

Perspective Taking and Cross-Party Support for Electoral Fairness

Ryan Strickler¹, Danielle Adams, Josh Peklo, and Zuzanna Przygoda

A worrisome characteristic of modern polarization is public opposition to liberal democratic norms. This study explores the role perspective taking can play in fostering support for such norms, focusing specifically on fair electoral processes. Past research suggests that perspective taking diminishes stereotype activation and allows individuals to perceive injustices experienced by outgroup members. As such, I argue that a perspective taking intervention can allow partisans to better recognize when outparty members are harmed by unfair election laws and practices. This can cause them to both a) oppose electoral norm violations, and b) support policy that prevent violations from occurring. I assess this argument through a series of experiments where respondents are presented real-life scenarios of *their own party* engaging in unfair electoral practices. Those in the treatment group receive a short video testimonial from a harmed outparty member, design to elicit perspective taking. I find inconsistent, yet encouraging evidence that these appeals reduce partisans' support for their own party's unfair electoral laws and activities. The results point to the broader potential encouraging empathy and perspective taking have in shoring up support for liberal democratic norms.

¹ Assistant Professor of Political Science, Colorado State University at Pueblo, ryan.strickler@csupueblo.edu

Democracy is worth preserving. There is intrinsic value in political equality and popular participation in lawmaking. In addition, democratic regimes are more peaceful and prosperous, and their publics register more trust and perceived legitimacy in the political system. While democracy has taken numerous theoretical and practical guises through history, in the 20th century democratic systems in the West and beyond have had a number of norms and institutions in common, including free and fair elections, the rule of law, freedom of speech and press, checks and balances across political institutions, and protection of minority rights (Held 2006). These legal and institutional norms essentially amount to “fair rules for the game,” and they are the backbone of modern liberal democracy.

These norms are currently under threat in the United States. Given the rise of partisan polarization, political elites have increasingly been willing to revise or restrict voting rights, subvert legal and constitutional checks to power, and attack freedom of speech and press in order to achieve partisan and policy priorities. What is more worrying is the public is increasingly allowing, or even welcoming, these anti-democratic activities. A high-profile example is the Capitol attack in January 6th and the common belief in false claims of election fraud among Republican identifiers. But it is more widespread than this. To wit, a recent poll shows that majorities of both Trump and Biden voters support censoring oppositional media, empowering an inparty President that need not be “constrained by Congress,” and having states secede from the union if their party is not in power at the federal level². Political experts give a one in five chance of a “democratic breakdown” in the United States in the near future³. Without greater public willingness to support and defend key democratic norms, this chance will likely increase.

² <https://centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/new-initiative-explores-deep-persistent-divides-between-biden-and-trump-voters/>

³ <https://www.authwarningsurvey.com/survey>

But how can we bolster support for democracy? Simple information-based appeals will likely not work. This is because while the public tends to support democratic norms in the abstract, when applied to specific political events and controversies, they are often no match for partisan psychology (Graham and Svobik 2020). A key feature of modern polarization is the growth of an affective, or “us versus them,” dimension of partisan conflict. With this, the propensity to engage in motivated reasoning, rationalizing even egregious norm violations from one’s ‘team,’ is stronger than ever (Finkel et al. 2020). Moreover, with a fragmented media environment and the proliferation of partisan media, many are conditioned to distrust information, particularly counter-attitudinal information, coming from an outside source (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Levendusky 2013). As such, any intervention seeking to bolster support for democratic norms needs to not simply inform, but to build psychological motivation to care about and respond to anti-democratic behavior. A few recent studies have shown promise in this regard; for example, outparty animus can be reduced by building common identities across party lines (Levendusky 2018), or correcting erroneous stereotypes partisans hold against outpartisans (Lees and Cikara 2020). No research as of yet, though, has looked at the potential for empathy and perspective taking across party lines to bolster support for democratic norms.

This project broadly theorizes that cross-party empathy, in a multifaceted way, can help provide the motivation needed to support threatened democratic norms. Empathy, or the ability to understand and care for others’ perspectives and emotional states, is both a stable personality trait as well as a context-dependent attitude that can be encouraged through interventions such as perspective taking appeals. I argue that both the personality and perspective-taking dimensions of empathy can buttress support for democratic norms. In another paper that is part of this project (Strickler 2022), I show that dispositional empathy is associated with support for free speech,

minority rights, and resistance to authoritarianism, even while controlling for partisanship, ideology, and demographic factors. With the portion of the project this paper focuses on, we show that, by creating a context that heightens empathetic concern, cross-party perspective taking appeals bolster support for the key norm of fair electoral laws and processes.

To demonstrate this, we utilize pre-registered⁴ experiments embedded in an online survey conducted in February 2023. We have separate experiments for Democratic and Republican respondents; each group is presented an example leading up to the 2022 election where *their own party* engaged in unfair electoral practices. Treatment consists of a short video testimonial from an outparty member harmed by the norm violation, designed to effectively elicit perspective taking (Kalla and Broockman 2021). We find that these perspective taking appeals broadly produce empathic concern for the individual in the video. We also find evidence that perspective taking depresses support for restrictive voting laws amongst Republicans—particularly (and paradoxically), Republicans with *higher* levels of affective partisanship. Democrats, however, did not reduce support for their party’s electoral norm violation after receiving a perspective taking appeal. This paper will unpack and interpret these inconsistent, yet encouraging results, and place them in the context of broader project’s goals of examining how empathy, perspective taking, and prosocial values can shore up support for liberal democratic norms.

Empathy and Electoral Fairness

“Democracy” means different things to different people. While what it means to live in a democratic society has, and will continue to be, contested (Held 2006), in the modern era free, fair, and participative elections are an essential component. And in the United States, there have been increasing aggressive efforts to subvert this norm of electoral fairness for partisan gain.

⁴ Pre-registration plan can be found at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/TMS9N>

Some of these efforts have consisted of changing law to restrict franchise or deny groups' supporting opposition parties access to the ballot box. For example, in 2022 alone, states passed 11 laws that restrict mail voting, make voter registration more onerous, or make it easier for partisan actors to engage in voter roll purges. There were also 12 laws states passed that make it easier for partisan state officials to interfere with electoral certification processes or bring criminal charges against local election administrators (Brennan Center for Justice 2022). Some subversions, though, have worked within the context of the law but have violated cultural values integral to fair and honest electoral competition (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). This has recently included extreme gerrymandering, efforts to undermine the perceived integrity of electoral processes, and using misinformation campaigns to demobilize political opposition. The common thread across all these efforts is that they seek to give one party an advantage in a way that a neutral observer would perceive as unfair.

In the abstract, large majorities in the public voice support for fair and inclusive electoral processes (Gomez and Doherty 2021). But, often, support melts when the public is asked to vote against their own party engaging in norm violation (Graham and Svulik 2020). How can, then, the public have the motivation to override their partisan priors and act on their latent support for democratic values? We argue that, in a multifaceted way, empathy can provide an answer. Our capacity for empathy is evolutionarily evolved (Zaki 2014), allowing us to foster social connection and providing incentive to engage in costly acts of altruism that produce long term benefits (de Waal 2008). It is broadly recognized to have both a cognitive and affective dimension (Davis 1983); empathetic success consists of *understanding* how one would feel if placed in the situation of another, as well as *feeling* emotional concern for another's situation (Batson and Ahmed 2009).

