Political Identity and Beliefs about Stolen Elections in the American Electorate

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The insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 was fueled by unsubstantiated claims that the 2020 presidential election was "stolen." How do a significant number of Americans come to believe and act on these false allegations? In explaining why some people are receptive to these claims we focus on aspects of partisan polarization that emphasize social and political identity. Heightened partisanship encourages the public to view politics in zero-sum "us versus them" terms and encourages people to believe the worst about political opponents. Furthermore, while claims about widespread voter fraud have been a part of GOP rhetoric for many years, President Trump took them to a new level in 2020. We use several national surveys to examine public beliefs about election integrity. Opposing partisans hold very different beliefs about voter fraud, the 2020 election, and events around January 6. The results reveal dangers for American democracy, since contempt for political opponents is associated with support for political violence and opposition to constitutional protections for minority rights.

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The insurrection at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, was a rare event in American politics. It marked the first organized assault on the seat of American government since the War of 1812. In 2021 the insurrectionists were home-grown terrorists, rather than a foreign army. Five people died and 140 police officers were injured in the attack. Those attacking the Capitol on January 6 were fueled by unsubstantiated claims that the 2020 presidential election was "stolen." How do a significant number of Americans come to believe and act on these false allegations?

We see three crucial elements that helped produce the conflagration on January 6. First, the growth of affective polarization means that a large segment of the mass public is susceptible to false claims of a stolen election and motivated to political action. Second, President Trump provided the spark, having turbo-charged Republican claims of voter fraud, taking the frequency and incendiary nature of those allegations to a new level. Third, other Republican political leaders acted as accelerants – rather than correcting the president's false claims of a stolen election, many GOP politicians have amplified those claims. These elements have combined to produce an American public that is bitterly divided over formerly mundane aspects of election administration, the fairness of the 2020 election, and the events surrounding January 6, 2021.

Fuel: Growing Affective Polarization

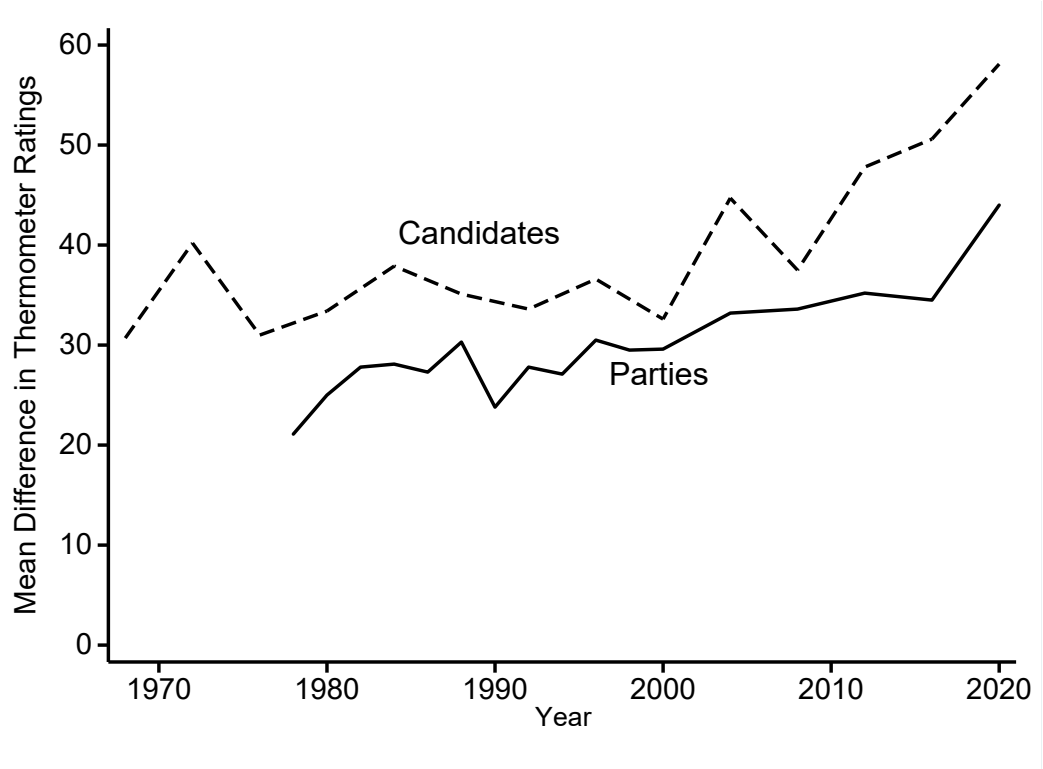
Partisan polarization is one of the most important features of American politics today. People tend to view the world in "us versus them" terms, often pitting their own party against the opposing party (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Americans develop a party identification at a relatively young age, and it rarely changes over one's lifetime (Stoker and Jennings 2008). In addition, Americans have recently become better "sorted," such that their partisanship has become closely intertwined with other aspects of their identity, like ideology, race, ethnicity, gender, religious devotion, and where they live (Levendusky 2009; Mason 2018; Abramowitz and Webster 2017; Webster 2020). Increased partisan disagreement among politicians and activists has fostered a more attentive electorate and a stronger sense of partisan identity among the mass public. Polarized politics encourages the public to view party competition in zero-sum terms and to denigrate their political

opponents more than in the past. Recent national elections have been heavily contested and produced close outcomes, which increases the stakes for partisan conflicts (Lee 2016; Sood and Iyengar 2016). Finally, the growth of partisan news sources, which often describe the opposition in negative terms, contributes to a heightened partisan environment (Levendusky 2013; Lelkes et al. 2017). These developments have increased the salience of party identification among the mass public.

