How Does American Public Opinion React to Overt Anti-Democratic Behavior by Politicians? Quasi-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 does public opinion impose little constraint on anti-democratic politicians? Existing studies have examined this fundamental question using hypothetical survey experiments which, while valuable, suffer from ecological validity and weak treatment concerns. I overcome these problems by studying a novel quasi-experiment created by the fact that Donald Trump's incitement of the January 6 insurrection unexpectedly occurred while Gallup was conducting a nationally representative public opinion survey using random digit dialing. Comparing party identification among respondents that happened to be 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 already stood at 93% of its pre-insurrection support level. While not zero, the public constraint on anti-democratic behavior is remarkably limited.

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1 Introduction

Politicians who 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. Political scientists have therefore long understood that for democracy to be truly self-enforcing it is necessary that politicians that display anti-democratic behavior lose so much popular support that their further political career is effectively doomed to fail.[1] Anticipating this reaction, political leaders would rarely attempt to violate key democratic norms in the first place (Almond and Verba, 1963; Diamond, 1999; Maravall and Przeworski, 2003; Svolik, 2020; Weingast, 1997).

Given the importance of the public as a check against undemocratic politicians it is 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 (2022) and Albertus and

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[1] Following Schumpeter (1942) I define "democracy" as a political system were state executives are selected via regular free and fair elections. Crucial in this system is that state executives that lose an election leave office peacefully so that the power of the state executive can smoothly transfer to the legitimate winner of the election (Huntington, 1991; Przeworski, 2005). Anti-democratic behavior, according to this definition, is any behavior that seeks to undermine the process of peaceful transfers of power in line with the results of free and fair elections. As I will argue in section 2, Donald Trump's speech on January 6, 2021—which was intended to rally his supporters to pressure vice president Michael Pence to unlawfully change the results of the 20202 U.S. presidential election against the will of the voters—is a clear example of anti-democratic behavior according to this definition.

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.[2]

This important existing evidence not withstanding significant uncertainty remains as to whether the American public does 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 survey experimental set-up may make large differences for the results in this particular research 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.[3] 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).

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[2]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. (2022), and Svolik (2019, 2020)).

[3]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.

To address these issues I analyze the results of a novel quasi-experiment generated by the fact that 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 public opinion survey among 1,023 Americans. Given that Gallup recruits 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 appear to have been no other events on January 6, 2021 that could plausibly have caused significant changes in political preferences I can recover the average treatment effect of Donald Trump's incitement of the January 6 insurrection (and the Republican Party's support for his acquittal thereafter) 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 quasi-experiment I find that support for the Republican Party went down with approximately 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 Republicans 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. Furthermore, 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%. I find similar results when analyzing the effect on opinions towards Donald Trump in particular. More specifically, I find that Donald Trump's favorability rating experienced a modest drop from 42.5% to 37.9% in the weeks following the January 6 insurrection, and that even this modest drop disappeared entirely within less than five months.

3

Taken together the quasi-experiment suggests that for the far majority of Republican Party supporters even a Republican president 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 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 (e.g., gerrymandering). For the stability of American democracy more generally the results suggest that a significant fraction of the American electorate is unlikely to chose democracy over partisanship 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) meanwhile 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.

My contributions to the study of the January 6 insurrection is two-fold. First, I provide a more credible estimate of the causal effect of the January 6 insurrection on American public opinion. 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) are 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 relatively modest to begin with, diminished quickly.

2 The January 6 Insurrection

On November 3, 2020 Joseph 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 large difference in the number of votes Donald Trump claimed that the election was fraudulent and that he was the true winner of the election. This claim was subsequently examined by a large number of judges (many of which were appointed by Donald Trump himself), election officials (many of which were supporters of the Republican Party), and social scientists. All these judges, election officials, and researchers independently and unanimously concluded that there was no evidence of voting fraud remotely large enough to be able to change the result of the 2020 U.S. presidential election (see Eggers, Haritz and Grimmer (2021) for an excellent summary of the absence of convincing evidence for widespread voting fraud in the 2020 U.S. presidential election).

