How Strongly Do American Voters React to Anti-Democratic Behavior by Politicians? Natural Experimental Evidence from the January 6 Insurrection

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Abstract

Do American politicians that clearly violate democratic norms lose significant public support, or do contemporary American voters form little effective constrain on democratic backsliding? The existing literature has studied this fundamental question using hypothetical survey experiments which, while useful, suffer from potential weak treatment bias and external validity limitations. I alleviate these concerns by studying a novel natural experiment that occurred because Donald Trump's incitement of the January 6 insurrection unexpectedly occurred while Gallup was conducting a nationally representative survey using random digit dialing. Comparing party identification among respondents that were interviewed just before, and just after, January 6, 2021 suggests that the Republican Party retained 78% of its pre-insurrection support base during the first 1.5 weeks. Even this modest loss was short-lived—in February 2021 the Republican Party stood at 93% of its pre-insurrection support level. While not zero, the electoral constrain on democratic backsliding is remarkably limited.

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"The U.S. Constitution has proved binding in practice partly because citizens are willing to defend it by reacting against proposed violations. Anticipating that reaction, political leaders rarely attempt violations." (Weingast, 1997, p. 254)

1   Introduction

Politicians that cannot win through free and fair elections self-evidently have an incentive to rig the electoral system for political gain. While democratic norms among politicians could in principle self-constrain them from doing so, this mechanism, even if such norms exist, becomes more and more brittle once the stake of elections increases. For democracy to be more robustly secured it is therefore important that the general public reacts to clearly undemocratic behavior by political leaders by withdrawing their support, taking away the ultimate source where political power derives from. Anticipating this, politicians would have strong disincentives to subvert democracy to begin with (Almond and Verba, 1963; Svolik, 2020; Weingast, 1997).

Given the importance of the public as the ultimate check against undemocratic politicians it is extremely disconcerting that a number of recent studies find that overt undemocratic behavior by politicians is only to a very limited extent punished by contemporary American voters. In their seminal paper Graham and Svolik (2020) find survey experimental evidence that suggests that a mere 3.5% of the U.S. electorate is willing to punish clear undemocratic behavior by politicians if this means that they are forced to vote for a politician that is further away from their own policy preferences. McCoy, Littvay and Simonovits (Forthcoming) and Albertus and Grossman (2021) meanwhile find survey experimental evidence that suggests that Americans are remarkably hypocritical when it comes to democratic backsliding, supporting the same anti-democratic state executive behavior when their own party is in power, while condemning it if the opposing party is in power.[1]

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[1]Similar survey experimental results have been found in Finland (Saikkonen and Christensen, 2021), Hungary (Ahlquist et al., 2018), Indonesia (Fossati, Muhtadi and Warburton,

This important existing evidence not withstanding significant uncertainty remains as to whether American voters do indeed not strongly react to clear undemocratic behavior by politicians. First, several studies employing very similar survey experimental methods conclude that American voters do in fact strongly punish undemocratic behavior by politicians (e.g., Carey et al. (2020) and Touchton, Klofstad and Uscinski (2020)). This suggests that relatively minor changes in framing and survey experimental set-up may make large differences for the results in this area. Second, all existing evidence is survey experimental in nature. It remains unclear therefore whether voters would not more strongly react to *real-life* democratic transgressions that would directly affect their own life.[2] Third, all existing studies examine important but nevertheless not truly fundamental and decisive forms of democratic backsliding (e.g., whether a candidate supported a proposal to reduce the number of polling places in areas that largely support the opposing party). It is unclear therefore whether American voters will not react more strongly to more extreme forms of democratic backsliding that would truly change the rules of the game (e.g., a president refusing to leave office after losing an election).

To address these issues I analyze the results of a novel natural experiment that occurred because Donald Trump's incitement of the insurrection of the U.S. Capitol, on January 6, 2021, unexpectedly occurred while Gallup was conducting a nationally representative

2021), Turkey (Şaşmaz, Yagci and Ziblatt, 2022), and Venezuela (Svolik, 2020). Another rapidly growing literature builds upon this survey experimental evidence and seeks to explain why voters may not always punish overt undemocratic behavior by politicians (e.g., Chiopris, Nalepa and Vanberg (2021), Grillo and Prato (Forthcoming), Grossman et al. (2021), and Svolik (2020)).

[2]Graham and Svolik (2020) are an exception to this. They also analyze the electoral effect of Republican Greg Gianforte hitting a journalist in the face. I differ from Graham and Svolik (2020) by focusing on a more extreme form of undemocratic behavior that had a more structural effect on American democracy.

public opinion survey among 1,023 Americans. Given that Gallup samples respondents using random digit dialing the probability of any particular individual to be interviewed before or after the January 6 insurrection is plausibly exogenous to any pre-treatment characteristics that may otherwise affect political party preference. Furthermore, given that there were no other events on January 6, 2021 that could plausibly have caused changes in political party alliance I can recover the average treatment effect of inciting the insurrection by simply comparing support for the Republican Party among respondents that happened to be interviewed just before, and just after, January 6, 2021.

Using this natural experiment I find that support for the Republican Party went down with roughly 11% in the 1.5 weeks after the January 6 insurrection. I interpret this effect as relatively modest in this context. A 11% reduction in Republican Party support means that 77.9% of Republican voters did *not* move away from the Party, *even through its leader incited a violent insurrection to overturn the results of a free and fair election.* Note here that potential sources of bias (e.g., social desirability bias, undersampling of die-hard Trump supporters), if at all present, are likely to bias *in favor* of finding stronger negative effects (see further discussion below). In addition, I find that even this modest effect diminished relatively quickly. For example, comparing Republican Party support in the days before the January 6 insurrection with Republican Party support during a follow-up survey that Gallup fielded from February 7 to February 15, 2021 reduces the effect to only 3.7%. This suggests that the Republican Party stood at 92.6% of its pre-insurrection support level after only one month. Similarly modest effects are found when analyzing the effect of the January 6 insurrection on attitudes towards Donald Trump more specifically.