One indicator of hardening partisanship is increasing expressions of contempt for partisan opponents, often termed "affective polarization" (Lelkes et al. 2017; Iyengar et al. 2019). One measure of affective polarization comes from feeling thermometer ratings of political parties and presidential candidates, according to national surveys conducted by the American National Election Studies (ANES).[1] The thermometer questions ask respondents to rate groups or political figures on a scale from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating warmer feelings and lower scores indicating more animosity toward the group or political figure. During the past forty years Republicans and Democrats have consistently rated their own party positively, at an average rating of approximately 70 degrees. However, ratings of the opposite party have dropped substantially during the same period, particularly since the turn of the 21st century. Mean ratings of the opposite party were close to 50 degrees in 1980 but have dropped to 25 degrees in 2020, a record low for the series. Colder ratings of Democrats by Republicans are concentrated among white Americans and those who oppose government aid to Black people (Mar 2020). As we show below, this is important for beliefs about election integrity. The absolute difference between thermometer ratings of the two major parties has become a fairly common measure of affective polarization (see Figure 1). As the solid curve in Figure 1 shows, the average gap in affection for each of the major political parties has increased from 21 degrees in 1978 to roughly 44 degrees in 2020, the highest level of polarization in the series.

[1] To maintain consistency with prior ANES surveys, for analyses of historical trends we only use the face-to-face samples of the 2012 and 2016 surveys. Online surveys tend to elicit greater hostility than face-so-face surveys (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018). In years where ANES used both survey modes, we find an Internet mode effect of roughly 6 degrees on the thermometer measures of affective polarization. Since the 2020 ANES survey was conducted entirely online, we adjusted the 2020 estimates of polarization to account for this mode effect. We apply sampling weights and we treat Independents who lean toward a party as partisans in all of the analyses reported below.

Figure 1. Growth in Affective Polarization, 1968-2020



Source: ANES Cumulative Data File; 2020 ANES Time Series Study

Evidence of affective polarization is even more compelling when we examine thermometer ratings of presidential candidates. Over the past several decades we see the same pattern of consistent positive ratings for the candidate of one's own party, but sharply declining ratings of the opposite party's candidate. The negative ratings of presidential candidates sunk to new depths in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. In 2016, 30% of respondents rated Donald Trump at 0 degrees and 23% rated Hillary Clinton at 0 degrees. In 2020, 38% rated Donald Trump at 0 degrees, while 21% rated Joe Biden at 0 degrees. As the dashed line in Figure 1 shows, the mean difference in thermometer ratings for the two major party candidates increased from 31 degrees in 1968 and 1976 to 58 degrees in 2020, a record level of affective polarization for the series. Several other measures provide further evidence of affective polarization in the American public (see Iyengar et al. (2019) for a recent summary). These measures of affective polarization tend to be strongly correlated with strength of partisanship, providing further evidence of

construct validity in the original measure of party identification (Campbell et al. 1960). Indeed, among respondents to the 2020 survey, 44 percent identified as strong partisans, also the highest share since ANES began measuring partisanship several decades ago.

One by-product of affective polarization is that it increases one's willingness to believe bad things about political opponents. For example, partisans are more likely to believe that politicians of the opposite party are guilty of sexual misconduct than politicians of their own party (Klar and McCoy 2021). Partisans also tend to dehumanize their opponents (Martherus et al. 2021) and view themselves as morally superior to political adversaries (Cassese 2021). Contempt for the opposite party goes a long way.

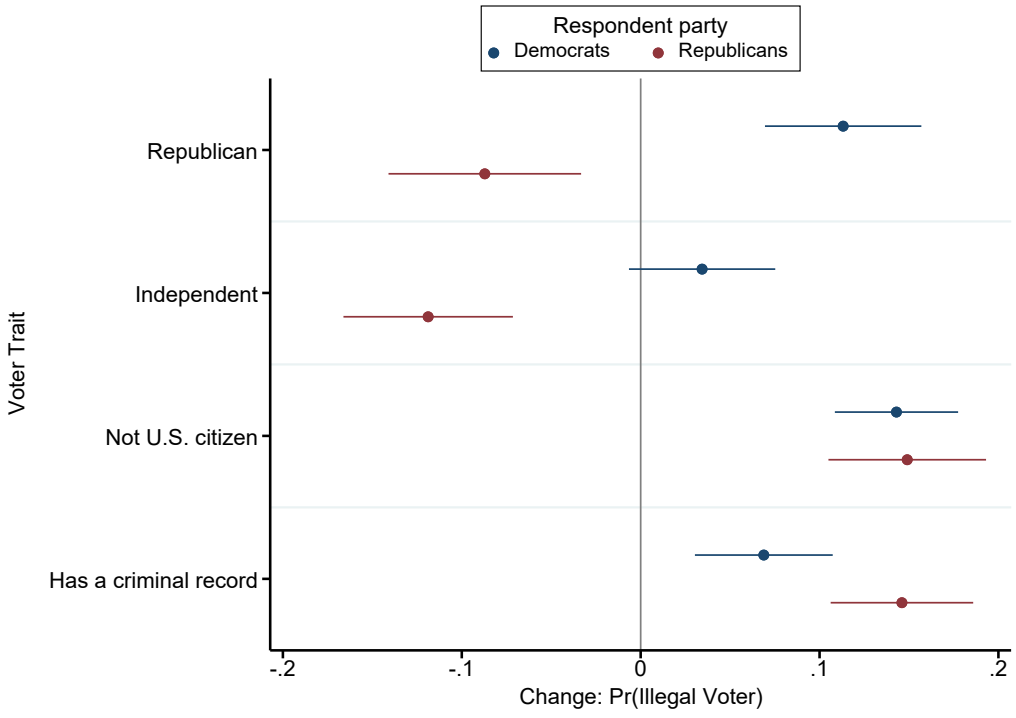
We also find that partisan biases influence beliefs about the types of people likely to commit voter fraud. That is, partisans suspect the opposition of voter fraud. We test this hypothesis in a conjoint experiment on a module of the 2017 CCES survey. Each respondent was shown profiles of two hypothetical voters and then asked which voter is more likely to cast an illegal ballot. The profile of each hypothetical voter includes eight randomly assigned attributes: sex, race, age, party, citizenship, language, occupation, and whether the person has a criminal record (see Table A-1 in the Appendix for a list of each attribute tested). We asked respondents to perform this task four times, each time asking them to evaluate a different pair of hypothetical voters.[2] This design allows us to estimate the effect of each attribute on the probability of being perceived as an illegal voter.

