

## How Strong Policy Attitudes Activate Support for Aggressive Political Action

Scott Clifford  
Associate Professor  
Texas A&M University  
College Station, TX, USA  
scottclifford@tamu.edu

Lucas Lothamer  
PhD Student  
University of Houston  
Houston, TX, USA  
ljlotham@cougarnet.uh.edu

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**Abstract.** There is a long history of political violence in the United States. Scholars have documented numerous dispositions that predict support for violence as a political tactic, finding that a general tendency toward aggression is consistently among the strongest predictors. Yet, we know much less about how political attitudes might activate aggressive personalities and direct them toward specific targets. In this paper, we examine how policy attitudes interact with dispositional aggression to motivate support for political violence. Across two studies, using novel measures and within-subjects designs, we show that intense policy opposition strongly predicts support for aggressive political tactics against politicians responsible for the legislation – primarily among those who are dispositionally prone to aggression. Surprisingly, the strength of partisan identity plays little role in explaining support for political aggression. Our findings suggest that policy attitudes are a crucial factor for understanding when aggressive individuals might turn to political violence.

Political violence is increasingly a concern in the United States, though it is hardly a new phenomenon. In the most extreme cases, politicians and their family members have been subjected to physical violence, such as the case of Senator Nancy Pelosi’s husband being attacked in their home or the thwarted plot to kidnap the Governor of Wisconsin, Gretchen Whitmer. But there has also been a dramatic increase in threats, intimidation, and other aggressive political action (Herrick and Thomas 2023). Many politicians have been subjected to verbal abuse, death threats, and “swatting,”<sup>1</sup> including Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, Rep. Eric Swalwell, and Texas attorney general Ken Paxton (Banks 2016; Garrett 2023; Schoenbaum 2023). There has also been a wave of vandalism and threats against the Catholic church since the Dobbs decision (Nerozzi 2023). Historically, many acts of violence have centered around specific issues, such as abortion, environmentalism, and animal rights (Kleinfeld 2021).

Scholars have studied support for political violence using a variety of methods, but common approaches involve measuring support for political violence as a general political tactic or as violence against the government (e.g., Armaly and Enders 2022; Hillesund 2015; Piazza 2023) or partisan opponents (Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2023; Lelkes and Westwood 2017; Mernyk, Pink, Druckman, and Willer 2022). Yet, if political violence is a form of action meant to communicate political views or influence political outcomes (for discussion, see Kalmoe and Mason 2023), then it is likely used conditionally to target specific actors in response to particular actions. In other words, many citizens may reject violence as a general political tactic, but support it in particular circumstances. Thus, improving

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<sup>1</sup> “Swatting” refers to falsely reporting a crime at a victim’s home to instigate an aggressive police response.

our understanding of support for violence as a political action will require theoretical approaches and research designs that reflect this conditionality.

In this manuscript, we focus on support for political aggression, which we define more broadly than violence, as including a variety of behaviors meant to cause harm or fear of harm.<sup>2</sup> We argue that people are more likely to support political aggression against political actors who have played a crucial role in government action to which they are strongly opposed. Support for political aggression should be particularly likely when the policy attitude is not only strongly held, but held with moral conviction, i.e., seen in terms of right and wrong. Further, we expect that aggressive action is only supported against the political actor in response to that particular action, and not for other actions that are not strongly opposed. In other words, a person's support for political violence is conditional not only on the target of the action, but also on the motivation for the action against that target.

Of course, policy disagreement is common and support for political violence is rare, which necessitates consideration of *who* is likely to respond with violence. Building on past research, we argue that trait aggression – or a dispositional tendency toward aggressive behavior – is a critical moderator. We develop competing expectations for how strong policy attitudes and trait aggression might interact to activate aggressive behavior.

Using two surveys in the United States, we examine how intense policy disagreement and trait aggression interact to influence support for political violence. In both surveys, we assign respondents to evaluate a random subset of real state policies passed in recent years and to report

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<sup>2</sup> Political aggression differs from conventional forms of political engagement in that fear and intimidation are the means of influence, rather than persuasion or electoral pressure.

their support for aggressive and violent action against the governor signing the legislation. Using a within-between random effects model (Bell and Jones 2015), which holds individual differences like partisanship constant, we show that people are more likely to support aggressive political action in response to a policy they intensely oppose. Contrary to expectations, we do not find an outsized role for morally convicted attitudes; instead, multiple aspects of attitude strength predict support for violence. Strong policy attitudes have the largest effects among those high in trait aggression. However, we find little evidence that the strength of one's partisan identity helps explain support for aggressive political behavior. Together, the results suggest that intensely held policy attitudes play a crucial role in motivating support for political violence and for activating a person's baseline tendency toward aggression.

### **Why Study *Support for Political Violence*?**

A flurry of recent research in American politics has examined the predictors of support for political aggression and violence (e.g., Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2023; Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Mernyk et al. 2022; Munis et al. 2023; Piazza 2023; Uscinski et al. 2021). Yet, few survey respondents who endorse political violence are likely to engage in it. Nonetheless, it's valuable to study support for violence for two reasons. First, personal beliefs about the acceptability of aggression and violence influence the likelihood of engaging in this behavior (e.g., Gendron, Williams, and Guerra 2011; Henry et al. 2000). So, research on the causes of support for violence likely also speaks to the causes of actual violent behavior. Second, support for political violence can affect others' attitudes and behaviors. A wide variety of research shows that beliefs about the acceptability of aggression and violence within one's social networks shapes the likelihood of engaging in this behavior (Arms and Russell 1997; Henry et al. 2000;

Russell and Arms 1995; Werner and Hill 2010). Similarly, partisans are more likely to support political violence when they believe their partisan opponents are supportive of violence (Mernyk et al. 2021). Thus, support for violence as a political strategy is likely a contributor to actual acts of violence.

