

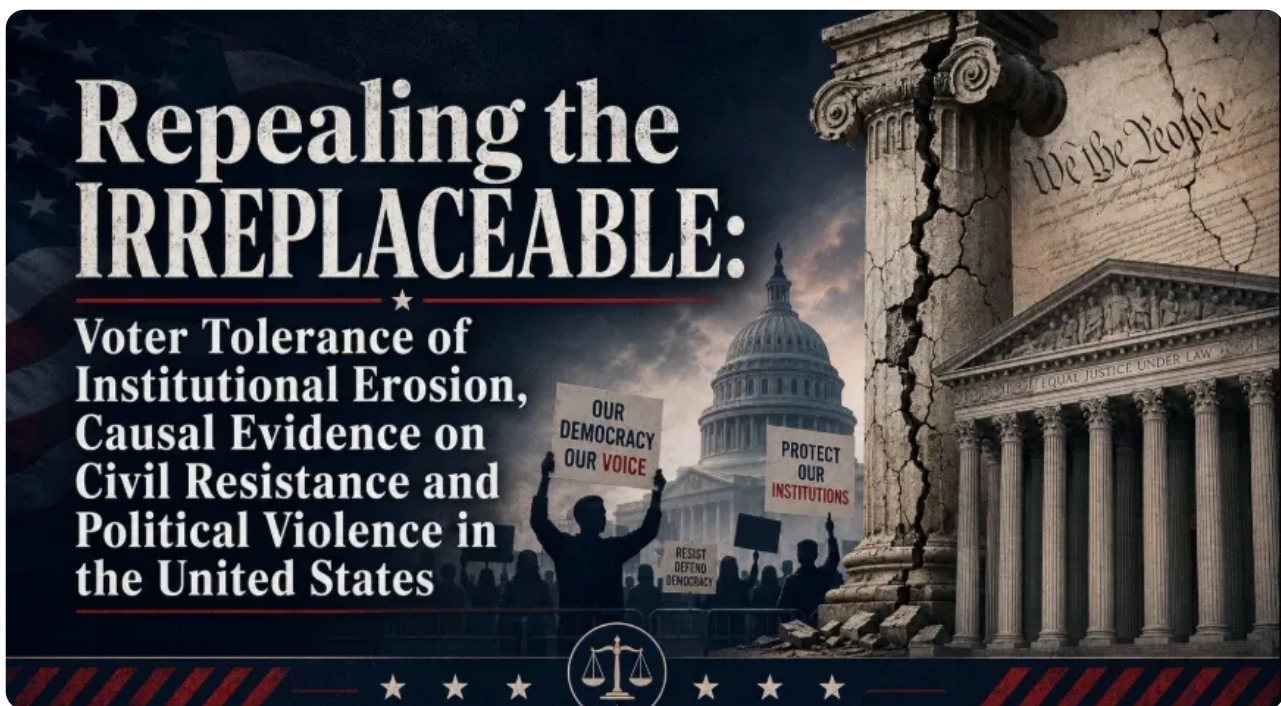
Repealing the Irreplaceable: Voter Tolerance of Institutional Erosion, Causal Evidence on Civil Resistance and Political Violence in the United States.

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Abstract

This article examines how voters may support democratic principles in theory while tolerating institutional violations committed by their preferred political leaders. It describes the influence of partisanship, political identity, fear, and perceived emergency on public acceptance of attacks against courts, election results, media freedom, and lawful opposition. The article mentions survey experiments as an effective method for separating genuine democratic commitment from reactions to party labels, candidate credibility, and policy preferences. It also discusses civil resistance and political violence as important contexts in which voter tolerance can be measured. Peaceful protest may demonstrate democratic strength, while selective policing and intimidation can weaken participation. The analysis emphasizes that electoral accountability depends on whether citizens impose comparable penalties on institutional violations regardless of the political party responsible. It concludes that causal evidence should connect expressed attitudes with candidate choice, donations, abstention, and other observable behaviours to assess whether democratic norms survive under partisan pressure.



