

Demographic Change Narratives and Democratic Backsliding

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Recently, more attention is needed on how attitudes about democracy are developing among the public. There is mounting evidence for increasing anti-democratic sentiment among the American public. These views present a threat to the function of American government, as well as to the very fabric and cohesion of American society. We also know that these attitudes can manifest in substantive forms of action, most pertinently demonstrated by the January 6th attack on the Capitol. The existence of these views among Americans is no longer in question, but what is still unknown pertains to where they come from and how they are motivated. If the American public is becoming more anti-democratic, why is this happening? In this project, I provide evidence that ideas and messages about racial demographic change are shifting public attitudes about American democracy.

Normative Concerns

There are two pressing concerns regarding the public and democracy which need to be highlighted concerning the lead-up to, and fallout from January 6. The first concern is immediate and direct – the idea of less security in a more anti-democratic American public. It is important that we identify dynamics that increase these sentiments among Americans. Spreading anti-democratic ideas can cultivate fertile ground for violent extremists. In other words, more extreme attitudes can radicalize more Americans, leading to more politically extreme behavior.

The second concern is indirect. It pertains to what I will call, “moving the needle” among the American public (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). The needle represents what is accepted as legitimate political practice (Dahl 1961). This needle is consistently affirmed and reaffirmed by what allowed as legitimate practice and what is sanctioned as illegitimate politics among the public. The prevalence and deepening of anti-democratic ideas among Americans can lead to a movement of the needle toward legitimizing more authoritarian ideas. Connecting to the first concern, the shift in these conditions can also help to facilitate further radicalization; but on the whole, it can lead to a more pervasively undemocratic society.

These concerns in tandem motivate my project. I causally test how narratives about the changing racial demographics in the US alter anti-democratic ideas in the mass public. Representatives and pundits alike have pushed forth narratives about the racial demographic changes occurring in the U.S., framing these changes to be negative and troublesome for the country (Bartels 2020; Thompson 2021). These changes, namely the projected majority-minority flip, have for some time caused senses of threat and anxiety (Craig and Richeson 2014a; 2014b; Danbold and Huo 2015; Willer, Feinberg, and Wetts 2016; Mutz 2018). In my work I show that very recently these notions come to directly motivate ideas of democracy.

The logic of this is simple. Americans feel more politically threatened because of the projected changes to the racial demographics of the country. They perceive these changes to be tied to their ability to express their own political interests, and as a result, they become less supportive in the system of democracy if these changes are to occur.

The predominate narrative of racial demographic change is that White Americans will become a numerical minority by midcentury, and Americans of color will become the majority group. In the following project, I test another narrative that sits in contrast to the majority-minority flip. I articulate that White Americans are actually slated to maintain their majority status. Overall, I investigate how information about how the country is changing drastically alters how the general public thinks about American democracy.

To briefly summarize my findings, I find that even reframing ideas about the shifting racial composition of America causally motivate more support for abstract and grounded anti-democratic ideas among Americans. When they learn of their majority status sustaining over time, I find that White Americans still feel racially threatened, which then leads them to become more supportive of anti-democratic ideas to vitiate their threatened feelings.

Testing Racial Demographic Change Narratives

To causally test the role of these narratives, I conduct a survey experiment where I slightly alter wording about the diversification of the U.S. I investigate two prominent narratives about these changes. The first is the most well-known narrative which describes that how White Americans are projected to be a minority by midcentury, while racial minorities are slated to overtake them as the predominate majority. The second narrative describes that White Americans will actually maintain their majority status through midcentury by way mixed race Americans and other racial minorities coming to identify as White – this dynamic is akin to the shift in racial identification of Irish Americans in the early 20th century (Painter 2010; Ignatiev 2008). Both of these narratives are plausible conclusions to the function and role of racial identity in America, so none of them should be taken as the “true” narrative of the direction of the country (Serwer 2021; Levy and Myers 2021). The intention behind testing these two narratives is that the idea of White Americans maintaining their numerical majority should come across as less threatening to them than becoming a numerical minority.

Study Design

I randomly assign respondents to read a mock article of each of these two narratives, then fill out a set of survey questions that measure their anti-democratic support. The random assignment of each of these stories allows me to specifically identify the effect of the information that is displayed in each. Importantly, the only difference between these articles are a few sentences which articulate one of the two narratives that I described above.