### **How Strong Policy Attitudes Motivate Support for Political Violence**

In the following sections, we first review the literature on attitude strength and develop expectations about the types of policy attitudes that are most likely to motivate support for aggression. Then, we review the literature on trait aggression and develop expectations about how it will interact with policy attitudes to shape support for violence. Finally, we contrast our expectations with those of an influential model that places partisan identity at the root of violent behavior.

#### *Strong Policy Attitudes and Political Aggression*

Scholars have documented a variety of broad grievances that might provoke support for political violence. Within the American context, a recent literature has documented several individual differences, many of which represent broad grievances against the government, that predict support for violence. For example, constructs such as conspiratorial predispositions (Uscinski et al. 2021; Armaly and Enders 2022), populism (Armaly and Enders 2022; Piazza 2023), and Christian Nationalism (Armaly, Buckley, and Enders 2022) are all associated with support for violence. Collectively this literature provides insight into the social and political discontents that are linked with support for violence.

While this literature is informative about dispositions that are associated with support for political violence, it tells us less about the specific instances in which a person might support the

use of violence. As argued above, political aggression, as a political tactic, is likely only supported conditional on the right combination of target and motivation. For example, two individuals may both support political violence due to grievances about economic inequality or moral decay, but support the use of violence in very different circumstances. Thus, to understand when a person is likely to support political violence, we need to examine attitudes towards specific government actions.

A long and influential line of literature casts doubt on the influence of policy attitudes, however, describing them as unconstrained by broader ideological viewpoints and highly unstable over time, undermining their potential impact on political behavior (e.g., Converse 1964; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). While many policy attitudes might be best characterized as non-attitudes, some attitudes are “strong” attitudes that are “persistent over time, are resistant to change, have [a] strong impact on information processing, and have [a] strong impact on behavior” (Krosnick et al. 1993, 1132). Most citizens have at least one strongly held political attitude (Ryan and Ehlinger 2023), which can develop its strength through perceived value relevance, group interests, or self-interest (Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent 1995). If policy attitudes motivate support for political aggression, then it is likely only strongly held attitudes, by virtue of their persistence over time, resistance to persuasion, and impact on behavior, that do so.

Attitude strength is a multi-dimensional construct, however, and different aspects of attitude strength can have different causes and consequences (Krosnick et al. 1993; Visser, Bizer, and Krosnick 2006), some of which may have implications for political violence. While psychologists and political scientists have studied a wide variety of correlated measures of attitude strength (Miller and Peterson 2004), we focus our attention on three meta-attitudinal

aspects of attitude strength that are particularly relevant to political science research and the question at hand: moral conviction, personal importance, and attitude extremity.

Moral conviction – the perception that one’s attitude is a reflection of one’s core moral beliefs and values – is particularly likely to be an antecedent to support for political violence. While morally convicted attitudes are otherwise strong, many strong attitudes are not necessarily held with moral conviction (e.g., Ryan 2017). Attitudes that are held with moral conviction are perceived to be objective and universal (Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis 2005). That is, one’s stance on the matter is not merely an opinion, but a universal truth that should be acknowledged by everyone. Consequently, morally convicted attitudes tend to generate strong emotional responses toward disagreeing others (Ryan 2014), an unwillingness to compromise (Delton, DeScioli, and Ryan 2020; Ryan 2017), and social and political conflict (Garrett and Bankert 2018; Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis 2005).

Issue positions rooted in moral conviction may be particularly resistant to the legitimizing effects of institutions and thus drive support for political violence. When people are *morally* opposed to an outcome, they are less likely to accept it and more likely to denigrate the institution (Mullen and Skitka 2006; Skitka, Bauman, and Lytle 2009; Skitka and Houston 2001; Wisneski, Lytle, and Skitka 2009). Moral conviction and moral outrage also drive support for extrajudicial punishment and murder (García-Ponce et al. 2019; Skitka and Houston 2001). Most directly, moral conviction contributes to support for “hostile collective action,” in response to gender discrimination and inequality (Zaal et al. 2011) and support for violence against far-right protestors (Mooijman et al. 2018). However, existing evidence has several limitations, such as the failure to systematically investigate alternative measures of attitude strength or the role of individual differences, and a collective focus on only two topic areas. Thus, there is good

theoretical reason and some empirical evidence to suggest that moral conviction may play an important role in support for political violence.

While our strongest theoretical case can be made for moral conviction, it's crucial to consider other aspects of attitude strength. Within political science, attitude importance has been the most commonly used measure of attitude strength. For an attitude to be personally important means "to care passionately about it and to be deeply concerned about it" (Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent 1995, 62). Personally important attitudes tend to be more stable over time (Krosnick 1988a), more impactful on vote choice (Krosnick 1988b), more resistant to partisan cues (Barber and Pope 2023), and people seek out and store more information about personally important topics (Holbrook et al. 2005). Thus, if personally important attitudes are more resistant to change and more likely to influence other attitudes and behaviors, then personal importance may also contribute to a greater willingness to support political violence. However, more recent research questions these conclusions, finding little evidence that attitude importance predicts attitude stability (Leeper 2014) or increases issue voting (Leeper and Robison 2018). Overall, while there is some reason to expect that personal importance is an aspect of attitude strength that may contribute to support for violence, the empirical evidence is mixed.

