

How Racial Threat Motivates Partisan Differences in Anti-Democratic Attitudes

Abstract:

A great deal of concern has been raised recently about anti-democratic support among the American public. Across two surveys on large samples of Americans, I find that Republicans are, in orders of magnitude, more supportive of anti-democratic norms and practices, such as violence against political opposition, than Democrats and Independents. Second, I find that racial threat primarily motivates these attitudes only among Republicans. Lastly, taking a parsimonious approach to threat, I find that these anti-democratic sentiments among Republicans are temporally driven. Future senses of minority threat are the only predictors of their anti-democratic attitudes. Overall, I confirm that a main current which underpins partisan politics is the changing demographic landscape of the United States.

Scholars have recently raised concern over democratic backsliding in the American political system. Prompted by authoritarian rhetoric and behavior among elites (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) as well as movement away from democratic ideals among the public (Carey et al. 2019; Graham and Svolik 2020), these indicators need significantly more attention – in order to identify their causes and test potential bulwarks. Recent examples of this backsliding include questioning the legitimacy of the outcome of the 2020 Presidential Election, increased voter suppression and intimidation, and the potential of lack of a peaceful transfer of power. These recent happenings, particularly prompted by Republican party, are red flags that elites in the GOP could be willing to roll back democratic institutions and norms in attempts to maintain power. Recent work has shown that the primary motivator of Republicans' views is threat from changing demographics, and the resultant loss of power among whites (Bartels 2020). These sentiments, however, have only been explored generally and only in the context of Republican attitudes. We are unaware of the degree that anti-democratic attitudes pervade both political parties and if particular types of racial threat are motivating these attitudes. In this paper, I investigate if Republicans have more anti-democratic views than Democrats, if racial threat is the main predictor of these attitudes, and what temporal sense of racial threat is the most powerful predictor of these views.

Questions

There are two questions which are central to this study. First, are Republicans more supportive of anti-democratic practices and norms when compared to Democrats? Recent work related to this question has only accounted for Republicans, which fails to show the extent that this is motivated

by one or both parties (Bartels 2020). A direct comparison between partisans is necessary in showing how pervasive these attitudes are.

The second question I pursue is, if minority threat is the main motivation behind these anti-democratic sentiments, is it concern about these groups in the present or the future? A large body of work has shown that the increasing size of minorities in the U.S. generates senses of threat (Blumer 1958; Quillian 1996; Dixon and Rosenbaum 2004; Dixon 2006; Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Craig and Richeson 2014a; 2014b; Mutz 2018). Typically, these results have been framed in the context of future changes, however, studies have not assessed variant temporal senses of this threat. In short, we do not know *where* the public thinks the threat is coming from.

Overall, these questions help to elucidate the degree to which anti-democratic support pervades American politics. If support exist broadly among the public, then this suggests a developing problem across parties in US democracy. If it is limited to one party, then it suggests that party supporters have potentially moved away from other Americans in their tolerance of anti-democratic practices and norms.

Hypotheses

I develop a number of expectations out of these questions. First, I expect that Republicans will be significantly more supportive of anti-democratic norms and practices than Democrats (H1).

Overall, I expect this because Republicans receive more anti-democratic messaging from elites, partisan media, and fellow partisans. Following from this first hypothesis, I also expect that Republicans will have a greater sense of racial threat than Democrats (H2). Similar to my first expectation, Republican attitudes about racial threat will be more primed than Democrats.

Thirdly, I expect that threat will be the main motivator of these anti-democratic attitudes (H3). Republicans have relaxed their views of democracy due to the anxiety and fear they have about this ethnic antagonism (Bartels 2020). My fourth and final hypothesis is that threat from demographic change in the coming years, rather than in the present day, will be the strongest driver of these sentiments for Republicans (H4). In order to evaluate these hypotheses, I conduct two surveys on diverse samples of the American public.¹

Study 1

In my first study, I conduct a survey of attitudes on a diverse sample of Americans (N = 518) in September 2020. On demographics, this sample is primarily white (70%) and is nearly evenly spread along gender lines (52% women). On party identification, there are slightly more Republicans (40%) than Democrats (33%). For full sample demographics, see Appendix 1A.

In this survey, I develop five novel measures of anti-democratic attitudes and norms – they range from support for violence against political opponents to support for institutions that prevent political opposition from participating (for all measures, see Appendix 1A). I also include a sixth item taken from the authoritarianism personality scale (Altemeyer and Altemeyer 1981). These six items load well together in factor analysis ($\alpha = 0.91$) but given the distinct nature of each measure as well as their explanatory power, in this first study I will assess individual items that measure the most extreme attitudes.

