Strengthening Democracy
Challenge

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Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Northwestern University

Stanford PACS
Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society

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What is the Strengthening Democracy Challenge?

[The Strengthening Democracy Challenge](#) is a joint project between academics and

practitioners to identify short, online interventions to strengthen Americans' commitment to

democratic principles of political engagement. We invite you to join this effort by

contributing an intervention that could reduce three important outcomes: (a) anti-

democratic attitudes, (b) support for partisan violence, and/or (c) partisan animosity.

Contributors will have opportunities to receive public recognition, co-authorship in

published research, and cash prizes. Interventions will first be vetted by our advisory board,

and we will test up to 25 interventions in a large, online experiment. Submissions to the

Strengthening Democracy Challenge will be accepted until October 1, 2021.

Why Should I Participate in the Strengthening Democracy Challenge?

We hope you will contribute your ideas for how to reduce (a) anti-democratic attitudes, (b) support for partisan violence, and/or (c) partisan animosity in the United States. To acknowledge your efforts, everyone whose intervention is selected for testing by the Strengthening Democracy Challenge …

- will be offered authorship (listed as "Qualifiers") on the primary publication resulting from the challenge,

- will be honored at a virtual conference organized by Stanford's Polarization and Social Change Lab, in which the results of the Strengthening Democracy Challenge will be presented to the public.

In addition, we will award a **series of cash prizes[1]**:

- Support for Anti-Democratic Attitudes: A **$15,000[2]** prize will be divided between those teams submitting interventions that significantly reduce anti-democratic attitudes.

- Partisan Animosity: A **$15,000**[2] prize will be divided between those teams submitting interventions that significantly reduce partisan animosity.

- Support for Partisan Violence: A **$15,000**[2] prize will be divided between those teams submitting interventions that significantly reduce support for partisan violence.

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[1] If none of the interventions reduce an outcome (according to a significance test), no award will be given out for that outcome. If an intervention reduces multiple outcomes (e.g., anti-democratic attitudes and partisan animosity) it is eligible for prizes for each outcome.

[2] If we receive fewer than 15 viable submissions that qualify for testing, the cash prize will be $5,000.

Those teams submitting interventions that **most reduce** a) anti-democratic attitudes, (b) support for partisan violence, and/or (c) partisan animosity…

- will be given awards as the "**overall winning intervention**" for each outcome,

- will be offered authorship (listed as "**Winners**") on the primary publication resulting from the challenge,

- will be invited to give talks at a virtual conference organized by Stanford's Polarization and Social Change Lab, in which the results of the Strengthening Democracy Challenge will be presented to the public.

In addition, we will give special awards to those teams led by (1) graduate students and (2) practitioners[3] whose interventions most reduce a) anti-democratic attitudes, (b) support for partisan violence, and/or (c) partisan animosity (resulting in six additional awards). Finally, awards will be given for the interventions rated as most novel by the advisory board in three categories: submitted by a graduate student-led team, submitted by a practitioner-led team, and overall.

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[3] Here we define a "practitioner" as any submitter who does not do research for an academic institution.

How Do I Win the Strengthening Democracy Challenge?

You win the Strengthening Democracy Challenge in three steps:

Step 1: You submit your idea (see the section "Where do I Submit my Intervention?").

Step 2: Your idea is selected for testing by a Selection Committee (see the section "How Will my Intervention be Reviewed?").

Step 3: Your intervention wins the Strengthening Democracy Challenge by significantly reducing at least one of the three target variables of the challenge: a) anti-democratic attitudes, (b) support for partisan violence, and/or (c) partisan animosity (see all awards in the section "Why Should I Participate in the Strengthening Democracy Challenge?"). You can take different strategic approaches to win: You could target one variable, two, or all three, but regardless of your approach, you will be eligible to win awards associated with all three outcomes.

Where Do I Submit My Intervention?

You may submit your intervention through our [website](#). Submissions are being accepted until

October 1, 2021.

What are the Requirements for My Intervention?

Interventions must meet the following requirements:

- ❏ *Ethical*: The intervention must be approved by Stanford's Institutional Review Board.

- ❏ *Online*: The intervention must be deployable online.