Taken together the natural experiment suggests that for the far majority of Republican Party supporters even inciting an insurrection to overturn the results of a free and fair election—arguably a most-likely case—is insufficient to *say* in an anonymous phone survey that they no longer support the Party (let alone take costly action to protect democracy). This uncomfortable fact may explain why the Republican Party, while initially relatively

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condemning of Donald Trump, has not generally tried to distance itself from Trump after the January 6 insurrection. More generally, it may explain why many less severe, but nonetheless very serious, forms of democratic norm transgressions are relatively common in American politics, particularly on the Republican side of the aisle (e.g., gerrymandering). Most fundamentally the results suggest that the far majority of Republican Party supporters are unlikely to prioritize democracy over party alliance when it really comes down to it.

I am not the first to study the effect of the January 6 insurrection on American public opinion. Agosta and Lightbourn (2021) show that the January 6 insurrection led to a net gain for the Democratic Party of 61,000 registered voters, or approximately 0.1% of all registered voters, in the 25 states that publish voter registration data. Eady, Hjorth and Dinesen (2021) show that expressions of identification with the Republican Party on Twitter dropped with 7% in the weeks after January 6, 2021. Keeter (2021) uses data from the American Trends Panel and finds that 25% of those who approved of Donald Trump's job performance in July 27-August 2, 2020 changed their answer to disapproval in January 8-12, 2021.

I make two important contributions to the study the January 6 insurrection—an event that is already likely to be a watershed moment in 21$^{\text{th}}$ century American history. First, I provide a more credible causal estimate of the effect of the January 6 insurrection on voter preferences. Keeter's (2021) data forces us to assign the entire change in Donald Trump's approval rating between July/August 2020 and January 2021 to the January 6 insurrection, while many other events occurred during this time period that could also have affected Trump's presidential approval rating (e.g., the second wave of the Covid-19 virus, the 2020 presidential election, etc.). Agosta and Lightbourn (2021) is likely to underestimate the effect of the January 6 insurrection because most voters in the U.S. do not change their party registration several years before the next election (even when their actual party preference has in fact changed). The changes in Twitter profiles documented by Eady, Hjorth and Dinesen (2021) are meanwhile hard to interpret as population-level changes in political attitudes because Twitter users are not a representative sample of the American population,

and because changes in Twitter profiles do not necessarily correspond to actual changes in underlying voter preferences. Second, and in contrast to Agosta and Lightbourn (2021), Eady, Hjorth and Dinesen (2021), and Keeter (2021), I show that the effect of the January 6 insurrection on political party preferences, while quite modest to begin with, diminished quickly.

2   The January 6 Insurrection

On November 3, 2020 Joe Biden (Democrat) won the 2020 U.S. presidential election of sitting U.S. president Donald Trump (Republican) with a difference of a little more than 7 million popular votes (and 74 Electoral College votes). Despite this enormous difference in the number of votes, and the absence of any convincing evidence of widespread voting fraud, Donald Trump claimed that the election was fraudulent and that he was the true winner of the election.

After several months of constant misinformation regarding the election, and a wide range of highly publicized court cases (which were all essentially dismissed for a lack of evidence), Donald Trump held a speech at the "Stop the Steal" rally on January 6, 2021. In the speech Trump said, among other things, that the election was stolen, that he and his supporter will never concede, that they will fight like hell, and that they are going to walk down to the Capitol because "you'll never take your country back with weakness".[3]

Directly after this speech a large mob of Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol building, leading to the death of 5 people, the injury of at least 138 police officers, physical property damages in excess of 30 million dollars, the abrupt halt of an ongoing congressional debate, and the immediate evacuation of all members of Congress.

Luckily for American democracy, the insurrection was ultimately unsuccessful in overturning the results of the 2020 presidential election. From January 13 to February 13, 2021

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[3]See Appendix A for direct quotes from the speech.

a trial was held in the U.S. Congress to impeach president Trump. In this trial only 10 of the 207 Republican Party members of the U.S. House of Representatives and only 7 of the 50 Republican Party members of the U.S. Senate voted to impeach president Trump, leading to his acquittal (all Democrats in both houses voted for impeachment).

I regard this event as a clear case of democratic backsliding that should be recognized and sanctioned as such *if* the U.S. electorate is to function as an effective check against overt anti-democratic behavior by politicians.

3   Data

To study whether the American electorate reacted to Donald Trump's incitement of the insurrection of the U.S. Capitol in a way that is consistent with them checking overt undemocratic behavior by elected officials I exploit that the January 6 insurrection unexpectedly occurred while Gallup was conducting its January 2021 "Mood of the Nation" survey.

As the treatment variable I use a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent was interviewed after January 6, 2021, and 0 if a respondent was interviewed before this date. Figure 1 shows the number of respondents that were interviewed by Gallup before, on, and after January 6, 2021. As can be seen 177 people were interviewed before January 6, 2021 and 715 people were interviewed after January 6, 2021.[4] In the main results I drop all 118 respondents that were interviewed on the day of the January 6 insurrection itself. All results remain substantively unchanged when assigning all respondents that were interviewed on January 6, 2021 to either control or treatment.

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[4]The number of observations in the control group (177) far exceeds the N$\geq$30 threshold that is sufficient for the central limit theorem to hold true (which is necessary for valid statistical significance tests), and Figure 2 below shows that the control group is not unbalanced on observables by random chance. This provides me with confidence that the results cannot be explained by small sample bias.

