

The Partisan Utility of Racial Demographic Change and Democratic Backsliding in the American Public

Abstract: Racial demographic change has become a political flashpoint in the United States. It is so salient that racial threat felt from these changes is tied to anti-democratic sentiments among Americans. In this project, I argue that the partisan utility of demographic change, not racially discriminatory attitudes, underlies the motivation behind both racial threat and anti-democratic views. Across 3 surveys and 2 pre-registered experiments, I demonstrate that Republicans anti-democratic attitudes are causally determined by the inferences they make about the coming racial demographic changes in the U.S. – they assume Democrats will benefit. When I frame the changes to be advantageous to the GOP, it reshapes Republicans' views about the value of demographic change. This reframing decreases their feelings of racial threat, and in turn leads to less anti-democratic views. Overall, I argue that my findings are indicative of partisan utility-based view of democracy and race relations in the U.S.

The United States over the past several years has undergone democratic backsliding (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Carey et al. 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Graham and Svobik 2020). This backsliding has included the erosion of democratic norms and creeping authoritarianism among American elected officials. Americans are expressing more support for practices and ideas that run counter to American democratic values. These anti-democratic sentiments reached a fever pitch in early 2021 with the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol building, which was an unprecedented event in American history.

The racial diversification of the U.S. sits at the core of American democratic backsliding, and the logic of this motivation is simple. To start, Americans feel threatened by the future of the country's racial demographic landscape. These senses of threat often emerge as anxieties and concerns about issues that are racial in their orientation. Examples of these issues are debate about Critical Race Theory in high schools (Gibbons 2021), and backlash over pushes for representation of people of color in media (Anderson 2021). These threatened views can and do relate closely to changing attitudes about democracy because of what they say about changes to politics.

The story behind this connection is one of relative power gains and losses where Republicans perceive a loss for themselves and their party. Demographic change causes racial threat among Republicans because of latent fears of racial minorities being activated (Bartels 2020). This idea is that racial prejudice is behind threat, and subsequently shifts anti-democratic views. The diversifying country is inflaming racially prejudiced attitudes among Republicans which is causing them to feel more racial threat and in turn want to limit the political abilities of racial minorities. The conclusion of this story is that these fearful Americans become more willing to support the rollback of American democratic institutions and more willing to engage in

anti-democratic behavior. These views that run against democracy have been described as stemming from ideas of protecting Republicans' senses of their relative status in society. However, the power loss narrative does not cohere with the functions of these anti-democratic views specifically for Republicans. I argue that Republicans' concerns as they relate to racial demographic change stem from inferences that they make about racial minorities' party identification. Their actual concern of racial threat is not a prejudicial one, but a politically instrumental one that I describe next.

Republicans, I assert, infer that racial minorities will mostly identify as Democrats, thereby shrinking the influence of their party as the country diversifies. So, their feelings of racial threat do not originate from outward prejudice toward minority racial groups, but rather stem from inward-facing fears about their shrinking political influence in the United States. So, their willingness to rollback democratic institutions comes from this partisan-oriented concern. Republicans then want to limit the democratic capabilities of their opponents because they see racial demographic change as something that gives overwhelming advantage to the Democratic Party. I call this the partisan utility hypothesis. Republican partisans feel a racial threat from racial diversification *because* they perceive it as a harm to their party. The racial demographic changes are depicted to be inevitable, which Republicans perceive to be an inevitable end to their party's influence in American politics.

I test my hypothesis by first examining how racial threat predicts anti-democratic attitudes among partisans. Across three surveys, I find that Republicans' anti-democratic attitudes are in fact predicted by racial threat, and that the relationship between these two concepts does not carry over for Democrats. This first set of studies offers associational evidence

for the partisan utility hypothesis. Following this first test, I then causally test the hypothesis through a set of preregistered experiments.

In these studies, I explicitly frame racial demographic change as a phenomenon that will benefit either Democrats or Republicans – causally testing the partisan utility hypothesis through specific frames. Through this hypothesis, I expect that when Republicans are told that their party will benefit from racial demographic change, their senses of racial threat will be assuaged *and* their support for anti-democratic ideas will decrease. This is exactly what I find across both experiments. Within the first experiment I show that the partisan utility frame shifts Republicans' general and wide-ranging views of racial threat and anti-democratic support. In the second experiment, I go on to demonstrate that the partisan utility hypothesis holds in that it reduces specific views of racial threat and decreases support for anti-democratic policy proposals.

Ultimately, I show that Republicans' racially threatened attitudes and anti-democratic sentiments are closely tied to their party. When Republicans learn that their party will benefit from minorities increasing in size, they express less racially threatened ideas which then leads to a reduction in anti-democratic support. I argue that feelings of threat come from a place of *partisan utility* for Republicans and not for Democrats.

This idea of partisan utility holds across both experiments that I conduct, leading to two major implications. The first implication is the establishment and confirmation of the partisan utility hypothesis. I show that racial demographic concerns among Republicans are contingent upon their perceptions of the party that is slated to benefit which confirms the partisan utility hypothesis. Moreover, I demonstrate that concerns for the Republican Party's position motivate ideas about racial threat, rejecting the idea that racially antagonistic or prejudiced views are not as central to the story of racial threat and democratic attitudes.

The second implication of my findings is broader than the first. I demonstrate that Republicans' anti-democratic views are causally directed by racial threat through my experiments. My findings are the first demonstration of the causal relationship between racial threat and views of American democracy and show that the relationship between threat and democracy is not unidirectional. Stronger feelings of racial threat can increase anti-democratic support among Republicans (i.e., increasing attitudes that support democratic backsliding), but I show that decreasing these same views of threat can also decrease anti-democratic notions (i.e., decreasing backsliding). In summary, contemporary views of American democracy are directly related to and *motivated* by race and partisanship. American democratic values can and do shift with demographic perceptions.

Racial Threat Considered

Racial threat has a long history in the study of American politics. When racial minorities actually grow or are projected to grow in size on local or national levels, the dominant group (typically White Americans) feel a sense of threat on their societal status (Blumer 1958; Blalock 1967; Key and Heard 1984; Fossett and Kiecolt 1989; Quillian 1995; 1996; Craig and Richeson 2014). The size of racial minorities is a proxy for their influence; the more there are, the more they can influence politics, culture, and society at large. Whites are motivated in a zero-sum way, perceiving racial minorities' influence as antithetical to their own. The more minorities there are, the less influence Whites perceive that they will have.