Having exhausted all legal options of challenging the results of the 2020 presidential election the democratic thing to do for Donald Trump was clearly to accept the results of

the election and cooperate with the peaceful transition of power to Joseph Biden. Instead, on January 6, 2021, the day that the U.S. Congress would officially certify the election result, Donald Trump held a speech in front of a large group of supporters rallying them to go to the U.S. Capitol building and pressure vice president Michael Pence to unlawfully disregard the casted Electoral College votes and return the issue to the U.S. states, in the hope that the U.S. states would then certify him as U.S. president for another term even through he lost the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

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, that they are going to walk down to the Capitol because "you'll never take your country back with weakness", and that "All vice president Pence has to do is send it back to the states to recertify and we become president and you are the happiest people".[4]

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 January 6 insurrection was ultimately unsuccessful in overturning the results of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. From January 13 to February 13, 2021 a trial was held in the U.S. Congress to impeach president Trump. In this trial only 10 of the 207 Republican members of the U.S. House of Representatives and only 7 of the 50 Republican members of the U.S. Senate voted to impeach president Trump, leading to his acquittal (all Democrats in both chambers voted in favor of impeachment).

I regard this event as a clear case of anti-democratic behavior that should be recognized and sanctioned as such *if* the American public is to function as an effective check against overt anti-democratic behavior by politicians. First, Donald Trump failed to concede that he lost the election, even while all evidence and legal procedures has indicated that the election

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

6

was free and fair and that he had lost (a violation of the core democratic principle that politicians that lose elections leave office peacefully). Second, Donald Trump then tried to stay in power against the will of the people, expressed through their votes, by inciting an insurrection (a violation of the core democratic principle that political conflicts are resolved peacefully).

I regard the acquittal of President Trump by other Republican members of Congress as a part of the treatment—i.e., a clear and overt undemocratic act by the Republican Party at large. I therefore examine effects on the Republican Party as a whole, not only on support for president Donald Trump himself. As shown in section 7 results are very similar when focusing on public opinion towards Donald Trump in particular.

Crucially, it is not necessary for my identification strategy that all American citizens themselves regarded Donald Trump's behavior on January 6, 2021 as anti-democratic. Instead this is simply part of the treatment itself—that is, if the American electorate is to act as an effective constraint on anti-democratic behavior by politicians it is necessary that they actually perceive behavior like that of Donald Trump on January 6, 2021, and the behavior of the Republican Party afterwards, as anti-democratic.

3 Data

To study how much support the Republican Party lost due to Donald Trump's incitement of the January 6 insurrection I exploit that the 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.[5] In the main results I drop all 118

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[5]The number of observations in the control group (177) far exceeds the N≥30 threshold

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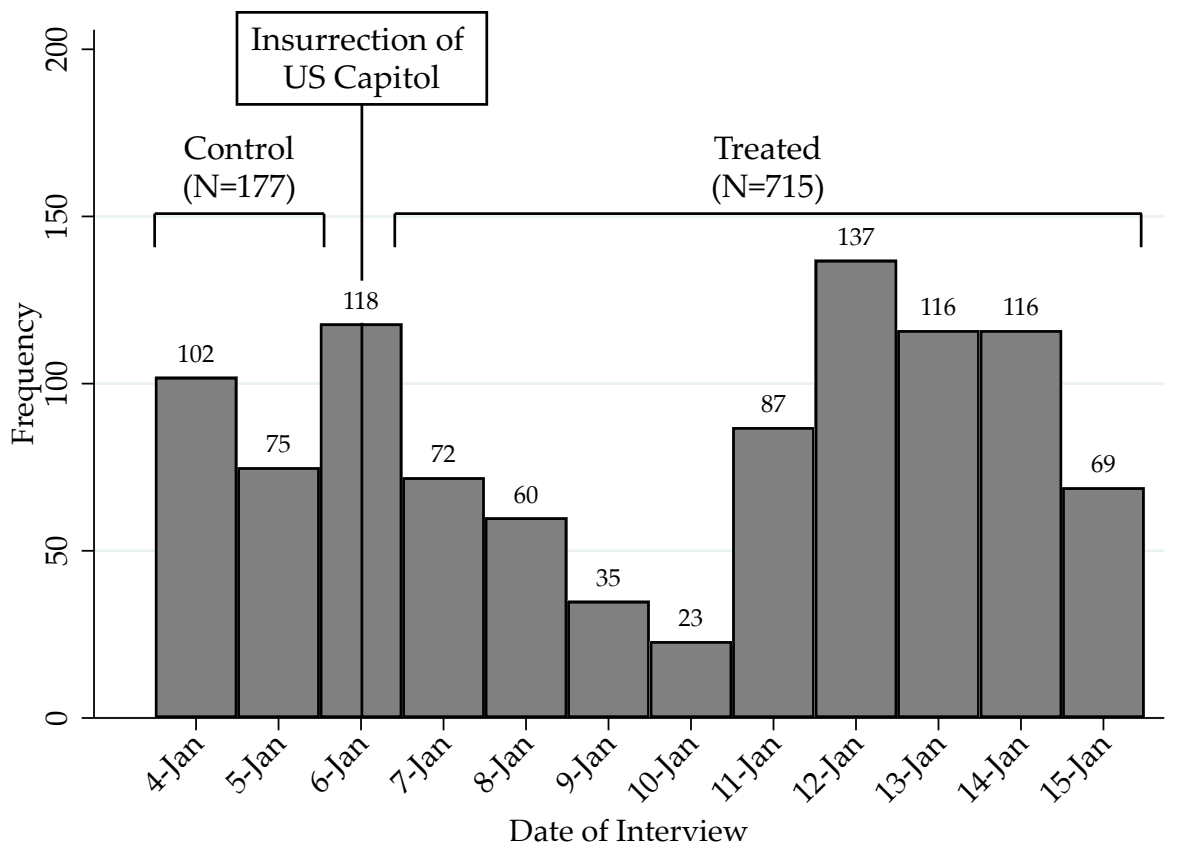
Note: Data refers to the year 2021. Data comes from Gallup's January "Mood of the Nation" survey. Respondents with missing data on the party identification variable are omitted (N=13).