Figure 1: Histogram of dates of interviews relative to treatment.
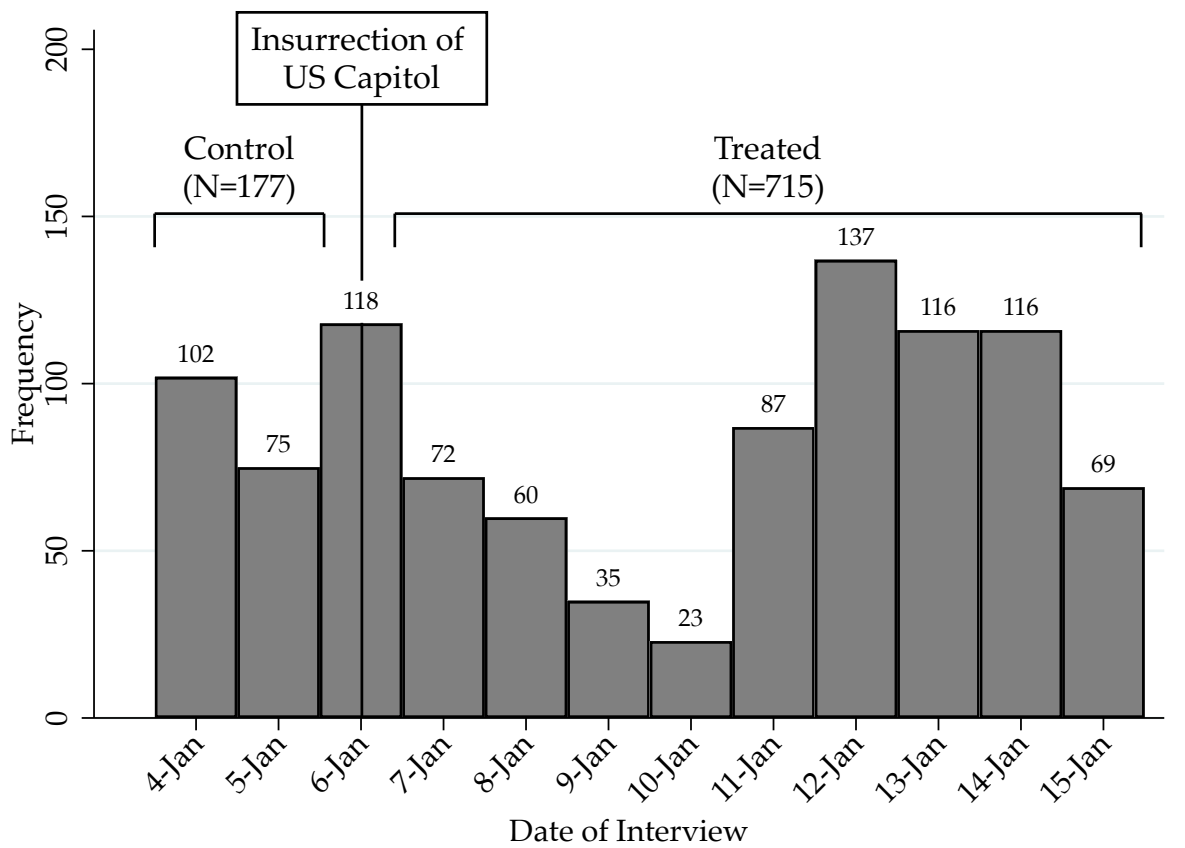
Note: Data refers to the year 2021. Data comes from Gallup's January "Mood of the Nation" survey. Respondents with missing data on the party identification variable are omitted (N=13).

As the dependent variable I use the variable: "In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself: a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?". If a respondent selects "Independent" the survey asks: "As of today, do you lean more to the Democratic Party, more to the Republican Party, or neither?". I analyze this variable as a nominal variable with 5 categories (Republican, lean Republican, Independent, lean Democratic, and Democrat). In addition, I analyze results using a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent considers, or leans towards considering, him/herself a Republican, and 0 otherwise.

4 Identification strategy

To identify the causal effect of the January 6 insurrection I employ a so-called "unexpected event during survey" design. This design relies on a simple comparison between the average support for the Republican Party among respondents surveyed just before, and just after, January 6, 2021. Causal identification relies on two assumptions. First, *temporal ignorability*, meaning that whether any particular individual is interviewed before or after January 6, 2021 should be orthogonal to any other individual-level characteristic that may also affect party identification. Second, *excludability*, meaning that whether any individual respondent is interviewed before or after January 6, 2021 should affect party identification only through the insurrection event, not through any other channel (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno and Hernández, 2020).

4.1 Temporal ignorability

Temporal ignorability is likely to hold for four reasons.

First, Gallup interviews over the phone and samples respondents using random digit dialing. This ensures that any individual, regardless of where he/she lives, and regardless of his/her own background characteristics, has an equal probability to be contacted for an interview on any particular day. In line with this I find that the control and treatment groups are balanced on common pre-treatment determinants of Republican Party support (see Figure 2).

Second, there is no evidence of endogenous reachability bias (i.e., supporters of the Republican Party being more/less difficult to reach for an interview and therefore being more/less likely to be included in the treatment group). First, the number of tries before an interview was successfully completed is uncorrelated with supporting the Republican Party (OLS coefficient: -0.022; P-value: 0.199).[5] Second, estimates of roughly similar magnitude are

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[5]This result is generated by regressing a dichotomous variable that takes the value 1 if a respondent considers, or leans towards considering, him/herself a Republican, and 0

Figure 2: Balance on observables.
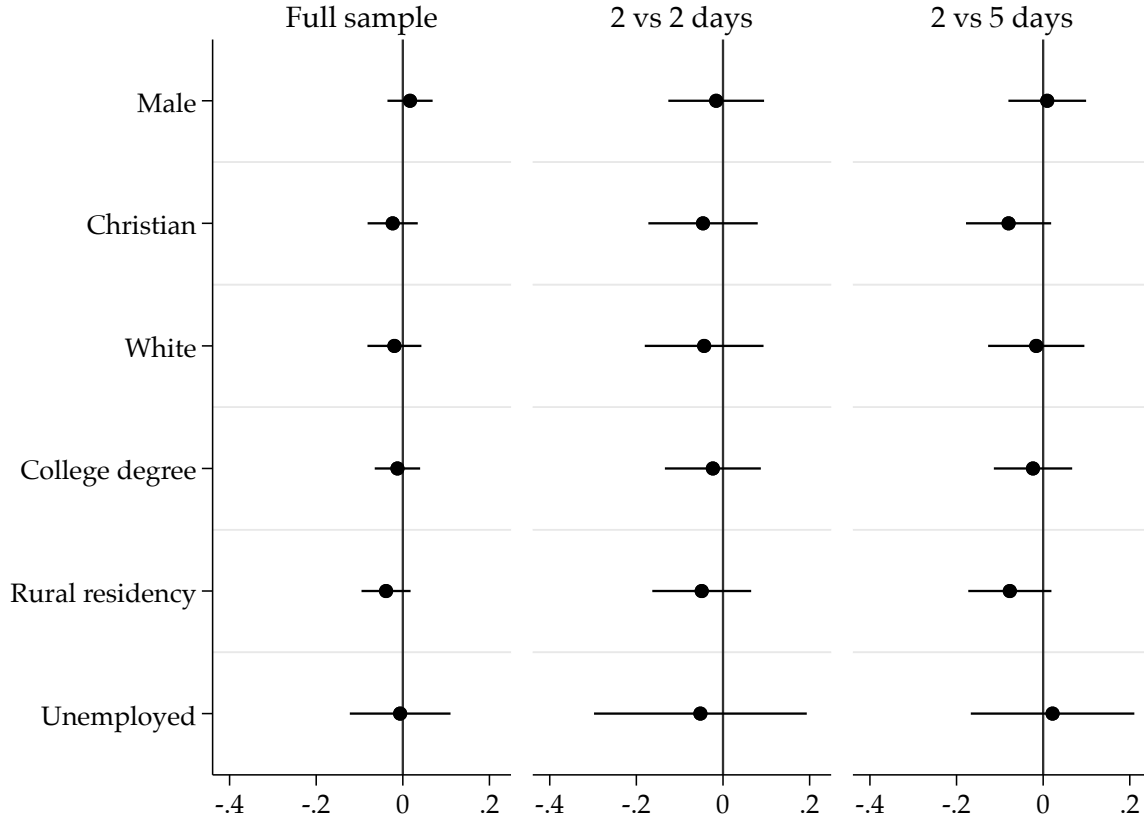
Note: Each dot represents an individual OLS regression. Dependent variable is treatment status. Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals are reported. Confidence intervals are robust against heteroscedasticity.