The illusion of public support for democracy is comforting until a genuine election is held that puts the people under the pressure of deciding between democratic principles and winning the election. That dynamic is almost ripe in the middle of American politics in January 2025. Amidst national-level opinion polling, citizens from a wide range of party affiliations can be found to support free elections, fair competition, and constitutional boundaries; tolerance, however, can change when one's preferred candidate appears to be at risk of violating any or all of these principles. Fear, identity and perceived emergency can make institutional actions seem justifiable, thus compounding the pressures brought on by civil resistance and political violence.

Voter attitudes also represent a strand of danger: Highly aspiring leaders do not usually weaken the institutions without an election clearing the way. There doesn't need to be a high-level commitment to the rules of the game partisan and policy preferences matter, as Milan Slovik's research and related survey experiments have found. Many citizens approve norm violations for a favored group and disapprove of similar norms for other groups, particularly when it comes to elections seen as an existential struggle. That space between support and sanctioning affords opportunity for the erosion of institutions. So, convictions under a pinch in situations like supporting an undemocratic chief candidate, accepting intimidation, tolerating preferential prosecution, or rejecting certified results with vested interests at stake, are more convincing.

In causal analysis it is important to differentiate real democratic commitment from responses to a party name, candidate "credibility", or "opposing" a set of policy positions.

But very carefully-designed survey experiments can manipulate only one institutional violation at a time, whether by threatening judges, limiting the free media, inciting political violence, or denying election results. Stated concern can be then followed through electoral returns or donation behaviors or even opinion survey to see the measurable sanction. Heterogeneous effects are important because they are differential, that is, the answer from independents, from strong partisans, from ideological moderates and from citizens whose level of political knowledge varies may be different. Experiments that link attitudes with actual behaviors (rather than simply asking for support for democracy) are most useful.

Specifically, civil resistance offers a particularly effective diagnostic lens because, as one form of action, protest activity shows the grievance, as well as the response of institutions. Between October 2023 and early June 2024, the Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC) documented almost 12,400 pro-Palestine demonstrations and over 2,000 pro-Israel demonstrations in the U.S. The majority of events were peaceful and thus showed that massive mobilization does not necessarily lead to chaos or unrest. More telling questions involve variations in police force efficiency, policing of marches, various policy measures at colleges, as well as contrasting official talks on different issues. A democracy that does not many Hm's at the sounds of a raucous protest has demonstrated that it has a backbone; and as soon as dissent becomes a security category, the democracy finds itself on a road that leads it toward criminalizing entire populations and entire social groups.

Political violence is unlike other types of violence; symbolic targets, ideological motivation, and public intimidation all play a role in the violence. Violence perpetrated by extremist groups, by police using excessive force, by violent mobs, hate crimes, and attacks associated with political identity have also been included in ACLED's monitoring for the United States. A threatening storm petal might not disrupt or fly off, but if repeated threats against election officials, judges, journalists, legislators and other local leaders occur even if not often behavior can change. The reduction in democratic participation come from resignations, decreased candidate recruitment, self-censorship, and hardened security procedures. Therefore, the number of events is not the most important early-warning sign, but also the "chilling effect" exerted on those conducting their normal democratic activities.

There can be no Democratic Government without Formal Law. There is an informal system of operation under the written rules of the game based on institutional forbearance, mutual toleration, professional neutrality and acceptance of adverse outcomes. Backsliding happens when all legal tools have turned into weapons, all legal

vacancies are a litmus test and all investigations are partisan. Litigation may come after the damage Courts can rule against unlawful action or, but only if civil servants comply with the Court's orders.

There is room for legislation to review, but is less when partisanship triumphs over institutional accountability. But trust and secure protection ultimately require many different actors to not take every opportunity for an advantage particularly at times when short-term gain and long-term legitimacy may diverge.

