

# Did the 2024 Election Change American Attitudes About Democracy?

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December 12, 2024

## Introduction

The build-up to the 2024 presidential election was marked by a significant sense of concern and dread (Lerer and Glueck 2024). While U.S. elections are often associated with increased anxiety and emotional sensitivity (Early et al. 2023; Mukhopadhyay 2022), the stakes of the 2024 election appeared particularly high for many Americans. For some, the fate of democracy was on the ballot in November (Swenson and Sanders 2024), and there was significant concern that the country could descend into partisan violence in the electoral aftermath (Hanna 2024; Narea 2024). Before any votes were cast, many doubted the legitimacy of the outcome (Public Affairs Council 2023), a continuation of simmering election skepticism within the electorate (Holliday et al. 2024).

As election day came to pass, however, and Donald Trump assumed the title of president-elect, the most acute concerns around post-election instability did not materialize. Voters of both parties perceived the election was run both efficiently and fairly (Pew Research Center 2024) and no major incidents of extremist, inter-partisan violence occurred (Doyle 2024). Trump won by a relatively large electoral college margin (and a smaller but incontrovertible popular vote margin), Kamala Harris conceded the day after the election, and the Biden administration began the process of peacefully transitioning power. While legitimate concerns over the fate of democracy still persist (Binder et al. 2024), the American public has seemingly weathered the immediate aftermath of the election with a great deal of resilience.

In this brief report, we dive deeper into the effect the 2024 election had on the political attitudes of Americans. Using a nationally representative survey with an embedded panel of respondents interviewed both before and after the election, we show no increase in outparty hostility among either Democrats or Republicans resulting from the contest. While the effects of the election on feelings of perceived accuracy of the election in conveying the wishes of the American public, trust in political institutions, and resignation over potential democratic backsliding diverged for Democrats and Republicans, the *net* effect of the election on such

attitudes was generally positive, undoing much of the deleterious skepticism present since the 2020 election among Republicans.

For the mass public, therefore, the 2024 election represents a potential opportunity to re-solidify trust in our electoral institutions while electoral confidence remains high. It remains unclear whether incoming elected officials will parlay such good-will into building trusted, durable institutions and processes; indeed, the outgoing Republican supermajority in the North Carolina state legislature has already passed legislation stripping incoming Democratic state executives of significant powers (Marley et al. 2024). But if such trust does erode, it does not appear to be as an immediate result of the 2024 election.

## Data and Methods

Since September 2022 and through the November 2024 election, the Polarization Research Lab (PRL) has conducted weekly surveys of roughly 1,000 YouGov panel respondents (eligible for re-contact after 3 weeks), constituting a total sample of over 124,000 responses from 75,000 distinct respondents (Westwood and Lelkes 2023). The survey measures attitudes related to partisan animosity, trust in political institutions, support for antidemocratic norms, and support for political violence, and is weighted to national demographic targets. In the days immediately before and after the election, PRL fielded responses to an expanded set of survey items related to perceived accuracy of the election and resignation around the possibility of democratic backsliding (see appendix for full question wording). This election-focused survey yielded 990 pre-election and 1,000 post-election responses (See Figure 1 for distribution).

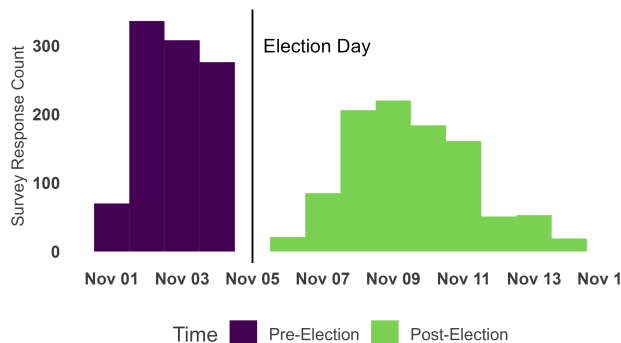


Figure 1: Number of responses during election data collection, by day.

