

Electoral Costs of Political Retaliation: Bipartisan Rejection of Attacks on Corporate Speech

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Abstract

Overt political retribution, typically considered outside the bounds of American democracy, has recently risen to the surface of American political discourse. How do voters respond to elected officials wielding their powers of office for retributive purposes? In the current partisan political climate, do voters' views of retribution depend on whether the official is a member of their party? Politicians in both parties have demonstrated willingness to threaten or pursue retaliation against corporations for using their political voice to publicly express opposition. Due to the American public's ambivalence about the role of business in politics and the rights of corporations to political speech, the scenario of corporate political speech provides a useful case in which to test for partisan acceptance of the use of political retaliation. In an original and replication experiment, the researchers find strong bipartisan rebuke of an elected official's employment of "abusive legalism" in response to corporate political criticism. Strikingly, the negative consequences are greatest for an in-party official. The drop in support suffered by the official is equivalent to the effect of partisanship, such that an in-party official using their powers of office to "keep business out of politics" is viewed as unfavorably as a non-responsive out-party official.

1. INTRODUCTION

In early 2022, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed into law the Florida Parental Rights in Education Act (HB 1557), restricting instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in Florida public schools. The same day, The Walt Disney Company released a public statement, stating in part:

Florida’s HB 1557, also known as the ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill, should never have passed and should never have been signed into law. Our goal as a company is for this law to be repealed by the legislature or struck down in the courts...¹

In response to Disney’s criticism, Governor DeSantis threatened to seize the special jurisdiction surrounding the Walt Disney World Resort land, which had been established five decades earlier to provide the company with governance and tax benefits, and shortly thereafter signed a bill dissolving the district. The Walt Disney Company filed suit, claiming that the governor and his administration had violated the company’s First Amendment rights, using government power to exact political retaliation (*Walt Disney Parks and Resorts v. DeSantis et al.*, 2023).

The protracted political and legal battle that unfolded between Disney and Gov. DeSantis received considerable attention, but it is not the only recent example of elected officials threatening or insinuating use of their powers of office against companies voicing a political position. In response to companies including Coca-Cola, Delta Airlines, and Major League Baseball publicly denouncing a Georgia voting law, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said in a 2021 press conference:

My advice to the corporate CEOs of America is to stay out of politics. Don’t pick sides in these big fights.²

In a concurrent press release, Senator McConnell castigated businesses for weighing in, warning that “Corporations will invite serious consequences” for taking sides.³ From the other end of the ideological spectrum, Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts engaged in a public spat with Amazon over

¹ <https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/statement-from-the-walt-disney-company-on-signing-of-florida-legislation/>

² <https://www.reuters.com/article/business/stay-out-of-politics-republican-leader-mcconnell-tells-us-ceos-warns-of-c-idUSKBN2BS1R7/>

³ <https://www.mcconnell.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/pressreleases?ID=54AB06DF-4E02-4991-BC94-6D980FE85925>

tax loopholes, writing that in addition to fighting to make sure the company paid its fair share, she would also “fight to break up Big Tech so you’re not powerful enough to heckle senators with snotty tweets.”⁴

Political retribution has typically been considered beyond the pale in American politics. Carey et al. (2019) report that 80% of the public and 97% of political experts say that it is “important” or “essential” that government agencies not be used to attack political opponents. And Lawson (2024) finds that career bureaucrats and subordinate political officials report considerable (though variable) resistance to orders that could appear to involve the use of government apparatuses against political opponents. Nevertheless, evidence of U.S. officials wielding the powers of their office against political adversaries has been found both by scholars (e.g., Gordon 2009) and courts of law (see Horz and Simpson 2023)—with the executive office appearing especially prone to abusing power (Gordon 2009; Howell and Moe 2023).

In recent years, this concept ostensibly repugnant to American democratic values has bubbled to the surface of political discourse. Both Democratic⁵ and Republican⁶ campaign rallies have erupted into chants of “lock [him/her] up” aimed at the candidate’s political rival, and both parties accuse their opponents of using impeachment proceedings^{7,8} and prosecutions^{9,10} as political weapons. In a decision that reflects heightened watchfulness against the specter of political retribution, while simultaneously expanding the potential for presidential abuse of power, the Supreme Court’s finding of broad presidential immunity in *Trump v. United States* (2024) turns largely on the argument that presidents should be protected from fear that political enemies will use the president’s official decisions to charge them with crimes.

In the study presented here, we are interested in the *electoral* effects of an elected official’s use of political retribution. Taking the particular case of companies using political voice to express opposition, we ask: is political retribution an electorally strategic response? If politicians are increasingly overt

⁴ <https://x.com/SenWarren/status/1375283617341968385>

⁵ <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/lock-hillary-clinton-smiles-nods-chants-echoing-trump-supporters-rcna167299>

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/22/a-brief-history-of-the-lock-her-up-chant-as-it-looks-like-trump-might-not-even-try/>

⁷ <https://cole.house.gov/media-center/weekly-columns/impeachment-not-political-weapon>

⁸ <https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/facts-on-republicans-sham-impeachment>

⁹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/republican-lawmakers-rally-to-trumps-defense-after-guilty-verdict>

¹⁰ <https://www.vox.com/politics/354091/hunter-biden-trial-political-guns-prosecutors>

in issuing intimations or outright threats of political retaliation, it suggests they do not expect such statements to cause them electoral harm.

