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Published online: 01 Jul 2021.

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Democratic Norms, Social Projection, and False Consensus in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

Aaron C. Weinschenk[a], Costas Panagopoulos[b] and Sander van der Linden[c]

[a]Ben J. and Joyce Rosenberg Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, Green Bay, Wisconsin, USA; [b]Professor and Chair, Department of Political Science, Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA; [c]Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Cambridge, Old Cavendish Laboratory, Free School Lane, Cambridge, UK

ABSTRACT

We examine individuals' views about democratic norm violations related to the peaceful transfer of power and acceptance of election results and the link between those views and broader perceptions about support for social election norms in the American public. Using data from an original national survey fielded after the 2020 presidential election, a number of important findings emerge. First, sizable majorities of Americans personally support the peaceful transfer of power (89%) and accept the 2020 presidential election results (74%). Second, individuals perceive these social norms to be widely held by the public. Respondents believe that 67% of Americans support a peaceful transfer of power and that 63% of Americans will accept the results of the 2020 election. Third, there is a strong link between personal views about these election norms and social perceptions about election norms. Consistent with research in psychology on the false consensus bias, people expect the public at large to share their views about election norms. Finally, we demonstrate that political ideology moderates the relationship between personal views about election norms and public perceptions about these norms. Among conservatives who do not support the election outcome, the perception is that only a small portion of the general public supports the election. On the other hand, among conservatives who do support election norms, the perception is that a large share of the public shares their views.

We will never give up, we will never concede. You don't concede when there's theft involved. Our country has had enough, we will not take it anymore.

—Donald J. Trump (January 6, 2021).

Even before Donald Trump was elected president in 2016, political observers expressed concern about his violation of political norms, or, "the unwritten rules and conventions that shape political behavior" (Nyhan 2017). One of the most highly publicized of Trump's norm violations during his presidential campaigns was his unwillingness to release his tax returns. While presidential candidates are not legally required to release their tax returns to the public, it had been the norm for them to do so for decades. Although scholars have devoted considerable attention to the role of formal institutions (e.g., laws, constitutions, etc.) in political life, Donald Trump's behavior while running for office and serving as president has heightened interest in, and concern about, informal institutions, such as norms, in the United States (Carey et al. 2019; Lieberman

et al. 2019; Panke and Petersohn 2017). Indeed, in the days following the 2016 election, author Amy Siskind began tracking norm violations by President Trump. She ultimately wrote a book called *The List* (Siskind 2018) that chronicles the president's norm violations, and, in October 2020, just a few weeks before the November 2020 presidential election, Siskind published a list of several hundred of Trump's norm violations in *The Washington Post*.[1] Following Joe Biden's victory in November of 2020, Siskind continued to track Trump's norm violations, identifying nearly 300 of them since the election.[2]

The violations identified by Siskind and other political observers are wide ranging[3], but in this study, we are interested in norm violations related to the 2020 presidential election. More specifically, we are interested in the norm violations that occurred when Trump refused to commit to a peaceful transfer of power following the election and when Trump indicated, on numerous occasions, that he would not accept the election results.[4] In fact, Trump encouraged his followers to attend a "Save America" protest rally to coincide with the electoral vote count and certification by Congress on January 6, 2021, noting it "will be wild."[5] Following Trump's inflammatory speech, riot supporters stormed the Capitol in what has been described by media commentators as an unprecedented insurrection.[6] The peaceful transfer of power and acceptance of election results—even when one loses—are important norms in democratic systems. We should note that although we are interested in Trump's norm violating behavior during the 2020 election, he did violate norms related to the election during the 2016 election as well. For example, during a 2016 presidential debate, Trump indicated that he might not concede if Hillary Clinton was declared the winner of the election.[7]

Although there has been some research on the effects of norm violations by President Trump (Carey et al. 2019; Clayton et al. 2020; Helmke and Ozturk 2020), scholars are only just starting to understand public reaction to President Trump's norm violations, especially those related to the 2020 presidential election. In the current study, we interested in several questions about election-related norms. First, how do people perceive levels of support for the peaceful transfer of power and acceptance of the 2020 election results among the American public? That is, in the aftermath of the election, do people think that support for these norms is widespread in the public? Second, what factors influence the perceptions that people have about public support for norms related to the election? We are particularly interested in understanding the link between peoples' *personal views* about election-related norms (i.e., whether they personally support a peaceful transfer of power or accept the election results) and their *perceptions* about support for such norms in the U.S. population at large. Various studies (Wallen 1943; Mullen et al. 1985) have found that people have a "tendency to attribute their own sentiments to others" (Wojcieszak and Price 2009, p. 27). Thus, people often believe, or project, that their individual views are widely held by the public, something known as the "false consensus effect" or "consensus bias" (Ross, Greene, and House 1977). An example of consensus bias would be the fact that college students consistently perceive that binge drinking is the norm or that their peers drink more than they do (Baer, Stacy, and Larimer 1991). While consensus bias occurs in the context of a wide range of topics, including racial attitudes, social issues, and environmental issues (Fields and Schuman 1976; Fabrigar and Krosnick 1995; Leviston, Walker, and Morwinski 2013), we are not aware of research that has examined the relationship between personal support for election norms and perceptions about public support for those norms. Thus, we add to the literature by examining whether there is a consensus bias in the context of political norms surrounding the 2020 presidential election.

