issue salient. At the same time, opposition parties are not penalized for focusing on democracy, even if doing so is no more effective than focusing on ordinary policy issues. The effects of opposition critique on citizens' approval of an autocratic incumbent are roughly equivalent for policy-based and democracy-based critiques. Second, *Crying Wolf* shows that opposition parties need not fear being perceived as the boy who cried wolf when they contest early violations of democracy. They may instead accelerate defection from an autocratic incumbent without losing credibility when subsequent violations occur. Third, opposition parties do attempt to shape the narrative surrounding democratic violations, though their effectiveness is limited, if not absent, once an incumbent has justified the violation.

Lastly, a point worth stressing that cuts across all the studies of opposition behavior is that opposition parties are never penalized for criticizing undemocratic actions. No backlash against such criticism is observed, even among voters who support the incumbent. While it may seem a modest conclusion, it is important to establish that the limits of opposition success are not caused by the focus on democracy as such. Moreover, it has some significant properties that I want to draw out, in a similar fashion to the conclusion reached by Coppock (2023), and suggest that voters react to undemocratic actions in a manner that can be described as *reasonable*. It may seem a strange conclusion to reach in a dissertation about how difficult it is for opposition parties to persuade voters to sanction undemocratic actions, but the absence of backlash against opposition criticism on democracy suggests as much.

To think this through, consider two prominent ways of modeling how voters process information like opposition communication: a) Bayesian updating or Bayesian learning and b) motivated reasoning. Bayesian updating is often taken to be the rational way of responding to new information, though this is somewhat misleading as people may hold bewildering beliefs while updating in a perfectly Bayesian fashion. Bayesian updating refers rather to an individual's belief about a subject and their confidence in that belief, with updating occurring when a prior belief is adjusted in light of new evidence and thereby becomes a posterior belief (Coppock, 2023; Druckman & McGrath, 2019).

Motivated reasoning instead posits that all reasoning and information processing is driven by some goal, whether accuracy oriented or directional (Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Accuracy goals involve reasoning aimed at reaching correct beliefs, whereas directional goals involve reasoning aimed at reaching desired beliefs, for example beliefs that align with one's partisanship. Directional goals in particular have re-

ceived attention in political science as a mechanism through which voters process information and arrive at seemingly irrational conclusions (Bisgaard, 2015, 2019; Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Flynn et al., 2017; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). One such conclusion is the reported tendency for corrections of a misperception to make citizens more likely to hold it (Flynn et al., 2017; Guess & Coppock, 2020; Nyhan, 2021; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

Bayesian updating and motivated reasoning face an equivalence problem as it is exceedingly difficult to disentangle accuracy and directional goals from prior beliefs with any confidence (Coppock, 2023; Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Little, 2025). Even backlash can arise from any theory, even if it is often attributed to motivated reasoning (Guess & Coppock, 2020). This means it is difficult to adjudicate between different theories of information processing. However, no matter the theory of information processing, we can establish that voters react to information in a similar fashion regardless of partisanship (see also Frederiksen, 2024). This is suggestive that partisan directional goals are not the main driver of how voters respond to undemocratic actions. Indeed, the absence of backlash is striking, given the contentiousness of democracy and the polity. As such, it is suggestive that voters are reasonable at the very least in how they process information about democratic violations. This is sobering yet encouraging news for democracy. Persuasion by opposition parties is possible, though it also means that their limited success to date was not preordained.

Limitations and Unanswered Questions

It is worth keeping a few limitations of this dissertation's findings in mind. First, all studies have been conducted in the United States, an old, polarized democracy with a two-party system. The findings should be read in that context, which constrains their generalizability. Chapter 3 suggests two broad scope conditions for generalization: 1) contexts in which democracy is intrinsically valued, and 2) critiques from parties that are not ideologically aligned with the autocratic incumbent. While these scope conditions permit cautious generalization to other contexts, I do stress that it should remain cautious, particularly given the high stakes of democratic backsliding. Future research should also assess how democratic defense is (Capoccia, 2026; Gamboa, 2023; Laebens & Ślarzyński, 2025) and has been (Capoccia, 2007) conducted effectively in other contexts. There is, in particular, ample room for more internally valid studies of opposition behavior during democratic backsliding.