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.

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 "Inde-

that is sufficient for the central limit theorem to hold true (which is necessary for valid statistical significance tests). Figure 2 furthermore shows that the control group is not unbalanced on observables by random chance. Taken together this provides me with confidence that the results cannot be explained by small sample bias.

pendent" 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. I use this variable as the risk of the January 6 insurrection to American democracy ultimately did not only come from Donald Trump rallying his supporters to storm the U.S. Capitol, but also from the Republican Party tolerating this behavior afterwards (hence implying that the Republican Party as a whole should have been punished for the January 6 insurrection if American public opinion is to act as an effective constraint on anti-democratic behavior by politicians). Results remain broadly the same when analyzing the effect on Donald Trump's approval rating in isolation.

4 Identification strategy

For identification I employ an "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

Four features of Gallup's survey structure, as well as the results of several design checks, provide me with confidence that temporal ignorability is likely to hold in this case.

Figure 2: Balance on observables.
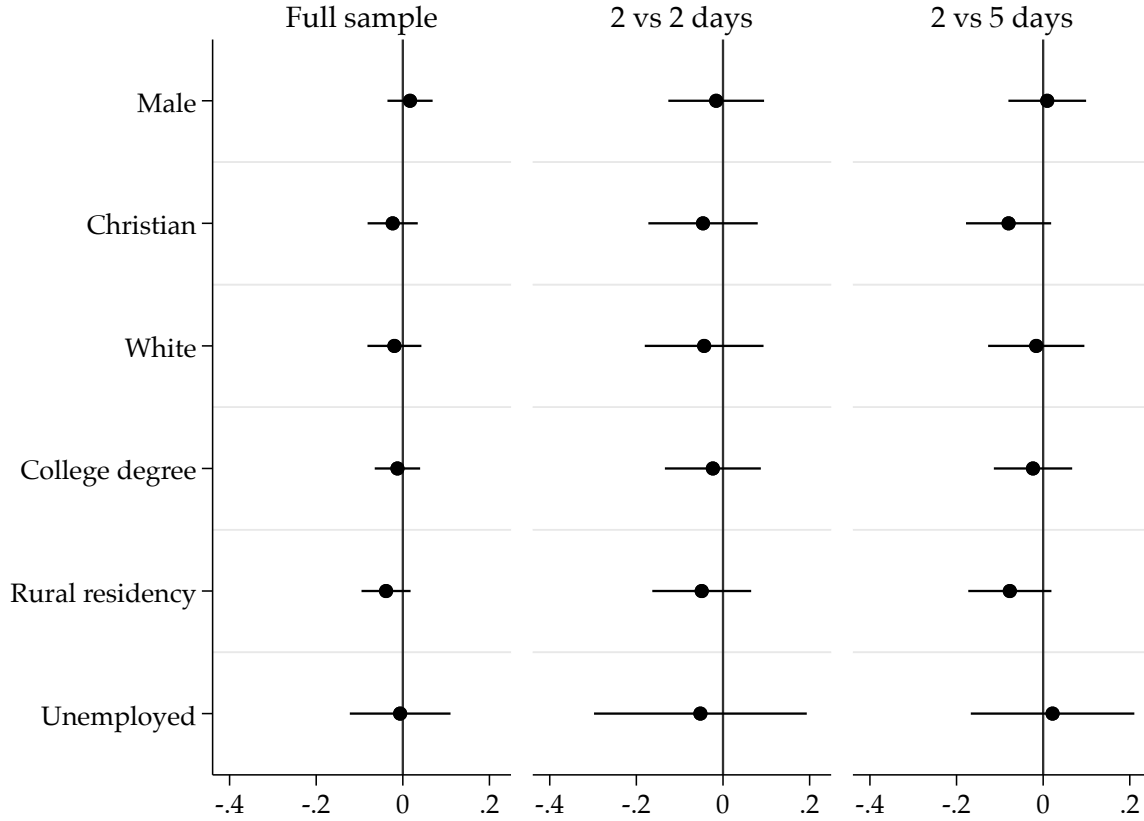
First, Gallup interviews over the phone and samples respondents using random digit dialing. This ensures that any individual, regardless of where he/she lives, and regardless of his/her own background characteristics, has an equal probability to be contacted for an interview on any particular day. In 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, while one may be concerned that supporters of the Republican Party may for whatever reasons been more/less difficult to reach for an interview and therefore being more/less likely to be included in the treatment group (i.e., endogenous reachability) this

