

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup>Following Schumpeter (1942) I define “democracy” as a political system where 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 2020 U.S. presidential election against the will of the majority of the electorate—is a clear example of anti-democratic behavior according to this definition.

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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.<sup>2</sup>

This important existing evidence notwithstanding 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.<sup>3</sup> 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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<sup>2</sup>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)).

<sup>3</sup>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. My contribution lies in a focus 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 preferences. 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 comparing support for the Republican Party and Trump 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 percentage points in the 1.5 weeks after January 6, 2021, and that 77.9% of voters that identified as Republicans before January 6, 2021 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*. I interpret this effect as relatively modest in this context. 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 of the January 6 insurrection to only -3.7 percentage points in total. I argue that this latter drop in the already modest initial effect is likely because of the decisive switch of Republican Party elites from silence or moderate criticism to unquestioned support for Trump and the trivialization of the events of January 6, which

occurred approximately two weeks after the event. It is important to note here that these long run results are less credibly identified because increasing the time window of analysis after January 6, 2021 increases the chance that the control and treatment group differ on other things besides Trump's incitement of the January 6 insurrection.

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 (here again it is important to notice that identification becomes less credible the further one extends the time window post January 6, 2021).

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/Trump (let alone take costly action to protect democracy). This uncomfortable fact 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. While the results directly after January 6, 2021 suggests that the public is unlikely to publish overt anti-democratic behavior to begin with, the result that even the modest initial effect faded away after Republican Party elites started consistently trivializing the January 6 insurrection and Trump's role within it, suggests that co-partisan elite messaging/framing may play an important role in moderating the extent to which voters are likely to punish anti-democratic behavior at the polls.

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 percentage points 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 for 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 supporters 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”<sup>4</sup>

Directly after this speech a large group 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 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 in the 2020 presidential election, by inciting an insurrection (a violation of the core democratic principle that political conflicts are resolved peacefully in accordance with the rule of law).

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 6.2 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

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<sup>4</sup>See Appendix A for direct quotes from the speech.



themselves regarded Donald Trump’s behavior on January 6, 2021 as anti-democratic or that they were even aware of the January 6 insurrection at all. 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 are aware and 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.

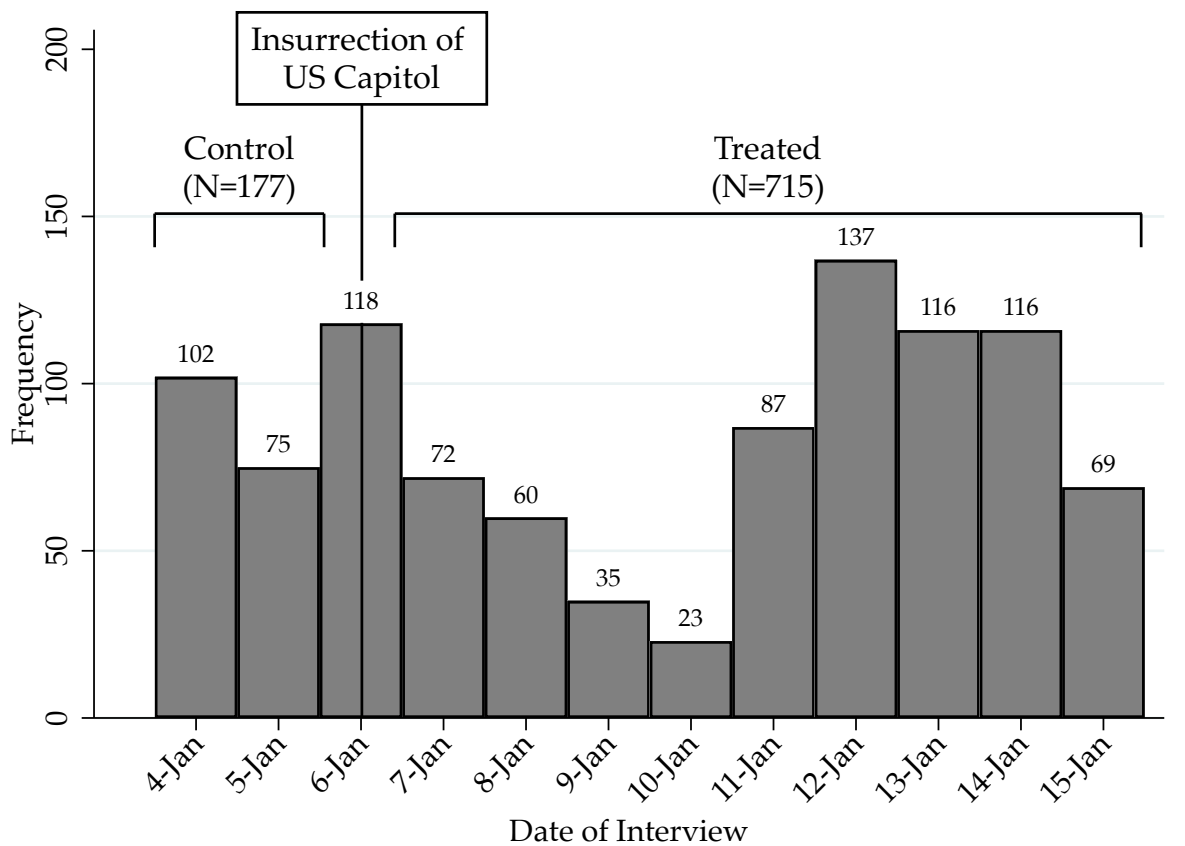
As the treatment variable I use a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent was interviewed after January 6, 2021, and 0 if a respondent was interviewed before this date. Figure 1 shows the number of respondents that were interviewed by Gallup before, on, and after January 6, 2021.<sup>5</sup> As can be seen 177 people were interviewed before January 6, 2021 and 715 people were interviewed after January 6, 2021.<sup>6</sup> In the main results I drop all 118

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<sup>5</sup>Note that there was no increase in non-response on January 7 to January 10. Instead, response was somewhat higher than expected on January 6, relative to January 5, 7, and 8, and January 9 and 10 were weekend days, and Gallup interviews less on the weekend. This was conveyed to me by Kris Hodgins (Senior Consultant at Gallup).

<sup>6</sup>The number of observations in the control group (177) far exceeds the  $N \geq 30$  threshold that is sufficient for the central limit theorem to hold true (which is necessary for valid statistical significance tests). 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. Appendix B provides a power analysis and shows that the design has sufficient power to identify even relatively modest treatment effects.

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.