Second, opposition parties are treated as unitary actors throughout the dissertation. This implies that there is no internal disagreement within the opposition party over (a) whether an incumbent is autocratic or (b) how to combat that incumbent effectively. This is, of course, unrealistic. In the United States, the Democratic Party has disagreed on both. Such disagreement makes research on which opposition strategies are most effective all the more important since it can inform internal deliberation, but it also means that in practice, the opposition does not act in concert as my studies assume.

This carries substantial implications for the studies of early opposition action, i.e., *Positioning* and *Crying Wolf*. Consider a case in which a moderate-left party leader would prefer to hold off on raising the salience of democracy and therefore declines to challenge the incumbent's violations, while the party's left flank criticizes those same violations on their own social media accounts and raises the salience of democracy regardless. This scenario is plausible as Appendix B in *Positioning* shows that parties further from the political center are more likely to talk about democratic erosion, perhaps because ideological substance is rationalized as being about democracy (see Krishnarajan, 2023). The further a legislator stands from the autocratic incumbent, in other words, the more likely they may be to characterize the incumbent as undemocratic. The party's left flank would thereby force the leadership's hand on the democracy issue. Treating parties as unitary actors consequently overstates their agency somewhat since the fragmented nature of parties means that action by one faction of the party may suffice to make democracy salient. In the American primary-to-general election system, this dynamic may be especially pronounced as primary voters may be more ideological than voters in the general electorate. It may also mean that critiques of democratic violations come to be perceived as far-left or far-right critiques precisely because those factions are the most likely to voice them.

Third, democratic backsliding is a process that unfolds over many years, with numerous dynamic factors at play throughout. Modern political communication involves simultaneous messaging, sustained campaigning, and polarized media environments, all of which may shape the course of backsliding. The experiments presented in this dissertation isolate individual variables, such as opposition framing, but cannot simulate every relevant aspect of backsliding simultaneously. While care has been taken to manipulate the relevant variables, caution is warranted when generalizing experimental results to the real world. Treatment effects in particular are more likely to generalize in the estimated direction than

at the exact estimated magnitude (Druckman, 2022, but see Gelman and Carlin, 2014; Landy et al., 2020).

In *Crying Wolf*, one difference between the experiment and the real world may matter a great deal for interpreting the results. The article's interpretation is that opposition parties contesting early violations of democracy accelerate defection from an autocratic incumbent, with no effect on subsequent violations. The article notes, however, that one potentially important mechanism is not manipulated in the experiment, namely that voters may become desensitized to democratic violations over months or years of backsliding. Because the treatment is administered within a five-minute survey, this desensitization cannot occur. The observed acceleration of defection might, therefore, be absent in the real world if voters do become desensitized as backsliding proceeds. Nonetheless, desensitization is unlikely to affect the opposition's credibility on subsequent violations, so there remains little reason to expect opposition parties to be perceived as crying wolf when they contest early violations, yet the mechanism may still dampen the estimated defection.

Implications for Democratic Defense

Answering a well-defined research question is an important scholarly activity, but the societal value of that work lies in making sense of its implications for the real world. Political science is no exception (Lenz, 2018). This section therefore offers some reflections on the implications for the defense of democracy.

First, defending democracy is not an easy task. It is, unfortunately, a very difficult one. Yet opposition parties have at times appeared to treat it as straightforward, as though it were simply a matter of convincing the public that the incumbent is an autocrat. Even in liberal democracies, however, convincing voters that an incumbent violates democracy is not always sufficient to make them withdraw their support (Frederiksen, 2024; Graham & Svolik, 2020; Wunsch et al., 2025). Relying solely on a strategy of being the more democratic party is not enough when voters want a multitude of things from politics, even if opposition parties are not penalized for focusing on democracy. Moreover, no silver bullet of opposition behavior has emerged anywhere in this dissertation. Indeed, no strategy that consistently and substantially leads voters to withdraw support from autocratic behavior has been found. Perhaps it is unlikely that there is any single solution to the problem of autocratization, and in the absence of one, every small decision carries considerable weight.