does not appear to be the case. 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).[6] Second, estimates of comparable magnitude are obtained when dropping all respondents that were not successfully interviewed on the first try (OLS coefficient: -0.141; P-value: 0.006).

Third, while it could be the case that supporters of the Republican Party were dispro-portionally more likely to lie about their true party alliance as a results of the January 6 insurrection this appears unlikely to be a large problem in the data, and if anything should bias *against* my general findings. If it were true that Republicans were disproportionally more likely to conceal their true political party preference as a result of the January 6 insur-rection one would reasonably expect: (1) non-response on the party identification question to go up after January 6; and (2) support for Independents, rather than Democrats, to go up after January 6, 2021 (i.e., assuming that selecting Independents would still be socially "ac-ceptable" 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 identification question before and after January 6, 2021 (OLS co-efficient: 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). Crucially, 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., assum-ing that social desirability bias will induce more Republicans than Democrats/Independents to disguise their true political party preference as a result of the January 6 insurrection).

Last, while endogenous survey non-response (i.e., supporters of the Republican Party being altogether less likely to participate in the Gallup survey after the January 6 insurrec-

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[6]This result is generated by regressing a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent considers, or leans towards considering, him/herself a Republican, and 0 otherwise, on the number of tries before an interview was successfully completed.

tion) is always a concern in "unexpected event during survey" designs placebo tests suggests that this is unlikely to be a major concern in this case, and, importantly, endogenous survey non-response should also weight *against* my main findings. 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 the January 6 insurrection to be similar to the voter profile of Democrats on average. Second, a placebo test that uses 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

Two design checks provide me with confidence that excludability—meaning that whether any individual is interviewed before or after January 6, 2021 only affects party identification through the January 6 insurrection event—is likely to hold in this case.

First, while it is natural to be concerned about other events that occurred on January 6, 2021 that could also possibly affect party alliances I conduct content analyses of the New York Times and the USA Today and find that there were no other events that occurred on January 6, 2021 that could plausibly have had a major effect on political party identification (see Appendix B).

Second, while I naturally cannot exclude with absolute certainty that the January 6 insurrection triggered some other, perhaps currently unknown, voter reaction that has also affected Republican Party support besides concerns surrounding Donald Trump's anti-democratic behavior, the data does suggest that this is unlikely to be the case. 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).[8]

5 Generalizability

Gallup samples by randomly selecting respondents from a list of all telephone numbers that have recently been used 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. 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 representativeness I benchmark Gallup's January 2021 "Mood of the Nation" 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

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[7]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.

[8]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).

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 American political behavior, 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, 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).[9] As shown below the results remain substantively unchanged when estimating the effect in this weighted sample.[10]

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[9]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 the largest weight. This leads to a weight range of 0.65 to 1.35 in this case.

[10]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 *under*sampled in Gallup's January 2021 "Mood of the Nation" survey (e.g., like all other public opinion surveys Gallup polls have tended to underestimate Donald Trump's vote share in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections (Clinton et al., 2021)).