The ideal dependent variable to test whether citizens tend to punish overt undemocratic politicians would be the intention of respondents to vote for the Republican Party (or Trump) if an election was held tomorrow (or some variant of this vote intention question). Unfortunately, this question is not measured in Gallup’s January 2021 “Mood of the Nation” survey.

I therefore use two dependent variables that come as close as possible to this ideal. First, I use the variable: “In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself: a Republican,

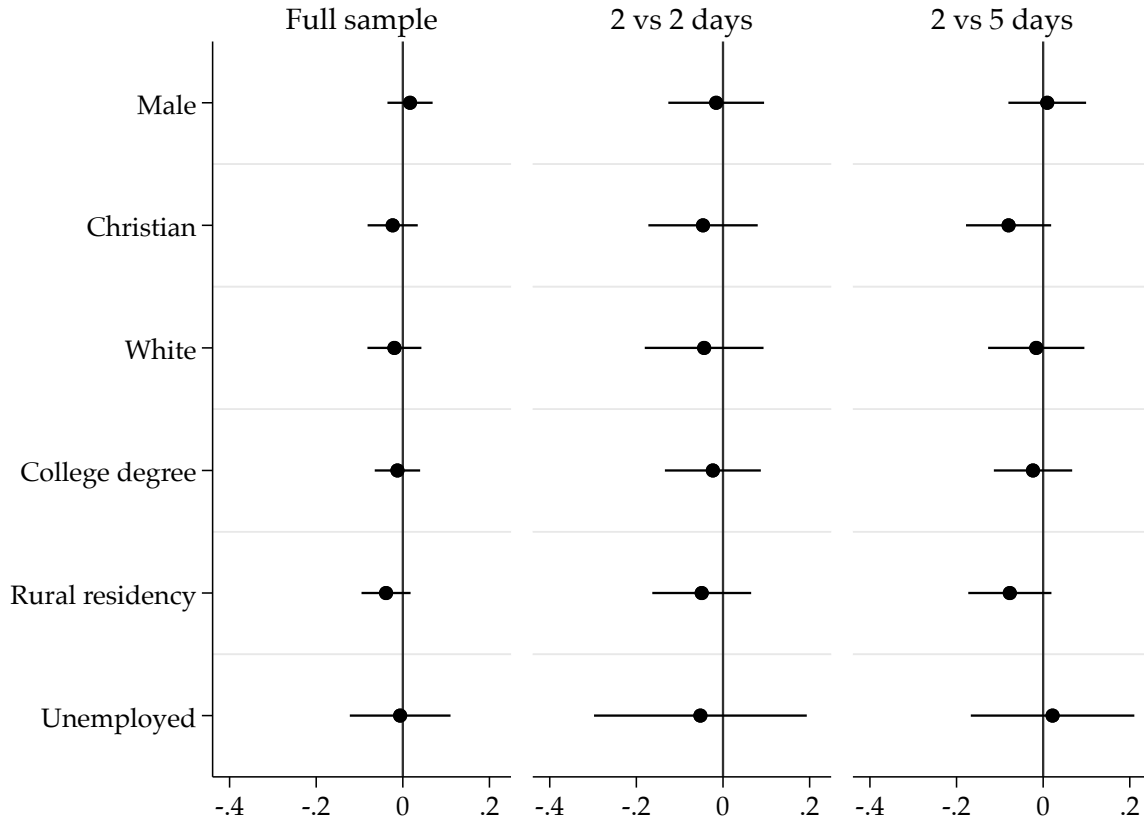
a Democrat, or an Independent?”. If a respondent selects “Independent” the survey asks: “As of today, do you lean more to the Democratic Party, more to the Republican Party, or neither?”. I analyze this variable as a nominal variable with 5 categories (Republican, lean Republican, Independent, lean Democratic, and Democrat). In addition, I analyze the results using a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent considers, or leans towards considering, him/herself a Republican, and 0 otherwise. Second, I study the variable: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as president?”. I recode this variable to a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent approves of Trump’s job as president, and 0 if he/she disapproves.

While these variables come as close as possible to the vote intention question they come with the important limitation that they do not directly ask respondents what they would do *if an election was held tomorrow*. It is theoretically possible that respondents would consider themselves as a Republican and/or would approve of Donald Trump’s job as president but not vote for the Republican Party/Trump in an actual election. The results reported below thus directly relate to public opinion, and only relate to actual voting behavior to the extent that public opinion neatly maps into voting behavior.

## 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 and Trump 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 political preferences. Second, *excludability*, meaning that whether any individual respondent is interviewed before or after January 6, 2021 should affect political preferences only through the insurrection event, not through any other channel (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno and Hernández, 2020).

Figure 2: Balance on observables.



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

## 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.

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 political preferences (see Figure 2).

Second, while one may be concerned that supporters of the Republican Party/Trump may

for whatever reasons have 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)<sup>7</sup> and approving of Trump's job as president (OLS coefficient: -0.031; P-value: 0.053). Second, the effect of Trump's incitement of the January 6 insurrection on support for the Republican Party (OLS coefficient: -0.141; P-value: 0.006), and Trump's approval rating (OLS coefficient: -0.116; P-value: 0.025), are of comparable magnitude to the baseline results when dropping all respondents that were not successfully interviewed on the first try.

Third, while it could be the case that supporters of the Republican Party/Trump were disproportionately more likely to lie about their true political preferences as a result 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 Republican Party/Trump supporters were disproportionately more likely to conceal their true political preferences as a result of the January 6 insurrection one would reasonably expect: (1) non-response on the party identification and Trump's approval rating questions 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 "acceptable" while preferable over Democrats for "Republicans in disguise"). This is not what the data suggests. Instead, there is no economically or statistically significant difference in non-response on the party identification (OLS coefficient: 0.004; P-value: 0.661) and Trump presidential approval (OLS coefficient: 0.014; P-value: 0.199) questions before and after the January 6 insurrection, and support tends to predominantly shift to the Democratic Party, rather than Independent,

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<sup>7</sup>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.

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., assuming that social desirability bias will induce more Republican Party/Trump supporters 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/Trump being altogether less likely to participate in the Gallup survey after the January 6 insurrection) 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, any 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 Republican Party/Trump supporters that disproportionately 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 Republican Party/Trump supporters (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 Republican Party/Trump supporters 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 political preferences 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, the Washington Post, 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 preferences (see Appendix C).

Second, while I naturally cannot exclude with absolute certainty that the January 6 insurrection did not trigger some other, perhaps currently unknown, voter reaction that has also affected Republican Party/Trump 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).<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>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.