The concept of racial threat also drives specific political attitudes. Scholars have shown that racial demographic change prompts more prejudiced views toward minorities (Quillian 1995), more punitive attitudes (Dixon 2006), among a host of other ideas. The majority-minority

flip (where Whites will become a national minority in the U.S., and racial minorities will become the majority group) causes greater senses of threat and leads to more expression of conservative ideology (Craig and Richeson 2018).

On a broader level, the phenomenon of racial threat from demographic change has contributed to the emergence of far-right politics throughout many Western democracies (Bonikowski 2017; Hanley and Vachudova 2018; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Vachudova 2020; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Marinov and Popova 2021). Only recently has it gained prominence as a potential cause in far-right political activity in the U.S. I argue that the dynamic between racial threat and democratic backsliding in the United States is crucial.

Racial Threat and American Democracy

White nationalists have long advocated for the idea that a “Great Replacement” is occurring in Western nations where elites are attempting to subvert the power of Whites through immigration and declining White birth rates. In short, politicians have weaponized demographic change. The “Great Replacement” has recently caught fire within contemporary American politics. For example, protesters in “Unite the Right” in Charlottesville [in 2017] chanted “Jews will not replace us,” evoking this notion of the “Great Replacement” (Katz 2017; Wildman 2017). The stakes of the “Great Replacement” are grand – contesting it is perceived to be a fight for the survival of the White race in the Western world. No institution is too big in this fight.

Democracy is on the chopping block for those who feel threatened because it is existential.

The Republican Party over the past decade incorporated these ideas of threat from racial demographic change into its rhetoric. Earlier notions of the Great Replacement were advocated for by the Tea Party, and once the faction captured the Republican Party the idea took root in

mainstream GOP rhetoric (Blum 2020). The ideologically extreme wing of the Republican Party has tied racial threat to American democracy overall, thereby advancing an American ethnonationalist sense of democracy. That is, the diversifying country will lead to Whites having less purchase in the electoral system. Logically implied in this ethnonationalist view, Republicans ought to protect their political power through any means, including anti-democratic ones if necessary.

This elite messaging bears out in politics. Scholars have shown strong correlations between Republican voters' animosity toward Democratic-linked social groups, many of which are racial minorities, to support for Donald Trump (Mason, Wronski, and Kane 2021). Messaging directed at the Republican base has been so successful that anti-democratic sentiments among voters closely connect to racial threat. Using a nationally representative sample of Republicans, Bartels (2020) shows racially antagonistic views are the main drivers behind anti-democratic views when compared to a series of other alternative explanations. Though, despite this recent evidence of a connection between these two concepts, the mechanism behind this racial threat remains in question. Identification of this mechanism is vital to the overall understanding of American democratic backsliding among Republicans. Both aforementioned studies put forth the motivation for racial threat which I term the "racial antagonism hypothesis."

This antagonism hypothesis asserts that racial prejudice drives racially threatened views about the U.S. Threat then connects with anti-democratic views. When Republicans learn that minorities are soon to be the majority, their latent prejudicial attitudes are inflamed, leading them to feel more racially threatened. Threat leads to more support for anti-democratic ideas to protect the political position of Republicans. The explanation behind this mechanism does not capture

the major partisan concerns that racial demographic change can imply for Republicans. Simply put, why are Republicans specifically feeling more threatened? I argue that the partisan utility hypothesis explains this question more effectively, and importantly does a better job explaining democratic backsliding among Republicans.

Partisan Utility Hypothesis

Why is it that Republicans are the ones to feel racially threatened about the future of the country, and connect these ideas to views of democracy? I assert that this discussion about racial threat is an implicitly partisan one. Republicans are inferring ideas about partisan advantage that connect to the future of the country, and it is this dynamic that makes them so worried. The inference is this: Racial minorities are likely to identify as Democrats, and so with a diversifying country the GOP will be unable to compete as the U.S. continues to change. For years, this has been a concern of party elites, only recently filtering down to the Republican base.

One significant moment among party elites where the idea of the partisan utility of racial demographic change was made salient in the party platform came in the “autopsy” report following the electoral loss to Barack Obama in 2012. In the early pages of the report, party experts write,

The nation’s demographic changes add to the urgency of recognizing how precarious our position has become. America is changing demographically, and unless Republicans are able to grow our appeal the way GOP governors have done, the changes tilt the playing field even more in the Democratic direction (Barbour et al. 2013).

Here, elites are asserting the partisan utility hypotheses – racial demographic change brings threat to the GOP because more racial minorities appear to give Democrats an advantage. Recent evidence shows that this narrative has filtered down through party channels into Republican voters. Looking at a nationally representative survey conducted by Pew Research in 2019, Republicans express significantly less optimism on the prospect of the majority-minority flip in the U.S. Only 19% are very optimistic relative to 55% among Democrats. Moreover, 47% of Republicans are very pessimistic about the prospects for the country (Horowitz 2019). Because it extends from the broader concerns about the future of the country, the partisan utility hypothesis also offers a better explanation for the development of anti-democratic attitudes among Republicans than the racial antagonism hypothesis.

Racial demographic change causes Republicans to worry about the prospects of their party winning consistently or even at all in the future. Using a fatalistic lens to predict the political consequences of the majority-minority flip reveals a doomed future for the GOP. So, to save the party, Republicans are willing to sacrifice the function of democracy. The background conditions of increased polarization (Druckman et al. 2021) and partisan sorting (Mason 2015; Mason and Wronski 2018) support this hypothesis even further because Republicans' social identities have become increasingly connected to their partisan identity.

The partisan utility hypothesis offers a more nuanced take on the mechanism behind democratic backsliding than the racial antagonism hypothesis. In the alternative hypothesis, racial prejudice is less grounded. It essentializes negative racial views, considering them to be latent ideas in the American public, and offers little explanation for why they specifically motivate Republicans' racial threat. Further, racially prejudiced attitudes are not theoretically linked to Republicans' anti-democratic attitudes. Under the racial antagonism hypothesis,

antagonistic views toward racial minorities need not lead to any more or less support for democracy on their own. From this point, I assert that the partisan utility hypothesis brings together Republicans' partisan attitudes and racial attitudes in a logically coherent way that then explains democratic backsliding in the public. To do this, next I describe my expectations about the connection between racial threat and anti-democratic attitudes among partisans.