Within my following analyses, I use the majority-minority flip narrative as the baseline, as this is the most well-known discussion of the changing country.[1] Ultimately, I am comparing to see if the other narrative, which is also plausible conclusions to the diversification of America, alter how Americans think about democracy. I fielded this study on February 17, 2022 using CloudResearch (N = 2,467).

Strongly Shifting Democratic Attitudes

All the measures I assess in this study concern anti-democratic attitudes, and they take the form of being either abstract or grounded. The abstract ideas are very general. They concern ideas such as support for protecting the traditional American way of life with force, supporting violence against one's political opponents, and using force to prevent racial minorities from participating in politics.

As an intermediary for abstract and grounded anti-democratic ideas, I also analyze support for pro- and anti-democratic values within a hypothetical presidential candidate running in 2024.

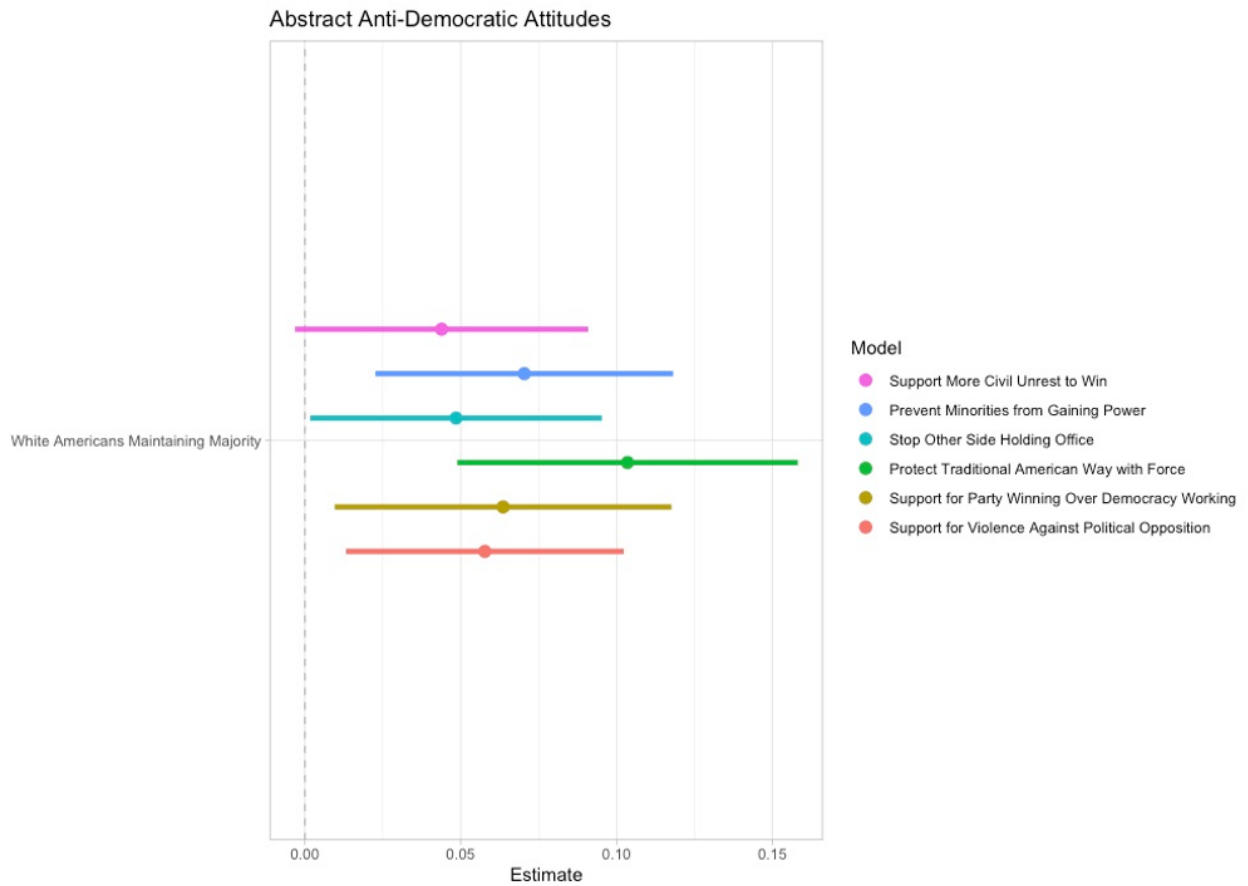
The grounded anti-democratic ideas are immediately relevant, and concern support for January 6 rioters, support for Donald Trump using the military to remove voting stations, views of the legitimacy of the election of Joseph Biden, Donald Trump, and Barack Obama.