First, I present descriptive statistics for two items comparatively across party identification.² All of the following measures are reverse coded, with 1 as strongly agree and 7 as strongly disagree. The first outcome, in Table 1, measures support for violence directed at

¹ These studies were both fielded through Lucid Fulcrum, a survey firm.

² Party identification is collapsed here – strong, not very strong, and lean Democrat/Republican are combined.

political opposition. The second measure shown in Table 2 concerns support for institutions and practices that prevent political opposition from participating in politics.

Table 1

“It is reasonable to use violence against people who are politically opposed to me”

	Republicans	Democrats
<i>Mean</i>	4.69	5.43
<i>Median</i>	6.0	6.0
<i>Min</i>	1.0	1.0
<i>Max</i>	7.0	7.0
<i>SD</i>	2.35	1.92
<i>N</i>	204	168

Table 2

“I support institutions and practices that prevent people I dislike from participating in politics.”

	Republicans	Democrats
<i>Mean</i>	4.08	4.83
<i>Median</i>	4.0	5.0
<i>Min</i>	1.0	1.0
<i>Max</i>	7.0	7.0
<i>SD</i>	2.15	1.89
<i>N</i>	204	168

There is a sizable difference in support between Democrats and Republicans for these anti-democratic attitudes – the means for Democrats and Republicans differ by nearly a full point on a 1-7 Likert scale across these two measures. For support for violence, I find a significant

difference between parties ($p < 0.001$). On a 0-1 scale, Republicans are roughly .12 points more supportive of violence against political opposition than Democrats. Put differently, Republicans are, in orders of magnitude, more willing to support the use of violence against Democrats than Democrats are about Republicans.

On support for anti-democratic institutions and practices (Table 2), I find a similar divergence to the measure of violence. Republicans are significantly ($p < 0.01$) more supportive of these institutions and practices than Democrats. Again, the gulf between these partisan groups is large, on a 0-1 scale, Republicans express .1 more support to anti-democratic institutions preventing people they are opposed to from participating in politics.

Across the other four measures this same pattern persists (Appendix 1B).³ Ultimately these results confirm H1, showing that Republicans are far and away more supportive of anti-democratic norms and practices than Democrats. Importantly, these concepts and attitudes are considerably controversial, meaning there could be a degree of social desirability bias in levels of support – as such these results should be interpreted as potential underestimates for how pervasive these ideas are across parties.

Testing for H2, I look at differences between Democrats and Republicans along the lines of threat. Using the same measure from Craig and Richeson (2014b), I test the differences among partisan's senses of racial threat – the idea that whites will lose influence if minorities increase in size. I find that Republicans feel a significantly stronger sense of general minority threat than Democrats ($p = 0.009$). This demonstrates that these ideas of threat are more pervasive among Republicans, confirming hypothesis 2. Republicans are likely primed about minority threat much more than Democrats through their platform – presumably through partisan media, elites, and

³ This finding also, expectedly, bears out in difference-in-means tests for the additive scale of all six measures ($p < 0.01$, 11 percentage point difference).

party affiliates. To test the robustness of these findings, I turn briefly to comparisons of means between Republicans and Independents, as well as Independents and Democrats. For the former comparison, it is important that potential differences in perceptions of threat are teased out –if, say, Democrats are anchoring their attitudes in reaction to Republicans, then what could appear as *more* threat among Republicans could also be less threat among Democrats. Independents have less party attachment, and therefore work as another helpful baseline. Comparisons between Democrats and Independents provide another useful check – by showing if there are meaningful differences in the same partisan to less partisan comparison.

For comparisons of Republicans to Independents along racial threat, I find a similar difference to Republicans to Democrats. Republicans feel a significantly larger sense of threat than Independents ($p = 0.03$), which bolsters the idea that this threat is primarily coming from Republicans. Between Democrats and Independents, I find there to be insignificant differences along racial threat ($p = 0.83$), thereby showing that Democrats' attitudes are not anchoring the earlier partisan comparison. Moving toward the motivation behind these anti-democratic attitudes, I turn next to my third hypothesis.

