Correcting Exaggerated Meta-Perceptions Reduces American Legislators' Support for Undemocratic Practices

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Abstract

There is substantial concern about democratic backsliding in the United States. Evidence includes notably high levels of support for undemocratic practices among the public. Much less is known, however, about the views of elected officials – even though they influence democratic outcomes more directly. In a survey experiment with state legislators, the researchers show that these officials exhibit much lower levels of support for undemocratic practices than the public. However, legislators vastly overestimate the undemocratic views of voters from the other party (though not the views of their own party's voters). These inaccurate "meta-perceptions" are significantly reduced when legislators receive accurate information about the views of voters from the other party, suggesting that legislators' own support for undemocratic practices are causally linked to their inaccurate meta-perceptions of other-party voters. The researchers' findings highlight the importance of ensuring office holders have access to reliable information about voters from both parties.

American democracy is in crisis. Multiple international indicators of democracy have downgraded the United States, suggesting backsliding (1). Social scientists have documented citizens' acceptance of undemocratic behaviors (2). There also is recognition that backsliding typically occurs via elites (3), or as one author puts it "democracy erodes from the top" (4). In the U.S., state level elites are crucial: "episodes of democratic collapse at the state level have had profound reverberations for national politics" (5, p. 301). Examples of undemocratic state actions include partisan gerrymandering, voting restrictions, challenging federal court rulings, etc.

We offer the first study of the democratic attitudes of American state legislators with a pre-registered four-condition survey experiment (N = 531; see *Methods*). Legislators answered questions about their support for undemocratic practices (SUP), support for partisan violence (SPV), and level of partisan animosity (PA) (i.e., dislike of members of the other party), all on 0 to 100 scales. They were assigned to one of four experimental conditions such that *prior* to providing their own opinions, they estimated 1) how the average voter from the their own party would respond to SUP, SPV, and PA (same-party no correction), 2) how the average voter from the other party would respond (other-party no correction), 3) how the average voter from their own party would respond, and then also received a "correction" with accurate information about the average same-party voter (same-party correction), 4) how the average voter from the other party would respond, and then also received a "correction" with accurate information about the average other-party voter (other-party correction). The correction data came from a nationally representative sample we previously conducted with the same items (6).

Results

We compare legislators' own scores to the public's, the latter of which came from the same survey as the correction data (6). We merge parties for the public's scores since there are

no party differences that alter the results. Figure 1 shows, across all three outcomes – SUP, SPV, PA – legislators report significantly lower scores than the public ($p < .01$ for all outcomes), significantly overestimate the scores of other party voters ($p < .01$ for all outcomes), and either significantly underestimate ($p < .01$ for SUP, $p < .05$ for SPV) or accurately rate ($p = .23$ for PA) the scores of same-party voters. The accuracy of same-party voter estimates contrasts with work on policy attitudes that suggests legislators misperceive voters' opinions (7).

Figure 1: Legislators' Attitudes and Meta-perceptions
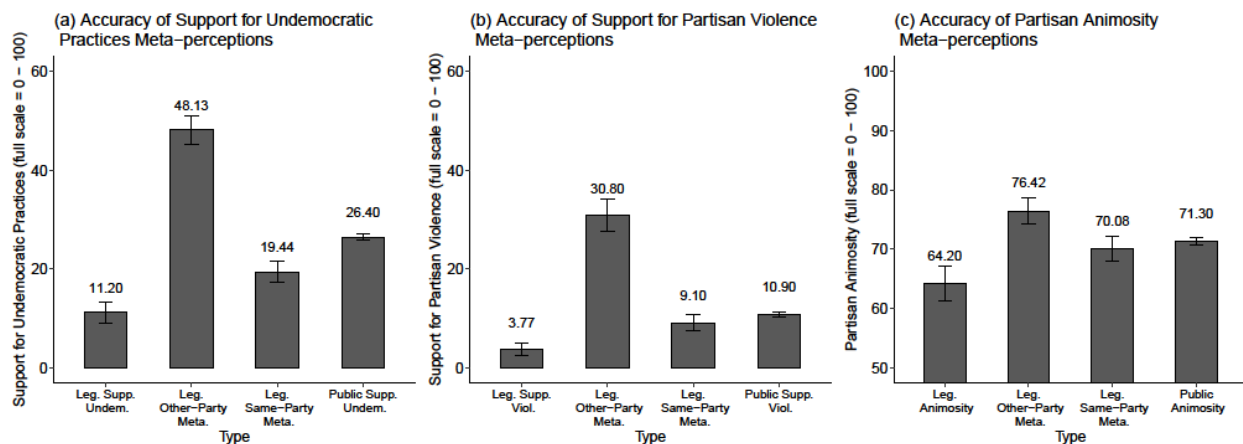
Correlational evidence from the no correction conditions suggests that legislators' views are associated with what they believe voters think. For SUP, legislators' attitudes are significantly correlated with both same-party meta-perceptions ($r = .53$, $p < .01$), and other-party meta-perceptions ($r = .31$, $p < .01$) ($p < .01$ difference in correlations). For SPV, legislators' attitudes significantly correlate with same-party meta-perceptions ($r = .42$; $p < .01$) but not with other-party meta-perceptions ($r = .02$, $p > .05$). For PA, legislators' attitudes correlate with both same-party ($r = .39$, $p < .01$) and other-party meta-perceptions ($r = .46$, $p < .01$). Highly exaggerated other-party meta-perceptions of SUP (more than 20 percentage points) and PA (5