Finally, it is also worth considering the role of attitude extremity, defined as the intensity of affect towards the attitude object (Wegener et al. 1995). Unlike attitude importance and moral conviction, extremity "is a more global measure that might, in part, be determined by more specific aspects of an attitude" (Delton, DeScioli, and Ryan 2020, 12). In practice, attitude extremity is typically operationalized as a folded attitude position scale that represents how strongly a person holds that view. Similar to moral conviction, attitude extremity also has been shown to predict outcomes such as stronger emotional responses to disagreeing others (Ryan



2014) and opposition to compromise (Delton, DeScioli, and Ryan 2020; Ryan 2017). Thus, we also examine the role of attitude extremity in explaining support for aggression and violence.

Overall, we expect that strongly held opposition to a policy will motivate support for political aggression and violence. Additionally, there is some reason to think that specific aspects of attitude strength – moral conviction in particular – may uniquely contribute to support for violence.

### *The Moderating Role of Trait Aggression*

While strong policy disagreements may lead to support for political violence, this effect is likely to be limited to a subset of the population. Most citizens, when faced with a policy that they intensely oppose, will turn to legitimate acts of political participation, expressing their anger through voting, donations, or other traditional means (e.g., Skitka and Bauman 2008). Others, however, may turn to aggressive and violent political action. To differentiate between these types, we turn to one of the strongest predictors of support for political violence – trait aggression.

Trait aggression is defined as “a person’s stable propensity to engage in interpersonal aggression in everyday interactions, from argumentativeness and hostility to physical aggression” (Kalmoe 2014, 548). In other words, trait aggression is a domain-general construct that captures the propensity toward aggression in all aspects of a person’s life. Trait aggression, as conceptualized in the psychology of aggression literature, consists of four dimensions: physical and verbal aggression, anger, and hostility. Physical and verbal aggression are seen as the “instrumental” components of trait aggression (Buss and Perry 1992, 457). Anger is the affective component of trait aggression and represents the “preparation for aggression.” Finally, hostility is the cognitive component, which captures resentment and perceptions of injustice.

There are three possible ways that trait aggression might interact with policy attitudes to influence support for political violence. The first possibility, which we refer to as the amplification hypothesis, is that intense policy opposition will increase support for violence primarily among those who are dispositionally prone to supporting violence. This view stems from the psychological literature on aggression, which finds that provocation amplifies the effects of individual differences on aggressive behavior (Anderson et al. 1998; Caprara et al. 1983; Felsten and Hill 1999). Thus, intense policy opposition will activate trait aggression in the domain of politics, increasing support for political violence primarily among those high in trait aggression. Crucially, this expectation differs from past research in that people high in trait aggression are not unconditionally supportive of violence, but instead are activated by policy disagreement.

The alternative interaction view, which we refer to as the leveling hypothesis, holds that intense policy opposition might make anyone capable of violence. This hypothesis stems from aggression research that finds that provocation increases support for violence among everyone, but especially for those who are low in trait aggression (Marshall and Brown 2006). In other words, those who are most prone to aggression are already prepared to support violence, while those who are not generally prone to aggression will only support violence when they are provoked. In this view, provocation is “perhaps the most important single cause of human aggression” (Anderson and Bushman 2002). As such, the leveling hypothesis suggests that nearly anyone is capable of supporting violence in support of their political cause, but some will require stronger policy motivations than others.

The final possibility is that trait aggression and policy attitudes have additive, but not interactive effects. The fact that trait aggression has been a much stronger predictor of support for violence than political measures, such as affective polarization, has led some to suggest that “tolerance for violence is a general human preference and not a specifically political preference” (Westwood et al. 2022, 8). In this view, while support for political violence may be influenced at the margins by political views, support is primarily determined by a general (i.e., non-political) orientation toward violence. In contrast, our discussion above suggests that intense policy disagreement may be what activates trait aggression within the domain of politics.

### *The Role of Partisan Identity*

Before turning to our design, it is worth contrasting our argument with an ongoing debate over the role of partisan identity. Influential research in the American context places partisan identity as the main driver of political violence (Kalmoe and Mason 2022), while other work suggests it plays a modest role relative to other dispositions (Armaly and Enders 2022; Uscinski et al. 2021). According to the partisan-centric view, partisan polarization and political activism are driven by strong partisan identities, rather than policy attitudes (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015; Mason 2015). The “increasing vitriol” in politics is “unconnected from issue attitudes” (Mason 2013, 155). This view offers a different perspective on the role of policy attitudes, suggesting that these attitudes are merely a reflection of partisan identity. This viewpoint has two testable implications that conflict with a policy-based view. First, if policy conflict is merely a rationalization for partisan-motivated aggression, then it should only predict support for aggression among those with strong partisan identities. Among those with weak or absent partisan identities, policy attitudes should be largely irrelevant since they don’t serve a partisan goal. Second, there should be little *within-subjects* variation in support for out-partisan violence

to explain. In other words, a strong partisan who is willing to support violence in response to an out-partisan leader's policy should be just as willing to support violence in response to a different out-partisan leader or a different policy passed by that same leader. These two patterns of results would suggest that policy attitudes are more of a partisan rationalization than a motivation for violence.

## **Studies 1 and 2**

We conducted two tests of our hypotheses on separate samples. The design of each is similar, so we first provide an overview of both designs. Each survey began with questions about individual differences, such as partisan identity and trait aggression. Respondents were asked about three state policies, randomly selected from a larger set, that had recently been signed into law. After each policy, respondents were asked about their position on the policy, the strength of their position, their anger about it,<sup>3</sup> and their support for aggressive and violent political action in response. In Study 2, we made several changes to strengthen tests of the role of partisan identity, which we discuss in detail below.