Here, I aim to test whether the sense of minority threat is the main motivator for anti-democratic attitudes as I expect. To do this, I use linear regression and include racial threat as a covariate. I look at the predictive strength of system threat,⁴ racial threat, minority contact,⁵ and approval of the job Trump is doing in office – among other demographic control.⁶ System threat and racial threat are all measures adopted from Craig and Richeson (2014b) and minority contact

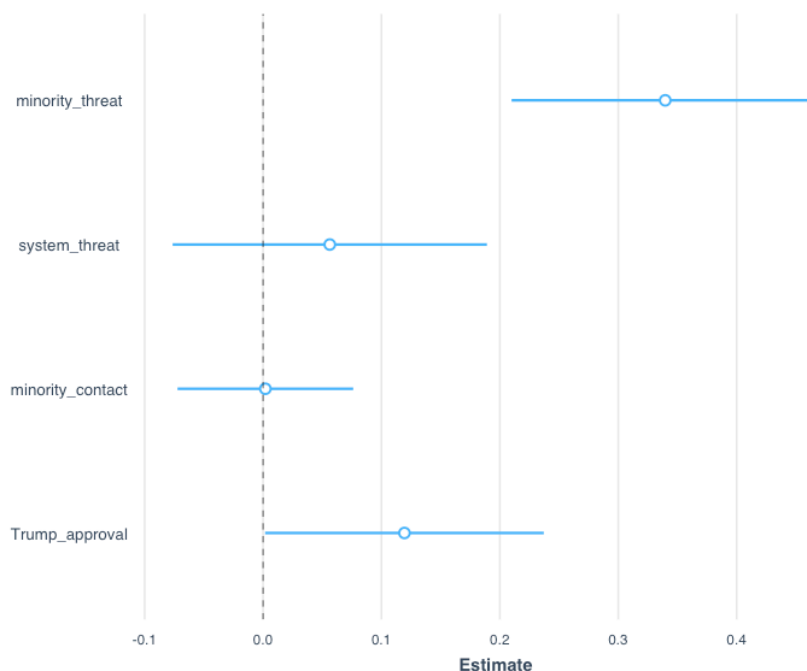
⁴ The extent to which one believes the American way of life is threatened.

⁵ The number of friends one has with minority groups (Black/African Americans, Asians/ Asian Americans, Latinos/as).

⁶ These are age, gender, education, household income, ideology, and how often one consumes media.

(Pettigrew 1998). Below in Table 3, I show results for linear regressions that show how these covariates predict anti-democratic attitudes among Republicans only.

Figure 1

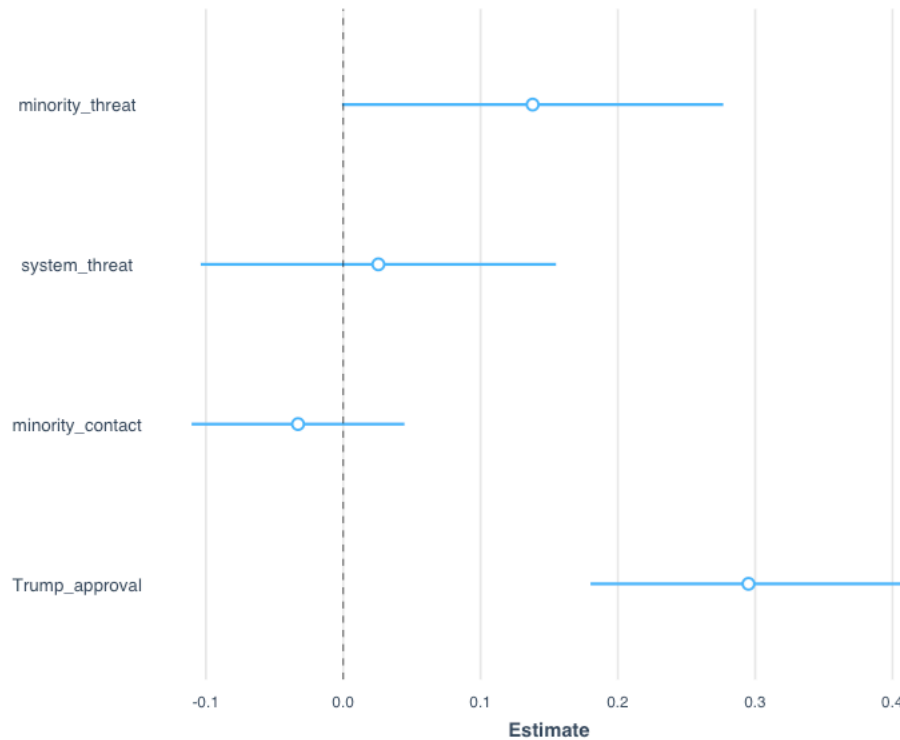


Threat from minority racial groups is the strongest predictor of support for anti-democratic attitudes among the various ideas I test. This confirms my third hypothesis for Republicans. They are willing to taper back democratic institutions and practices as a result of growing concern about the status and size of minority groups. Approval of the job that President Trump is doing also significantly predicts anti-democratic attitudes ($p = 0.046$), while contact with minority groups has an insignificant relation to these attitudes.

