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

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Abstract

We examine whether democratic elections correct citizens' misperceptions about opposing partisans' commitment to democracy. Using repeated cross-sectional surveys conducted immediately before and after Bangladesh's first competitive national election in nearly two decades, we measure respondents' own democratic beliefs and their perceptions of rival partisans' beliefs. Prior to the election, opposition supporters held substantially more skeptical views about the election-winning party's democratic commitment than its own supporters. After the election, opposition supporters revised these perceptions upward by roughly 10 percentage points. However, this belief correction did not translate into improved institutional attitudes. Opposition supporters who updated their beliefs about opponents reported declines in economic expectations, perceived electoral accountability, and trust in politicians. Non-voters showed the opposite pattern, reporting improved institutional evaluations without belief updating. Elections can thus correct what citizens believe about one another, but not what they expect from democratic institutions.

Keywords: false polarization, second-order beliefs, democratic transition, winner–loser gap
JEL: D72, D8, P0

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1. Introduction

Citizens in polarized societies systematically overestimate the extremity of their political opponents' views (Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso, 2018; Bursztyn and Yang, 2022). These misperceptions extend beyond policy preferences to beliefs about opponents' commitment to democratic governance itself, creating a form of false polarization that can erode institutional trust, increase tolerance for political violence, and undermine the stability of democratic systems (Bonomi, Gennaioli, and Tabellini, 2021). A growing experimental literature has tested whether providing corrective information can reduce such misperceptions, with generally modest effects (Ahler and Sood, 2018). Yet evidence on whether real-world political events such as elections—rather than researcher-administered treatments—can correct partisan misperceptions remains limited.

This question is particularly important in developing and transitional democracies, where elections often occur under conditions of deep partisan suspicion and fragile institutions. Many such countries experience prolonged periods of authoritarian rule that eventually give way to competitive elections, raising uncertainty about whether rival political groups genuinely support democratic rules of the game. If elections in these settings reinforce rather than correct such suspicions, the resulting polarization may undermine institutional stability and hinder the effective provision of public goods (Acemoglu et al., 2019). Conversely, if electoral competition provides credible signals about opponents' democratic commitments, it may help reduce misperceptions and support both democratic consolidation and broader development outcomes.

This paper examines whether democratic elections can correct citizens' misperceptions about opposing partisans' support for democracy, and whether such corrections translate into broader improvements in institutional trust and political attitudes. We leverage the February 2026 parliamentary election in Bangladesh—the first genuinely competitive national poll in nearly two decades, following a popular uprising that ended prolonged one-party rule—as a rare opportunity to observe how citizens update beliefs in the context of a high-stakes. Using repeated cross-sectional surveys conducted immediately before and after the election, we measure both first-order beliefs (respondents' own support for democracy) and second-order beliefs (their perceptions of how much supporters of rival parties trust democracy).

The political backdrop makes this setting particularly informative. Following the ouster of

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 and eighteen months of interim rule, the election took place amid deep mutual suspicion across partisan lines—a legacy of two decades of political repression, contested elections, and democratic backsliding. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which ultimately won the election, had been systematically suppressed under the previous regime, while the formerly dominant Awami League (Awami) was barred from contesting. This configuration produced distinct political groups: election winners (BNP supporters), opposition supporters (primarily voters of Jamaat-e-Islami, hereafter Jamaat), and a substantial pool of non-voters, many of whom likely include former Awami supporters left without an institutional vehicle for participation.

We employ independent cross-sectional samples drawn from the same subject pool before and after the election, rather than a panel design. This approach avoids anchoring effects and experimenter demand that repeated interviewing around a highly salient political event could generate. Each wave administered an identical questionnaire to a combined sample of roughly 1,200 respondents.

Our primary measures capture both citizens' own democratic attitudes and their perceptions of others' beliefs. We measure first-order attitudes using a direct question on trust in democracy, and employ a list experiment to mitigate social desirability bias when eliciting views about the fairness of the election. To capture perceived partisan differences, we elicit second-order beliefs by asking respondents to estimate the share of each party's supporters who trust democracy. Comparing these perceived beliefs with observed attitudes allows us to quantify partisan misperceptions and examine how they change around the election. Finally, we measure a broader set of political and economic perceptions—including evaluations of electoral representation, accountability, economic expectations, and tolerance for extra-institutional protest—to assess whether any belief correction extends beyond perceptions of democracy to wider institutional attitudes.

The regression results show that opposition supporters substantially revise upward their estimates of BNP supporters' commitment to democracy after the election, reducing the pre-election misperception gap by approximately 10 percentage points. This updating is not limited to perceptions of the winning party: election participants across partisan lines also increase their estimates of Awami supporters' democratic commitment, suggesting a broader reassessment of

partisan outgroups rather than a narrow reaction to the electoral outcome. These results are robust to controlling for prior Awami League voting, satisfaction with the political transition, and experimental treatments from prior studies in which our subject pool had participated.

Despite this correction in partisan beliefs, institutional evaluations move in the opposite direction. Opposition supporters who update their beliefs about rivals simultaneously report sharp declines in economic expectations, perceived electoral accountability, and trust in politicians, generating a winner–loser gap substantially larger than those documented in established democracies. Non-voters, by contrast, display a distinct pattern: although they show no detectable updating in second-order beliefs—consistent with their lower levels of social trust and perceived political efficacy—they report improved evaluations of democratic institutions after the election. Taken together, these patterns suggest that elections may perform different informational and legitimizing functions for participants and non-participants.

This study contributes to the literature on belief updating and political misperceptions in political economy. A growing body of work documents that voters hold systematically distorted views about opposing partisans—overestimating their ideological extremity (Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016), misjudging their demographic composition (Ahler and Sood, 2018), and underestimating their commitment to democratic norms (Braley et al., 2023; Voelkel et al., 2023). A related strand of the literature shows that these misperceptions can be corrected through the provision of accurate information, which in turn can increase support for democratic norms (Braley et al., 2023; Voelkel et al., 2024), revise broader social and economic beliefs (Alesina et al., 2018), and strengthen support for democratic institutions even in authoritarian settings (Acemoglu et al., 2024). Yet nearly all of this evidence rests on researcher-administered information treatments delivered in laboratory or survey-experimental environments, leaving open whether comparable belief revision occurs when citizens encounter politically meaningful information through their own lived experience.

We address this question by examining elections as the most salient democratic events through which such information is generated. Existing work has used elections as natural experiments to study how electoral outcomes reshape expectations and behavior, including shaping consumption (Gerber and Huber, 2009; Gillitzer and Prasad, 2018), portfolio allocation (Meeuwis et al., 2022), fertility (Dahl et al., 2022), asset prices (Snowberg et al., 2007), and the

discernment of political news (Angelucci et al., 2024). When focusing on cross-partisan attitudes, this literature generally finds that electoral competition intensifies rather than attenuates partisan divisions (Hernández et al., 2021; Michelitch and Utych, 2018; Mullainathan and Washington, 2009; Singh and Thornton, 2019). Leveraging Bangladesh's February 2026 election as a real-world, high-stakes information shock, we show that elections can also play a constructive informational role: opposition supporters revised upward their estimates of rival partisans' commitment to democracy by approximately 10 percentage points, an effect comparable in magnitude to those produced by targeted information interventions in the experimental literature.

In addition, this study contributes to a growing body of work examining whether correcting partisan misperceptions translates into broader improvements in democratic attitudes and institutional trust. Recent experimental evidence from the United States shows that interventions reducing affective polarization or correcting cross-partisan misperceptions do not reliably improve support for democratic norms, reduce endorsement of partisan violence, or strengthen institutional trust (Broockman et al., 2023; Voelkel et al., 2024). However, this evidence is based largely on researcher-induced belief correction in laboratory or survey-experimental settings within established democracies, leaving open whether the same disconnect arises when belief updating occurs organically through real-world political events, particularly in transitional contexts.

Leveraging the rare opportunity afforded by Bangladesh's democratic transition, we show that this disconnect is neither an artifact of experimental design nor confined to consolidated democracies. Despite substantially revising their beliefs about opponents' democratic commitment, opposition supporters exhibit no corresponding reduction in tolerance for violent and disruptive protest and experience declines in trust in politicians, electoral accountability, and economic governance. These findings suggest that the dissociation between interpersonal belief correction and broader democratic attitudes may reflect a general feature of how citizens process political information, rather than a peculiarity of specific interventions or institutional settings. They also qualify the optimistic view that correcting misperceptions can serve as a lever for democratic consolidation: belief revision about opponents, even when achieved at scale through credible elections, does not appear sufficient on its own to restrain destabilizing behavior or build institutional confidence.