Expectations

I consider anti-democratic attitudes to be violations of central democratic norms. Examples of these views are support for violence against political opposition and concern for one's party winning over the proper function of democracy. As a first test of my partisan utility hypothesis, I expect that Republicans' anti-democratic attitudes will be strongly predicted by feelings of racial threat, while Democrats' attitudes will not be (H1) because Republicans will have received more messaging about racial threat. Democrats are not likely to have received similar messages from Democratic Party elites, and given the more heterogeneous makeup of the party, are also less likely to view demographic changes as a political threat.

Expanding from H1, I expect that ethnonationalist sentiments among Republicans are causally tied to their views of democracy. As Republicans feel more or less senses of racial threat, their anti-democratic views will move in the same direction because they see democracy as a system that is correspondingly more or less likely to work for their party (H2).

Within the following studies, I first test H1 through a series of cross-sectional studies looking at racial threat and anti-democratic attitudes among Democrats and Republicans. Then, I test H2 through a set of pre-registered experiments. I do this by explicitly priming the partisan orientation of racial minorities, then examining support for anti-democratic views among

Democrats and Republicans. In this first section I begin by surveying and analyzing how racial threat predicts Republicans' and Democrats' anti-democratic views through a series of cross-sectional studies.

Cross-Sectional Studies

My first cross-sectional study was conducted using a diverse sample of Americans¹ (N = 518) in September 2020 through Lucid Fulcrum.² For this study I investigate anti-democratic attitudes using 5 novel measures. Overall, they capture zero-sum ideas of supporting one's party winning over democracy functioning and intentionally. These measures are shown below:

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*

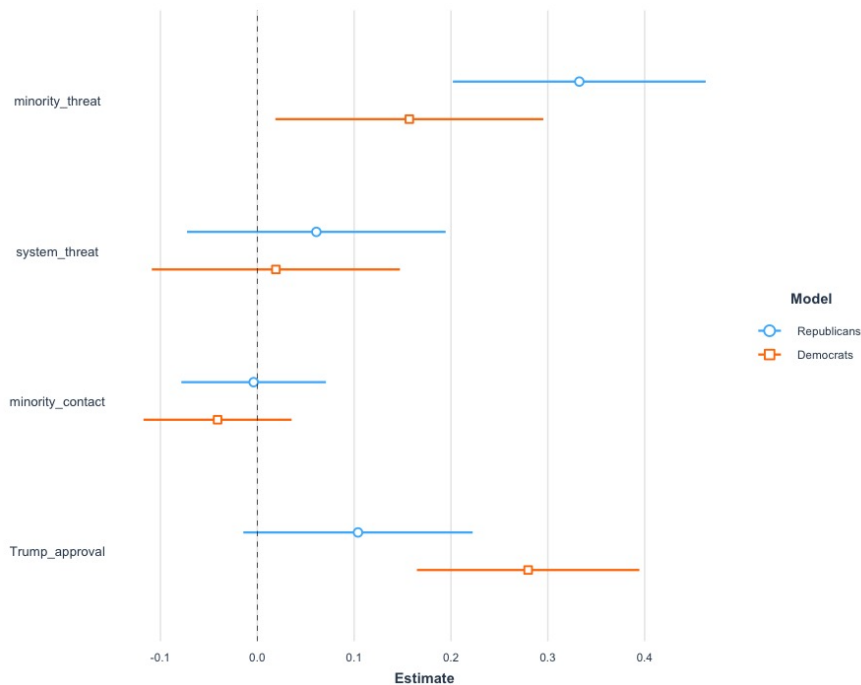
¹ This sample is primarily White (70%) and is nearly evenly spread along gender lines (52% women). On party identification, there are slightly more Republicans (40%) than Democrats (33%). For full sample demographics, see Appendix 1.

² To ensure high quality of responses, I use multiple attention and quality checks throughout this survey to confirm the quality of the sample, excluding those who fail these checks (See Appendix 2).

These items load well together in a single scale ($\alpha = 0.91$) which I use for all subsequent analyses. First, comparing means between partisans through t-tests, I find a large difference between Republicans and Democrats' anti-democratic attitudes ($p < 0.01$, Republicans are 11 percentage points more supportive). This shows there to be important partisan views that correspond with anti-democratic views.

Next, using this scale as an outcome variable, I test for H1 (the expectation that racial threat is the main motivator for anti-democratic attitudes for Republicans). I use linear regression, including racial threat as a covariate among several alternative hypotheses. These alternative explanations are system threat, minority contact, and job approval of President Trump as well as demographic controls.³ Systems threat calls to general feelings of threat to the American way of life (Craig and Richeson 2014); minority contact identifies the extent that respondents might be in contact with racial minorities (Pettigrew 1998); and the job approval of President Trump is included because of the high correspondence of support and racially conservative views (Mason, Wronski, and Kane 2021). In Figure 1 below I present my results, subsetting on Republicans and Democrats.

³ These are race, age, gender, education, household income, ideology, and how often one consumes media.

Figure 1

Note: This figure shows regression results with 95 percent confidence intervals.

Here I confirm my expectation that racial threat is the strongest predictor of anti-democratic support among Republicans. I also find that threat significantly predicts anti-democratic attitudes for Democrats, but job approval for President Trump is slightly more predictive. Racial threat matters *more* to Republicans than to Democrats in motivating their anti-democratic views.

Next, I extend the design of Study 1, conducting a survey with a larger sample using more granular measures of racial threat.⁴ I split apart the idea of racial threat, creating multiple

⁴ This study was conducted in October 2020 using Lucid Fulcrum (N=1629). Again, I use quality and attention checks to ensure better data quality. For these checks as well as the full sample demographics, see Appendices 3 and 4.