Empathy is also both a stable *trait* and a context-dependent *state*. Across contexts, some individuals have higher or lower levels of empathetic personalities. Empathic personality differences have complex and multifaceted effects on political attitudes broadly and attitudes toward democratic norms specifically (Simas, Clifford, and Kirkland 2020; Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2021; Strickler 2022). At the same time, across personality types empathic processes can be influenced by contextual factors such as target characteristics, power dynamics, situational norms, environmental stressors, and others (Zaki 2014).

Indeed, interventions such as perspective taking and role playing can successfully produce favorable contexts for extending empathy to others (Weisz and Zaki 2017; Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000). A large literature has shown that fostering understanding for outgroup members can reduce prejudice (Paluck et al. 2021), and some studies show that successful interventions can have long lasting effects (Broockman and Kalla 2016; Devine et al. 2012). Successful perspective taking in regard results in the perspective taker drawing a stronger mental connection between their self and the outgroup. As such, it results in less stereotype activation, stronger active processing of the outgroup member experiences, and greater appreciation for the individual differences of outgroup members (Shih et al. 2009; Todd and Galinsky 2014). Perspective taking also allows takers to feel and respond to the affective state of targets. For example, Dovidio et al. (2004) utilize a video-based perspective taking intervention and find significant anti-Black stereotype reduction. They show that this effect is mediated by perspective takers feeling anger toward the perceived injustice experienced by the target in the video.

The vast majority of perspective taking literature has focused on prejudice reduction based on race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and other demographic categories. Little research has examined perspective taking in a *cross-partisan* context. We argue, though, that

perspective taking may be uniquely suited to bolster support for democratic norms broadly, and fair electoral processes specifically. The US public is socialized by school and media to embrace democratic ideals such as free speech, checks and balances, and the rule of law. What's more, humans have evolved to recognize and react negatively to unfair treatment (Brosman and de Waal 2014). Thus, by cognitively understanding the experience of an outparty member who has perceived an electoral norm violation, perspective takers can connect latent pro-democratic attitudes with the specific treatment felt by the outparty target. What's more, perspective takers should be able to empathize with the emotional reaction that arises from the injustice perceived by the outparty target (as Dovidio et al. 2004 find). As such, they will be able to connect latent concerns for fairness and justice to the outpartisan target's experience. We argue that this will not only result in greater empathetic concern for the individual harmed by electoral norm violations; it will also result in a desire to change the policy structure producing said norm violation. This is in line with Broockman and Kalla (2016) who find that perspective taking not only reduces prejudice toward transgender individual, but also generates support for LGBT anti-discrimination law. To wit, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

- H1: Cross party perspective taking results in increased opposition to in-party election norm violations
- H2: Cross party perspective taking results in increased support for federal policies that bolster electoral fairness
- H3: The effects of perspective taking on electoral norm support will be highest for those that express higher empathetic concern for individual target/subject of perspective taking

Cross-party perspective taking effects, though, have to compete with partisan motivated reasoning. We do argue that perspective taking can provide the motivation necessary to place democratic fairness ahead of partisan calculation. However, in an era marked by affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019), some partisans may not respond as readily as others. Distinct from polarization based on ideology or issues, affective polarization is “the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively” (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). And one's level of what we call affective partisanship is closely linked to the strength of one's party as a social identity. Partisans with stronger social identity or affective attachments are more likely to harbor negative emotions towards the outparty, seek out homogeneous social circles, and engage in activism in behalf of their team (Mason 2018). They are also more likely to engage in motivated reasoning on policy issues even where it potentially personally costly (Druckman et al. 2020). As such, for this subset of partisans, we expect to see more muted perspective taking effects:

- H4: The effect of perspective taking on electoral norm support will be weakest for those with higher, as opposed to lower, levels of affective partisanship

It is important to note that we are not claiming that perspective taking will produce more cross-party consensus on substantive policy issues not related to electoral fairness. We argue that, given the unfairness at play, democratic norm violations are *uniquely* suited to exhibit a perspective taking effect. It is an open question whether cross-party perspective taking appeals could have a consensus-building effect for health care, taxation, gun control, or other substantive issues. We are also not arguing that cross-party perspective taking will result in a reduction in affective partisanship. It is plausible that, through reducing negative stereotype accessibility (Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000), cross-party perspective taking could foster less animus toward

outpartisans. That being said, it is also plausible that perspective taking causes individuals to recognize and react negatively to unfair practices, all while their hatred for ‘the other side’ does not decrease. At this point, then, we are agnostic regarding cross-party perspective taking’s effect of affective partisanship, or the role of affective partisanship as a mediator between perspective taking and support for electoral fairness.

Data and Method

To test these hypotheses, we embedded a series of experiments in an online survey conducted in February 2023. The sample of 1,216 respondents was provided by Cint (formerly Lucid), a marketing and academic research firm. While respondents opt-in to the population of potential respondents from which Cint draws (and, thus, it is not a representative sample), they ensure the sample is balanced on age, gender, ethnicity, and region, based on US Census national averages. Research has used Cint samples to replicate gold-standard political science experiments conducted on nationally representative samples (Coppock and McClellan 2019).

In the survey⁵, respondents are first asked about their partisan identification, as well as a series of questions regarding political awareness, ideology, and affect towards the two major parties. Following Druckman and Levendusky (2019), we construct a measure of affective partisanship as the difference between inparty and outparty feeling thermometer scores. Wording for these feeling thermometer items can be found in the appendix.

Next, respondents are presented with a recent event where their own party (or the party they lean toward) has benefitted from a violation of fair election norms in 2022. If the respondent

⁵ As the preregistration plan indicates, additional hypotheses were tested, and additional items were included in the survey that go beyond what is listed in the appendix. This is a ‘first cut’ at analysis; any published material will conduct and interpret all analysis as described in the plan. For more, you can see the preregistration plan linked in footnote four, or the full survey instrument here: https://ryanstrickler.weebly.com/uploads/5/3/0/1/53011311/spring_2023_survey_questions.pdf

is a ‘pure’ independent, they receive one of these two vignettes at random. Republicans (in the “Republican” vignette) receive information about a new mail voting law Texas adopted in 2021⁶. They learn that in the 2022 primary, 12% of all mail-in ballots were rejected statewide, largely due to the requirements the new law put in place. Ballot rejections heavily impacted the Democratic-leaning Austin area, as well as Democratic-leaning demographic groups, such as Black, Hispanic, and Asian voters.

Democrats (in the “Democratic” condition), in turn, got information about the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee spending money to “meddle” in the Republican primary for Michigan’s Third District⁷. Here Peter Meijer, a popular incumbent, was competing against John Gibbs, a 2020 election denier that once argued that women should not have the right to vote. The DCCC spent half a million dollars funding ads for Gibbs in the primary because he was perceived to be a weaker general election candidate. Gibbs won the primary, then lost the general election to the Democrat. Critics accused Democrats of unfairly meddling in the Republican party, as well as hypocrisy for financially supporting a candidate with illiberal and anti-democratic views. It is true that this example is different in character than the ballot rejection example Republicans receive. Nonetheless, it constitutes an example of Democrats a) violating norms of respect for the integrity of political opposition (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), as well as b) advancing anti-democratic candidates and messages for short-term electoral gain.