- ❏ *Short*: The intervention must be no longer than 8 minutes.

- ❏ *Scalable*: The intervention must be able to handle up to 1,000 participants at the same time.

- ❏ *Comprehensible*: The intervention must be understandable to an English-speaking audience.

- ❏ *Costless*: The intervention must not pay participants in addition to what they are already being paid to participate in the study.

- ❏ *Aligned*: You cannot add additional measures for evaluating your intervention.

These requirements are described in more detail below.

Requirement 1: Ethical

Your intervention must provide accurate and true information without exposing participants to unnecessary risks or harm:

- ● you may not deceive participants,

- you may not ask participants to state false beliefs (e.g. ask them to rate all feeling thermometers at 100),

- you may not present information to participants that is hateful, disturbing, or offensive,

- you may not ask participants to engage in hateful or disturbing behaviors.

Further, your intervention must obtain ethics approval by Stanford's Institutional Review Board (IRB). **If your intervention is selected, our team will obtain IRB approval for your intervention.** If the IRB requires changes to your intervention, we will work with you to make those changes while maintaining as much consistency as possible to your original idea. You are encouraged to contact us via sdchallenge@stanford.edu if you have concerns about ethics approval. We will not select interventions that attempt to game the system in some way, e.g., by instructing participants on how to reply to the DVs.

Requirement 2: Online

Your proposed intervention must occur online, but our platform allows for a diverse range of possibilities.

Requirement 3: Short

Participants should be able to complete your proposed intervention in 8 minutes or less. We may request that you shorten your intervention if pretesting indicates it will take longer than 8 minutes to complete your intervention.

Requirement 4: Functioning at Scale

A large number of participants must be able to simultaneously engage in your proposed intervention.

Requirement 5: Comprehensible

The intervention must be understood by an English-speaking audience because we will collect data within the USA.

Requirement 6: Costless

The intervention must not involve paying people in addition to what they are already being paid.

Requirement 7: Aligned

You must not administer additional measures after your intervention because this would interfere with estimating the effect of your intervention on a) anti-democratic attitudes, (b) support for partisan violence, and/or (c) partisan animosity.

Can I Submit Different Interventions for Different Participants?

It is acceptable for an intervention to vary based on participant features (e.g., their partisanship, gender, race). For example, an "imagined contact with out-partisans" intervention can ask Democratic participants to think about contact with Republicans and ask Republican participants to think about contact with Democrats. That is, the intervention would have the exact same instructions for all participants (imagine contact with an out-partisan) but vary in terms of who the out-partisan is (a Republican or Democrat). **However, we do not accept interventions that involve substantively different interventions for different groups of participants.** For example, you cannot have an "imagined contact with out-partisans" intervention for Republican participants that asks them to imagine interacting with Democrats, and an "overarching identity" intervention for Democrat participants that asks them to think about a common identity with Republicans (such as all being Americans). If you have questions whether your interventions satisfy these criteria, you are welcome to email us about the suitability of your intervention before you submit your intervention.

How Will My Intervention be Reviewed?

Formal Check Review

Our staff team will review submitted interventions to check whether they satisfy the requirements for interventions. We will notify you if your intervention does not satisfy the requirements and work with you, within reason, to revise the intervention so that it is eligible. You are welcome to contact us with questions about your intervention before you submit at sdchallenge@stanford.edu.

Selection Process

The selection process will depend on the number of interventions:

- If we receive over 25 viable interventions, our Selection Committee will select the most promising 25 interventions to test.
- If we receive very few viable interventions (less than 5), we will reconsider running the Strengthening Democracy Challenge.

The selection committee consists of an advisory and editorial board.

The Advisory Board

Members of the advisory board will provide expert reviews for the interventions. Members are experts on political polarization from diverse backgrounds, including academics from different disciplines as well as practitioners. You can learn more about the members of the advisory board at https://www.strengtheningdemocracychallenge.org/team .

Each intervention will be reviewed by 1-3 experts. The experts will review based on the following criteria:

- What is the expected success of this intervention in reducing a) anti-democratic attitudes, (b) support for partisan violence, and/or (c) partisan animosity among Americans in the general public?