Our main analysis uses time-series cross-sectional data in an interrupted time series (ITS) design, regressing our outcomes of interest on a binary post-election indicator.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>To alleviate concerns of ignorability (i.e. that our post-election respondents are somehow systematically distinct from our pre-election respondents), we also conduct an analysis of panel respondents who completed interviews both before and after the election (Muñoz et al. 2020).

## Results

Below, we present the main results from our ITS models on outcomes related to partisan animosity and political attitudes, followed by an analysis of panel respondents. All results can be interpreted as the post-election percent change in attitudes, with 95% confidence intervals, weighted to national demographic targets.

### Partisan Animosity

Elections generally heighten the salience of partisan identity (Sood and Iyengar 2016), which may have consequences for feelings of warmth toward copartisans and members of the opposing parties. Previous research has come to mixed conclusions about the effects of elections on affective polarization (Fasching et al. 2024; Hernández et al. 2021; Phillips and Warner 2024). For the 2024 election, however, we find no difference in pre- and post-election levels of affective polarization, shown in Figure 2. However, we do observe some difference in party-level differences. Democrats felt about 5% colder toward co-partisans after the election, whereas Republicans felt about 5% warmer toward out-partisans. Republicans and Democrats felt no differently toward in- and out-partisans after the election, respectively.

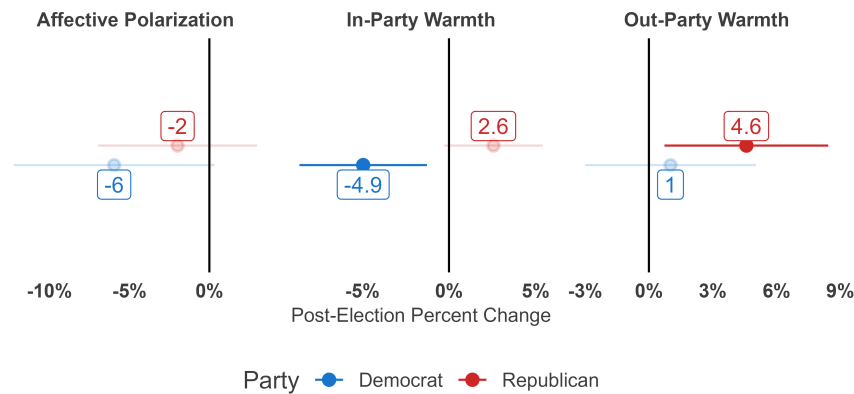


Figure 2: Post-election percent change in affective polarization, out-party warmth, in-party warmth, and out-party warmth. Warmth measured using feeling thermometers (0-100). 95% CIs, weighted to national demographic targets.

This is not to say that Democratic (Republican) feelings toward Democrats are now net cold (warm). Democrats still feel warmly about other Democrats (75.9 on a 0-100 scale), and Republicans still feel coldly toward Democrats (30.3). The clear resolution, then, did not necessarily bring partisans closer together, but also did not inflame tensions.

A potentially related and more pressing concern about 2024 election attitudes was related to support for antidemocratic norms and political violence. There is debate on the degree to which affective polarization and such downstream attitudes are related (Broockman et al. 2023; Finkel et al. 2020; Voelkel et al. 2023), so we consider whether support could have moved independently of affective polarization.

We find no evidence of any movement in support for anti-democratic norms or political violence, shown in Figure 3. As has been shown in previous research, these deleterious attitudes are rare in the American public, and are generally held in equal levels between partisans (Holliday et al. 2024). The median partisan supports 0 norm violations or acts of political violence, which remained the case both before and after the election.