Next, respondents in both the Democratic and Republican vignettes are randomized into one of multiple treatment conditions, or a control condition, using simple random sampling. In the control condition, respondents receive no video. For two of the treatment conditions,

⁶ <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/06/1091267343/almost-25-000-mail-in-ballots-were-rejected-in-texas-for-its-march-1-primary-ele>

⁷ <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/26/1113659467/dccc-meijer-gibbs-michigan-gop-primary>

respondents watch a short (less than a minute) video of a white male volunteer giving a testimonial. In the “perspective taking” condition, the individual in the video describes how they are affected personally by the event and feel like an injustice has been done to them. His script takes a “perspective getting” or narrative/testimonial approach, which has been shown to be particularly effective, as compared to other perspective taking strategies, in reducing outgroup prejudice (Kalla and Broockman 2021). This being said, it remains a short, video-based intervention embedded in an online survey. It thus serves as a ‘tough test’ for our theoretical expectations regarding perspective taking. In the “informational” condition, the same actor describes how electoral access is important to democracy in generalized terms. There are no personal appeals or references to his personal situation. The purpose of this condition is to assess whether it is the perspective taking language specifically (and the motivation to listen it can engender), rather than merely watching a video of someone talking about the issue, is driving any treatment effect. The language for the “perspective taking” and “informational” videos, for both the “Democratic” and “Republican” vignette, are in the table below. For a sample, the perspective taking testimonial from the Republican vignette can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2F-esi6yb0>.

Table One: Treatment Condition Language

<i>Condition</i>	<i>Democratic Vignette</i>	<i>Republican Vignette</i>
Perspective Taking	“I don’t get a fair say in who represents me in the election. Everyone wants to be able to vote for the person they support and who represents them. When extremists get unfair advantage, other Republicans are perceived as extremists as well, even if many of us don’t feel that way. I wish I could discuss politics with others without being labeled as a radical. I even feel discouraged to vote. I feel like my voice doesn’t matter now, since the candidate I support basically never got a chance. I’m sure other more moderate Republicans feel the same way.” (N = 193)	Participating in the political process, and the right to vote, is really important. We’ve participated in every election since we have moved here, but this year our ballots were rejected. I was uncertain of the reason and when I attempted to have my application corrected, I didn’t get much guidance. It was frustrating; thanks to this law, my vote wasn’t counted. I know that the person I vote for could win or lose, but we all want the opportunity to have our voice heard. I feel like we were treated unfairly and relegated to second class citizens. I feel like ‘why try?’, if they are going to add red tape and create barriers that will ultimately reject my vote. (N = 177)
Informational	“The parties should be able to nominate who they want. It’s important to democracy for primary voters to choose who represents their party in a fair, transparent way. If the other party is meddling in that process, or trying to coerce Republicans to vote for a weak candidate, that’s not a fair election process.” (N = 212)	It is important for everyone to be able to vote. Democracy hinges on everyone’s voice being heard, and this law is making it too hard. A quarter of the mail-in ballots are being rejected, and many are getting rejected elsewhere as well. The will of the primary voters are not being reflected. (N = 186)
Control	(no video) (N = 250)	(no video) (N = 198)

After treatment, respondents are asked a series of questions that gauges their perspective on a) the specific fair election norm violation they read about, b) their perspective on potential Congressional reform that would address the norm violation, and then (after a and b above) c) if they are in the “perspective taking” or “informational” groups, how they feel about the person in the video specifically. Specific question wording and response choices can be found in the appendix. While questions pertaining to the electoral norm violation and potential for Congressional reform are analyzed individually, felt empathy toward the individual in the video is measured through an additive index of three items that gauge how sympathetic and concerned the respondent feels toward the individual, as well as whether the respondent feels that the

individual has been treated unfairly (Allamong and Peterson 2021). Analysis is conducted using multivariate regression models that include binary variables for the “perspective taking” and “informational” treatment conditions, as well as controls for race, age, gender, education, and ideological self-identification⁸. This multivariate approach allows for greater precision in estimating the true average treatment effect and is unbiased outside of very small sample sizes (Green and Aronow 2011). While the tables and figures in this paper rely on OLS regression to provide a substantive estimate of average treatment effect size, results are consistent using ordered logistic regression models.

Results

Table Two below illustrates the impact in both vignettes of the perspective taking treatment on empathetic concern for the individual presented in the video. These models exclude individuals assigned to control condition; thus, the Perspective Taking variable in the model indicates the effect of being in this condition as compared to the Informational condition. Model One indicates that Republicans had significantly higher levels of empathy for the individual in the video if they received a perspective taking, as opposed to informational, appeal. For Democrats, while the difference between the perspective taking and informational language is somewhat weaker, it is in the correct direction, and the difference is marginally significant at $p \approx 0.08$. This, collectively, suggests that our perspective taking testimonials were working as indicated; the “perspective giving” (Kalla and Broockman 2021) language used greater sympathy and concern, across party lines, for the individuals in the video.

⁸ While this variable is not listed in the pre-registration plan, it is included to provide a substantive comparison to the treatment effect. We can compare effect sizes to a one-step difference in the seven-point ideological self-identification scale. Results are wholly consistent when this variable is excluded.