When elected officials do use the powers of their office to threaten or punish companies for exercising political speech, how do voters respond? Are such actions seen as an appropriate show of strength that keeps business from meddling in politics, providing politicians with a general boost in voter support? Are they seen as unacceptable abuse of governmental power, and met with broad voter disapproval? Or, as might be expected to occur within the current political landscape—characterized by partisan rancor and a seemingly invulnerable link between partisanship and vote choice—do voter responses depend entirely on whether the elected official is a member of their own or the opposing party?

When considering how voters respond to instances of political retribution, the case of corporate political speech is useful to examine in several respects. The American public exhibits “a profound ambivalence” about the role of business in politics (Hersh 2023, p. 98). Because voters are concerned about corporate influence in politics and exhibit relatively weak support for corporate freedom of speech (see, e.g., Jago and Laurin 2017; Mentovich, Huq, and Cerf 2015), the wielding of political power to “keep business in its place” is an opportune setting in which to observe voter openness to political retribution; a context in which we might expect voters to feel more accepting of the use of political power to suppress political voice.

While former President Trump stands out for his public threats of political retaliation against individual political adversaries,¹¹ public threats of political retaliation by U.S. officials against individuals are uncommon. More common, as with the examples of Gov. DeSantis and Sens. McConnell and Warren above, is for such public threats to be directed at corporations. Perhaps attuned to the public’s ambivalence about business in politics and about corporate political speech in particular,^{12,13} elected officials may presume that a strong reaction warning business to stay out of politics will be acceptable to voters, or potentially provide strategic electoral advantage.

The case of political retaliation against corporate political speech also provides an interesting vantage point into the changing nature of relations

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/21/us/politics/trump-investigations-enemies.html>

¹² <https://news.gallup.com/poll/648269/americans-business-stay-quiet-public-policy.aspx>

¹³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/01/09/70-of-americans-say-u-s-economic-system-unfairly-favors-the-powerful>

between the business community and the two major political parties in the United States. The Republican Party has shifted balance from its historical prioritization of business interests (see, e.g., Schattschneider 1960) toward populism (Miller and Schofield 2008), with elements leaning toward authoritarianism (Galvin 2020; Jacobson 2020; Luttig 2021)—a hallmark of which is the wielding of governmental power against political opponents. This shifting orientation within the GOP coincides with changing trends in corporations’ use of political voice, as companies have become more likely to make explicitly political public statements (T. J. Weber et al. 2023).

These various and potentially countervailing forces—the changing nature of business-party relations; bipartisan ambivalence about corporate political voice; increasingly commonplace public references to political retribution; and the contentious and influential nature of partisanship in shaping voter evaluations—mean there are no obvious answers to questions about how voters will respond to an executive using the powers of their office to retaliate against a corporation’s use of political voice.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. *Ambivalence about corporate political speech in the United States*

The Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010) established that a corporation’s political speech, by way of messaging or spending, is constitutionally protected (see Padfield 2013 for a discussion of the case in the context of corporate theory). This decision represented a reversal in the previously dominant ideological alignment on freedom of speech. The *Citizens United* decision espoused the libertarian perspective on freedom of speech, championed by the ideological right, rather than the egalitarian perspective on speech that had been championed by the ideological left (Sullivan 2010).

The decision in *Citizens United* raised concern that corporations’ financial resources would allow them to exert outside, undemocratic influence on the political process (Hasen 2011; Néron 2016; Werner 2011). However, evidence is mixed on the impact of corporate speech via spending on political outcomes. Klumpp, Mialon, and Williams (2016) find striking evidence of an increase in Republican electoral probabilities after *Citizens United*, but other scholars have noted there was little indication of an increase in corporate political spending *per se* in the wake of the decision (Bonica 2016; see Hansen and Rocca 2019 on the increased role of wealthy individuals). Some theorists (e.g.,

Nyberg 2021; Stoll 2015) argue that any involvement of corporations in the democratic process is a form of political corruption.

Among the public, majorities in both parties agree that business should be less involved in political advocacy—though a majority of Democrats simultaneously state that business should be *more* involved on certain issues (Hersh 2023). Overall, the public expresses ambivalence on corporate political speech, recognizing corporations’ rights to freedom of speech to some degree and under some conditions, but not equivalent to those rights afforded to individuals (Jago and Laurin 2017; Mentovich, Huq, and Cerf 2015).

The bulk of scholarship on corporate political speech has focused on monetary contributions or lobbying, as these have long represented the predominant forms of corporate political activity (Gur and Tomashevskiy 2024; Stoll 2015). However, in recent years, companies have increasingly engaged in political speech by way of public messaging on political topics (Gur and Tomashevskiy 2024; Hydock, Paharia, and T. Weber 2019; Jung and Mittal 2020; T. J. Weber et al. 2023).