obtained when dropping all respondents that were not successfully interviewed on the first try (OLS coefficient: -0.141; P-value: 0.006).

Third, there is no indication of endogenous social desirability bias (i.e., supporters of the Republican Party being disproportionally more likely to lie about their true party alliance after January 6, 2021). If it were true that Republicans were disproportionally more likely to conceal their true political party preference as a result of the January 6 insurrection one would reasonably expect: (1) non-response on the vote preference question to go up after January 6; and (2) support for Independents, rather than Democrats, to go up after January

otherwise, on the number of tries before an interview was successfully completed.

6, 2021 (i.e., assuming that selecting Independents would still be socially "acceptable" while preferable over Democrats for "Republicans in disguise"). This is not what the data suggests. Instead, there is no economically or statistically significant difference in non-response on the party support question before and after January 6, 2021 (OLS coefficient: 0.004; P-value: 0.661), and support tends to predominantly shift to the Democratic Party, rather than Independent, after January 6, 2021 (see Table 2 below). Importantly, if social desirability bias is nonetheless present in the survey this would mean that the "true" voter reaction to the January 6 insurrection has been even weaker than what I report (i.e., assuming that social desirability bias will induce more Republicans than Democrats/Independents to disguise their true political preference as a result of the January 6 insurrection).

Last, there is no evidence of endogenous survey non-response (i.e., supporters of the Republican Party being altogether less likely to participate in the Gallup survey because of the January 6 insurrection). First, notice that passing the balance on observables test in Figure 2 in the presence of endogenous survey non-response requires Republicans that disproportionally choose to opt out of the survey after January 6 to be similar to the voter profile of Democrats on average. Second, a placebo test using a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent is in favor of further restrictions on abortion, and 0 otherwise, suggests that the treatment group is, if anything, overrepresenting a priori Republicans (OLS coefficient: 0.068; P-value: 0.190). Importantly, if endogenous survey non-response is nonetheless present in the survey this would mean that that the "true" voter reaction to the January 6 insurrection has been even weaker than what I report (i.e., assuming that more Republicans than Democrats/Independents would refuse to be interviewed as a result of the January 6 insurrection).

4.2 Excludability

Excludability is likely to hold for two reasons.

First, a content analysis of the New York Times and the USA Today suggests that there

were no other events that occurred on January 6, 2021 that could plausibly have caused a significant shift in political party identification (see Appendix B).

Second, while I naturally cannot exclude the possibility that the January 6 insurrection did not trigger some other, perhaps currently unknown, voter reaction that could have affected Republican Party support besides democratic backsliding concerns, the data does suggest that this is unlikely to be of major concern. This is because respondents in the treatment group are not more likely to express dissatisfaction towards other issues that could in theory be linked to the January 6 insurrection, such as crime and violence (OLS coefficient: 0.000; P-value: 0.994), moral and ethical climate (OLS coefficient: 0.014; P-value: 0.683), respect for others (OLS coefficient: -0.003; P-value: 0.876), and race relations (OLS coefficient: 0.021; P-value: 0.686).[67]

5 Generalizability

Gallup samples by randomly selecting respondents from a list of all household telephone numbers that have recently been in use within the continental United States (see Gallup (2022) for more information). As discussed in the previous section this random digit dialing sampling strategy allows me to causally identify the effect of the January 6 insurrection.

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[6]Regrettably, Gallup did not ask respondents about their satisfaction with the state of American democracy. This prohibits me from assessing whether respondents interpreted the January 6 insurrection as an attack on democracy.

[7]Note that if any collateral events nonetheless did take place my identification strategy would still identify the causal effect of the events of January 6, 2021, but this would represent a bundled treatment of democratic backsliding *plus* other closely related treatments. Like with other potential sources of bias, it is likely that many potential bundled treatments would bias in favor of finding stronger negative effects (e.g., when voters punish the Republican Party not for reasons related to democracy but because they perceive the January 6 insurrection as a reprehensible desacralization of a national monument).

Being a phone survey does come at a potential cost, however, as phone surveys generally suffer from more survey non-response than in-person surveys.

To assess the representativeness of Gallup's January 2021 "Mood of the Nation" survey I benchmark the Gallup survey against data from the 2020 American National Election Study (ANES), which was conducted from August 18, 2020 until January 4, 2021 (N=8,280). I use the ANES for three reasons. First, the ANES is one of the most rigorously sampled in-person surveys in American politics. Second, data from the Census and the Current Population Survey, which are even more rigorous in-person surveys, were, at the time of writing, only available for the year 2019. Last, the Census and the Current Population Survey do not collect data on religious affiliation, while religious affiliation is an important determinant of political behavior in the U.S., and is therefore an important variable to assess the survey' representativeness on.