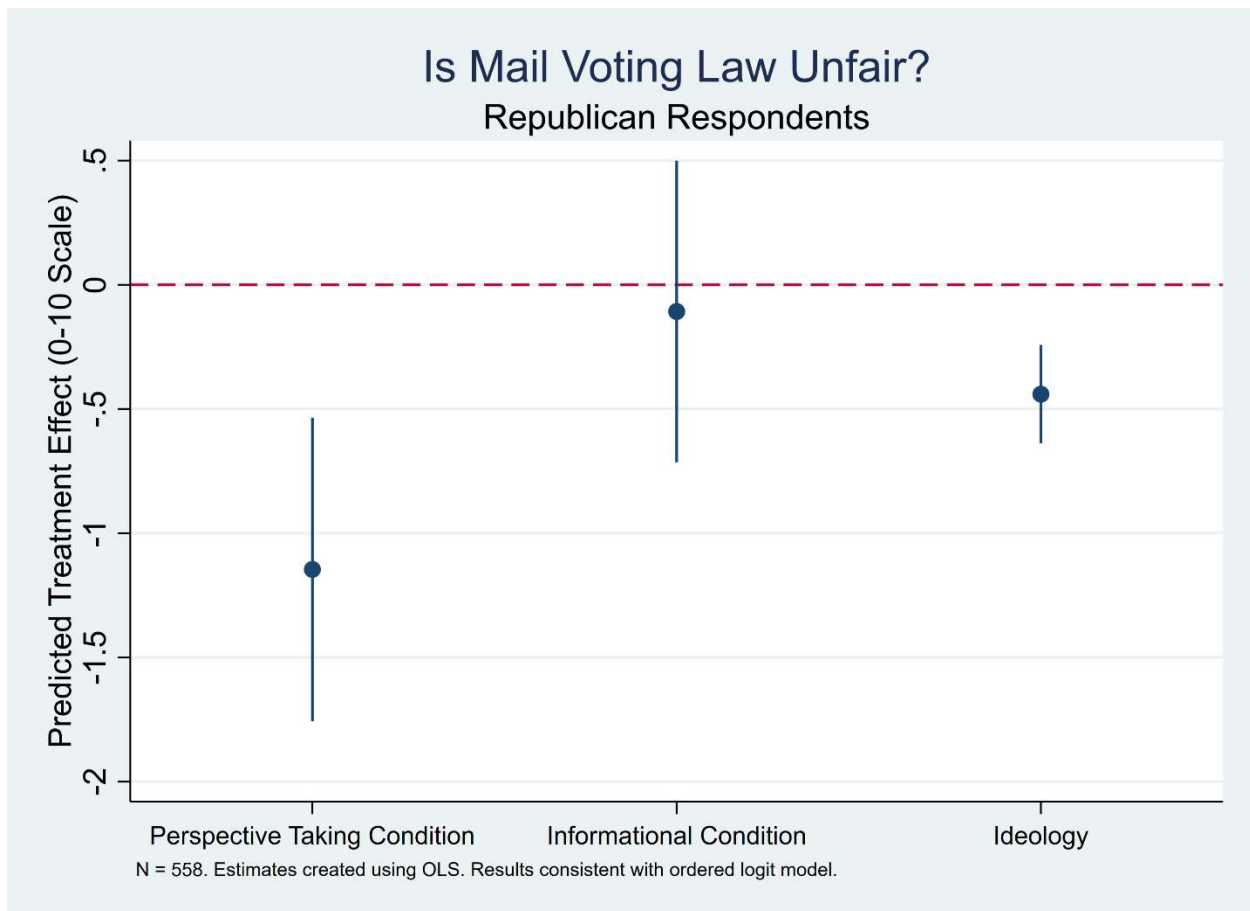
Table Two: Effect of Perspective Taking on Empathy Toward Individual in Video

	(1) Republican Vignette	(2) Democratic Vignette
Perspective Taking	0.74** (0.29)	0.46+ (0.25)
Race: White	0.22 (0.32)	-0.17 (0.28)
Gender: Male	-0.58* (0.29)	0.22 (0.26)
Age	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)
Education	-0.06 (0.10)	0.19* (0.08)
Ideology	0.19 (0.11)+	-0.10 (0.09)
Constant	9.50*** (0.69)	10.38*** (0.60)
<i>N</i>	361	402
<i>R</i> ²	0.069	0.083
adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.054	0.070

Does this empathic concern translate to opposition to the norm violation in question? For Republicans, yes; those in the perspective taking treatment condition, as compared to the informational and control conditions, are significantly more likely to rate the Texas law as unfair, as opposed to fair, on 0 to 10 scale. We see this with Figure One, which focuses on a question that asks whether the respondent perceives the Texas election law as fair or unfair. On average, respondents move more than a point on the scale toward the ‘unfair’ end as compared to control. Respondents in the ‘informational’ condition do not respond significantly different than control. To put this result in context, the right side of the figure displays the predicted effect of a one-

point move on the standard seven-point ideological self-identification scale. The perspective taking treatment effect is over two times the size of this marginal effect. In other words, receiving a short perspective taking video appeal produces a change in opinion on the Texas voting law amongst Republicans that is greater than, for example, the change from identifying as “slightly conservative” versus “strongly conservative”, or “slightly liberal” versus “slightly conservative. Furthermore, analysis in the Appendix shows that those who felt higher, as opposed to lower, empathy for the individual in the video responded most to treatment.

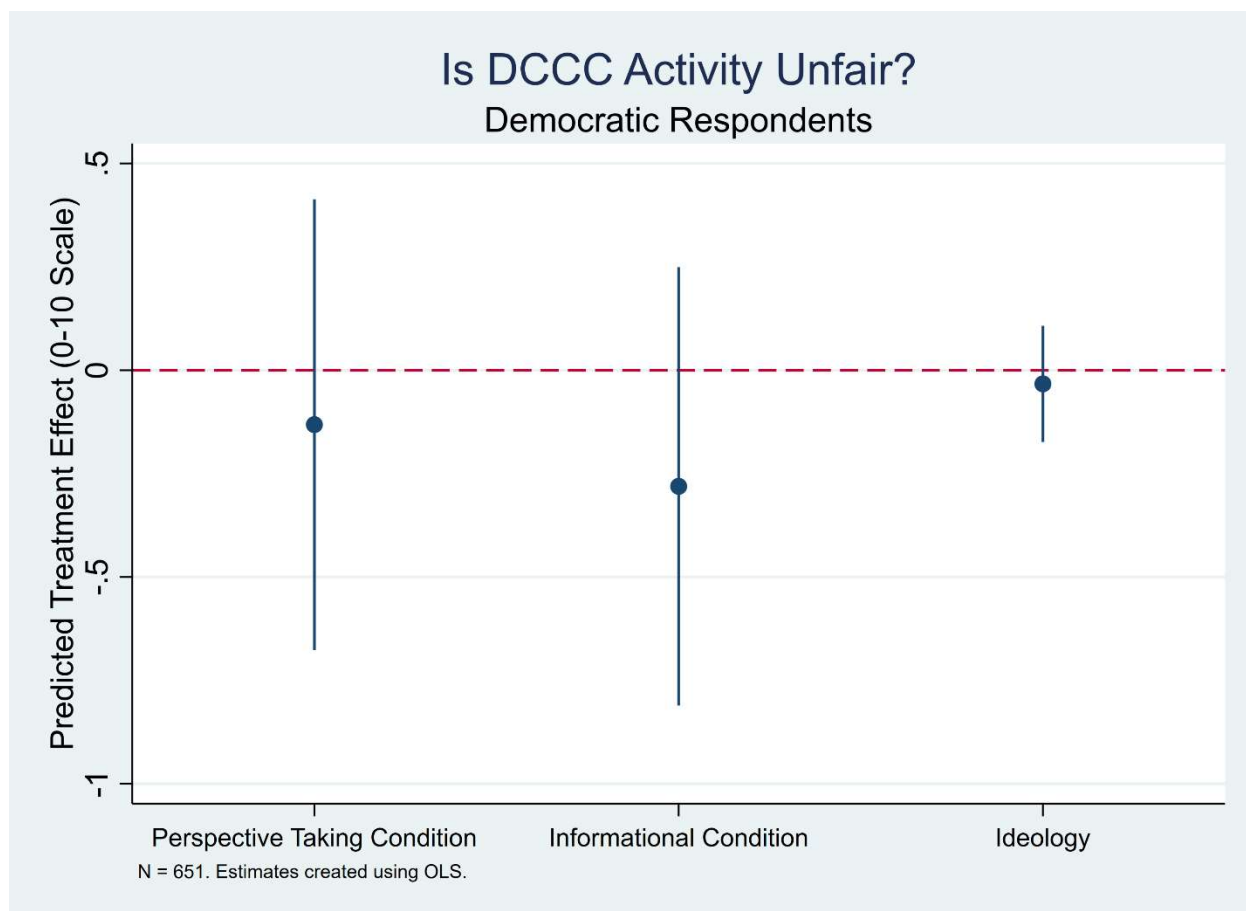
Figure One



There is not the same perspective taking effect, however, for those in the Democratic vignette. Figure Two illustrates the effect of treatment on whether respondents in the Democratic condition feel that the “meddling” actions of the Democratic Congressional Campaign

Committee (DCCC) are fair or unfair (again, measured on a 0 to 10 scale). Neither the perspective taking or the informational treatment effects are significant. The Appendix also shows that there are not significant results when focusing on the subset of respondents that felt higher, as opposed to lower, empathy for the individual in the video.

