

# Why Democrats Are More Upset Now Than If There Had Never Been an FBI Investigation

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In the workplace, there is no disputing the most important four-letter “f-word”: *fair*. Employees care greatly about whether they are treated fairly by organizational leaders. In fact, [convincing evidence](#) demonstrates that when decision *outcomes* and the *processes* used to make those decisions are perceived to be fair, employees are more committed, are more likely to go above and beyond what is expected in their formal job descriptions, are less likely to be unethical, and they perform better.

Given the importance of fairness in organizations, it is perhaps not surprising that most Democrats are disappointed and angry about the confirmation of Chief Justice Kavanaugh because they believe it was an unfair process. What is surprising is that research shows us that Republicans may have been better off voting a week ago and not doing the FBI investigation. Why would having a procedure that is fairer (i.e., one that includes the FBI investigation) not in part assuage the negative reactions of Democrats?

A [consistent research finding](#) is that perceiving a process as fair matters more when a decision outcome is unfavorable. For example, if an organization adopts a new policy that employees do not like, the employees feel better if at least they had a chance to voice their opinions first. This finding, that procedures matter the most when someone does not get what they want, is found across a variety of [organizational decisions](#) such as selection, compensation, and policy implementation decisions.

If fair processes matter the most when a decision doesn't go one's way, why are Democrats so upset—and perhaps even more upset than if there had never been an FBI investigation? Research on fairness in organizations helps us understand this surprising reaction.

A [classic set of studies in social psychology](#) on the “frustration effect” helps us explain the reaction of Democrats. In these studies, the researchers allowed the participant to voice his/her feelings and views before a decision was made, but then the participant became aware that his/her opinion was never truly considered. The researchers found that when the procedures are made fairer by providing the opportunity for voice but that voice was not adequately considered that participants were more upset by the decision than if they had never had a chance to provide their perspectives in the first place.

Although most Democrats were pleased about the FBI investigation because the process was supposed to be fairer, meaning it would be more accurate and less biased, they believe the scope

and depth of the investigation was insufficient. The FBI investigation got Democrats hopes up that all relevant information would be surfaced but then had their hopes dashed by what they believed to be a brief and shallow investigation followed by the confirmation of Chief Justice Kavanaugh.

What if the process had been perceived as fair by Democrats? Let's imagine that all relevant witnesses were interviewed, there was no rush on the investigation, and the FBI had full rein to conduct the investigation. At that point it would be hard to state that the process wasn't fair given Democrats voices were heard and the process was more accurate and unbiased. Would Democrats have felt better about the confirmation than if there hadn't been an FBI investigation?

Interestingly, research suggests the answer is probably "no." My colleagues and I found evidence for the "[identity violation effect](#)" in multiple studies. These studies demonstrate that when a decision is extremely important to someone's identity, such as who will sit on the Supreme Court and have a vote on upholding one's core values, that if a decision outcome is unfavorable that objectively fair procedures do not improve their reactions. In fact, people in this situation tend to discount whether the procedures were in fact fair even when they were objectively fair. [Other studies](#) similarly find that fair procedures do not positively influence reactions when an outcome is unfavorable if someone has a strong moral stance on the issue.

In general, making procedures fair is a great way for organizations to get buy in from employees—especially if the decision is unfavorable. However, employees must believe the process was in fact fair—that voice was considered and that the decision was based on accurate and unbiased information—or else they may react worse than if they never believed they would have a fair process.

The implications for decision makers in organizations are clear: if you tell people they are going to get a fair process, they better believe that it was in fact fair if they do not get the outcome they want. And, although it may feel fatalistic, if someone cares deeply about the issue for moral or identity reasons, decision makers should not expect fair procedures will help in that specific situation.

The Democrats are upset and disheartened by Kavanaugh's confirmation. And the way the FBI investigation was conducted may have made things worse.