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

	Gallup		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 group of the Republican Party went down with 10.8% in the 1.5 weeks after the January 6 insurrection.[11] 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 unchanged 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 0 if he/she was surveyed before this date. I use a linear probability model for ease

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[11]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.

of interpretation. The results remain substantively unchanged when using a probit model (Appendix C).

As shown in Figure 3 the effect on Republican Party support remains approximately 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 reveals that the treatment effect is typically statistically significant on the 95% confidence level.

Is an approximately 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 (if such an inflection point in fact exists), 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.* On the other hand, however, analysis of longterm Gallup data does suggest that this reduction in Republican Party support was significantly larger than any other within-one-month change in Republican Party support since 2004.

Figure 3: Robustness checks.
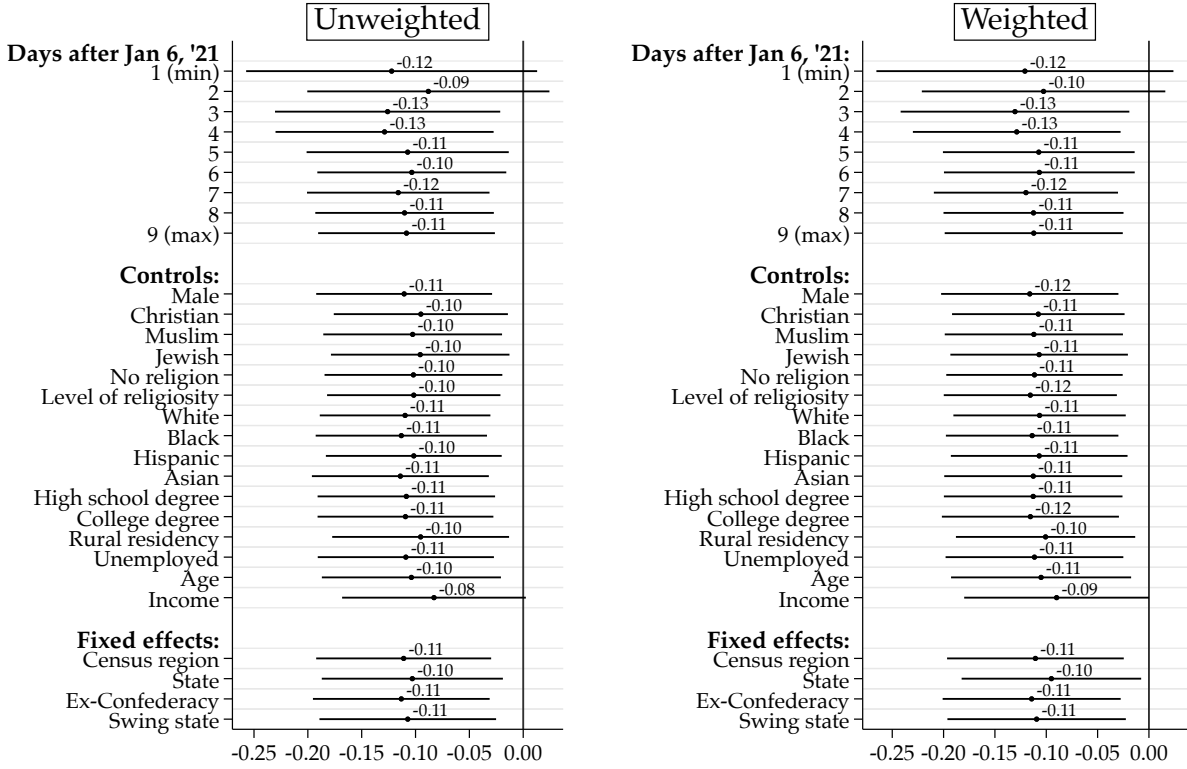
Note: Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals of (separate) OLS regressions of a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent considers, or leans towards considering, him/herself a Republican, and 0 otherwise, on a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent is interviewed after January 6, 2021, and 0 if a respondents is interviewed before January 6, 2021. 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.

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.[12] 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.

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

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 available quasi-experiment that could seamlessly separate these two scenario's by design. To nonetheless provide suggestive 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.[13]

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, 2021 (N=1,007). As can be seen the percentage of respondents that indicated to support or lean towards supporting the Republican Party was 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.[14] During this 23 day period the news was still very much dominated by the January 6 insurrection, and while it

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[13]Note that it is not possible to assess the effect on Donald Trump's presidential approval rating, as this data is not available after January 20, 2021 (when Trump left office).