percentage points), along with their strong correlation with legislators' own attitudes raise the question of whether the corrections causally reduced legislators' own SUP and PA (8,9). Figure 2 shows that they did. The other-party meta-perception correction reduces legislators' SUP from 11.28 to 7.76, a 31% reduction ($p = .03$) and PA from 64.39 to 59.61 ($p = .06$), a 7% reduction. The correction reduced the correlation between legislators' own attitudes and other-party meta-perception, respectively from .31 to .15 ($p < .01$) and .46 to .17 ($p < .01$).

Figure 2: Impact of Correction
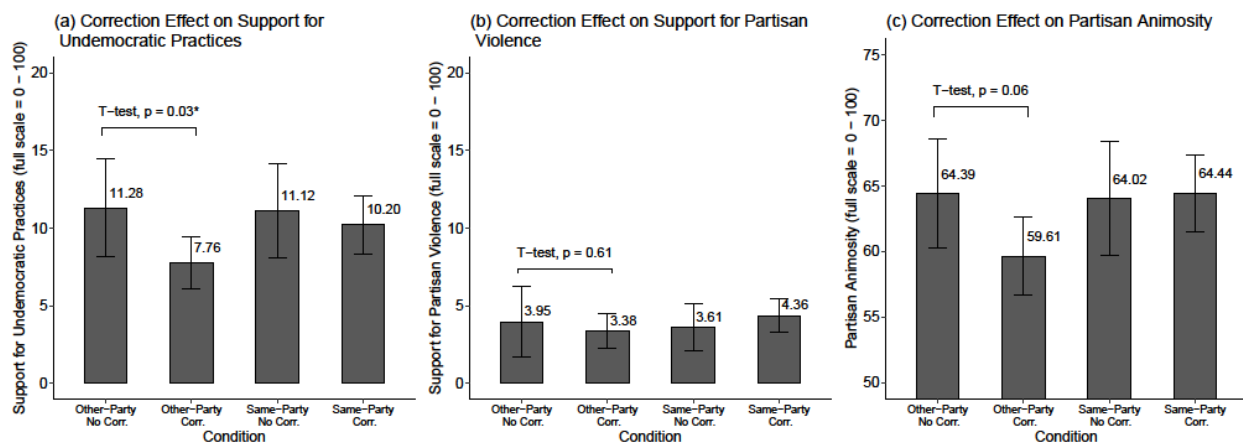
Discussion

The results may appear reassuring. State legislators report significantly lower scores on each indicator, relative to the public, and have accurate views of voters from their party. Yet, they also suggest that exaggerated meta-perceptions of out-partisans as polarized and anti-democratic endanger democracy by shaping officials' own views, leading to higher levels of SUP and PA. If the same officials publicly state their anti-democratic positions that could increase public support for undemocratic practices (10), creating a self-perpetuating dynamic where exaggerated meta-perceptions create problematic attitudes among citizens and, in turn, among elites.

There is a clear benefit from elected officials learning about the attitudes of the other party's voters so that they hold accurate views. Candidates invest substantially to learn about what their (potential) supporters believe to ensure election (11); once elected, it is important officials learn about those who did not support them as well. Otherwise, state legislators' misperceptions may push them to continue to tolerate undemocratic practices such as partisan gerrymandering or voting restrictions - eroding democracy from the top. Just as the public benefits from bipartisan information (12), so do legislators: learning accurate information about out-partisans leads to less undemocratic attitudes among elected officials.

Materials and Methods

We pre-registered our study at: https://aspredicted.org/YMY_P86. We identified the population of 7,383 state legislators from Google's Civic Information API (https://developers.google.com/civic-information), of whom 6,945 had accessible email addresses listed. We invited each of these legislators to participate in our survey via email from June 22 to July 29, 2022. Of the emails we sent, 131 bounced back. Our final sample included 534 legislators, for a response rate of 7.8%, in line with our pre-registered expectation of 7%. In consenting to participate, we asked respondents to confirm that they were in fact the actual legislator. Demographics of the sample are provided in the *Supporting Information* (*SI*), which also reports the results with a weighted sample. Each respondent was in the same condition for each outcome and the survey was always ordered from PA to SUP to SPV, answering the assigned meta-perception, receiving a correction (or not), and then providing their own responses for each outcome battery. Following Voelkel et al. (6), we measured SUP with the average of a four-item battery ($\alpha = .70$), SPV with the average of a four-item battery ($\alpha = .86$), and PA with a feeling thermometer. Meta-perception measures asked the same items but from the perspective

of an average member of the other party. Full text of treatments and survey items are provided in

SI. We used "an average member" of the other party since it was the only available data, and we

suspect it highly correlates with perceptions of other partisan populations (e.g., other legislators).

