

# Lethal Mass Partisanship: Prevalence, Correlates, & Electoral Contingencies<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

U.S. historical accounts of partisanship recognize its contentiousness and its inherent, latent threat of violence, but social scientific conceptions of partisan identity developed in quiescent times have largely missed that dangerous dimension. We rebalance scholarly accounts by investigating the national prevalence and correlates of 1) partisan moral disengagement that rationalizes harm against opponents, 2) partisan *schadenfreude* in response to deaths and injuries of political opponents, and 3) explicit support for partisan violence. In two nationally representative surveys, we find large portions of partisans embrace partisan moral disengagement (10-60%) but only small minorities report feeling partisan *schadenfreude* or endorse partisan violence (5-15%). Party identity strength and trait aggression consistently increase each kind of extreme party view. Finally, experimental evidence shows inducing expectations of electoral victory give strong partisans more confidence to endorse violence against their partisan opponents. We conclude with reflections on the risks of lethal partisanship in democratic politics, even as parties continue to serve as essential bedrocks of democracy.

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## INTRODUCTION

The American Constitution's authors were deeply concerned about the mortal dangers posed by political parties for American democracy and its citizens alike. James Madison wrote in Federalist #10 that partisan majorities in small democracies would inevitably "sacrifice the weaker party" and produce "spectacles of turbulence and contention," which explained why democracies had historically been "short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths." He argued that a large, diverse nation and a carefully designed constitution would save the American republic from a similar fate. The Framers were right to worry but wrong about preventing partisan disaster. Divisions over slavery led Southern Democrats to reject the legitimate 1860 presidential election, inaugurating a civil war that killed three-quarters of a million Americans, the population equivalent of 7 million today. Partisan violence shook the nation on a smaller scale in the decades before and after the rebellion, meant to press electoral advantages and, in the post-war South, inseparable from defending and extending white supremacy (e.g. Grimsted 1998; Foner 1988; Potter 1977).

The scientific study of political behavior matured in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, long after the most extraordinary partisan violence of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century had subsided. The quiescent period in which American scholars conceptualized partisan identity probably contributed to its potent but largely benign parameters: partisanship at best as a guide for vote choice and policy views, at worst serving to distort political perceptions (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes 1960). Since that time, U.S. parties sorted ideologically, contending social groups aligned more exclusively in the parties, and partisan animosity grew fierce (e.g. Mason 2018; Poole 2015). Accordingly, behavioral scholars have gradually recognized the darker aspects of partisanship and inched the field toward a warier view of

partisanship's capacities—first partisan dislike, then social avoidance, and now material discrimination (e.g. Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar & Westwood 2015; Pew 2016).

Here, we step beyond the affective polarization incrementalism and return to a much broader, more historically grounded view of partisan power that includes *lethality*—in which ordinary partisans 1) hold views that rationalize harming opponents (moral disengagement; Bandura et al. 1996), 2) feel less sympathy over opponents' deaths (*schadenfreude*), and 3) feel less restraint about killing opponents (violence). Supplementing our conceptual development around these three aspects of *lethal partisanship*, we derive predictions about their correlates and contingencies from political psychology and the psychology of human aggression. We argue that an examination of the more powerful and dangerous elements of partisanship in the study of contemporary American politics is not only necessary but also overdue.

To test the prevalence of lethal partisanship and its dynamics, we present evidence from two nationally representative surveys. First, we find that large numbers of partisans embrace partisan moral disengagement (40-60%). In contrast, only small minorities express partisan *schadenfreude* and support for partisan violence (5-15%). Even so, the smallest observed estimates reflect violent partisanship among tens of millions of Americans. Second, we find party identity strength and aggressive personality traits are the most consistent correlates increasing all three aspects of lethal partisanship. Other constructs including political emotions, ideological orientations, and demographic traits correspond with moral disengagement and *schadenfreude* items but not violence. Third, experimental evidence shows inducing expectations of electoral victory in the next presidential election gives strong partisans more confidence to endorse violence against their partisan opponents.

We conclude with a discussion of inferential limitations, next steps in this research area, and reflections on how lethal partisanship rebalances scholarly views of partisan

potency. That effort highlights the broader dangers partisanship poses in democratic politics, even as parties continue to serve as essential bedrocks of democracy (Schattschneider 1960).

### **From Benign to Malign Partisanship**

Lazarsfeld and Berelson provided the first systematic, holistic investigations of partisan voting behavior in their foundational works *The People's Choice* (1944) and *Voting* (1954), covering the relatively sleepy elections elevating FDR in 1940 and Truman in 1948 in two communities. They found stable partisan preferences over the length of each campaign, with preferences shaped by interpersonal influence from family, friends, and co-workers, positional influence from socioeconomic status and group affiliation, and more limited, impersonal influence from local political organizations and mass media.

*The American Voter* (1960) established the social-psychological framework for partisanship as a social identity related to other group identities and attitudes and situated in social, economic, and historical contexts (Campbell et al. 1960). Parents instill partisan identity in their children through political socialization and those attachments are durable over lifetimes (see Jennings et al. 2009). Partisanship further reflects other social identities as they align with party coalitions and attitudes toward social groups associated with the parties (e.g. Ahler & Sood 2018; Green et al. 2004; Huddy et al. 2015; Mason 2018). Issue attitudes and ideological commitments play a smaller and largely derivative role, primarily among a narrow slice of political sophisticates attentive enough to notice partisan position-taking (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960; Kinder & Kalmoe 2017; Lenz 2012; Zaller 1992). Critical work focuses on how partisan reasoning can lead people astray (e.g. Achen & Bartels 2016).

More recent scholarship finds partisan identities fueling attitudes and social behaviors that corrode democracy: inter-party hostility, perceptions of out-partisans as a national threat, delegitimizing views, social avoidance, and outright social discrimination (e.g.

Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Cho, Gimpel, and Hui 2013; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Huber and Malhotra 2017; Klofstad, McDermott, and Hatemi 2012; Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017; Levendusky 2013; Mason 2015; Mason 2018; McConnell et al. 2018; Miller and Conover 2015; Pew 2014; Pew 2016a: Pew 2016b). These divides grew dramatically in recent decades and, by some metrics, now rival the nation's deepest social divisions (Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Pew 2014; Pew 2016a: Pew 2016b). However, even these partisan maladies fall far short of the extreme potential of partisan identity.

Electioneering from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to the present lacked the violence that characterized 19<sup>th</sup> century partisanship, and we believe that tranquility limited scholarly perspectives on the potential harm that partisanship could do. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw low-level partisan violence and party militias that accompanied election activity in the antebellum years (e.g. Grimsted 1998), partisan conflict over slavery in “Bleeding Kansas” in the 1850s (e.g. Potter 1977), racialized partisan violence in the Reconstruction and Jim Crow Eras in the South (e.g. Acharya et al. 2018; Fisher 1997; Foner 1988; Graham & Gurr 1979), and the maximal partisan violence of the Civil War following the 1860 presidential election (e.g. Costa & Kahn 2003; McPherson 1998). To be sure, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw plenty of political violence by extremists, including anarchist bombings in the 1920s and radical left bombings in the 1970s, but none of these mapped onto ordinary partisan contestation.

Contemporary U.S. public opinion research has largely ignored the modern potential for partisan violence, and even comparative politics research on partisan violence tends to focus on elite level coordination rather than micro-foundations for individual-level partisan violence (e.g. ). Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) diverge from the macro-level scholarly approach in their study of individual-level civil war participation in Sierra Leone, which found some evidence that party affiliation affected willingness to participate as a combatant.

Gubler and Selway (2012) and Scarcelli (2014) both point to the effects of ethnic, religious, and ideological (but not partisan) cleavages in extra-American contexts as potential catalysts for civil war. The only U.S. scholarship we know of that investigates lethal partisanship dynamics is Kalmoe's (N.D.) experimental work that finds partisan bias in state violence attitudes targeting political opponents (e.g. police violence, death penalty, civil war scenarios).

### **From Social Identity to Violence**

Outside of partisan contexts, the relationship between ethnocentrism and violence is abundantly clear cross-nationally and historically, often focused on racial, religious, and national conflicts. Comparative politics scholars in particular find plenty of violence from intergroup conflicts beyond partisanship, usually emphasizing the predominance of ethnic identity (e.g. Horowitz 1985; Posner 2004; Varshney 2003; Wilkinson 2004). American political behavior scholars seem to forget those identity-based conflicts when considering partisan politics, even as recent scholarship points to similar ethnocentric maladies.

Social identifications like partisanship produce in-group favoritism and out-group derogation in attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors when groups compete (Hewstone et al. 2002; Tajfel 1981). Identity is most potent as an enduring sense of belonging, strongly linked to a personal sense of self (Tajfel et al. 1971; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Each social identity can be reinforced by other, overlapping social identities, and partisanship can act in this way for many people (Huddy 2001; Huddy et al. 2015; Mason 2018). In-group identification does not necessarily produce out-group hostility (e.g. Brewer 1999), but the two often coincide, especially where group goals come into conflict.