[14]Note that there is no sign that the treatment effect already diminished in the first 1.5 weeks after the January 6 insurrection—i.e., the number of days a respondent is interviewed after January 6, 2021 is uncorrelated with identifying with the Republican Party in the January 7-15 sample analyzed in Table 2 and Figure 3 (OLS coefficient: 0.002; P-value:

is true that the current 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).[15]

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 (New York Times, 2022).[16] Given what we know about the influence of 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

0.803).

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[15]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.

[16]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 Times, 2022).

Table 3: Effect of the January 6 insurrection on party identification 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.

9, 2022).[17] 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 favorability (unfavorability) of 4.6% (6.3%) is again arguably quite modest (particularly also because Trump's favorability has experienced much larger swings in the past, even in the absence of such an extreme event as the January 6 insurrection). More importantly, however, Donald 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 Trump's favorability rating has been relatively stable.

While, as discussed above, we cannot be absolutely certain what Trump's current favorability rating would have been in the absence of 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.

Taken together the results from Table 3 and Figure 4 suggest that even the relatively modest immediate (short run) effect of the January 6 insurrection found in Table 2 and

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[17]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.
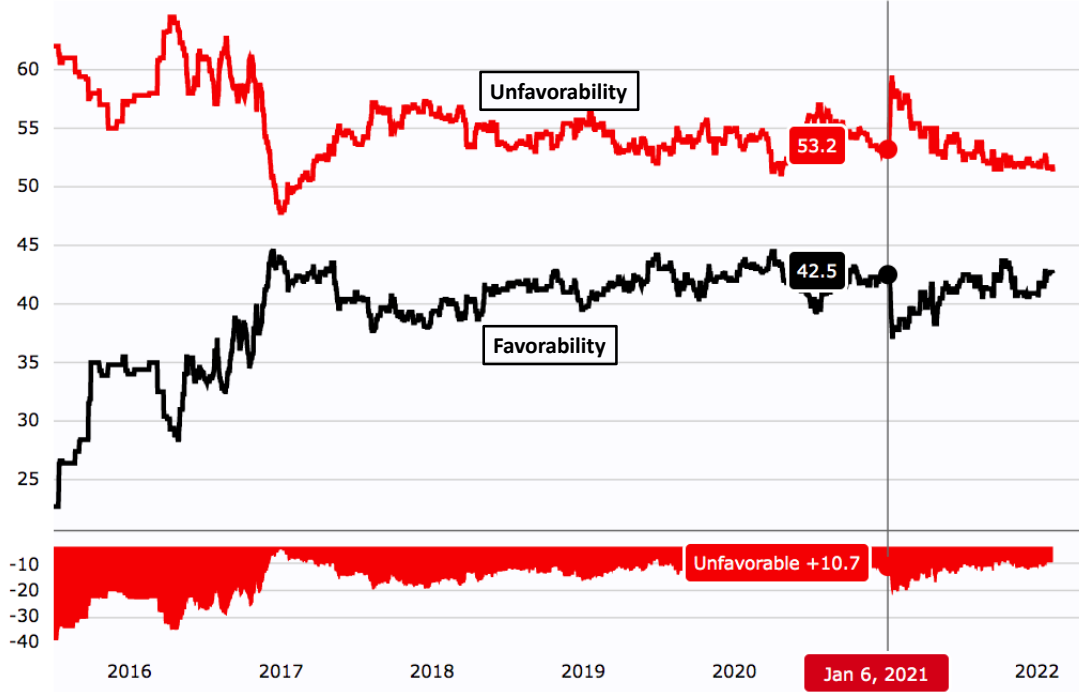
Note: The top line is the percentage of respondents that view Donald Trump unfavorably. The bottom line is the percentage of respondents that view Donald Trump favorably. The bargraphs in the bottom plot the difference between these two variables. Data comes from Real Clear Politics, which has generated this data by pooling survey data from YouGov, Politico, Harris, NBC News, Rasmussen, CNBC, and the Wall Street Journal.

Figure 3 was most probably not long-lasting. This finding is consistent with a large body of literature in American politics indicating that partisanship in the United States is extremely stable and tends to quickly reverse back to the mean after short-term shocks (e.g., Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2004) and Iyengar and Westwood (2015)).