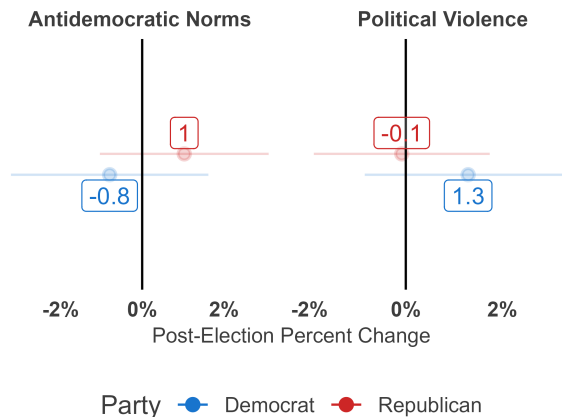


Figure 3: Post-election percent change in support for antidemocratic norms (measured using an index of 4 norms, 0-4) and support for political violence (measured using an index of 6 items, 0-6). 95% CIs, weighted to national demographic targets.

## Political Attitudes

We now consider a broader set of attitudes related to election accuracy, political trust, and democratic resignation. Previous electoral cycles have witnessed a precipitous decline in electoral confidence and trust, culminating in a violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol (Holliday et al. 2024). While this event set a new high-water mark for election skepticism, asymmetric responses to elections are common in American politics. Members of the losing party tend to view elections with greater skepticism, whereas members of the winning party tend to demonstrate greater confidence (Sances and Stewart 2015; Sinclair et al. 2018).

We find robust evidence of such a “winner’s effect,” shown in Figure 4. While Democrats responded to the 2024 election with reduced perceptions of accuracy, Republicans increased their feelings of accuracy by almost 50 percentage points. Prior to the election, only 13.8% of Republicans (28% of Democrats) believed the election would accurately represent the will of the people. After the election, 63.2% of Republicans (20% of Democrats) thought the same, representing an 18 percentage-point increase across both parties. We also observe similar, but less intense asymmetric changes in political trust and feelings of resignation.

## Panel Analysis

As a robustness check, we subset our post-election sample to repeat respondents, then match the post-election response to the most recent pre-election response to create an asynchronous

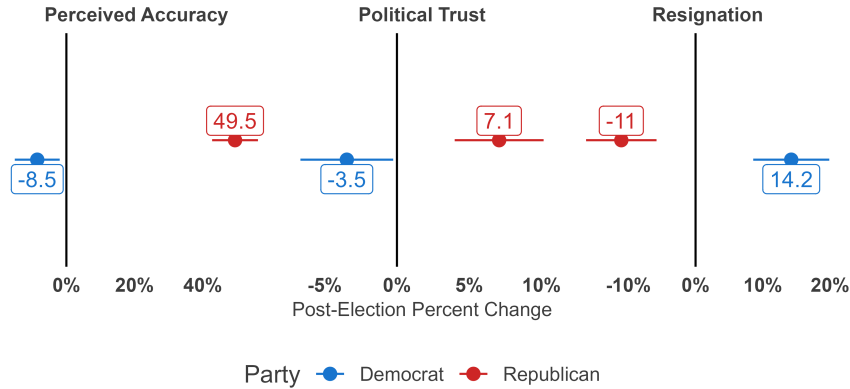


Figure 4: Post-election percent change in perceived election accuracy (originally measured 0-1), trust in political institutions (index of 3 items), and resignation to democratic backsliding (index of 2 items). 95% CIs, weighted to national demographic targets.

two-wave panel. The resulting data includes 403 individual panelists. We recreate the analyses from above in Figure 5, including individual-level fixed effects. We are unable to repeat the analysis for variables measured in only the electoral survey fieldings (e.g. perceived accuracy, resignation).

Only the positive change in trust from the prior set of results survives the panel robustness check, although the in-party warmth for Republicans now also becomes significant. Overall, this suggests the election had fairly minor, if any, effects on the broader set of attitudes non-specific to the 2024 election.

One limitation of this panel design is that we have relatively few panelists to draw conclusions from; just because we fail to observe a significant effect does not mean we wouldn't have given a sufficiently large sample or with a different draw of panelists. To better understand the magnitude of the effects we do observe, we perform a placebo test. That is, we look back at all the weeks of panelists in the past year *before* the election and calculate the same set of effects. By comparing the election-week estimates (shown by vertical lines) to the larger distribution of effects that occurred in the previous year, we get a better idea of how extreme the movement in attitudes was in the election window relative to all other windows in time.