Research was approved by the Northwestern University Institutional Review Board.

Data Availability. Data and analysis code files will be deposited at Dataverse upon publication.

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Supporting Information

Sample Information and Weighting

Our sample matches the population well in terms of office (76% of the sample comes from state Houses versus 73% of the population), and term limited states (26% of the sample versus 27% of the population). It over-represented female legislators (38% in the sample versus 31% in the population), and Democrats (53% in the sample versus 44% in the population). It also is slightly skewed for some regions (respective sample percentages for the Midwest, Northeast, South, and West are 24%, 27%, 28%, and 21% versus population percentages of 24%, 18%, 32%, and 26%). We re-analyzed the data with sample weights for office, term limits, gender, party, and region and the results stand although become slightly less statistically significant which is to be expected since weighting reduces power.

For SUP, the weighted no correction score is 10.85, the other-party meta-perception is 47.82, the in-party meta-perception is 19.98. The weighted no correction other-party meta-perception-attitude correlation is .33 while the in-party meta-perception-attitude correlation is .49. The weighted other-party no-correction condition score is 10.82; the in-party no correction condition score is 10.87; the other-party correction condition score is 7.81; and the in-party correction condition score is 10.26 (the other-party correction effect is significant at $p = .07$). The weighted correction other-party meta-perception attitude correlation is.18.

For SPV, the weighted no correction score is 3.50, the other-party meta-perception is 31.20, the in-party meta-perception is 9.44. The weighted no correction other-party meta-perception-attitude correlation is.01 while the in-party meta-perception-attitude correlation is .41. The weighted other-party no-correction condition score is 3.35; the in-party no correction condition score is 3.65; the other-party correction condition score is 3.37; and the in-party correction condition score is 4.55 (the other-party correction effect is significant at $p = .99$). The weighted correction other-party meta-perception attitude correlation is .11.

For PA, the weighted no correction score is 63.06, the other-party meta-perception is 76.51, the in-party meta-perception is 69.83. The weighted no correction other-party meta-perception-attitude correlation is .46 while the in-party meta-perception-attitude correlation is.43. The weighted other-party no-correction condition score is 63.69; the in-party no correction condition score is 62.47; the other-party correction condition score is 59.22; and the in-party correction condition score is 63.70 (the other-party correction effect is significant at $p = .10$). The weighted correction other-party meta-perception attitude correlation is .16.

Question Wording and Stimuli

What is your age?

▼ 19 (20) ... 99 (100)

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

◯ Less than high school graduate (1)

◯ High school graduate (2)

◯ Some college (3)

◯ Associate's degree/2-year degree (4)

◯ Bachelor's degree (5)

◯ Advanced degree (6)

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

◯ Strong Republican (1)

◯ Moderate Republican (2)

◯ Independent Leaning Republican (3)

◯ Independent (4)

◯ Independent Leaning Democrat (5)

◯ Moderate Democrat (6)

◯ Strong Democrat (7)

Were you elected as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or something else?

○ Democrat (1)

○ Republican (2)

○ Independent (3)

○ Other party (4) _____

In general, do you think of yourself as ...

○ Extremely liberal (1)

○ Liberal (2)

○ Slightly liberal (3)

○ Moderate (4)

○ Slightly conservative (6)

○ Conservative (7)

○ Extremely conservative (8)
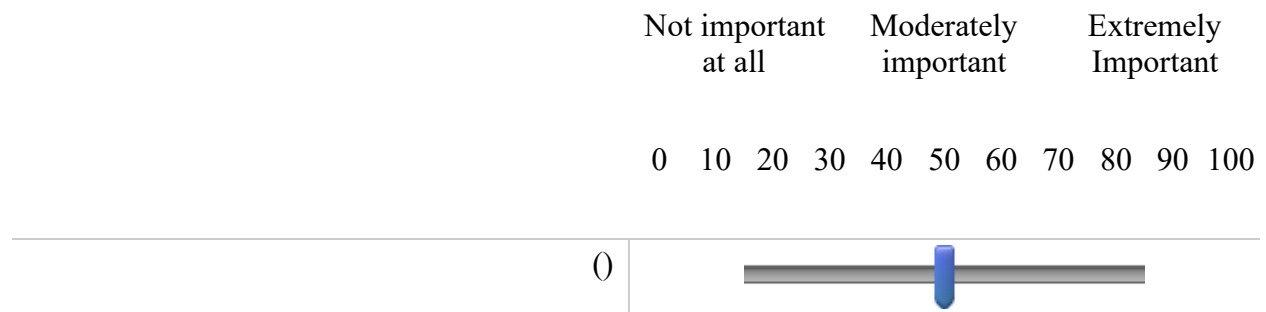
What is your gender?