We focus on this public messaging form of corporate political speech: direct political statements by corporations. The public’s ambivalence about corporate political speech is magnified when it comes to direct political statements: predictably, consumer responses are strongly divergent dependent upon alignment with the expressed statement (Hydock, Paharia, and Blair 2020)—but overall, negative responses to these statements appear to outweigh the positive (Hydock, Paharia, and Blair 2020; T. J. Weber et al. 2023). As direct political statements by corporations have increased, public support for such position-taking has declined, such that just over one-third of Americans agree that businesses should take a public stance on current events.¹⁴

2.2. *Changing dynamics of partisan and corporate ideology*

The Republican party has long been considered the party of business. Schattschneider (1960) remarked on the business community’s dependence on the GOP in representing their interests, noting that “...Republican members of Congress are committed in advance to a general pro-business attitude” and that the means through which the business community “has retained great

¹⁴ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/648269/americans-business-stay-quiet-public-policy.aspx>

influence in American politics has been due chiefly to the overall-mediating role played by the Republican party” (1960, p. 42).

Miller and Schofield (2008) write that although the Republican Party’s identity had consolidated around a pro-business position as early as 1896, a populist element has also been present within the party’s coalition for decades. Beginning in the 1960s and increasing with the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, “the Republican Party has managed to maintain a coalition that includes both Populists and pro-business interests...by simultaneously serving the economic interests of business while advancing the agenda of the social conservative wing of the party” (p. 439).

As social conservatives gained power within the Republican party from the 1980s onward, the strategic accommodation of each group’s individual, non-conflicting interests increasingly gave way to “conflict between moderate pro-business Republicans and hardcore social conservative activists.” (p. 444). Miller and Schofield (2008) predicted that the result of this intra-party shifting balance of power between pro-business economic conservatism to social conservatism was “likely to be as significant a transformation in the Republican Party as the one that occurred in the Democratic Party” during the 1960s, when the Democratic Party definitively emerged as the party of social liberalism.

As the balance of power in the Republican party has shifted from business interests toward social conservatism and right-wing populism, the business community has faced contemporaneously increasing pressures toward social liberalism via corporate social responsibility (CSR). Although the concepts of corporate social responsibility, rooted in classical liberalism, are essentially conservative in nature (Mäkinen and Kourula 2012; Steensen and Villadsen 2020), in practice, CSR tends toward social liberalism in the American political context (Chin, Hambrick, and Treviño 2013; Gupta, Briscoe, and Hambrick 2017; Liston-Heyes and Ceton 2007; Xu et al. 2022). Pressures to engage in CSR arise both externally—from activists (King 2008), shareholders (Lee, Gupta, and Hambrick 2022), and consumer behavior (Flammer 2015)—and from within, through the personal political ideology of employees and corporate leadership (Chin, Hambrick, and Treviño 2013; Gupta, Briscoe, and Hambrick 2017; Gur and Tomashevskiy 2024; Jiao and Ren 2024; Liston-Heyes and Ceton 2007). The rise in visibility of CSR and the concomitant growth of corporate political position-taking exacerbates the internal tensions

between the pro-business and social-conservative/right-wing populist elements of the Republican party.

Populism is described as a “thin-centered” ideology, meaning that it can attach to a range of ideological forms and characteristics, left and right (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Gagnon et al. (2016) write that, “if populism has a single defining characteristic, it may be the invocation of ‘the people’ who are betrayed, wronged, or otherwise left vulnerable to forces outside their control.” This is consistent with the rise of “grievance” politics—the use of anger, resentment, and provocation as a political tool—embodied on the political right in politicians like Donald Trump and Boris Johnson (Flinders and Hinterleitner 2022).

Populism and grievance politics point a natural trajectory toward retaliation against political opponents. Urbinati (2019) characterizes populism in power as “an authoritarian rendering of how democracy should be implemented... [with] an elected leader who rules as a leader of his majority in disdain of... the principle of a legitimate opposition.” Abts and Rummens (2007) further articulate how populism’s claim of representing the unified will of the people ultimately implies suppressing political opposition:

Populist leaders who advocate the rule of the people and claim to embody the will of the people in their own person have to consider their political opponents... as obstacles to be ignored or even removed. ...the survival of such a regime depends on the successful preservation of the fictitious image of the people-as-one that brought them to power. This requires a continuous effort to delegitimize all possible opponents and to suppress all possible political divergence.

All of this can occur within the confines of the legal structure of government, in the form of “abusive legalism”. Abusive legalism consists of “legitimately elected governments using procedures provided by the democratic framework itself and consistent with a nominal respect for the rule of law to undermine the integrity of democratic institutions.” (Herman and Muirhead 2021).

2.3. *Voter response to political retribution*

Research on voter response to politicians’ antidemocratic behaviors provides mixed evidence regarding electoral constraints on such behavior. A num-

ber of studies suggest that partisan alignment plays a deciding role in whether voters care about immoral behavior by politicians or the erosion of democratic norms. Partisans of both parties express significantly greater negativity when a politician of the other party violates a moral foundation (Walter and Redlawsk 2019). And Albertus and Grossman (2021) have shown that voters are receptive to anti-democratic practices if certain conditions are met: Anywhere from 10%-35% of voters will support anti-democratic practices if they are targeted towards the opposite party. Albertus & Grossman’s findings are not unique; Bloeser et al. (2024) conducted similar studies on how voters’ opinions on authoritarianism would fluctuate depending on whether that voter received benefits from authoritarian practices. The authors found that while both Democrats and Republicans are willing to support leaders who would violate basic principles of Democracy, Republicans, in aggregate, showed greater support for anti-democratic leaders and policies.