As can be seen in Table 1 the January 2021 Gallup survey has approximately the same share of Christian, White, and rural individuals as the ANES indicated existed in the U.S. electorate at the end of 2020. Importantly, however, the Gallup sample does contain on average slightly more males, college graduates, and unemployed people than ANES indicated existed in the U.S. electorate at the end of 2020. To correct for this I devise inverse probability weights (see last two columns in Table 1).[8] As shown below the results remain substantively unchanged when estimating the effect in this weighted sample.[9]

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[8]I create these weights using Deville and Särndal's (1992) distance function. In terms of calibration I employ the principle of minimizing the distance between the smallest and largest weight. This leads to a weight range of 0.65 to 1.35 in this case.

[9]With regard to the direction of potential bias generated by survey non-response I would again suggest that my estimates are likely upperbound. This is because die-hard Donald Trump supporters—which are presumably significantly *less* likely to change their party alliance as a result of the January 6 insurrection—will, if anything, be likely to be *un-dersampled* in Gallup's January 2021 "Mood of the Nation" survey (e.g., like all other surveys Gallup polls have tended to underestimate Donald Trump's vote share in the 2016

Table 1: Congruence with American National Election Survey (ANES) on observables.

	Gallup		Weighted ANES		Weighted Gallup	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Male	0.520	0.500	0.479	0.500	0.479	0.500
Christian	0.719	0.450	0.722	0.448	0.722	0.448
White	0.790	0.407	0.792	0.405	0.795	0.404
College degree	0.481	0.500	0.355	0.479	0.356	0.479
Rural residency	0.349	0.477	0.398	0.490	0.396	0.489
Unemployed	0.055	0.228	0.049	0.217	0.050	0.217

Notes: ANES includes both the pre- and post-election data. ANES is weighted using the probability weights provided in the data itself. Inverse probability weights for the Gallup survey are generated using the "sreweight" Stata package.

6 Results

Table 2 reports the main results. As can be seen the percentage of respondents that indicated to identify as Republican reduced from 31.6% on January 4 and 5, 2021, to 24.6% on January 7 to 15, 2021; a reduction of 7%. The percentage that indicated to lean Republican meanwhile reduced from 18.1% to 14.3%; a reduction of 3.8%. Taken together this suggests that the total (likely) support for the Republican Party went down with 10.8% in the 1.5 weeks after January 6, 2021.[10] This reduction of 10.8% is the equivalent of a 21.8% decline in total support relative to the Republican Party' pre-insurrection support level. The last three columns of Table 2 show that these results remain substantively the same when using the probability weights devised in the previous section.

In Figure 3 I examine the robustness of these results to: (1) limiting the sample to only include respondents interviewed directly before and directly after January 6, 2021; and (2) adding covariates. To do so I use OLS to regress a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent self-identifies, or leans towards self-identifying, as a Republican, and 0 otherwise, on a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent was surveyed after January 6, 2021,

and 2020 presidential elections (Clinton et al., 2021)).

[10]As can also be seen in Table 2 8.4% of this 10.8% shifted to the Democratic Party. The rest went to Independent.

Table 2: Party identification before and after the January 6 insurrection.

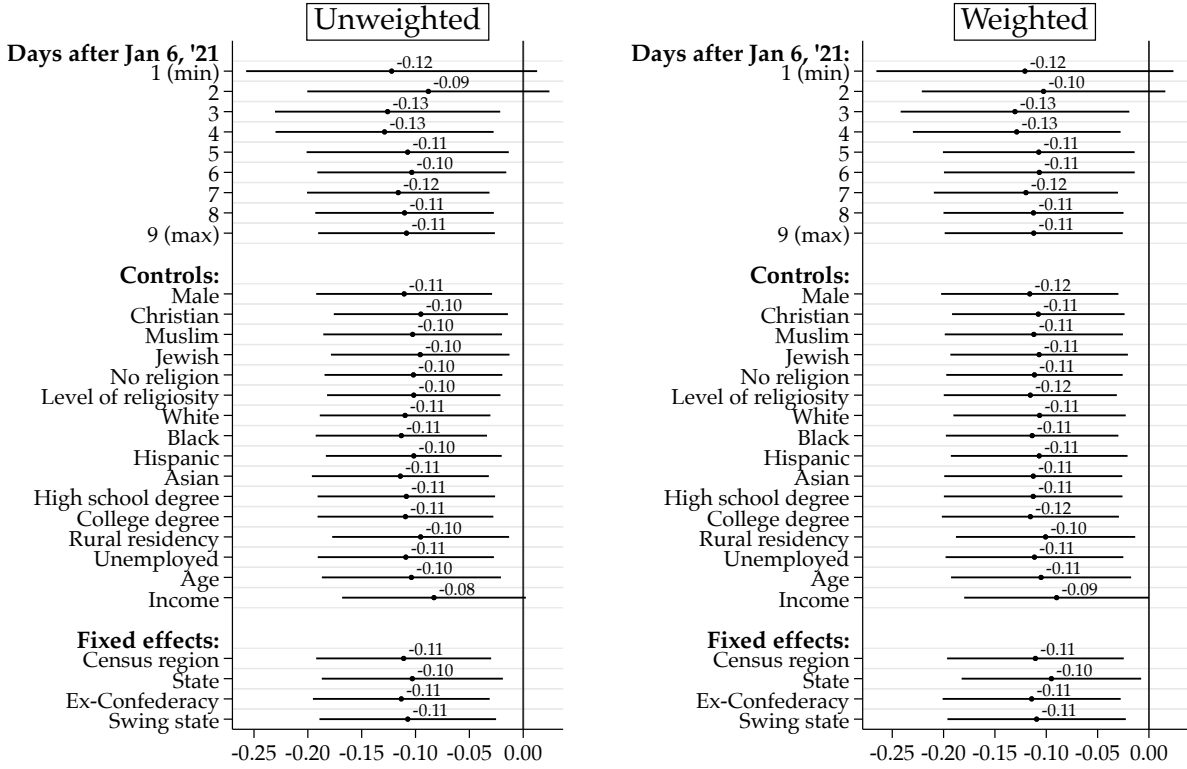|	Unweighted			Weighted		
	Jan 4–5	Jan 7–15	Δ	Jan 4–5	Jan 7–15	Δ
Republican	31.6%	24.6%	-7.0%	33.9%	26.4%	-7.5%
Leaning Republican	18.1%	14.3%	-3.8%	18.1%	14.5%	-3.6%
Independent	7.3%	9.8%	+2.5%	6.4%	9.3%	+2.9%
Leaning Democrat	17.5%	21.1%	+3.6%	17.8%	20.5%	+2.7%
Democrat	25.4%	30.2%	+4.8%	23.7%	29.4%	+5.7%

Notes: Data comes from Gallup's January 2021 "Mood of the Nation" survey. Weights are generated using American National Election Study data on the percentage of male, Christian, White, college educated, rural, and unemployed individuals that existed in the U.S. electorate at the end of 2020.

and 0 if he/she was surveyed before this date. I use a linear probability model for ease of interpretation. The results are substantively the same when using a probit model (Appendix C).