Figure Two



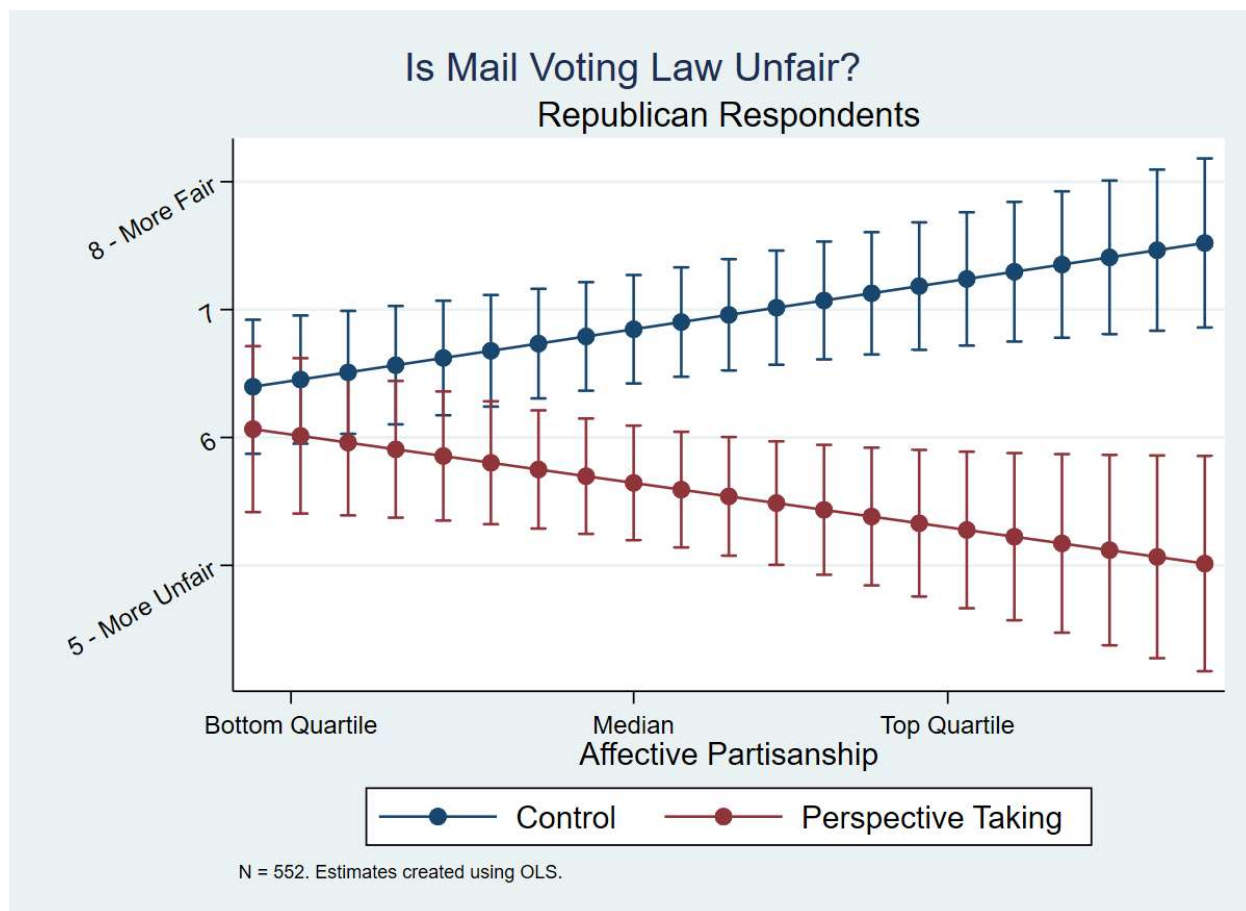
While more analysis needs to be done to explain the differences in response from Republicans and Democrats, we believe that it is due to the nature of the issue itself, rather than differences essential to the two partisan groups. Being denied the right to vote is an unambiguous norm violation, one that citizens of all perspectives have been socialized to oppose. Thus, when confronted with the testimony of an individual to whom this has happened, it is harder to refute

or mentally counterargue. But while we argue that the “meddling” case is an example of a failure of forbearance, it also may be easier to rationalize. What’s more, it was a more complex case for our respondents, illustrated in part by the fact that a higher percentage selected “5”, or the middle option, on the 0-10 scale as opposed to respondents in the voting laws vignette. This complexity may have made it harder for Democrats to clearly see the norm violation at hand, or it may have made it more easy for them to fall back on partisan cue-taking. Future research as part of this project will explore how issue characteristics moderate perspective taking effects, and it will be able to assess how much of the difference we see in the vignettes presented here are due to fundamental differences between the two parties.

We also hypothesized that affective partisanship would moderate the relationship between perspective taking and support for fair electoral practices. In the Democratic vignette, we did not find a moderating effect. We did find one in the Republican vignette, but in the opposite direction that we had hypothesized. It was Republican displaying the *most*, rather than the least, affective partisanship that changed their attitudes as a result of perspective taking. This is illustrated with Figure Three. Not only does perspective taking blunt the impact of affective partisanship on Republican support for the Texas law, it causes its moderating impact to move in the *opposite* direction. When provided a perspective taking appeal, Republicans become *less* supportive of the law the *more* affective charged they are. Further research is needed to further confirm and explain this puzzling finding. One possibility, though, is that those higher in affective partisanship are more likely to have (erroneous) mental models of outparty individuals. Research shows that when those stereotypes are corrected (which is an established effect of perspective taking—see Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000), it can have a depolarizing effect (Druckman et al. 2022). As such, when affectively polarized Republicans are presented with a

‘real’ Democrat who was not able to vote due to the new law, it may be a larger correction to their priors, and thus create a larger movement in their opinion on the law. Further research, and research on other issues, will help confirm whether this is the case.