<sup>9</sup>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/Trump not for reasons related to democracy but because they perceive the January 6 insurrection as a reprehensible desacralization of a national monument).

## 5 Generalizability

### 5.1 Population validity

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 to what extent Gallup's January 2021 "Mood of the Nation" survey is representative of the American electorate at large I benchmark the data against the 2020 American National Election Study (ANES), which was conducted from August 18, 2020 until January 4, 2021 (N=8,280).

I use the ANES for three reasons. First, the ANES is one of the most rigorously sampled in-person surveys in American politics. Second, data from the Census and the Current Population Survey, which are even more rigorous in-person surveys, were, at the time of writing, only available for the year 2019. Last, the Census and the Current Population Survey do not collect data on religious affiliation, while religious affiliation is an important determinant of American political behavior, and is therefore an important variable to assess the survey's 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](#)).<sup>10</sup> As shown below the results remain substantively unchanged

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<sup>10</sup>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



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.

when estimating the effect in this weighted sample.<sup>11</sup>

## 5.2 Treatment specificity

My identification strategy enables us to learn about the effect of Trump’s incitement of the January 6 insurrection among respondents in Gallup’s sample, and hopefully also among the American electorate more generally (see section 5.1.).

It lies outside the scope of this article to study the extent to which the results of this particular quasi-experiment generalize to other instances of undemocratic behavior by politicians within the United States and/or in other countries (an issue that cannot be studied rigorously from within the quasi-experiment available to us).

Having said that, to get a grasp on what other situations the results may apply to it largest weight. This leads to a weight range of 0.65 to 1.35 in this case.

<sup>11</sup>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 *undersampled* 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)).

is worthwhile to consider what “type” of treatment Trump’s incitement of the January 6 insurrection was (besides the obvious point that it was an effort to overturn the results of a free and fair election). Of particular importance is what reactions and counter-reactions followed on Trump’s incitement of the January 6 insurrection, and how this may have shaped the public opinion response that we observe in the data.

To examine what the reactions and counter-reactions to Trump’s incitement of the January 6 insurrection were I have conducted a content analysis of the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the USA Today for all the days from January 6, 2021 to January 15, 2021 (the end of the survey period). This content analysis is included in Appendix D.

This content analysis shows that the first reactions to Trump’s behavior from the side of the Republican Party elite came approximately 6 days after the event (e.g., Mitch McConnell saying on January 13, 2021 that he will support impeachment proceedings, but not saying what he would vote), and these responses were ranging from relatively neutral to modestly critical. Note here that the largely silent resignation of several cabinet members (e.g., Elaine Chao, Betsy DeVos) citing Trump’s behavior on January 7 is an important exception. Another important exception is a video that was released on January 11 were ex-Republican governor of California Arnold Schwarzenegger heavily criticized Trump.

Importantly, the content analysis also shows that reactions from others (e.g., journalists, pundits, and Democratic Party politicians) was essentially immediate, and that these reactions were overwhelmingly negative and highly critical of Donald Trump’s behavior. Importantly, this also included several pundits on Fox News, a TV channel that many supporters of Trump and the Republican Party watched regularly at the time, and a TV channel that was highly supportive of Trump throughout his presidency.

One way to look at the results is therefore to regard them as the causal effect of the “type” of event where a clearly anti-democratic act by a politician is followed by little reaction of his/her own party (during the survey period), but significant negative reactions by others. While the results may generalize to other such “types” of events, it is unclear whether

the results generalize to cases where co-partisans immediately strongly and unequivocally criticize the perpetrator.

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Party identification

Table 2 displays the main findings with regard to party identification. As can be seen, the proportion of respondents who identified as Republicans decreased from 31.6% on January 4 and 5 to 24.5% from January 7 to 15, 2021, a decrease of 7 percentage points. The percentage of respondents who indicated that they lean towards identifying as a Republican decreased from 18.1% to 14.3%, a decrease of 3.8 percentage points. This suggests that the total (probable) support for the Republican Party decreased by 10.8 percentage points in the 1.5 weeks following the January 6 insurrection.<sup>12</sup> This reduction of 10.8 percentage points corresponds to a 21.8% decline in total support for the Republican Party relative to its support level prior to the January 6 insurrection. 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 of interpretation. The results remain substantively unchanged when using a probit model (Appendix E).

As shown in Figure 3 the effect on Republican Party support remains approximately

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<sup>12</sup>As can also be seen in Table 2 8.4 of this 10.8 percentage point decline 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	$\Delta$	Jan 4–5	Jan 7–15	$\Delta$
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%

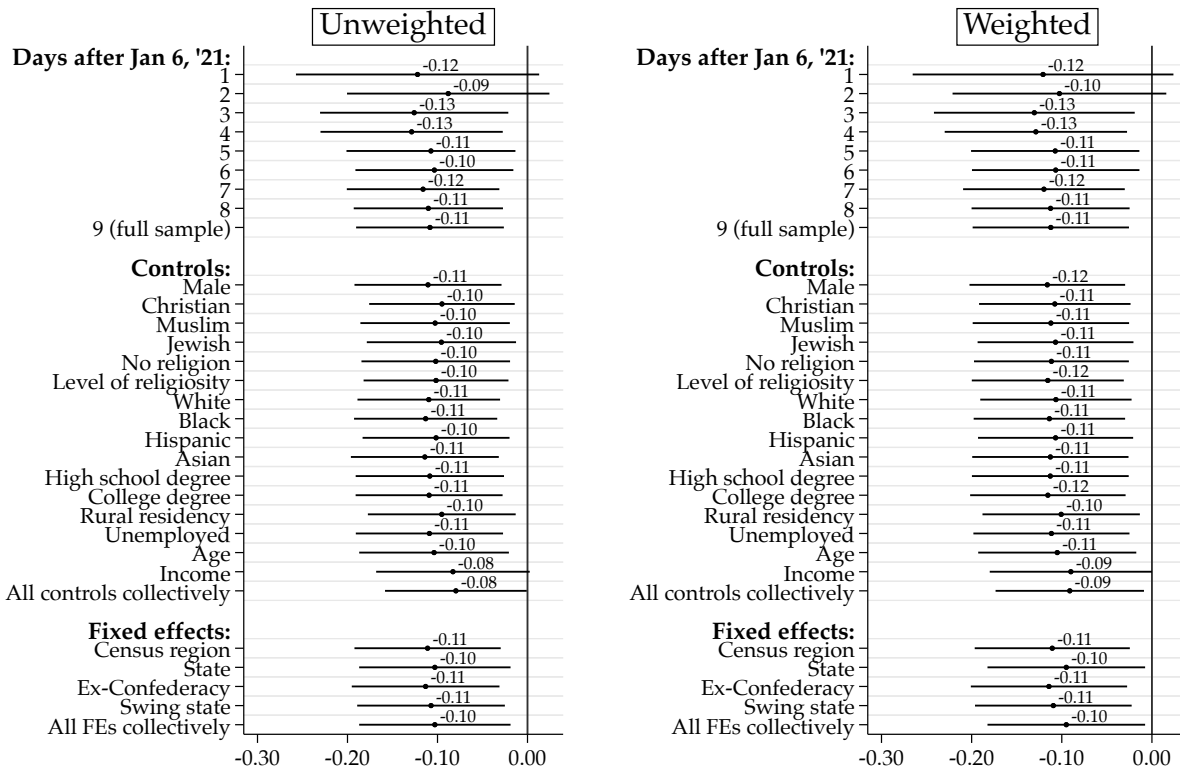
*Notes:* Data comes from Gallup’s January 2021 “Mood of the Nation” survey. Weights are generated using American National Election Study data on the percentage of male, Christian, White, college educated, rural, and unemployed individuals that existed in the U.S. electorate at the end of 2020.