○ Male (1)

○ Female (2)

○ Other (3) _____

Please select which race / ethnicity you identify as. (Please select all that apply.)

☐ White / Caucasian (1)

☐ Black / African American (2)

☐ Hispanic / Latino (3)

☐ Asian American (4)

☐ American Indian / Alaska Native (6)

☐ Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander (7)

☐ Other (5) _____

How important is being a [**IN-PARTY**] to you?

	Not important at all	Moderately important	Extremely Important
	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100		

()

Are you a Representative or a Senator?

○ Representative (1)

○ Senator (2)

For how many years have you held your current office?

▼ 0 (1) ... 60 (61)

For how many years have you held any elected political office?

▼ 0 (1) ... 60 (61)

How many hours a week do you spend, on average, working at your political job?
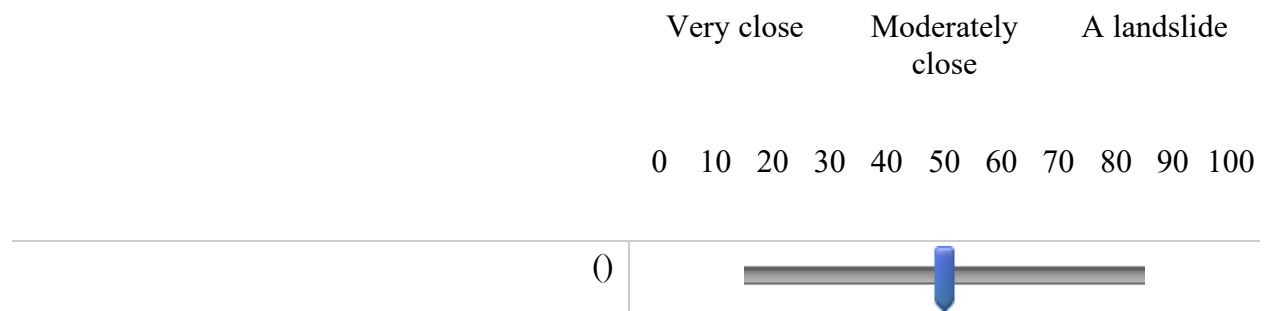
▼ 0 (1) ... 60 (61)

Do you consider your elected position to be your primary source of income?

○ No (1)

○ Equal to another source (2)

○ Yes (3)

Would you say your most recent election was: very close, moderately close, or a landslide?

	Very close	Moderately close	A landslide
	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100		
()			

How likely are you to run for re-election?

	Not likely at all	Moderately likely	Very likely
	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100		
()			
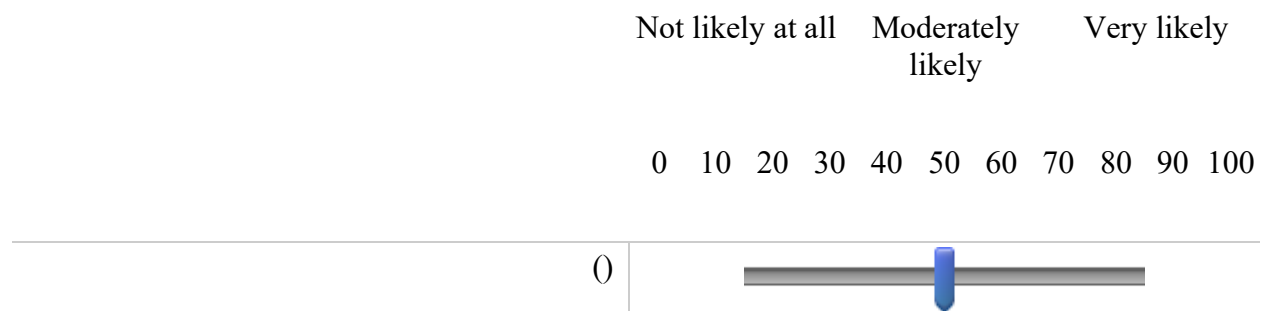
Are there term limits for your position?

○ No (1)

○ Yes (2)

In what state do you hold office?

▼ AL (1) ... WY (50)

What is your previous experience? (Check all that apply.)

☐   Private sector (1)

☐   Other political position (2)

☐   Public sector (3)

☐   Other (4) _____

We'd like you to guess how an **average [OTHER-PARTY]** voter would respond to the following questions. Please give your best guess.

Where do you think an average **[OTHER-PARTY]** voter would rate **[OTHER-PARTY]**s and **[IN-PARTY]**s on the feeling thermometer? Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that they feel favorable and warm toward them. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that they don't feel favorable toward them and that they don't care too much for them. They would rate them at the 50 degree mark if they don't feel particularly warm or cold toward them.