We estimate an OLS regression model with standard errors clustered by respondent. OLS coefficients produce an average marginal component effect (AMCE), which represents the marginal effect of an attribute on the probability of a person being selected as an illegal voter (Hainmueller et al. 2014). Since we are testing for partisan biases, we present the results of the experiment separately for Democratic and Republican respondents. Most of the attributes did not generate statistically significant effects. For ease of presentation, in Figure 2 we report the coefficients for the three attributes that mattered, partisanship, citizenship, and criminal record, along with their 95% confidence intervals. These estimated effects are relative to a hypothetical voter who is a white male

[2] We verified that the randomization produced a balanced set of voter profiles for respondents of each party (Hainmuller et al. 2014).

Democrat, a United States citizen, and has no criminal record. As Figure 2 shows, respondents of both parties suspect non-citizens and people with a criminal record of being illegal voters. We also find evidence of affective polarization. Democrats tend to believe that a Republican is more likely than a Democrat to commit voter fraud (b=0.11, p<0.001), while Republicans believe the opposite (b=-0.08, p<0.01). There is a rough symmetry to the partisan biases, and the magnitude of the partisan bias in this test is similar to the impact of being a non-citizen or having a criminal record. Although not presented here, these findings only hold for strong identifiers of the two major parties. Weak identifiers and independent leaners do not associate the opposite party with an increased likelihood of illegal voting. Strong partisans on each side suspect the opposition of committing voter fraud.

Figure 2. Effects of Voter Attributes on Perceptions of Voter Fraud



Source: 2017 CCES – UM-St. Louis Module

The 2020 election took place amid resurgent partisanship in the mass public. Increased levels of contempt for political opponents means that partisans, especially strong partisans, are willing to believe the worst about the opposition and follow cues from party leaders. Members of both major parties are susceptible to the forces of affective polarization. A highly charged electorate provided fuel for the events that came during and after the 2020 election.

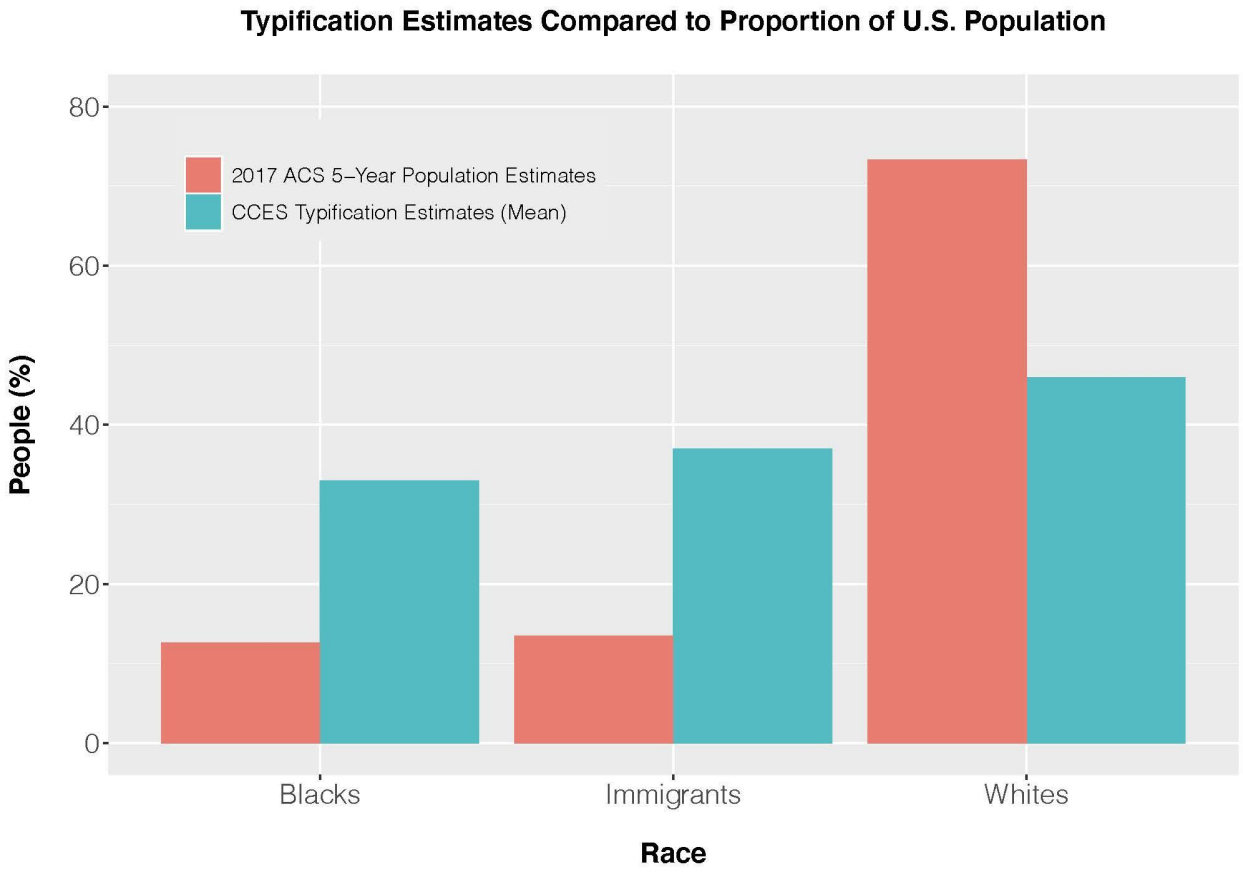
Tinder and the Spark: Racial Views of Criminals and President Trump's Voter Fraud Claims