As can be seen in Figure 3 the effect on Republican Party support remains roughly 11% when controlling for gender, religion, race/ethnicity, education, rural/urban residency, unemployment, age, and income, and when only comparing respondents that were surveyed directly before and directly after January 6, 2021. Figure 3 also shows that the effect is generally statistically significant on the 95% confidence level.

Is a roughly 11% decline in overall support for the Republican Party a large or small effect? Answering this question remains to some extent subjective, as the quantity of what a large effect is, and what effect is large enough to incentivize politicians from refraining from undemocratic behavior, cannot be clearly defined. While acknowledging this fact there are good reasons to consider a 11% decline as relatively modest in this context. A reduction of 11% suggests that 77.9% of the Republican Party' pre-insurrection support group remained loyal to the Party, *even through its leader incited a violent insurrection to overturn the results of a free and fair election.* Furthermore, as discussed above, all estimates in Table 2 and Figure 3 are arguably upperbound—i.e., the major potential sources of bias, if anything, appear to bias in favor of finding *stronger* negative effects in this context. For example, if, even given the design checks discussed in Section 4, it is the case that some Republicans in

Figure 3: Robustness checks.

	Unweighted			Weighted	
Days after Jan 6, '21			**Days after Jan 6, '21:**		
1 (min)	-0.12		1 (min)	-0.12	
2	-0.09		2	-0.10	
3	-0.13		3	-0.13	
4	-0.13		4	-0.13	
5	-0.11		5	-0.11	
6	-0.10		6	-0.11	
7	-0.12		7	-0.12	
8	-0.11		8	-0.11	
9 (max)	-0.11		9 (max)	-0.11	
Controls:			**Controls:**		
Male	-0.11		Male	-0.12	
Christian	-0.10		Christian	-0.11	
Muslim	-0.10		Muslim	-0.11	
Jewish	-0.10		Jewish	-0.11	
No religion	-0.10		No religion	-0.11	
Level of religiosity	-0.10		Level of religiosity	-0.12	
White	-0.11		White	-0.11	
Black	-0.11		Black	-0.11	
Hispanic	-0.10		Hispanic	-0.11	
Asian	-0.11		Asian	-0.11	
High school degree	-0.11		High school degree	-0.11	
College degree	-0.11		College degree	-0.12	
Rural residency	-0.10		Rural residency	-0.10	
Unemployed	-0.11		Unemployed	-0.11	
Age	-0.10		Age	-0.11	
Income	-0.08		Income	-0.09	
Fixed effects:			**Fixed effects:**		
Census region	-0.11		Census region	-0.11	
State	-0.10		State	-0.10	
Ex-Confederacy	-0.11		Ex-Confederacy	-0.11	
Swing state	-0.11		Swing state	-0.11	

Note: OLS regressions of a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent considers, or leans towards considering, him/herself a Republican, and 0 otherwise, on a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent is interviewed after January 6, 2021, and 0 if a respondents is interviewed before January 6, 2021. Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals on treatment dummy are reported. Confidence intervals are robust again heteroscedasticity. Weights are generated using American National Election Study data on the percentage of male, Christian, White, college educated, rural, and unemployed individuals that existed in the U.S. electorate at the end of 2020.

the direct aftermath of the January 6 insurrection felt inclined to lie about their support for the Republican Party, or refused to be surveyed altogether, the "true" effect of Donald Trump's incitement of the January 6 insurrection on Republican Party support was even weaker than the estimates reported in Table 2 and Figure 3.

7 Long run effect

My identification strategy is particularly suitable to examine the immediate (short run) effect of the January 6 insurrection on political party identification.[11] Examining how the treatment effect has developed over longer periods of time is significantly more challenging. This is because many other things happened in the months after January 6, 2021 that could also have affected political party preferences—creating a bundled treatment problem.

To illustrate: if identification with the Republican Party today is the same as what it was in the days before the January 6 insurrection this could be because the negative effect of the January 6 insurrection has disappeared entirely, *or* it could be that this rebound in Republican Party support was due to other factors (e.g., the chaotic military withdrawal from Afghanistan under president Biden), so that support for the Republican Party would have been even higher today, were it not for the January 6 insurrection.

I am not aware of an existing quasi/natural experiment that could doubtlessly separate these two scenario's by design. To nonetheless provide suggestive (correlational) evidence on the long run effect of the January 6 insurrection I employ two complementary analyses. First, I examine the effect of the January 6 insurrection on political party identification after only one month, when few other events that may cause a bundled treatment problem had the time to take place. Second, I analyze the effect of the January 6 insurrection on Donald Trump's favorability rating, which is less likely to be affected by other electorally important events that occurred after January 6, 2021.[12]

Table 3 compares party identification on January 4 and 5, 2021 with political party identification in a follow-up survey that Gallup fielded from February 7 to February 15,

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[11]The immediate (short run) effect is also the quantity that is identified in existing survey experiments on the effect of overt undemocratic behavior by politicians on voter preferences.

[12]Note that it is not possible to assess the effect on Donald Trump's presidential approval rating, as this data is not available for the period after Trump's presidency (i.e., after January 20, 2021).