We proceed as follows. In the next section, we discuss how presidential norm violations are communicated to the public, highlight previous research on the effects of President Trump's norm violations, and discuss our expectations about election-related norms. We then turn to our data and measures. As a brief overview, we developed and fielded an original national survey following the 2020 election in which we asked respondents about their own views on election-related norms and about their perceptions of public support for such norms. We next present our empirical results and discuss the implications of our findings. We conclude by suggesting some ideas for future research.

Elite messages, norms, and the American public

Decades worth of research on public opinion and political communication has shown that the public takes cues from political elites about many issues (Zaller 1992; Popkin 1991; Lupia 1994; Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Lenz 2012; Endres, Panagopoulos, and Green 2020). In short, people often learn about what is important and what to think about different issues by observing what political leaders (e.g., the president, members of congress, etc.) and groups (e.g., political parties) say and do. Not surprisingly, people are especially likely to adopt the views of leaders and groups with whom they agree and to reject the views of leaders and groups with whom they disagree (Zaller 1992; Rahn 1993; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013).

Overall, we argue that the public likely picks up elite cues not only on political issues but also on political norms (and violations of those norms). In the context of the 2020 election, a number of pieces of evidence support the idea of public responsiveness to elite cues on norms. For instance, President Trump's comments about a peaceful transfer of power and unwillingness to accept the election results generated considerable media attention in the months and weeks that followed. And it appears that the public almost immediately became aware of the president's remarks. For example, in a national survey fielded from September 24-26, 2020, just a few days after President Trump's first public comments on his unwillingness to commit to a peaceful transfer of power (which occurred during a September 23, 2020 press conference), the majority of voters (60%) said that they had already read or heard a lot or some about "President Trump refusing to commit to leaving office peacefully if he loses the election."[8] In the weeks following the 2020 presidential election, the electorate also picked up on cues from President Trump and his allies, who had continually cast doubt on the 2020 election, and Democratic leaders, who argued against the interpretation of the election by the president.[9] Indeed, one survey conducted in December 2020 found that 82% of Trump voters did not consider Joe Biden the legitimate president and that 49% of Trump voters believed that Trump should refuse to concede after the Electoral College vote and do all he can to stay in power.[10] The president's messaging on the election appears to have impacted his supporters. Among those who did not view Biden's win as legitimate (most of whom are Republicans and Trump voters), 93% believed that millions of ballots were cast illegally, 94% thought that voting equipment, software, and ballots were manipulated in many places, and 87% said that Donald Trump got more votes, but it was not reported. These are all reasons that President Trump and his allies have given for why he did not accept the 2020 election results. It is also noteworthy that 75% of Republicans, and 79% of Trump voters, agreed that "[t]he election is not over and not settled; it should still be contested." Again, this is an argument that President Trump had been making ever since the election was called for Biden. Supporters of Joe Biden also picked up on the messaging from Democratic leaders. The same survey indicated that 100% of Biden voters believed him to be the legitimate winner, and 98% believed that Trump should concede if the Electoral College voted for Biden. In addition, 98% of Biden voters, and 93% of Democrats, agreed that, "[t]he election is over and settled, it's time to move on."

Although there have only been a few studies on the effects of President Trump's statements related to election norms on voters, a recent study by Clayton et al. (2020) is directly relevant to our ideas about Trump's messaging on norms. Using an experimental design and data from MTurk, Clayton et al. (2020) examine whether exposure to tweets from President Trump that violate norms (general norm violations or election norm violations) influence public attitudes toward democracy. Interestingly, while they find that views on political violence and support for democracy do not change after exposure to norm-violating statements, they do find that "[a]mong people who approve of his [Trump's] performance in office, repeated exposure to norm-violating rhetoric about electoral fraud erodes trust and confidence in elections and increases belief that elections are rigged." They also find that exposure to election norm violations decreases the willingness of Trump supporters to accept the election results peacefully. In

short, at least among Trump supporters, the president's rejection of norms appears to influence their personal views on norms. Interestingly, Helmke and Ozturk (2020) find that bipartisan pushback from political elites can influence the perceived appropriateness of Trump's norm violating behavior for Republicans. This suggests that it may be possible to counter the negative effects of norm violations, although it likely requires collaboration between elites from both major parties.

In this study, our goal is not to understand all of the factors that lead people to personally support or accept (or not) election-related norms. Rather, our interest in is understanding whether and how one's personal views about norms related to the 2020 presidential election influence perceptions about support for those norms in the public at large. As we noted above, it appears that the public has picked up on President Trump's views about the peaceful transfer of power and election outcome and that personal support for or rejection of these norms is informed, at least in part, by whether one supports (or does not support) President Trump. To what extent do the personal views that people have about President Trump's democratic norm violations influence their broader perceptions about support for these norms in the American public? Fortunately, existing studies provide valuable ideas about how one's personal views may be related to boarder perceptions about the public.