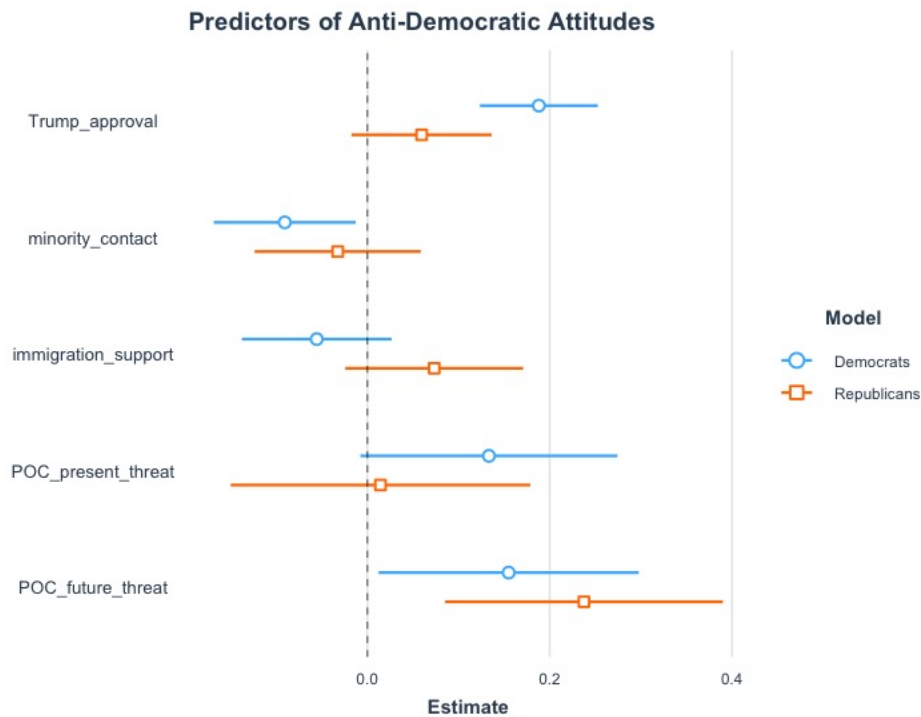
measures. Specifically, I design 2 scales on minority racial groups that are often seen as threatening (Latinxs, African Americans, and immigrants) that vary the temporal context of threat (i.e., present and future). Scholars have considered minorities to be threatening in the present – e.g., by physically encroaching on the position of White Americans (Zou and Cheryan 2018)– or in a future circumstance – e.g., the majority-minority flip creating a sense of status threat (Mutz 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019) – but have never measured for both.

Whether threat felt about the present or future is worth investigating in this project because it can help to better explain mechanisms behind anti-democratic views. If present racial threat motivates anti-democratic views, then this suggests that concern about current social conditions is more salient. If threat in the future is more determinative of anti-democratic attitudes, then this sentiment more closely aligns with concern about losing status as the country diversifies.

I use linear regression again to test for H1, this time using temporally distinct types of racial threat as predictors. I include additional covariates that serve as competing hypotheses.⁵ The main dependent variable in this study is, like in Study 1, the novel anti-democratic scale that I have created ($\alpha = 0.91$). Figure 2 below displays my results.

⁵ These competing hypotheses are job approval of President Trump, contact with racial minorities, the view that minorities have a negative impact on society generally, and support for pro-immigration policy, along with demographic controls.

Figure 2



Note: This figure shows regression results with 95 percent confidence intervals.

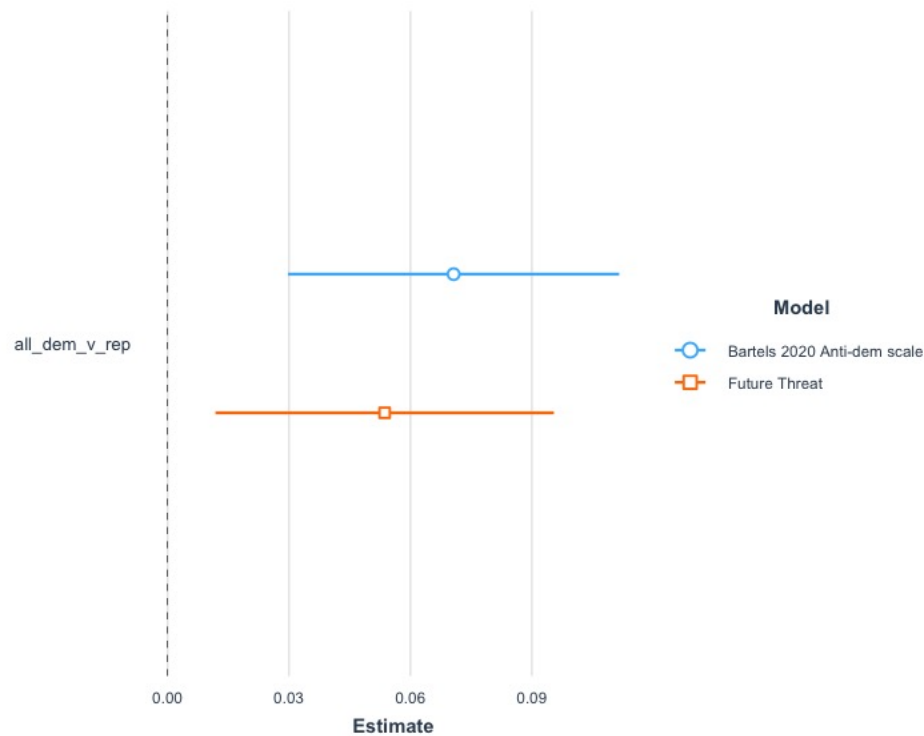
I find that threat from minority groups *in the future* to be the main predictor of anti-democratic attitudes for Republicans ($p = 0.006$). Once again, in comparison I do not find this to be the case for Democrats. Future threat does significantly predict anti-democratic attitudes among Democrats, but it is not the primary driver; Trump support is. I interpret this finding as further demonstration of attitudes aligned with the Republican Party to be mostly behind anti-democratic views.

Next, in a third cross-sectional study, I briefly test a second set of anti-democratic measures with a representative sample of the American public to validate partisan differences in anti-democratic views. Study 3 was fielded on December 7, 2020, using a representative sample of the American public through Qualtrics. It is benchmarked to the Census along the lines of

race, gender, region with a near equivalent size of Republicans and Democrats for partisan comparisons (Appendix 5 for full demographic breakdown of the sample).

I use three items on anti-democratic attitudes from Bartels (2020): 1) Support for the use of force to save tradition; 2) Americans taking the law into their hands; and 3) patriotic Americans protecting tradition. For future threat, I use the same scale as Study 2. This study is meant to clarify three things. First, it tests the pervasiveness of anti-democratic attitudes. Specifically, I look to clarify if these views are held expansively across the American public – as studies 1 and 2 use non-representative samples. Second, I test an alternative measure of anti-democratic attitudes which works as a robustness check of my previous findings. Republican support in studies 1 and 2 could have been contingent on the scale I created and used in those studies. The adapted measure from Bartels (2020) offers an alternative measure of anti-democratic views. Thirdly, this study tests partisan differences in senses of future threat. In Figure 3 below, I present my main results. I look across partisans in the following analyses, using difference-in-means tests to compare Democrats and Republicans.⁶

⁶ Independent-leaning, weak and strong Democrats are combined under the value 0, and Independent-leaning, weak and strong Republicans are combined under the value of 1.