Here, in the context of electoral competition, we expect to find similar antagonism among partisans, in which strongly-identified partisans psychologically disengage from

opponents in ways that facilitate violence, lack empathy for the suffering of opponents, and actively express support for violence against their political foes. We cannot systematically say whether such partisan hostilities are more prevalent now than the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, though we know the 19<sup>th</sup> century was full of outright partisan violence. However, we expect to find that millions of ordinary partisans *today* are full of righteous, violent fury at their political opponents, even without explicit calls for violence from leaders and rising body counts.

Our lethal partisanship concept and the tests below pair well with recent work by Kalmoe (N.D.) showing experimental evidence of partisan biases in state violence endorsement depending on the partisanship of the target. In some ways, that extreme partisanship is psychologically easier to manage because it comes in response to illegalities that might conceivably justify use of force when carried out by the sanctified forces of the state. Partisans simply see state force as more justified when the target is from the opposing party. Here, we go further, dropping the pretense of legitimized state violence to focus solely on the prevalence of support for naked violence against partisan opponents.

### **A Typology of Lethal Partisanship**

Here, we describe three categories of partisan animosity beyond dislike, social avoidance, and discrimination. *Moral disengagement* serves as a psychological facilitator for engaging in violence, *schadenfreude* reflects a lack of empathy or even a joy in the misfortune of others, and support for *threats and physical harm* get at attitudes facilitating violence directly.

Mechanisms of moral disengagement involve psychological rationalization that facilitates harm against others (Bandura et al. 1996; Bandura 1999). It gives people the moral leeway to harm others in ways they would not otherwise find acceptable without that psychological distancing, thereby protecting one's self-image as a good person even as one harms other people. This constellation of related attitudes is *not* direct support for violence,

but it constitutes a key risk factor for developing violent attitudes. Attitudes corresponding with moral disengagement include vilification and dehumanization of targets, blaming targets and emphasizing their deservingness for punishment, holding morally righteous views of oneself or one's group, displacement of personal and collective responsibility for harm done, and minimizing or misrepresenting the extent of those harms.<sup>2</sup> Moral disengagement reduces pro-social behavior and expectations of self-censure for harmful actions (Bandura et al. 1996). Vilification and an emphasis on worthy purposes are the strongest predictors.

*Schadenfreude* involves deriving pleasure from the unfortunate experiences of others. Here, we are interested in whether physical harm experienced by out-partisans is viewed less negatively, or perhaps even positively, by opposing partisans. For example, Combs and colleagues (2009) found evidence that Democrats were less concerned and more pleased about minor physical harm to President George W. Bush after a bicycle accident, alongside some non-physical negative outcomes. *Schadenfreude* could arise from relatively mild setbacks for disliked opponents, like losing a minor contest, but we set these reactions in terms of the death of politicians by illness and by violence, so that responses to our questions are unambiguously extreme. We also conceptualize wishing harm on political opponents (but not advocating that they *be* harmed) as a hybrid between *schadenfreude* and violent attitudes.

Violent partisan attitudes are the most straightforward of our three types. We are interested in direct, explicit, unambiguous endorsement of intentional violence against partisan opponents under present political circumstances, rather than theoretical or historical advocacy of violence under extreme tyrannical circumstances. Within this construct, we also include threats against leaders and citizens that make them fear for their physical safety.

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<sup>2</sup> Political behavior scholars have recently begun to study partisan dehumanization (e.g. Cassesse 2017; Martherhus 2018; Pucilli et al. 2016). Here, we investigate the broader array of moral disengagement, of which dehumanization is one part.



These forms of terrorism work in concert to advance partisan goals through the use of violence and fear of violence.

### **Our Expectations for Lethal Partisanship**

Prevalence. Our three types of attitudes vary in their degree of norm violation and self-implication. Moral disengagement involves making extreme judgments about the opposing party but does not involve harm to them. By contrast, partisan *schadenfreude* is a response to real people being physically hurt, by chance or by malice. When harm is explicit (i.e. *schadenfreude*), we expect less endorsement than when the attitudes simply one step removed from harm (moral disengagement). We expect more sympathetic reactions to harm from violence (versus accidents) because of norms against political violence as well as the human agency involved in violence that implicates anyone who looks approvingly upon it. Extending that logic, we expect the least support for explicit endorsements for threats of violence and violence itself, both targeting partisan opponents. These attitudes move from reactions to a *fait accompli* to proactive normative endorsement of terrorism and violence in the future. Past work has found low but detectable levels of support for political violence in general (Kalmoe 2014; Pew 1998), and we expect similar distributions here when we make partisan targets explicit.

Correlates. What kinds of partisans are more or less likely to endorse these three types of lethal partisanship? Naturally, stronger identification should produce stronger partisan differentiation (Huddy 2000; Huddy et al. 2015), and we expect that dynamic to produce greater endorsement among strong partisans for all three attitude types here. Likewise, we have already established why we expect partisan moral disengagement to correspond positively with partisan violence and *schadenfreude*.

Aggressive personality traits (i.e. trait aggression) are strong predictors of violent political attitudes as well (Kalmoe 2014), and anger fuels more belligerent attitudes and behaviors (Anderson & Bushman 2002; Huddy et al. 2007). People who behave aggressively in everyday life are more likely to see violence as a solution to political problems as well. Demographic factors could matter too. For example, women are less supportive of state violence even after accounting for small sex differences in trait aggression (Kalmoe 2013), and younger people and those with lower levels of education are more likely to engage in aggression generally (e.g. Kalmoe 2015). Those demographic patterns for interpersonal aggression may persist when the outcome involves lethal partisanship instead. Finally, given the partisan nature of these attitudes, we may find that exposure to partisan news media or opinion leadership driven by favorable views of President Trump may play a role.

Electoral Contingencies. Human aggression arises from an interaction between traits of the person (e.g. partisan identity, aggressive personality) and situations (e.g. provocations; Anderson & Bushman 2002). In other words, some people are more prone to respond aggressively than others, and some situations are more likely to prompt aggression than others. We expect similar contingencies for endorsing partisan violence in particular. Many contextual factors could play a role in endorsing lethal partisanship. However, we are particularly interested in how partisans respond to elections.

Elections are essential instruments of democracy (Powell 2000), and yet they produce substantial discord as well, from the competition itself and the substantive stakes for groups and policies. When that discord boils over into violence, democracy does not function properly. Those inherent democratic tensions make elections an especially important site for studying support for partisan violence.

Political violence is often associated with political losers, with the presumption that their grievances motivate violence. Winners get what they wanted and so they have less need for political violence. Winners also have control of the state apparatus, which means they control the state's monopoly on the use of legitimate violence. They could direct that *state* violence at the political losers if they seem to pose a threat. That would reduce non-state violence endorsement among winners (and those who expect to win). In that vein, experimental work shows that strongly identified partisans are angrier when their group loses an election, and that anger mobilizes political participation (Huddy et al. 2015; Valentino et al. 2011). Likewise, losing increases levels of hostility toward opponents among strongly identified partisans (Mason 2018). Those findings might lead us to expect more support for partisan violence when an electoral loss is expected, especially since anger is the emotional fuel of aggression (Anderson & Bushman 2002).

On the other hand, we think political winners have their own reasons to support partisan violence. Mackie, Devos, and Smith (2000) argue that strong partisanship makes partisans think most Americans prefer their party, and that enhances their anger and motivation to act against political opponents who seek to obstruct them. Given affirmative signals of likely electoral success—or better yet, confirmation in election results—strong partisans are likely to respond to continued political opposition with greater hostility. In this way, anger among winners mobilizes aggression. By contrast, the weaker party may feel anxiety rather than anger when in conflict with a powerful majority, leading them away from confrontation. Finally, we think winners may feel enriched with more political capital to burn through hostile action, and that, since most of the public backs them anyway, violent intimidation and score-settling against political opponents become more attractive options. Expectations of violence by both winners and losers fit comparative literatures on election-

related violence in which multiple parties often compete with violence as well as other means for political advantage (e.g. Horowitz 1985; Posner 2004; Varshney 2003; Wilkinson 2004).

With two plausible relationships between electoral outcomes and partisan violence, we remain agnostic and look to the data for validation of one view or the other.

## **RESEARCH DESIGNS**

To test our static and dynamic expectations for lethal partisanship, we fielded two original nationally representative surveys in Fall 2017 and Spring 2018. The first was fielded in November and December 2017 as a module in the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES,  $N=1,000$ ), an online national stratified sample survey administered by YouGov. The second study was administered by Nielsen Scarborough from June 1-5, 2018 ( $N=1,215$ ). Nielsen uses a probability-based panel, which was originally recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of adults provided by Survey Sampling International. Responses in the Nielsen Scarborough surveys are weighted by age, gender, income, education, race, geographic region, and partisan identification. This particular dataset includes an oversample of Evangelicals, and the data are weighted to account for this.

### **Outcomes**

Each participant's party ID directed conditional displays for lethal partisanship items, specifying the in- and out-party for the questions. Partisanship was measured with a 7-point response scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican, plus other/don't know options. We treated party categorically as Democrat or Republican, including "leaners." Table 1 presents the question text for the full set of items in the CCES survey. For later ease of presentation, we have assigned letter and number labels to each item.