One important idea that psychologists have developed on the link between personal views and perceptions about others is called the "false consensus effect" (Ross, Greene, and House 1977). As a quick overview, the basic idea behind the false consensus effect is that "people who engage in a given behavior will estimate that behavior to be more common than it is estimated to be by people who engage in alternative behaviors" (Mullen et al. 1985, p. 262). In a more general sense, the false consensus effect "refers to a tendency for people's estimates of the prevalence of a given response to be positively correlated with their own response" (Gilovich 1990, p. 623). Meta-analyses show that the false consensus effect is an incredibly robust empirical finding (Marks and Miller 1987; Mullen et al. 1985) that occurs in the context of many issues. Although the false consensus effect has been examined in many studies, including some political issues (e.g., see Fabrigar and Krosnick 1995), we are not aware of research examining this concept in the context of perceptions about election norms. If the false consensus effect exists when it comes to election norms, we should find that people who personally support a peaceful transfer of power following the 2020 presidential election also believe that the public supports this norm. Similarly, among people who personally do not support a peaceful transfer of power, we should find that they believe that the public shares this view. The pattern should be the same for the acceptance of the election results norm. Among those who personally accept the election results, we should find that they believe acceptance of the results is fairly common in the population at large. Those who do not personally accept the results should believe that the public shares their view.[11]

We are also interested in whether the false consensus effect is moderated by political ideology. Research in political psychology has indicated that conservatives have a higher desire for shared reality than liberals (Jost et al. 2018). In short, "conservatives are more likely than liberals to…exaggerate within-group consensus when making political and non-political judgments" (Jost et al. 2018, p. 81). In the context of this study, this may mean that the relationship between personal views and perceptions about the public is more pronounced among conservatives than liberals. Conservatives who do not support a peaceful transfer of power (or who do not accept the election results) may believe that the public holds similar views as them. On the other hand, conservatives who *do* support a peaceful transfer of power (or who *do* accept the election results), may believe that—because they are a member of a group that sees the peaceful transfer of power as important regardless of whether Trump won or lost—public support for a peaceful transition will be fairly high. In short, people in this group may not think of themselves just as conservatives but as *conservatives who disagree with Trump*, at least on the peaceful transfer of power norm. The conservatives in this group may think that their views are commonplace.

Data & measures

Our data come from a national survey we designed and fielded following the November 2020 presidential election in the United States (fielded December 11-16, 2020). The survey was administered by YouGov, a firm that uses advanced statistical techniques to recruit survey respondents online and produce a representative sample of the target population. For our survey, YouGov interviewed 1,870 respondents who were then matched down to a sample of 1,750 respondents to produce the final dataset. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2018 American Community Survey 1-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements.[12] Research shows that YouGov surveys are equivalent to representative surveys conducted via telephone (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2014).

To measure *personal views* on norms related to the 2020 presidential election, we asked respondents to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements: "I support a peaceful transition of power following the 2020 presidential election," and "I accept the results of the 2020 presidential election." We code each variable as dichotomous, such that strongly agree/agree responses are collapsed and assigned a value of one, and strongly disagree/disagree responses are coded as zero.

We also asked respondents about their *perceptions* of the extent to which the public supports these norms. More specifically, we asked respondents to tell us what percentage of Americans they think support a peaceful presidential transition following the 2020 presidential election. Responses were recorded using a slider that ranged from 0% to 100% (respondents could choose any whole number from 0 to 100). In addition, we asked respondents to tell us what percentage of Americans they think will accept the results of 2020 presidential election. Again, we used a slider that ranged from 0% to 100%. The use of sliders provides us fine-grained measures, and research has shown that the use of sliders (compared to other types of measurement approaches) does not impact response rates, completion time, or data quality (Roster, Lucianetti, and Albaum 2015).

Finally, since we are interested in the possible moderating role of political ideology, we measured ideology using a three-category variable where a value of one corresponds to liberal, a value of two corresponds to moderate, and a value of three corresponds to conservative. The liberal category includes those who reported being "very liberal" or "liberal" and the conservative category includes those who reported being "very conservative" or "conservative."[13]

Results & analysis

Our empirical analysis begins visually with Figure 1, which shows the distribution of respondents' *perceptions* of the percentage of Americans who support a peaceful transfer of power and the percentage of Americans who will accept the results of the 2020 election.[14] The mean for the perceived percentage of Americans who support a peaceful transfer of power is 67%, and the mean for the perceived percentage of Americans who will accept the results of the 2020 election is 63%. In other words, on average, people believe that the majority of Americans accept and support these norms. It is worth noting that although the means are fairly high, there is considerable variation around the mean for each variable. Indeed, for the peaceful transfer measure, 15% of respondents reported thinking that fewer than half Americans support a peaceful transition. Similarly, more than one-in-five (22%) respondents reported believing that less than fifty percent of Americans will accept the election results.