11 percentage points when controlling for gender, religion, race/ethnicity, education, rural/urban residency, unemployment, age, and income (separately or collectively), 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 percentage point 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 I regard a 11 percentage point decline as relatively modest in this context. A reduction of 11 percentage points 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.*<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup>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 and research has long found that party identification in the United States is an unusually stable social identify that is significantly less sensitive to leadership behavior than other variables (Bartels et al., 2011; Campbell

Figure 3: Party identification 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 against 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.

## 6.2 Approval of president Trump

Tables 3 and 4 show the results when using Donald Trump's presidential approval rating as the dependent variable. Similar to the results with regard to party identification I find that Trump's incitement of the January 6 insurrection led to an approximately 11 percentage point decline in his presidential approval rating.<sup>14</sup> This effect size implies that 76% of people (et al., 1960; Converse, 1964; Converse and Markus, 1979).

<sup>14</sup>Interestingly, and unlike the party identification results, the effect appears to be somewhat stronger when one restricts the sample to respondents that were surveyed in the first few days after January 6, 2021, and when using the ANES weights (although these differences

Table 3: Presidential approval Trump before and after the January 6 insurrection.

	Unweighted			Weighted		
	Jan 4–5	Jan 7–15	$\Delta$	Jan 4–5	Jan 7–15	$\Delta$
Approve	47.2%	35.9%	-11.3%	49.7%	37.8%	-11.9%
Disapprove	52.8%	64.2%	+11.4%	50.3%	62.2%	+11.9%

*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.

that approved of Donald Trump’s job as president before January 6, 2021 did *not* change their opinion, *even through it was Donald Trump personally that incited a violent insurrection to overturn the results of a free and fair election.*

### 6.3 Long run effect

My identification strategy is particularly suitable to examine the immediate (short run) effect of the January 6 insurrection on political preferences.<sup>15</sup> Examining how the treatment effect has developed over longer periods of time is significantly more challenging. This is because many other things happened in the months after January 6, 2021 that could also have affected political party preferences—creating a bundled treatment problem.

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

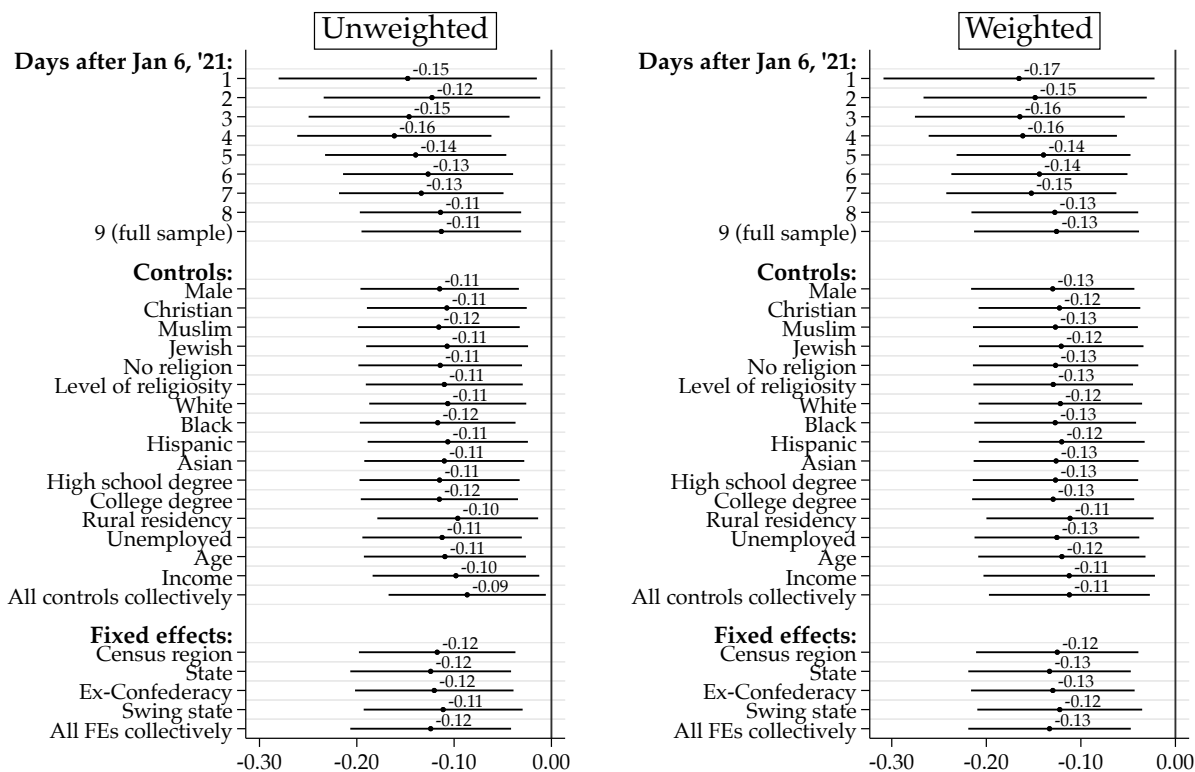
I am not aware of an available quasi-experiment that could seamlessly separate these two scenario’s by design. To nonetheless provide suggestive evidence on the long run effect of the

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are not statistically significant).

