Unconditional Support for Trump's Resistance Prior to Election Day in Public Opinion

Brendan Hartnett, Tufts University
Alexandra Haver, Tufts University

Abstract: Prior to the 2020 Presidential Election, it was predicted that then-President Trump would lose the popular vote and Electoral College but refuse to concede. Indeed, this was exactly what occurred and ultimately manifested in the January 6 Capitol Insurrection. Thus, a few weeks before the election we explored support among Trump voters for resisting hypothetical election results when Joe Biden is said to win by a range of popular vote margins. In this paper, we examine whether popular vote margins influence the acceptance of election results, or, if in the novel and contentious 2020 election, Trump voters would resist the results regardless of the closeness of the election itself. Finding the latter, we explore why Trump voters would support the former President's resistance, and show that the legal challenges, protests and insurrection that followed the election enjoyed support from Trump voters prior to the election itself.

1. Research Question and Significance

Leading up to the 2020 Presidential Election, it was unclear for the first time since the Election of 1800 whether the incumbent president would honor the results and accept defeat if not reelected. Amid the uncertainty, we examined the extent to which Trump voters would support him if he lost the election but refused to concede. The results indicate that the insurrection on January 6, 2021 was not a surprise, but an expected manifestation of an illiberal and contentious culture surrounding the 2020 Presidential Election.

We explored the following question: Would a higher popular vote margin of victory for Biden increase acceptance of his Electoral College victory among Trump voters? If higher popular vote margins are met with greater acceptance of election results, we would find a direct correlation between popular vote margins and acceptance of election results when the popular vote and Electoral College align. However, if support for resistance remains consistent regardless of popular vote margins, this indicates diminished legitimacy in the 2020 Presidential Election as a whole.

We also examined the professed reasoning of those who would not accept the election results. Before conducting our study, we were interested in the extent to which Trump and his administration's rhetoric about voter fraud, as well as hyperpolarization, could lead his supporters to contest the election. We also sought to examine the extent to which partisan motivations, rather than perceptions of electoral injustice, caused respondents to support resistance of results. Our findings suggest that Trump's refusal to concede, which manifested in the January 6 insurrection, likely would have occurred regardless of Biden's margin of victory.

2. Theory

2.1. Popular Vote Margins and Legitimacy

There is generally a negative relationship between the popular vote margin and the extent to which a presidential election is contested. For the Electoral College winner, having a higher popular vote margin of victory typically confers the victor greater legitimacy (McCann 1997). With the 2020 Presidential Election being a close race—so close, in fact, it took five days to determine a winner—analyzing the perceived legitimacy of the election across popular vote margins provides an understanding of why voters support resistance. If resistance is found only when the election is won narrowly in both votes, then the election's legitimacy is, indeed, determined by popular vote margins. If, however, support for resistance persists across all popular vote margins, then the legitimacy of the election is challenged by factors beyond the electoral outcome itself.

Defining legitimacy itself is a difficult task. Almond and Verda (1963) argue that legitimacy is a collective feeling based on value consensus and widespread sentiments of truth and trust. In the post-Vietnam War era, however, legitimacy has become synonymous with power and can be defined as people's belief in the rightness of authority (Mast 2017). This is the definition we will adopt in our analysis.

By providing Trump voters with a randomized popular vote margin of victory for Biden and asking them how Trump should respond if he lost the Electoral College, we are able to analyze the effect of popular vote margins on perceived Electoral College legitimacy. If the popular vote margin impacts election legitimacy, we would expect to find a statistically significant relationship between the popular vote margin provided and support for resisting the

election. To explore this relationship, popular vote margins provided to respondents were randomized within the range of aggregate polling at the time of our study.

2.2. Misinformation and Partisan Cheerleading

The severity and spread of misinformation have grown dramatically in the United States, bolstered by Trump's labeling of traditional media outlets as "fake news" (Oehmichen et al. 2019). Allegations of election irregularities in the 2016 Presidential Election were levied from across the political spectrum (Norris 2019). The evidence supporting right-wing allegations of voter fraud was lacking, warranting these claims to be labelled as "misinformation," yet they spread rapidly online and had a profound impact on views of the election's legitimacy (Oehmichen et al. 2019).