Voter fraud is a type of crime. As we note above, Americans tend to hold biased images of typical illegal voters. Highly charged debates about voting restrictions in the United States sometimes include explicit or implicit references to race, such as allegations of "inner city" voter fraud (Wilson and Brewer 2013; Dreier and Martin 2010; Ellis 2013). Similar rhetoric links an immigrant threat narrative with concerns about voter fraud (Udani and Kimball 2018). Donald Trump has contributed to this rhetoric for several years. During and after the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump made repeated and unsubstantiated claims about voter fraud, often labeling immigrants as perpetrators (Johnson 2016; House and Dennis 2017). President Trump also created a commission to investigate claims of voter fraud in the 2016 election. The commission disbanded without producing evidence of meaningful voter fraud.

It is no surprise that beliefs about voter fraud are shaped by attitudes toward immigrants and Black people in the United States. Resentment towards people of color and anti-immigrant attitudes are strong predictors of public beliefs about voting integrity (Wilson and Brewer 2013; Udani and Kimball 2018; Appleby and Federico 2017). Further research has found substantial differences in the ways that Democrats and Republicans think about this issue. Textual analysis of how partisans define the meaning of voter fraud (Sheagley and Udani, 2021) has shown that Republicans appear to ground their views of fraud in concerns about voter actions involving immigrants and "illegal" immigration while Democrats commonly think of the issue in terms of institutional barriers that impact non-specific groups and minoritized groups.

In our 2017 national sample of U.S. voters, we asked respondents to estimate the share of voter fraud perpetrators belonging to three different groups (immigrants, Blacks, and Whites). The exact wording of the question is: "What percentage of people who commit voter fraud in this country would you say are [immigrants/Black/White]." Once again, the order of the questions was randomized. Responses ranged from 0 percent to 100 percent, and there is considerable variation in estimates across respondents (each item has a standard deviation between 24 and 29). The mean estimate for Whites (46%) exceeds the mean estimates for Blacks (33%) and immigrants (37%). We don't have reliable measures of each group's share of actual voter fraud violators in the United States. However, since voter fraud is rare we might start with each group's share of the U.S. population. Using five-year estimates from the American Community Survey from 2017 U.S. Census data, Whites make up a much larger share of the American population (73.3%) than foreign born residents (13.5%) and Blacks (12.6%). Figure 3 clearly shows that U.S. voters tend to significantly overstate the immigrant and Black share of illegal voters and underestimate the White share.

Figure 3. Americans Typify Blacks and Immigrants as Fraudulent Voters



Source: 2017 CCES – UM-St. Louis Module

If Republican leaders' long history of unsubstantiated voter fraud allegations and the U.S. mass public's racially biased stereotypes of criminals serve as tinder, Donald Trump's rhetoric was the spark that took voter fraud claims to a new level in 2020. Before he was banned from the site, Twitter was one of President Trump's most frequent means of communication. For example, between Election Day and December 17, 2020, Trump posted 729 tweets, and 69 percent were about the election (Troyer 2020). These messages were frequently spread by his followers - roughly four-in-ten of President Trump's most-liked tweets contained false claims about the 2020 election (Rattner 2021). As we note below, President Trump and his campaign filed dozens of lawsuits challenging the administration and results of the 2020 election. By not accepting the results of the 2020 election, President Trump led many Republicans to believe that the election was not legitimate.

Accelerant: Amplification of Misinformation

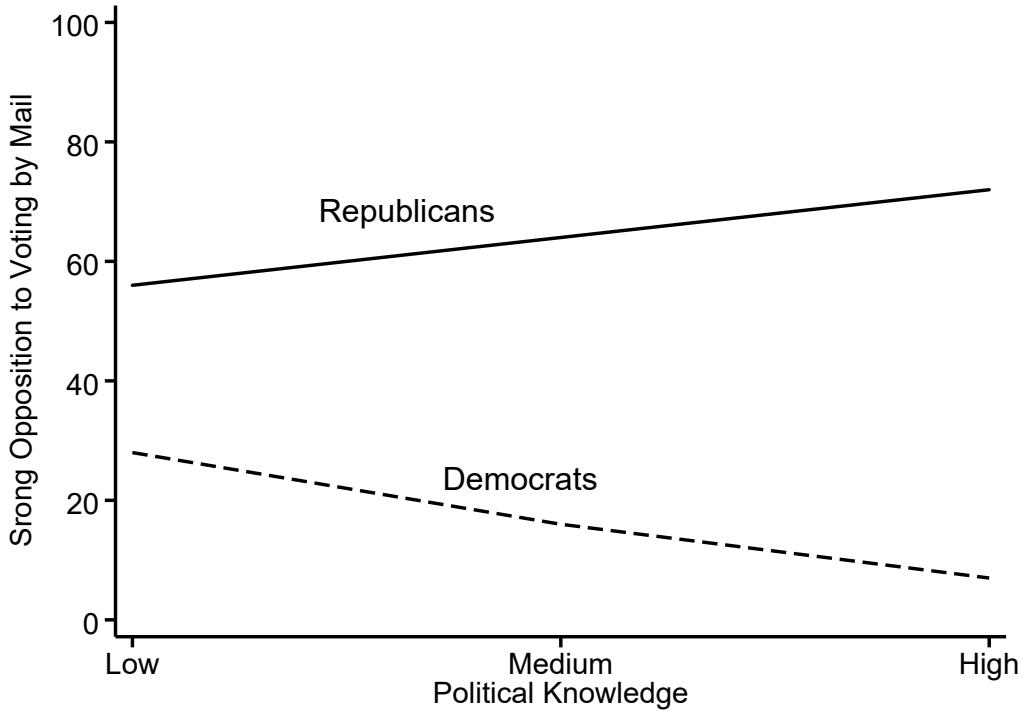
The public tends to mimic arguments made by political leaders they trust. If most Republican leaders disavowed or contradicted Trump's baseless allegations of election fraud, then perhaps public opinion would not be so polarized on assessments of election integrity and the 2020 election. However, rather than correcting the president's false claims of a stolen election, many Republican leaders have amplified those claims, acting as accelerants. In a review of congressional electronic newsletters from 2010 to 2021, Republicans' messages to constituents mentioned voter fraud much more than Democrats, particularly as it related to Trump's election (Brown and Cormack 2021). These messages matter because they provide signals to the public about what to believe.