Shifting Anti-democratic Ideas

The alternative narrative about racial demographic change wields a powerful effect on American's attitudes about democracy. They cause Americans to become more anti-democratic in both abstract and grounded ways. First, regarding abstract anti-democratic ideas, when White Americans learn that they will maintain the majority they become more supportive of violence against political opposition (5 percentage point increase, $p = 0.07$), become more supportive of their party winning than they are of democracy functioning well (6 percentage point increase, $p = 0.02$), are more supportive of using force to save the traditional American way of life (10 percentage point increase, $p = 0.0002$), are more supportive of using force to prevent racial minorities from participating in politics (7 percentage point increase, $p = 0.003$), are more supportive of civil unrest for the sake of their political party (4 percentage point increase, $p = 0.07$), and preventing political opposition from taking office (5 percentage point increase, $p = 0.04$). These results are shown in Figure 1 below.

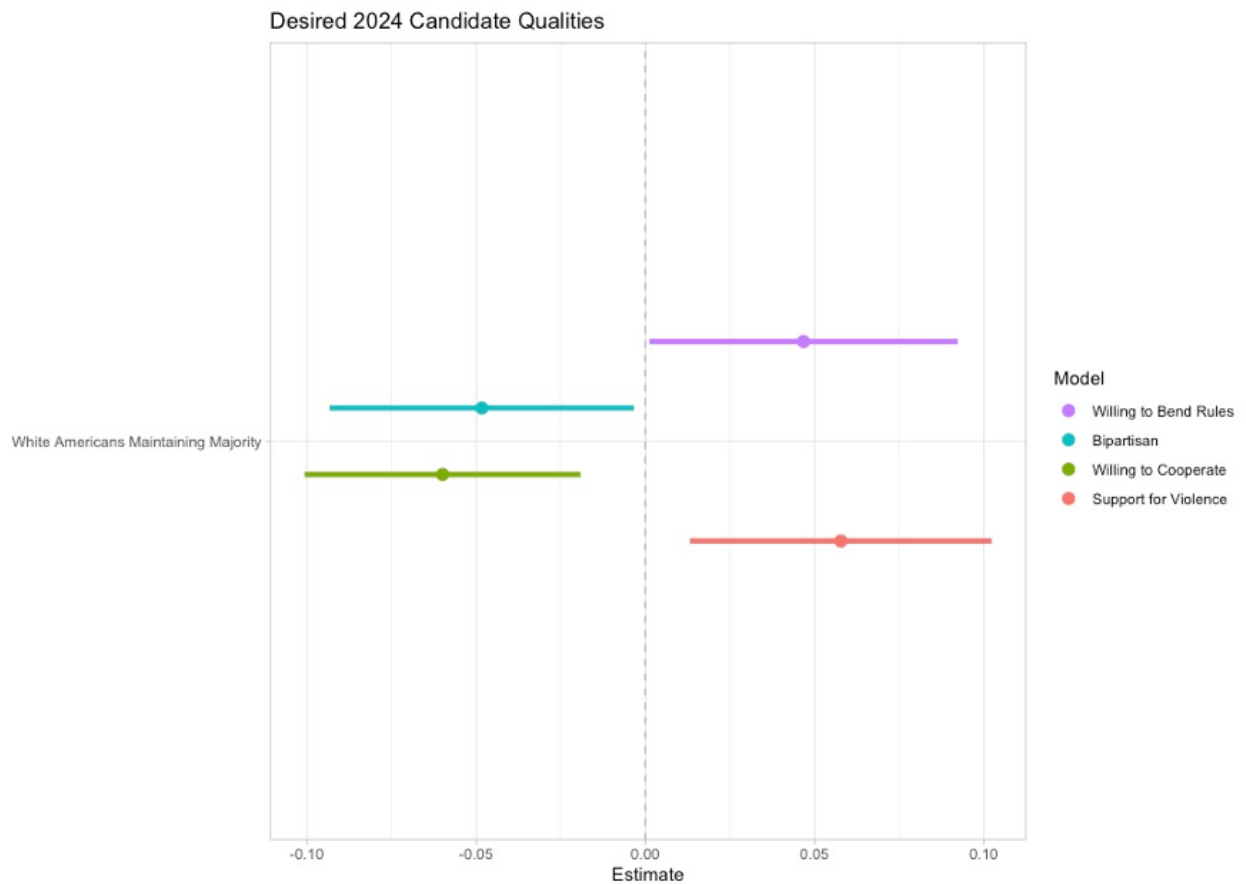
[1] Pretesting this discussion of racial demographic change has shown that it is understood among the general American public.