Misinformation spread online is tactically catered to the political preferences of its viewers, driving polarization over conflict about what is the truth (Enders and Smallpage 2019). This reflects a tenet of misinformation: it is commonly accepted by those whose pre-existing beliefs, assumptions, and worldviews already conform to the misinformation's message (Swire et al. 2017). Misinformation in the 2020 presidential campaign was in full force, fostering a general distrust in election integrity, likely causing some respondents to doubt the legitimacy of the election process at large (Badger 2020a).

Partisans can be especially susceptible to believing misinformation that supports their party. Regardless of the information provided, partisanship can substantially impact factual beliefs in politics. Responses to survey questions, and public opinion on politics more broadly, are shaped by partisan thinking and motivated reasoning (Klein 2020). Presented with the same information, partisans interpret that information differently to support their own beliefs (Enders

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and Smallpage 2019). When interpreting information such as the winner of an election, identity-protective cognition is employed, representing a "way of avoiding dissonance and estrangement from valued groups," such as political parties, that leads "individuals [to] subconsciously resist factual information that threatens their defining values" (Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, and Braman 2011, 154; Kahan et al. 2012, 733). Identity-protective cognition made Trump voters more susceptible to Trump's unfounded claims of voter fraud leading up to—as well as after—the 2020 Presidential Election.

Some respondents supporting resistance, however, might be partisan cheerleading by purposely basing their responses on information they know to be inaccurate (e.g. voter fraud and malpractice) merely out of a desire to support their party, rather than believing misinformation to be true (Bullock et al. 2020). This form of expressive responding persists even when the information presented offers a clear truth. For example, when respondents were presented with photographs of Obama and Trump's respective inaugurations, "the most politically engaged Trump supporters," falsely claimed that Trump's inauguration photograph depicted a larger crowd, thereby providing "expressive responses to a straightforward question related to controversy" in which the factual answer was clear (Schaffner and Luks 2018, 142). These findings suggest that many Trump voters in our survey would likely state that Trump should resist disappointing results, not because they necessarily think doing so is right, but rather to signal political support for him.

2.3. Actions of Leaders

In the third debate of the 2016 Presidential Election, Trump refused to commit to accepting the election results if he lost (Gellman 2020). Soon after, he told supporters at a rally that he would

"totally accept the results [of the 2016 presidential election] ..." but followed the statement with "*if I win!*" (Diamond 2016). This threat was never tested, as Trump won the Electoral College. However, in the third presidential debate of the 2020 Presidential Election, Trump again refused to commit to accepting the election results, stating that the only way he could lose would be due to fraud from mail-in-ballots used amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Gellman 2020). This threat was then substantiated when Trump lost both the popular vote and the Electoral College but refused to concede (Komeda 2020).

Prior to the election, Gellman predicted in *The Atlantic* (2020) that Trump would lose the popular vote and the Electoral College but refuse to accept defeat. Gellman offered a multitude of ways by which Trump could do this, including filing lawsuits to challenge the results, demanding states send conflicting electors to the Electoral College, and declaring a national emergency to inhibit the peaceful transfer of power (Gellman 2020). A poll in August 2020 by Opinium Research and *The Guardian* found that 47% of all Americans were afraid Trump would lose the election but refuse to concede. This number rose to as high as 75% among Biden supporters and 30% among Trump supporters (Smith 2020).

A Reuters/Ipsos poll fielded in October 2020 asked 2,649 voters whether they would accept the results of the election if their preferred candidate lost. Although minimal context was provided, and questions did not ask about what the candidates themselves should do, the poll found that 41% of likely Trump voters would not accept a Biden victory and 16% "would engage in street protests or even violence" (Kahn 2020).

Regardless of the popular vote margin provided, we believed that Trump voters who said he should resist would cite voter fraud related to mail-in ballots as their justification. This claim was touted by Trump and conservative news outlets prior to the election and served as the basis

for Trump's legal challenges to results in a multitude of battleground states he lost (Kaplan 2020). We anticipated that, regardless of the popular vote margin, some respondents would always support Trump resisting the results due to the gravity of this election and the hyper-polarization of American politics. If voters' objections to election results are driven primarily by concerns about voter fraud, then we expected that they would be increasingly likely to resist results of closer elections. However, if resistance is fueled largely by unchecked partisan motivated reasoning, then we expected that Trump voters would support resisting the outcome even in cases where Trump lost by a large margin.