2. Method

2.1. Context: The February 2026 Bangladesh Election

Bangladesh's political trajectory in the decade preceding the election was one of accelerating authoritarianism under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League (see Appendix B for a detailed political timeline). The government systematically suppressed opposition: BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia was convicted and placed under house arrest, thousands of BNP leaders were arrested, and Jamaat-e-Islami, the country's largest Islamist party and longtime BNP ally, was banned from contesting elections while several of its senior leaders were executed. By 2024, Bangladesh was widely characterized as a competitive authoritarian regime; experimental evidence from the 2018 general election documented systematic suppression of the opposition, partisan appointments to the Election Commission, and widespread irregularities in the conduct of the vote (Ahmed et al., 2024). This trajectory was abruptly reversed by the July 2024 student uprising, which began as protests against civil service quota policies but escalated into a nationwide anti-authoritarian movement after the government responded with lethal force, killing an estimated 1,400 people. On August 5, 2024, Hasina resigned and fled to India. Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus was appointed to lead an interim government, which subsequently banned the Awami League under the Anti-Terrorism Act.

The 13th National Parliamentary Election, held on February 12, 2026, was the first genuinely competitive national poll in nearly two decades. Critically, the banned AL could not field candidates, leaving its former supporters without an institutional vehicle for political participation. The BNP contested independently, formally ending its longstanding alliance with Jamaat, which headed a separate coalition. The BNP won a decisive landslide, securing approximately 208 of 299 seats; Jamaat emerged as the principal opposition with roughly 68 seats, its strongest electoral performance in history. Voter turnout was approximately 60 percent, and the election was characterized as broadly peaceful and credible. The election thus represents a sharp political transition: from extended one-party dominance, through an interim period, to an electorally legitimized BNP government.

This setting offers a rare opportunity to study how a democratic transition—achieved through both popular mobilization and electoral competition—affects citizens' beliefs about each other's support for democracy and their evaluations of democratic institutions. The election is analytically valuable for three reasons. First, the pre-election period was marked by political violence,

widespread uncertainty about whether the election would be conducted fairly, and deep mutual suspicion across partisan lines (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Pandya, 2026). Under these conditions, voters' beliefs about out-group democratic support were likely to be severely distorted—making the election a sharp test of whether a credible electoral process can correct such misperceptions. Second, the lopsided outcome created clear winners (BNP supporters), losers (opposition supporters), and a substantial pool of non-voters—predominantly former AL supporters left without an institutional vehicle for participation—whose attitudes are theoretically distinct from active partisans on either side. Third, the transition from an unelected interim government to an elected one allows us to examine whether electoral legitimacy—independent of policy changes—reshapes democratic attitudes.

2.2. Survey Design

We employ a repeated cross-sectional design, surveying two independent random samples drawn from the same subject pool: one immediately before the election (Wave 1: January 29–February 11, 2026) and one immediately after (Wave 2: February 25–March 14, 2026). The timing was designed to capture attitudes in the weeks surrounding the election while minimizing the influence of post-election policy developments.

We deliberately chose a cross-sectional design over a panel. Given the short interval between waves and the salience of the election, re-interviewing the same respondents would risk anchoring effects—respondents may recall and adjust toward their pre-election answers—as well as experimenter demand effects, whereby awareness of being repeatedly observed around a political event could induce socially desirable or strategically altered responses. Independent samples drawn from the same pool could reduce these concerns and provide a cleaner comparison of attitudes before and after the election.

Our subject pool consists of individuals who had previously participated in one of two research studies conducted in Bangladesh. The first study (hereafter Study H) examined the impact of the 2017 Rohingya refugee influx on host community sentiments using an incentivized behavioral game (Higuchi et al., 2025). The second (hereafter Study T) investigated the effects of virtual intergroup contact with Rohingya refugees on social cohesion through a randomized controlled trial involving an online gaming application (Takahashi et al., 2025). The subject pools from these two studies were combined, and within each pool, individuals

were re-randomized into the pre-election or post-election wave, stratified by age, gender, and education to ensure covariate balance across waves. Approximately 36 percent of the final sample is drawn from Study H, with the remainder from Study T. The final sample comprises approximately 1,200 respondents across both waves, with roughly balanced representation across groups and survey periods.

An important consideration when re-surveying participants from prior studies is whether earlier experimental treatments may confound the outcomes of interest. We address this concern for each study in turn. Study H involved a survey-based measurement of host community attitudes toward Rohingya refugees; it did not administer any experimental intervention that could have altered participants' political beliefs or democratic attitudes. Study T, by contrast, included an experimental treatment in which participants interacted virtually with Rohingya-labeled computer bots through an online game. We consider it unlikely that this treatment confounds our election-related outcomes, for three reasons. First, the intervention targeted attitudes toward Rohingya refugees specifically, and refugee policy was not a salient issue in the February 2026 election. Second, the results of Study T show that while the treatment improved attitudes toward Rohingya, it had no significant effects on trust toward other Bangladeshis or toward individuals of different religious backgrounds—the attitudinal dimensions most relevant to partisan beliefs and democratic evaluations. Third, as a direct test, we include an indicator for assignment to the gaming treatment in Study T for all specifications including.

The pre-election and post-election surveys used mostly identical questionnaires. The key difference is that the pre-election survey could not observe actual voting behavior. Instead, respondents were asked whether they intended to vote in the February general election and, if so, which party they intended to support. These responses are used as proxies for voting behavior.

Based on respondents' partisan affiliation and voting behavior (or vote intention), we classify individuals into three groups. The first group consists of BNP supporters, the party that won the election, and serves as the reference category in the empirical analysis. Opposition supporters are respondents who supported parties other than BNP. Non-voters are individuals who did not vote (or did not intend to vote). The non-voter category includes heterogeneous types of respondents. Some appear to be politically disengaged and would likely abstain regardless of the election. Others supported the Awami League and refused to participate because the party was unable to contest the election.

Summary statistics for respondents in the pre-election and post-election surveys are reported in Table 1. The share of respondents who intended to vote (pre-election) closely matches the share who voted (post-election), and the distribution of intended party choice similarly mirrors that of actual party choice across waves. This consistency supports the use of vote intention as a proxy for voting behavior in the pre-election sample.

2.3. Outcome Measures

First-order democratic beliefs.—We measure respondents' own trust in democracy using a direct binary question ("Do you trust democracy as the best form of government?") and a list experiment designed to elicit more truthful responses about the February general election in the presence of social desirability bias and experimenter demand effects. In the list experiment, respondents in the control group received a list of four non-sensitive statements and reported how many they agreed with; treated respondents received the same list with an additional statement "This general election is free and fair." The difference in the mean number of statements endorsed between the treatment and control groups identifies the underlying prevalence of agreement with the sensitive statement without requiring respondents to disclose their individual positions.

Second-order democratic beliefs.— We also measure second-order beliefs, defined as respondents' perceptions of the extent to which supporters of major political parties trust democracy. Specifically, respondents are asked to estimate, on a 0–100 scale, the percentage of supporters of the election-winning party (BNP), the party that became the opposition in the election (Jamaat-e-Islami), and the previously dominant authoritarian party (Awami League) who trust democracy.

Because we also observe respondents' own first-order democratic support and use their vote choice as a proxy for partisan affiliation, we can construct group-level estimates of actual democratic support among BNP supporters, opposition supporters, and non-voters. We then compare these observed rates with respondents' estimates of each group's support for democracy to identify the extent of partisan misperception—that is, the degree to which citizens systematically over- or underestimate others' support for democratic governance.

Political and economic perceptions.—We measure a range of political and economic perceptions that capture how citizens evaluate the functioning of democracy and its institutions, using four- and five-point response scales. These measures include perceived level of democracy in Bangladesh, economic expectations for the coming year, perceived electoral representation, and perceived electoral accountability. We also measure institutional trust, including trust in politicians, to capture evaluative attitudes toward political actors and institutions. In addition, we include tolerance for extra-institutional protest, defined as the degree to which respondents consider it acceptable for citizens to resort to protests rather than institutional channels such as elections or courts. To further characterize political engagement, we measure perceived political pivotality, which we use to analyze differences among non-voters. Finally, to assess whether any observed effects extend beyond the political domain, we measure social trust toward multiple groups, including family members, people from the same community, other ethnic groups, other religions, foreigners, and Rohingya refugees.

2.4. Empirical Strategy

We estimate the following specification for each outcome *Y* for individual *i* surveyed in period *t*:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 Opposition_i + \beta_2 NonVoter_i + \gamma Post_t + \delta_1 (Opposition_i \times Post_t) + \delta_2 (NonVoter_i \times Post_t) + \theta X_i + \varepsilon_{it}$$

where $Opposition_i$ is a dummy variable equal to 1 if the respondent voted (or intended to vote) for a party other than BNP, and $NonVoter_i$ is an indicator equal to 1 if the respondent did not vote (or did not intend to vote). $Post_t$ indicates the post-election wave, and X is a vector of individual controls including age, gender, years of schooling, geographic coordinates (latitude and longitude) obtained directly from respondents' mobile phones, as well as indicators for inclusion in the Study T sample and assignment to the past experimental treatment. The coefficients of primary interest are the total effects on opposition supporters ($\gamma + \delta_1$) and non-voters ($\gamma + \delta_2$), which capture the post-election change in each group's outcomes relative to their pre-election levels. These are reported as "Total Effects" at the bottom of each table, with standard errors computed via linear combinations.