Figure 3

Note: This figure shows difference-in-means results with 95 percent confidence intervals.

I find Republicans are significantly more supportive than Democrats of anti-democratic ideas using this alternative scale ($p < 0.01$, 7 percentage points greater). Also, with a similar magnitude, Republicans feel stronger senses of future threat ($p = 0.01$, 6 percentage points greater).

In this third cross-sectional study, I again confirm that senses of anti-democratic attitudes and senses of racial threat are uniquely partisan in the public. So, observationally there is a clear connection between these two ideas (as evidenced by Studies 1 and 2), and they are felt more strongly among Republicans (shown in Studies 1-3) on a national scale (shown in Study 3).

Discussion

The association between the anti-democratic attitudes and racial threat calls to a potential causal connection between the two ideas. Racial threat could alter views about democracy, encouraging ideas of rolling back democratic practices and institutions to mitigate the threat of minorities. Despite the implied causal connection between racial threat and these views of democracy, no study so far has tested the connection explicitly. Moreover, while previous work has assessed the effects of racial threat on partisanship and ideology (Craig and Richeson 2018), the perceived political orientation of racial minorities and concerns that come with those perceptions have remained uninvestigated. Why are Republicans specifically threatened by the growth of racial minorities? As mentioned above in H2, I anticipate that this concern is motivated by perceptions of the partisan utility of racial demographic change. Republicans seem to anticipate that minorities are more likely to identify with the Democratic Party – e.g., as party elites made explicit in the 2012 GOP autopsy (Barbour et al. 2013) – and so the racial majority-minority flip implies that Democrats will be at an advantage. I test this inference explicitly using a set of pre-registered experiments where I prime partisan notions of demographic change and investigate how they motivate threat and anti-democratic attitudes among Republicans and Democrats, respectively. I discuss these studies next.

Causally Testing the Partisan Utility Hypothesis

Next, I causally test the partisan utility hypothesis. To reiterate, the expectation is that racial threat from demographic change among Republicans is motivated by concerns for the future of the party. The salient frame I anticipate will exist in the minds of Republicans is Democrats will benefit from the majority-minority flip. As such, when the Republican Party is explicitly framed

to benefit from racial demographic change, I anticipate that racial threat will *decrease* among Republicans (H1a). The mechanism at work here is the perception of utility for the Republican Party. Threat is motivated by the sense that the GOP will consistently lose because of the majority-minority flip. When they are told that Republicans benefit from this shift, their feelings of racial threat will be reduced.

Following this expectation, I expect that the reduction in threat will then decrease anti-democratic sentiments among Republicans (H2b). The negative views toward democracy held by Republicans are wrapped up in their perceptions of an increasingly unwinnable electorate *caused by* racial minorities. Again, this is motivated by the expectation that racial minorities are inferred to be mostly Democratic voters. I anticipate that when Republicans learn that racial minorities will be a boon for their party, they will become less concerned about democracy, and therefore less anti-democratic.

Thirdly, I anticipate that Democrats' racial threat and anti-democratic attitudes will not be affected by explicitly articulating that Republicans will benefit from racial demographic change (H3b). For Democrats, racial demographic change will not be as salient of a political phenomenon. I anticipate that party elites and Democratic base voters alike do not think of these changes as often as Republicans because they are either seen as innocuous or not a threat to the party.⁷

To causally test the partisan utility hypothesis, I use a set of 2 pre-registered vignette experiments where I make explicit the party that is projected to benefit from the majority-

⁷ Importantly, they might infer that the changes will *benefit* the party, leading to a host of positive assumptions about the future of politics. This does not connect to racial threat, but instead to positive affect (e.g., optimism, hopefulness) about the future prospects of the Democratic Party.

minority flip, then assess the extent to which they elicit senses of racial threat and generate support for anti-democratic ideas among Republicans and Democrats.

Experimental Design

I test the effects of these partisan frames on racial threat and support for anti-democratic views as outcome variables with two online, pre-registered surveys. Both experiments test the partisan utility hypothesis through vignettes that frame the majority-minority as an event that will benefit the Democratic or Republican Party (hereafter, partisan frames). The baseline condition I use describes the majority-minority flip generally – which allows me to isolate the effects of each partisan frame.

Across both experiments I am investigating the effects of the partisan frames on racial threat and anti-democratic attitudes, but, in my first experiment, I analyze general senses of racial threat and anti-democratic ideas. Within the second, I use more granular measures of both concepts, particularly in the vein of threat from specific racial groups and degrees of support for policy that is overtly anti-democratic. Experiment 1 tests the effect of the partisan utility hypothesis on wider notions of threat and democracy; Experiment 2 tests whether these abstract ideas are connected to grounded, real political scenarios.

Experiment 1 was conducted using the online vendor Lucid Fulcrum in April 2021 (N = 1,087; for full sample demographics, see Appendix 6). Experiment 2 was conducted with a representative sample through Forthright (formerly Bovitz, Inc.),⁸ and is Census matched on gender, race, and region (N = 1,274).

⁸ This survey platform has been utilized in a series of previous works (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Rothschild 2020; Bakker, Lelkes, and Malka 2020).

Respondents provided consent, completed an attention check which filtered out inattentive participants, then answered demographic items in the beginning of this survey.⁹ Upon completing these pretreatment items, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions, three of which involve racial demographic change.¹⁰ Two conditions are partisan frames of racial demographic change, one is a baseline condition for demographic change, and one is a pure control (See Table 1 below).

Table 1

| Conditions | Description |
|------------|--|
| 1 | Pure Control |
| 2 | Majority-minority flip |
| 3 | Majority-minority flip + Republican frame |
| 4 | Majority-minority flip + Democratic frame |

The administration of the treatment involved two steps. First, all respondents are provided the following question, “Which of the following events is projected to occur in the United States by midcentury?” with a list of answers (See Appendix 7 for the treatment wording). Upon completing the question, all three treatments then tell respondents that the correct answer to the question is that “racial minorities will overtake Whites as the majority

⁹ As a second quality check, respondents also completed an open-ended question, which asked them to describe their community. Those who did not answer the prompt or provided an indecipherable response are excluded from the sample.