### Partisan Moral Disengagement

In the CCES, we ask ten questions on partisan moral disengagement modeled on Bandura and colleagues' (1996) non-political items. Five items tap moral disengagement involving justification and blame: seeing opponents as a national threat (dichotomous, 62% yes), seeing them as evil (0-1, 5-point agree/disagree,  $m=.52$ ,  $s.d.=.34$ ), thinking they deserve mistreatment (0-1, 5-point agree/disagree,  $m=.38$ ,  $s.d.=.32$ ), perceiving one's own party as morally righteous (0-1, 5-point agree/disagree,  $m=.60$ ,  $s.d.=.28$ ), and seeing only one's own party wanting to improve the country (0-1, 5-point agree/disagree,  $m=.53$ ,  $s.d.=.32$ ). Three questions focus on partisan dehumanization: opponents behaving badly should be treated like animals (0-1, 5-point agree/disagree,  $m=.31$ ,  $s.d.=.33$ ), opponents have the same thoughts and feelings as anyone else outside politics (reversed, 0-1, 5-point agree/disagree,  $m=.31$ ,  $s.d.=.33$ ), and opponents have their heart in the right place even when they disagree (0-1, 5-point agree/disagree,  $m=.44$ ,  $s.d.=.32$ ). Two more items minimize the consequences of breaking political rules (0-1, 5-point agree/disagree,  $m=.43$ ,  $s.d.=.32$ ) and believing that such rule breaking does no lasting harm (0-1, 5-point agree/disagree,  $m=.23$ ,  $s.d.=.28$ ). We combine all these items into an additive index coded 0-1, with 1 being most negative toward opponents ( $m=.45$ ,  $s.d.=.22$ ,  $\alpha=.85$ ).

Nielsen survey space was limited so we fielded three moral disengagement items with identical wording and response options: outparty threat ( $m=.66$ ,  $s.d.=.47$ ), inparty commitment to national improvement ( $m=.23$ ,  $s.d.=.28$ ), and minimizing the consequences of rule-breaking ( $m=.23$ ,  $s.d.=.28$ ). An index of those items has similar properties as the larger CCES index of the same ( $m=.49$ ,  $s.d.=.27$ ,  $\alpha=.57$ ).

### Partisan Schadenfreude

The CCES survey included six items on reactions to physical harm. These questions are meant to measure the pleasure opposing partisans might gain from these harmful

outcomes, or, at minimum, a reduction in negative feelings when those outcomes befall political opponents. The first asks about more negative feelings (or equal) when hearing about an in-party or out-party leader dying of cancer, where 1 is feeling worse about an in-party death, 0 is equal for both, and -1 is feeling worse about an out-party death ( $m=.11$ ,  $s.d.=.37$ ), and then the same question but for a leader murdered ( $m=.09$ ,  $s.d.=.34$ ). Next, we asked if they ever wished someone would injure outparty leaders (0-1,  $m=.12$ ,  $s.d.=.36$ ). We also wanted to know how partisans felt about in-party leaders who voted disloyally against the party, asking whether they ever wish such people would get sick and die (0-1,  $m=.05$ ,  $s.d.=.22$ ). Then we asked whether respondents would prefer to see bad things happen to out-partisans, disloyal in-partisans, or neither (-1 to 1,  $m=.07$ ,  $s.d.=.40$ ). Finally, we asked whether the respondent ever wished that a large number of partisan opponents in the public would just die (0-1, 5-point agree/disagree,  $m=.18$ ,  $s.d.=.39$ ). We combine the *schadenfreude* items in an additive index (-1 to +1,  $m=.10$ ,  $s.d.=.20$ ,  $\alpha=.65$ ).

In the Nielsen survey, we only asked the cancer death question ( $m=.06$ ,  $s.d.=.26$ ), similar again to the CCES responses.

### Partisan Violence

Past scientific studies have assessed support for political violence in general (e.g. Kalmoe 2014; Pew 1998), but, to our knowledge, these studies are the first to assess support for *partisan* violence by citizens. Likewise, these past items are framed so broadly that critics have argued that endorsement could indicate support for violence in the American Revolution, or against totalitarian government, hardly controversial. To avoid these limitations, we framed questions to clearly indicate partisan targets in present-day America. As it turns out, response distributions for these specific partisan questions are nearly

identical to those framed broadly, providing some validation for that more general framing approach in past research.

We measure partisan violence attitudes in the CCES with four items: two endorsing threats and two endorsing violence. The two threat items ask when (if ever) is it OK for in-partisans to send physical threats and intimidating messages to out-partisan leaders (0-1, 4-point frequency,  $m=.06$ ,  $s.d.=.17$ ), and when (if ever) it is OK for an ordinary in-partisan in the public to harass an ordinary out-partisan on the Internet in a way that makes the target feel unsafe (0-1, 4-point frequency,  $m=.04$ ,  $s.d.=.16$ ). The two outright violence items ask how much it is justified for the in-party to use violence to advance their goals these days (0-1, 5-point from “not at all” to “a great deal,”  $m=.04$ ,  $s.d.=.13$ ) and how justified violence would be if the out-party wins the 2020 presidential election (0-1, 5-point,  $m=.08$ ,  $s.d.=.20$ ). We combine these four items in an additive index (0-1,  $m=.05$ ,  $s.d.=.13$ ,  $\alpha=.74$ ).

We fielded the two threat items in the Nielsen survey, with responses similar to the CCES for threatening leaders ( $m=.10$ ,  $s.d.=.21$ ) and ordinary partisan citizens ( $m=.03$ ,  $s.d.=.13$ ). We combine these two items in an additive index (0-1,  $m=.06$ ,  $s.d.=.15$ ,  $\alpha=.62$ ).

We pause here to note that, in line with our expectations, moral disengagement scores have the highest means, followed next by schadenfreude, and with violent partisan attitudes finding the least overall support. We recognize that ordinal differences between items and their combination into indices make substantive interpretation more difficult, and the difference between schadenfreude and violence measures is too small to make confident distinctions. However, we are comfortable concluding that the evidence supports a general rank-order with moral disengagement more popular than harm items.

## **Partisan Identity**

We measure strength of partisan identity with an index of three Huddy/Mason items in the CCES, coded 0 to 1 ( $m=.48$ ,  $s.d.=.32$ ,  $\alpha=.80$ , “important,” “we,” “feel important,” see Huddy et al. 2015; Mason 2018).<sup>3</sup> Due to space limitations, those items are not available in the Nielsen data, and so we generate a less robust but common partisan strength measure by folding the seven-point party ID scale. Since our analysis excludes pure independents, the scale runs from .33 to 1 ( $m=.74$ ,  $s.d.=.28$ ).

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<sup>3</sup> These items are not significantly influenced by the election win/loss treatment that precedes it, either as a net effect or conditional on party strength as measured by the folded 7-point partisanship scale. The three partisan strength questions we utilize in the CCES analysis were not asked in the Nielsen survey.



Table 1. Partisan Hostility Items

<b>Moral Disengagement</b>	
MD1	Would you say [Opposing party] are a serious threat to the United States and its people, or wouldn't you go that far?
MD2	Only [Own party] want to improve our country.
MD3	[Opposing party] are not just worse for politics—they are downright evil.
MD4	If [Own party] break a few rules to oppose [Opposing party], it's because they need to do it for the sake of the country.
MD5	If [Opposing party] are going to behave badly, they should be treated like animals.
MD6	[Opposing party] deserve any mistreatment they get from [Own party].
MD7	[Opposing party] have their heart in the right place but just come to different conclusions about what is best. [reverse-coded]
MD8	[Own party] are not just better for politics—they are morally right.
MD9	Many [Opposing party] lack the traits to be considered fully human—they behave like animals.
MD10	Breaking a few rules to help [Own party] win does no lasting harm.
<b>Partisan Schadenfreude</b>	
PS1	If you heard a politician had died of cancer, would your feelings about that depend on whether they were a Republican or a Democrat?
PS2	If you heard a politician had been murdered, would your feelings about that depend on whether they were a Republican or a Democrat?
PS3	Have you ever wished that someone would physically injure one or more politicians? [Yes, outparty]
PS4	When a [Own party] politician votes against the party on a key issue, have you ever wished they would get sick and die?
PS5	Who would you rather see bad things happen to: [Opposing party] politicians, or [Own party] politicians who vote against the party on a key issue? [Answer: outparty]
PS6	Do you ever think: we'd be better off as a country if large numbers of [Opposing party] in the public today just died?
<b>Political Violence</b>	
PV1	When, if ever, is it OK for [Own party] to send threatening and intimidating messages to [Opposing party] leaders?
PV2	When, if ever, is it OK for an ordinary [Own party] in the public to harass an ordinary [Opposing party] on the Internet, in a way that makes the target feel unsafe <sup>4</sup> ?
PV3	How much do you feel it is justified for [Own party] to use violence in advancing their political goals these days?
PV4	What if [Opposing party] win the 2020 presidential election? How much do you feel violence would be justified then?