Figure 1



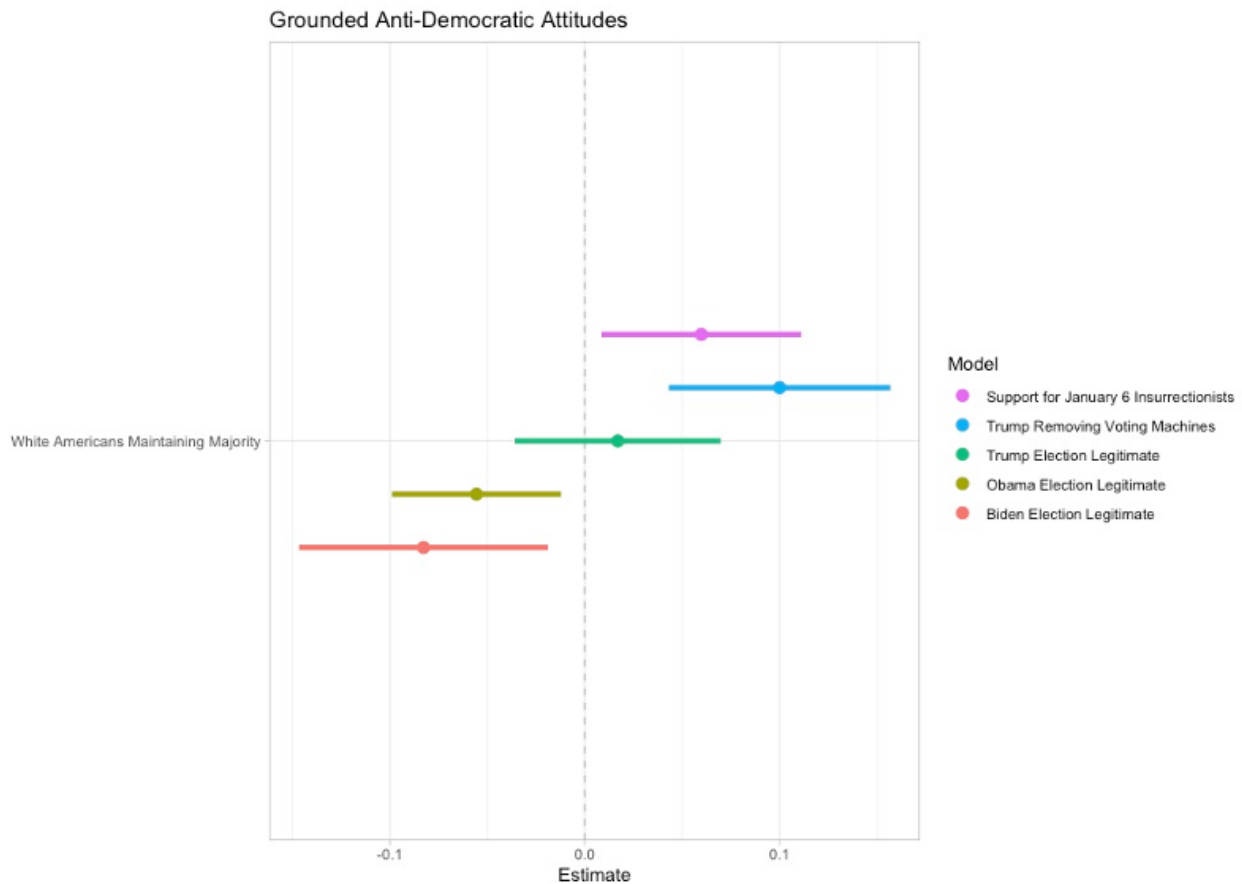
Regarding support for leadership, I investigate support for abstract qualities in a hypothetical candidate running for office in 2024. When White Americans learn that they will maintain their majority this leads to more support for a candidate who will bend rules (~5 percentage point increase, $p = 0.04$) and support violence (6 percentage point increase, $p = 0.01$), and leads to less support for a leader who is bipartisan (4 percentage point decrease, $p = 0.03$) and willing to cooperate with political opposition (6 percentage point decrease, $p = 0.003$). These results are shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2