2021 (N=1,007). As can be seen the percentage of respondents that indicate to support or lean towards supporting the Republican Party is only 3.7% lower in February 7-15, 2021 as compared to January 4 and 5, 2021. While it is possible that this reduction in effect size from 10.8% to 3.7% within one month was (partly) due to other events that occurred between January 15 and February 7, 2021, this does appear unlikely.[13] During this period the news was still very much dominated by the January 6 insurrection, and while it is true that the current sitting U.S. president, Joseph Biden, is relatively unpopular, which could in general explain a Republican Party' re-emergence, this unpopularity only arose six months later, at the beginning of August 2021 (Rakich and Wiederkehr, 2021).[14] Rather than unrelated events, it appears more likely that the almost two-thirds reduction in effect size within one month was due to a significant shift in position-taking and messaging by members of the Republican Party itself. While many Republican Party politicians were moderately condemning of Donald Trump's behavior in the 1.5 weeks after the January 6 insurrection, this radically changed in the second half of January 2021. Since then there has been a well-organized campaign by the Republican Party to downplay the severity of the January 6 insurrection, trivialize Donald Trump's role in it, and silence all Republican members of Congress that contradict this framing.[15] Given what we know about the influence of

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[13]Note that there is no sign that the treatment effect already diminished in the January 7-15, 2021 period analyzed in Table 2 and Figure 3—i.e., the number of days a respondent is interviewed after January 6 is uncorrelated with identifying with the Republican Party in the January 7-15 sample (OLS coefficient: 0.002; P-value: 0.803).

[14]This drop in Biden's presidential approval rating in the beginning of August 2021 coincided with the chaotic military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the spread of the Delta variant of the Covid-19 virus, and was thus plausibly unrelated to the January 6 insurrection.

[15]This has gone so far that the Republican National Committee has censured two of its own representatives—Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger—for participating in the National Commission to Investigate the January 6 Attack on the United States Capitol Complex, and has instead declared the January 6 insurrection "legitimate political discourse" (New York

Table 3: Effect of January 6 insurrection after one month.

|	Unweighted			Weighted		
	Jan 4–5	Feb 7–15	Δ	Jan 4–5	Feb 7–15	Δ
Republican	31.6%	29.6%	-2.0%	33.9%	30.7%	-3.2%
Leaning Republican	18.1%	16.4%	-1.7%	18.1%	16.4%	-1.7%
Independent	7.3%	6.9%	-0.4%	6.4%	6.5%	+0.1%
Leaning Democrat	17.5%	16.3%	-1.2%	17.8%	16.0%	-1.8%
Democrat	25.4%	30.9%	+5.5%	23.7%	30.4%	+6.7%

Notes: Data comes from Gallup's January 2021 "Mood of the Nation" survey and Gallup's February 2021 "World Affairs" survey. Weights are generated using American National Election Study data on the percentage of male, Christian, White, college educated, rural, and unemployed individuals in the U.S. electorate at the end of 2020.

elite messaging on co-partisan political preferences it appears likely that this at least partly explains the observed rebound in Republican Party support within the first month of the January 6 insurrection (e.g., Agadjanian (2021), Barber and Pope (2019), and Broockman and Butler (2017)).

Figure 4 plots the percentage of people that perceive Donald Trump favorably (bottom line) and the percentage of people that perceive Donald Trump unfavorably (top line) from the time when this data first came available (July 2, 2015) until the time of writing (February 9, 2022).[16] As can be seen Donald Trump's favorability (unfavorability) decreased (increased) from 42.5% (53.2%) on the eve of the January 6 insurrection to 37.9% (59.5%) on January 16, 2021. Given the actual severity of the January 6 insurrection this decrease (increase) in favortability (unfavorability) of 4.6% (6.3%) is again arguably quite modest. More importantly, however, Trump's favorability (unfavorability) improved from January 16, 2021 onwards, leading his favorability rating to be essentially back to pre-insurrection levels on July 8, 2021 (42.5% favorability; 52.3% unfavorability). Since then Donald Trump's favorability rating has been relatively stable. While, as discussed above, I cannot be 100 percent certain what Trump's current favorability rating would have been in the absence of

Times, 2022).

[16]This data is collected by Real Clear Politics, and is generated by pooling survey data from YouGov, Politico, Harris, NBC News, Rasmussen, CNBC, and the Wall Street Journal.

Figure 4: Donald Trump (un)favorability rating from July 2, 2015 until February 9, 2022.
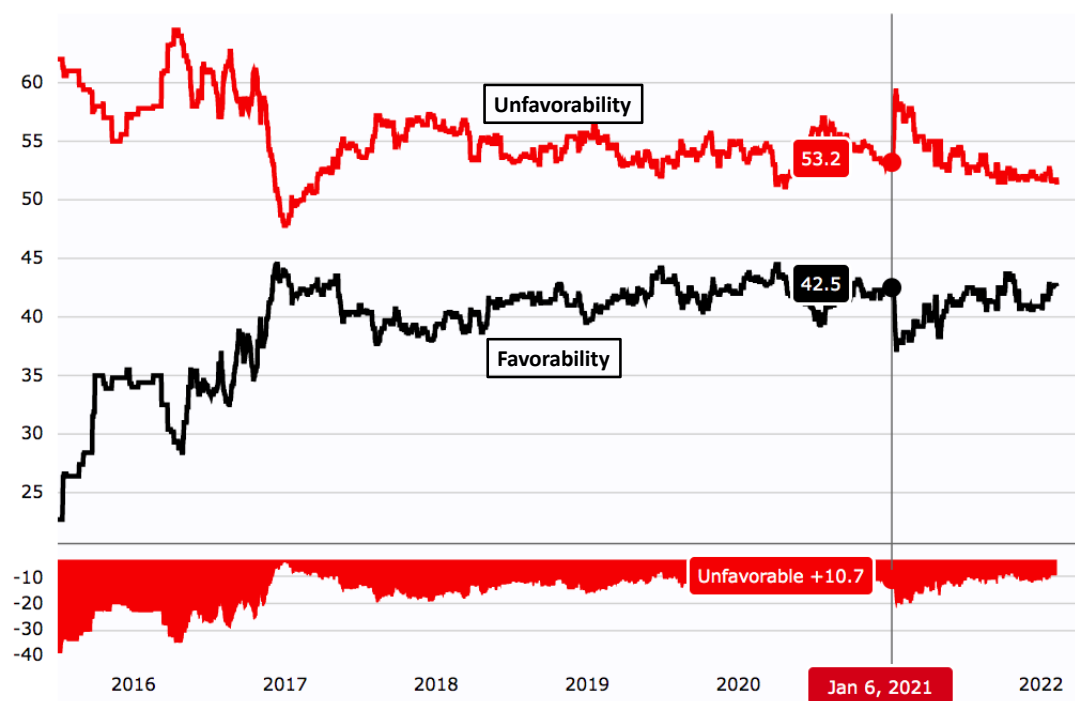
Note: The top line is the percentage of respondents that view Donald Trump unfavorably. The bottom line is the percentage of respondents that view Donald Trump favorably. The bargraphs in the bottom plot the difference between these two variables. Data comes from Real Clear Politics, which has generated this data by pooling survey data from YouGov, Politico, Harris, NBC News, Rasmussen, CNBC, and the Wall Street Journal.

