

Do Elections Reduce Partisan Misperceptions? Evidence from a Democratic Transition in Bangladesh

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Abstract

We examine how democratic elections shape citizens' beliefs about opposing partisans' commitment to democracy and their evaluations of democratic institutions. Using repeated cross-sectional surveys conducted immediately before and after Bangladesh's first competitive national election in nearly two decades, we compare respondents' own democratic beliefs with their perceptions of rival partisans' beliefs. Before the election, opposition supporters substantially underestimated the election-winning party's commitment to democracy relative to its supporters' reported views. After the election, these perceptions increased by roughly 10 percentage points, partially reducing the misperception gap. However, this belief correction did not improve broader institutional attitudes. Opposition supporters reported declines in trust in politicians, perceived electoral accountability, and economic expectations after the election. Non-voters, by contrast, showed no evidence of belief updating but reported improved evaluations of selected democratic institutions. The findings suggest that elections may reduce partisan misperceptions about democratic commitment without generating broader institutional optimism among electoral losers.

Keywords: false polarization, second-order beliefs, democratic transition, winner–loser gap

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