The identifying assumption is that, in the absence of the election, the gap between BNP supporters and each comparison group would have remained constant across survey waves. While this assumption is not directly testable in a repeated cross-section, several features of the design lend it credibility. The two waves were fielded within a narrow window surrounding the election, limiting the scope for confounding events. The samples were drawn from the same frame, and we verify covariate balance across waves (Appendix Table A1). For the list experiment, we extend the specification to include triple interactions with the list treatment indicator, following the standard difference-in-difference-in-lists design.

3. Results

3.1. First-Order and Second-Order Democratic Beliefs

Table 2 presents results for first- and second-order democratic beliefs. Columns (1) and (2) present first-order beliefs, capturing respondents' own trust in democracy and their perceptions of the freeness and fairness of the 2026 general election.

The direct measure (Column 1) shows that the dummy variables for opposition supporters and non-voters are negative and statistically significant. This result indicates that, prior to the election, both groups exhibited significantly lower trust in democracy than BNP supporters. However, this does not necessarily imply that their levels of trust were particularly low. Rather, it reflects the fact that BNP supporters—who played a central role in overthrowing the previous government—displayed exceptionally high levels of enthusiasm for democracy compared to other groups. Indeed, their mean value is extremely high at 0.94. More importantly, the post-election dummy and the two interaction terms show no significant change for any group after the election. This result suggests that opposition supporters did not experience a decline in their trust in democracy, even though the party they supported lost the election.

Column 2 reports the results from the list experiment. The list treatment dummy, indicating the inclusion of the "free and fair election" statement, is positive and statistically significant. The estimated coefficient of 0.51 implies that approximately 51 percent of respondents, regardless of partisanship, believe that the election was free and fair. In contrast, the triple interaction terms with the list treatment are not statistically significant, and the corresponding total effects for opposition supporters and non-voters are also indistinguishable from zero. These results suggest that, even

after accounting for social desirability bias, perceptions of electoral fairness are both high and broadly shared across groups, with little evidence of change between the pre- and post-election surveys.

The results for second-order beliefs about democratic trust among supporters of different political parties are reported in Columns 3–5. Focusing first on the pre-election period, Columns 3 and 4 reveal clear evidence of cross-partisan skepticism between BNP supporters and opposition supporters.

In Column 3, which reports perceived democratic trust among BNP supporters, the coefficient on the opposition supporter dummy is negative and statistically significant, indicating that opposition supporters hold skeptical views about BNP supporters' commitment to democracy. A similar pattern emerges in Column 4, which reports second-order beliefs about supporters of the main opposition party, Jamaat-e-Islami. Here, the coefficients for both opposition supporters and non-voters are significantly positive, implying that BNP supporters perceive Jamaat supporters as having lower levels of democratic trust. Consistent with this interpretation, the pre-treatment control mean is 42 percent—substantially lower than the actual level of democratic trust among Jamaat supporters (87 percent), as reported in Appendix Table A1.

These findings indicate the presence of substantial partisan misperceptions between BNP supporters and opposition supporters prior to the election. Moreover, as shown in the analysis of first-order beliefs, BNP supporters themselves exhibit high levels of democratic trust, suggesting that the skepticism expressed by opposition supporters in Column 3 reflects misperception rather than accurate assessment.

Turning to the post-election effects, the central finding is that this polarization is partially reduced after the election. In Column 3, the post-election dummy is significantly positive, and the estimated total effect for opposition supporters is approximately 10 percentage points. Relative to the pre-election gap of about −16 percentage points, this implies that roughly two-thirds of the initial skepticism toward BNP supporters is mitigated after the election, indicating a substantial reduction in partisan polarization.

For beliefs about Jamaat supporters (Column 4), the post-election dummy is likewise positive and statistically significant, while the interaction term with the opposition supporter dummy is significantly negative. This pattern indicates that belief updating after the election occurs primarily

among BNP supporters. In substantive terms, BNP supporters revise their beliefs about Jamaat supporters upward by roughly 7 percentage points after the election. Given the relatively low pre-election control mean of 42 percent, this change may seem only a partial correction. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the update is sufficient to bring BNP supporters' beliefs to roughly the same level as those held by non-voters, whose baseline beliefs are about 8 percentage points higher.

Strikingly, a similar pattern of belief updating is also observed for perceptions of Awami League supporters, despite the party's authoritarian reputation (Column 5). Prior to the election, there is no statistically significant difference between BNP supporters and opposition supporters, and Awami supporters are perceived to have relatively low levels of trust in democracy, with a control mean of 38 percent. After the election, however, both BNP supporters and opposition supporters revise these beliefs upward by approximately 11 and 15 percentage points, respectively. These results indicate that, among respondents who participated in the election, individuals revised upward their estimates of Awami supporters' trust in democracy regardless of partisan alignment. More broadly, the findings suggest that, among election participants, the election triggered a generalized reassessment of partisan outgroups' democratic values rather than belief updating confined to a single partisan group.

While polarization between BNP supporters and opposition supporters reduces after the election, an opposite pattern emerges among non-voters. As shown in Columns 3 and 4, the post-election total effects for non-voters are small in magnitude and insignificant, indicating little evidence of belief updating in this group. In addition, non-voters evaluate Awami supporters more favorably even before the election (Column 5), with baseline perceptions about 13 percentage points higher than those of election participants. This pattern points to political alignment rather than simple disengagement. Consistent with this interpretation, Appendix Table A**3** shows that non-voters report significantly higher satisfaction with the Awami League government (Column 1) and lower satisfaction with the interim government (Column 2), with differences of approximately 13 percent and −18 percent, respectively. These results suggest that non-voters may disproportionately consist of Awami League supporters rather than politically disengaged individuals.

3.2. Political and Economic Perceptions

Table 3 presents results for political and economic perceptions. If the correction of partisan misperceptions reflected a genuine deepening of democratic conviction, we would expect it to propagate to broader evaluations of democratic institutions. Instead, we observe the opposite pattern: the winner–loser gap in these perceptions widens after the election.

We first examine how trust in politicians changes before and after the election (Column 1 of Table 3). Opposition voters—the same group that substantially revised their beliefs about partisan opponents' democratic commitment—experience a sharp decline in trust toward politicians, even though their pre-election level of trust was comparable to that of BNP supporters. To assess whether this pattern reflects a broader decline in social trust, we also examine trust in six other social groups (i.e., family members, community members, and members of other ethnic or religious groups). As reported in Appendix Table A2, we find no evidence across any of these groups that trust among opposition supporters changes relative to BNP supporters between the pre- and post-election periods. These results indicate that the decline in trust after the election is specific to politicians rather than reflecting a generalized erosion of social trust among opposition supporters.

A widening gap between BNP supporters and opposition supporters is also evident in perceptions related to the functioning of democracy in Bangladesh. Perceptions of the overall level of democracy (Column 2) and of electoral representation (Column 3) increase significantly among BNP supporters after the election, while remaining largely unchanged among opposition supporters. A similar divergence appears in perceptions of electoral accountability and economic expectations (Columns 4 and 5), with opposition supporters exhibiting significant post-election declines that generate winner–loser gaps equivalent to approximately 11 percent and 17 percent of the BNP pre-election baseline, respectively.

Another noteworthy finding concerns tolerance for extra-institutional protests. Column 6 reports the effects on respondents' tolerance for situations in which people resort to protests rather than democratic procedures such as elections or courts. The coefficient on the opposition supporter dummy is positive and significant, indicating that opposition supporters are more tolerant of such protests relative to BNP supporters. A similar tendency is observed among non-voters, although the estimate falls just short of conventional levels of statistical significance ($p = 0.101$). Importantly, this tolerance does not decline after the election for either group, suggesting that the

correction of partisan misperceptions does not necessarily diminish support for extra-institutional protest as a political option.

In contrast, non-voters exhibit a different pattern. Their trust in social groups—including politicians—does not deteriorate after the election. However, a striking feature of non-voters is their comparatively low level of trust in domestic social groups even before the election. While there are no significant differences across groups in trust toward external groups such as foreigners or Rohingya refugees, non-voters report significantly lower trust in domestic groups—including family members, people in the same community, and politicians.

Non-voters also report significantly lower levels of political pivotality prior to the election, as shown in Column 3 of Appendix Table A3. That is, they are less likely to perceive their vote as influential in determining political outcomes. One interpretation is that these patterns reflect low political efficacy and social trust, consistent with conventional accounts of voter disengagement. At the same time, they may also reflect the political context of the election: given that Awami League candidates were excluded from the ballot, some non-voters may have perceived limited meaningful electoral choice, leading to lower perceived pivotality despite holding political preferences.