the January 6 insurrection, Figure 4 does, at the minimum, show that any negative effect of the January 6 insurrection was not sufficient to permanently reduce Trump's favorability rating below what it was prior to January 6, 2021. This in itself is quite remarkable considering the fact that it was Trump himself that incited his supporters to storm the center of U.S. democracy in an attempt to violently overturn the results of a free and fair election.

Taken together the results from Table 3 and Figure 4 suggest that even the relatively modest immediate effect of the January 6 insurrection found in Table 2 and Figure 3 was most probably not long-lasting.

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8 Discussion

The essence of democracy is that when politicians lose elections they accept defeat and leave office peacefully (Przeworski, 1991). On January 6, 2021 this did not happen when then sitting U.S. president Donald Trump incited his supporters to storm the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to keep Congress from certifying his defeat in the 2020 presidential election. Luckily for American democracy this effort was unsuccessful. Living still in a democracy one would hope that Donald Trump, and with him the Republican Party, would have lost all credibility among the U.S. population. Unfortunately, this is not what happened. Yes, Donald Trump and the Republican Party did lose some of their supporters in the 1.5 weeks directly following the January 6 insurrection, but this reduction was modest as compared to the actual severity of the January 6 insurrection, and furthermore appears to have been largely temporary.

While insightful, my data and identification strategy do not come without limitations. First, because there was no election ongoing when the January 6 insurrection occurred I am forced to analyze the effect of the January 6 insurrection on stated political preferences, instead of actual observed voting behavior. While this, if anything, is likely to overestimate the negative effect of the January 6 insurrection on Republican Party support (assuming that social desirability bias is only a potential problem in surveys, not in secret ballot voting), this is an important limitation of my design. Second, my results are naturally limited to the specifics of the January 6 insurrection. Future research is necessary to establish how strongly the American electorate reacts to other types of democratic backsliding (e.g., vote suppression)[17] and to other actors doing the backsliding (e.g., politicians from the Democratic rather than the Republican Party).

These limitations not withstanding the natural experimental results reported in this paper are clear: the far majority of current supporters of the Republican Party is so weakly

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[17]Note in this regard that there exists some survey experimental evidence that suggests that voters react differently depending on the type of democratic norm transgression (Carey et al., 2020; Graham and Svolik, 2020).

committed to democracy that even a violent insurrection to overturn the results of a free and fair election is insufficient for them to *say* in an anonymous phone survey, directly following the insurrection, that they no longer support the Republican Party.

This result has far-reaching implications for democracy promotion/protection. If large parts of the electorate are unlikely to effectively act on overtly undemocratic behavior by a president when he/she is already in office, safeguarding democracy becomes primarily about avoiding undemocratic leaders from being elected in the first place.

Further research is necessary to establish which institutional reforms may make it less likely that an undemocratic American president comes to power going forward. One important possibility is Electoral College reform. Donald Trump got elected in the 2016 U.S. presidential election while *losing* the popular vote with more than 2.9 million votes. Haggard and Kaufman (2021) find that this pattern is characteristic of the far majority of democratic backsliding cases around the world—i.e., in more than two-thirds of all countries where democratic backsliding occurred in the 1974-2019 period incumbents were able to exploit disproportionalities in the electoral system in such a way to rule as a (super)majority while winning only a *minority* of the popular vote. Like in many other backsliding countries there does not appear to be a country-wide majority in the U.S. that would tolerate, let alone actively encourage, the anti-democratic behavior currently displayed by the Republican Party. Instead, the Republican Party is currently only able to hold significant political power, and use this power to further erode democracy, because it does not require majorities to win elections.[18] One way to fight democratic erosion in the U.S. is therefore to enact institutional reforms that ensure that no political party can win the presidency without winning at least a plurality of the nationwide popular vote (a basic democratic principle that anyone,

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[18]Note, for example, that since 1992 the Republican Party has held the presidency 3 out of 8 terms while winning the national popular vote only once (i.e., in the 2004 presidential election; which in itself was heavily influenced by rally-'round-the-flag effects from the 9/11 attacks).

regardless of political persuasion, should at least in theory be able to agree with).[19] One way to ensure that the nationwide popular vote decides who becomes president is through a constitutional amendment, but there may also be other options that do not require a constitutional amendment (e.g., the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact).[20]

Another approach to reducing the risk of American democracy eroding further is to increase the likelihood that American voters in general, and Republican voters in particular, strongly oppose politicians that display clearly undemocratic behavior. Future research could examine ways to increase genuine commitment to democracy among the electorate, and/or could study how to reduce political polarization, so that the "cost" of defecting from one's own preferred political party/candidate, in case it acts undemocratically, is lowered (Graham and Svolik, 2020; Svolik, 2020)).

All these reforms are difficult but essential to achieve for the sustainability of American democracy. Without any reform American democracy will be continuously exposed to a Republican Party that is not clearly committed to democracy, supported by millions of people that are unlikely to choose democracy over partisanship when it comes down to it.

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[19]A similar argument could of course be made about the U.S. Senate. The Republican Party held a legislative majority in the U.S. Senate during the entire Trump presidency (2016–2020) while winning a stunning 28 million votes *less* than the Democratic Party in the 2016 and 2018 U.S. Senate elections. The presidency is, however, arguably more important for the survival of democracy because the state executive has a much greater capacity to subvert democracy than the legislature. Also, the fact that in the U.S. political system each state receive two senators regardless of population size cannot be changed without a constitutional amendment.

[20]Note, however, that their exists an ongoing legal debate on whether the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact is legal under the current U.S. Constitution (e.g., Muller (2007)).

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