<sup>15</sup>The immediate (short run) effect is also the quantity that is identified in existing survey experiments on the effect of overt undemocratic behavior by politicians on voter preferences.

Figure 4: Presidential approval Trump robustness checks.



*Note:* Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals of (separate) OLS regressions of a dummy that takes the value 1 if a respondent approves of Donald Trump’s job as president, and 0 if a respondent disapproves of Trump’s job as president, 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 against 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.

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, data which is available for significantly longer than presidential approval ratings (Gallup stopped collecting presidential approval data for Trump on January 20, 2021), and which is less likely than political party identification to be affected by other electorally important events that occurred after Trump left office.

Table 4 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 percentage points 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 percentage points within one month was (partly) due to other events that occurred between January 15 and February 7, 2021, this does appear unlikely.<sup>16</sup> During this 23 day period the news was still very much dominated by the January 6 insurrection, and while it 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).<sup>17</sup>

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 elite 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

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<sup>16</sup>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: 0.803).

<sup>17</sup>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.



Table 4: Effect of the January 6 insurrection on party identification after one month.

	Unweighted			Weighted		
	Jan 4–5	Feb 7–15	$\Delta$	Jan 4–5	Feb 7–15	$\Delta$
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.

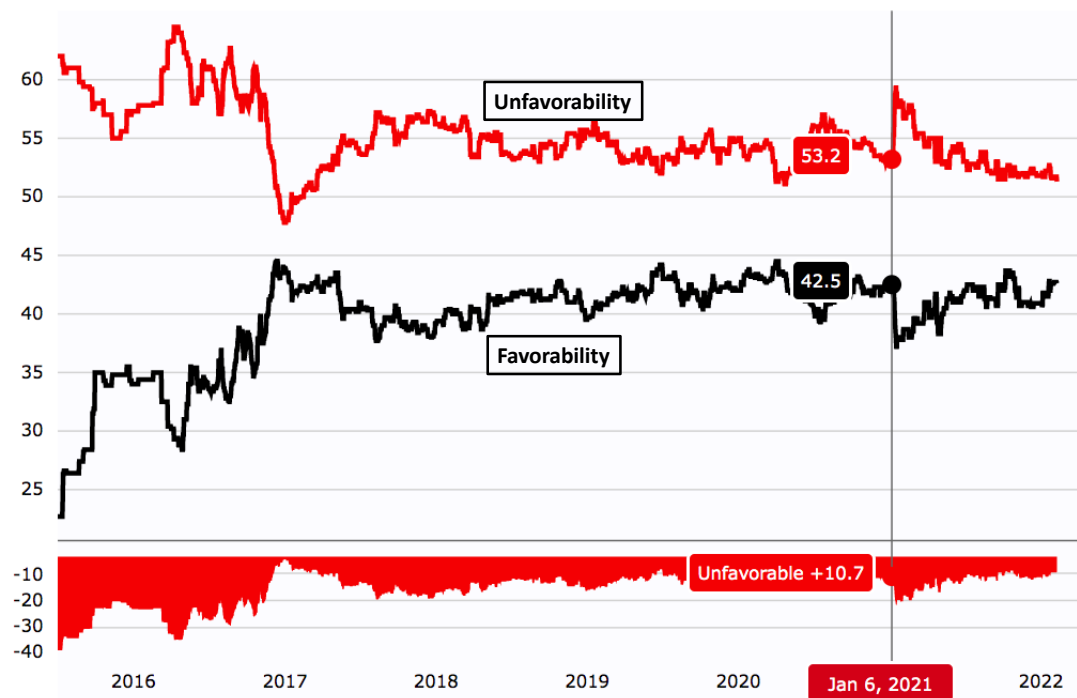
members of Congress that contradict this framing (New York Times, 2022).<sup>18</sup> Given what we know about the influence of elite messaging on co-partisan political preferences it appears likely that this at least partly explains the observed rebound in Republican Party support within the first month of the January 6 insurrection (e.g., Agadjanian (2021), Barber and Pope (2019), and Broockman and Butler (2017)).

Figure 5 plots the percentage of people that perceive Donald Trump favorably (bottom line) and the percentage of people that perceive Donald Trump unfavorably (top line) from the time when this data first came available (July 2, 2015) until the time of writing (February 9, 2022).<sup>19</sup> 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) percentage points is again arguably quite modest

<sup>18</sup>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).

<sup>19</sup>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 5: 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.

(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 5 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.

## 7 Theoretical implications

To reiterate, the empirical results suggest that: (1) Trump’s incitement of the January 6 insurrection reduced support for the Republican Party and himself as a leader with a relatively modest 11 percentage points; and (2) even this modest effect reduced significantly after Republican Party elites firmly started backing Trump and trivializing the events of January 6, 2021, from approximately two weeks after the event onwards.

I argue that to explain these results theoretically we need to go beyond existing theoretical models of democratic backsliding and voters role therein. Most crucially, the results imply a need to combine “static” theories about why voters may be unlikely to punish overt anti-democratic behavior by politicians a priori (e.g., polarization), with “dynamic” theories about how co-partisan elites can influence voters’ propensity to punish overt undemocratic behavior through framing effects.

The fact that in the first few days after January 6, 2021, when Republican Party elites were mostly silent, the Republican Party as a whole, and Trump as a leader more specifically, “only” suffered an 11 percentage point decrease in popularity, rhymes well with the seminal theoretical work of Svulik (2019, 2020). Svulik’s argument, in sum, is that when ideological polarization is high (i.e., the policy positions of the political parties are far apart), as is certainly the case in the United States today, people are less likely to punish overt undemocratic behavior by politicians. The logic is here that when ideological polarization is high, the political alternative to ones preferred political candidate/party (i.e., the candidate/party that most closely aligns with one owns policy ideal point) is likely to be further away. This increases the “cost” of punishing ones preferred candidate/party in case of undemocratic behavior, as one has to give up more of ones preferred policy positions when switching ones support to the alternative candidate/party.

Importantly, however, Svulik’s seminal theory does not appear to be able to explain that the initial 11 percentage point effect dissipated rapidly in only a couple of weeks time (especially given that the events of the January 6 insurrection were still very much front-

and-center in the media during this time period). This is because ideological polarization is a relatively structural variable that is unlikely to have changed much in these few weeks time.