Although it is worthwhile to examine how people view the support for different norms among the American public, we also want to understand if and how peoples' *personal views* about these norms influence their *perceptions* about the public. As we noted above, research on the false consensus effect indicates that when people personally endorse something (here, support a peaceful transfer of power and accept the election results), they often expect that most others

Distribution of Norm Perception Measures
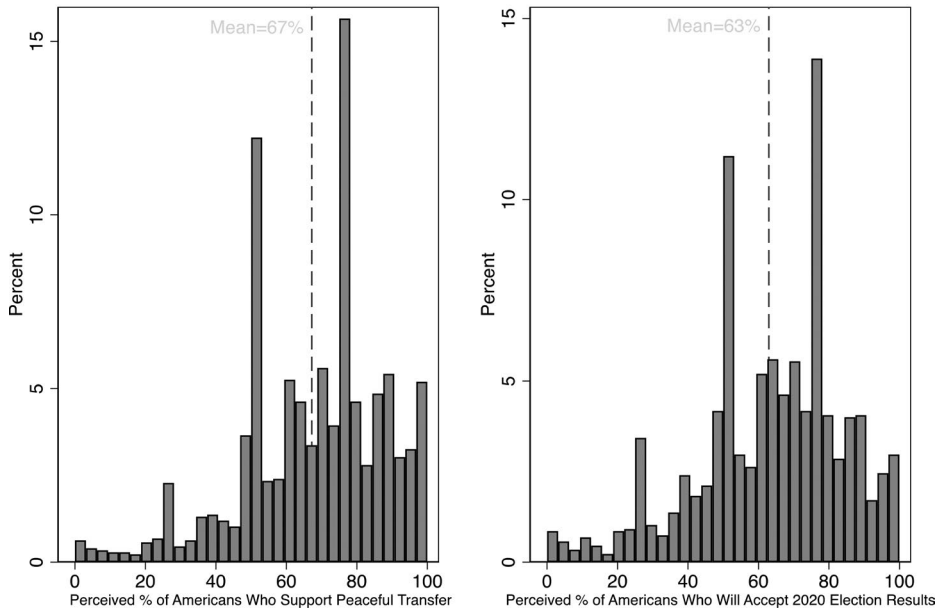
Figure 1. Histograms of respondents' perceptions of the percentage of Americans who support a peaceful transfer of power (left panel) and the percentage of Americans who will accept the results of the 2020 election (right panel).

do so as well. Similarly, when people do not personally endorse something, they often expect that most others concur. In short, we examine whether people project their own views about election norms more broadly onto the public at large.

In Table 1, we present the results from two OLS regression models in which the perceptions measures, both of which are continuous in nature, are used as dependent variables. In order to examine whether the false consensus effect exists when it comes to election norms, we include the corresponding personal attitude measures as predictors. In both models, we include a number of control variables and state fixed effects, though we note that the results for the personal attitude coefficients are nearly identical if we omit the controls and state fixed effects. Overall, the results in Table 1 indicate that personal views about the peaceful transfer of power following the 2020 election have a statistically significant effect ($p < .001$) on one's perceptions about the percentage of Americans who support a peaceful transfer of power. Similarly, personal attitudes about the election results have a statistically significant effect ($p < .001$) on one's perceptions about the percentage of Americans who will accept the election results.

Figure 2 provides a visual look at the relationship between each personal attitude measure and the corresponding perception measure. We note that in order to provide an accuracy benchmark, we include a dashed line in each graph showing the sample average for the personal questions (since they are coded as binary items, where 0 = do not accept/support and 1 = accept/support, we simply calculated the mean for each item). Thus, the dashed line in the first plot in Figure 2 shows the percentage of individuals in our survey who said that they personally support a peaceful transfer of power (89%). The dashed line in the second plot in Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents who indicated that they personally accept the election results (74%). Because we have results from a national survey asking people about their own personal views on the transfer of power and acceptance of election results, we know what the public actually thinks about these items on average and can use these estimates as benchmarks to examine perceptions about the overall levels of support for these norms in the American public.

Starting with the left panel in Figure 2, which examines the peaceful transfer of power norm, we find that those who personally do not support the peaceful transfer perceive that just 42%

Table 1. The relationship between personal views and perceptions about Americans' support for peaceful transfer of power and acceptance of election results norms.

	Perceived % of Americans who support peaceful transfer	Perceived % of Americans who will accept 2020 results
	b/se	b/se
Personal View	31.424***	29.823***
	2.468	1.863
Ideology (Conservative)	0.119	−0.289
	0.772	0.914
Education	0.429	−0.193
	0.38	0.363
White	6.276*	7.744***
	2.686	1.935
Black	7.102*	9.217***
	3.173	2.648
Hispanic	6.613*	3.865
	3.093	2.491
Asian	4.946	3.312
	4.032	3.157
Male	0.832	1.036
	1.124	1.099
Age	0.030	0.017
	0.034	0.036
Interest in Politics	1.316	1.005
	0.800	0.815
Constant	29.841***	34.960***
	6.801	7.589
State FEs	✓	✓
N of Obs.	1,370	1,415
R^2	0.318	0.454