How would the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** voter rate **[OTHER-PARTY]**s?

	Very cold or unfavorable feelings	No feelings at all	Very warm or favorable feelings

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

( )
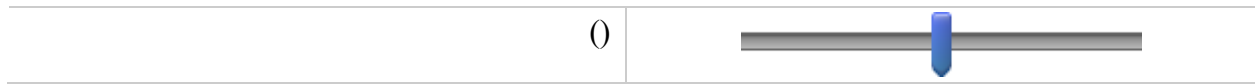
How would the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** voter rate **[IN-PARTY]**s?

| Very cold or unfavorable feelings | No feelings at all | Very warm or favorable feelings |

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

( )

Please indicate how much you think the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** voter would **disagree** or **agree** with each of the following statements.

[OTHER-PARTY]s should reduce the number of polling stations in areas that support **[IN-PARTY]**s.

How would the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** respond?

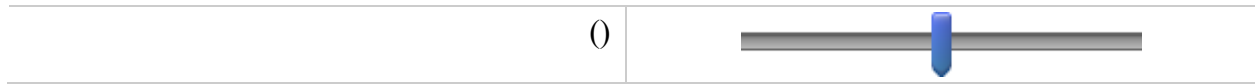| Strongly Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Strongly agree |

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

( )

[OTHER-PARTY] governors should ignore unfavorable court rulings by **[IN-PARTY]**-appointed judges.

How would the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** respond?

| Strongly Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Strongly agree |

13

	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
()	

[OTHER-PARTY] governors should prosecute journalists who accuse **[OTHER-PARTY]** politicians of misconduct without revealing sources.

How would the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** respond?

	Strongly Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly agree

	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
()	

[OTHER-PARTY]s should not accept the results of elections if they lose.

How would the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** respond?

	Strongly Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly agree

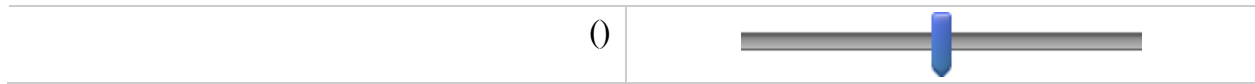|	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
()	

Please indicate how you think the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** voter would answer the following questions.

When, if ever, is it OK for **[OTHER-PARTY]**s to send threatening and intimidating messages to **[OTHER-PARTY]** party leaders?

How would the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** respond?

	Never	Always

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

( )

When, if ever, is it OK for an ordinary **[OTHER-PARTY]** in the public to harass an ordinary **[IN-PARTY]** on the Internet, in a way that makes the target feel frightened?

How would the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** respond?

Never   Always

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

( )

How much do you feel it is justified for **[OTHER-PARTY]**s to use violence in advancing their political goals these days?

How would the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** respond?

Not justified at   Moderately   Extremely
all   justified   justified

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

( )

How much do you feel it is justified for **[OTHER-PARTY]**s to use violence if the ${e://Field/Inparty} party wins more races in the next election?

How would the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** respond?

Not justified at   Moderately   Extremely
all   justified   justified

15

	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
()	

With regard to the experimental treatments, we provide wording for the other-party no correction condition and the other-party correction condition. The wordings for the other conditions follow straightforwardly.

Earlier in the survey, you answered a question about what feeling thermometer ratings you think the **average [OTHER-PARTY]** voter assigns to **[IN-PARTY]**s on a scale from 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm).

No Correction Condition

Your guess for how the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** would rate **[IN-PARTY]**s was: **XX**.

Correction Condition

We also **asked this same question to a nationally representative sample of [OTHER-PARTY]**s. The **[OTHER-PARTY]s** who took the survey had the same distribution of gender, age, race, and education as the full **[OTHER-PARTY]** party. The survey was conducted from April 27 to May 26, 2022.

Your guess for how the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** would rate **[IN-PARTY]**s was: **XX.**

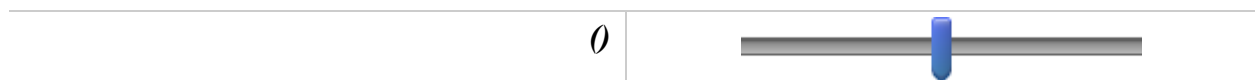The actual average **[OTHER-PARTY]**'s rating was **28.3 (for Republican respondents) / 29.2 (for Democrat/non-partisan respondents).**