Figure Three

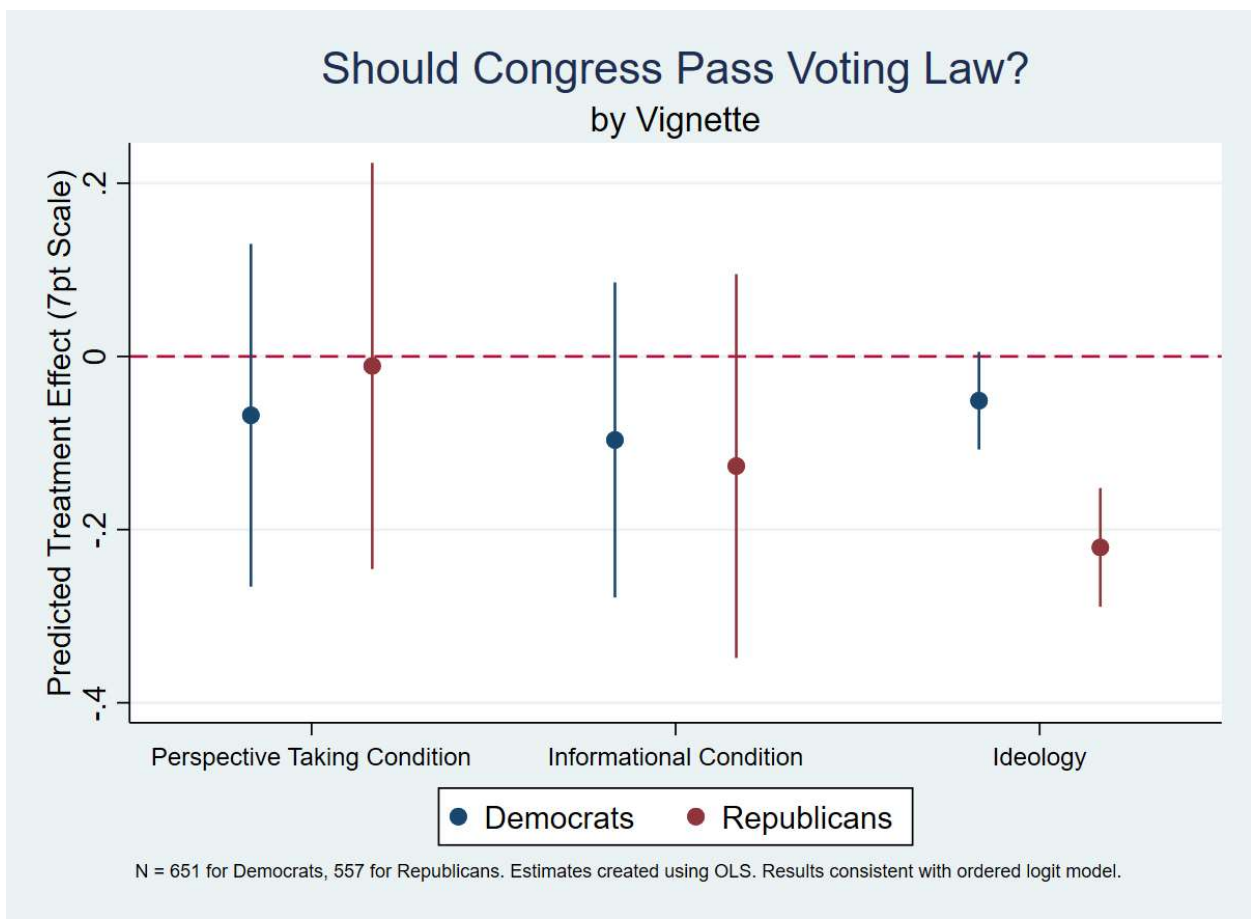


Finally, the change in perception of the Texas voting law engendered by perspective taking did not translate into support for Congressional electoral reform. Respondents in the Republican and Democratic vignettes were told that Congress has “recently introduced legislation⁹” that could prevent the electoral fairness violations they have been considering, and it described how it would do so. Figure Four, however, shows that, in both vignettes, approval of

⁹ This is a reference to the For the People Act, which was introduced in Congress in 2021 but never passed.

this potential law was not significantly different from control for either the perspective taking or informational conditions. This is, in fairness, a much harder test of the effects of perspective taking than asking about the specific democratic norm violation. It is a question that activates respondents' perceptions of Congress, partisan control of Congress, and federal vs. state power in setting election laws. All of this seems to have swamp any perspective taking effects. The null result here is in line with previous research suggesting that perspective taking does not always change perspectives on policies seeking to ameliorate unfair or prejudicial conditions (SOURCES).

Figure Four



Discussion and Conclusion

Partisan political debate can be dehumanizing (Martherus et al. 2021). Both traditional and social media encourage us to adopt mental models that are unidimensional and rooted in exaggerated stereotypes (Druckman et al. 2022). This, in turn, erodes the respect for opposition necessary to sustain fair and healthy political competition.

What happens, though, when we break through stereotypes and encourage understanding and concern for outparty individuals? Our results are mixed, but they suggest that even minimal interventions along these lines can in some contexts bolster support for fair electoral processes. We argue that cross-party perspective taking appeals allow partisans to better perceive and understand unfair treatment, even when it is at the hands of their own party. And to wit, we find that Republicans significantly and substantively reduce support for a restrictive mail voting law when presented with a short perspective taking testimonial from a Democratic voter harmed by the law. This is despite given information detailing how *their party*, electorally, benefits from the law. We find that those that particularly empathize with the individual voter's testimonial reduce their support for the law the most. What's more, we find that it is the *strongest* Republicans, or those that are most affectively polarized, responding particularly strongly to perspective taking treatment. And even though perspective taking did not bolster support for Congressional electoral reform, these results are nonetheless relevant to current debate on voting law. In the past two years, states have passed nearly 50 laws that restrict access to the ballot box in some way (Brennan Center for Justice 2022). Our research suggests that, by presenting testimonials from individuals harmed or disenfranchised, advocates can foster opposition to these lines across party lines.

We did not find the same results for the vignette we presented to Democrats. When given a perspective taking appeal, Democrats did not significantly reduce support for their party “meddling” in Republican primaries by supporting illiberal and extreme candidates, who were perceived as weaker general election candidates. This may be due to fundamental differences in Democratic and Republican coalitions (Grossman and Hopkins 2016). However, we believe it is more likely due to the issue context. A law disenfranchising voters is a clearer violation of electoral norms. The “meddling” activity of the Democratic party is more complex, takes more explanation to convey as a norm violation, and is more contestable as a violation. As such, Democrats were less likely to recognize, and empathize with, the unfairness of the Democratic party’s actions. And even those that empathized with the individual in the video specifically did not decrease their support for their party’s campaign activities. Broadly, this may suggest there are differences in the ability of partisans to respond to perspective taking interventions across “easy” and “hard” issues (Carmines and Stimson 1980). Further research, though, will be needed to explain how and why perspective taking effects vary across issue context, and if there are fundamental partisan differences across issue contexts.

The fleeting nature of our intervention, and our inability to examine long-term effects, are limits to our research design. That being said, the mixed opinion change we find with our minimal intervention is cause for optimism. There is nothing innate or immutable about resistance to democratic norms. A partisan’s typical media diet, however, encourages them to double down on their partisan priors, rather than reflect on how party leaders’ actions relate to valued democratic ideals. Our research suggests that if this environment could change in even modest ways—be that through changes in media, party leader messaging, or even conversation in social networks—perhaps the public would respond with more support for democracy.