When it comes to perceptions of voter fraud, partisan divisions are not a new phenomenon. Party identification and ideology are significant predictors of beliefs about voter fraud (Ansolabehere and Persily 2007), and Republicans tend to believe that voter fraud occurs more frequently than Democrats (Wilson and Brewer 2013; Bowler et al. 2015; Wilson and King-Meadows 2016). But what happened in 2020 was not run-of-the-mill partisan maneuvering. A sitting president refused to accept his electoral loss, and according to reports conspired with others to overturn the results of a free and fair election (Alemany et al. 2021; McWhirter 2021; Sprunt 2021). Part of that strategy was to convince tens of millions of Americans that the election was 'rigged', and in that aspect of the strategy they were effective. The myth of stolen elections moved from the fringes to being accepted by the majority of Republicans who believe that the election was rigged and that Donald Trump is the rightful President, not Joe Biden (Ipsos 2021; Dickson 2021; Levine 2021). Even though election officials from both parties spoke out to say the 2020 election was free and fair, allegations of election fraud were found to be unsubstantiated in more than 60 lawsuits (Parks 2020; Kahn et al. 2021), and President Trump's own federal agency declared the November 2020 election to be the "most secure in American history" (Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency 2020). The message from President Trump, other GOP leaders, and conservative media outlets was clear: the 2020 election was stolen from Trump.

Elite rhetoric was especially polarized on how voting processes should adjust to the coronavirus pandemic. Even though he voted by mail in 2020 and many other elections (McEvoy 2021), President Trump and many other Republican leaders criticized voting by mail as fraudulent. In contrast, many Democratic leaders and election officials promoted voting by mail as a way to avoid spreading coronavirus during a deadly pandemic. Indeed, there was a dramatic increase in voting by mail in the 2020 election (Stewart 2020). However, the partisan disagreement over voting by mail polarized public opinion on this feature of election administration. In one survey we fielded in 2015, voting by mail was strongly opposed by 25 percent of Democrats and 43 percent of Republicans, a modest partisan gap in preferences. When we asked the same question in another survey conducted just after the 2020 election, voting by mail was strongly opposed by 11 percent of Democrats and 71 percent of Republicans. Public opinion on voting by mail was so polarized in 2020 that Democrats were twice as likely as Republicans to cast their ballots by mail in the general election (Stewart 2020).

There is further evidence of elite opinion leadership on voting by mail in the 2020 election. Americans, particularly those most attentive to politics, tend to follow the political positions of leaders they trust (Zaller 1992; Lenz 2012; Barber and Pope 2018). This often creates a pattern where public opinion is most polarized among those with high levels of political knowledge. Figure 4 illustrates the percent of respondents strongly opposed to voting by mail, with the ANES sample segmented by party and political knowledge. The pattern in Figure 4 is consistent with John Zaller's (1992) theory of opinion leadership. Among Republicans, opposition to voting by mail increases as knowledge increases. Among Democrats, opposition declines as knowledge increases. Thus, the most knowledgeable respondents are the most polarized by party on the question of voting by mail. A similar pattern exists in public support for laws requiring voters to show photo identification (Gronke et al. 2019), another election policy featuring strong partisan disagreements among politicians.

Figure 4. Opposition to Voting by Mail by Party and Political Knowledge, 2020



Source: 2020 ANES Time Series Study

We examine public beliefs about election integrity more systematically in our next analysis, focusing on three dependent variables from the 2020 ANES survey. One pre-election question asked respondents to indicate how accurately the votes will be counted in the 2020 election on a five-point scale (1 = not at all accurately, 5 = completely accurately). A post-election item asked how often votes are counted fairly in this country's elections (1 = never, 5 = all of the time). The third dependent variable we examine is a pre-election item measuring support for voting by mail on a seven-point scale (1 = favor a great deal, 7 = oppose a great deal).

Our primary independent variables measure group attitudes. The first is a measure of affective polarization (Republican Party thermometer rating minus Democratic Party rating). We expect this variable to be negatively associated with election integrity beliefs. The second is a racial resentment scale, which measures a belief that a lack of work ethic accounts for inequality between black and white Americans. We measure racial resentment based on four questions that ask respondents the degree to which they agree or disagree

with statements about the status of blacks in society (Tesler and Sears 2010, 19). Responses to these four items are averaged together to create the racial resentment index ($\alpha = .88$). Racial resentment gained potency in public opinion during the presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump (Tesler and Sears 2010; Kimball et al. 2018). Since political rhetoric around voter fraud includes frequent allegations targeting people of color, public beliefs about voter fraud have become racialized (Wilson and Brewer 2013; Appleby and Federico 2017; Udani and Kimball 2018). Thus, we expect racial resentment to be associated with negative assessments of election integrity.