- How novel is this intervention? Academic reviewers will consider novelty relative to the current academic literature, and reviewers from the bridging community will consider novelty in terms of other bridging interventions.

- Reviewers will reveal if they know the identity of the proposers to avoid conflicts of interest.

The Editorial Board

The editorial board will make the final decision about which interventions qualify for the Strengthening Democracy Challenge. The editorial board consists of the three principal investigators of the challenge:

- Robb Willer (Professor of Sociology, Psychology (by courtesy), and Organizational Behavior (by courtesy) at Stanford University)

- James Druckman (Payson S. Wild Professor of Political Science and Faculty Fellow at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University)

- David Rand (Associate Professor of Management Science and Brain and Cognitive Sciences at MIT)

The editorial board will use the reviews from the advisory board to determine the 25 best interventions. The editorial board will find the most promising interventions aiming to maximize the expected probability that the interventions will a) anti-democratic attitudes, (b) support for partisan violence, and/or (c) partisan animosity, and maximizing the diversity of interventions within the pool of submitted interventions. If two or more identical or extremely similar interventions have been submitted, the editorial board will prefer the intervention submitted by authors who have already published on this intervention. Every intervention that was approved by the formal check team will be informed about the decision and given a rationale for the decision.

How Will You Evaluate the Selected Interventions?

The 25 selected interventions will be evaluated in a large-scale online experiment. Study participants will be recruited from a sample provider (see section "Who Are the Participants?"). Consent is required before participation in the study, and those who identify as "True Independents" and those who fail basic attention checks will be excluded from the study. We will collect information about participant demographics, including gender, age, ethnicity, highest level of education, and partisan identity. Then, we will randomize each participant to experience a different intervention or a control group where they are not exposed to any intervention. Because participants are randomly assigned to experience various interventions, any subsequent differences in a) anti-democratic attitudes, (b) support for partisan violence, and/or (c) partisan animosity relative to the control group can be interpreted as causal effects of the intervention (see section "How Will You Determine the Effect of My Intervention?"). Finally, participants complete the measures of anti-democratic attitudes (see section "How Will Anti-Democratic Attitudes Be Measured?"), support for partisan violence (see section "How Will Support for Partisan Violence Be Measured?"), and partisan animosity (see section "How Will Partisan Animosity Be Measured?").

How Will Anti-Democratic Attitudes be Measured?

Anti-democratic attitudes (ADA) will be measured via four items that will be combined into a composite. Square brackets indicate that there are multiple versions of an item. Republican participants will read the first wording and Democratic participants will read the latter version of the wording. The four items are as follows:

- [Republicans/Democrats] should reduce the number of polling stations in areas that support [Democrats/Republicans].

- [Republican/Democratic] governors should ignore unfavorable court rulings by [Democratic/Republican]-appointed judges.

- [Republican/Democratic] governors should prosecute journalists who accuse [Republican/Democratic] politicians of misconduct without revealing sources.

- [Republicans/Democrats] should not accept the results of elections if they lose.

The items are answered on 101-point scales from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree".

Composite

The final score of anti-democratic attitudes is defined as the average of the four items.

$$ADA = (ADA1 + ADA2 + ADA3 + ADA4) / 4.$$

Example: A participant answers the first question with a 20, the second question with a 30, the third question with a 10, and the fourth question with a 20. Then the participants' score is

$ADA = (20 + 30 + 10 + 20) / 4 = 20.$

How Will Support for Partisan Violence be Measured?

Support for partisan violence (SPV) will be measured via four items that will be combined into a composite. Square brackets indicate that there are multiple versions of an item. Republican participants will read the first wording and Democratic participants will read the latter version of the wording. The four items are as follows:

- When, if ever, is it OK for a [Republican/Democrat] to send threatening and intimidating messages to [Democratic/Republican] party leaders?

- When, if ever, is it OK for an ordinary [Republican/Democrat] in the public to harass an ordinary [Democrat/Republican] on the Internet, in a way that makes the target feel frightened?

- How much do you feel it is justified for [Republicans/Democrats] to use violence in advancing their political goals these days?