Because each respondent was asked about three policies and their attitudes toward each, we can conduct fully within-subjects tests of our hypotheses about attitude strength, while holding all individual differences constant. This also largely rules out satisficing and trolling as an explanation for our results, which has been shown to inflate support for conspiracy beliefs (Clifford, Kim, and Sullivan 2020), misinformation (Lopez and Hillygus 2018), and political violence (Westwood et al. 2021). Additionally, it provides a direct test of whether people have

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<sup>3</sup> Due to space constraints, we examine the role of anger elsewhere.

generally consistent views about acceptable forms of political engagement (in which case there will be no within-subjects variance) or whether what is acceptable depends on the motivation. Thus, while our independent variables are not experimentally manipulated, our within-subjects design provides much stronger inferences than standard cross-sectional designs (e.g., Freeder, Lenz, and Turney 2019; Ryan 2017) that are popular in the study of support for political violence (e.g., Armaly et al. 2022; Armaly and Enders 2022; Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Munis et al. 2023; Piazza 2023; Uscinski et al. 2023). As we discuss in more detail below, any potential confound must be correlated with attitude strength and vary *within* respondents across issues.

### *Samples*

For Study 1, we recruited 802 respondents from Amazon's Mechanical Turk on 11/23/2021. Respondents were required to be located in the US, have completed at least 100 HITs, and have an approval rate of at least 95%. We also limited eligibility to the CloudResearch approved respondents to avoid problems with fraudulent respondents (Kennedy et al. 2020). Additionally, we exclude 11 respondents (1%) who failed an attention check embedded in a grid prior to the core content of the survey, for a final sample size of 791.

To build on the findings of Study 1 with a more representative sample, we conducted a second study that was fielded by Dynata on Dec. 2-11, 2022 and 1,318 respondents completed the study. Survey completions were planned to be balanced to US demographics on age, gender, race, and census region. However, due to an error by Dynata, we ended up with an oversample of some demographic groups and a larger sample size.<sup>4</sup> Similar to Study 1, an attention check was

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<sup>4</sup> The main discrepancy is an oversample of racial minorities. However, our results are substantively identical when restricting the sample to white respondents.

embedded in the trait aggression grid at the beginning of the survey. Respondents who failed the attention check were not allowed to complete the survey. Despite the differences between the samples, we find highly similar results, as shown below.

### *Stimuli*

Study 1 included 11 state policies, five of which were passed by Democratic governors from California and Oregon, while six were passed by Republican governors in Texas and Florida. Study 2 included 12 state policies, including five from Study 1. The additional policies also added variation in states with two new Republican states (OK and AL) and one new Democratic state (WA). Policies were not restricted to respondents' own state of residence. The policies were largely selected to be salient and ideologically divisive policies. For example, respondents were told that the Governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, recently signed legislation that bans abortion after six weeks of pregnancy, does not allow exceptions for rape or incest, and allows private citizens to sue abortion providers or anyone else who helps a woman get an abortion. However, we also included some policies that we expected to be less likely to elicit intense, ideological attitudes, such as a ban on public "camping" that targets homeless people. Greater variation between policies should increase within-subjects variation, which will make it easier to identify the effects of within-subjects variables, such as attitude strength.

To increase the likelihood that respondents would oppose the policy, respondents were only shown policies passed by an out-party politician. Pure independents were randomly assigned to one of the two partisan conditions. In Study 2, respondents were assigned to different policies with equal probability within each partisan branch. Study 1 used a more complex randomization scheme that ensured that all respondents received one policy that was less ideologically divisive (e.g., homelessness) to increase within-subjects variability in attitude

strength. To strengthen tests of the role of partisan identity, Study 2 included prominent partisan labels for the governor that was responsible for signing the legislation.

### *Measures*

All respondents completed a standard branching measure of partisan identification. To improve the measurement of the strength of partisan identification, respondents in Study 1 rated the importance of their partisan identification, while respondents in Study 2 completed a four-item measure of partisan social identity (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015).<sup>5</sup> In both studies, we measured trait aggression with a common four-item scale (Bryant and Smith 2001; Kalmoe 2016).

Policy attitudes were measured on a seven-point favor/oppose scale. Our two focal measures of policy attitude strength, personal importance (e.g., Krosnick 1990) and moral conviction (Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis 2005) were both measured on five-point scales. Attitude extremity is measured by folding the policy attitude scale. Finally, respondents were asked to rate their anger on a five-point scale (see Appendix for full question wording).

To measure support for aggression and violence, respondents were asked how much they would “support or oppose taking each of the following actions as a means of protesting against this law.” For Study 1, we selected eight actions that range from protesting outside of the Governor’s mansion to punching the Governor in the face. We included two less aggressive items, which involve protesting and blocking a street, to allow respondents a wider range of behavioral responses than our focal items. Because we see these items as less aggressive, we

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<sup>5</sup> Due to a programming error, the first 104 respondents did not receive the partisan social identity measure in Study 2.

omit them from our scale of support for aggression below.<sup>6</sup> In designing Study 2, we reduced the eight items to five, retaining only one non-aggressive action.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, by focusing on concrete and specific forms of aggression, we avoid the possibility that respondents are interpreting broad terms such as “violence” in heterogenous ways (Westwood et al. 2021).

### *Results*

We start with some simple descriptive statistics. On average, respondents opposed a majority of the policies they evaluated (Study 1: 66%; Study 2: 53%). For the remaining descriptive statistics, we focus only on cases in which the respondent opposed the policy, as there is little reason to support aggressive action against a favored policy. Support for aggressive and violent action was generally low, but varied by action and policy scenario. As shown in Figure 1, in both samples a majority of policy opponents supported protesting the governor. Support for explicitly aggressive behaviors was much lower. For example, just under 20% of each sample supported shouting the governor out of a restaurant and about 10% supported throwing eggs at the governor. Support for sending threatening messages or punching the governor fell between four and nine percent.