As we show above, beliefs about election fraud have also become closely tied to views of immigrants. The recent growth of and diffusion of immigrants in the United States makes immigration a more top-of-mid consideration in public opinion. In addition, many political leaders, led by President Trump, have made unsubstantiated allegations that immigrants are committing voter fraud in large numbers. Thus, public beliefs about voter fraud have become strongly associated with hostility toward immigrants (Udani and Kimball 2018). We create a measure of hostility to immigrants based on responses to four ANES questions that ask whether immigrants (1) increase crime, (2) harm America's culture, (3) are good for America's economy, and (4) whether immigration levels should be increased or decreased. The four variables were averaged together to form an immigrant attitude scale ($\alpha = 0.82$). We expect hostility toward immigrants to be correlated with negative evaluations of election integrity. Finally, we include covariates for age (ranging from 18 to 81 years), political knowledge, sex and white respondents. Each independent variable is rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

Table 1. Predictors of Beliefs about Election Integrity

Independent Variable	Ballots will be counted accurately (Pre-election)	Ballots are counted fairly (Post-election)	Oppose voting by mail (Pre-election)
Affective polarization	-0.87* (0.06)	-1.50* (0.06)	2.89* (0.10)
Racial resentment	0.03 (0.06)	-0.37* (0.06)	1.16* (0.10)
Anti-immigrant sentiment	-0.54* (0.08)	-0.84* (0.07)	0.98* (0.12)
Political knowledge	0.21* (0.06)	0.75* (0.06)	-0.02 (0.10)
Age	0.49* (0.05)	0.40* (0.05)	-0.10 (0.07)
White	0.13* (0.03)	0.13* (0.03)	-0.14* (0.05)
Women	-0.15* (0.03)	-0.13* (0.02)	0.02 (0.04)
Constant	3.30* (0.06)	4.24* (0.05)	2.23* (0.09)
N	6,907	6,922	6,933
R^2	.11	.32	.35

Source: 2020 ANES Time Series Study
*p < .05, two-tailed

Table 1 presents the results of OLS regressions with each dependent variable modeled as a function of the independent variables described above. Affective polarization and group attitudes emerge as potent predictors of beliefs about election integrity. Before the 2020 election, respondents at the Republican end of the polarization scale were almost one point less confident about the vote count than polarized Democrats. Those with the most negative views about immigrants were about half a point less confident than respondents with the most positive assessments of immigrants. Contrary to our

expectations, racial resentment is uncorrelated with the pre-election measure of voter confidence.

We find even stronger associations between our measures of group attitudes and post-election confidence in the vote count. Strong party identification tends to equate with a strong desire to see one's party win (Mason 2018). Thus, after an election voter confidence tends to increase among supporters of the winning party and decrease among identifiers with the losing party (Sances and Stewart 2015). This pattern was evident in the 2020 election as well. After the 2020 election, affective Republicans were 1.5 points less confident about election fairness than affective Democrats on the five-point dependent variable. Those with the most negative views about immigrants were almost a point less confident in election fairness than respondents with the most positive assessments of immigrants. We also find that racial resentment is negatively correlated with beliefs about election fairness in the post-election measure. Meanwhile, those with higher levels of political knowledge tend to hold more positive views about the fairness and accuracy of the vote count. Finally, older voters, men, and white respondents tend to report higher levels of voter confidence than young adults, women, and non-white respondents.

In the final column of Table 1 we find the strongest association between group attitudes and opposition to voting by mail, while the other covariates register almost no association. A GOP effort to denigrate voting by mail produced an extremely polarized public regarding support for that voting method. On the seven-point scale, the average position of affective Republicans is almost three points more opposed to voting by mail than the average position of affective Democrats. In addition, racial resentment and anti-immigrant sentiment each have coefficients near 1, also indicating strong associations with voting by mail preferences. A Republican who strongly dislikes the Democratic Party and holds high levels of racial resentment and anti-immigrant views is likely to strongly oppose voting by mail in 2020. An affective Democrat with low levels of racial resentment and anti-immigrant sentiment is likely to strongly support voting by mail. This is significant since the 2020 election saw record numbers of Americans voting by mail. Affective polarization and other group attitudes are strong predictors of beliefs about the integrity and fairness of the 2020 election. These results are consistent with another study. Among those who

believe there was widespread fraud in the 2020 election, they attribute the fraud to cities (72%), black communities (39%), and mail ballots (77%) (Khanna & De Pinto 2021).

The Party of Trump

While rhetoric over mail-in ballots and other measures implemented to increase access to voting during a pandemic were opposed by many Republicans before the election, it is what happened after the election that was particularly problematic. The majority of the Republicans in Congress refused to acknowledge that Trump had lost the election, either outright parroting Trump's claims or avoiding the issue and refusing to clearly state that Biden had rightfully won the presidency. This unquestioning fidelity to Donald Trump was not always the position of mainstream Republicans. When Trump sought the nomination to be the Republican presidential candidate in 2016, he faced strong opposition from within the party and inspired the #NeverTrump movement. GOP lawmakers voiced a variety of concerns about candidate Trump including his lack of experience, policy preferences, controversial statements, and personal characteristics (Johnson, McCray, and Ragusa 2018). However, once Trump was the nominee, almost all Republicans in Congress supported him, even if some were reluctant supporters.

Few GOP Senators were critical of Trump during his presidency, and just seven voted to convict him in his second impeachment trial. Of those, many were not seeking reelection, several were reelected in 2020 and do not face reelection until 2026, while only one, Lisa Murkowski, is up for reelection in 2022 (Sprunt 2021b). The ten Republicans who voted to impeach Trump in the House of Representatives marks the most members of a president's party to vote for impeachment in U.S. history (Montanaro 2021). The relatively small number of Republicans who broke with Trump after January 6 have faced censure in their home states by members of their own party (Sprunt 2021b).