Civil resistance can make democracy costlier to authoritarianism without using the authoritarian logic, thereby saving democratic institutions. Nonviolent movements increase membership, tap into new social categories, induce loss of support from the reigning combination of power, and provide opportunities for observation of official constraint. There aren't a magic number of people involved or a magic moment in a march for one to be successful. Often more important than the crowd size in a headline, is the organization, the strategic discipline, the local networks, the participation of the labor, the credibility of the media and the demands.

Conflicts within a movement may also deflect focus from institutional violence to public order, which may be used to push for repression and can reduce forming of alliances. Tactics thus serve a cause of defense that are capable of revealing the misconduct without undermining the general legitimacy of democratic defense.

A solid evidence approach includes both wide-ranging comparisons and in-depth study of institutions. Event data can be used to determine when and where things occur, and administrative data can be used to determine how things are being enforced and how organizations are reacting. Using survey experiments, public tolerance can be tested, while process tracing 'reliquefies' critical decisions. Other indicators may include court opinions, internal guidance, personnel turnover, disciplinary actions and budget changes.

There is no single indicator that can summaries the erosion of democracy or accountability. Triangulation is a critical tool, since some dangers can be amplified in discussions and some official figures can be a form of underreporting and some legal changes may never be realized. More independent voices all direct to the same mechanism at the various levels of governance, the higher the confidence level rises.

Voter tolerance is particularly important in the context of political violence being couched in terms of defending against an "illegitimate" foe. Experiments will examine if citizens react to norm violations with same penalties when the party labels and policy positions

invert. But civil-resistance messages can make a difference in tolerance as well by framing institutional defense as a common rule rather than a partisan demand.

It is also important to pay particular attention to any local variation as this could represent either a focused incident of intimidation, a targeted effort of enforcement, or administrative failure. A credible warning system ought to provide clear criteria, make a clear distinction between legitimate disagreement and pressure and not bypass a risk assessment to become a party exercise in labeling. An ordinary capacity like record-keeping, qualified personnel, periodic audits and safe havens for dissent constitute the capacity of institutional resilience as well.

This means that spectacular incidents can get the attention of the media while behind-the-scenes adjustments are made that change the rules of engagement, affecting who's playing and who's receiving a response. Comparative evidence points toward the identification of danger; the study of the American federal system needs to investigate institutions at the state and municipal level as well as the national level and in the context of conflict. The relevant standard is fair competition; the standard isn't total consensus; it is competition consistent with the rules, without the rules changing depending on the timing of a changing political landscape.

Inherent protections of election workers must be both physical and legal without relocating administration from public view and lawful challenge. Threat assessment can only be used in a democratic sense when the criteria are uniformly applied throughout ideology, identities, geography, and institutional affiliation. Repeatedly using dehumanizing language can help normalize, justify and even make intimidation seem necessary as a political strategy by the political leaders.

Civic groups can help to reduce tension by disseminating accurate information, by educating legal eyes and ears and by sorting out rumor from substantive documented institutional change. Bridging networks can be in place in the form of universities, unions, professional associations, faith communities, and local media in cases of extreme polarization within national parties. Public agencies ought to document exceptional decision making so that at a subsequent time, it would be clear whether it was a necessity or just an opportunity.

Transparency does not protect against abuse but hidden authority causes it to be corrected more slowly, more onus for authorizations is weak, and makes public suspicion easier to manipulate.

The main point being that protection in a democracy must start before a constitutional emergency arises; it is not something that can be postponed until the issue becomes a popular topic or is mainstreamed. Patterns give early signals meaning – not loosely standing controversy. Institutions have the endurance to withhold complicity when citizens, officials, courts and legislatures, professional bodies, and civic organizations make it costly for them to violate this principle and rewarding for them to exercise restraint. There will be significant political disagreement and protest will continue as a design feature.

Rough roads, or only slightly smoother ones, are not an impediment to democratic resilience, nor is lack of uniform trust. It takes institutions that can manage conflict without rendering opposition to be disloyal and coercion to be a matter of routine, nor temporary advantage to permanent exemption.