Instead of only ideological polarization it appears necessary to bring the agency of co-partisan elites into Svulik's theoretical framework (that is to say, co-partisan elites agency besides potentially affecting ideological polarization itself). More specifically, the long-term results provide suggestive evidence that whether voters are likely or unlikely to punish overt anti-democratic behavior by politicians depends to an important extent on how co-partisan elites respond to such events. This is in line with existing work within American Politics on the importance of co-partisan framing effects (e.g., [Agadjanian \(2021\)](#), [Barber and Pope \(2019\)](#), and [Broockman and Butler \(2017\)](#)), but is, to the best of my knowledge, new in the democratic backsliding literature. While [Levitsky and Ziblatt \(2018\)](#) have studied the influence of co-partisan elites in the context of whether they uphold basic norms of forbearance and tolerance in public debate, and in whether the institutional structure of parties makes it more or less likely for demagogues to get the chance to become political candidates, I am not aware of much systematic research on how co-partisan elite messaging interacts with voters' propensity to punish undemocratic behavior.

If it is indeed the case that co-partisan elites maintain their strong sway over voters even in the presence of significant anti-democratic behavior by party leaders this has very significant consequences for our understanding of how to counteract democratic backsliding. Most fundamentally, it suggests that voters are unlikely to act as an independent force against politicians (who themselves have career incentives to stay in power) and that norms among elites, as well as other counterbalancing forces (such as a strong, independent, and democratically-minded court system), take central stage in the fight against democratic backsliding.

## 8 Conclusion

In this paper I have quasi-experimentally examined whether the American public tends to retract its support from politicians that clearly violate key democratic norms (in this case, state executives refusing to leave 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's 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 Republican Party/Trump supporters 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 identify as a Republican and no longer approve of Trump's job as president.

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 naturally comes 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).

Further research is also required to investigate *why* many American voters do not respond to clearly undemocratic behavior by politicians. It is noteworthy that in the week and a half after the January 6 insurrection both the number of individuals identifying as Republicans and Donald Trump's presidential approval rating decreased by approximately 11 percentage

points, but that this effect dissipated quickly after Republican Party elites started publicly backing Donald Trump and started downplaying Trump's involvement in the January 6 insurrection (the Republican Party's establishment decisively made this switch in framing approximately two weeks after January 6, 2021). This suggests that the American public may be willing to hold politicians accountable for violating norms, but only if co-partisan elites also take a strong and unequivocal stand against norm-violations.

Another important question for future research is the extent to which the results reported in this paper generalize to other countries. On the one hand, one could argue that they might. The United States has a long history as a democracy, and the value of democracy is deeply ingrained in American culture (in fact one could argue that being a democracy is one of the few national prides that virtually everyone in the United States, at least in theory, agrees on). Hence, it is possible that if even the American public is reluctant to penalize undemocratic behavior by politicians, publics in other countries with a shorter democratic history, or less entrenched democratic values, may also have similar tendencies. Moreover, survey experiments testing voter responses to undemocratic behavior in other countries generally yield similar results as in the United States (e.g., Saikkonen and Christensen (2022), Ahlquist et al. (2018), Fossati, Muhtadi and Warburton (2022), Şaşmaz, Yagci and Ziblatt (2022), and Svolik (2019, 2020)), suggesting that voter responses to undemocratic behavior treatments may be quite similar across countries. On the other hand, it is possible that publics in many other countries may be more inclined to respond to undemocratic behavior by politicians. Political polarization is especially profound and widespread in the United States, and political polarization tends to heighten the "cost" of breaking away from one's preferred political party or candidate because the alternative party or candidate in a highly polarized political context is more likely to be further removed from one's preferred political agenda (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?**

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## 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 anti-democratic behavior of a politician.

Below, I provide a number of direct quotes from 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 Power analysis

In this section I conduct a power analysis for the two main analyses that study the effect of Donald Trump’s incitement of the January 6 insurrection on whether a respondent identifies as a Republican, or not, and whether a respondent approves of Trump’s job as president, or not.

To conduct this power analysis I follow Gerber and Green (2012) by solving the following equation with varying assumed values of  $\mu_t$  and  $\mu_c$ :

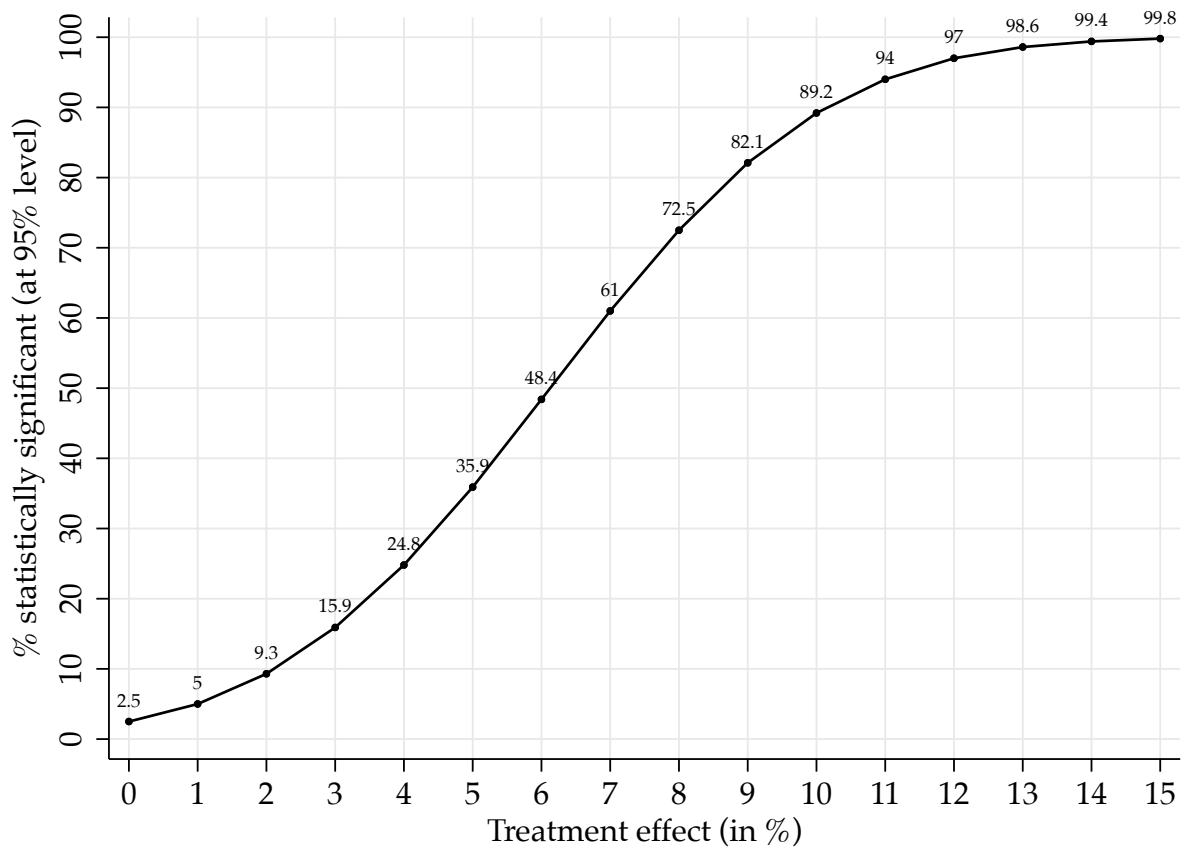
$$\beta = \Phi \left( \frac{|\mu_t - \mu_c| \sqrt{N}}{2\sigma} - \Phi^{-1} \left( 1 - \frac{\alpha}{2} \right) \right) \quad (1)$$