As a check on other potential theoretical motivators, I find null effects of system threat on anti-democratic attitudes. This measure captures the idea that the “American way of life is threatened.” This lack of an effect is important in that it shows that views of general threats are not a powerful mover of attitudes among Republicans. In short, a feeling of threat in general is

not what makes Republicans more anti-democratic. Importantly, this same pattern across these concepts does not hold for Democrats shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2



Unlike Republicans, Democrats' attitudes are not motivated by racial threat in the same way as Republicans. The main predictor of their anti-democratic attitudes is the approval of the job President Donald Trump is doing in office – which here could function as a proxy for both a degree of conservatism and Trump-oriented populism among Democrats. This finding ultimately demonstrates that my expectation for minority threat functioning as the main predictor of anti-democratic views is contingent on party identification.

Study 2

As an extension of my first study, I conduct a second survey with a significantly larger sample ($N=1629$) in October 2020, see Appendix 1C. In this survey, I assess variant types of threat among the general public. Specifically, I analyze feelings of threat by particular minority groups based on different temporal contexts (i.e. past, present, and future). This approach directly tests my fourth hypothesis. Additionally, I use this study as a second test of H1-2.

So far, the way that racial threat could vary has gone overlooked. It is often considered as coming from growing minority groups, but whether that is in the present or future has gone unstated (Craig, Rucker, and Richeson 2018). The type of threat that most motivates anti-democratic sentiments is important for making inferences about the mechanism behind these sentiments. For example, if a sense of racial threat or antagonism in the present context is the most motivating anti-democratic attitudes, then those who feel this way might be more inclined to act on those beliefs because they find them more pressing. In other words, the temporal orientation could alter how Americans react the current political moment.

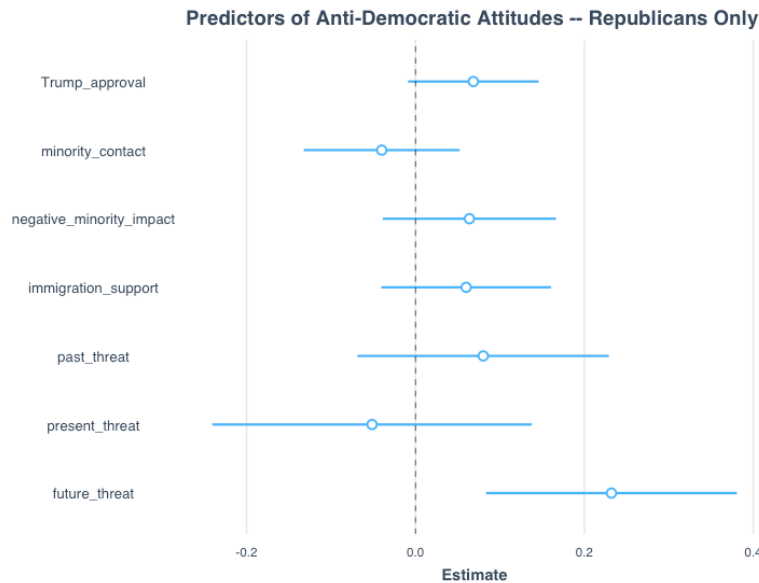
First, to test hypothesis 1, I compare levels of support for anti-democratic norms and institutions between Democrats and Republicans. For two measures, I find significant differences, within directions that support hypothesis 1. Republicans are significantly more supportive of the idea of caring more about their party winning than democracy functioning well ($p = 0.056$) and are more comfortable with less democracy if it means their party winning ($p = 0.075$).

In short, along certain axes, Republicans are more willing to compromise democracy for the sake of their party maintaining power. Testing for hypothesis 2, I look at levels of threat along a different measure from study 1. I use three sets of items that assess threat along temporal

lines. The three measures ask, “To what extent do you perceive each of the following racial/ethnic groups to posed/pose a threat to people like you in [1960/2020/2080]?” They were measured on a scale of 0 being not threatening at all, to 100 being most threatening. For the past, present and future senses of threat from 5 different groups – African Americans, whites, Latinos, Asians, and immigrants.

For this analysis, I first collapse across the three groups that are viewed as most threatening, which are African Americans, Latinos, and immigrants. The items load well together in factor analysis across past ($\alpha = 0.92$), present ($\alpha = 0.92$), and future contexts ($\alpha = 0.93$). For a sense of threat from these minority groups in the past, I do not find any differences between Democrats and Republicans ($p = 0.36$). I do, however, find sizable differences between present ($p < 0.01$, ~15% increase relative to Democrats) and future ($p < 0.01$, ~ 20% increase relative to Democrats) senses of threat.