A comparable baseline pattern is observed in political and economic perceptions. Prior to the election, non-voters report significantly lower evaluations of the level of democracy, electoral representation, electoral accountability, and economic expectations compared to election participants. One difference, however, is that after the election, the total effects for non-voters are significantly positive for three indicators—perceptions of the level of democracy, electoral representation, and electoral accountability—suggesting some improvement in these perceptions. Nevertheless, the magnitude of these changes is insufficient to fully offset the initially lower baseline levels, particularly for perceptions of electoral representation and electoral accountability.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the non-voter group is heterogeneous, comprising both politically disengaged individuals and respondents whose abstention reflects alignment with excluded political actors rather than a lack of interest in politics.

3.3. Robustness

The benchmark results show that opposition voters update their beliefs about their opponents' democratic commitment after the election, whereas non-voters do not. A key concern is whether this difference reflects belief updating driven by the experience of electoral participation or instead arises from differences in underlying political attributes across the two groups. In particular, the group of non-voters may include individuals who abstained not simply because they rejected electoral participation but because they were sympathetic to the Awami League and thus did not support participation in the election.

To address this concern, we conduct several robustness checks. First, we re-estimate the benchmark specification including a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent voted for the Awami League in the 2018 election, when the BNP did not boycott the election. The results remain virtually unchanged (Appendix Table A4), suggesting that prior Awami support does not drive the main findings.

We next assess whether the contrasting patterns documented above—belief updating among opposition voters and its absence among non-voters—reflect genuine differences in electoral participation or compositional differences in underlying political attributes. To do so, we examine within-group heterogeneity in both directions: among opposition voters, we test whether belief updating is concentrated in subgroups that are politically similar to non-voters; among non-voters, we test whether belief updating emerges in subgroups that resemble opposition voters. If the observed differences were driven by composition rather than participation, we would expect to observe such within-group heterogeneity.

We begin with the opposition sub-sample (Columns 1–3 of Table 4). A natural concern is that the post-election updating documented for opposition voters is driven by individuals who are politically distant from non-voters—specifically, opposition supporters without Awami-leaning attributes—while those who share characteristics with Awami-aligned non-voters do not update. To assess this possibility, we interact the post-election dummy with two proxies for Awami-leaning attributes: satisfaction with Awami League policies (Column 2) and prior support for the Awami League (Column 3). Across all specifications, the post-election dummy remains positive and statistically significant, while the interaction terms are uniformly insignificant. This indicates that belief updating is not concentrated among opposition voters who are most distant from non-voters; even those with Awami-leaning attributes exhibit comparable post-election belief revision.

We now turn to the non-voter sub-sample, shown in Columns 4–6. The mirror concern is that the absence of belief updating among non-voters reflects their lower levels of political engagement rather than the absence of electoral participation per se. If so, non-voters whose political attributes more closely resemble those of opposition voters—specifically, those with higher perceived political pivotality or greater social trust—should exhibit post-election updating. To test this, we interact the post-election dummy with a measure of political pivotality (Column 5) and with a social trust index constructed using principal component analysis (Column 6). Across all specifications, neither the post-election dummy nor the interaction terms is statistically significant. Even non-voters whose political attributes resemble those of opposition voters show no evidence of belief updating.

These findings suggest that the benchmark difference between opposition voters and non-voters is unlikely to be explained by compositional differences in underlying attributes. Instead, the evidence is more consistent with belief updating associated with the experience of electoral participation.

4. Discussion

This study documents three findings from Bangladesh's February 2026 democratic transition that, taken together, complicate prevailing accounts of how elections shape mass political beliefs. First, the election substantially corrected cross-partisan misperceptions: opposition supporters revised upward their estimates of rival partisans' commitment to democracy by roughly 10 percentage points, with updating extending even to perceptions of supporters of the formerly authoritarian Awami League. Second, this belief correction was sharply asymmetric across winners and losers in its translation into institutional trust: although both groups updated beliefs about opposing partisans, only winners exhibited corresponding improvements in evaluations of democratic institutions. Third, neither the belief updating nor the improvement in institutional trust reduced tolerance for violent and disruptive protest actions—respondents continued to endorse such actions at rates indistinguishable from the pre-election baseline.

These findings reveal a paradox at the heart of democratic transitions: the same election that corrected partisan misperceptions did not shift the behavioral attitudes most directly relevant to democratic stability. We discuss possible interpretations of each finding in turn, focusing on their

implications for the broader literature on democratic transitions.

Interpreting the depolarizing effect of the election.—Our finding that a competitive election produced cross-partisan belief convergence contrasts with a previous literature showing that elections often intensify rather than attenuate partisan animus (Hernández et al., 2021; Mullainathan and Washington, 2009). This pattern reflects the role of prior beliefs about electoral integrity: when citizens suspect fraud, elections can amplify polarization, as individuals update in divergent directions following the same outcome (Botvinik-Nezer et al., 2023). Consistent with this, Marx et al. (2021) provide evidence from Kenya that when such suspicions are present, electoral outcomes reinforce these beliefs and erode trust in electoral institutions among losing partisans. We propose two non-mutually-exclusive interpretations that help reconcile our results with this literature.

The first concerns the structure of prior beliefs about electoral integrity. Our list experiment indicates that approximately 51 percent of respondents believed, prior to the election, that the vote would be conducted freely and fairly. Historical benchmarks help place this estimate in context (Appendix Figure A**3**). Before the consolidation of Awami League rule, perceptions of electoral fairness were much higher: Asian Barometer surveys report levels of 84 percent in 2005 and 75 percent in 2013. However, by 2018, confidence had deteriorated sharply, with only 36 percent expressing confidence in fair vote counting, 33 percent in election administration, and 26 percent in the existence of genuine electoral choice, according to World Values Survey data.

Relative to these recent benchmarks, our estimate of 51 percent represents a recovery of more than 10 percentage points, suggesting a partial improvement in perceptions of electoral fairness. This implies that prior beliefs had shifted into a range where credible election conduct could function as a common informational signal rather than a polarizing stimulus. This interpretation is consistent with Botvinik-Nezer et al. (2023): when priors do not place substantial weight on electoral manipulation, observed outcomes are less likely to generate divergent belief updating across partisan groups.

The second interpretation concerns the informational content of the election itself. The peaceful transfer of power after the defeat of a long-dominant authoritarian-leaning party was not merely an electoral outcome; it was also a public demonstration that political actors across the

spectrum were willing to compete within shared institutional rules. This type of behavioral signal differs from the information typically provided in survey-experimental treatments, which communicates facts about out-party attitudes. Rather than describing opponents' democratic commitments, the election made visible their participation in a common democratic process. Although our design cannot directly test the durability of this signal, it suggests that real-world political events may update cross-partisan beliefs through observable behavior, not only through explicit factual correction.

Belief updating without behavioral implications.—Perhaps the most consequential finding of this study is the dissociation between cognitive updating about opposing partisans and tolerance for violent and disruptive protest. A substantial body of recent work argues that correcting political misperceptions can strengthen democratic attitudes and reduce support for partisan violence (Braley et al., 2023; Voelkel et al., 2024). Our results offer a sobering qualification. The Bangladeshi election generated the kind of misperception correction these interventions aim to achieve, yet the behavioral attitudes most directly relevant to democratic stability—support for violent and disruptive forms of contention—did not change.

While prior work shows that depolarization interventions can reduce affective polarization without improving democratic attitudes (Broockman et al., 2023; Voelkel et al., 2023), our findings suggest that this disconnect may persist even when belief updating arises from real-world political events. In our setting, improvements in perceptions of political opponents do not translate into corresponding changes in behavioral attitudes central to democratic stability. This pattern is difficult to reconcile with standard Bayesian accounts of political attitude formation, in which updated beliefs about opponents' democratic commitments would be expected to reduce the perceived legitimacy of violent and disruptive responses to electoral outcomes. It is more consistent with accounts in which protest tolerance is anchored in identity-based or expressive logics that are not fully reducible to beliefs about specific out-party attitudes (Iyengar et al., 2019). Identifying interventions that can shift this behavioral margin—where information about opposing partisans alone does not appear to suffice—remains an important open question.

5. Conclusion

The February 2026 Bangladesh election demonstrates that democratic transitions can correct partisan misperceptions about opponents' democratic commitment—a prerequisite for peaceful coexistence under democratic rules. Opposition voters substantially revised upward their estimates of how many rival party supporters genuinely trust democracy. This finding is encouraging: it suggests that the democratic process itself generates information that can narrow the partisan perception gap.

However, this cognitive correction did not translate into broader institutional confidence. Opposition voters who updated their beliefs about their opponents simultaneously lost trust in electoral accountability, economic governance, and politicians. Non-voters moved in the opposite direction, gaining institutional confidence without updating partisan beliefs. The election thus produced a belief correction that was real but shallow: it changed what citizens think about each other without changing what they expect from democratic institutions.