¹⁰ I block randomize on party identification to provide sufficient and uniform statistical power across Republican and Democratic respondents.

group” with the partisan frames going further to articulate that the Democratic Party or Republican Party is projected to benefit from the majority-minority flip because the growing racial minority population mostly identifies with the corresponding party.

After being assigned to and receiving a condition, all respondents then complete a series of posttreatment items which measure senses of racial threat and support for anti-democratic ideas. Within all following analyses, I subset on party identification, looking exclusively at Democrats and Republicans.¹¹ I do this to assess treatment effects conditional on party. Next, I present my analyses for Experiment 1.

Testing the Partisan Utility Hypothesis on Grand Views of Threat and Democracy

I first test the partisan utility hypothesis on broader notions of racial threat and democracy. For my outcome measures of threat, I assess perceptions of how the American way of life is threatened and views about the direction of American society (Craig and Richeson 2014).¹² These measures connect to previous works and are expansive in their scope of threat because they concern the overall impact of the diversifying U.S. On anti-democratic attitudes, I assess trust in electoral outcomes – an adapted item from Bartels (2020) that closely connects to the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and other overt contestations of American democratic practices. Across all the following analyses, I use Condition 2 from Table 1 as my baseline, then use difference-in-means tests to analyze treatment effects.

Testing H1b, on senses of racial threat among Republicans, I find that when Republicans learn that minorities groups that are expanding identify mostly as Republicans, they view

¹¹ For each subset partisan group, I include Independent leaners.

¹² I test general senses of threat in Study 4, then in Study 5 look to more specific measures.

American society as getting progressively better each year ($p = 0.03$). They also express marginally less support for the idea that the American way of life is threatened ($p = 0.09$). These results confirm my expectation that the framing of demographic change that connects with ideas partisan utility *reduces* racial threat.

Moving to Republicans' attitudes toward democracy (H2b), this same frame drastically alters their views. I find that when the GOP is said to benefit from the majority-minority flip, it *increases* their trust in elections. I find that Republicans become significantly *less* supportive of the idea that "It is hard to trust the results of elections when so many people will vote for anyone who offers a handout" ($p = 0.003$). This confirms H2b in this first experiment. The magnitude of this effect is large with a 14 percent decrease in support.

Next, as a test of H3b, I find no significant effects of the Democrat partisan frame for Democrats for either their views of racial threat or anti-democratic attitudes. For measures testing threat, I also find insignificant results for perceptions of threat on the American way of life ($p = 0.50$) and views about the direction of American society ($p = 0.86$). Overall, when Democrats learn that their party will benefit from the majority-minority flip, they do not feel stronger or weaker senses of threat. This same frame also does not move Democrats' anti-democratic views. More specifically, this is their support for the idea that it is hard to trust the outcomes of elections ($p = 0.64$). Ultimately, these findings confirm my expectations for H3b. Democrats' attitudes toward racial threat and democracy are not affected by learning their party will benefit from racial demographic change. Democrats' views of racial threat are therefore not couched in partisan assumptions per these results, nor do these assumptions affect their views toward democracy.

The test of these three hypotheses together show that Republicans' senses of racial threat seem to be very closely tied to their partisanship, while this is not equally the case for Democrats. This serves as evidence of the partisan utility hypotheses. Republicans' senses of racial threat, and their anti-democratic views motivated by these threat attitudes, are bound up with partisanship. More to this point, they are motivated by zero-sum evaluations of the party expected to benefit from the majority-minority flip. If this were *not* the case, then there should be no difference general racial demographic change condition (Condition #2) and the partisan frame condition (Condition #4). This, however, is not the case as I show above. Comparisons between the Democratic partisan frame (Condition #3) and the general frame (Condition #2) also do not elicit more senses of racial threat nor motivate more anti-democratic views for Republicans, which confirms my expectation that they are inferring Democrats will benefit from learning from the general discussion of the majority-minority flip (Appendix 8). This suggests that the change is already politicized.

Recall that Experiment 1 is meant to test more wide-ranging, abstract notions of racial threat and anti-democratic views. So, although I confirm the partisan utility hypothesis within this first experiment, these results could only pertain to abstract ideas. Next, I causally test this same hypothesis in a more grounded, specific fashion. I advance this design with granular measures of both concepts. I also go further by extending the experimental design to a representative sample of the American public and gather nearly equivalent sizes of Republicans and Democrats. These are additional robustness checks of the partisan utility hypothesis; namely in demonstrating how wide-ranging it is.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 expands on the goals of Experiment 1, testing the same stimuli with more contemporary outcome measures for both racial threat and anti-democratic attitudes. These measures are used to assess whether the partisan utility hypothesis operates only in an abstract way (as I show in Experiment 1), or if it also shapes politically grounded views of racial threat and anti-democratic attitudes.

For threat, I assess how threatened individuals feel from racial groups in the future. On anti-democratic attitudes, I use party-contingent items adapted from Graham and Svulik (2020).¹³ I list the adapted measures below, then provide a brief description of what they capture:

- 1) A proposal to reduce the number of polling stations in areas that support [Republicans/Democrats].
- 2) [Republican/Democratic] governors should prosecute journalists who accuse them of misconduct without revealing sources.
- 3) [Republican/Democratic] governors should ban far-right group rallies in state capitols.
- 4) [Republican/Democratic] governors should ban far-left group rallies in state capitols.

Policy proposal 1 has the most immediate relevance to anti-democratic policies on state and local levels. It concerns overt and partisan-motivated voter suppression. Political elites have put forth policies that they articulate are intended to prevent the outparty from participating

¹³ By party-contingent, I mean that respondents viewed a particular wording of the measure based upon their party identification.

rather than racial minorities (Timm 2021). This measure overtly describes a policy that would restrict the participation of the opposing party

Proposal 2 calls for the prosecution of journalists by party elites. This is a restriction of the freedom of press. The policy demonizes the reporting of misconduct rather than the actions of misconduct by partisan elites. The threat of the prosecution by media has been a tool of anti-democratic elites who use it to guard themselves from public scrutiny.

Lastly, proposals 3 and 4 concern ideologically extreme groups. Here, I assess how Republicans and Democrats support restricting the freedom of speech of extreme groups: their ability to hold rallies at state capitols. Banning the freedom of speech for either ideological group is anti-democratic because it limits expression for a group based upon their political views.