Notes: Cell entries are unstandardized betas/standard errors.
***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$ (two-tailed).
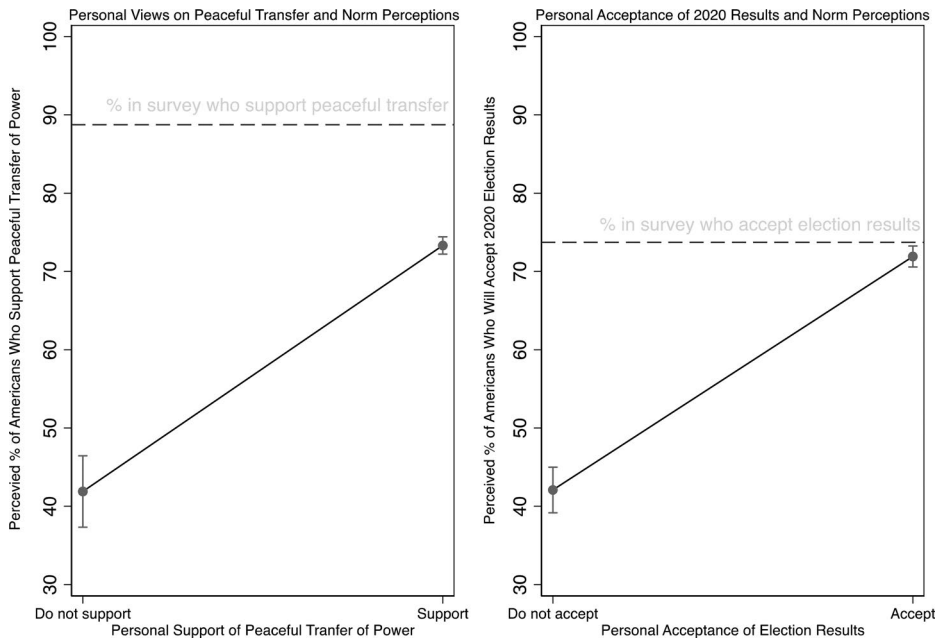
Figure 2. Relationship between of personal views and perceptions about Americans' views on peaceful transfer of power and acceptance of election results (dots are predicted values generated from regression results and are enveloped by 95% confidence intervals).

of Americans feel the same way. By contrast, those who personally support the peaceful transfer of power perceive 73% of Americans to concur. We interpret this finding to suggest that, when it comes to the peaceful transfer of power norm, peoples' perceptions are off by quite a bit, and the gap between perception and reality is very large for those who do not support the peaceful transfer of power. Indeed, the difference between these individuals' perception of the level of support for this norm (42%) and the actual level of support overall (89%), is a striking 47 percentage points. Those who do support the peaceful transfer of power also misperceive what is occurring in the public, but they are closer to the actual level of support for the norm than those who do not support the peaceful transfer of power. Among those who personally support the peaceful transfer of power, perceived support (73%) differs from actual support (89%) by 16 percentage points.

The right panel in Figure 2 shows the results for the acceptance of election outcome norm. Similar patterns emerge. Among those who do not accept the election results, the perception is that just 42% of Americans on average will accept the election results; actual support is 74% on average, implying a difference of 32 percentage points. Among those who do accept the election results, the perception is that 72% of Americans will accept the election results. Recalling that the actual level of support in the public is 74% on average, the difference is only 2 percentage points. Overall, these results support the notion that there exists a false consensus effect when it comes to norms related to the 2020 presidential election. Individuals' own views guide their perceptions when making assessments about support for election-norms in the American public.

Next, we explore the role of political ideology in shaping the relationship between personal attitudes and perceptions about social norms. As we note above, conservatives who do not support a peaceful transfer of power (or who do not accept the election results) may be more likely than liberals to believe that the public holds similar views. On the other hand, conservatives who do support a peaceful transfer of power (or who do accept the election results) may be more likely than liberals to believe that the public supports a peaceful transition as well. Figure 3 shows the relationship between personal views about the transfer of power and the acceptance of election results by political ideology. These results are derived from regression models in which ideology is interacted with the personal measures (detailed results are presented in the Online Appendix). We note the models include several control variables and state fixed effects, but the interaction effects are nearly identical if we omit these measures. Starting with the left panel, we see that the correspondence between personal norm views and perceptions about the public is more pronounced for conservatives than it is for liberals. Among conservatives who do not support a peaceful transfer of power (8% of the overall sample; 28% of conservatives), the perception is that just 39% of the public supports a peaceful transfer. On the other hand, among conservatives who do support a peaceful transfer of power (20% of the overall sample; 72% of conservatives), the perception is that 74% of the public supports a peaceful transition.[15] Among liberals, there is a difference in perceptions depending on support for a peaceful transition (note that only a small number of liberals do not support a peaceful transfer of power, just 1.2% of the overall sample), but the difference in perceptions is not nearly as stark as it is for conservatives. Indeed, the perception among liberals who do not support a peaceful transition is that 57% of the public supports a peaceful transition. Among liberals who do support a peaceful transition, the perception is that 72% of the public supports a peaceful transfer of power. When it comes to the acceptance of the election results norm, we see a similar pattern. Among conservatives who do not accept the election results (20% of the overall sample; 66% of conservatives), the perception is that just 39% of the public will accept the results. On the other hand, among conservatives who do accept the election results (10% of the overall sample; 34% of conservatives), the perception is that 76% of the public supports a peaceful transition. This is actually 2 percentage points higher than the actual level of support in the public on average (74%).