I use linear regression to test hypothesis 4, using the temporally distinct senses of threat as predictors. I include other concepts which work as competing hypotheses. These are approval of President Trump, contact with other races, the view that minorities have a negative impact on society, and support for pro-immigration policy. The main dependent variable in this study is, like in study 1, the anti-democratic scale that I have created. This scale also loads well in factor analysis ($\alpha = 0.91$). In Figure 3 below, I test each of these concepts in how they predict support for anti-democratic attitudes for Republicans.

Figure 3

As expected, I find that threat from minority groups *in the future* is what most motivates anti-democratic attitudes for Republicans ($p = 0.002$). Importantly, no other coefficient is a significant predictor, showing that the alternative concepts are not as powerful in moving Republicans' attitudes. This confirms hypothesis 4 – Republicans' view of minorities threatening their status in the future is primarily moving their anti-democratic attitudes. Again, in comparison I do not find this to be the case for Democrats (Appendix 1D). The divergence of these attitudes along partisan lines shows that there are important differences to how Republicans and Democrats think about anti-democratic practices and norms. Drawing out what these differences are and testing the extent that they motivate anti-democratic attitudes deserves further inquiry. Senses of racial threat in the future seem to only work to motivate Republican attitudes.

Conclusion

I ultimately find there to be sizable differences in support for anti-democratic norms and practices between Republicans and Democrats. For one, this is evidence that democratic

backsliding, in the way of eroding democratic norms among the public, is being directed by one political party. This partisan difference has not been shown before in the study of American public opinion. Moreover, I confirm that the main motivation behind Republicans' anti-democratic attitudes is a sense of threat from racial minority groups. I go further to show that threat from these groups *in the future* is the prime motivator of these views – meaning it is the continuing loss of social status and political power from minority groups that is pushing Republicans in anti-democratic directions.

The U.S. is undergoing racial demographic changes. These changes, in previous work have been shown to change attitudes, but only recently have they drifted into the realm of American's democratic attitudes. They appear to be chronically salient among Republicans, and most importantly have direct influence on the public's democratic views. Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that moving forward, public views on racial demographic change are vital for thinking about the future of democracy in America.

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Appendix 1A

Study 1 Demographics

	Percent of the sample
Female	52.5
Male	47.5
Republican (<i>includes leaners</i>)	40.1
Independent	20.4
Democrat (<i>includes leaners</i>)	39.3
Median Household income	\$40,000-44,999
Average age	44.7
Average number of days watching the news (0-7)	4.8
Average number of days talking about politics (0-7)	4.3

Anti-democratic attitudes

To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

1. It is reasonable to use violence against people who are politically opposed to me
2. I care more about my political party winning office than I care about democracy functioning well
3. I support institutions and practices that prevent people I dislike from participating in politics
4. The point of politics is to win at all costs
5. I am comfortable with less democracy if it also means my political opposition losing
6. Opposition to my beliefs should be punished (Altemeyer and Altemeyer 1981)

Appendix 1B

“I care more about my political party winning office than I care about democracy functioning well”

	Republicans	Democrats
<i>Mean</i>	4.11	4.67
<i>Median</i>	4	4
<i>Min</i>	1	1
<i>Max</i>	7	7
<i>SD</i>	2.16	1.86
<i>N</i>	204	168

“The point of politics is to win at all costs”

	Republicans	Democrats
<i>Mean</i>	3.98	4.69
<i>Median</i>	4	5
<i>Min</i>	1	1
<i>Max</i>	7	7
<i>SD</i>	2.19	2.04
<i>N</i>	204	168

“I am comfortable with less democracy if it also means my political opposition losing”

	Republicans	Democrats
<i>Mean</i>	4.11	4.64
<i>Median</i>	4	4
<i>Min</i>	1	1
<i>Max</i>	7	7
<i>SD</i>	2.06	1.72
<i>N</i>	204	168

“Opposition to my beliefs should be punished”

	Republicans	Democrats
<i>Mean</i>	4.42	5.13
<i>Median</i>	4	6
<i>Min</i>	1	1
<i>Max</i>	7	7
<i>SD</i>	2.21	1.91
<i>N</i>	204	166

Appendix 1C
Study 2 Demographics

	Percent of the sample
Female	51.9
Male	48.1
Republican (<i>includes leaners</i>)	34.6
Independent	18.5
Democrat (<i>includes leaners</i>)	46.8
Median Household income	\$40,000-44,999
Average age	44.2
Average number of days watching the news (0-7)	5.8
Average number of days talking about politics (0-7)	4.2

Appendix 1D
Figure 4