These findings carry important implications for the design of democracy-strengthening interventions in transitional contexts. While a growing body of work emphasizes correcting cross-partisan misperceptions as a lever for democratic consolidation, our results suggest that such correction is unlikely to be sufficient on its own, even when achieved endogenously through credible elections. In many developing-country settings where authoritarian rule gives way to competitive elections, transitions hinge not only on whether elections are held, but on whether they generate durable confidence in democratic institutions. Our findings indicate that information revealed through elections can narrow partisan perception gaps without translating into broader institutional trust, highlighting the need to complement information-based approaches with investments in the institutional foundations of democratic confidence, including visible accountability mechanisms, credible economic governance, and improvements in public sector performance. The asymmetric trust dynamics we document further suggest that belief updating may be fragile if not validated by subsequent institutional performance, underscoring the importance of reinforcing institutional credibility in the post-transition period.

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Table 1. Balance check

	Pre-election (1)	Post-election (2)
Number of respondents	705	759
Turnout / vote intention (1 = Yes)	0.837	0.828
	(0.370)	(0.377)
Vote choice:		
BNP (Election-winning party)	0.486	0.488
	(0.500)	(0.500)
Opposition party		
Jamaat (Main opposition party)	0.254	0.220
	(0.436)	(0.414)
NCP	0.055	0.057
	(0.227)	(0.232)
Other parties	0.032	0.045
	(0.176)	(0.208)
Non-voter	0.173	0.190
	(0.379)	(0.393)
Study T Sample (1 = Yes)	0.665	0.619*
	(0.472)	(0.486)
Past treatment (1 = Yes)	0.538	0.495
	(0.499)	(0.500)
Age	31.794	33.630**
	(13.256)	(15.002)
Female (1 = Yes)	0.222	0.220
	(0.416)	(0.415)
Year of schooling	10.918	10.224**
	(5.939)	(6.092)
Bengali ethnicity (1 = Yes)	0.970	0.967
	(0.171)	(0.179)
Muslim (1 = Yes)	0.875	0.879
	(0.331)	(0.326)

Notes: Standard deviations are in parentheses. ** and * indicate that the difference between the pre-election sample (Column 1) and the post-election sample (Column 2) is statistically significant at the 5% and 10% levels, respectively, based on a t-test.

Table 2. Democratic beliefs: First-order and second-order

	First-order		Second-order		
			Perceived trust democracy among:		
	Trust democracy (1=Yes) (1)	List experiment: Values (2)	BNP supporters (3)	Jamaat supporters (4)	Awami supporters (5)
List Treatment (1=A)		0.514***			
		(0.136)			
Opposition supporter	-0.064**	-0.287**	-15.565***	22.388***	-4.898
	(0.030)	(0.144)	(2.828)	(2.886)	(3.373)
Non-voter	-0.180***	-0.304*	-7.655*	9.195**	13.496***
	(0.048)	(0.178)	(4.012)	(4.152)	(4.648)
Post-election	-0.006	-0.089	6.251***	5.939**	11.459***
	(0.019)	(0.125)	(2.085)	(2.594)	(2.920)
Opposition*Post	-0.044	0.277	3.730	-4.915	3.100
	(0.041)	(0.197)	(3.763)	(3.975)	(4.716)
Non-voter*Post	0.015	0.305	-3.816	-8.428	-9.870*
	(0.062)	(0.218)	(4.944)	(5.254)	(5.846)
List*Post		0.327*			
		(0.186)			
Opposition*List		0.301			
		(0.218)			
Non-voter*List		0.150			
		(0.262)			
Opposition*List*Post		-0.460			
		(0.286)			
Non-voter*List*Post		-0.290			
		(0.327)			
Study T sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Past treatment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,178	1,174	1,092	1,073	1,064
Pre-control mean	0.94		66.97	42.18	38.00
[Total Effects]					
Effect on Opposition	-0.050	-0.133	9.981***	1.025	14.559***
	(0.037)	(0.269)	(4.518)	(2.988)	(3.680)
Effect on Non-voter	0.009	0.037	2.436	-2.489	1.589
	(0.059)	(0.216)	(3.127)	(4.586)	(5.114)

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. ***, ** and * indicate statistical significance at the 1, 5 and 10% levels, respectively.

Table 3. Effects on political and economic perceptions

	Trust in politicians (1)	Level of democracy (2)	Electoral representation (3)	Electoral accountability (4)	Economic expectations (5)	Tolerance for extra-institutional protests (6)
Opposition supporter	0.041	-0.023	-0.061	0.049	0.015	0.177**
	(0.088)	(0.064)	(0.064)	(0.081)	(0.083)	(0.081)
Non-voter	-0.242**	-0.232***	-0.336***	-0.429***	-0.240**	0.144
	(0.099)	(0.088)	(0.075)	(0.094)	(0.105)	(0.101)
Post-election	0.065	0.281***	0.182***	0.090	0.107	-0.016
	(0.075)	(0.054)	(0.055)	(0.068)	(0.072)	(0.068)
Opposition*Post	-0.269**	-0.224***	-0.217**	-0.398***	-0.644***	-0.103
	(0.113)	(0.086)	(0.085)	(0.110)	(0.113)	(0.108)
Non-voter*Post	-0.046	-0.092	0.054	0.084	-0.234*	-0.092
	(0.131)	(0.111)	(0.099)	(0.123)	(0.133)	(0.129)
Study T sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Past treatment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,164	1,167	1,159	1,158	1,167	1,167
Pre-control mean	2.04	2.64	2.50	2.78	3.25	1.87
[Total Effects]						
Effect on Opposition	-0.204**	0.057	-0.036	-0.308***	-0.538***	-0.120
	(0.108)	(0.098)	(0.083)	(0.103)	(0.113)	(0.084)
Effect on Non-voter	0.019	0.188*	0.236***	0.174*	-0.128	-0.108
	(0.084)	(0.066)	(0.065)	(0.085)	(0.087)	(0.109)

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. ***, ** and * indicate statistical significance at the 1, 5 and 10% levels, respectively.

Table 4. Heterogeneity in Second-Order Belief Correction

	Trust democracy among BNP supporters					
Sub-group	Opposition supporters			Non-voters		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Post-election	9.850***	10.280***	11.042***	3.213	-1.832	3.391
	(3.117)	(3.274)	(3.376)	(4.722)	(17.570)	(5.111)
High Awami Satisfaction		14.433				
		(8.932)				
Post*Awami		-7.330				
		(10.687)				
Voted Awami			10.912			
			(6.873)			
Post*Voted Awami			-14.805			
			(10.092)			
Pivotality					-1.012	
					(4.846)	
Post*Pivotality					1.742	
					(5.541)	
Trust Index						0.078
						(2.339)
Post*Trust Index						0.984
						(3.215)
Study T sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Past treatment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	362	361	346	205	205	203

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. ***, ** and * indicate statistical significance at the 1, 5 and 10% levels, respectively.

Appendix A

Additional Figures and Tables

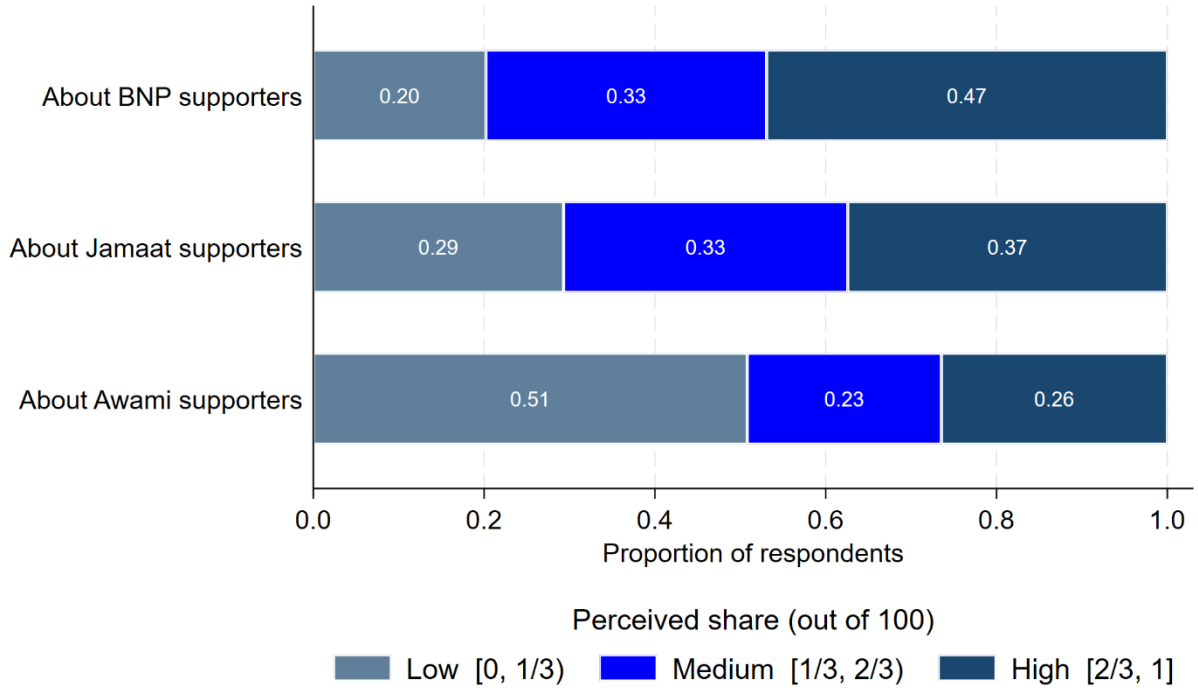

Figure A1. Distribution of second-order beliefs about democratic support (pre-election). Figure shows the distribution of respondents' second-order beliefs about democracy, measured prior to the February 2026 election. Respondents were asked: "Out of 100 [party] supporters, how many do you think trust democracy?" The figure reports the proportion of respondents whose beliefs fall into three bins: low [0,1/3), medium [1/3,2/3), and high [2/3,1]. Bars are shown separately for beliefs about BNP supporters, Jamaat-e-Islami supporters, and Awami League supporters.

