

Demographic Determinism, the Republican Party, and Anti-Democratic Attitudes

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Following the 2010 Census, demographers and other experts of Census data began calling a definitive coming shift in U.S. racial demographics (Bowler and Segura 2011). This was the idea that by midcentury, Whites would become a minority and the people of color would become the numerical majority of the country. It has since been described as the majority-minority flip, or the browning of America (Sundstrom 2008).

Due to the politicization of race in America, the majority-minority flip also led experts to make inferences about the future of politics. The narrative that emerged in this period has had staying power in American political discourse and has shaped how Republicans and Democrats interpret the ongoing demographic changes. I call the narrative demographic determinism. It is a view of racial demographic change that anticipates it will overwhelmingly benefit the Democratic Party. It is a simple, yet powerful idea: over time as Americans of color increase in size, the Democratic Party will be at an increasing advantage over the Republican Party because the party platform appeals more to people of color. Racial minorities are increasing in size, so electorally they will be able to exercise their influence more. The determinism also cuts in the opposite direction, in that Whites are perceived to be more Republican, and therefore the GOP will be less able to win elections as the country diversifies.

This narrative has caught fire in American political discussion recently. Some political elites talk about “The Great Replacement” which calls directly to the aforementioned changes (Charlton 2019; Obaidi et al. 2021). It is the conspiratorial idea that political representatives are intentionally facilitating the racial demographic changes afoot in the U.S., and that they are specifically trying to diminish the White American population. We know that these sentiments can quite easily generate a sense of threat (Danbold and Huo 2015; Willer, Feinberg, and Wetts 2016; Mutz 2018; Myers and Levy 2018). For Republicans, when demographic determinism is taken to its logical conclusion, it leads to an electoral map that is unwinnable through democratic means. If White Americans are diminishing, and are seen as more associated with the GOP, and Americans of color are increasing, and are seen as more associated with the Democratic Party, then Democrats are at a growing advantage. In the minds of Republicans, I find that views of democracy are directly connected to the partisan assumptions in racial demographic change. So, if they think their party to be at an insurmountable disadvantage in the coming years, this sense of threat will likely motivate more anti-democratic views. To summarize, Republicans will feel less confident in democracy because they will perceive their party to be less able to win as time goes on. This idea is at the core of some anti-democratic ideas in the country, and recent scholarship shows that it also was the main motivator in January 6th rioters (Pape 2021).

Across two studies, when I reframe the idea of demographic determinism to benefit the GOP, I find that Republicans express less anti-democratic views. Comparatively, I do not find this to be the case among Democrats. I explain the implications of the partisan orientation of demographic change for anti-democratic attitudes and behavior, like those expressed on January 6th, 2021.

Causally Testing Demographic Determinism

I use a set of 2 survey experiments where I make the party that is projected to benefit from the majority-minority flip explicit. After this, I assess the extent to which they elicit senses of racial threat and generate support for anti-democratic ideas among both Republicans and Democrats. The baseline condition I use describes the majority-minority flip generally – which allows me to isolate the effects of each partisan frame.

In my first experiment, I analyze general senses of racial threat and anti-democratic ideas. Within the second, I use more granular measures of both concepts, particularly in the vein of threat from specific racial groups and degrees of support for policy that is overtly anti-democratic.

Experiment 1 was conducted using the online vendor Lucid Fulcrum in April 2021 (N = 1,087).

Experiment 2 was conducted with a representative sample through Forthright (formerly Bovitz, Inc.),^[1] and is Census matched on gender, race, and region (N = 1,274). Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions, three of which involve racial demographic change.^[2] Two conditions are partisan frames of racial demographic change, one is a baseline condition for demographic change, and one is a pure control (See Table 1 below).