- How much do you feel it is justified for [Republicans/Democrats] to use violence if the [Democratic/Republican] party wins more races in the next election?

The first two items are answered on 101-point scales from "Never" to "Always" and the latter two items are answered on 101-point scales from "Not justified at all" to "Extremely justified".

Composite

The final score of support for partisan violence is defined as the average of the four items.

$$SPV = (SPV1 + SPV2 + SPV3 + SPV4) / 4.$$

Example: A participant answers the first question with a 20, the second question with a 30, the

third question with a 10, and the fourth question with a 20. Then the participants' score is

$SPV = (20 + 30 + 10 + 20) / 4 = 20$.

How Will Partisan Animosity be Measured?

Partisan animosity will be measured in two ways that will be combined into a composite.

Feeling Thermometer

The first measure of partisan animosity is a so-called "feeling thermometer" rating for opposing partisans. The feeling thermometer question asks participants to rate how they feel toward Democrats and Republicans. on a 101-point scale from 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm). The colder participants rate opposing partisans on the feeling thermometer, the stronger their partisan animosity. This measure is then defined as

$$PA1 = (100 - \text{Feeling Thermometer Score}) / 100.$$

Example: A participant who identifies as a Democrat reports that they feel pretty cold toward Republicans (a score of 28). Then, we will subtract this score from 100 (100 - 28 = 72) so that larger scores indicate stronger partisan animosity. Thus, the result is then a PA1 score of 72.

Dictator Game

The second measure of partisan animosity is giving in a "dictator game". In a dictator game, a participant will be given an endowment of $0.50 that they can distribute among themselves and a real but unknown person from the opposite party. The higher the percentage of money participants keep for themselves, the stronger their partisan animosity. This measure is defined as:

$$PA2 = [(\$0.50 - \text{Amount given to out-partisan}) / \$0.50] * 100$$

Example: A participant who identifies as a Republican shares $0.14 with a Democrat. Then, we will subtract this score from 0.50 (0.50 - 0.14 = 0.36) so that a larger score indicates stronger partisan animosity. Finally, we will divide this difference by the maximum amount (0.36 / 0.50 = 0.72) and multiply the result by 100 to rescale the measure to range from 0 to 100. Thus, the result is then a PA2 score of 72.

Composite

The final score of partisan animosity is defined as the average of the two measures.

$$PA = (PA1 + PA2) / 2.$$

Example: Using the scores from the examples given above, the participant's score is

$$PA = (72 + 72) / 2 = 72.$$

How Will You Determine the Effect of my Intervention?

The effect of your intervention will be estimated by comparing the mean levels of a) anti-democratic attitudes, (b) support for partisan violence, and/or (c) partisan animosity, among those assigned to your intervention to the mean level of these outcomes for participants in the control condition. The control condition is a "passive control", i.e. does not have an intervention. For each of these three variables, we will estimate the difference in the average level of the variable in the intervention condition compared to the control condition by running a linear regression model. To increase the precision of our estimate, we will statistically control for several characteristics of study participants: gender, age, race, education, party identification, and strength of party identification. There are two important criteria for your intervention effect:

1. What is the size of the effect? We will report the coefficient, *b,* as the estimate of your intervention's average effect. This coefficient indicates the adjusted mean difference between participants in your intervention condition and the control condition. A negative intervention effect signals a reduction. The stronger the magnitude of this effect, the more effective the intervention.

2. Is the effect statistically significant? We will report p-values for one-sided tests. If this p-value is below .05, your effect is statistically significantly different from 0. This would suggest that it is very unlikely that the observed effect occurred just due to chance.

How Much Can I Trust Your Results for My Intervention?

There are two common ways that our findings could be wrong, and we are taking measures to minimize the likelihood of both of them. First, your intervention could be effective in reducing a) anti-democratic attitudes, (b) support for partisan violence, and/or (c) partisan animosity, but our test indicates it is not (a "false negative"). Our study has a probability of more than 99% to identify the effect of an intervention as statistically significant if the true effect size of this intervention is at least 0.2 standard deviations (which is considered a small effect size). Thus, if we do not find that your intervention had a statistically significant effect, it may still have an effect, but it is probably very small. Second, your intervention could have no effect but our experiment indicates that it does have an effect (a "false positive"). Our study has a probability of less than 5% to identify an intervention as statistically significant if the true effect size of this intervention is actually 0.