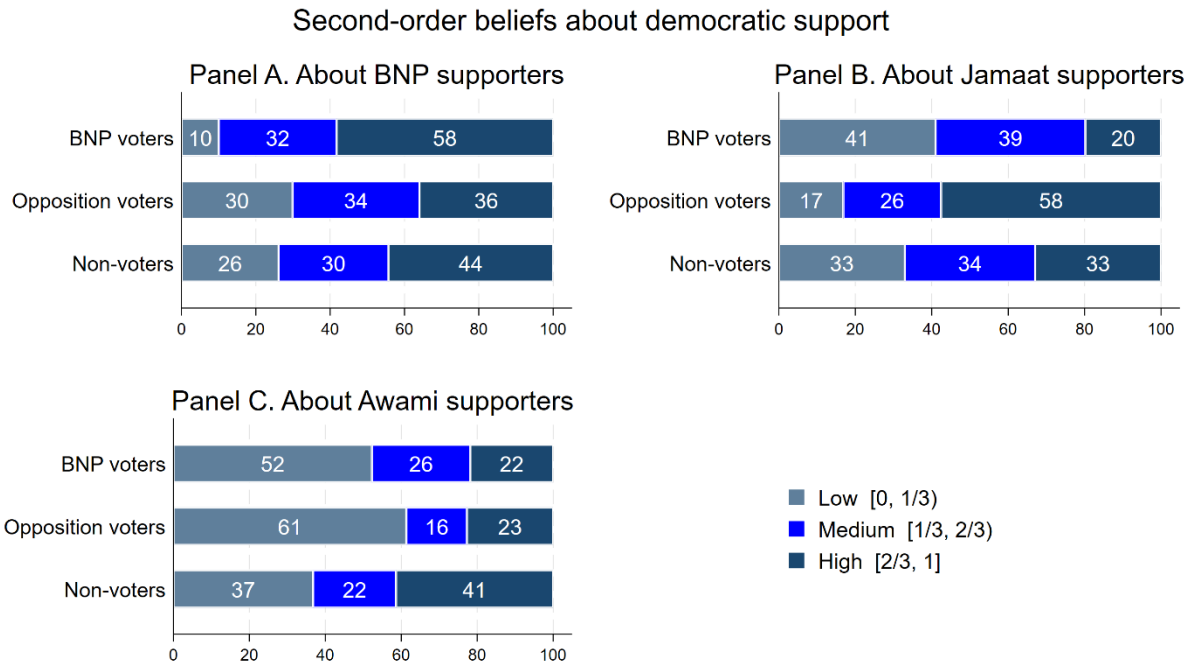

Figure A2. Distribution of second-order beliefs by respondent group (pre-election). Figure shows the distribution of second-order beliefs about democracy, measured prior to the February 2026 election. Respondents were asked: "Out of 100 [party] supporters, how many do you think trust democracy?" Each panel reports the proportion of respondents whose beliefs fall into three bins: low [0,1/3), medium [1/3,2/3), and high [2/3,1]. Panel A shows beliefs about BNP supporters, Panel B about Jamaat-e-Islami supporters, and Panel C about Awami League supporters. Within each panel, bars are shown separately for BNP voters, opposition voters, and non-voters.

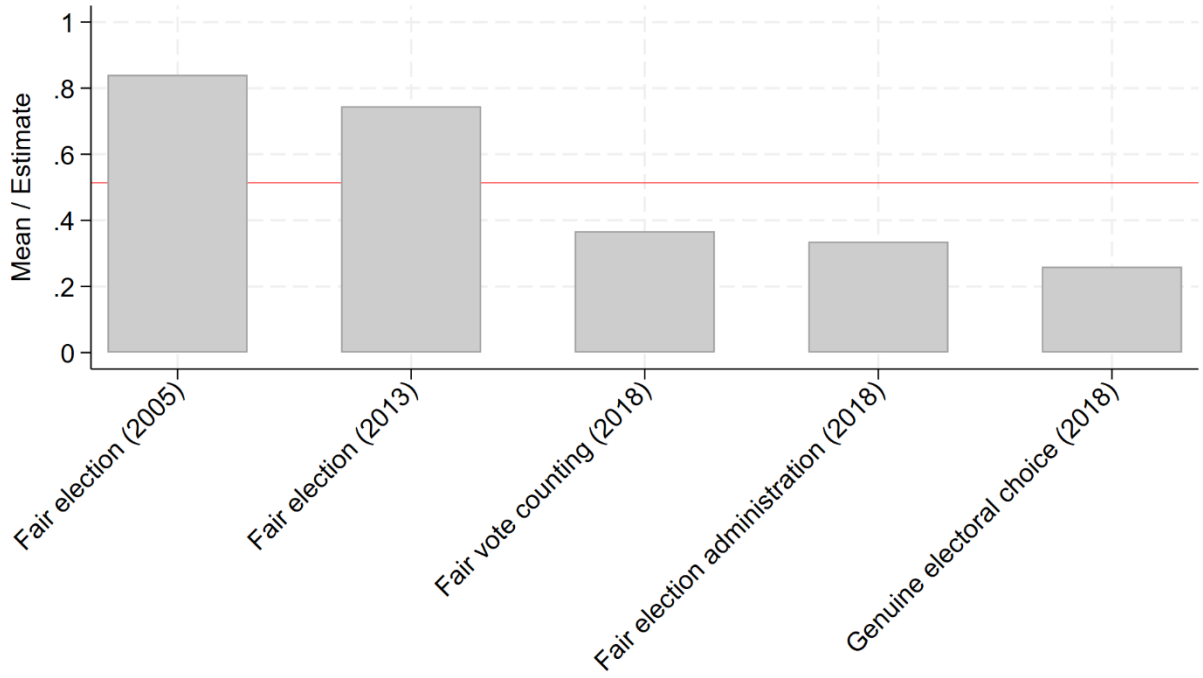

Figure A3. Perceptions of electoral fairness. Bars show survey-based measures of electoral fairness from Asian Barometer (2005, 2013) and the World Values Survey (2018). The red horizontal line shows the estimated share viewing the February 2026 election as free and fair based on a list experiment (0.51).

Table A1. First-order and second-order democratic beliefs by partisan group (pre-election)

		Opposition party supporters		
	BNP supporters (winning party) (1)	All opposition parties (2)	Only Jamaat (3)	Non-voters (4)
First-order				
Trust in democracy (1=Trust)	0.944	0.865	0.871	0.750
	(0.230)	(0.343)	(0.336)	(0.435)
Second-order (%)				
BNP voters trust democracy	66.97	51.92	50.08	60.61
	(24.14)	(29.48)	(29.03)	(32.94)
Jamaat supporters trust democracy	42.14	64.69	69.88***	49.74
	(27.48)	(27.88)	(25.61)	(33.45)
Awami League supporters trust democracy	38.23	34.00	33.32	52.28
	(31.80)	(33.02)	(31.40)	(37.64)

Notes: Standard deviations are in parentheses. *** indicates that the difference between Column 2 (all opposition party supporters) and Column 3 (Jamaat-e-Islami supporters) is statistically significant at the 1% level based on a t-test.