The first implication, and the first piece of advice for opposition parties, is to resist the temptation to focus on democracy at the expense of other important aspects of politics, such as fundraising, candidate selection, proper policy positioning, competence, and internal cohesion. One of the major setbacks for US democracy, for example, came with the second election of Donald Trump in 2024. The election was close, and Trump's victory rested on no overwhelming majority. Many small factors likely contributed to the outcome, but the Democrats had at least some control over several of them. They initially ran Joe Biden despite internal concerns about his age, and they exercised at least some influence over their immigration policy and over inflation, both of which voters tended to view unfavorably. Performing better on any one of these might well have halted democratic backsliding in the US by returning a Democrat to office. This is certainly not to say that parties do not miscalculate constantly, backsliding or not. Rather, minimizing miscalculation in other domains becomes all the more important during backsliding when the stakes are considerably higher. This sort of implication is a bit akin to saying *do better politics*, perhaps easier said than done, yet the weight of democracy does in some ways depend on it, so simply internalizing the *do better politics* may be useful.

Even ordinary politics, during periods of stable democracy, is a devious business. Mao Zedong, in a formulation that is perhaps revealing of his own politics, put it as follows: "[P]olitics is war without bloodshed, while war is politics with bloodshed" (Ratcliffe, 2018). During democratic backsliding, however, opposition parties are confronted with both blatant and more ambiguous abuses of power by an autocratic incumbent. Their available reactions are numerous, but one that I want to reject as ultimately counterproductive amounts to appealing to the referee. Opposition parties can become stuck in the paradigm of relative democratic stability in which the natural response to a democratic violation is to protest that it is unfair. This reaction is feckless and counterproductive. Not only does it tend not to work (see *Framing* and, to an extent, *Positioning*), it also keeps opposition parties from seeking new ways to win, perhaps by compromising on ideology for the sake of democracy (Laebens & Ślarzyński, 2025). In short, an excessive focus on the incumbent's foul play is not solution oriented and thereby not a way to win for democracy. Opposition parties must instead examine both traditional and creative ways to defeat autocratic incumbents or to limit their violations of democracy. I suggest that one of the opposition's principal political goals ought to be the preservation of democracy, and reaching it will require them to be ever more Machiavellian and cunning. During periods

of democratic stability, parties should seek to play by the rules for the betterment of the populace, but during backsliding, opposition parties should internalize the view that politics is war without bloodshed.

The first two implications are largely about opposition parties not reducing their democracy strategy to democracy alone. Some, however, take these lessons too far and suggest that criticizing democratic erosion is itself counterproductive (see *Positioning*). Democratic Senator John Fetterman, for example, has said: "When Vice President Harris referred to President Trump as a 'fascist,' and I knew, absolutely, we lost the plot at that point" (Bolton, 2025). This dissertation has found no evidence of backlash against Democrats who criticize Donald Trump's violations of democracy, even among Republican respondents. Previous work on why voters tolerate undemocratic actions likewise finds clearly and consistently that voters do withdraw support from an undemocratic incumbent, even if they do so less than would be normatively preferable (Aarslew, 2023a, 2026; Eady et al., 2023; Frederiksen, 2022a, 2024; Graham & Svolik, 2020; Saikkonen & Christensen, 2023; Svolik, 2023). The standard account is that voters trade off democracy, which they prefer, against other relevant considerations such as partisanship, policy, or competence. As such, there is no reason to expect that criticizing democratic violations produces backlash among voters. One implication of this dissertation is accordingly that democratic-minded opposition parties, and the Democrats in particular, need not worry unduly about being penalized for calling out an incumbent's violations of democracy. Voters do react to opposition parties reasonably.

A related and perhaps more legitimate concern for opposition parties is to avoid pressing democratic rhetoric so far that it becomes about the incumbent's voters rather than about the incumbent. During Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign, for example, she famously characterized half of Trump's supporters as a basket of deplorables and described them as racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, and Islamophobic. While not about democracy, we can imagine that calling Republican voters undemocratic is unproductive, yet calling Trump undemocratic may not be. Harris calling Trump a fascist invites considerably less moral condemnation of Republican voters than the quote by Clinton. However, it may ultimately produce a similar effect since voters may perceive, as Fetterman suggests, that the charge extends to them. The best way to avoid backlash is likely to criticize democratic violations for violating democracy without implicating the moral character of the incumbent's voters.

In summary, democratic-minded opposition parties should not fear competing on democracy as they are not penalized for it, and at times it

may be useful. However, I warn against having your entire democracy strategy be about democracy as other considerations also matter and may matter more to voters. As such, defending democracy sets a high bar for *good politics*, and opposition parties should be prepared to meet it for the preservation of democratic governance. Future research ought to examine the myriad of ways in which opposition parties may become better stewards and defenders of democracy by doing better politics.