3. Methods and Data

We explored our research questions in a nationally representative survey fielded online to 1,208 American adults via Lucid on October 25, 2020. Post-stratification weights were applied to make the survey nationally representative of American adults by gender, age, region, education, race, and 2016 presidential vote, with targets defined by the most recent 5-year American Community Survey.

Respondents were asked if they intended to vote in the 2020 general election. Those who said they planned to vote, would probably vote, had already voted (either by mail or early voting), or were undecided were then asked for their presidential vote choice. Trump voters were categorized as those who had already voted for Trump, planned to vote for Trump, or leaned toward voting for Trump.

After the preface, "The following question will ask about a hypothetical outcome of the 2020 presidential election. Please choose the answer that best reflects your preferences," Trump voters were asked, "Biden wins the popular vote by __ percentage points and wins the Electoral

College. The Trump campaign should..." We randomized the margin of victory from 1-15. The response options were:

  a. "Resist the results of the election through measures such as discrediting the results as invalid, declaring a state of emergency, and/or taking any means possible to remain in office,"
  b. "Concede defeat and commit to a peaceful transfer of power."

We chose a popular vote margin between 1-15 percentage points for Biden based on polling aggregates from *FiveThirtyEight*, *The Economist*, and *Real Clear Politics*. At the time of our study, there was less than a 6% chance of Trump winning the popular vote, warranting our exclusion of such a scenario (Silver 2020).

To respondents who said Trump should resist the election results, we asked a follow-up open-ended question: "Why should the Trump campaign resist the results of the election? Please be as specific as possible." We coded responses according to themes and included those that provided more than one theme in multiple categories. Themes observed in less than 10 responses were coded as "Other."

4. Analysis

4.1. Should Trump Resist?

Figure 1 shows Biden's randomized hypothetical popular vote margin of victory against the percentage of Trump voters who responded that Trump should resist the election results if Biden won the Electoral College. About 45% opt for Trump to resist when Biden receives a margin of victory between 1-12 points. This is consistent with other polls conducted prior to the election asking about how Trump voters would accept a Biden Electoral College victory.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Across most margins of victory, a minority of Trump supporters would support his campaign resisting the election results if Biden won both the popular vote and the Electoral College. In total, 40% of surveyed Trump voters supported him resisting the election results. Despite a slight downward trend in our figure, our regression model (see Table 1) failed to find a relationship between the popular vote margin and support for Trump resting the election results (p=.39).

Of the scenarios we presented, the most reflective of reality was with Biden winning the popular vote by 4%, given that he actually won by 3.9%. Among those presented with this then-hypothetical, 44% would support Trump resisting the election results.

4.2. Why Should Trump Resist?

Table 1 shows responses, coded for themes, to the open-ended question asking respondents' rationales for supporting Trump resisting the election results. The most common theme was that Trump should resist the results because he is the respondent's preferred candidate. These responses ranged from "[I] am saying this because I am for trump 2020" to "BECAUSE HE HAS DONE MORE FOR THIS COUTRY IN 4 YEARS THEN BIDEN HAS IN 47 YEARS." These respondents justified their support for Trump working to overturn the results simply because he was their preferred candidate. To this group of Trump voters, the election itself appears irrelevant to the legitimacy of the presidency.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Similarly, opposition to the Democratic Party was high, either because respondents perceived Democrats to be radicals or corrupt, or because they believed Biden to be incompetent. Combined, these themes were present in 41.5% of the reasons provided by respondents.

"Democrats are radicals" was coded as those who suggested a Biden presidency would undermine their perceptions of American traditions and values. These included general attacks on Democrats' policies and governance such as "Because the Democrats will ruin america" and "Democraps are destroying our nation," allegations of Democrats supporting socialism, such as "I don't want to live under Socialism and all that the Democrats stand for!" as well as perceptions of Democratic governance serving an ethno-cultural threat, such as "cause we dont want or need a woman of color as the vp!!!" These responses reflect hyper-partisanship, and a general opposition to Democratic leadership associated with cultural change.

Those coded as "Democrats are Corrupt" included "the Democrat party is totally corrupt," and "I personally think there is a hidden agenda, I never thought that way until I saw the so called [first] impeachment process and saw how absolutely corrupt the Democratic party is." Those who levied ad hominem attacks against Biden and his capacity to govern were coded as "Biden is Incompetent." These included "Because in reality Biden isn't fit," and "because biden is an idiot and there is no way he can lead this country as president."