Table A2. Trust indicators

	Family	Same community	Other ethnic tribe	Other religions	Foreigners	Rohingya refugees	Politicians
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Opposition supporter	-0.031	0.014	-0.064	-0.014	0.097	0.125	0.041
	(0.034)	(0.074)	(0.077)	(0.079)	(0.085)	(0.083)	(0.088)
Non-voter	-0.207***	-0.224**	-0.191*	-0.188*	-0.016	0.003	-0.242**
	(0.062)	(0.091)	(0.100)	(0.099)	(0.108)	(0.110)	(0.099)
Post-election	-0.041	0.156**	0.040	0.003	-0.009	0.076	0.065
	(0.029)	(0.069)	(0.071)	(0.071)	(0.074)	(0.073)	(0.075)
Opposition*Post	0.044	-0.118	-0.046	-0.116	-0.084	-0.082	-0.269**
	(0.048)	(0.097)	(0.103)	(0.106)	(0.114)	(0.113)	(0.113)
Non-voter*Post	0.088	-0.067	0.063	0.089	-0.042	-0.062	-0.046
	(0.081)	(0.117)	(0.129)	(0.126)	(0.134)	(0.138)	(0.131)
Study T sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Past treatment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,182	1,180	1,166	1,171	1,105	1,154	1,164
Pre-control mean	3.92	3.05	2.71	2.70	2.40	1.75	2.04
[Total Effects]							
Effect on Opposition	0.003	0.038	-0.006	-0.113	-0.092	-0.006	-0.204**
	(0.037)	(0.096)	(0.075)	(0.078)	(0.112)	(0.085)	(0.108)
Effect on Non-voter	0.047	0.089	0.103	0.092	-0.051	0.013	0.019
	(0.075)	(0.068)	(0.108)	(0.105)	(0.085)	(0.117)	(0.084)

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. ***, ** and * indicate statistical significance at the 1, 5 and 10% levels, respectively.

Table A3. Effects on satisfaction with political leadership and pivotality perceptions

	Satisfaction:		
	Awami	Interim government	Pivotality
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Opposition supporter	-1.183***	0.606***	0.101**
	(0.241)	(0.224)	(0.042)
Non-voter	0.551*	-1.071***	-0.788***
	(0.315)	(0.293)	(0.104)
Post-election	0.265	0.579***	-0.043
	(0.224)	(0.201)	(0.045)
Opposition*Post	0.485	0.351	-0.158**
	(0.328)	(0.302)	(0.069)
Non-voter*Post	-0.411	0.507	-0.187
	(0.409)	(0.391)	(0.141)
Study T sample	Yes	Yes	Yes
Past treatment	Yes	Yes	Yes
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,177	1,179	1,187
Pre-control mean	4.17	5.93	3.80
[Total Effects]			
Effect on Opposition	0.751***	0.930***	-0.201***
	(0.344)	(0.225)	(0.052)
Effect on Non-voter	-0.146	1.086***	-0.230*
	(0.237)	(0.336)	(0.134)

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. ***, ** and * indicate statistical significance at the 1, 5 and 10% levels, respectively.

Table A4. Estimation with the past voting experience for the Awami League

	First-order		Second-order		
			Perceived trust democracy among:		
	Trust democracy (1=Yes) (1)	List experiment: Values (2)	BNP supporters (3)	Jamaat supporters (4)	Awami supporters (5)
List Treatment (1=A)		0.455***			
		(0.140)			
Opposition supporter	-0.063**	-0.301**	-15.822***	22.160***	-2.770
	(0.030)	(0.142)	(2.931)	(2.988)	(3.469)
Non-voter	-0.173***	-0.277	-7.267*	9.450**	16.085***
	(0.048)	(0.180)	(4.115)	(4.308)	(4.809)
Post-election	-0.010	-0.068	5.269**	5.742**	12.632***
	(0.021)	(0.126)	(2.223)	(2.782)	(3.067)
Opposition*Post	-0.050	0.254	4.761	-5.090	1.209
	(0.043)	(0.197)	(3.901)	(4.137)	(4.863)
Non-voter*Post	0.034	0.245	-3.846	-8.143	-12.922**
	(0.063)	(0.221)	(5.120)	(5.489)	(6.097)
List*Post		0.333*			
		(0.191)			
Opposition*List		0.373*			
		(0.222)			
Non-voter*List		0.153			
		(0.268)			
Opposition*List*Post		-0.444			
		(0.290)			
Non-voter*List*Post		-0.266			
		(0.335)			
Past Awami voter	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Study T sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Past treatment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,098	1,095	1,020	1,002	994
Pre-control mean	0.94		66.97	42.18	38.00
[Total Effects]					
Effect on Opposition	-0.059	-0.071	10.030***	0.652	13.841***
	(0.038)	[0.272]	(3.201)	(4.741)	(3.749)
Effect on Non-voter	0.024	0.040	1.423	-2.401	-0.290
	(0.059)	[0.218]	(4.644)	(3.046)	(5.310)

Notes: All regressions include a dummy variable for voting for the Awami League in the 2018 election. Standard errors are in parentheses. ***, ** and * indicate statistical significance at the 1, 5 and 10% levels, respectively.

Appendix B

Context: Political Background and the 2026 Bangladesh General Election

B.1 Bangladesh's Two-Party Rivalry and the Caretaker Government System

Since the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1991, Bangladesh's political landscape has been dominated by two rival parties: the Bangladesh Awami League (AL), led by Sheikh Hasina, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by the family of the late President Ziaur Rahman. The deep mistrust between these parties has shaped the country's electoral institutions in distinctive ways. A defining feature of Bangladesh's democratic architecture was the non-partisan caretaker government (NCG) system, introduced through the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1996. Under this arrangement, an unelected interim administration—headed by a retired Chief Justice as Chief Adviser—would assume power during the 90-day period before a general election, with the sole mandate of ensuring free and fair polls. The system was born out of the Awami League's own agitation: after the BNP organized the February 1996 election under its own government—prompting an opposition boycott—mass protests compelled the adoption of the NCG framework.

Three successive elections were held under this system—in 1996, 2001, and 2008—each widely regarded by international observers as substantially more credible than elections conducted without it. However, the 2006–2008 political crisis, during which a military-backed caretaker government extended its rule for nearly two years and detained leaders from both major parties, provided the Awami League with a rationale for dismantling the system. In 2011, following a Supreme Court ruling that declared the Thirteenth Amendment unconstitutional by a narrow 4–3 majority, the Hasina government abolished the NCG through the Fifteenth Amendment. Despite the fact that a parliamentary committee had unanimously recommended retaining the caretaker system, the recommendation was reversed after direct intervention by the Prime Minister.

B.2 Democratic Backsliding under Hasina (2009–2024)

The abolition of the caretaker system inaugurated a period of sustained democratic erosion. Three consecutive elections—held in 2014, 2018, and January 2024—were conducted under Hasina's government rather than a neutral interim administration. The BNP boycotted the 2014

election, in which the Awami League won 153 of 154 uncontested seats by default. The 2018 election was marred by widespread allegations of vote rigging, and the BNP was reduced to just seven seats amidst mass arrests of its leaders. By this point, several international observers and organizations began characterizing Bangladesh as a competitive authoritarian or hybrid regime.

Throughout this period, the Hasina government intensified its crackdown on political opposition and civil society. Thousands of BNP leaders and activists were arrested; the party's chairperson, Khaleda Zia, was convicted on corruption charges in 2018 and placed under house arrest. Jamaat-e-Islami, the country's largest Islamist party and a longtime BNP ally, was banned from contesting elections in 2013 after its registration was cancelled by the High Court on the grounds that its charter violated the constitutional principle of secularism. The government's International Crimes Tribunal, originally established to try collaborators of the 1971 liberation war, was used to prosecute and execute several senior Jamaat leaders. Meanwhile, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and the systematic silencing of journalists and activists became hallmarks of the regime.

The January 7, 2024 general election represented the nadir of this trajectory. The BNP again boycotted the polls, demanding elections under a neutral caretaker government. With no meaningful opposition, the Awami League secured 224 of 300 seats, while 62 seats were won by nominally independent candidates—most of whom were AL members running as "dummy candidates" to simulate electoral competition. Voter turnout was approximately 42 percent, the second lowest in the country's democratic history. The United States Department of State declared the election not free and fair; the United Kingdom described it as "lacking the preconditions of democracy."

B.3 The July Uprising and the Fall of the Hasina Government

In June 2024, the High Court Division of the Supreme Court reinstated a quota system reserving 30 percent of civil service positions for descendants of 1971 liberation war veterans—a policy that had been abolished following student protests in 2018. The ruling ignited student demonstrations that quickly escalated amid high youth unemployment and accumulated grievances against the regime. On July 14, Prime Minister Hasina inflamed the situation by appearing to compare student protesters to "Razakars"—a deeply derogatory term referring to Bengali

collaborators with the Pakistani military during the 1971 war. Clashes between protesters and the Awami League's student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), were followed by a massive security crackdown involving the police, the Rapid Action Battalion, and the Border Guard Bangladesh. A nationwide curfew was imposed and internet services were shut down.

Rather than suppressing the movement, the government's violent response transformed a policy-specific protest into a broad-based, anti-authoritarian uprising. The student-led organization, Students Against Discrimination (SAD), shifted its demand to a single point: the resignation of Sheikh Hasina. On August 4, tens of thousands joined protests across the country. On August 5, defying a nationwide curfew, massive crowds marched toward the Prime Minister's official residence in Dhaka. When security chiefs reportedly refused to authorize further lethal force, Hasina resigned and fled to India by military aircraft. A United Nations investigation later estimated that up to 1,400 people—including many children—were killed between mid-July and early August, with the majority of fatalities caused by security forces' gunfire.