Summary

Democratic backsliding is the sustained deterioration of the qualities of democratic governance. It occurs around the world, including in democracies previously considered consolidated such as the United States. Unlike a coup d'état, for example, democratic backsliding can be stopped by citizens who are able to vote out the autocratizing incumbent. Yet often, they do not. Citizens instead give quasi-consent to democratic backsliding by reelecting those who undermine democratic governance. This dissertation examines what makes this possible under the following research question: *How do incumbent and opposition parties' narratives affect voters' approval of democratic violations?*

The question is addressed in four articles and a summary report, all of which analyze backsliding in the United States from the first Trump administration onward. The first article asks whether opposition parties should publicly position themselves on democracy during backsliding at all. Intuitively, democracy is a winning issue as most voters intrinsically prefer democratic governance. However, elevating democracy risks reducing the salience of other important issues. It is also unclear whether opposition parties can be persuasive when they criticize on democratic grounds as their vested interest against the incumbent means they are not neutral arbiters of democracy. An analysis of speeches in the United States Congress between 2001 and 2025 shows that Democratic legislators increased their focus on democratic erosion after Donald Trump became the Republican nominee for president. Yet across three survey experiments, the findings consistently show that a policy focus and a democracy focus are about equally effective. This is interpreted as evidence that opposition parties are not penalized for focusing on democracy but also that doing so is no more effective than focusing on policy.

The second article examines how incumbents and opposition parties attempt to shape the narrative around democratic violations in order to increase or decrease citizens' approval. Using four novel survey experiments in the United States, the article finds that incumbent frames increase citizens' approval of democratic violations, whereas the impact of opposition frames is far more limited and usually null. Once an incum-

bent has justified a democratic violation, opposition parties' capacity to shape the narrative appears modest. This is interpreted as an asymmetry in the framing of democratic transgressions, one that constrains opposition parties' ability to hold the incumbent accountable.

The third article examines whether opposition parties lose credibility when they compete on democracy in the early stages of democratic backsliding, that is, whether they are perceived as *the boy who cried wolf* and lose credibility when subsequent violations occur. Using a sequential experimental design in the United States, the article finds that opposition parties are not penalized for criticizing early democratic violations. They instead accelerate early defection from an autocratic incumbent, with no long-term costs. This implies that opposition parties need not fear competing on democracy in the early stages of backsliding.

The fourth article examines whether voters perceive democratic transgressions as isolated incidents or as an attack on democracy and, specifically, whether backlash against one democratic violation spills over onto attitudes toward other violations. Leveraging survey data from the second article and the interval between its two data collections, the article models a natural experiment in which only second-wave respondents had been exposed to Donald Trump's mobilization and deployment of the California National Guard to suppress a protest. These respondents report greater disapproval of hypothetical protest suppression but not of other undemocratic actions such as gerrymandering, poll closures, or media suppression. This suggests that while voters do sanction undemocratic actions, that sanctioning does not spill over onto related attitudes.

Taken together, these findings suggest that opposition parties can compete on democracy without being penalized by voters. At the same time, the dissertation finds that the limited success of opposition parties is not without reason. No strategy emerges that works markedly better than another, and incumbents exert a much greater influence over the narrative surrounding democratic transgressions. Since no grand strategy for ousting an incumbent is identified here, the advice that follows is to carefully weigh both the small and the large decisions opposition parties make, including those unrelated to democratic communication, as potentially consequential for the health of democracy.

Dansk Resumé

Demokratisk erosion er en vedvarende forringelse af demokratiets kvaliteter. Den finder sted over hele verden, herunder i demokratier, der tidligere blev betragtet som konsoliderede, såsom USA. I modsætning til f.eks. et statskup kan demokratisk erosion standses af borgerne, som kan stemme den autokratiserende leder ud af embedet. Alligevel gør de det ofte ikke. I stedet giver borgerne kvasi-samtykke til demokratisk erosion ved at genvælge dem, der undergraver det demokratiske styre. Denne afhandling undersøger, hvad der gør dette muligt ud fra følgende forskningsspørgsmål: Hvordan påvirker regeringens og oppositionspartiers narrativer vælgeres støtte til demokratisk erosion?