8   Conclusion

I quasi-experimentally examine whether the American public tends to retract its support from politicians that clearly violate key democratic norms (in this case, state executives leaving office peacefully after losing a free and fair election). To do so I exploit that Donald Trump's incitement of the January 6 insurrection (and the Republican Party' support for his acquittal thereafter) unexpectedly occurred while Gallup was conducting a nationally

representative public opinion survey using random digit dialing. I find that the far majority of current supporters of the Republican Party is so weakly 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. Similar results are found when analyzing the effect on opinions towards Donald Trump in particular.

My novel quasi-experimental design allows me to state with relative certainty that the January 6 insurrection did not cause a major and long-lasting public opinion penalty for the Republican Party in general and/or Donald Trump in particular. This is a crucial finding because one would expect to find such a reaction after an insurrection aimed at overturning the results of a free and fair election *if* the American public is indeed to function as an effective constraint on overt anti-democratic behavior by politicians.

Focusing on one major case where a plausible identification strategy is available also comes naturally with limitations. Future research is necessary to establish how strongly the American electorate reacts to other types of undemocratic behavior by politicians (e.g., vote suppression) and to other politicians acting undemocratically (e.g., politicians from the Democratic rather than the Republican Party).

Looking further beyond the results highlight the urgent need for more research on how to increase the likelihood that Americans voters will strongly oppose politicians that display clearly undemocratic behavior. Future research could examine ways to increase genuine commitment to democracy among the general public 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).

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— Online Appendix —
How Does American Public Opinion React to Overt Anti-Democratic Behavior by Politicians?

By: Sam van Noort

Contents

A   Quotes from Trump's speech on January 6, 2021

My identification strategy relies on the claim that Donald Trump's speech on the January 6 "Stop the Steal" rally incited the insurrection of the U.S. Capitol, and should therefore be interpreted by the American public as a clear case of democratic backsliding.

Below, I provide a number of direct quotes from Donald Trump's speech to substantiate this assertion:

> "All of us here today do not want to see our election victory stolen by emboldened radical-left Democrats, which is what they're doing. And stolen by the fake news media. That's what they've done and what they're doing. We will never give up, we will never concede. It doesn't happen. You don't concede when there's theft involved."

> "Our country has had enough. We will not take it anymore and that's what this is all about. And to use a favorite term that all of you people really came up with: We will Stop the Steal."

> "Because if Mike Pence does the right thing, we win the election. [...] All Vice President Pence has to do is send it back to the states to recertify and we become president and you are the happiest people."

> "[...] we're going to walk down to the Capitol, and we're going to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women, and we're probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them."

> "Because you'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong. "

> "We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."

> "So let's walk down Pennsylvania Avenue."

Not only I but also virtually all reputable news outlets characterized the words of Trump as inciting the insurrection. The New York Times, for example, opened on January 7, 2021 with "Trump Incited Mob", the Washington Post opened with "President incites crowd to acts of insurrection", and the USA Today opened with "Trump incited crowd to march to Capitol Hill."

B   Content analysis of potential simultaneous events

My identification strategy relies on the assumption that there were no other events on January 6, or in the days surrounding January 6, that could also have induced a significant shift in political party identification.

To test whether this assumption is likely to hold I read the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the USA Today cover to cover on January 5, 6, and 7, 2021. I find that the most salient event in this period, besides the January 6 insurrection, was the Georgia runoff elections for the U.S. Senate, which were held on January 5, 2021.

After the general 2020 elections the Republican Party held 50 Senate seats, and the Democratic Party held 48 seats. As a result, the two runoff races in Georgia would determine which Party would control the Senate under the incoming Biden administration. In the early hours of January 6, 2021 both elections were called for the Democratic Party, giving the Democratic Party an effective majority in the Senate with Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris having the right to cast a tie-breaking vote. The extraordinary high political stakes of this election caused the race to attract significant nationwide attention.

I am not aware of research that suggests that the mere existence of salient elections or Republican Party defeats in crucial elections in itself causes major shifts in political party identification (which is necessary for this event to confound my results).

To test this null hypothesis more rigorously I run a placebo test analyzing the effect of the occurrence and results of the 2006 United States elections on Republican Party support. The 2006 elections were in two important respects comparable to the Republican Party' defeat in the 2021 Georgia runoff elections. First, the Republican Party suffered a historic defeat in 2006, loosing control of both houses of Congress in one election cycle (which was the first time either party did so since the 1994 elections). Second, like the 2021 Georgia runoff elections, the bad performance of the Republican Party in 2006 was largely blamed on an unpopular Republican president (George W. Bush in the 2006 case).