<sup>4</sup> “Unsafe” was replaced with “frightened” in the Nielsen survey.

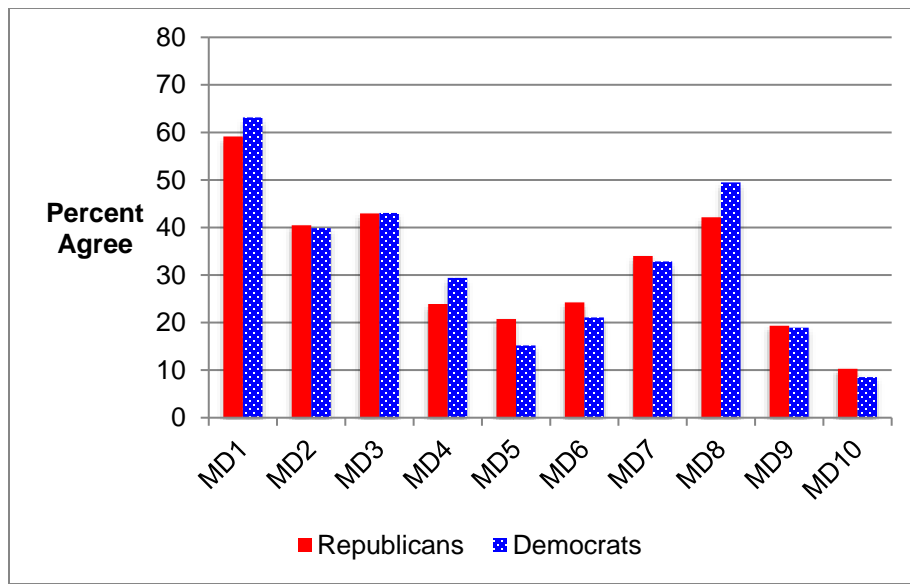
## Prevalence of Lethal Partisanship

To establish baseline levels of these attitudes in the electorate at large, we first present simple average response levels for each of the items in Table 1. Considering that these are relatively new questions for the study of American partisanship, it is important simply to understand how prevalent these attitudes are. To show this as succinctly as possible, Figures 1 through 6 present the percentage of each sample whose responses to these items leans in the direction of partisan hostility.

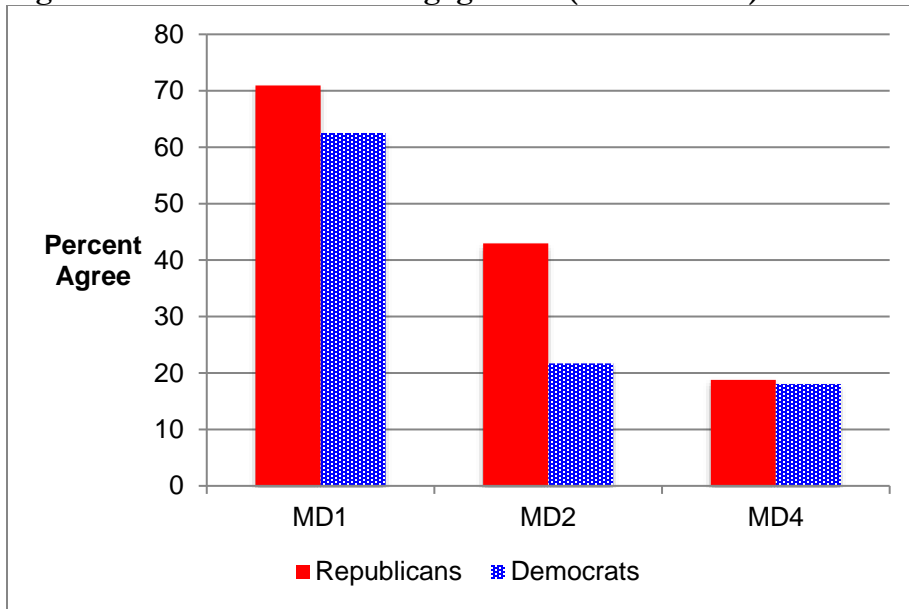
### *Moral Disengagement*

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the percent of respondents who place themselves on the “morally disengaged” end of the spectrum for CCES and Nielsen data, respectively, for each item individually, disaggregated by party. Although we have no a priori expectations for partisan asymmetries, the questions are technically different and we find the comparison informative regardless. The Nielsen data provides a useful replication with a smaller number of overlapping items identical to the CCES questionnaire.

**Figure 1. Partisan Moral Disengagement (CCES 2017)**



**Figure 2. Partisan Moral Disengagement (Nielsen 2018)**



In Figure 1, partisan moral disengagement appears to be relatively prevalent among partisans of both parties. Nearly 60 percent of Republicans and more than 60 percent of Democrats agree, in item MD1, that the opposing party is a serious threat to the United States and its people. This response is even more pronounced in Figure 2, in which 70 percent of Republicans and more than 60 percent of Democrats agree with this statement. Item MD2 assesses the extent to which respondents believe that only their own party wants to improve the country. In Figure 1, approximately 40 percent of Republicans and Democrats either “strongly” or “somewhat” agree with this statement. In Figure 2, more than 40 percent of Republicans but only about 20 percent of Democrats agree. The third item replicated across both samples is MD4, which assesses the extent to which respondents agree that their own party needs to break a few rules to oppose the other party for the sake of the country. In Figure 1, about 25 percent of Republicans and 30 percent of Democrats “strongly” or “somewhat” agree. In Figure 2, just under 20 percent of both parties shares

this view. Differences between the CCES and Nielsen may be due to sample details or time. Results are similar when sample weights are applied.

The remaining moral disengagement items in Figure 1 indicate support ranging from about 10 percent of the sample (MD10 – “Breaking a few rules to help [own party] win does no lasting harm”) to 50 percent (MD8 among Democrats – “[Own party] are not just better for politics – they are morally right”). The most disturbing items may be those comparing outgroup partisans to animals (MD5 and MD9). About 20 percent of respondents agree with these items in the CCES data,. Furthermore, MD7, which rates the degree to which respondents believe opposing partisans have their hearts in the right place, is only endorsed by about 30 percent of partisans, meaning that more than 60 percent of respondents do not hold this more generous belief. Taken as a whole, even the lower bounds of partisan moral disengagement provide some cause for concern. Extrapolated to the electorate at large, this figure represents many millions of partisans.

#### *Partisan Schadenfreude*

Figures 3 and 4 present expressions of partisan *schadenfreude* in the CCES and Nielsen data, respectively. The Nielsen data has one item overlapping with the CCES (PS1), gauging whether respondents would feel more sad if a politician who died of cancer was in their own party or in the outparty. In Figure 3, 12 percent of Republicans and 13 percent of Democrats report that they would feel more sad if it were an inparty member. In Figure 4, these numbers are significantly lower, with about 5 percent of Republicans and 4 percent of Democrats feeling more sad if the politician was from their own party.

Figure 3. Partisan Schadenfreude (CCES 2017)