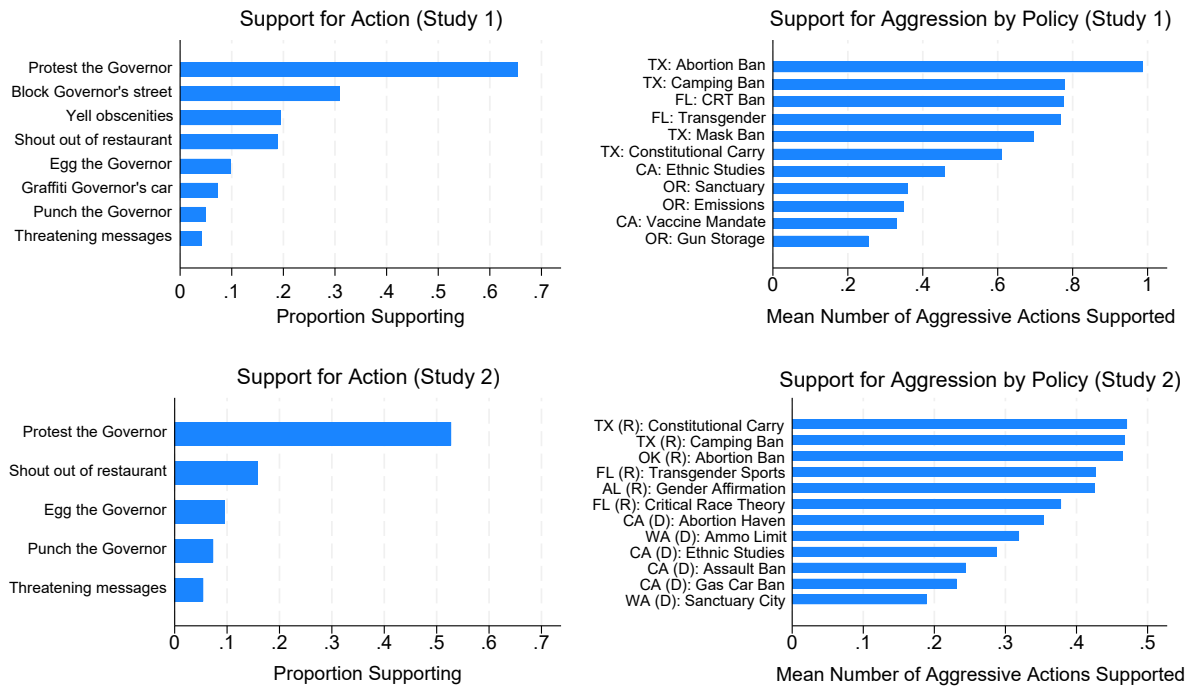
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<sup>6</sup> This exclusion follows our intended design, though our subsequent research suggests that blocking the street is perceived by many as an aggressive action.

<sup>7</sup> We removed items that were largely redundant to others, while retaining items that maximized variation in item difficulty according to an item response model.



**Figure 1. Support for Aggressive Political Action Among Policy Opponents**



Note: Effective sample size for aggressive actions (left panel) is 1,560 in Study 1 and 2,200-2,202 in Study 2. Sample sizes by policy (right panels) range from 59 to 313 in Study 1 and from 80 to 329 in Study 2.

The right-hand panel of Figure 1 shows the mean number of aggressive actions (out of six in Study 1 or four in Study 2) supported by opponents for each of the policies. Most respondents rejected all violent actions, so the means all fall below one. In Study 1, support ranges from a low of 0.25 actions (OR gun storage law) to a high of 0.99 actions (TX abortion ban). Notably, even when considering the same state and governor (e.g., Texas’s Greg Abbott), support for aggression varies considerably in response to the policy in question.<sup>8</sup> In Study 2, we

<sup>8</sup> It is also worth noting that laws passed by Republican governors inspired considerably more support for violence than laws passed by Democratic governors. We believe this is likely due to differences in the nature of the policies due to constraints on available legislation.

again find meaningful variation (though lower means than Study 1 due to fewer items), with the TX constitutional carry law inspiring the most aggression and the WA immigration sanctuary policy inspiring the least.

One of our key arguments is that support for aggression and violence may vary *within* a person, depending on the target and motivation. As the strictest test of this claim, we limit our data to only cases where 1) respondents evaluated the same governor more than once, and 2) opposed the policy in each scenario. Thus, we hold constant the target and opposition to the policy (though not the *strength* of opposition), and assess whether support for violence varies *within* respondent, across policies.<sup>9</sup> In Study 1, 41% endorsed different levels of aggression, while 31% of respondents in Study 2 endorsed different levels of aggression. Thus, support for aggression varies within individuals and is conditional on not just who is targeted, but *why*.