Election irregularities were coded as any responses questioning the legitimacy of the election results, without explicitly mentioning mail-in-ballots, as well as those that alluded to the election being rigged, such as "there is no way biden is gonna win the election if the election [is] fair" and "the democrats are rigging the election." Issues with mail-in-ballots were those that mentioned mail-in-ballots, including personal stories speculating they would be abused, such as "my experience, I've received 2 mail-in-ballots and individuals have never lived here," as well as statements arguing these ballots would be used to commit fraud favoring Democrats. Despite being touted before and after the election—and being the basis for Trump's challenge to the state

election results—election irregularities, voter fraud, and issues with mail-in-ballots were cited by only 31.9% of respondents who thought Trump should resist.

The variance in responses reflects conflicting rationales for supporting Trump's resistance. Those who stated Trump should resist because he is their preferred candidate or because they dislike the Democratic Party appeared to be engaged in partisan cheerleading, but those who cited voter fraud were likely influenced by misinformation and identity-protective cognition. The former group's responses are based on explicit, conscious partisan loyalty. As Trump expressed a willingness to thwart the 2020 Presidential Election results, these respondents may have used this question to signal their support for Trump and his ambitions, rather than believing there to be grounds for his resistance. The latter's interpretation of the results could be affected by their news intake and processing, possibly believing that vast mail-in-voter fraud would exist. Nonetheless, they all reflect resistance to a Biden victory present within public opinion prior to the election itself taking place.

5. Conclusion

While the Trump administration allowed a transition to begin on November 23, 2020, Trump refused to concede until after the Capitol insurrection. Before his account was suspended, Twitter flagged over 200 tweets by the former-President, for false or disputed information pertaining to the election (Spangler 2020). It is undeniable that Trump's rhetoric and disrespect for the election results and the democratic process led to the January 6 insurrection. Yet, our findings suggest this desire for resistance existed prior to the election itself and without regard to how close the outcome would be.

The public support we found for Trump resisting hypothetical election results grew after those results became a reality. According to a poll conducted between November 15 and 17,

2020, only 12% of Trump voters believed "Biden legitimately won the election," compared to 57% of all voters (The Economist/YouGov 2020). The Economist/YouGov (2020) also found that 79% of Trump voters believed Trump should not concede, 75% of Trump voters believed "Trump should not start the transition process," and only 48% of Trump voters believed that a peaceful transfer of power was likely. This increase in support for resistance is likely attributed both to partisan cheerleading for those who knew that Biden won but would not admit it, and by misinformation, for respondents who legitimately believed that Trump won when accounting for perceived voter fraud (Badger 2020b).

Nevertheless, the high level of support for Trump resisting defeat, as he did in the months following the election, is staggering when viewed in the context of American electoral history. With 40% of Trump voters in our study stating Trump should resist the results of the election even in scenarios where Biden won by double-digits, the precedent of the peaceful transfer of power in American elections was already shaken. Further, the rationale behind these respondents' selection that Trump should not commit to a peaceful transfer of power reflects the erosion of democratic norms. Of those who said Trump should resist, 42.7% provided reasoning that was, primarily, based on their preference for him as a candidate.

Our findings confirm the troubling consequences of the 2020 Presidential Election. Trump's resistance to election results enjoyed support before the election even took place. What ultimately manifested in the Capitol insurrection derived from a long line of public support for Trump to resist his electoral loss by any means possible.

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Table 1. Significance of Biden's popular vote margin on Trump voters' support for Trump to resist results of Electoral College loss.

	Dependent variable:
	Trump Should Resist
Constant	0.43***
	(0.04)
Margin	-0.004
	(0.005)
Observations	510
R^2	0.001
Adjusted R^2	-0.001
Residual Std. Error	0.27 (df = 508)
F Statistic	0.74 (df = 1; 508)
	*p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01

Table 2. Trump Voters' Reasons for Him to Resist Results of Potential Electoral College Loss

Statement	n	% of Respondents
Support Trump	66	40.5%
Democrats are corrupt	41	25.2%
Election irregularities	40	24.5%
Voter fraud / Mail-in-ballots	19	11.7%
Democrats are radicals	14	8.6%
Biden is incompetent	10	6.1%
Other	10	6.1%

n=147

Note: Respondents could be coded under more than one category.

Figure 1. Support for Trump Resisting the Results of a Biden Electoral College Victory Across Popular Vote Margins