Over the past several decades, Republican party identification and presidential vote choice has become increasingly associated with measures of authoritarian worldview (Cizmar et al. 2014). Luttig (2021) presents over-time survey evidence suggesting this has occurred not as a result of authoritarians sorting into the Republican party, but rather that “the rhetoric of Republican opinion leaders increasingly leads strong Republicans to become more authoritarian over time” (p. 786). The shift towards populism and authoritarianism in the Republican party in particular could render Republican leaders especially inclined toward—and Republican voters especially amenable to—the use of retaliation against political opponents.

3. HYPOTHESES

A variety of factors are likely to influence how voters respond to an elected official’s political retaliation against a corporation voicing public criticism. In this study, we are primarily interested in how the partisan alignment (or mismatch) between the voter and the elected official affects voter response to the official’s use of political retribution. In other words, how does partisan identification shape how the voter evaluates the elected official’s behavior?

Our baseline hypothesis is that partisan alignment with the elected official—i.e., whether the official shares the same political party affiliation as the voter or is from an outparty—will be the predominant factor influencing support for the official’s actions. In the United States, partisanship remains

the strongest predictor of support for a candidate or politician (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018). As such, we expect that partisanship and party affiliation will supersede all other factors when it comes to how political retribution by an elected official against a businesses affects voter support for the official.

H1: Party alignment will be the primary determinant of willingness to vote and support of the elected official's actions.

Moreover, we anticipate that party alignment will interact with the effect of the politician's actions: we expect that how a voter reacts to the politician's response will depend on whether that official shares the voter's party affiliation or is an out-partisan. In particular, we expect that voters will be more accepting of political retribution by an in-party official than the same action by an out-party official. Our reasoning is that if respondents already disapprove of the opposite party's politicians, then the out-party official's "weaponization" of their political power will seem even more damaging. An elected official's resort to retribution against a business voicing political opposition will be viewed more critically by voters when that elected official is a member of the opposing political party than when the official shares the voter's party affiliation.

H2: The effect of political retaliation on voter support will be more negative for an out-party official than for an in-party official.

Finally, we expect Democratic voters to respond differently from Republican voters to the use of political retribution by an in-party elected official. The shift towards populism and authoritarianism in the Republican party in particular may render Republican leaders especially inclined toward—and Republican voters especially amenable to—the use of retaliation against political opponents. In conjunction with the socially liberal tilt of CSR and the increase in direct political messaging from corporations, these contextual dynamics may predispose Republican respondents toward greater acceptance of an in-party politician's use of retaliatory actions to keep business out of politics.

H3: The effects of political retaliation by an in-party elected official will be heterogeneous by party: Republican voters will be more accepting of political retaliation against a business voicing political opposition than will Democratic voters.

4. EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN & PROCEDURE

To test these hypotheses, we designed a 2 (in-party/out-party) x 3 (response severity) factorial survey experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to a condition featuring either an in-party or out-party governor, and were independently randomized to one of three response-severity conditions, representing the governor's actions in response to public criticism from an in-state business. All participants were assigned to only one condition and were presented with a single scenario (i.e., completed only one set of responses).

We chose to represent the elected official as a governor because the executive office holds the requisite power to exact overt political retribution against an in-state business; because situating the scenario at the state level allows reference to the executive while maintaining the abstraction of an unnamed state and unnamed official (in contrast to the federal level); and because the office of governor is familiar to participants.

All conditions present participants with a brief mock newspaper report about the governor of a state encountering public criticism from the largest business in the state regarding a recently-passed bill, which the governor intends to sign into law. All conditions state the party affiliation of the governor as either Democratic or Republican, with party affiliation randomly assigned to reflect either the same party identification as the participant or the opposing party identification.

The governor's response to criticism from the in-state business was independently randomly assigned. Participants assigned to the control condition do not learn about any actions taken by the governor in response to criticism by the business, and the mock newspaper report ends by stating, "The Governor remains unwavering in his support of the bill and is expected to sign it into law as early as next week." Participants assigned to the tempered-response condition received the same mock newspaper text with the insertion of the following sentence into the control text, immediately preceding the final sentence (quoted above): "The Governor is not taking these criticisms lightly and has publicly spoken out against the business and decried their interference." For participants assigned to the retributive-response condition, the following penultimate sentence was instead inserted into the control text: "The Governor is not taking these criticisms lightly and has removed tax benefits in order to hurt the business' profits, publicly spoken out against the business,

and urged a state-wide boycott. Finally, just yesterday the Governor introduced new legislation intended to block emerging business opportunities for the company, significantly hurting their future prospects.”

We collected two primary outcome variables after presenting the mock newspaper article. First, we asked respondents about their willingness to vote for the governor’s re-election, as measured on a 20-point scale (–10 indicating “Extremely unlikely” and +10 indicating “Extremely likely”).

Because vote choice is a voter’s primary means of expression in a democratic system, willingness to vote is an important outcome to measure. However, given the strength of party identification in determining vote choice, we anticipated that respondents might indicate that they would vote for an in-party politician even if they did not truly support the governor’s actions towards the business (i.e. be unsupportive of political attacks on business as a principle).

To better assess whether there was genuine support for the governor’s tactics or whether a respondent was begrudgingly indicating a vote for the governor based on partisanship, we included a second outcome measure intended to obtain a more sensitive gauge of attitude towards the governor’s behavior. Partisans may be more willing to express dissatisfaction with a specific action from an in-party official than to shift their willingness to vote for the official. As a more sensitive measure, we asked participants to rate their *support* for the governor’s response to the business’s vocal opposition of the bill. Support for the governor’s response was also measured on a 20-point scale (–10 indicating “Strongly oppose”, +10 indicating “Strongly support”).