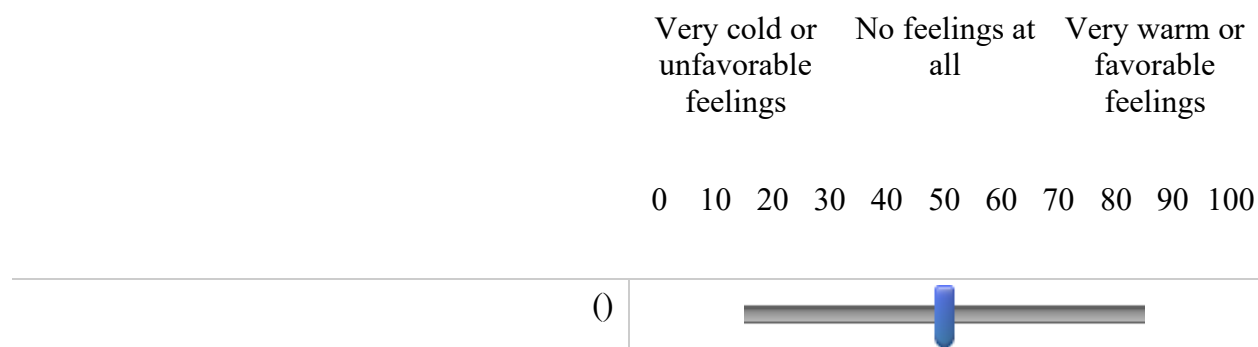Now we'd like to ask you about **your own ratings.**

How would you rate **[OTHER-PARTY]**s?

	Very cold or unfavorable feelings	No feelings at all	Very warm or favorable feelings
	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100		
0			

16

How would you rate **[IN-PARTY]**s?

	Very cold or unfavorable feelings	No feelings at all	Very warm or favorable feelings

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70   80   90   100

( )

No Correction Condition

Earlier in the survey, you answered 4 questions about how much you think the **average [OTHER-PARTY]** voter agrees with various political reforms on a scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 100 (strongly agree).

In the table below, we have included the responses you gave about how you think an average **[OTHER-PARTY]** would respond to these items.

Item	Your guess
[OTHER-PARTY]s should reduce the number of polling stations in areas that support **[IN-PARTY]**s.	
[OTHER-PARTY] governors should ignore unfavorable court rulings by **[IN-PARTY]**-appointed judges.	
[OTHER-PARTY] governors should prosecute journalists who accuse **[OTHER-PARTY]** politicians of misconduct without revealing sources.	
[OTHER-PARTY]s should not accept the results of elections if they lose.	
Average agreement with reform	

Your guess for how the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** would respond to these 4 items was: **XX.**

Correction Condition

Earlier in the survey, you answered 4 questions about how much you think the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** voter agrees with various political reforms on a scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 100 (strongly agree).

We also **asked these same questions to a nationally representative sample of [OTHER-PARTY]s**. The **[OTHER-PARTY]s** who took the survey had the same distribution of gender, age, race, and education as the full **[OTHER-PARTY]** party. The survey was conducted from April 27 to May 26, 2022.

In the table below, we have included **the responses you gave** about how you think an average **[OTHER-PARTY]** would respond to these items alongside the **actual answers** that a representative sample of **[OTHER-PARTY]s**. gave to these items.
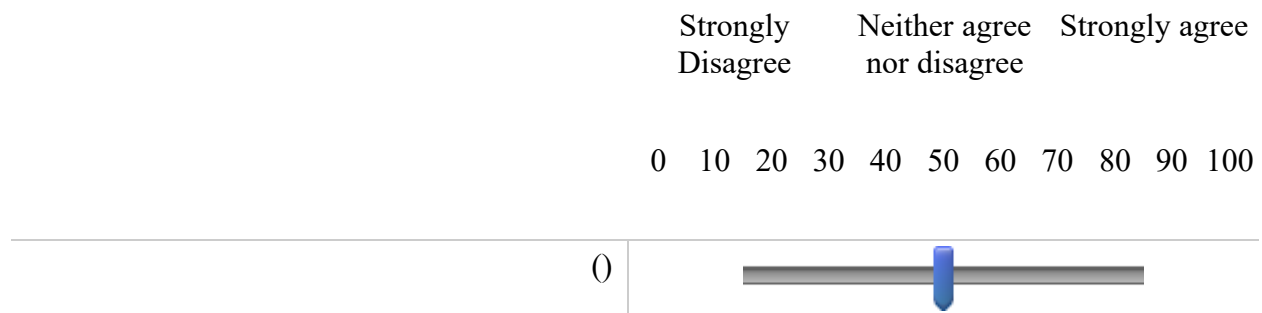
Item	Your guess	Actual average [OTHER-PARTY]'s response
[OTHER-PARTY]s should reduce the number of polling stations in areas that support **[IN-PARTY]**s.		**19.9 (for Republican respondents) / 22.6 (for Democrat/non-partisan respondents)**
[OTHER-PARTY] governors should ignore unfavorable court rulings by **[IN-PARTY]**-appointed judges.		**25.4 / 26.4**
[OTHER-PARTY] governors should prosecute journalists who accuse **[OTHER-PARTY]** politicians of misconduct without revealing sources.		**30.6 / 41.9**
[OTHER-PARTY]s should not accept the results of elections if they lose.		**19.3 / 26.1**
Average agreement with reform		**23.8 / 29.2**