Table 1

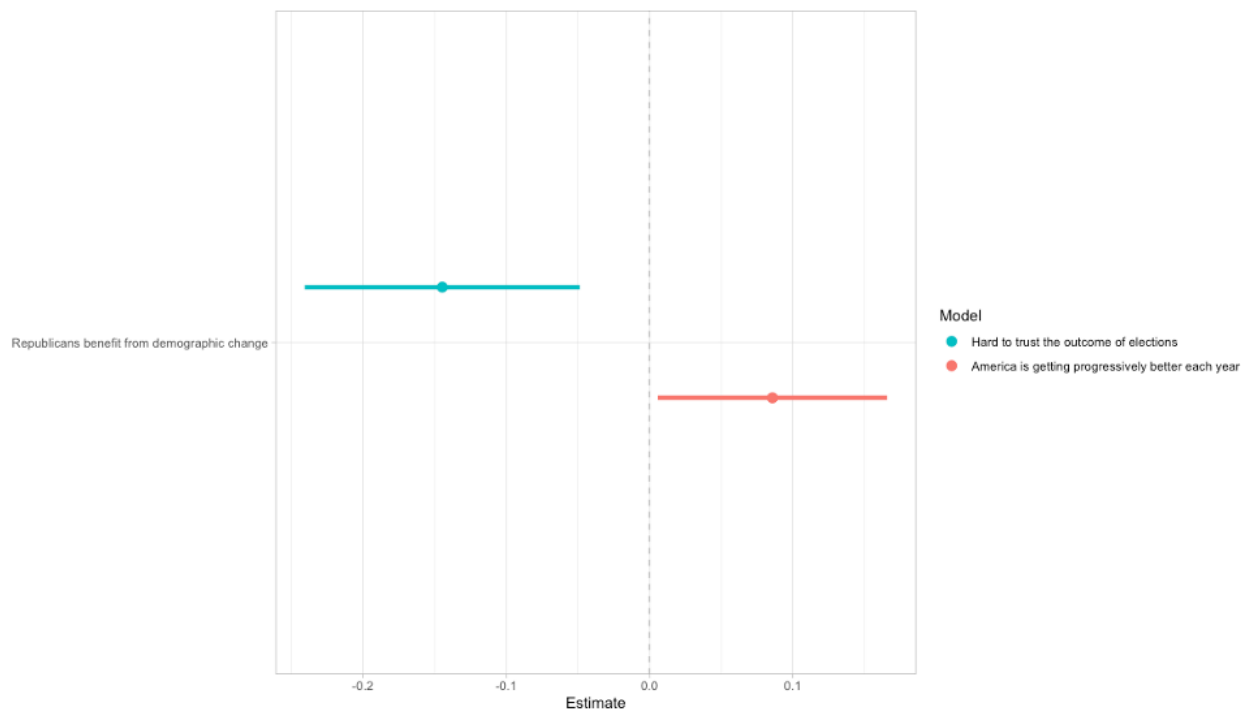
Conditions	Description
1	Pure Control
2	Majority-minority flip
3	Majority-minority flip + Republican frame
4	Majority-minority flip + Democratic frame

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

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

In both studies, I ultimately find that the frame that shifts the idea of demographic determinism (Condition #3 above compared to condition #2) in favor of the GOP causes Republicans to feel more confident in American society and reduces anti-democratic views.