After these two main outcome measures, we included a multiple choice question presenting six options describing reasons for supporting or opposing the governor’s actions. Participants were asked to select the one option that most closely reflected their reasoning. Finally, participants were given the option to provide further explanation of the reasoning behind their choices in an open-ended response question.

Participants were recruited through the Prolific survey platform, filtered for voting eligible U.S. citizens, with quotas set to provide an even distribution on gender and a sample primarily composed of respondents who self-identified with the Democratic or Republican party. The first round of data was collected in February 2024, with N=528 participants. The sample was 47% women, with 29% between the ages of 18-29, 49% between 30-49, and 21% between 50-69.

49% of this sample reported identifying with the Democratic party, 40% with the Republican party, 11% as not leaning towards one party or the other. Participants were paid \$1.00 via Prolific for completing the experiment. The median time for completion was roughly four and a half minutes.

A replication was conducted in April 2024 using the same methods, survey, and tools described above. We collected a sample of 490 participants in the replication round. The sample was 48% women, 25% aged 18-29, 52% aged 30-49, 20% 50-69. 50% of these respondents identified as Democrats, 41% as Republicans, and 10% as Independents.

5. RESULTS

Results from both the original and replication experiments showed consistent, bipartisan aversion to an elected official using their political power, within the bounds of a legal framework, to punish a corporation’s use of political speech. This appeared across all of the outcome variables we examined: in reduced willingness to vote for the governor’s re-election, in expressed opposition to the governor’s action, and in the reasoning indicated for feelings about the governor’s actions.

Table 1 shows the average direct effect of the governor’s response to the business’s criticism, and the average direct effect of in-party alignment with the governor (both of which were randomly assigned). The first column shows estimated effects on willingness to vote for the governor’s re-election, the second column shows estimated effects on expressed support for the governor’s actions. Results are estimated using ordinary least-squares regression, pooled across the original and replication rounds, with fixed effects for round of data collection and robust standard errors.

Both the political retribution response (Retributive) and shared party identification with the governor (In-party Gov.) exert strong, significant effects on willingness to vote and on expressed support for the governor’s response. In partial support of our baseline hypothesis (H1), column 1 shows that the largest-magnitude effect on willingness to vote for the governor’s re-election comes from party alignment with the governor: random assignment to a scenario featuring an in-party governor increased willingness to vote by nearly 7 scale points.

Strikingly, H1 was *not* supported with respect to support for the governor’s actions: the negative effect of political retribution (−4.97 scale points)

	Vote	Support
Tempered	-.00 [0.38]	-0.10 [0.40]
Retributive	-3.14*** [0.38]	-4.97*** [0.40]
In-party Gov.	6.80*** [.31]	5.01*** [0.32]
Rep. resp.	-0.07 [0.31]	0.19 [0.32]
Intercept	-4.38 [0.39]	-2.06 [0.39]
N	454	459

Pooled OLS regression with fixed effects for wave.
Robust standard errors in brackets. *** $p < .000$

Table 1. Effect of Governor Response on Willingness to Vote and on Support for Governor’s Actions. Results are pooled across the original and replication, with fixed effects for data collection round. (Appendix ?? shows these results separately for each wave.)

was equal in magnitude to the positive effect of partisan alignment with the governor (+5.01 scale points; F-test for equality of coefficients: $F(1,907)=0.01$, $p=0.935$)).

This finding is notable for two reasons: (1) it indicates that our support measure effectively captures a more nuanced reaction to the governor’s actions that is not picked up through willingness to vote; and (2) using this more sensitive measure reveals the negative effect of an elected official’s use of political retribution to be *on par with* the effect of party identification, a variable that commonly exerts an overpowering influence on measures of political attitudes and behavior.

Examining the treatment effects separately across the conditions shows considerable consistency of response among Democratic and Republican respondents and across in-party/out-party governor. Table 2 shows these estimates for the willingness to vote variable. The first two columns present estimates in response to an in-party governor and the last two columns present estimates in response to an out-party governor (among Democrats and Republicans, respectively).

In all cases, regardless of respondent partisanship or party alignment with the governor, respondents treat a tempered response from the governor as

indistinguishable from the control response of no action taken by the governor. In contrast, the political retaliation represented in the retributive condition significantly decreases willingness to vote for the governor among all four groups. Democrats' willingness to vote for an in-party governor drops nearly 5 scale-points ($\beta = -4.84$, 95% CI(-6.27, -3.42)), and Republicans show a decrease of more than 3 scale points ($\beta = -3.14$, 95% CI(-4.82, -1.46)). Both Democrats and Republicans move from indicating a positive vote intention on average for the in-party governor's re-election within the control and tempered response conditions, to a negative response on average in the retributive condition (Dem: -1.57 , 95% CI(-2.67, -0.47); Rep: -1.06 , 95% CI(-2.34, 0.21)), indicating being "unlikely" to vote for the governor's re-election.