Your guess for how the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** would respond to these 4 items was: **XX.**
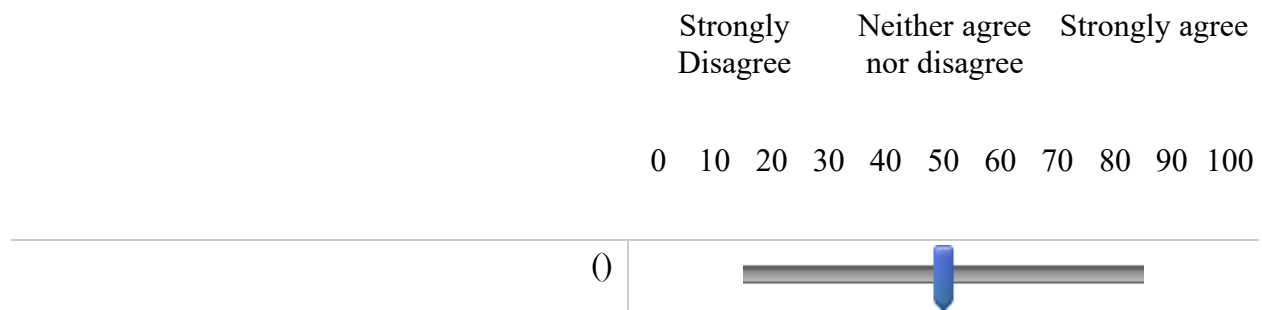
The actual average **[OTHER-PARTY]**'s response to these 4 items was **23.8 / 29.2.**

Now we'd like to know how much you **disagree** or **agree** with each of the following statements.

[IN-PARTY]s should reduce the number of polling stations in areas that support **[OTHER-PARTY]**s.

	Strongly Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly agree
	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100		
()			

[IN-PARTY] governors should ignore unfavorable court rulings by **[OTHER-PARTY]**-appointed judges.

	Strongly Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly agree
	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100		
()			

[IN-PARTY] governors should prosecute journalists who accuse **[IN-PARTY]** politicians of misconduct without revealing sources.

	Strongly Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly agree
	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100		
()			
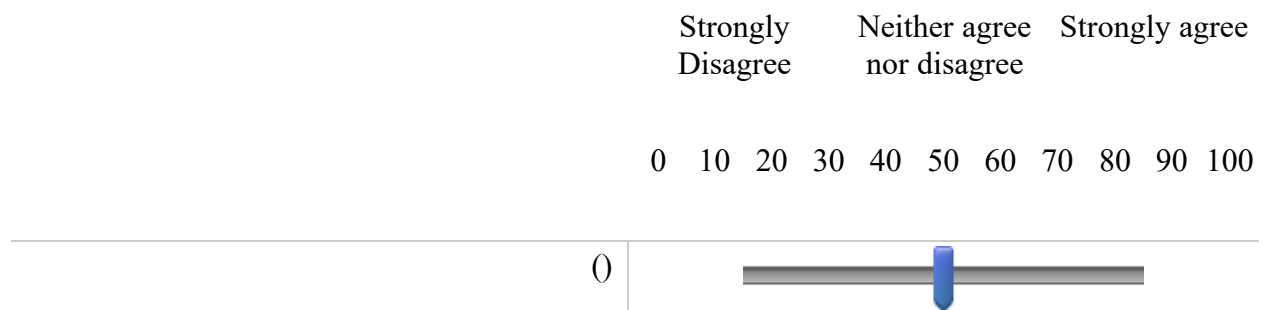
[IN-PARTY] should not accept the results of elections if they lose.

	Strongly Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly agree

() | ———————————————————

No Correction Condition

Earlier in the survey, you answered 4 questions about how much you think the
average [OTHER-PARTY] voter supports various forms of violence on a scale from 0 (do not
support) to 100 (fully support).

In the table below, we have included the responses you gave about how you think an average
[OTHER-PARTY] would respond to these questions.

Question	Your guess
When, if ever, is it OK for **[OTHER-PARTY]s** to send threatening and intimidating messages to **[IN-PARTY]** party leaders?	
When, if ever, is it OK for an ordinary **[OTHER-PARTY]** in the public to harass an ordinary **[IN-PARTY]** on the Internet, in a way that makes the target feel frightened?	
How much do you feel it is justified for **[OTHER-PARTY]s** to use violence in advancing their political goals these days?	
How much do you feel it is justified for **[OTHER-PARTY]s** to use violence if the **[IN-PARTY]** party wins more races in the next election?	
Average support for violence	

Your guess for how the average **[OTHER-PARTY]** would respond to these 4 items was: **XX.**

Correction Condition

Earlier in the survey, you answered 4 questions about how much you think the average
[OTHER-PARTY] supports various forms of violence on a scale from 0 (do not support) to 100
(fully support).