For the remaining analyses, our dependent variable consists of an average of the aggressive behaviors (excluding the *protest* and *block* actions). Our modeling strategy is somewhat uncommon in the behavior literature, so it is worth spending some time discussing it. To model support for aggression, we stack the data such that each respondent provides up to three observations. Thus, our modeling strategy must account for clustering at the individual level to make within-subjects comparisons of the effects of attitude strength (and thus hold constant all individual-level explanations, such as partisan strength). To allow within-subjects comparisons while also including individual differences variables, we use a within-between random effects model (Bell and Jones 2015). In addition to a respondent random effect, this involves decomposing all variables that vary within respondent (i.e., attitude strength measures)

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<sup>9</sup> As below, we exclude the less aggressive *Protest* and *Block* outcomes from these analyses.

into occasion-varying and occasion-invariant components. In other words, for each measure of attitude strength, the model includes both the respondent average (across multiple issues) and the deviation away from that average for each issue. The former controls out individual-level variation in response tendencies while the latter provides a fully within-subjects estimate of the effect of the variable. These models tend to produce the same results as fixed effects models, but allow a fuller substantive interpretation (for results using alternative model specifications, see Appendix). Our modeling approach means that some respondents are excluded from the model (those who do not oppose at least two policies) and some contribute more observations than others. However, as we show in the Appendix, these exclusions have only modest effects on the distributions of our primary independent variables.

Of course, because attitude strength is not randomly assigned, our design is still vulnerable to threats from unmeasured variables that vary within subjects, are correlated with our attitude strength measures, and predict support for aggression. The clearest threats come from unmeasured aspects of attitude strength (e.g., attitude certainty) that are likely correlated. This poses a threat to identifying the specific aspect of attitude strength that is most predictive, but is less likely to affect the larger goal of identifying the general effect of attitude strength. It is more challenging to think of potential confounds that vary within-subjects and are not mediated by attitude strength. Most importantly, our design rules out individual-level confounds like partisan identity, satisficing, conspiratorial dispositions, and racial resentment.

In all models below, we also exclude respondent-items in which the respondent does *not* oppose the policy in question. This choice has little effect on the distribution of individual-level covariates (see Appendix for details). All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1 and standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.

In the first set of analyses, we set aside individual differences and focus on measures of attitude strength as the key independent variables. As a first cut, we estimate the total effects of attitude strength by averaging attitude importance, moral conviction, and attitude extremity (e.g., Taber and Lodge 2006) (Study 1:  $\alpha = .82$ ; Study 2:  $\alpha = .79$ ). We refer to this index as attitude intensity. The unique feature of the within-between design is that it includes two components of attitude intensity. The between measure represents the respondent's average attitude intensity across the policies they evaluated while the within measure represents the deviation away from the respondent average for that policy. We focus our attention on the within measure because it allows us to use within-respondent variation to estimate the effects of attitude intensity while holding constant all between-person variables, such as partisan identity.

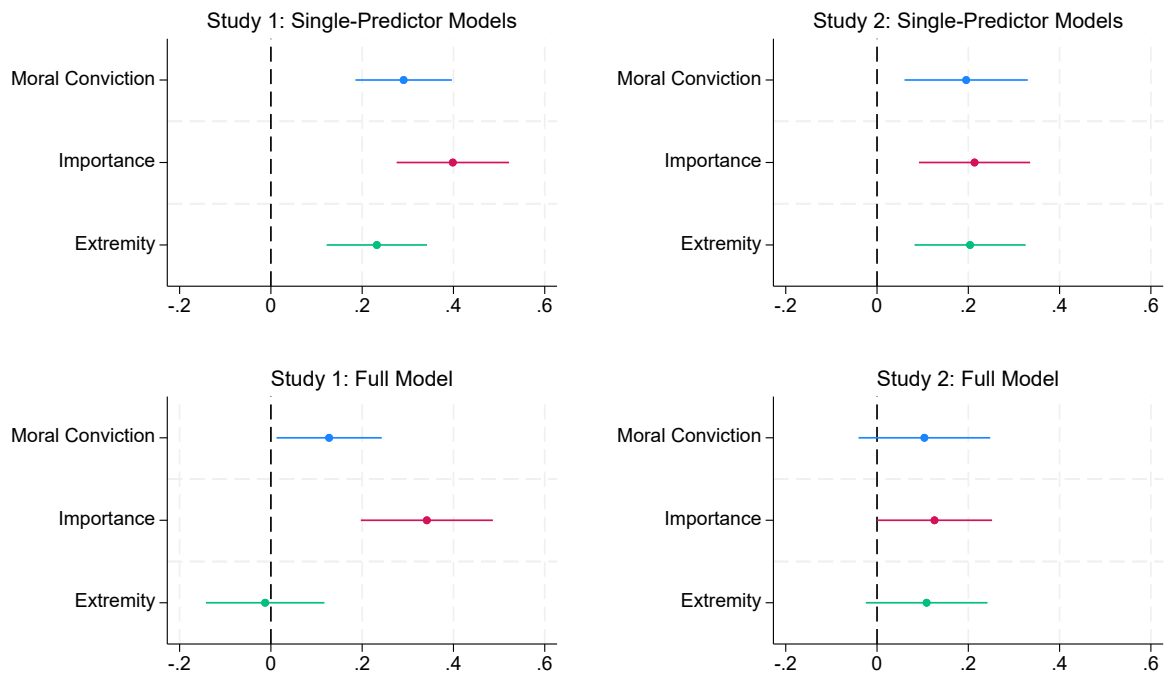
As a first step, we enter only attitude intensity (within and between) as a predictor (see Appendix for full model details). As expected, within-subjects variation in attitude intensity is a strong and significant predictor of support for aggression and violence in both Study 1 ( $b = .47, p < .001$ ) and Study 2 ( $b = .34, p < .001$ ). Thus, even after accounting for all individual differences, policy attitudes are a strong predictor of support for political aggression and violence.

Next, we turn to analyzing specific components of attitude strength. We begin by including each measure of attitude strength in a separate model. Results are shown in the top row of Figure 2 while full model results are shown in the Appendix. As expected, all three measures of attitude strength are positive and statistically significant in both studies ( $ps < .01$ ). In Study 1, attitude importance has a slightly larger effect than moral conviction or extremity, while the coefficients are all similar in Study 2.