To examine the robustness of these results, we replicated the models using two, alternative variables that are strongly related to ideology (partisanship and vote choice in the 2020
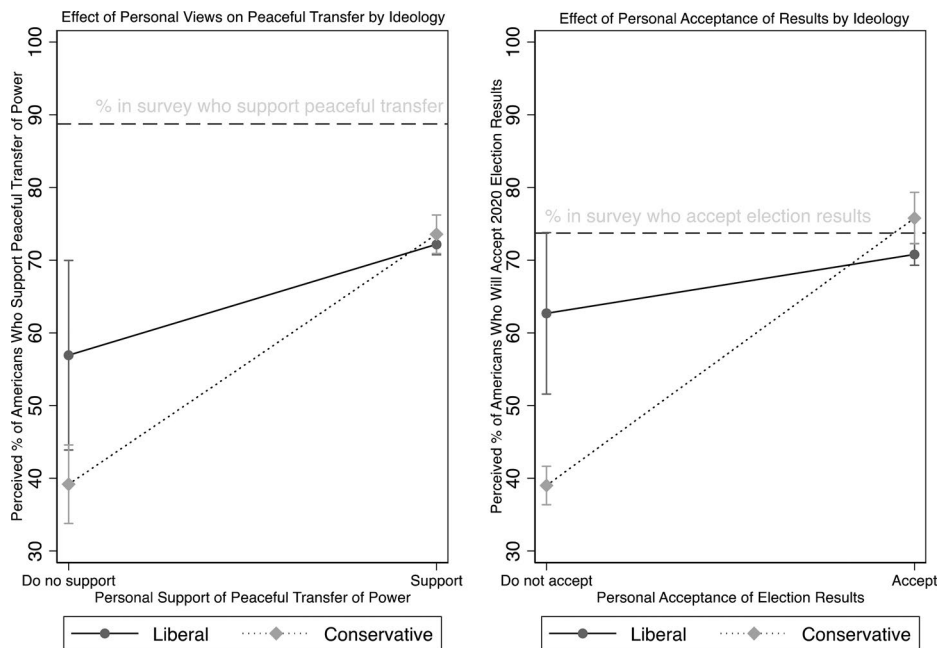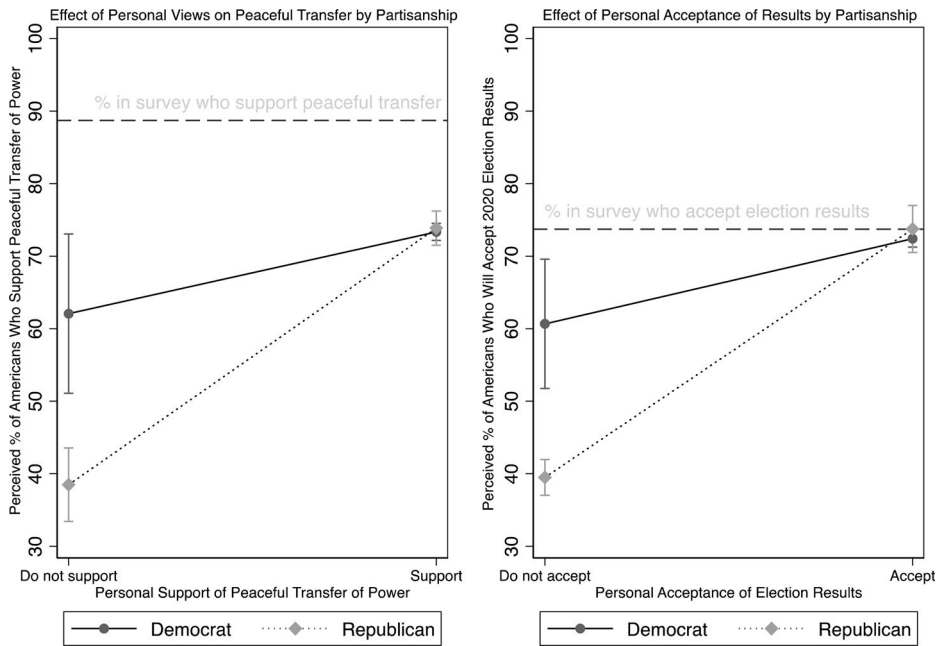
Figure 3. Effect of personal views on perceptions about Americans' views on peaceful transfer of power and acceptance of election results by political ideology (Dots are predicted values generated from regression results and are enveloped by 95% confidence intervals).

presidential election). In our dataset, ideology is correlated with partisanship at $r=.71$ ($p < .001$), and it is correlated with presidential vote choice at $r=.74$ ($p < .001$).[16] This allows us to ensure that these variables play similar roles as ideology in shaping the relationship between personal views and perceptions about the American public with respect to social election norms. The results from these additional analyses are presented in Figures 4 and 5 (detailed results available in the Online Appendix). The results for partisanship and vote choice tell a story that is very similar to what we observed for political ideology. In Figure 4, we see that among Republicans who do not support a peaceful transfer of power (or who do not accept the election results), there is a big difference between their perceptions and the actual number of Americans on average who support each norm. Among Democrats who do not support these norms, there is still a gap between perception and reality, but it is not quite as large as it is for Republicans. As was the case with ideology, those who personally support each of these norms are much closer to reality in their perceptions. The patterns shown in Figure 5, which focuses on the effects among Trump and Biden supporters separately, are very similar to the patterns displayed in Figures 3 and 4.[17]