The 2006 elections occurred on November 7. To the best of my knowledge no public

opinion survey was going on before and after November 7, 2006. Importantly, however, CBS News and the New York Times conducted a call-back poll, in which they surveyed 715 respondents on October 27–31 and then again on November 11–14. This allows me to estimate the effect of the election (result) by regressing a dummy capturing whether a respondent would vote for the Republican Party if there was an election today on a pre/post-election dummy, while controlling for individual-level fixed effects. Given that potential confounders are unlikely to have changed over such a short period of time this credibly identifies the causal effect of the election event.

In support of the null hypothesis I find that the 2006 electoral defeat of the Republican Party had no effect on Republican support in the CBS/NYT call-back poll (OLS coefficient: 0.000; P-value: 0.869).

C Probit estimates

In the main text I use linear probability models for ease of interpretation. Figure A1 shows that the results remain essentially unchanged when using probit estimation.

Figure A1: Results when using probit models.
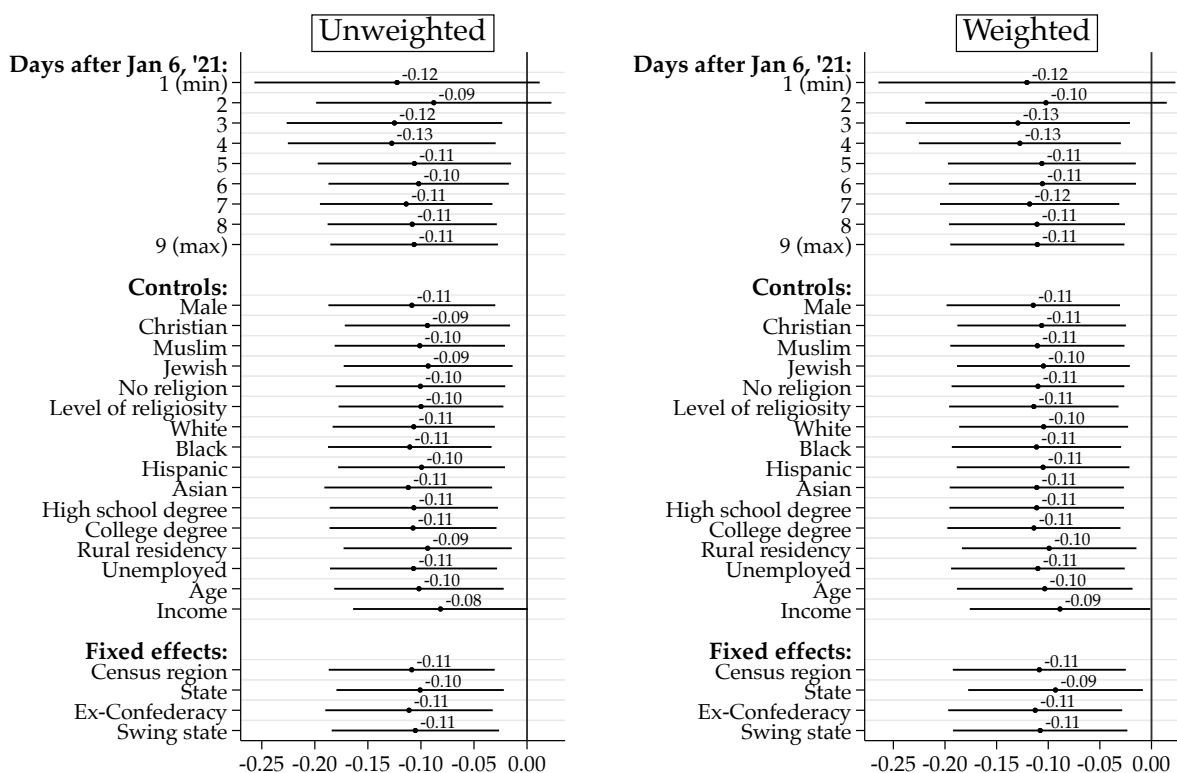
Note: Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals of (separate) probit regressions of a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent considers, or leans towards considering, him/herself a Republican, and 0 otherwise, on a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent is interviewed after January 6, 2021, and 0 if a respondents is interviewed before January 6, 2021. Coefficients are average marginal effects. 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.

D   Access to Gallup data

To get access to the Gallup data I have signed an agreement to not share the data with anyone else. This is because this data is for sale. The data is, however, freely available for scholars associated with any of these universities. The data can otherwise be bought here.