Columns 3 and 4 show that, while baseline willingness to vote for an out-party governor is much lower, the same pattern of voter response is apparent. For both Democrats and Republicans, the tempered action has no effect on willingness to vote for the out-party governor, while the retributive response significantly decreases willingness to vote (Dem. out-party $\beta = -2.03$, 95% CI (-3.41, -0.67); Rep. out-party $\beta = -2.44$, 95% CI (-3.87, -1.01)). Taking Democratic and Republican respondents together, the effect size with respect to willingness to vote is considerable for an out-party governor (-2.22 scale points; Hedge's $g = 0.51$) and even larger in response to an in-party governor (-4.07 scale points, Hedge's $g = 0.84$).

The retributive action elicited a strong negative reaction from voters of both parties, whether the governor was from their own party or the opposing party. This runs counter to our hypothesis (H2) that respondents would be more critical of political retribution by an out-party official than they would be of the same actions by an in-party official. Contrary to our expectations, the negative reaction to an in-party governor's use of political retribution is *not* muted by shared partisanship or magnified by partisan antipathy. Indeed on average, the penalty is slightly *larger* for a governor from one's own party, though this pattern is only suggestive (in the initial round, the in-party/out-party difference is in the correct direction but not significant; Appendix Tables A3-A5 show interaction estimates together and for each round separately.)

Figure 1 provides a picture of the responses with regard to partisans' expressed support for the governor's actions. The left panel shows mean responses among experimental conditions in the original experiment, and the right panel shows means from the replication round. Estimates are shown

	Dem. voter, Dem. Gov	Rep. voter, Rep. Gov	Dem. voter, Rep. Gov.	Rep. voter, Dem. Gov
Tempered	0.14 [0.66]	0.54 [0.84]	-0.89 [0.69]	0.36 [0.82]
Retributive	-4.84*** [0.72]	-3.14*** [0.85]	-2.03** [0.69]	-2.44** [0.72]
Intercept	3.43 [0.52]	1.86 [0.66]	-4.46 [0.56]	-5.07 [0.66]
N	250	204	254	205

Pooled OLS regression with fixed effects for round of data collection.

Robust standard errors in brackets. *** $p < .000$; ** $p < .01$

Table 2. Effect of Governor Response on Willingness to Vote by Partisanship & Alignment. In-party responses are shown in the first two columns; out-party responses in the last two columns. Results are pooled across the original and replication, with fixed effects for data collection round. (Appendix refapdx:tA1 shows these results separately for the original and replication experiment.) The same pattern of results appears for both Democratic and Republican voters and for in-party and out-party governors, with the tempered response appearing indistinguishable from taking no action, and the retributive response significantly decreasing willingness to vote for the governor’s re-election.

separately for Republican and Democratic respondents: within both partisan groups, mean responses to an in-party governor are shown in the left-hand column and mean responses to an out-party governor in the right-hand column. Points plot mean support for the governor’s actions within each experimental condition, with the retributive response conditions denoted with an X. Lines plot 95% confidence intervals estimated using robust standard errors.

As with willingness to vote, within each partisan group, the retributive-response condition significantly decreases expressed support for the governor’s actions, while support for the tempered response remains indistinguishable from support in the control group.

For both Republican and Democratic voters, the effect of a retaliatory response from an in-party governor drops support for that in-party governor to the same level as partisans’ support for an *out-party* governor in the control group. This is apparent in both the original and replication rounds. This shows that, for both Democratic and Republican voters, a Democratic (Republican) governor’s use of political retribution against a vocally critical business renders him as objectionable as an official from the opposing party who exhibits a more tempered response to the criticism.

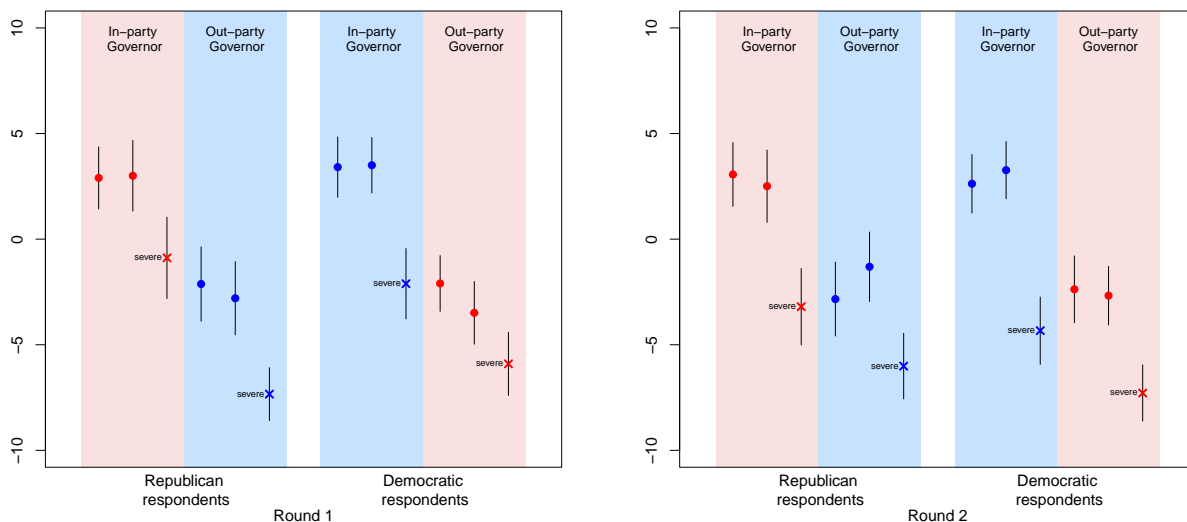


Figure 1. Mean support for governor response within experimental condition, Original and Replication Rounds. Points plot mean support for the governor’s actions within control, tempered-response, and retributive-response experimental conditions. Means are plotted separately for Republican and Democratic respondents, with in-party governor conditions shown in the lefthand column and out-party governor conditions shown in the righthand column for each partisan group. The first point in each column shows the control group mean, the middle point shows the tempered-response mean, and the third point, marked with an X, plots the mean in the retributive-response condition. 95% confidence intervals are plotted using robust standard errors. The first panel shows data from the original experiment (Round 1), and the second panel shows data from the replication (Round 2).