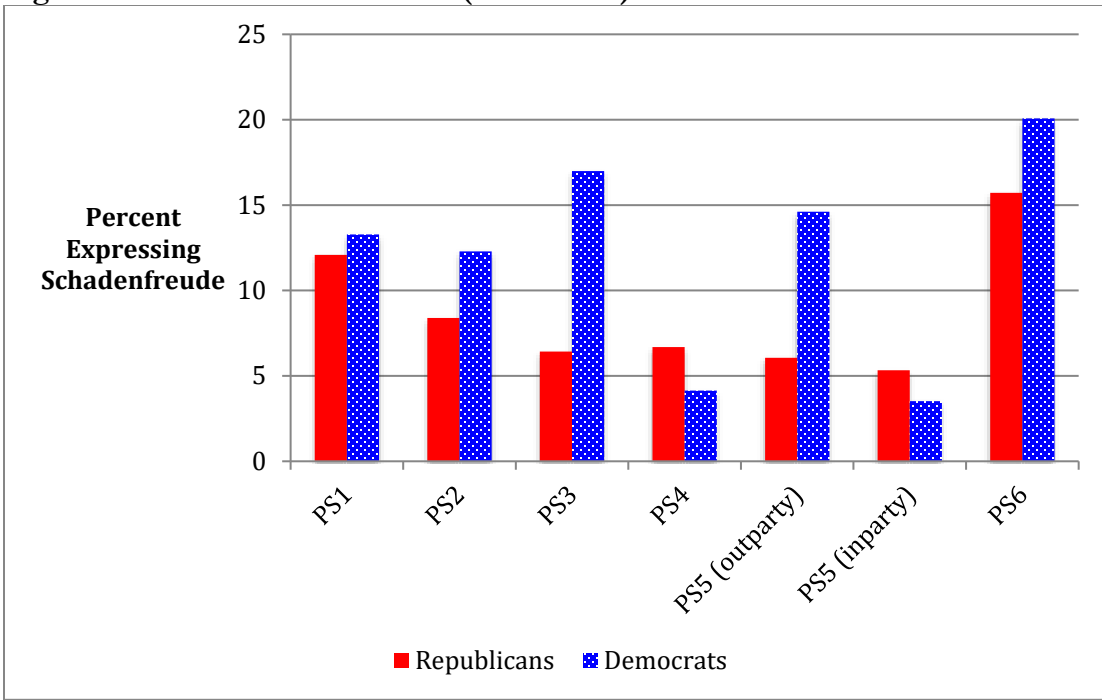
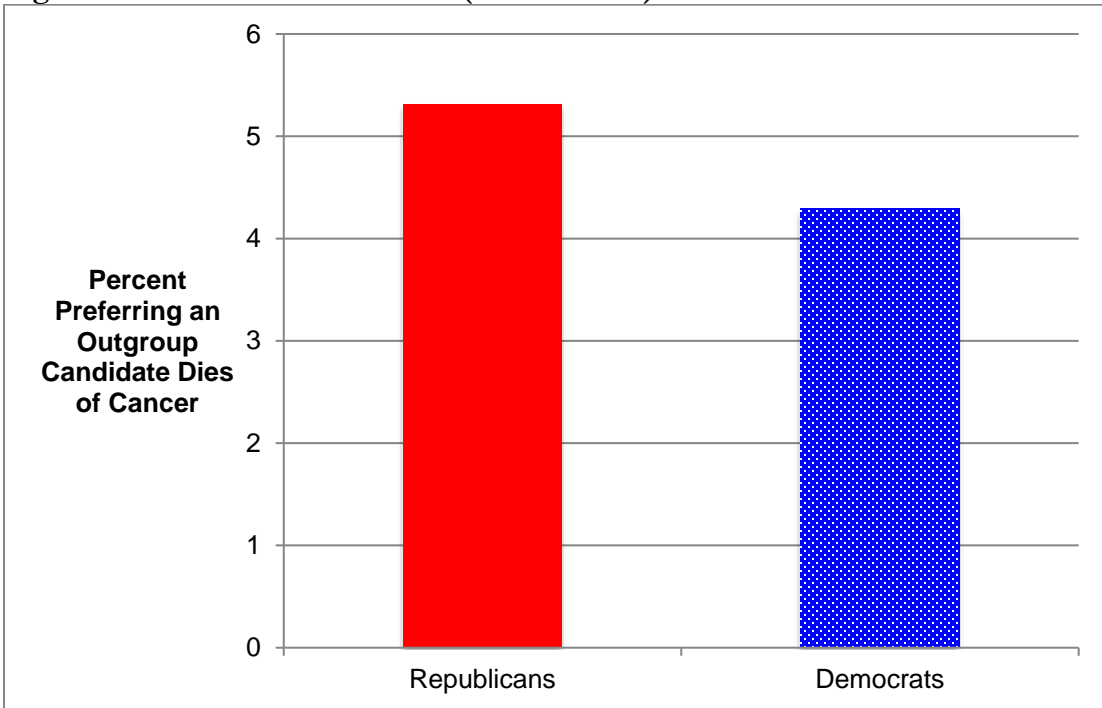


Figure 4. Partisan Schadenfreude (Nielsen 2018)



The remainder of CCES schadenfreude items are presented in Figure 3. The most prevalent expression of schadenfreude is item PS6, in which 15 percent of Republicans and 20 percent of Democrats agreed that the country would be better off if large numbers of opposing partisans in the public today “just died,” a shockingly brutal sentiment. Democrats appear more willing to express schadenfreude than Republicans for most of the items, particularly items PS3 and PS5 (outparty). For PS3, 17 percent of Democrats and 7 percent of Republicans report ever wishing that someone would injure one or more politicians from the outparty. For PS5 (outparty), 14 percent of Democrats and 6 percent of Republicans would rather see bad things happen to opposing party politicians over inparty politicians who vote against the party.

#### *Partisan Violence*

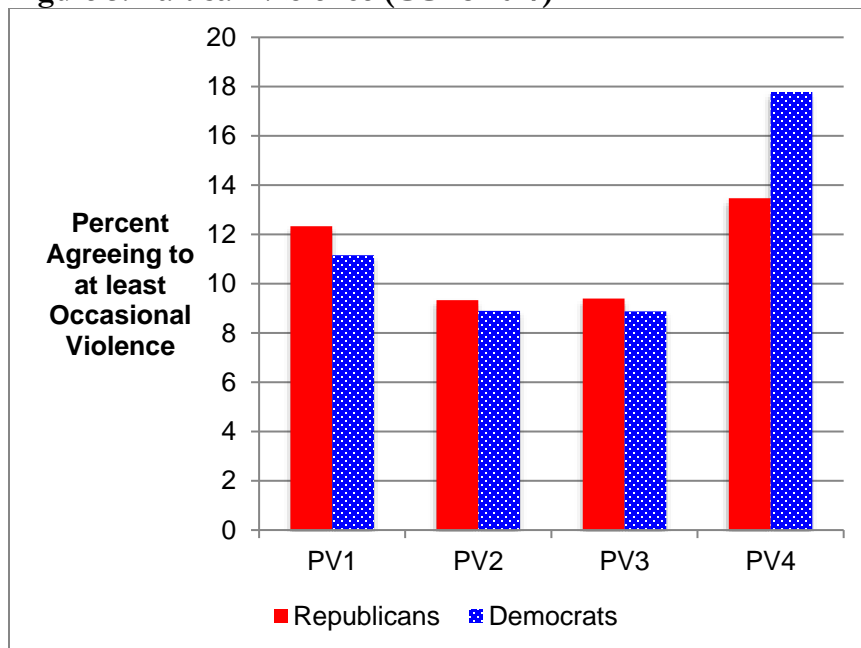
Although some of the items from the schadenfreude category are hybrids that could arguably be construed as partisan violence, we reserved that categorization for explicit endorsement of violent or harassing action against outgroup partisans. Average levels of endorsement of violent or harassing action against outgroup partisans. Average levels of violent partisan attitudes are presented in Figures 5 and 6. Two of the four partisan violence items (PV1 and PV2) are replicated in the Nielsen data. Both of these items assess the degree to which the respondent approves of sending threatening messages to outparty public officials (PV1) and outpartisans in the public (PV2). Figures 5 and 6 present the percentage of respondents who believe that there is ever an acceptable time to send these threats.

In Figure 5 (CCES data), 12 percent of Republicans and 11 percent of Democrats believe that it is at least occasionally acceptable to send threatening messages to public officials. In Figure 6 (Nielsen data), these figures are higher, with 24 percent of Republicans and 17 percent of Democrats holding this belief. The numbers are lower for threats against partisans in the public (PV2). In Figure 5, 9 percent of Republicans and Democrats think it

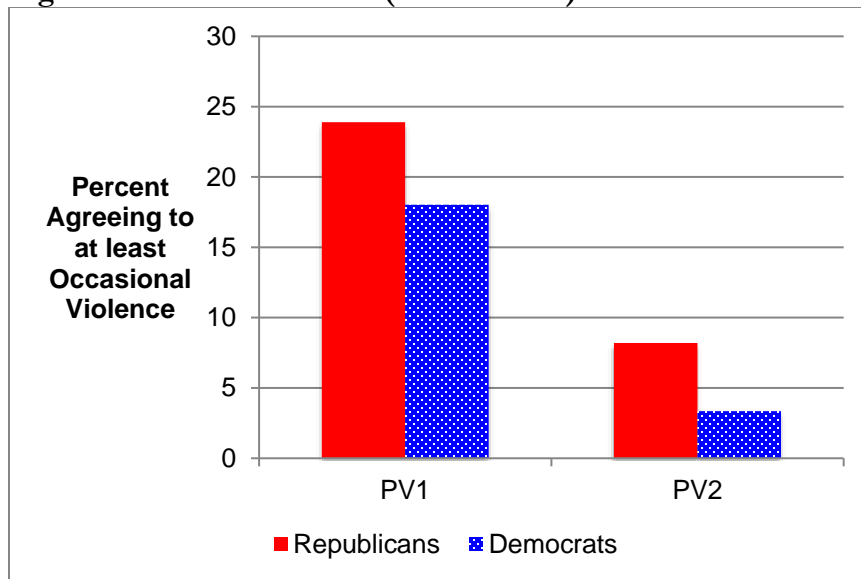
is at least occasionally acceptable to harass outgroup partisans on the internet in a way that makes them feel unsafe/frightened. Seven percent of Republicans and 3 percent of Democrats say the same in the Nielsen data. Clearly there is some real variance across the samples, but there is a non-negligible number of partisans in the 2017 and 2018 electorate who are comfortable with threats and harassment directed toward the outparty.

Items PV3 and PV4 from the CCES involve justifying violence by the inparty to advance political goals. Terrorism, in other words. PV3 asks about violence today. PV asks for responses if the outparty wins the 2020 presidential election, a hypothetical but realistic scenario given recent alternation in party control of the presidency. Nine percent of Republicans and Democrats say that, in general, violence is at least occasionally acceptable. However, when imagining an electoral loss in 2020, larger percentages of both parties approve of the use of violence – though this increase is greater for Democrats (18 percent approve) than Republicans (13 percent approve).

