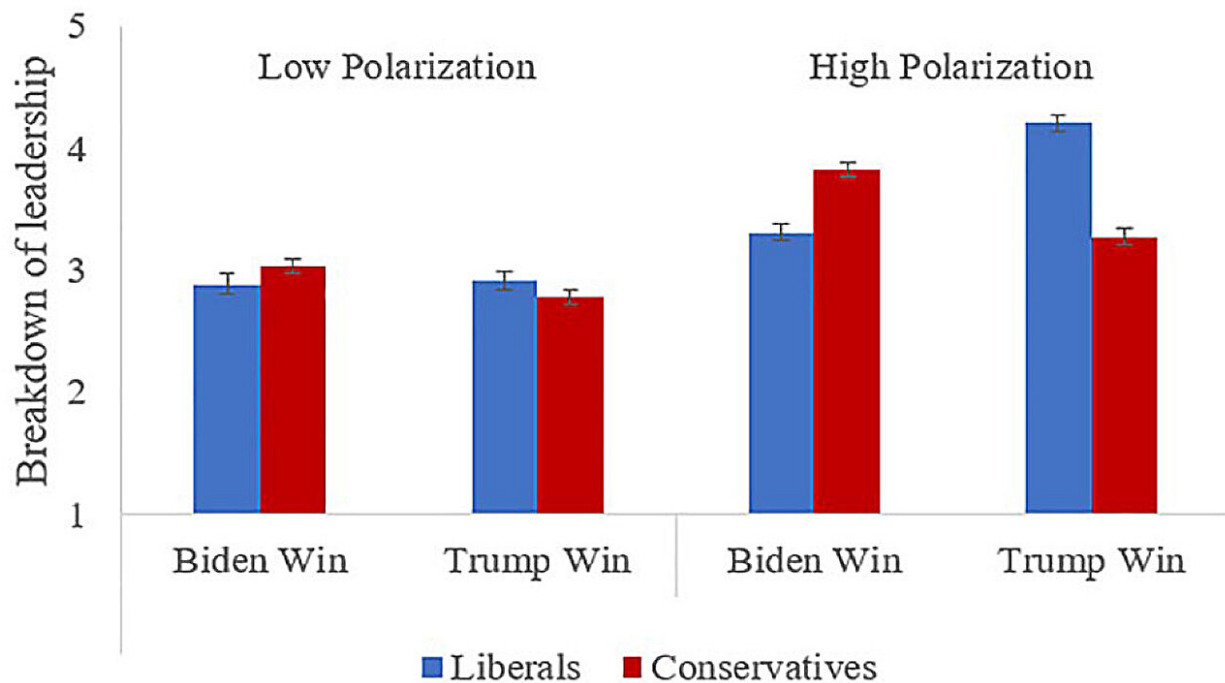


Research shows people's perceptions can fuel political unrest

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Expected breakdown of leadership in the event of a Biden versus Trump election win moderated by political orientation and projected moral polarization: Study 1 (United States). Credit: *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* (2024). DOI: 10.1177/13684302231223896

People's feelings about how morally divided a society is in the lead-up to an election can cause them to have extreme reactions if the result doesn't go their way, like the 6 January 2021 attacks on the US Capitol, new

research from The Australian National University (ANU) has shown.

The researchers argue that voters' sense of division, even if inflated and misguided, can prove crucial.

Participants in the study were asked to what extent they thought their country would "become increasingly morally polarized in the coming years."

If their preferred candidate lost the election and a sense of polarization was high, both Democrat and Republican voters reported elevated anxiety about the future of their [society](#), increased likelihood of civil war, and an enhanced obligation to fight to overturn the outcome of the election.

According to lead author Dr. Charlie Crimston, the 2020 US election proved to be an important case study. The belief that society was made of morally opposed groups when it came to issues like gun control, abortion, and immigration was linked to collective angst about the future.

"It also made people more likely to think America was heading for a second civil war, and they had a duty to fight to overturn the election outcome," Dr. Crimston said.

"Distinct from actual moral divides that might exist on a specific issue, we were keen to look at the perception that society is made up of these opposing moral groups and how that might fuel a sense of unrest in the leadup to an election.

"We were already investigating this prior to the attack on the US Capitol in 2021. At the time, we thought our results were pretty extreme, but it turns out, to a certain extent, we saw it play out."

The study polled left and right-leaning voters in the days prior to the election—when tensions were high.

Participants were asked to what extent they thought their country would "become increasingly morally polarized in the coming years."

"Our perceptions regarding these tensions are usually overestimated. But when a narrative of division is built up and often fueled by the media, our sense of 'us versus them' can translate into 'good vs. evil', and that's when things can really become problematic," Dr. Crimston said.

As a point of comparison, the research also examined how voters were feeling ahead of the 2021 [general election](#) in the Netherlands, which has a multi-party system.

"We thought not having a two-party system may help quell things," Dr. Crimston said.

"But we were a little shocked when we saw pretty similar results. The idea that Dutch society was morally polarized prior to their 2021 general election still ramped up the concern that the country was heading for civil war, and voters there reported similar obligations to overturn the result of the election if things didn't go their way."

"Elsewhere around the world in recent years, we've seen the rise of a certain type of populist, extreme leader. This is all very much connected to the concept of polarization."

"Looking forward, there are some very important elections coming up, and the world could potentially look very different in 2025, depending on which way they go. Our research serves as a reminder that as much as we may hold differing views about certain issues, it is our perceptions about division and conflict that may be the most dangerous thing."

The study has been published in [*Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*](#).

More information: Charlie R. Crimston et al, "Fight like hell": Projected moral polarisation predicts anticipated conflict and the perceived responsibility to overturn an election loss, *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* (2024). DOI: [10.1177/13684302231223896](https://doi.org/10.1177/13684302231223896)

Provided by Australian National University

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