where  $\beta$  is the probability of getting a statistically significant result,  $\Phi$  is the cumulative distribution function of the normal distribution,  $\mu_t$  is the average outcome in the treatment group,  $\mu_c$  is the average outcome in the control group,  $N$  is the number of observations,  $\sigma$  is the standard deviation of outcomes, and  $\alpha$  is our demanded statistical significance level.

To solve equation (1) I vary the difference between  $\mu_t$  and  $\mu_c$  (i.e., the estimated treatment effect) from 0 to 15% (in increments of 1%), set  $N$  to 1,023 (i.e., the number of observations in the sample), set  $\sigma$  to the observed standard deviation of the dependent variables in the control group (i.e., approximately 0.5 for both the party identification and the Trump presidential approval variables), and set  $\alpha$  to 0.05 (i.e., the standard 95% confidence level).

Figure A1 shows the results of the power analysis. As can be seen the power analysis suggests that treatment effects above 10% will have a probability of 89.2% to be found to be statistically significant on the 95% level under the conditions assumed above.

Figure A1: Power analysis.



## C 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 preferences.

To test whether this assumption is likely to hold I have 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 preferences (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, losing 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).



## D Timeline of reactions to the January 6 insurrection

In this section I provide a timeline of the reactions to Donald Trump's incitement of the January 6 insurrection from January 7 to January 15, 2021 (the survey period after the treatment). This timeline is based on a content analysis of the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the USA Today. Studying this timeline can help with understanding what "type" of treatment Trump's incitement of the January 6 insurrection was, and thus what other type of cases the results may or may not generalize to.

- **7– January, 2021: Non-Republican backlash against Trump.** From January 7 onwards a large number of individuals and cooperations spoke out against Trump's actions on January 6, 2021. This included many social media companies banning Trump from their platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook), and many news pundits and Democratic Party politicians heavily criticizing Trump's actions. I see this as part of the treatment in the sense that any violent attempt to subvert the results of a free and fair election is likely to generate such reactions. I don't see these reactions as independent events (or compound treatments) as they are caused by Trump's incitement of the January 6 insurrection, and thus at most mediate the effect of Donald Trump's incitement of the insurrection on voter preferences.
- **7–13 January, 2021: Republican backlash against Trump.** Several members of the Republican Party establishment also spoke out against President Trump. On January 7 several cabinet members (e.g., Elaine Chao, Betsy DeVos) resigned, citing the January 6 violence on Capitol Hill as their main motivation but not providing much additional information otherwise. Arnold Schwarzenegger (ex-Republican governor of California) posted a video denouncing Trump on January 11. Liz Cheney said on January 12 that she will vote to impeach Trump. Mitch McConnell said on January 13 that he will support impeachment proceedings, but did not commit to voting in favor of conviction. In general I see these events as part of the treatment, for the same

reasons as discussed above.

- **8 January, 2021: Trump allegedly mentions the option of pardoning himself.**

On January 8 it is made public that according to anonymous sources Trump has mentioned to aides that he wants to pardon himself. Trump in the end does not attempt to pardon himself and it never becomes clear whether he actually ever seriously considered it.

- **10 January, 2021: Public opinion poll shows that majority of Americans want President Trump removed from office.**

On January 10 ABC News/Ipsos published the results of a poll that found that 56% of those surveyed believe that President Trump should be removed from office before his term ends on January 20, and that 67% blame Trump for the riots in Washington.

- **11 January, 2021: COVID-19 vaccine distribution is going slowly.**

There were no major COVID-19 news stories that broke during the period of Gallup's January 2021 survey (besides basic updates on infections, casualties, and vaccinations that were continuously reported for months before January 2021, and which were relatively similar in tone before and after January 6). Arguably the most notable COVID-19 news story broke on January 11 when it was reported that at that point less than a third of available vaccine doses had been sent to the states for administering. This cannot explain my results because the effect is equally large before January 11 (see figure 3 in main text).

- **12 January, 2021: Leaders of the U.S. army send letter in support of Joe Biden to all army personnel.**