This study was conducted with representative,¹⁴ non-probability sample through Forthright (formerly Bovitz, Inc.). I block randomize on party identification for better powered party-specific analyses (See Appendix 9 for power analyses). I test again for the hypotheses tested for in Experiment 1. Next, I turn my attention to the effect of partisan frames on threat). I subset on party identification.¹⁵

Results

Testing the partisan utility hypothesis again in the context of racial threat, I find that Republicans' senses of racial threat decline when they learn that racial minority growth will benefit the GOP. When Republicans receive the inparty frame, they express less feelings of threat over the future changes to national racial demographics (5 percentage point decrease; $p =$

¹⁴ Census matched on gender, race, and region (N = 1,274).

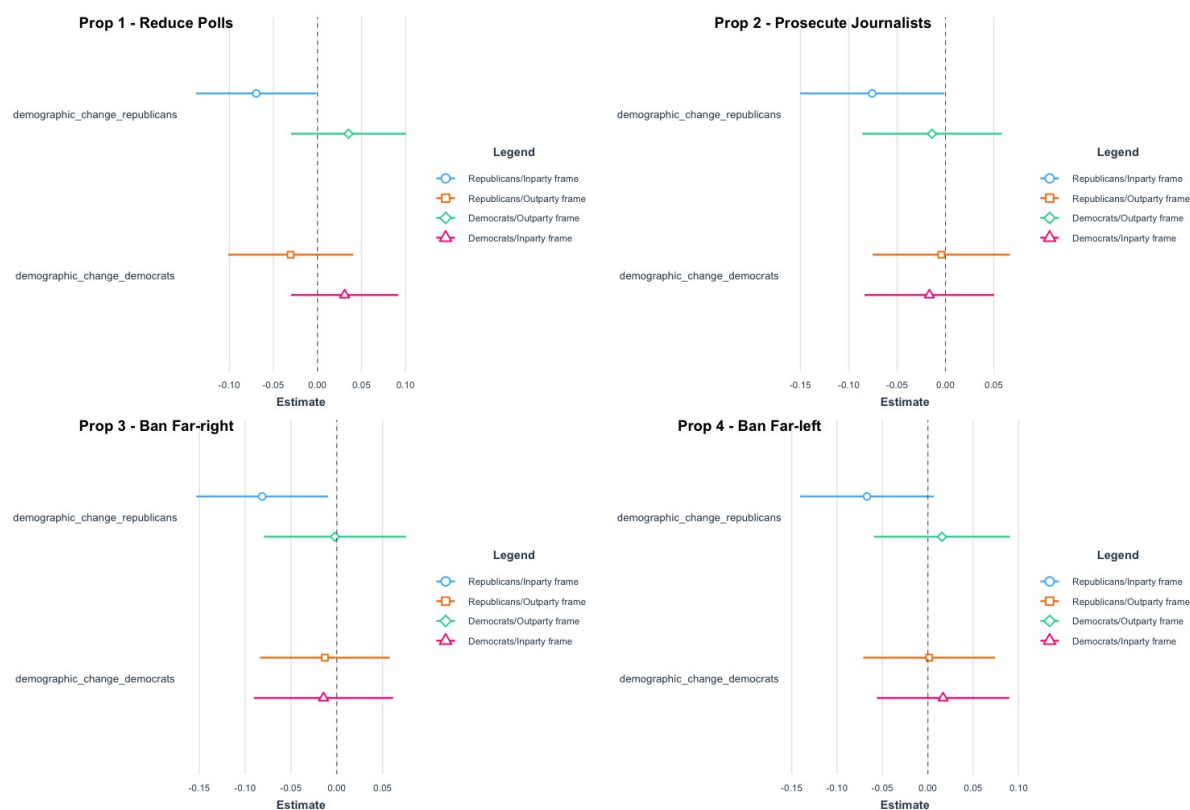
¹⁵ Including leaners, this totals 561 Democrats and 471 Republicans

0.046), and less of future-oriented senses of threat from racial minorities (6 percentage point decrease; $p = 0.08$), again confirming H1b.

Testing for one part of H3b, I find that the inparty and outparty frames have little effect on Democrats' senses of racial threat, and additionally find little effect of the outparty frame for Republicans. These frames do not cause greater or lesser senses of threat for concerns over national racial demographics (inparty $p = 0.18$; outparty $p = 0.80$) or future senses of threat (inparty $p = .17$; outparty $p = 0.80$). Ultimately, these findings again confirm the partisan utility hypothesis as it relates to racial threat. Republicans' future-oriented feelings of threat are assuaged when they learn that their party will benefit from racial demographic change. I turn next to testing the partisan utility hypothesis on politically grounded anti-democratic views.

Here, I test the effects of all frames across each of the four anti-democratic policy areas. The partisan utility hypothesis holds for each of the four contexts. The frame that articulates Republicans will benefit from racial demographic change reduces anti-democratic policy support (shown below in Figure 6).

Figure 6



Note: The baseline in each of these graphs is the general racial demographic change (Condition #2). This figure shows the results of these comparisons along with corresponding 95 percent confidence intervals.

The inparty frame decreases support for each anti-democratic proposal in similar magnitudes. When Republicans learn that the GOP is slated to benefit from minorities becoming the majority group, it decreases their support for reducing polls in Democratic areas by 7 percentage points ($p = 0.046$); decreases their support for Republican governors prosecuting journalists who accuse them of misconduct by 7 percentage points ($p = 0.046$); and decreases their support for Republican governors banning far-right groups (8 percentage points, $p = 0.026$) and far-left groups (7 percentage points, $p = 0.073$) from holding rallies at state capitols. All other frames have insignificant effects upon support, for Democrats confirming H2b.

Discussion

I confirm the partisan utility hypothesis across all 5 studies. Republicans' senses of racial threat which emerge from racial demographic change are contingent on which party they expect to benefit from those changes. I confirm that the inference they make about the coming majority-minority flip is that racial minorities will mostly identify as Democrats. When they are told that Republicans will actually benefit, this counteracts their racially threatened views. I also go to show that this is a party-related concern, because Democrats are not affected by the same information about their party or Republicans benefiting from the racial demographic changes. For Republicans, if racial antagonism from racial minorities, outside of the context of party, was at the core of racially threatened views and anti-democratic support, then I should not find any differences between the partisan frame conditions. Under this hypothesis, Republicans should feel threat from *both* Conditions 3 and 4, and both conditions should increase anti-democratic support. I do not find this; instead, I demonstrate the validity of the partisan utility hypothesis (Condition #3) because it is the only condition that decreases threat and support for anti-democratic ideas. As such, party is central to Republicans' perceptions of racial demographic change.