In the next set of models, we include all three aspects of attitude strength simultaneously. Results are shown in the bottom row of Figure 2. In Study 1, importance and moral conviction

are both statistically significant, though the former coefficient is significantly larger. Extremity is no longer significant. In Study 2, all three coefficients are similar in magnitude, but fall short of statistical significance. Overall, while all three aspects of attitude strength are associated with support for aggression, attitude importance tended to have the strongest and most reliable association. Of course, it is possible that importance is causally downstream from moral conviction (Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent 1995), implying that it's a mechanism through which moral conviction affects support for political violence.

**Figure 2. Attitude Strength Predicts Support for Political Aggression and Violence**



Note: the top row shows coefficients from separate models in which each predictor is entered separately. The bottom row shows coefficients from models that include all three aspects of attitude strength. All models include the corresponding between-subjects measures of attitude strength, respondent random effects, and issue fixed effects.

Next, we examine how trait aggression and partisan identity may help explain support for aggression and condition the effects of policy attitudes. In initial models we exclude measures of attitude strength but include trait aggression and the strength of partisan identity. In Study 1, we measure partisan strength by averaging the typical folded measure of 7-point partisan identity with a five-point measure of the importance of one's partisan identity ( $\alpha = .85$ ).<sup>10</sup> In Study 2, we examine both the standard folded measure of partisan strength and the four-item social identity measure in separate models.

In both studies, trait aggression is a strong predictor of support for political aggression (Study 1:  $b = 1.07, p < .001$ ; Study 2:  $b = 1.52, p < .001$ ). However, contrary to the partisan-centric model, the effect of partisan identity strength is small and not significantly different from zero in any of the three models (Study 1:  $b = 0.01, p = .959$ ; Study 2 (folded measure):  $b = -.02, p = .804$ ; Study 2 (social identity measure):  $b = .09, p = .433$ ). Thus, we find no evidence that the strength of partisan identity is an important predictor of support for political aggression regardless of the sample or how partisan identity is measured.

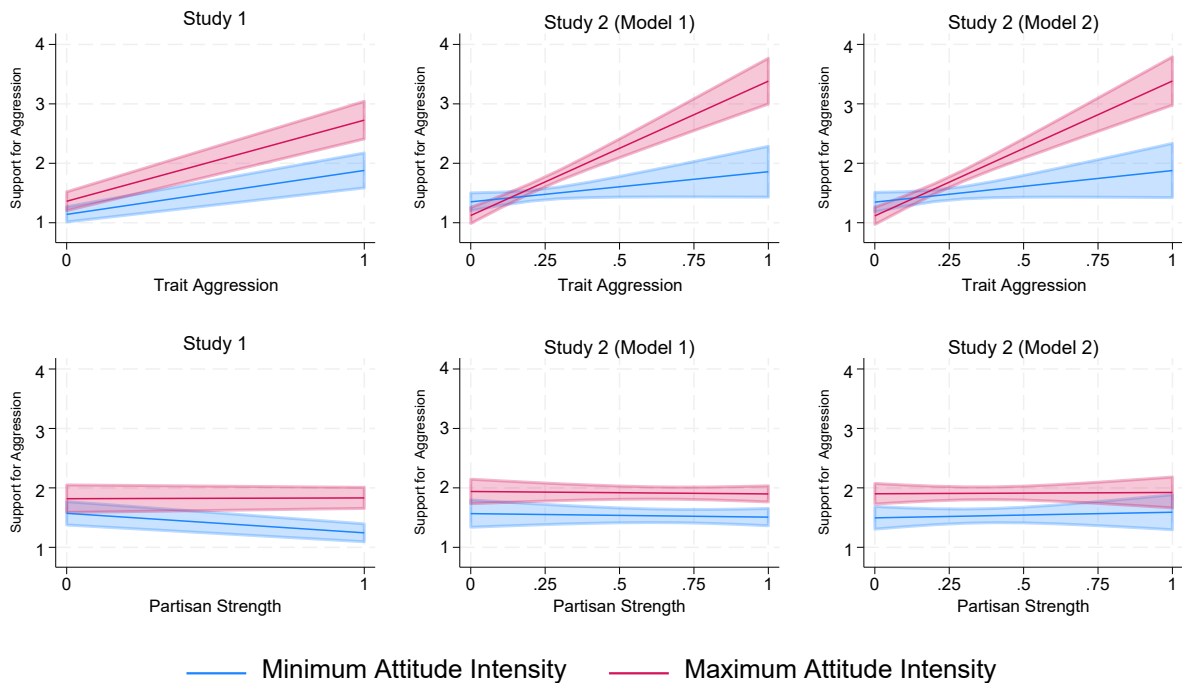
We extend the models described above by incorporating interactions between attitude strength and both partisan strength and trait aggression. To simplify our models, we focus only on the attitude intensity index, as the aspects of attitude strength had similar effects in the models reported above (for discussion see Visser, Bizer, and Krosnick 2006). Predicted values are shown in Figure 3 below. We begin with the interactive effects of trait aggression. Across both studies and all three models, the story is the same – trait aggression strongly moderates the effect of

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<sup>10</sup> Because this question was not asked of pure independents, we assign the minimum value on this measure to pure independents.

policy opposition ( $ps < .05$ ). In Study 1, the effect of trait aggression is significant at minimum values of attitude intensity ( $b = 0.74, p < .001$ ), but is nearly twice as large at maximum values of attitude intensity ( $b = 1.36, p < .001$ ). In Study 2, the pattern is even starker. The effect of trait aggression is marginally significant at minimum levels of policy opposition ( $b = .51, p = .065$ ), but is more than four times as large at maximum levels of policy opposition ( $b = 2.26, p < .001$ ). Thus, trait aggression seems to consistently contribute to support for political aggression, but this effect is greatly exacerbated when a person is intensely opposed to a policy.