**Figure 5. Partisan Violence (CCES 2017)**



**Figure 6. Partisan Violence (Nielsen 2018)**



Unfortunately, given the novelty of these questions, the levels of partisan hostility we observed from American partisans in 2017 and 2018 cannot be compared to levels experienced years, decades, or centuries ago. Certainly, the 2016 presidential election was acrimonious and intense, norm-defying and extraordinarily hostile. The partisan hostility we find here may therefore reflect a new trend. However, partisan acrimony certainly did not begin in 2016 (see e.g. Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2018), and small differences between 2017 and 2018 data do not present a clear case for unidirectional change over time. In any case, this glimpse at simple descriptive measures of national approval for lethal partisanship are important whether new or ongoing, and our evidence sets reference points for comparison in the future as political winds shift.

Beyond levels of endorsement, we are also interested in the covariates of lethal partisanship. Are some kinds of individuals more likely to hold these supremely hostile partisan beliefs? The following section provides some answers.

### **Correlates of Lethal Partisanship**



The extant literature provides a few potential explanations for why partisans may hold overtly hostile attitudes toward their political opponents. First, as discussed above, partisan identity should play a major role (Huddy, Mason, and Aaroe 2015). Ideological strength may matter too, alongside, as a prominent adjacent political identity. Second, moral disengagement is known to produce aggressive behavior generally (e.g. Bandura et al. 1996), and so we expect the same predicting *schadenfreude* and violent attitudes in partisan contexts.

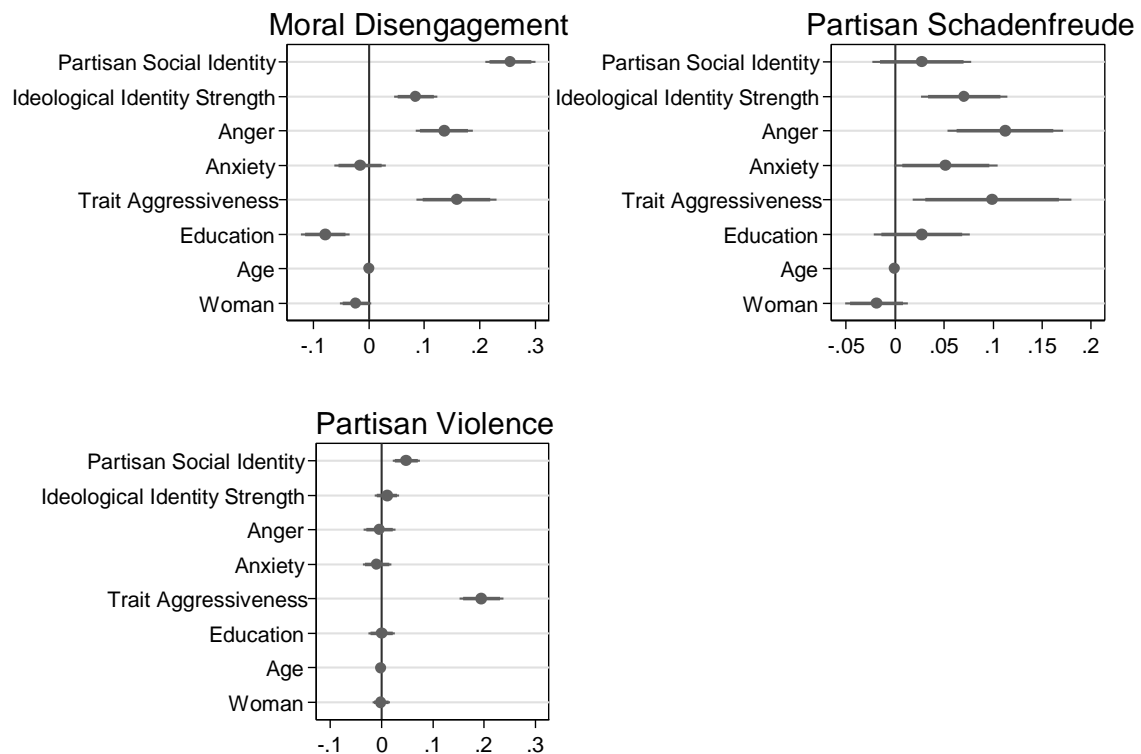
Third, aggressive personality traits and political anger may fuel the desire to harm partisan opponents (Anderson & Bushman 2002; Huddy et al. 2007; Kalmoe 2014). Fourth, young people, men, and those with less education may be more likely to endorse partisan violence and hostility (e.g. Kalmoe 2013; Kalmoe 2015). Finally, partisan media could have a polarizing, and therefore malignant effect on partisan hostility (e.g. Druckman, Levendusky, and McClain 2017; Lelkes et al. 2017), as might opinion leadership associated with trust in Donald Trump, who violates norms of appropriate social and political behavior and frequently espouses views hostile to democracy, including the endorsement of low-level political violence at his campaign rallies. Across our two studies, we can test each hypothesis to some degree, but not all predictors are available in both.

First, and most simply, we test the bivariate correlations between partisan moral disengagement, *schadenfreude*, and violent partisan attitudes. As expected, the CCES data show a moderate and significant positive correlation between moral disengagement and *schadenfreude* ( $r = .34$ ) and between disengagement and violent partisan attitudes ( $r = .28$ ). Similarly, the Nielsen data with fewer items indicate a positive, significant disengagement-*schadenfreude* correlation ( $r = .18$ ) and the same for disengagement-violence indices ( $r = .22$ ).

We begin with the CCES data, focusing on variation in the three indices for partisan moral disengagement, *schadenfreude*, and violence. Figure 7 estimates multivariate OLS models

with the CCES data with all predictors included simultaneously. Partisan social identity strength is significantly more associated with moral disengagement than with either *schadenfreude* or violence, but all three estimates are positive as expected. A change from the least- to the most-strongly identified partisan increases moral disengagement by a quarter of moral disengagement’s full range, on average. Smaller *schadenfreude* estimates are not statistically significant, while the link between partisan identity and violent partisan attitudes is small but marginally significant. Ideological identity (folded 7-point ideology scale) is also associated with significantly greater moral disengagement and partisan *schadenfreude* but not partisan violence. Both political identities, then, are associated with some but not all dimensions of lethal partisanship.

**Figure 7. Predicting Partisan Hostility (CCES 2017)**



Note: Models present results from OLS models. Lines show 90 and 95 percent confidence intervals.

In the CCES data, we measure political anger and anxiety with one item each (0-1). We expect anger to produce more partisan hostility in general, whereas anxiety might produce less. In fact, we find political anger significantly predicts moral disengagement and *schadenfreude*, but surprisingly not partisan violence. Political anxiety, on the other hand, is marginally associated only with *schadenfreude*, and opposite the expected direction.

We also have a two-item index of trait aggressiveness in the CCES data (physical aggression & general anger, 0-1,  $m=.19$ ,  $s.d.=.21$ ,  $\alpha=.53$ ). Trait aggression is a strong predictor of all three partisan hostility indices—the most consistently strong factor, in fact. We find this to be a good indication that the three indices are indeed measuring some desire for partisan harm, as the more aggressive respondents are more readily inclined toward this type of behavior. It also shows the robustness of other significant predictors that function in the presence of a control for interpersonal aggressiveness, among other factors.

Of the demographic measures, only education has notable effects. Education is negatively associated with moral disengagement. Age and sex are not, in these data, strongly associated with any of these indices of partisan hostility.

Readers might wonder about our choice to model these relationships simultaneously. Rest assured, the multivariate results we find are roughly consistent with bivariate correlations, and so multicollinearity does not meaningfully distort the estimates. Of note, the bivariate estimate for political anxiety and moral disengagement becomes significantly positive, the estimate for partisan strength and *schadenfreude* becomes positive and significant, and the estimate for age and political violence becomes negative and significant. These last two align better with our expectations than the multivariate results showed.

The CCES data tell us much, but not regarding partisan opinion leadership. For that, we turn to the Nielsen data. Figure 8 presents equivalent tests with similar predictors,

disaggregated out of the indices here given the smaller number of items available, which provides a more granular look at variations across the items.