Johnson et al (2018) discussed reasons GOP lawmakers opposed Trump in 2016, those same motivations seem to apply for why Republicans are going along with unfounded claims of a rigged election: electoral motivations, policy preferences, identity, and establishment dynamics. One concern that would constrain political actors from attempting to overthrow an election would be the concern of the damage it would do to

their electoral, financial, and organizational support. However, in recent years Republicans have supported increasingly extreme ideological positions, and seem to have faced little backlash (Hacker & Pierson 2006). And Republicans who supported the Big Lie have not suffered negative consequences; to the contrary, they have been able to campaign and fundraise off these false allegations. And the few that have stood up to this unethical behavior have been targeted by Trump and his allies, censured by their state legislatures, had threats on their lives, and have lost the support of the Republican party (Markay 2021; Sprunt 2021b).

As a clear example of the party supporting the false claims that were made by Donald Trump, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said two days after the election on Fox News "President Trump won this election" and went on to warn voters about the potential of a stolen election saying "Do not be silent about this. We cannot allow this to happen before our very eyes" (Scherer and Dawsey 2021). He was not alone in forwarding these false allegations and undermining faith in elections. Senator Lindsey Graham also went on Fox News to support Trump's allegations saying "I don't trust Philadelphia" and "I am here tonight to stand with President Trump" (Crowley 2020). Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue who were in a run-off Senate race in Georgia put out a statement less than a week after the election, while Georgia was still being decided saying "The secretary of state has failed to deliver honest and transparent elections" and calling for the resignation of Georgia's Secretary of State (Loeffler 2020). Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick offered a minimum of $25,000 to anyone who provided information about voter fraud that leads to an arrest and conviction. Nearly a year after this bounty was offered, the only payout was to a poll worker in Pennsylvania who reported a Republican for casting a ballot in his son's name (Feinberg 2021). While these sorts of calls for investigations and audits were made by Republicans in swing states where Biden won, concerns about election integrity were noticeably absent in states that Trump won.

Perhaps some of the most incendiary comments from an elected official came from Arizona Congressman Paul Gosar who repeatedly made false allegations that the 2020 election was stolen. Gosar and fellow Republican Representative from Arizona Andy Biggs made unfounded claims that there was rampant fraud in other states including widespread voting by deceased people, Republican poll-watchers being banned, and large ballot dumps

and found ballots that almost all went for Biden, and they also called for an audit in their home state of Arizona (Hansen 2020). Among other false comments in an open letter on December 7, 2020, Gosar made claims of "statistically impossible spikes in votes for Joe Biden" and "voting patterns that emerged that could not occur in the absence of fraud", and said "I will fight to restore the rightful victor, President Trump. Our Constitution, our Republic and our nation demand election integrity. We are not giving up. The President has not conceded and will not concede to a Third World coup d'etat."; he also called Biden an "illegitimate usurper" (Gosar 2020).

Another way the false allegations of a stolen election were propagated by Trump and his allies was through a series of unsuccessful lawsuits. Between November 3, 2020 and January 6, 2021, Republicans filed 76 lawsuits relating to the presidential election (Kovacs-Goodman 2021). While the plaintiffs had no success in proving any allegations of fraud, they did contribute to an erosion of public trust in the democratic process (Kovacs-Goodman 2021). When Texas filed a lawsuit seeking to overturn the presidential election results in four states Biden won, more than half of the members of the House Republican Caucus signed an amicus brief in support of the suit (ProPublica 2020). In multiple rulings across many states, attorneys who brought forth demonstrably false allegations regarding the 2020 election have faced repercussions including have had their licenses suspended, have been ordered to receive additional legal education, and have been mandated to pay costs incurred by states and cities to defend the spurious cases; one judge went so far as to say that if the allegations made by these attorneys were "accepted as true by large numbers of people, are the stuff of which violent insurrections are made (Helderman 2021).

Conservative outlets and social media

Affective polarization is associated with sharing incendiary information on social media. In a study of Twitter users, Osmundsen and colleagues (2021) find that people who report hating their political opponents are the most likely to share political fake news and selectively share content that is useful for derogating these opponents. A significant minority of Republicans in the House of Representatives used the label 'fake news' on Twitter since the election of Donald Trump in 2016; conservative representatives used that

term at significantly higher rates than moderate Republicans (Cowburn and Oswald 2020). Research suggests that exposure to liberal views on social media that contradict their beliefs led to Republicans expressing markedly more conservative views (Bail et al. 2018). All of this means that the most politically attentive Republicans, particularly Fox News viewers, those in social media echo chambers, and those most devoted to Trump, may be most likely to believe false claims about voter fraud, that the 2020 election was stolen, and that January 6 participants were justified.

Previous studies suggest that viewers of Fox News were particularly likely to support voter ID laws and that political parties have tried to motivate their voting base by making voter fraud a salient issue (Dreier & Martin, 2010; Wilson & Brewer, 2013). Conservative news sources help fuel the partisan nature of election reform debates (Hasen, 2012; Hicks et al., 2015). Recent polling also indicates an influence of conservative news sources in beliefs about voter fraud, finding that 69% of Republicans and 74% of Trump voters say there was widespread voter fraud in 2020; for Trump voters who regularly watch conservative cable news such as Fox, One America News Network, or Newsmax eight in ten said there was widespread voter fraud, compared to two-thirds of other Trump voters. When asked how they heard about voter fraud, the number one source for those who believe there was widespread voter fraud was reports on the news (73%), 49% said they heard about fraud through social media, 43% said Donald Trump was a source, and 39% cited politicians in Washington (Khanna & De Pinto 2021). In addition to conservative media outlets, social media has played a significant role in the spread of misinformation about voter fraud. Studies indicate that false information spreads faster than the truth on Twitter and those effects are more pronounced for false stories about political news than other topics (Vosoughi et a. 2018), and that misinformation shared by political leaders is more damaging than if it were shared by ordinary users (Timberg et al. 2021). Trump and his allies were effective at utilizing social media to spread the false allegations of a stolen election and to promote the January 6 rally to #StopTheSteal.