Spørgsmålet besvares i fire artikler og en sammenfatning, som alle analyserer demokratisk erosion i USA fra og med Donald Trumps første regeringsperiode. Den første artikel spørger, om oppositionspartier overhovedet bør positionere sig offentligt på demokrati under demokratisk erosion. Intuitivt er demokrati en vindersag, eftersom de fleste vælgere har en præference for demokratiet. At øge demokratiets saliens risikerer imidlertid at mindske saliensen af andre vigtige sager. Det er desuden uklart, om oppositionspartier kan virke overbevisende, når de kritiserer med demokratiske argumenter, eftersom deres egeninteresse i at bekæmpe magthaveren betyder, at de ikke er neutrale dommere over demokratiet. En analyse af taler i den amerikanske Kongres fra 2001 til 2025 viser, at demokratiske kongresmedlemmer øgede deres fokus på demokratisk erosion, efter at Donald Trump blev republikansk præsidentkandidat. På tværs af tre surveyeksperimenter viser resultaterne dog konsistent, at et policyfokus og et demokratifokus er omkring lige effektive. Dette fortolkes som udtryk for, at oppositionspartier ikke straffes for at fokusere på demokrati, men også at det ikke er mere effektivt end at fokusere på policy.

Den anden artikel undersøger, hvordan regeringen og oppositionspartier forsøger at forme narrativen om brud på demokratiet med henblik på at øge eller mindske borgernes støtte. Fire surveyeksperimenter i USA finder, at regeringens framing øger borgernes opbakning til brud på demokratiet, mens oppositionspartiernes framing har en mere begrænset

og oftest ikke-eksisterende effekt. Når først en magthaver har retfærdiggjort et brud på demokratiet, fremstår oppositionspartiernes mulighed for at forme narrativen beskeden. Dette fortolkes som en asymmetri i framing af demokratisk erosion, en asymmetri, der begrænser oppositionspartiernes mulighed for at holde regeringen til ansvar.

Den tredje artikel undersøger, om oppositionspartier mister troværdighed, når de tager kampen op om demokratiet i de tidlige faser af demokratisk erosion, det vil sige, om de opfattes som *drengen der råbte ulv*, og mister troværdighed, når der senere sker yderligere brud med demokratiet. Ved hjælp af et sekventielt eksperimentelt design i USA finder artiklen, at oppositionspartier ikke straffes for at kritisere tidlige brud på demokratiet. Tværtimod fremskynder de, at vælgerne trækker deres støtte fra en autokratisk regering uden langsigtede omkostninger. Det betyder, at oppositionspartier ikke behøver at frygte at tage kampen op om demokratiet i de tidlige faser af den demokratiske erosion.

Den fjerde artikel undersøger, om vælgerne opfatter brud på demokratiet som isolerede hændelser eller som et angreb på demokratiet, og nærmere bestemt, om modstanden mod ét brud smitter af på holdningerne til andre brud. Ved at udnytte surveydata fra den anden artikel og tidsrummet mellem dens to dataindsamlinger modellerer artiklen et naturligt eksperiment, hvor kun respondenterne i anden bølge har været eksponeret for Donald Trumps mobilisering og indsættelse af Californiens nationalgarde med henblik på at nedkæmpe en demonstration. Disse respondenter udtrykker større modstand mod hypotetisk undertrykkelse af demonstrationer, men ikke mod andre udemokratiske handlinger såsom gerrymandering, lukning af valgsteder eller undertrykkelse af medier. Det tyder på, at vælgerne sanktionerer udemokratiske handlinger, men at denne sanktionering ikke smitter af på beslægtede udemokratiske handlinger.

Samlet set tyder resultaterne på, at oppositionspartier kan tage kampen op om demokratiet uden at blive straffet af vælgerne. Samtidig finder afhandlingen, at oppositionspartiernes begrænsede succes ikke er uden årsag. Ingen strategi viser sig markant mere effektiv end andre, og den siddende regering har langt større indflydelse på narrativen om demokratisk erosion. Da afhandlingen ikke identificerer nogen samlet effektiv strategi, betyder det også, at små og store politiske beslutninger må vejes på en guldvægt, da de potentielt kan være udslagsgivende for demokratiet, også de beslutninger som ikke omhandler demokratiet direkte.

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