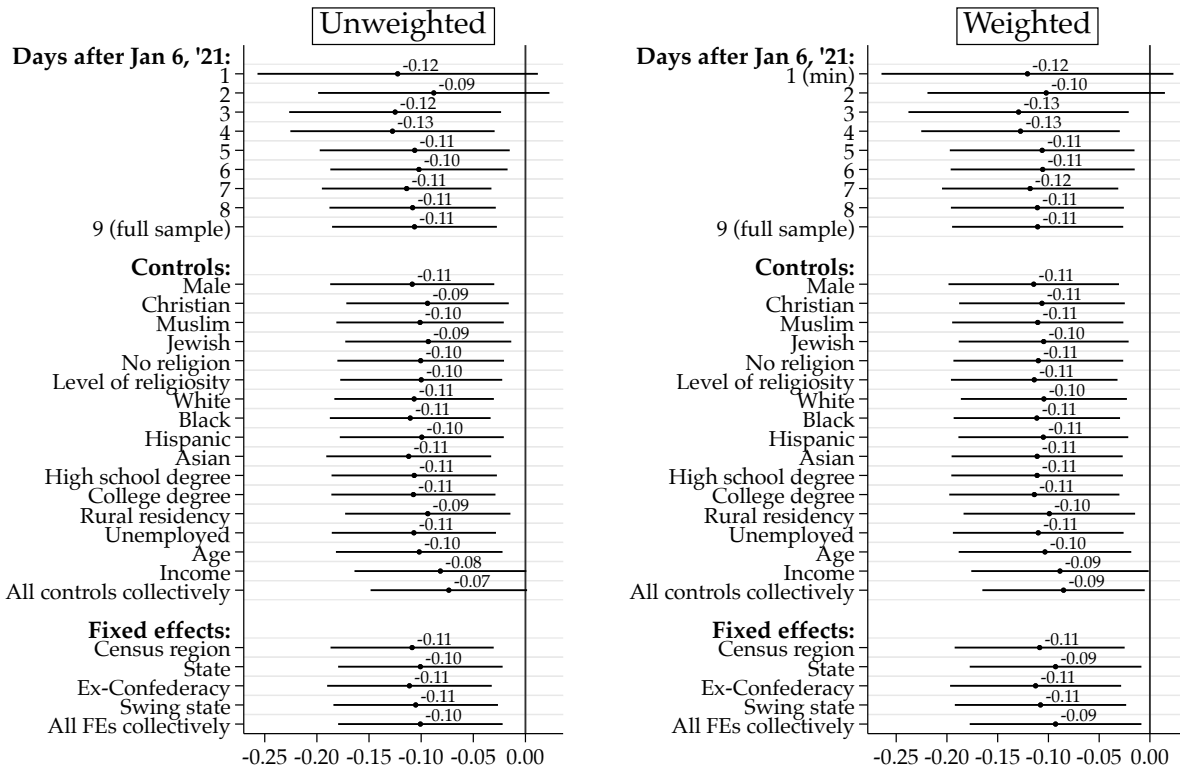
On January 12 the military's Joint Chiefs of Staff send a letter to the entire American forces reminding them that their job is to support and defend the Constitution, and that Biden will soon be their next commander in chief. The publication of this letter cannot explain my results because the effect is equally large before January 12 (see figure 3 in the main text).

- **12 January, 2021: Republican members of Congress block a resolution to urge Vice President Pence and Trump’s cabinet members to invoke the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment.** On January 12 Republican members of Congress vote against a resolution aimed at the removal of President Trump through the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment. This triggers Democratic members of Congress to start impeachment proceedings.
- **14 January, 2021: The House passes Articles of Impeachment.** On January 14 the House of Representatives passes Articles of Impeachment charging Trump with “incitement of insurrection.” Impeachment later fails on February 13, 2021 because of Republican opposition in the Senate.
- **14 January, 2021: Capitol building and surrounding gated and packed with heavily armed National Guards.** From January 14 until after Joe Biden’s inauguration on January 20 the entire Capitol building and surrounding was packed with tens of thousands of heavily armed National Guards that were forced to spend the night on the stone floor within the Capitol building.
- **15 January, 2021: Democrats claim that some Republican lawmakers may have conspired with the January 6 insurrectionists.** On January 15 several Democratic members of Congress claimed that some of their Republican colleagues — none of whom they named specifically — may have conspired with the insurrectionists in an attempt to overturn the election. Serious evidence is never provided for these claims.

## E Probit estimates

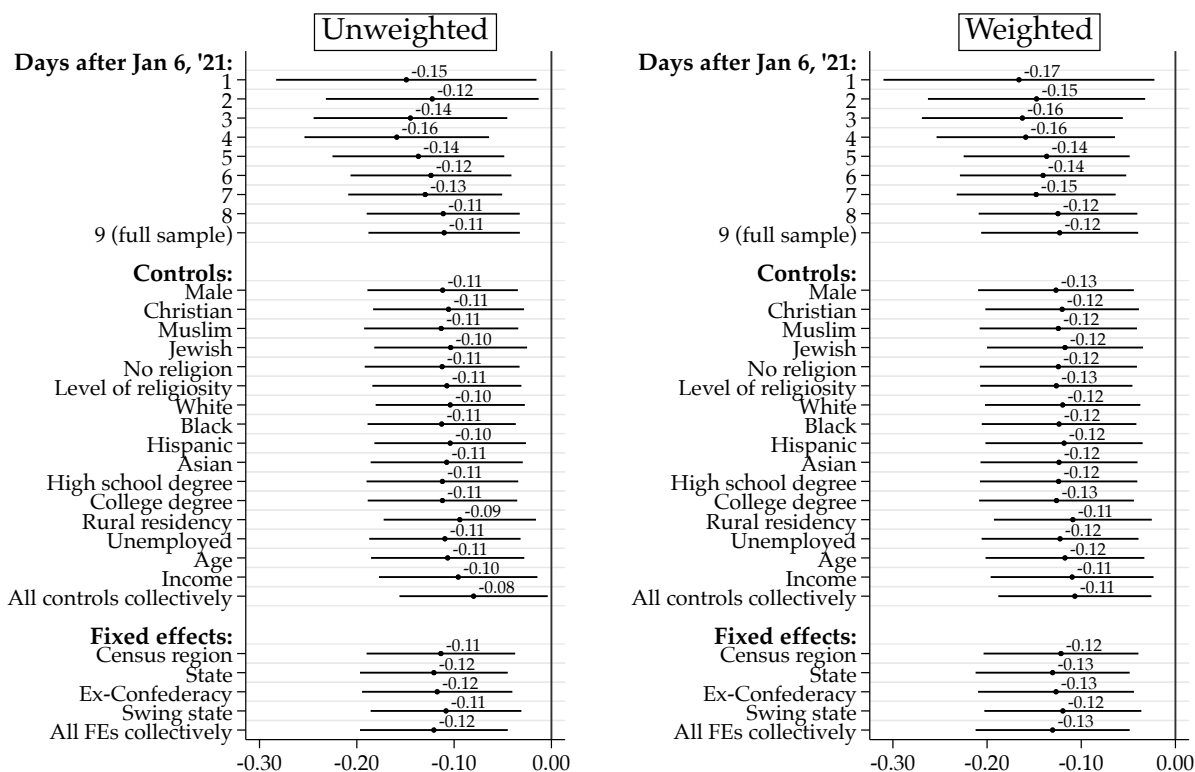
In the main text I use linear probability models for ease of interpretation. Figures [A2](#) and [A3](#) show that the results remain essentially unchanged when using probit estimation.

Figure A2: Effect on party identification 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.

Figure A3: Effect on Trump’s presidential approval rating 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 approves of Donald Trump’s job as president, and 0 if a respondent disapproves of Trump’s job as president, 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.

## F 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](#).

## References

Gerber, Alan S. and Donald P. Green. 2012. *Field Experiments: Design, Analysis, and Interpretation*. WW Norton.