**Figure 3. Intense Policy Attitudes Amplify the Effects of Trait Aggression**



Note: Study 2 (Model 1) uses the traditional single-item measure of partisan strength, while Study 2 (Model 2) uses the 4-item social identity measure.

It is also informative to examine how the effects of attitude intensity vary across trait aggression. In Study 1, holding trait aggression at its minimum value, a min-max shift in attitude

intensity increases support for political aggression by 0.24 ( $p = .026$ ). This same shift at the maximum value of trait aggression increases to 0.93 ( $p < .001$ ). In Study 2, the effect of attitude intensity is actually negative at the minimum value of trait aggression ( $b = -.22, p = .048$ ), but large and significant at the maximum value ( $b = 1.48, p < .001$ ). Thus, attitude intensity increases support for political aggression primarily among those who are already at least somewhat disposed to aggression.

Turning to partisan strength, we find no evidence for the partisan-centric claim that strong attitudes serve as rationalizations and thus only motivate support for aggression among strong partisans. In none of the three models do we find a statistically significant interaction between partisan strength and attitude intensity ( $ps > .10$ ). Moreover, in both studies and in all three models, the effect of partisan strength is null and close to zero when attitude intensity is held at the maximum level. Thus, the effects of intense policy opposition seem to be independent of partisan strength, which alone plays no apparent role in support for political aggression. Taken together, at least in the context of our studies, we find no support for the partisan-centric view of support for political violence.

## **Conclusion**

Much recent work treats support for political violence as a feature of the individual. While most people oppose violence, some people, particularly those with strong partisan identities (Kalmoe and Mason 2022) or populist views (e.g., Armaly and Enders 2024; Piazza 2024), are willing to endorse it. In contrast to this literature, we find considerable *within-person* variation in support for violence, even when holding the target of violence constant. In other words, a person might see violence against a politician as a justified response to their behavior in



one instance, but not in another. These findings suggest that support for violence is not simply a feature of an individual or a response to a particular party or politician. Instead, violence is seen as a political strategy that can only be justified under particular circumstances.

Our results suggest that policy opposition is an important factor explaining when a person will support political aggression and violence. Even among individuals who have been identified as prone to partisan aggression – those holding strong partisan identities or a predisposition toward aggressive behavior – there is little support for political aggression in the absence of intense policy opposition. Rather, intense policy opposition seems to activate trait aggression, such that the most aggressive individuals become much more supportive of political aggression in response to a strongly opposed policy. These findings suggest that trait aggression is an important moderator of how people react to intense policy-based disagreement.

Contrary to our expectations, we found little evidence that specific aspects of attitude strength play different roles. Theory suggests that moral conviction might play an outsized role in motivating violence. While some research has supported this claim (Mooijman et al. 2018; Zaal et al. 2011), these studies mostly ignore the role of other aspects of attitude strength and each focuses on a specific topical application. By accounting for alternative measures of attitude strength, testing many policy areas, and making within-subjects comparisons, our results provide firmer evidence suggesting that moral conviction may not play a unique role in support for political aggression. Nonetheless, it is possible that moral conviction is causally prior to these other aspects of attitude strength and thus that it also contributes indirectly through these mechanisms.

To our surprise, partisan strength played little role in explaining support for political aggression, even in the face of clear partisan cues and a multi-item measure of partisan social

identity (Study 2). There was also no evidence for an interactive effect of partisanship. Even among those with intense policy attitudes, partisan strength consistently had a null effect. The effects of policy opposition were also just as large for those with weak or strong partisan identities. Thus, at least in the context of support for political aggression in response to disliked legislation, partisan identity appears to play a minimal role.

To reconcile the various findings on the relationship between the strength of partisan identity and support for violence, it's crucial to consider measurement. The research that finds that strongest effects of partisan identity (Kalmoe and Mason 2022) tends to ask explicitly about violence toward members of the opposing party (e.g., "When, if ever, is it OK for [*Own party*] to send threatening and intimidating messages to [*Opposing party*] leaders?"). Research that finds little relationship between violence and partisan strength (e.g., Armaly and Enders 2022; Uscinski et al. 2021) tends to ask about political violence more generally (e.g., "Violence is sometimes an acceptable way for Americans to express their disagreement with the government"). One way to explain this divergence is that a strong partisan identity is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for endorsing *partisan* violence. When questions about political violence are not restricted to partisan-motivated violence, independents and weak partisans are about as likely as strong partisans to endorse violence. In the case of our research, our scenarios offered opportunities for both issue-based and partisan-based motivations for violence, but only issue attitudes predicted support for violence. Of course, more research is needed on how to best conceptualize and measure support for political violence, but it seems crucial for researchers to consider the motives that are stipulated or left to the respondent.

Although we find little evidence for a meaningful role of partisan identity, it surely affects support for political aggression and violence through multiple pathways. First,

partisanship can play an important role in the development of strong political attitudes in the first place (e.g., Freeder, Lenz, and Turney 2019). In this sense, issue attitudes may be the more proximate motivator of political violence. Second, although some tests have found little evidence that partisan leaders can encourage support for violence (Kalmoe and Mason 2022), it may be more effective when paired with issue-based appeals. Thus, a promising avenue for future research is to investigate the intersection of partisan and issue-based appeals.

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