We also **asked these same questions to a nationally representative sample of [OTHER-
PARTY]s**. The **[OTHER-PARTY]s** who took the survey had the same distribution of gender,

age, race, and education as the full **[OTHER-PARTY]** party. The survey was conducted from April 27 to May 26, 2022.

In the table below, we have included **the responses you gave** about how you think an average **[OTHER-PARTY]** would respond to these questions alongside the **actual answers** that a representative sample of **[OTHER-PARTY]s**. gave to these questions.

Question	Your guess	Actual average **[OTHER-PARTY]'s** response
When, if ever, is it OK for **[OTHER-PARTY]**s to send threatening and intimidating messages to **[IN-PARTY]** party leaders?		**11.6 (for Republican respondents) / 10.4 (for Democrat/non-partisan respondents).**
When, if ever, is it OK for an ordinary **[OTHER-PARTY]** in the public to harass an ordinary **[IN-PARTY]** on the Internet, in a way that makes the target feel frightened?		**11.7 / 10.8**
How much do you feel it is justified for **[OTHER-PARTY]**s to use violence in advancing their political goals these days?		**11.5 / 10.2**
How much do you feel it is justified for **[OTHER-PARTY]**s to use violence if the **[IN-PARTY]** party wins more races in the next election?		**10.8 / 9.8**
Average support for violence		**11.4 / 10.3**

Your guess for how an average **[OTHER-PARTY]** would respond to these 4 items was: **XX.**

The actual average **[OTHER-PARTY]**'s response to these 4 items was **11.4 / 10.3**.

Now we'd like you to answer the following questions from **your own perspective.**

When, if ever, is it OK for **[IN-PARTY]** to send threatening and intimidating messages to **[OTHER-PARTY]** party leaders?
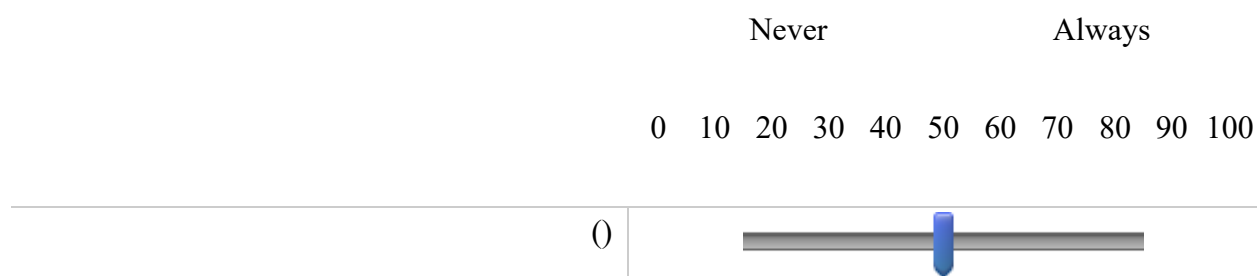
Never   Always

0   10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

()	———————————●———————————

When, if ever, is it OK for an ordinary **[IN-PARTY]**s in the public to harass an ordinary **[OTHER-PARTY]** on the Internet, in a way that makes the target feel frightened?

Never   Always

0   10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

()	———————————●———————————

How much do you feel it is justified for **[IN-PARTY]**s to use violence in advancing their political goals these days?

Not justified at   Moderately   Extremely
all   justified   justified

0   10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

()	———————————●———————————
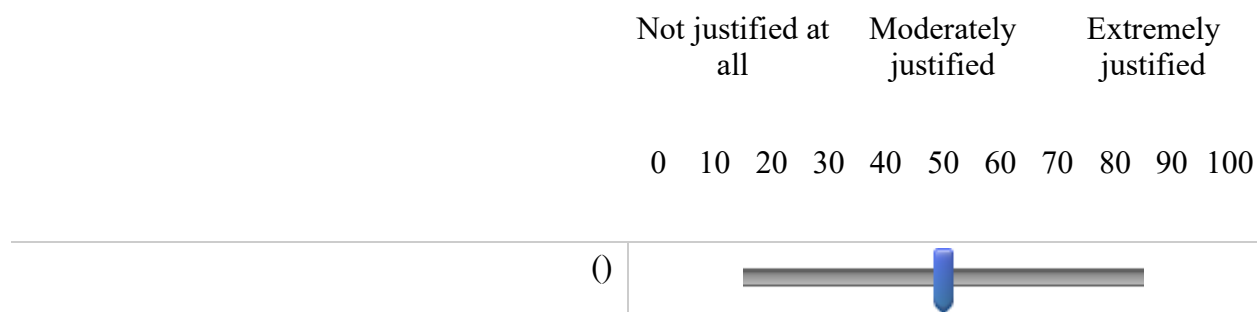
How much do you feel it is justified for **[IN-PARTY]**s to use violence if the **[OTHER-PARTY]** party wins more races in the next election?

Not justified at   Moderately   Extremely
all   justified   justified

0   10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

()	———————————●———————————