Comparing the “In-party” columns for Republican and Democratic respondents in both panels of Figure 1 also shows that, contrary to our expectation in H3, Republican respondents are no more accepting of retribution by an in-party governor than are Democratic respondents. There is no indication of an interaction for vote or support in either the original or replication (see Appendix Tables A10-A12).

We also find a great deal of consonance in how partisans respond in terms of the explanations they give for their indicated level of support for the governor’s action. After indicating their degree of support for the governor’s actions, all respondents were asked to select which one option from a list best reflected the reason for their response. The list included reasons for supporting and

reasons for opposing the governor's action. Figure 2 plots the proportion of partisans choosing a given reason for their response.

In Figure 2, the top three panels show the reasoning indicated within each condition presented with a Republican governor; the bottom panels show the conditions that were presented with a Democratic governor. Proportions are shown separately for each party: red bars represent the proportion of Republicans in that condition reporting that the indicated explanation best reflects their reasoning; blue bars show the analogous proportion for Democratic respondents assigned to that condition.

Within each condition, reasons for support of the governor's actions are shown in the left-side (lighter) panel, reasons for opposition shown in the right-side (darker) panel. Across the panel from left to right, the explanations are ordered from most active support to most active opposition, with more passive support/opposition closest to the dividing line at the center of each panel. This forms the following ordering of explanations in each panel:

- “The Governor has the right to defend themselves against criticism.”
- “Businesses should not interfere with politics and deserve to be put in their place.”
- “Democratic [Republican] politicians are often too weak against their opponents and should use their political power to respond.”
- “Democratic [Republican] politicians too often abuse the powers and authority of their office.”
- “A Governor should take seriously and listen to the concerns and complaints of businesses in their state.”
- “A Governor should not use their political power and authority to hurt businesses in their state.”

Examination of the reasons given show a dichotomy between the first two panels in each row (Control and Tempered conditions) and the last panel in each row (Retributive conditions). Comparing control and tempered conditions side-to-side, both panels show largely the same pattern of response, highly reflective of partisan alignment. In both rows, the first two panels depict in-party partisans providing active support of the governor's actions,

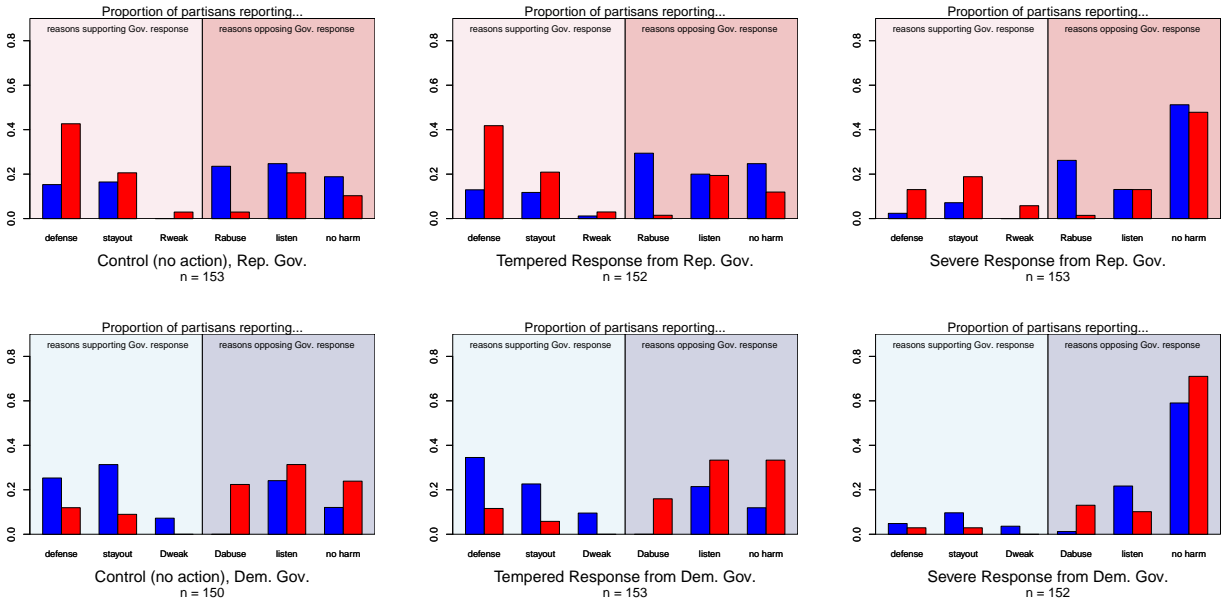


Figure 2. Reported reasoning behind support for/opposition to governor’s actions. Bars show proportion of partisanship selecting the indicated explanation for their support/opposition within each experimental condition. The top row shows conditions presented with a Democratic governor and the bottom row shows conditions presented with a Republican governor. Within each panel, bars on the left side of each pair (blue bars) show proportion of Democratic respondents selecting that explanation, and bars on the right side of each pair (red bars) show proportion of Republican respondents selecting that explanation. Proportions are calculated within party, within experimental condition, so that in each panel blue bars sum to 1 and red bars sum to 1. Original and replication rounds are pooled.

declining toward the middle, with out-party partisanship indicating a relatively uniform distribution of reasons opposing the governor’s actions.