The results suggest the election induced a greater-than-normal within-person change across several political attitudes, including feeling thermometers and political trust. Again, we note that these changes are small in absolute terms and uncertain. Of the small effects, however, election effects seem to be among the largest.

## Conclusion

While political commentators expressed significant concern over how the mass public would react to the 2024 election, our results offer additional evidence that Americans on average had rather muted changes in attitudes. For attitudes that *did* change, that change was typically in a positive direction for a population of specific concern: greater out-party warmth,

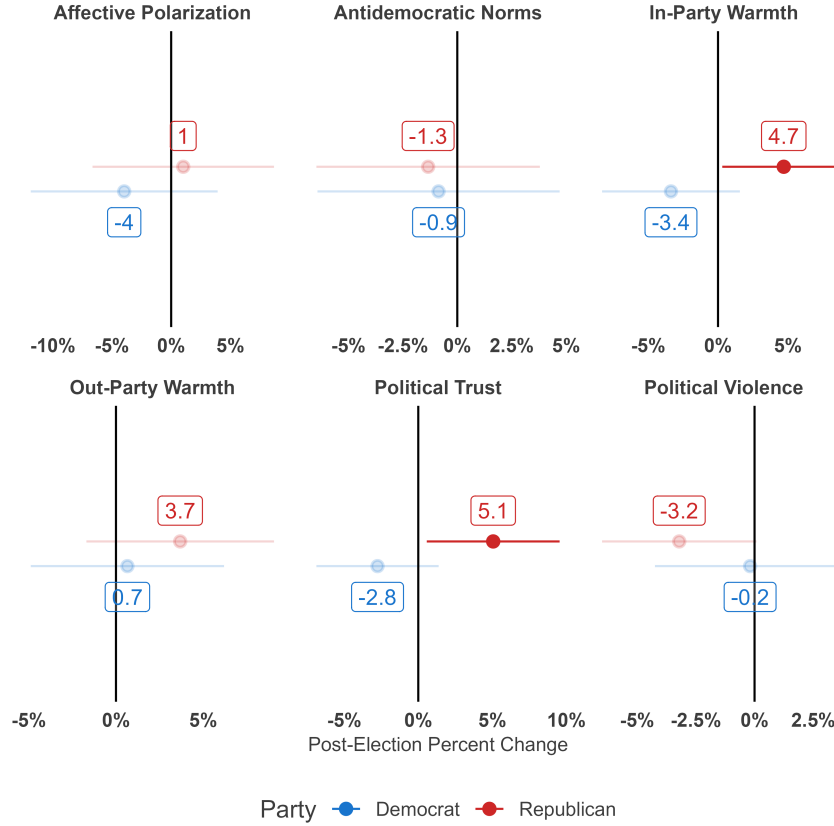


Figure 5: Post-election percent change in political attitudes among panel respondents. 95% CIs. Unweighted

greater trust, and greater confidence in elections among Republicans. It is worth noting, however, that Democrats did become more resigned than Republicans became less resigned. Additionally, while a net increase in election confidence is certainly a desirable outcome, it potentially signals that democratic commitments are largely conditional on in-party success. Should Democrats have greater success in the midterm elections, it seems unlikely high Republican confidence in election results will persist.

It is unclear how such attitudes will manifest in downstream behaviors, or how the actions of the incoming administration will or will not inflame partisan tensions. For the time being, however, our electoral processes endured and passed a serious test in the face of genuine skepticism (Fahey 2023). Given the party of the incumbent president tends to lose in midterm elections, we will have to wait and see how durable this increase in trust is.