The Rally

In addition to President Donald Trump, Eric Trump, Donald Trump Jr., and their significant others all spoke at the rally outside the White House on January 6, where they perpetuated lies about a stolen election, reminded Republicans in Congress that they were watching their votes and encouraged them to "choose wisely", warned lawmakers if they didn't fight for Trump "we're coming for you", and thanked the "red-blooded, patriotic Americans" "for standing up to the bullshit" (Ballhas et al 2021). It wasn't just the Trump family who was rousing the crowd with inflammatory messages. Rep. Mo Brooks fired up the crowd with his words "Today is the day American patriots start taking down names and kicking ass…Are you willing to do what it takes to fight for America? Louder! Will you fight for America?" (Edmondson and Broadwater 2021). And there were the now infamous words from Rudy Giuliani, Trump's personal attorney, "let's have trial by combat," (Ballhaus et al 2021).

On January 6, following the deadly riot at the Capitol, 147 Republican members of Congress voted against certifying the Electoral College vote, sending a message that the election was illegitimate (Kahn et al 2021). Given that party identification is associated with wanting to see your side win, partisanship heavily colored public reactions to the events associated with January 6, 2021. To illustrate, we summarize data from the Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS), which was conducted from April to August in 2021. The survey included several questions about January 6. Since party identification develops and shapes public opinion in different ways across racial groups (Hajnal and Lee 2011), we just summarize evaluations from white respondents. Several of these survey questions were forced choice items, without a neutral or don't know option. Nevertheless, the results reveal a public deeply divided in understanding the actions of political leaders and the insurrectionists on January 6 (see Table 2).

Table 2. Beliefs about January 6 by Party ID (White Respondents)

Question	Strong D	Weak D	Lean D	Pure I	Lean R	Weak R	Strong R
There was voter fraud: Trump was right to challenge the election results	1%	4%	2%	19%	42%	24%	59%
January 6 was a coordinated act of insurrection against the United States	84%	66%	80%	48%	19%	26%	19%
Trump encouraged or incited the attack, and shares blame for what happened	86%	80%	87%	50%	13%	22%	8%
GOP members of Congress who tried to stop election certification were protecting democracy	11%	11%	3%	18%	47%	30%	62%
January 6 rioters were not white supremacists	5%	13%	7%	29%	44%	33%	56%

Source: 2020 CMPS primary sample – white respondents (N = 3,002)

Democrats almost uniformly thought President Trump was wrong to challenge the election results, while a plurality of Republicans, and a majority of strong Republicans, thought Trump was right to challenge the results. Democrats overwhelmingly believe that President Trump incited the attack on the Capitol, while very few Republicans hold Trump responsible. Similarly, over four-in-five Democrats believe January 6 was a coordinated act of insurrection against the United States, while less than one-in-five Republicans share that assessment. Democrats overwhelmingly believe the January 6 rioters were white supremacists, while a significant number of Republicans, including a majority of strong Republicans, believe otherwise. Finally, a plurality of Republicans, including a majority of strong Republicans, believe that GOP members of Congress who voted against certifying the election results in some states were protecting democracy – less than 10 percent of Democrats shared that belief. We find the greatest differences of opinion when comparing strong partisans. Strong Democrats and strong Republicans hold diametrically opposed interpretations of January 6.

Conclusion

When Trump lost the presidential election in 2020, many hoped that there would be a return to normalcy. There was hope that the former president's undermining of democratic processes was an aberration, and when he left office, the country would return to its previous norms, particularly around elections and institutions. However, that was not the case. While Donald Trump may have been the spark that ignited the 'Big Lie' about rigged elections, similar rhetoric and allegations have spread like wildfire and are being used in races at all levels across the country (Siders & Montellaro 2021). In the wake of the insurrection and failed election audits, the Big Lie has not faded away; instead it seems to have gained traction among Republican candidates. As of July 2021, of the nearly 700 Republicans who filed initial paperwork with the Federal Election Commission to run for Congress in 2022, "at least a third have embraced Trump's false claims about his defeat" (Gardner 2021). A majority of Republicans want Donald Trump to remain a major political figure, and a plurality want him to run for president in 2024 (Dunn 2021).

A highly polarized electorate combined with a partisan effort to undermine the legitimacy of elections has created a dangerous period for American democracy. Affective polarization and anger mobilizes people to engage in the political process, but these traits are associated with several troubling behaviors. For example, strong partisans are more likely to endorse the use of unsavory tactics to win an election or policy debate (Miller and Conover 2015). Those with high levels of partisan animosity are more likely to endorse violence as a solution to political conflicts (Kalmoe and Mason forthcoming). Contempt for political opponents reduces support for democratic values, like support for minority rights and constitutional limits on government authority (Webster 2020; Kingzette et al. 2021). Continuing efforts by Republican leaders to cast doubt on the outcome of the 2020 election may motivate some people to act on these impulses. Election officials at the state and local level, who used to conduct their work in relative anonymity, now are subject to verbal attacks and death threats, causing some to resign (Brennan Center for Justice 2021; Carew 2021). The forces that drove some Trump supporters to the Capitol on January 6 have not diminished. Are we at risk of another January 6 event?

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Appendix

Table A-1. Attribute Values for Conjoint Experiment (2017 CCES – UMSL Module)

Attribute	Value
Sex	Male
	Female
Race	White
	Black
	Asian
	Latino
	Middle-Eastern
Language Ability	Speaks English fluently
	Speaks English with an accent
	Speaks limited English
Age	18
	48
	68
Party Affiliation	Republican
	Independent
	Democrat
Work History	Janitor
	Primary School Teacher
	Doctor
Criminal History	No criminal record
	Has a criminal record
Citizenship	U.S. citizen
	Not U.S. citizen