Following Hasina's departure, Nobel Peace laureate Muhammad Yunus was appointed Chief Adviser of an interim government, tasked with institutional reform and the organization of new elections. Khaleda Zia was acquitted and released. The interim government pursued accountability for abuses under the Hasina regime: the International Crimes Tribunal sentenced Hasina to death in absentia in November 2025 for crimes against humanity during the July–August uprising. The Chhatra League was banned and designated a terrorist organization in October 2024, and in May 2025, the Awami League itself was banned under the Anti-Terrorism Act and its party registration was suspended by the Election Commission. In November 2025, the Supreme Court restored the Thirteenth Amendment's non-partisan caretaker government provisions, though their application was deferred to elections from the Fourteenth Parliament onward.

B.4 The February 2026 General Election

The 13th National Parliamentary Election was held on February 12, 2026—the first general election since the July uprising and the first genuinely competitive national poll in nearly two decades. More than 127 million voters were registered, and for the first time, postal voting was available for an estimated 15 million overseas workers. Fifty registered political parties fielded a total of 2,028 candidates across 299 constituencies. Critically, the Awami League—the winner of

the previous four elections—was barred from participation, fundamentally reshaping the competitive landscape.

The election was principally contested between two blocs. The BNP, led by Tarique Rahman—who returned from 17 years of exile in London in December 2025—contested independently for the first time since the 1991 election, formally ending its longstanding alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami. The Jamaat, for its part, headed an 11-party coalition that included the National Citizen Party (NCP), a new political party founded by leaders of the 2024 student protest movement. The dissolution of the BNP–Jamaat alliance marked a significant structural shift in Bangladesh's party system.

The BNP won a decisive victory, securing approximately 208 of the 299 seats with results declared, achieving a two-thirds parliamentary majority. Jamaat-e-Islami emerged as the principal opposition party with approximately 68 seats—its strongest performance in history. The NCP won six seats, and the remaining seats went to independents and smaller parties. Voter turnout was approximately 60 percent, a substantial increase from the 42 percent recorded in January 2024 and widely interpreted as a signal of renewed public confidence in the electoral process. The Election Commission characterized the election as having taken place in a broadly peaceful environment, and international observers noted the competitive and credible nature of the polls. Alongside the parliamentary vote, a constitutional referendum on the "July Charter"—a package of institutional reforms proposed in the wake of the 2024 uprising—was also conducted.

B.5 Implications for the Present Study

The 2026 election provides a particularly compelling setting in which to study how elections function as information shocks. Several features of the context are noteworthy. First, the election took place against the backdrop of extreme political polarization and mutual distrust between partisan camps—a legacy of two decades of authoritarian rule, opposition persecution, and the violent upheaval of 2024. Second, the absence of the Awami League from the ballot created a unique configuration in which former AL voters were distributed across other parties or abstained, generating a population of "non-BNP voters" who were heterogeneous in their partisan origins but unified in their experience of electoral defeat. Third, the election's widely acknowledged procedural credibility—in stark contrast to the three preceding elections—offers an opportunity to

examine whether perceived procedural fairness mitigates the polarizing effects of electoral competition. Finally, the pre-election period was characterized by intense political mobilization and anxiety, including widespread political violence and uncertainty about whether the election would indeed be conducted fairly, creating conditions under which voters' prior beliefs about out-group commitment to democratic norms were likely to be distorted.

Appendix C

Survey Instrument

This is the survey conducted by the University of Chittagong and Japanese universities, including Waseda University, Sophia University, and Kwansei Gakuin University, which we just explained during a call.
If you agree to participate in this study, please click the Agree button below. Your click signifies your consent.

1-1. Your telephone number.
2-1. The general election was held on February 12 this year. Did you vote? [1. Yes, 2. No]
2-2. [Only in pre-election survey] Have you decided which party you are going to vote for?
2-3. If Yes, which party did you vote for? [pre-election survey: which party are you going to vote for?]
[1. BNP, 2. Jamaat-e-Islami, 3. NCP, 4. Islamic front, 5. Bangladesh Islami Andolon (Charmonai), 6. Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis, 7. Jatiya party, 8. Voted for none (blank ballot), 9. Other (specify)]
3. How important was your own vote in determining the final outcome in this general election?
[1. Very important, 2. Moderately important, 3. Not so important, 4. Not important at all]
4-1. Have you voted in the 2018 general election? [1. Yes, 2. No, 3. Do not remember]
If Yes, 4-2. Which party did you support at the time of 2018 general election?
[1. Awami League (AL), 2. Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), 3. Jatiya Party (JP(E)), 4. Jamaat-e-Islami, 5. Other, 6. I did not support any party, 7. Do not remember]
5-1. Do you agree with the following statement?
"I trust democracy as a system." [1. I agree, 2. I do not agree]
5-2. Out of 100 randomly surveyed Bangladeshi people supporting Awami League (AL), how many would you guess agreed with the statement: "I trust democracy as a system." [0-100]
5-3. Out of 100 randomly surveyed Bangladeshi people supporting Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), how many would you guess agreed with the statement: "I trust democracy as a system." [0-100]
5-4. Out of 100 randomly surveyed Bangladeshi people supporting Jamaat-e-Islami, how many would you guess agreed with the statement: "I trust democracy as a system." [0-100]
6. Please read the statements below. How many of these statements do you agree with? You do not need to indicate which statements you agree with — only how many.
Pattern A
- Voting is a civic duty that people should take seriously.
- People often discuss elections with their family or friends.
- Many people find it difficult to choose among candidates.
- People often feel confused by election-related information.
- This general election is free and fair.

Pattern B
- Voting is a civic duty that people should take seriously.
- People often discuss elections with their family or friends.
- Many people find it difficult to choose among candidates.
- People often feel confused by election-related information.

7-1. How satisfied are you with the overall performance of the Awami League (AL) since it took the ruling position? Please answer on a scale from 1 to 10, where "1" means "not satisfied at all" and "10" is "completely satisfied."
7-2. How satisfied are you with the overall performance of the interim government of Muhammad Yunus? Please answer on a scale from 1 to 10, where "1" means "not satisfied at all" and "10" is "completely satisfied."
8. I want to know how much you trust different groups of people. Could you tell me how much you trust

each one? [1. Trust a lot, 2. Trust somewhat, 3. Trust just a little, 4. Not trust at all]
8-1. The people in your family
8-2. The people in your upazila
8-3. The people from the other ethnic tribe
8-4. The people from other religions
8-5. The people from a foreign country
8-6. The Rohingya refugees
8-7. The politicians
8-8. The government services (such as education, health, electricity, water, etc)
9. I am going to name a number of organizations and institutions. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them? [1. A great deal, 2. Quite a lot, 3. Not very much, 4. None at all]
9-1. The national government
9-2. Parliament
9-3. General elections
9-4. Upazilla chairman
9-5. Upazila-level elections
10-1. Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time? [1. Much worse, 2. Worse, 3. Same, 4. Better, 5. Much better]
10-2. Thinking about how elections work in practice in this country, how well do elections ensure that people like you are represented in Parliament? [1. Not at all well, 2. Not very well, 3. Fairly well, 4. Very well]
10-3. Thinking about how elections work in practice in this country, how well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want? [1. Not at all well, 2. Not very well, 3. Fairly well, 4. Very well]
10-4. Now let us speak about the political system in this country. In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Bangladesh today? [1. Not at all democratic, 2. Not very democratic, 3. Fairly democratic, 4. Very democratic]
10-5. Do you think that, even when people are dissatisfied with an election outcome, most people in society believe that institutional channels, such as courts, the election commission, or the next election, should be prioritized over protests? [1. Strongly agree, 2. Somewhat agree, 3. Somewhat disagree, 4. Strongly disagree]
11-1. We plan to donate BDT 100 to the Election Working Group (EWG), a non-partisan network of around 30 NGOs committed to free and fair elections and good governance. First of all, do you know EWG?
[1. Yes, and I know what they are doing, 2. Yes, I have heard of it, but do not know what they are doing, 3. No]
11-2. EWG was established in 2006 and has around 30 NGOs in its network. EWG works to promote free and fair elections and good governance in Bangladesh. EWG is a non-partisan network and does not support any particular political party. Now, we will give you the opportunity to authorize a donation to EWG. We make the donation only if you authorize it. Please note that you do not need to pay any money to authorize this donation. Would you like us to donate BDT 100 to EWG on your behalf?
[1. Yes, please donate BDT 100 to EWG on my behalf, 2. No, please do not donate BDT 100 to EWG on my behalf.]
14. How old are you?

Thank you very much. This is the end of the survey.