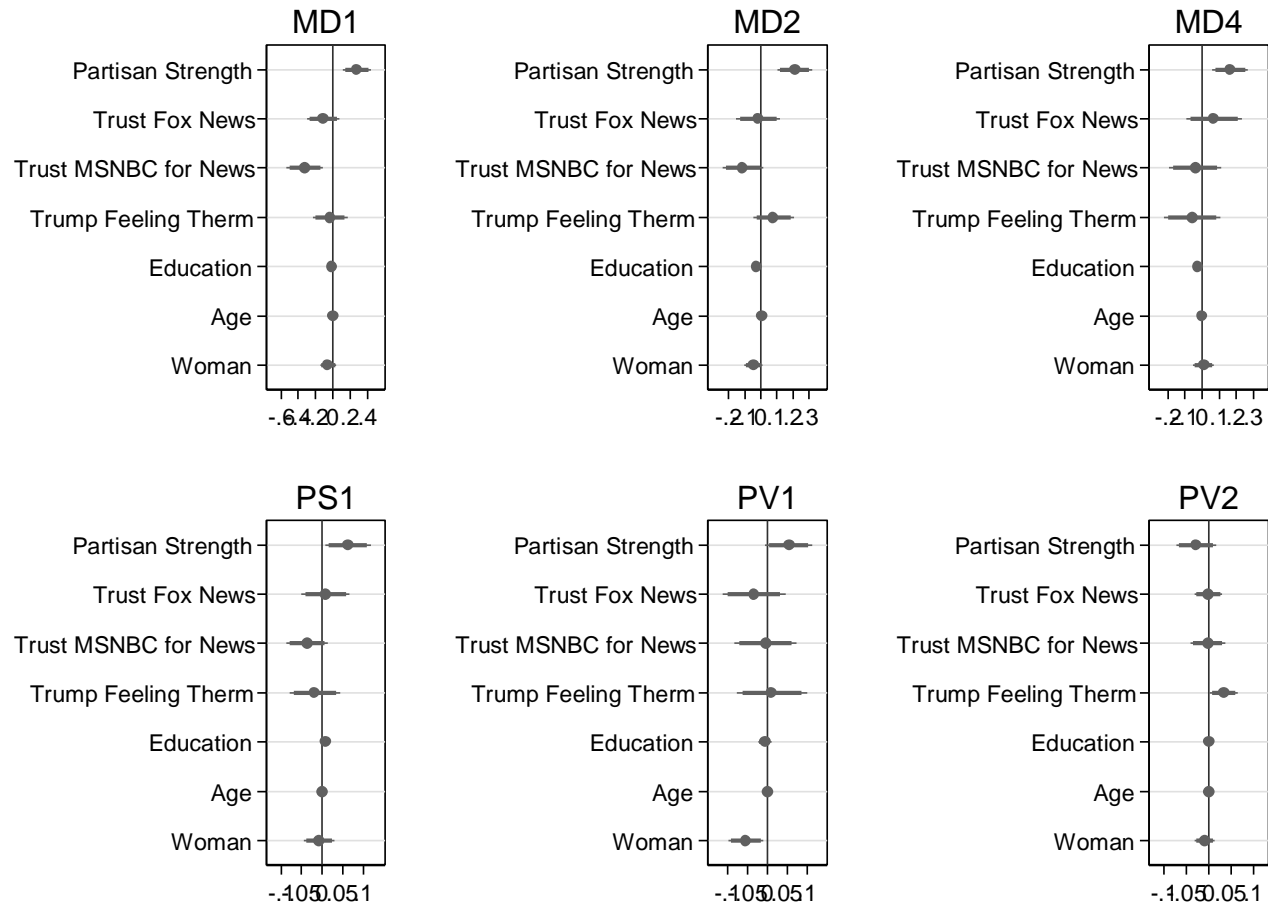
The top row of Figure 8 presents the three moral disengagement items: outparty is a serious threat to the United States, only ingroup partisans want to improve the country, and acceptance of breaking rules to oppose the outparty. In these models, we test the effects of partisan identity strength and demographic traits, but here we can also test the effects of trust in partisan media and feelings toward Trump.

Partisan identity strength is a significant positive predictor for all three items, consistent with the CCES data and in line with our expectations. This is particularly impressive given the blunter single-item measure of strength we use here. Trust in Fox News is unrelated to partisan moral disengagement, while MSNBC trust is negatively associated with two of the three items. Warm feelings toward Trump are unrelated to all three items, as are demographic items.

One *schadenfreude* item is available in the Nielsen data. Item PS1 assesses the extent to which respondents' feelings about a politician's death from cancer would depend on the party of the politician. For this item, only partisan strength has a significant and positive effect – with stronger partisans preferring an outparty politician to die of cancer.

The two political violence items provide different results, however. These items include PV1 (threatening outgroup leaders) and PV2 (harassing an ordinary outgroup member online). For PV1, partisan strength, as usual, is a significant predictor. Additionally, women are significantly less accepting of threats against politicians than men. For item PV2, none of the variables are significant predictors, though positive feelings for Trump may be related to an increased acceptance of harassment of outgroup partisans in the public.

Figure 8. Predicting Partisan Hostility (Nielsen 2018)



Note: Models present results from OLS models, with 90 (thin line) and 95 (thick line) percent confidence intervals shown.

To sum up our investigation into correlates of lethal partisanship, both studies show broadly consistent trends for the political identity items in expected directions. Strongly identifying with one political side is associated with increased political hostility toward opponents in terms of moral disengagement, partisan *schadenfreude*, and partisan violence. Trait aggression was the only factor that predicted all three types of lethal partisan attitudes, and political anger predicted moral disengagement and *schadenfreude* but not violence support. Consistent with the psychological literature on aggression, partisan moral disengagement significantly predicted partisan *schadenfreude* and violence, facilitating those hostile views.

Demographic factors of age, sex, and education were generally unrelated, though women tended to express less partisan moral disengagement. In addition, each study included unique questions enabling tests related to political emotions, aggressive personality traits, partisan news attitudes, and presidential approval. Surprisingly, MSNBC trust was associated with less partisan hostility. Most other tests were null.

What's the bigger picture from these results? As the electorate continues to grow more strongly partisan, we can expect all three types of lethal partisanship to increase. Having gone as far as our observational component can take us, we turn next to an embedded survey experiment for additional purchase on causal mechanisms.

### **Electoral Contingencies: An Experimental Test**

Earlier, we described the ways in which electoral victory and electoral loss might both produce partisan hostility among strongly identified, though in different ways. We therefore remained agnostic in our predictions. To test how electoral expectations shape violent partisan attitudes, we embedded an experiment in the 2017 CCES module. We told

participants that their party was likely to win the 2020 presidential election, likely to lose, or gave no information. Specifically, we told them incumbent presidents tend to be reelected, which bodes well for Republicans, or we told them that unpopular presidents tend to lose reelection, which bodes well for Democrats. We use each participant's party ID to judge whether each treatment is a win or a loss for their party.

Here, we test the impact of our intervention on the partisan violence index and its individual items.<sup>5</sup> We estimate OLS models predicting these outcomes as a function of partisan strength (4-item Huddy-Mason index), indicators for treatment win/loss/no information conditions, and interactions between treatments and identity strength. Partisan loss is the excluded condition. Table 2 presents the results.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 2: Election Expectations, Partisan Strength, and Lethal Partisanship**

	Partisan Violence Index	Harass Citizens	Threaten Leaders	Violence Now	Violence After 2020 Loss
Partisan Strength	.01 (.02)	.01 (.03)	-.03 (.03)	.01 (.03)	.05 (.04)
<b>2020 Election Win</b>	<b>-.03<sup>^</sup></b> <b>(.02)</b>	<b>-.01</b> <b>(.03)</b>	<b>-.04</b> <b>(.03)</b>	<b>-.03</b> <b>(.02)</b>	<b>-.05</b> <b>(.03)</b>
<b>2020 Election Win* Partisan Strength</b>	<b>.09*</b> <b>(.03)</b>	<b>.05</b> <b>(.05)</b>	<b>.10*</b> <b>(.05)</b>	<b>.07<sup>^</sup></b> <b>(.04)</b>	<b>.14*</b> <b>(.05)</b>
No 2020 Election Info	-.03 (.02)	-.01 (.03)	-.04 (.03)	-.02 (.02)	-.03 (.03)
No 2020 Election Info* Partisan Strength	.05 (.03)	.01 (.04)	.08 <sup>^</sup> (.05)	.05 (.04)	.06 (.05)
Constant	.04* (.01)	.04* (.02)	.07* (.02)	.03* (.01)	.05* (.02)
R <sup>2</sup>	.03	.01	.01	.02	.05
N	766	776	777	775	769

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , <sup>^</sup>  $p < .10$  (two-sided t-tests).

<sup>5</sup> Estimates for partisan moral disengagement and *schadenfreude* indices are null.

<sup>6</sup> Net treatment effects in each model are null ( $p > .25$ ).

As expected, learning that one’s own party is likely to win the 2020 presidential election significantly increases support for partisan violence among strong partisans, relative to loss information. This effect is broadly consistent across the four individual items, but it finds its strongest expression in the 2020 election loss item. The result isn’t substantively large, amounting to about 10-percent of the scale among the strongest partisans. On the other hand, the full-sample mean is just .05, so the treatment effect size represents a doubling of average scores across the breadth of partisan strength.

Importantly, the average response regarding the suitability of partisan violence is negative across *all* groups, which means respondents are saying partisan harassment and threats are “never” or “occasionally” acceptable, and that violence is “not at all” or “a little” acceptable today. That means the treatment effects we find here indicate a *weakening of opposition* to partisan violence, not full-throated support for it, at least for most respondents. Even so, any weakening of the bulwark against partisan violence is normatively concerning.