Discussion & conclusion

The violation of informal democratic norms has characterized Donald Trump's political campaigns and presidency. Scholars generally agree that informal norms can be just as important as formal institutions and are part of the reason why American democracy has been so durable. In the months leading up to (and following) the 2020 presidential election, many political observers expressed concern about Trump's norm violations, especially those related to the election. In the current study, we examined individuals' views about norm violations related to the peaceful transfer of power and acceptance of the election results. We also examined the link between those views and broader perceptions about support for social election norms in the American

Figure 4. Effect of personal views on perceptions about Americans' views on peaceful transfer of power and acceptance of election results by partisanship (Dots are predicted values generated from regression results and are enveloped by 95% confidence intervals).
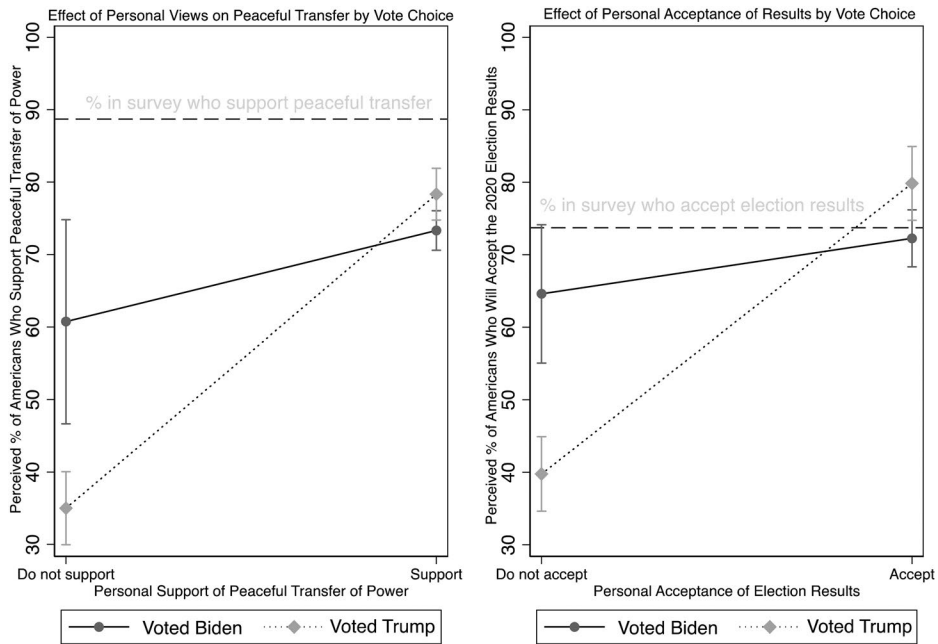
Figure 5. Effect of personal views on perceptions about Americans' views on peaceful transfer of power and acceptance of election results by vote choice in 2020 Presidential Election (Dots are predicted values generated from regression results and are enveloped by 95% confidence intervals).

public. To our knowledge, previous research has not examined the connection between *individual views* about election-related norms and *perceptions about how the public responds* to norm violations, especially in the context of multivariate models. A number of important findings emerged. First, we found that sizable majorities of Americans on average personally support the peaceful

transfer of power (89%) and accept the 2020 presidential election results (74%). Second, our findings reveal that individuals perceive these social norms to be widely held by the public. Specifically, our respondents believe that 67% of Americans support a peaceful transfer of power and that 63% of Americans will accept the results of the 2020 election. Third, we show there exists a strong link between personal views about election norms and perceptions about social election norms. Consistent with research in psychology, people generally expect the public at large to share their views about election norms. Thus, our findings support the idea of a false consensus bias in the context of these norms. Finally, we demonstrate that political ideology influences the relationship between personal views about election norms and public perceptions about these norms. Among conservatives who did not accept/support the election norms we examined, the perception was that only a small portion of the public accepts/supports the norms. On the other hand, among conservatives who did accept/support the norms we examined, the perception was that a large share of the public shared their views.

It is important to note that our findings revealed a sizable gap between perceptions and reality when it comes to election norms, although the magnitude of the gap varied depending on the norm under investigation. One interesting question that follows from our findings is how fix or deal with influential misperceptions individuals harbor. For example, among conservative voters or Trump supporters who do not support the election result (or a peaceful transition of power), the large misperception that much of the American public shares this view could be highly influential as people's behavior is often driven by their perceptions of what is acceptable and normative (Tankard and Paluck 2016). It is possible that recent political disorder (e.g., rioting at the Capitol in Washington D.C. in January 2021) partially stems from people feeling emboldened due to false consensus effects. Research shows that selective exposure to ideologically consonant campaign messages may further reinforce such false-consensus effects (Wojcieszak 2008). Accordingly, our research has important implications for the roles that political marketing and communications can play. In particular, some research has indicated that it is possible to change peoples' norm perceptions. For example, Tankard and Paluck (2017) found that when a favorable Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage was presented to people as likely to occur, perceived norms and personal attitudes toward gay marriage and gay people shifted. In short, it appears that some institutions (or the decisions they make) are capable of changing perceptions of social norms. It is interesting to consider how findings like this might apply to perceptions about election norms. It may be possible to fix the misperceptions we uncovered in this study by communicating to the public the fact that most Americans do accept the outcome of the 2020 presidential election and agree that there should be a peaceful transfer of power. Studies have shown that by presenting facts in the form of a descriptive norm or consensus (e.g., 97% of climate scientists have concluded that human-caused global warming is happening), it is possible to get both liberals and conservatives to shift their perceptions toward the consensus (see van der Linden, Leiserowitz, and Maibach 2018).