This paper is part of a broader project that explores in a multifaceted way the role cross party empathy can play in bolstering support for democratic norms. We posit that empathy can do this work both as a personality trait (see Strickler 2022) and as context dependent state encouraged through perspective taking. In addition to the experiments presented here, we plan to field additional, similarly-designed survey experiments that assess impact of cross-party perspective taking on support for checks and balances, the rule of law, civil liberties, and fair redistricting. In addition to developing and testing a theory regarding issue context, these experiments can confirm and explanation the curious finding that those higher in affective partisanship respond *more* to perspective taking treatment. Through these studies, we will also further assess how political awareness and group empathetic personality moderate the effects of perspective taking. Finally, we plan on eventually designing and field in-depth, focus-group based experiments. This will allow us to move away from the ‘minimal’ interventions presented here and assess the impact of encouraging perspective taking in a more robust and deliberative way.

Over the past decade, the United States has experienced significant democratic backsliding, with only muted response from many of our political leaders. To arrest this trend, the public needs to prioritize the norms of liberal democracy and hold their leaders accountable when they are violated. In the era of affective polarization, this seems to be a big ask. But by encouraging connection and perspective taking with those on “the other side,” the public just may be able to put their partisan interests to the side and give support to pillars of democracy.

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Appendix: Survey Items and Regression Models

Pretreatment Items in Survey

Partisan Identification

Now, I would like to ask you about your party affiliation. Generally speaking, do you consider you're a Democrat, Republican, Independent, or what?

- Democrat (1)
- Republican (2)
- Independent (3)
- Other/Third Party (4)

(If respondent identifies as a Democrat or Republican) Would you call yourself a strong Democrat/Republican, or a not very strong Democrat/Republican?

- Strong Democrat (1)
- Not very strong Democrat (2)

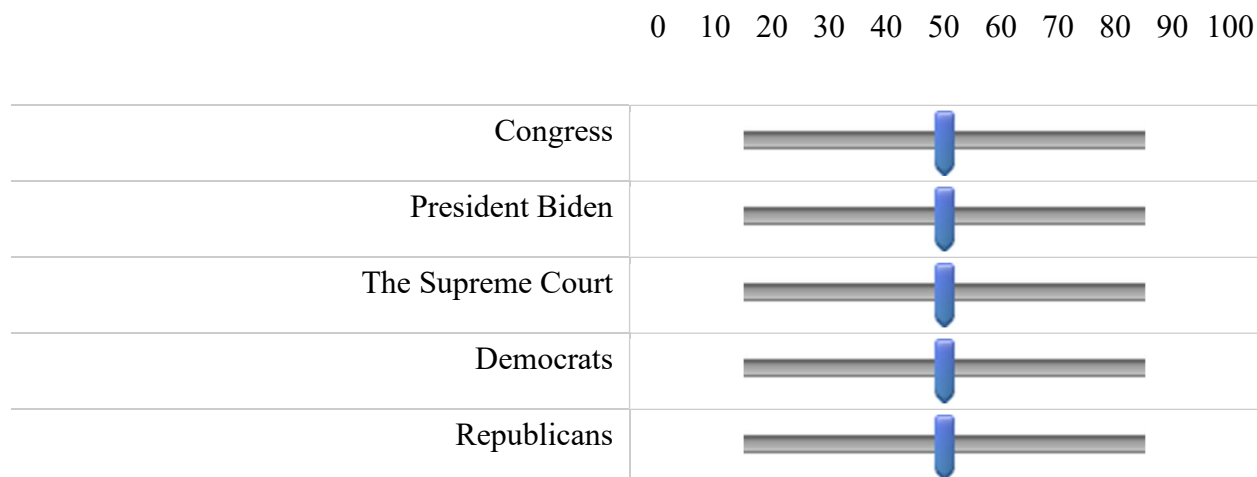
(If respondent does not identify as a Democrat or Republican) Would you call yourself a strong Republican, or a not very strong Republican?

- Strong Republican (1)
- Not very strong Republican (2)

Affective Partisanship/Feeling Thermometer

We would now like to get your feelings toward various groups who are in the news these days. We will show the name of a group and we'd like you to rate that person using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the group. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the group and that you don't care too much for that group. You would rate the person at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the group.

Please rate the following groups on the feeling thermometers below.



Information on Norm Violations Given to Respondents

Democratic Vignette

Now, I would like to get your perspective on some recent political activity related to the 2022 midterm elections. Please read the description below carefully. When you are done, click "I am done carefully reading" to proceed.

Last summer, groups associated with the Democratic Party were accused of "meddling" in the Republican party's primary elections. These groups provided significant financial support for controversial Republican candidates whom they considered easier to defeat in the November 2022 general elections.

As just one example, in Michigan's third Congressional district, incumbent Peter Meijer narrowly lost to John Gibbs in the Republican primary in August 2022. Meijer is a moderate and fairly popular political figure in Michigan. Gibbs, however, is a staunch conservative who denies the legitimacy of the 2020 Presidential election. In the past, he also has argued against women having the right to vote.

According to NPR, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee spent \$425,000 on advertising designed to help Gibbs defeat Meijer the Republican primary. After winning the primary, Gibbs lost in the general election to Democrat Hillary Schloten. Commentators say Schloten would have had a much tougher race if Meijer won the Republican primary.

Former members of the Senate and the House have written an open letter condemning this and other instances of Democratic groups "meddling" in Republican primaries. They believe it poses a threat to fair elections. Moreover, the tactic could backfire if the extreme and anti-democratic candidates supported this way end up elected.

Supporters of the practice, however, say that the practice is “smart politics.” They argue that Democratic groups should do what it takes to win, as long as it is legally allowed.

o I am done carefully reading

Republican Vignette

Now, I would like to get your perspective on some recent political activity related to the 2022 midterm elections. Please read the description below carefully. When you are done, click "I am done carefully reading" to proceed.

Election laws and voting rights have been in the news across the country lately. During September 2021, Texas adopted an election law bill (SB1) that, among other things, placed new restrictions and verification requirements on mail-in ballots. Supporters argue that they help ensure election security, but critics argue that the law is unnecessarily burdensome and prevents eligible citizens from voting.

In the March 2022 Texas primary, 12%, or one in eight, of all mail-in ballots were rejected statewide, largely due to the requirements the new law put in place. This is much higher than with the 2020 Presidential election, where the rejection rate was 1%. Ballot rejections heavily impacted the Democratic-leaning Austin area. What’s more, mail ballot rejection rates were higher than the average for Democratic-leaning demographic groups, such as Black, Hispanic, and Asian voters.

A legal challenge to SB1 is currently being heard in US District Court.

o I am done carefully reading

Dependent Variable Questions

Democratic Vignette

I would like your perspective on Democratic groups' involvement in Republican primaries last year. Here, I will provide two statements, and I would like to know which is closer to your view:

- Democratic groups donating to controversial candidates in Republican primaries is "meddling" and is unacceptable.
- Democratic groups donating to controversial candidates in Republican primaries is "smart politics" and is acceptable.

Imagine a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates you strongly feel that what Democratic groups are doing is unacceptable, 10 indicates you strongly feel that what Democratic groups are doing is acceptable, and 5 indicates you are neutral. Where would you place yourself, from 0 to 10, regarding these statements?