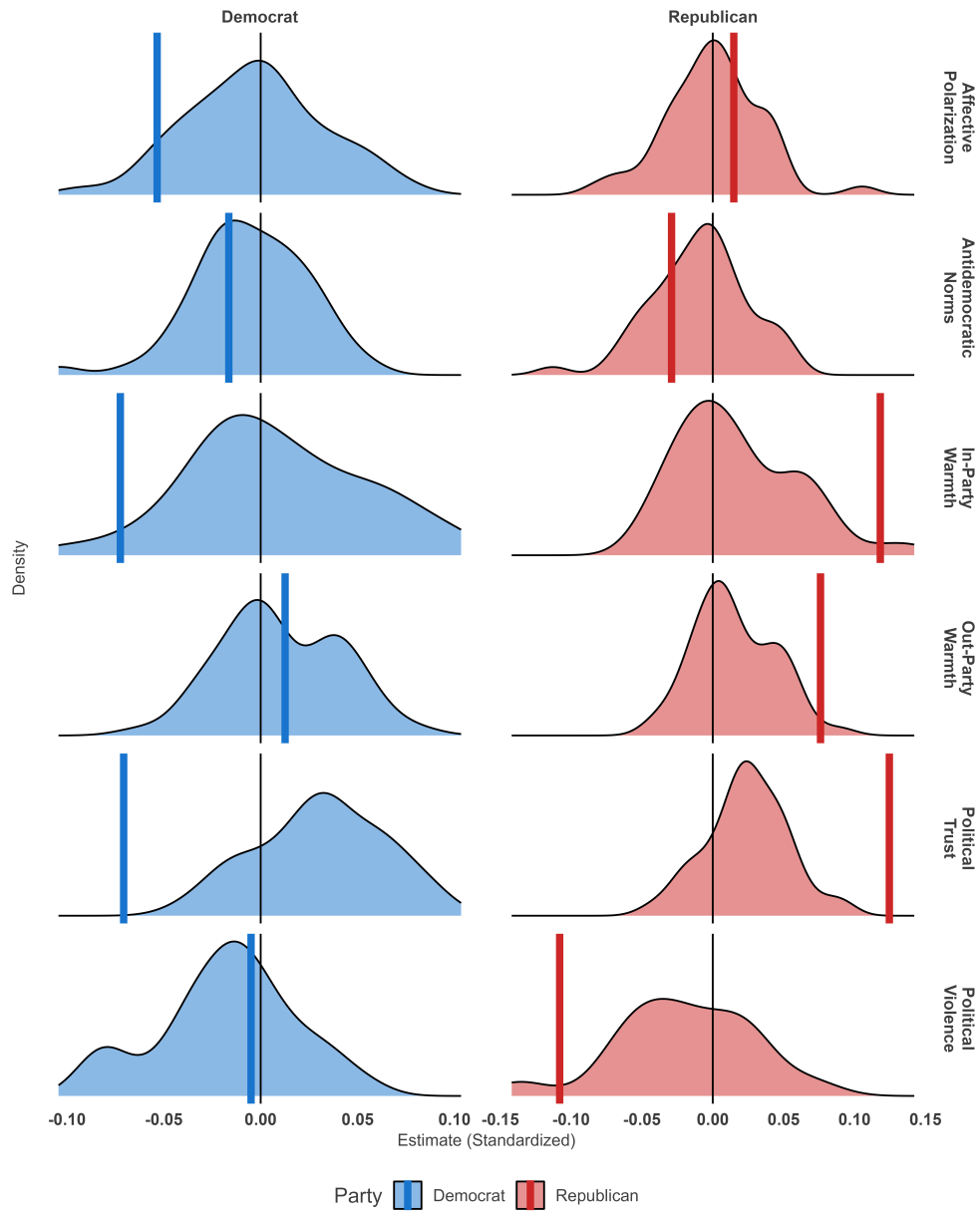


Figure 6: Panel Effects (vertical lines) plotted over distribution of panel effects over the past year.

# Appendix

Below we document in full the list of survey items from which we base out conclusions.

## Democratic Norms

Order within this section is randomized, except that perceptions always follow the norms questions. Response options for the norms questions are always Strongly agree / Agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Disagree / Strongly disagree. We recode to a binary classification of agree (strongly agree and agree) and not agree (neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree) and summed to create the summary measure.