When comparing those panels top to bottom (Republican governor vs. Democratic governor within condition) we see very similar patterns with an inversion of the colors. This indicates that Democrats and Republicans report very similar in-party/out-party reasoning; in other words, reasons given in the control and tempered-response conditions are driven primarily by partisanship.

The third panel, in contrast, shows a strikingly bipartisan plurality of respondents indicating active opposition to an elected official using their political power for retaliatory purposes.

Overall, these patterns of reported reasoning appear to reflect partisanship as the predominant influence in shaping evaluations at a baseline, business-

as-usual level — but that partisans show a strong bipartisan consensus when it comes to an elected official of either party wielding the power of their office against a business in retaliation for voicing political criticism.

6. DISCUSSION

Among both Democratic and Republican voters, a governor’s political retaliation against a business voicing political criticism drastically decreases willingness to vote for the governor’s re-election, exerting a sizable negative effect regardless of whether the governor is from the respondent’s own party or the opposing party, and pushing in-party voters to switch from a positive to a negative vote intention. This negative effect of political retribution on support for the governor is of the same magnitude as the effect of partisanship, the single-most potent political variable across a variety of contexts in the current political landscape.

The finding that the negative effects of political retribution are on par with the effects of partisanship is especially striking due to party-cue based inferences that respondents could make about the nature of the firm’s criticism. Although our design intentionally left the content of the issue and criticism abstract, a partisan respondent assigned to an in-party condition might reasonably presume that their personal opinion would go against the company’s stance on the issue—that is, respondents might infer that if a company is criticizing a policy strongly supported by a governor from the respondent’s own party, the company is likely taking a position on the issue that the respondent would disagree with. Open-ended responses indicate that these cue-based inferences do occur. For example, one Democratic respondent wrote, “historically, democratic policies typically support worker protections, so I would assume I agree with the governor over the business”; a Republican respondent commented, “In recent times, the most likely reasons for Republicans being in conflict with large businesses are good ones.” To the extent that participants make this cue-based inference of non-alignment with the company’s issue position when assigned to an in-party condition, this makes the strong voter rebuke of an in-party governor’s use of political retribution all the more notable. Voters appear willing to defend corporate political speech even under some presumption of disagreement with the company’s position on the issue.

The distribution of reasons given for support/opposition shows the same trends observed in willingness to vote and in support for the official: While

partisanship determines *levels* of response (e.g., Democratic respondents indicate greater willingness to vote for a Democratic governor than for a Republican governor at baseline), partisans' reactions to retributive behavior is largely the same for Democrats and Republicans, in-party and out-party. In the "business-as-usual" scenario of the control conditions, which depict corporate criticism of the policy and non-response from the governor, explanations for support/opposition of the governor reflect partisanship; but partisans appear to largely overcome the influence of partisanship when confronted by an elected official of either party engaging in political retribution. Even though opinion polling indicates a general distaste for corporations engaging in public position-taking on political issues,¹⁵ partisans do not justify an in-party governor's retributive actions by reasoning that "Businesses should not interfere with politics and deserve to be put in their place." Instead, voters exhibit bipartisan consensus in opposing the use of political power to retaliate against a business voicing political criticism.

Respondents in the retributive condition frequently referred to democratic principles when providing their reasoning for rejecting the governor's attack in the open-ended questions. Respondents stated that "The governor should not be acting like a dictator. Businesses have rights too..." and "Simply criticizing a politician shouldn't be enough for them to go after your business. It's unamerican", and simply, "It seems more like what [a] tyrant would do."

The findings from these experiments defied our expectations in interesting and important ways, presenting a picture of partisan voters that is more heartening than some recent literature on voter responses to antidemocratic behavior by elected officials. The bipartisan opprobrium apparent in the results presented here contrasts with many findings showing partisanship to trump democratic norms. Moreover, despite the presence of authoritarian and right-wing populist elements within the current Republican party, Republican voters appear no more accommodating of political retribution than Democratic voters.

The abstract nature of this experimental investigation is important to identifying the causal effects of retribution and partisanship—but contextual factors inevitably shape how voters behave in the real political world, and so these findings do not necessarily reflect how willingness to vote would play out

¹⁵ e.g. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/648269/americans-business-stay-quiet-public-policy.aspx>

in a true electoral context, or tell us what the steep drop in in-party support would mean in practical terms for an incumbent elected official. Future work could look into how factors like the specific issue in question or the surrounding electoral context affect how voters weigh the elected official's actions. However, the results reported here provide insight into partisan response to such behavior from an elected official at a fundamental level. These findings suggest that, even with regard to a right that Americans feel as ambivalent about as corporate freedom of speech, partisans hold a shared belief that political retribution remains outside the bounds of acceptability, regardless of party.

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