Lastly, and most pertinent to our understanding of how attitudes around January 6th are motivated, the White majority narrative causes severe increases in support for grounded anti-democratic ideas. It causes more support for January 6th insurrectionists (6 percentage point increase, $p = 0.02$), a great deal of more support for Trump using the military to remove voting machines after the 2020 election (10 percentage point increase, $p = 0.0005$) and decreases the views of legitimacy of the elections of President Biden (9 percentage point decrease, $p = 0.01$) and President Obama (6 percentage point decrease, $p = 0.01$), but not President Trump ($p = 0.56$). These results are shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3



Discussion and Implications from Results

Importantly, this narrative is intended to be less threatening than the majority-minority flip narrative that is being compared to. My findings are the opposite; White Americans feel a stronger sense of racial threat when they learn that they will maintain majority status, through racial minorities and mixed-race Americans identifying as White. The reason for this is vital to our understanding of how these narratives are interpreted among the American public. These senses of threat are so salient that information that is intended to vitiating senses of threat can still increase threat. I find there to be a chronically salient racial threat among the American public, particularly among White Americans. The most important takeaway from my findings are that these chronically salient ideas have a direct bearing on how Americans think about democracy, all in the negative direction.

When narratives about Whites Americans changing in size are brought to the fore, they not only cause greater feelings of anxiety, but they also contribute to democratic backsliding among the public. The narrative of White Americans maintaining their majority status is designed to alleviate these feelings of threat and anti-democratic ideas; instead, I find that it generates them further.

To be clear, chronically salient racial threat prompts support for both abstract and grounded anti-democratic ideas. It causes White Americans to become more supportive of violence and more willing to choose their party winning over democracy functioning, among other abstract ideals.

This relates closely to what I called “moving the needle,” which is pervasive tolerance for authoritarian ideas in the public. Increasing support for authoritarianism begets more support over time.

I also find that these racially threatened views generate more support for hypothetical authoritarian candidates. This can help to explain comfortability among the public with anti-democratic behavior among representatives. If political leaders generate racial threat, they can use those feelings to cultivate more support for their authoritarian behavior.

Lastly, I show that the most grounded anti-democratic ideas are also moved by feelings of racial threat. Threat leads to more support for January 6 insurrectionists, the removal of voting machines by President Trump in light of the 2020 election, and historical views of the legitimacy of the elections of President Biden and President Obama. The views on each of these ideas and events are directly connected to ideas of U.S. racial demographic change. Racial threat from this leads to alarming levels of increased anti-democratic support.

When messages from representatives about these demographic changes are prodded, advertently or inadvertently, they can help in generating anti-democratic sentiment. I show in this study, even the most innocuous narrative about the racial composition of the country can alter these ideas. These ideas can facilitate an environment wherein more Americans become supportive, again advertently or inadvertently, for political actions like those on January 6, the event itself, and grand ideas about the future of American democracy.

Democratic backsliding is afoot in the United States. In this process, the American public is key. It can operate as a failsafe in the movement toward authoritarianism, though the messaging that Americans receive matter greatly to how they consider democracy. My research shows, if racial threat is consistently called to mind in the public arena, it will only help to move the country in the direction of authoritarianism.

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