Scholars could pursue a number of intriguing research avenues based on the results reported in this study. First, it would be interesting to examine the extent to which the findings we uncovered here persist over a longer period of time. Given that we only have data from one point in time, it is not possible for us to assess the stability of perceptions about election related norms or whether such perceptions are predictive of perceptions about the public long after the election has passed. If peoples' perceptions do remain fairly stable over time, it would be interesting to see if they are related to other political behaviors (e.g., turnout in future elections, attitudes toward elections, etc.). It would be particularly valuable to see what happens over time to the perceptions of those people who expressed support for Trump's norm violations. For example, do they maintain their support for norm violations even though Trump is no longer in office? Second, it would be interesting to examine whether the false consensus effect occurs in the context of other democratic norms. In this article, we examined just two norms, and both focused on elections. Does the false consensus effect exist when it comes to other political norms? Third, it would be valuable to examine whether and how much misperceptions about

public support for norms can be changed. This could likely be examined in the context of an experimental design. It would be particularly interesting to examine whether elite cues from different sources (e.g., journalists, members of Congress, governors, state legislators) all have the similar effects on correcting misperceptions or whether some are more effective than others. Finally, we believe it would be worthwhile to examine perceptions about support for political norms in a range of different contexts. Our study focuses on norm violations in the United States surrounding the 2020 presidential election, but similar analyses conducted on other contexts would be instructive. We encourage additional research aimed at understanding public reactions to norm violations by political leaders to help answer these important questions.

Notes

1. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/outlook/siskind-list-trump-norms/
2. https://theweeklylist.org/weekly-list/after/
3. See: https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/lifestyle/magazine/trump-presidential-norm-breaking-list/ and https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/26/us/elections/trump-keeps-bending-and-breaking-presidential-norms-it-will-be-easier-for-his-successors-to-do-the-same.html
4. See the following articles for examples: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/23/us/politics/trump-power-transfer-2020-election.html, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/transcript-fox-news-sunday-interview-with-president-trump, and https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/24/politics/trump-election-warnings-leaving-office/index.html.
5. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/us/politics/capitol-mob-trump-supporters.html.
6. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-55574780.
7. For additional details, see the following article: https://www.vox.com/2016/10/19/13341712/presidential-debate-donald-trump-concede
8. https://morningconsult.com/2020/09/28/trump-transfer-of-power-polling/
9. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/survey-who-won-election-republicans-congress/2020/12/04/1a1011f6-3650-11eb-8d38-6aea1adb3839_story.html
10. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-poll-most-feel-election-is-settled-but-trump-voters-disagree/
11. It is worth noting, as Choi and Cha (2019) point out, that "a false consensus does not necessarily mean that people see their own responses as shared by a *majority* of people. Rather, it is a relative sense of commonness for their own responses, compared to the one perceived by those who provided the alternative responses, which constitutes the false consensus" (p. 1).
12. The matched cases are weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined, and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and region. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles. The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age, race, and education, to produce the final weight.
13. We note that our results are similar if we use the five-point measure of ideology (very liberal, liberal, moderate, conservative, very conservative) as opposed to the collapsed three-point measure.
14. Not surprisingly, the measures are positively correlated ($r = 0.70$, $p < .001$).
15. Among the subset of respondents who identify as conservative (about 30% of the overall sample), the majority (72%) report supporting a peaceful transfer of power, while 28% do not support a peaceful transition.
16. Partisanship is coded so that 1 = Democrat, 2 = Independent, and 3 = Republican. Vote choice is coded so that 0 = vote for Biden and 1 = vote for Trump.
17. During the period in which the survey was in the field (12/11/20 to 12/16/20), the Electoral College vote occurred (12/14/20). To examine whether the results reported throughout the paper played out similarly before and after the Electoral College vote, we estimated models for those respondents interviewed during the 12/11-13 period and those interviewed during the 12/15-16 period. Overall, the main results (those reported in Table 1 and Figure 2) and the interaction results (those in Online Appendix Table 1A and shown in Figures 3–5) are quite similar when we examine the results for respondents interviewed during these two different time periods. In short, subsetting the data into different time periods (which might correspond to different levels of tension) does not substantially alter the key findings reported in the paper.

Notes on contributor

Aaron Weinschenk is the Ben J. and Joyce Rosenberg Professor of Political Science and Department Chair at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. His research has appeared in journals such as the *British Journal of Political Science, Political Behavior,* and *Political Research Quarterly*.

Costas Panagopoulos (Ph.D., New York University) is Professor and Chair in the Department of Political Science at Northeastern University. He studies campaigns and elections, political behavior and communications and campaign finance.

Sander van der Linden is Professor of Social Psychology in Society in the Department of Psychology at the University of Cambridge and Director of the Cambridge Social Decision-Making Lab. His research has appeared in journal such as *Nature Climate Change, Nature Human Behavior, and Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.*

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