I go even further to show that racial threat *causally* motivates anti-democratic views for Republicans. That is, when Republicans' racially threatened views are decreased, so are their anti-democratic views. This finding is important for two main reasons. For one, it is the *first* causal demonstration of the connection between racial threat and anti-democratic views among

Republicans.¹⁶ This in and of itself is important because empirical work has so far shown the two of these concepts to be related, but not causally connected them. I show that the effect of threat on anti-democratic attitudes is not limited to abstract ideas.¹⁷ When these views are rooted in anti-democratic policy proposals, decreases in racial threat still go to decrease Republicans' support.

The second reason that this demonstration of a decrease in anti-democratic support is important is that I show that it is not unidirectional. Discussion and concern expressed about democratic backsliding and racial threat has been centered on ideas that as racial threat is increased, then so will anti-democratic support. While this is an important connection, it is not a sufficient theoretical connection between the two concepts. A thorough causal connection between racial threat and democratic backsliding necessitates that when threat is decreased, anti-democratic support will be, too.

The above confirmation of the partisan utility hypothesis holds immense implications for how racial threat and views of American democracy are thought about. Next, I test alternative mechanisms as robustness checks on partisan perceptions of racial demographic change. These alternatives are the role of emotion, the effect of sorting and polarization, and the role of racial identity.

¹⁶ Also, this causal explanation bears out in mediation analyses of racial threat's impact on Republicans' anti-democratic attitudes (Appendix 10). However, it is important to bear in mind how confoundedness factors into as mediator that is not randomly assigned ((Green, Ha, and Bullock 2010; Bullock, Green, and Ha 2010).

¹⁷ As a further test of the connection between racial threat and anti-democratic attitudes, I also show, through mediation analyses (Imai, Keele, and Tingley 2010), that racial threat is the key mediator in support for my anti-democratic attitude scale only among Republicans.

Alternative Explanations for the Partisan Framing of Racial Demographic Change

As additional tests of the efficacy of the partisan utility hypothesis, I will consider a series of alternative explanations for the mechanism behind the hypothesis. A first alternative explanation concerns the role that emotion plays in threat. Anxiety serves an important role in motivating racial threat (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008). If anxiety were not reduced among Republicans who receive the partisan utility frame, then it would call into question my findings. To test for this, in Experiment #1 I include a series of outcome measures of emotion about the diversification of the U.S. These are how concerned, hopeful, and excited respondents feel about “a diversifying United States.” Ultimately, I find that the partisan utility frame (the inparty frame for Republicans) *reduces* concern ($p = 0.01$) and *increases* hope ($p = 0.03$) and *increases* excitement ($p = 0.03$) about racial demographic change. These findings confirm the role of emotion, and more specifically anxiety, as related to racial threat. It both reduces anxiety and increases positive affect about the future of the country. This test affirms that the partisan utility in racial demographic change is successfully altering threat-motivating emotion. Moreover, I find insignificant results for Democrats emotional reactions¹⁸ which provides more support for the unique partisan nature of racial demographic change for Republicans.

A second alternative explanation relates to polarization and sorting. Given geographic partisan sorting (Brown and Enos 2021), Republicans could feel concern about demographic change because of greater physical and social distance from Democrats. Under this idea, the partisan utility hypothesis could be confounded by a perceived otherness of Democrats, and a

¹⁸ Concern about demographic change ($p = 0.94$); hope about demographic change ($p = 0.87$); excitement about demographic change ($p = 0.71$).

lack thereof for Republicans. Republicans are more geographically distant from Democrats, encountering them less. Conversely, they are in closer contact with fellow Republicans.

To test for the effects of geographic polarization and sorting, in Experiment #2 I use two pretreatment measures of contact with partisans that are adapted from Pettigrew (1998). I use contact as a proxy for sorting – people who have less contact with outparty members are likely to be more geographically sorted. The measures consider how many friends (Democratic/Republican) respondents have from “No friends” to “Many friends.” I interact these measures with both partisan frame treatments for Republicans (Conditions 3 and 4), then examine senses of racial threat. If contact is confounding my results for the partisan utility frame, I should find significant results when I interact contact (less contact as more partisan sortedness) with one of the party conditions. Testing the partisan utility frame and contact with Democrats and Republicans, I find insignificant results. This affirms that sorting exhibits little effect on partisan utility senses. Across the two other interactions of contact and inparty/outparty condition, I find insignificant results (Appendix 11). I go further and collapse the four anti-democratic policy proposals in Experiment #2 into a single scale and test the effects of sorting with another interaction. Here again, neither more or less contact with inparty or outparty members affects Republicans’ anti-democratic attitudes (Appendix 12)

A third alternative explanation is that the effects that I am capturing are determined more by race than by party. The Republican Party is more racially homogenous and appeals more to White Americans. This alternative explanation would be that Republicans’ concerns expressed are more racial than partisan because they cause worry among Whites only. To test for this, I look at how the partisan utility frame affects levels of threat among non-White Republicans. For these Republicans, White identity is not going to be tethered to party identity because they are

not White. Concerning future threat from racial minorities, I find that the partisan utility frame also *decreases* non-White Republicans' senses of racial threat (decreases by 11 percentage points, $p = 0.08$). This demonstrates that White identity is not a determinative factor of the partisan utility of racial demographic change.¹⁹

Conclusion

The implications from my findings are immense. If messaging about the majority-minority flip were to change (i.e., Republicans articulating demographics are not “destiny,” giving advantage to the Democratic Party) then attitudes that are facilitating democratic backsliding among Republicans would likely be reduced.

On an even larger scale, my findings present a grand picture about Republicans' views of party and democracy. Their views are racial in orientation. For them, as the racial composition of the party goes, so goes democracy. As mentioned from the onset, I argue that racially discriminatory views do a poor job in articulating anti-democratic motivations. The partisan utility calculus provides a better explanation of the motives; but, normatively, the implications of my findings are that Republicans' support for democracy is born out of their concerns for the racial composition of their party. In terms of understanding values among the American public, Republicans engage in a utility-based evaluation of democracy – they will support it insofar as they can win.

¹⁹ Importantly, there is a smaller number of non-White Republicans within this sample ($n = 115$), meaning my results here have less statistical power.

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