- o 0 - Democratic groups donating to controversial candidates in Republican primaries is unacceptable. (1)
- o 1 (2)
- o 2 (3)
- o 3 (4)
- o 4 (5)
- o 5 - Neutral (6)
- o 6 (7)
- o 7 (8)
- o 8 (9)
- o 9 (10)
- o 10 - Democratic groups donating to controversial candidates in Republican primaries is acceptable (11)

Recently, Congress introduced legislation to reform the campaign finance system. Among other things, it puts limits on the ability of outside groups to spend heavily in primary or general election campaigns. It also requires greater funding transparency, so the average voter would be more likely to tell when Democratic groups are funding ads for Republican primary candidates, or Republican groups are funding ads for Democratic primary candidates.

Proponents of the legislation argue that it would make for more transparent campaigns, and that it would prevent well financed groups from unduly influencing the will of the voters.

Opponents, however, argue that campaign activity and advertisements are political free speech protected by the First Amendment. What's more, when campaigns spend more money on advertisements and events, it serves to inform voters.

What do you think? Do you support or oppose this Congressional legislation to reform the campaign finance system?

- o Strongly support campaign finance legislation (1)
- o Support campaign finance legislation (2)
- o Neither support nor oppose campaign finance legislation (3)
- o Oppose campaign finance legislation (4)
- o Strongly oppose campaign finance legislation (5)

Republican Vignette:

Now, I would like your perspective on Texas's new mail voting law, SB1. Here, I will provide two statements, and I would like to know which is closer to your view:

- The new mail voting law is unfair and should be revoked.
- The new mail voting law is fair and should remain in place.

Imagine a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates you strongly feel that the law is unfair, 10 indicates you strongly feel the law is fair, and 5 indicates you are neutral. Where would you place yourself, from 0 to 10, regarding these statements?

- 0 - The new law is unfair (1)
- 1 (2)
- 2 (3)
- 3 (4)
- 4 (5)
- 5 - Neutral (6)
- 6 (7)
- 7 (8)
- 8 (9)
- 9 (10)
- 10 - The new law is fair (11)

Recently, the U.S. Congress considered legislation designed to reform the electoral process across the nation. This legislation would, among other things, require every state to allow registered voters to vote by mail if they choose to do so (often called "no excuse absentee voting"). It would also put limits on the verification requirements states can place on mail ballots.

Proponents of the legislation say that it will improve electoral access, and it would ensure that minority groups or other individuals are not prevented from voting due to excessive or complex paperwork.

Opponents, however, say that election law should be set at the state level, and the proposed law from Congress is an unwelcome intrusion from the federal government. Some also argue that limiting verification requirements enhances the potential for electoral fraud.

What do you think? Do you support or oppose this Congressional legislation to reform the electoral process?

- Strongly support the Congressional legislation (1)
- Support the Congressional legislation (2)
- Neither support nor oppose the Congressional legislation (3)
- Oppose the Congressional legislation (4)
- Strongly oppose the Congressional legislation (5)

Questions on Individual Videos (all respondents not in control groups receive these)

I would like to get your perspective on the individual in the video and their testimonial specifically.

How sympathetic do you feel towards the individual's perspective?

- Not at all sympathetic (1)
- A little sympathetic (2)
- Somewhat sympathetic (3)
- Very sympathetic (4)
- Extremely sympathetic (5)

How concerned are you about the situation the individual faces?

- Not at all concerned (1)
- Slightly concerned (2)
- Somewhat concerned (3)
- Moderately concerned (4)
- Extremely concerned (5)

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:

"The individual in the video has been treated unfairly."

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Models for Figures in Paper

Figure One Model: Is Texas Law Unfair?, Republican Vignette

	(1) Fair/Unfair Scale
Perspective Taking	-1.15*** (0.31)
Informational	-0.11 (0.31)
Race: White	0.06 (0.34)
Male	0.48 (0.26)
Age	0.02* (0.01)
Education	0.20* (0.09)
Ideology	-0.44*** (0.10)
Constant	6.23*** (0.64)
<i>N</i>	558
<i>R</i> ²	0.111
adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.099

OLS model. Robust standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure Two Model: Is DCCC Action Unfair?, Democratic Vignette

	(1) Fair/Unfair Scale
Perspective Taking	-0.13 (0.28)
Informational	-0.28 (0.27)
Race: White	0.06 (0.25)
Male	0.63** (0.23)
Age	-0.02** (0.01)
Education	0.28*** (0.07)
Ideology	-0.03 (0.07)
Constant	5.86*** (0.54)
<i>N</i>	651
<i>R</i> ²	0.049
adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.039

OLS model. Robust standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Perspective Taking Treatment Effect, by Empathy Felt Toward Individual in Video

	(1) Rep. High Empathy	(2) Rep. Low Empathy	(3) Democrats High Empathy	(4) Democrats Low Empathy
Perspective Taking Cond.	-2.34*** (0.40)	-0.28 (0.35)	-0.00 (0.38)	-0.25 (0.32)
Race: White	-0.05 (0.49)	0.05 (0.46)	0.26 (0.35)	0.03 (0.32)
Male	0.49 (0.35)	0.42 (0.33)	1.05** (0.33)	0.64* (0.31)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Education	0.12 (0.12)	0.14 (0.11)	0.22* (0.10)	0.28** (0.10)
Ideology	-0.58*** (0.14)	-0.60*** (0.14)	-0.13 (0.11)	-0.03 (0.11)
Constant	7.30*** (0.87)	6.72*** (0.81)	6.20*** (0.77)	5.47*** (0.73)
<i>N</i>	273	297	339	348
<i>R</i> ²	0.198	0.145	0.065	0.043
adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.180	0.128	0.048	0.026

Models compare treatment effect for those that score above, versus below, the median for the index rating empathy felt toward the individual in the video. OLS models. Robust standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure Three Model: Is Texas Voting Law Unfair?, by Affective Partisanship, Republican Respondents

	(1) Base	(2) Interaction
Perspective Taking	-1.19*** (0.32)	-0.33 (0.42)
Affective Partisanship	0.00 (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)
Persp. Taking x Affective P.		-0.02** (0.01)
Informational	-0.15 (0.31)	-0.18 (0.31)
Race: White	0.03 (0.33)	-0.01 (0.33)
Male	0.49 (0.26)	0.47 (0.26)
Age	0.02* (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)
Education	0.21* (0.09)	0.19* (0.09)
Ideology	0.39*** (0.10)	0.39*** (0.10)
Constant	2.81*** (0.60)	2.67*** (0.60)
<i>N</i>	552	552
<i>R</i> ²	0.112	0.128
adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.099	0.113

OLS model. Robust standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure Four: Approve of Congressional Reform?, by Vignette and Condition

	(1) Republicans	(2) Democrats
Perspective Taking	-0.01 (0.12)	-0.07 (0.10)
Informational	-0.13 (0.11)	-0.10 (0.09)
Race: White	0.08 (0.11)	-0.09 (0.09)
Male	0.19 (0.10)	-0.11 (0.08)
Age	0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)
Education	0.05 (0.03)	-0.13*** (0.03)
Ideology	-0.22*** (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)
Constant	3.02*** (0.24)	3.48*** (0.20)
<i>N</i>	557	651
<i>R</i> ²	0.150	0.072
adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.139	0.062

Robust standard errors in parentheses
 * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$