Figure 1

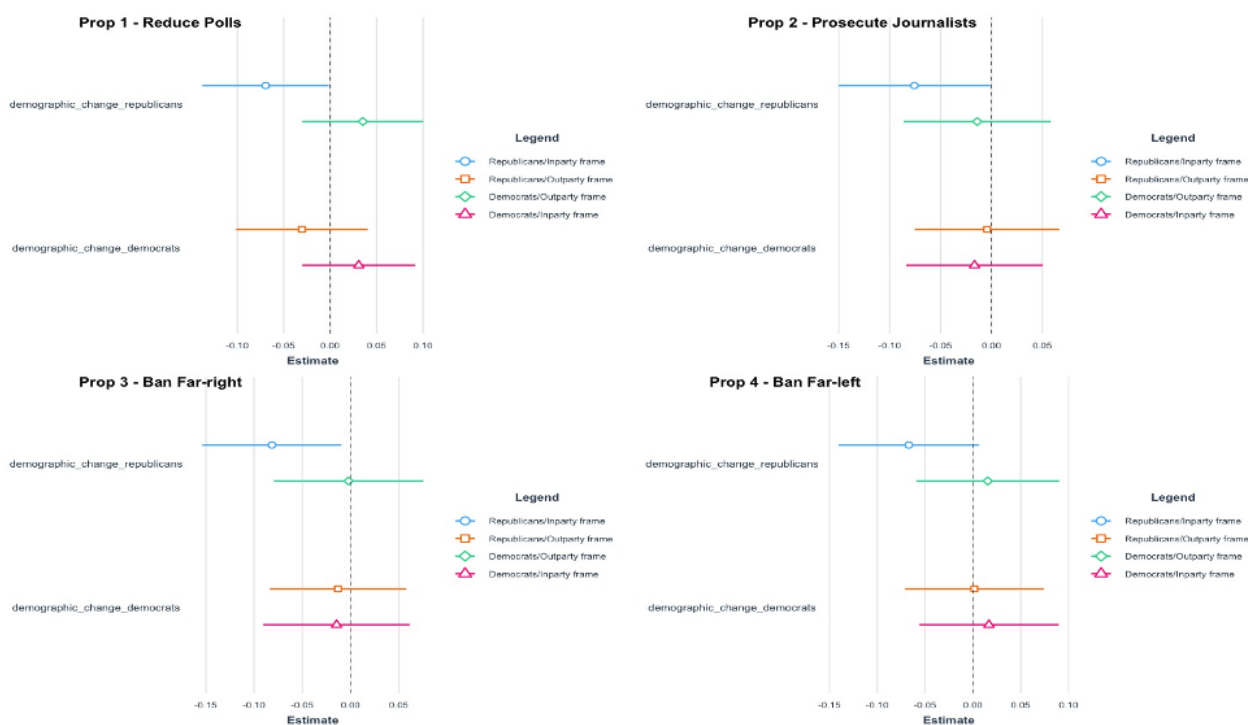


Experiment 2 expands on the goals of Experiment 1, testing the same stimuli politically grounded views of anti-democratic attitudes. I use party-contingent items adapted from Graham and Svulik (2020).[3] I list the adapted measures below, then provide a brief description of what they capture:

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

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

Figure 2



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

Ultimately, I find that the narrative which articulates that Republicans will benefit from racial demographic change leads to a decrease in support for anti-democratic policies (Figure 2 above). Within both of these studies, I show Republicans' senses of racial threat which emerge from racial demographic change are contingent on which party they expect to benefit from those changes. I confirm that the inference they make about the coming majority-minority flip is that racial minorities will mostly identify as Democrats. When they are told that Republicans will actually benefit from racial demographic change, this counteracts their racially threatened views. This counteraction of threatened views then directly affects attitudes toward democracy among Republicans. Both on an abstract level and an applied one, they become more pro-democracy.

My main conclusion here is that views about democracy among Republicans have become directly tied to their perceptions of the racial demographic change. These senses of threat motivate their democratic ideas. Specifically, their support for democracy is contingent on how they think about demographic determinism. This poses a major problem for the future of American democratic practices; both in how perceptions about it shift and in how support for democracy works in the minds of Republicans. Because of elite focus on racial threat, democratic support rests on the potential or lack thereof base voters see the GOP able to win. The more that the narratives of Democrats wielding demographic advantage over Republicans are articulated, the more we can expect anti-democratic ideas to be inflamed. These views can motivate behavior like that which occurred on January 6th at the Capitol building, as well as increasing support among the general American public. Both of these scenarios pose grave problems for the function of American democracy.

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