Who Are the Participants?

Participants will be self-identified Republicans or Democrats (including Independents who report leaning towards the Republican or Democratic party). All participants will be over the age of 18. Our sample will be a non-probability online sample of partisans that is representative on several major demographic benchmarks within parties including sex, age, ethnicity, education, and region within parties. These demographic benchmarks are based on the 2020 survey from the American National Election Studies (see the table below). The sample will be provided by Bovitz and two of their partners (Luth Research and Dynata). Further, due to filtering based on attention checks, participants can be expected to be relatively attentive to intervention materials.

	Republicans	Democrats
Sex		
Female	47%	57%
Male	53%	43%
Age		
18-24	7%	13%
25-34	14%	17%
35-44	16%	17%
45-54	17%	15%
55-64	21%	17%
65-75	16%	15%
75+	9%	5%
Ethnicity		
White (non-Hispanic)	82%	54%
Black (non-Hispanic)	3%	20%
Hispanic	8%	16%

Asian / Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	3%	5%
Native American / Alaskan Native	2%	2%
Multiple races (non-Hispanic)	2%	4%
Education		
No high school degree	7%	7%
High school graduate	28%	24%
Some college	32%	26%
Bachelor's degree	23%	26%
Graduate degree	11%	17%

Will the Materials and Data for My Intervention be Published?

The Strengthening Democracy Challenge is committed to open science principles such as openness and transparency. We want to maximize the scientific and public insights from the Strengthening Democracy Challenge, and we want our procedures to be as transparent as possible for submitters and outside observers. We will preregister our analysis plan. Interventions, the anonymized data file, and our analysis scripts will be made public as soon as our first scientific paper on the Strengthening Democracy Challenge is published.

How Can I Learn More about the Science Underlying the Strengthening Democracy Challenge?

If you want to learn more about a) anti-democratic attitudes, (b) support for partisan violence, and/or (c) partisan animosity, you can start by reading the following scientific articles and books.

1. Finkel, E. J., Bail, C. A., Cikara, M., Ditto, P. H., Iyengar, S., Klar, S., Mason, L., McGrath, M. C., Nyhan, B., Rand, D. G., Skitka, L. J., Tucker, J. A., Van Bavel, J. J., Wang, C. S., & Druckman, J. N. (2020). Political sectarianism in America. *Science, 370*(6516), 533-536. doi:10.1126/science.abe1715. [Read here]

2. Graham, M. H., & Svolik, M. W. (2020). Democracy in America? Partisanship, polarization, and the robustness of support for democracy in the United States. *American Political Science Review*, *114*(2), 392-409. doi:10.1017/S0003055420000052 [Read here]

3. Hetherington, M. J., & Rudolph, T. J. (2015). *Why Washington won't work: Polarization, political trust, and the governing crisis*. University of Chicago Press. [Find here]

4. Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *22*, 129-146. doi:10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034 [Read here]

5. Iyengar, S., & Westwood, S. J. (2015). Fear and loathing across party lines: New evidence on group polarization. *American Journal of Political Science*, *59*(3), 690-707. doi:10.1111/ajps.12152 [Read here]

6. Kalmoe, N. P., & Mason, L. (2019). Lethal mass partisanship: Prevalence, correlates, & electoral contingencies. In *National Capital Area Political Science Association American Politics Meeting*. [Read here]

7. Klein, E. (2020). *Why We're Polarized*. Simon and Schuster. [Find here]

8. Lelkes, Y., & Westwood, S. J. (2017). The limits of partisan prejudice. *The Journal of Politics*, *79*(2), 485-501. doi:10.1086/688223 [Read here]

9. Mason, L. (2018). *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. University of Chicago Press. [Find here]

10. Moore-Berg, S. L., Ankori-Karlinsky, L. O., Hameiri, B., & Bruneau, E. (2020). Exaggerated meta-perceptions predict intergroup hostility between American political partisans. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *117*(26), 14864-14872. doi:10.1073/pnas.2001263117 [Read here]