- **norm\_polling:** Do you agree or disagree: (inparty) should reduce the number of polling stations in areas that typically support (outparty).
- **norm\_loyalty:** Do you agree or disagree with the following: When a (inparty) candidate questions the outcome of an election other (inparty) should be more loyal to the (inparty) party than to election rules and the constitution.
- **norm\_judges:** Do you agree or disagree: (inparty) elected officials should sometimes consider ignoring court decisions when the judges who issued those decisions were appointed by (outparty) presidents.
- **norm\_censorship:** Do you agree or disagree with the following: The government should be able to censor media sources that spend more time attacking (inparty) than (outparty).

## Political Violence

The questions in this section appear in the order presented below. For all items, the response options are Strongly support / Support / Neither support nor oppose / Oppose / Strongly oppose.

- **violence1:** (name) was convicted of protesting without a permit. He was arrested by police after leading a protest against (outparty) on the grounds of the county courthouse. He made no effort to acquire the necessary permit for the protest and refused to leave when asked by police. Do you support or oppose (name)'s actions?
- **violence2:** (name) was convicted of vandalism. He was arrested by police after he vandalized several large signs expressing support for candidates of the (outparty) party. Do you support or oppose (name)'s actions?
- **violence3:** (name) was convicted of assault. He was arrested by police for throwing rocks at peaceful (outparty) protesters. Although no one was seriously injured, paramedics bandaged a man with a head wound. Do you support or oppose (name)'s actions?



- **violence4:** (name) was convicted of arson. He was arrested by police as he attempted to run from a fire he started at the local (outparty) headquarters. Although he waited for the building to close for the night, several adjacent buildings were still occupied. Do you support or oppose (name)'s actions?
- **violence5:** (name) was convicted of assault with a deadly weapon. He was arrested by police after driving his car into a crowd of (outparty) protesters. Although no one was killed, several individuals were seriously injured and one spent a month in the hospital. Do you support or oppose (name)'s actions?
- **violence6:** (name) was convicted of murder. He was arrested by police after surveillance footage was found showing him stabbing a prominent (outparty) to death. (name) targeted the victim because he believed the victim had prevented him from voting in the last election as part of a conspiracy to stop (inparty) voters. Do you support or oppose (name)'s actions?

### Feeling thermometers

- **democrat\_therm:** We'd like you to rate how you feel towards some groups on a scale of 0 to 100. Zero means very unfavorable and 100 means very favorable. Fifty means you do not feel favorable or unfavorable. How would you rate your feeling toward Democrats? [Response: 0-100 thermometer]
- **republican\_therm:** We'd like you to rate how you feel towards some groups on a scale of 0 to 100. Zero means very unfavorable and 100 means very favorable. Fifty means you do not feel favorable or unfavorable. How would you rate your feeling toward Republicans? [Response: 0-100 thermometer]

### Trust Index

Individual items are summed (Likert scale) to create the summary measure.

- **institutional\_corruption:** If a member of Congress were offered a bribe to influence the awarding of a government contract, do you think that the member of Congress would accept or refuse the bribe? [Response: Extremely likely to refuse / Likely to refuse / Equally likely to refuse or accept / Likely to accept / Extremely likely to accept]
- **institutional\_response:** If you were to complain about the poor quality of a public service, how likely or unlikely is it that the problem would be easily resolved? [Response: Extremely unlikely / Unlikely / Equally likely to unlikely / Likely / Extremely likely]
- **fair\_treatment:** Do you agree or disagree that you can expect fair treatment from government authorities? [Response: Strongly agree / Agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Disagree / Strongly disagree]

## Election-Specific Questions

- **accuracy\_2024:** Do you agree or disagree with the following: The 2024 Presidential election outcome [will accurately reflect/accurately reflected] the preferences of those who voted. [Response: Strongly agree / Agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Disagree / Strongly disagree]
- **resignation1:** Do you agree or disagree with the following: America is heading toward the end of democracy, where free and fair elections will no longer occur. [Response: Strongly agree / Agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Disagree / Strongly disagree]
- **resignation2:** Do you agree or disagree with the following: Very little can be done to stop American democracy from ending in the next decade. [Response: Strongly agree / Agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Disagree / Strongly disagree]

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