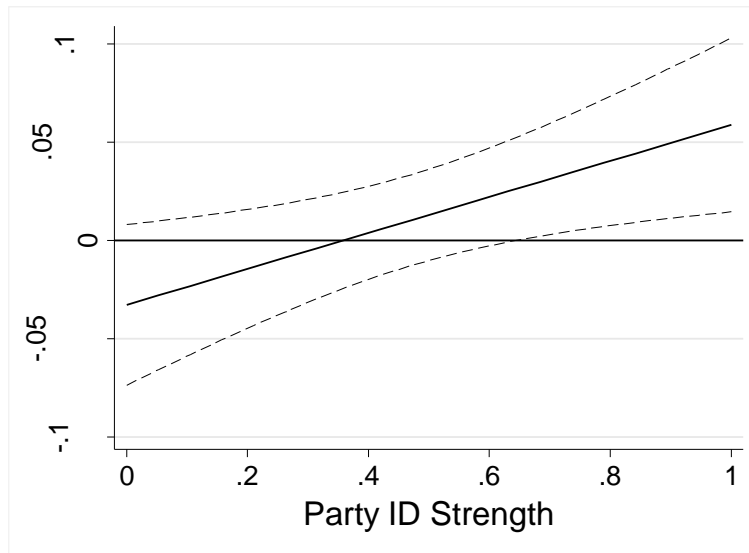
We also see that the loss treatment marginally increases support for violence relative to winning information among weak partisans, but that result falls short of standard levels of statistical significance. The neutral condition in these tests falls close to the middle between winning and losing treatments, which suggests each expected outcome is doing work to push and pull strongly-identified partisans in opposite directions, relative to no election information. Results are substantively the same when estimated separately by respondent partisanship (Win\*Strength estimates Reps:  $b=.08$ ,  $s.e.=.06$ ; Dems:  $b=.09$ ,  $s.e.=.04$ ).

For a clearer illustration of treatment effects, Figure 9 presents the marginal effects plot for the political violence index comparing the effect of win versus loss treatments on partisan violence support by levels of partisan strength (x-axis). The solid line is the estimate treatment effect at each level of partisan strength, and the dashed lines indicate 95%



confidence intervals. The figure shows significantly more support for partisan violence among strong partisans when told their party was more likely than not to win in 2020. The opposite effect among weak partisans fails to reach conventional significance. Overall, then, our evidence suggests that *winning* more than losing prompts strong partisans to feel less opposed to partisan violence.

**Figure 9: Marginal Effect of Win vs. Loss on Support for Partisan Violence**



### Reflecting on Real Violence: A Second Experimental Test

One criticism of our findings to this point might note that the violence items remain speculative or abstract in ways that reduce their substantive impact. To address that potential concern, we asked respondents to evaluate the real-life shootings of Congress members Gabby Giffords and Steve Scalise. Similarities in the attacks lent themselves to close comparisons of attitudes about the two cases of real, serious violence.

Giffords was identified as a Democrat and Scalise as a Republican. Besides their names and party, only the date of the attack varied in the brief descriptions: “In [January 2011/June 2017], [Democratic Congresswoman Gabby Giffords/Republican Congressman

Steve Scalise] was shot and seriously wounded, along with several other people. Thinking back on this event, would you say it was a bad thing or good thing?”

One third of respondents received the question on the Giffords attack and another third answered about the Scalise attack. (One third did not get either question.) Response options ranged from very bad to very good, coded -1 to +1 (Giffords:  $m=-.84$ ,  $s.d.=.36$ ; Scalise  $m=-.78$ ,  $s.d.=.44$ ). Notably, a large majority of respondents described each attack as “very bad.”

We merged these separate responses into a single item based on whichever target they evaluated, and we estimated an OLS model predicting the violent evaluation with an indicator variable that the target of the attack was an out-partisan. We find that partisans evaluated the attack slightly but significantly less negatively when the target was a partisan opponent ( $b=.10$ ,  $s.e.=.03$ ,  $N=531$ ). The point estimates are nearly identical for Republicans and Democrats (Reps:  $b=.09$ ,  $s.e.=.05$ , Dems:  $b=.11$ ,  $s.e.=.04$ ), and the results are similarly significant in an ordered probit model ( $b=.41$ ,  $s.e.=.13$ ). Strength of partisanship did not differentiate responses in this test (not shown). The result adds to our confidence regarding lethal partisanship dynamics overall, with evidence of party differences even when evaluating real cases of political violence targeting party leaders.

### **Preliminary Evidence against Expressive Responses**

Another line of criticism might regard these views as examples of expressive responses rather than views held sincerely by respondents. Perhaps partisans just like saying hostile—even lethal—things, this line of argument goes. They don’t *really* mean it. As an initial test of this idea, we asked respondents directly whether their responses were expressive or sincere. Specifically: “We have asked a lot of tough questions about disliking political opponents. Do you say negative things about them because it feels good, or do you

only say things about them you firmly believe?” Respondents answered on a five-point scale ranging from “just feels good to say” to “firmly believe.”

Naturally, this question itself could be subject to expressive responses (or, alternately, socially desirable ones, as with the other items). All we claim here is that we give respondents the opportunity for a sober second thought—do they really mean what they just said? Only 15% said they were mostly or wholly being expressive, but 34% said they were equally or somewhat expressive. The remaining 51% said the mostly or wholly stated what they firmly believe.

So how does expressiveness align with the normatively troubling responses? We tested the correlation between sincerity and the indices for partisan moral disengagement, *schadenfreude*, and violence. The first two were null ( $r=-.01$  &  $r=-.04$ , respectively), but the political violence index was significantly lower among people who said they were being more sincere ( $r=.18, p<.05$ ), and this was true for each of the four individual items (not shown). Substantively, bivariate OLS estimates show about a five-point drop in support for citizen harassment, politician threats, and violence today across the breadth of the sincerity scale, and a twelve-point drop for the 2020 election loss item. That provides some reason to think the most violent responses may be partly expressive, even if sincerity has little relation to partisan moral disengagement and *schadenfreude* responses. That could be normatively reassuring.

As a further test, we estimated whether our experimental results held among subgroups by levels of sincerity. They do. Results from partisan violence models are substantively identical when restricting the sample to respondents reporting “firm belief” or “mostly firm belief.” Results are likewise similar sequentially adding each level of sincerity

below.<sup>7</sup> We take these as evidence supporting the robustness of our experimental results, even when taking self-reported sincerity into consideration.

## CONCLUSIONS

Two and a half centuries ago, American founders worried about the lethal consequences of partisanship and hoped to avoid the pernicious development of parties. After ultimately founding parties themselves, their worst fears were realized in the extraordinary partisan violence of the American Civil War and the lesser violence before and after, carrying body counts in the hundreds rather than the rebellion's hundred-thousands. But when social scientists began conceptualizing partisan identity in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the latent potential for violence from partisanship was absent in their work. Recent scholarship on negative partisanship, affective polarization, and partisan social discrimination has gradually introduced an incrementally darker view of partisan behavior over decades.

Here, we substantially broaden the view of partisanship by simultaneously recognizing partisanship's supremely violent history while grounding our approach in modern psychological theories of intergroup hostility. We conceptualized and measured three aspects of lethal partisanship: 1) partisan moral disengagement that rationalizes harm against opponents, 2) partisan *schadenfreude* in response to deaths and injuries of political opponents, and 3) explicit support for partisan violence. In two nationally representative surveys, we found that large portions of partisans embrace partisan moral disengagement (40-60%) but only small minorities report feeling partisan *schadenfreude* or endorse partisan violence (5-15%). Even so, their views represent a level of extreme hostility among millions of American partisans today that has not been documented in modern American politics.

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<sup>7</sup> Notably, when sincerity is the outcome, the same treatment-party strength models show marginally more sincerity in the winning treatment among strong identifiers ( $b=.16, s.e.=.09$ ).

Party identity strength and trait aggression consistently predicted greater endorsement of lethal partisanship, while other factors like political anger and sex mattered for some elements but not others. Finally, experimental evidence showed that inducing expectations of electoral victory led strong partisans to endorse violence against their partisan opponents more than expectations of electoral loss.

Ultimately, these results find a minority of partisans view violence as acceptable acts against their political opponents. Many times more embrace partisan moral disengagement, which makes the turn to violence easier if they have not made it already. As more Americans embrace strong partisanship, the prevalence of lethal partisanship is likely to grow.

Parties and partisanship remain essential to a well-functioning democracy, even as partisanship can destroy democracy and produce violence on unfathomable scales. Many others have shown the good that parties do in mobilizing political participation, both as organizations and as individual identities (e.g. Huddy et al. 2015; Rosenstone & Hansen 1993). Likewise, parties reduce the informational burdens on citizens, organize efficient governance, and make democratic accountability more manageable (e.g. Aldrich 1995). On the other hand, we have shown here the extent to which ordinary partisans embrace partisan violence and its predicates today, and we have illustrated the inherent dilemma election outcomes pose in encouraging violent attitudes among individual citizens.

The challenge for democracy, as always, continues to be how to procure the political goods that parties provide while staving off partisanship's most sanguinary pitfalls—the ones identified by Madison but seemingly forgotten in modern behavioral scholarship. We think recognizing the dangers of partisanship is the first step toward quelling them.

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