

Political Parties and Loser's Consent in American Politics

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Social science has established that political parties have been indispensable to American democracy and their most active members as keepers of the democratic flame. The aftermath of the 2020 presidential election raised questions about the role of the parties in protecting democracy, particularly the fundamental democratic norm of “loser’s consent.” We argue that recent political developments—close elections, ideological polarization, participatory party nominations, and changes in campaign finance and media—have worked to undermine the parties’ commitment to loser’s consent. We use recent survey data to show that party activists no longer demonstrate greater commitment than do ordinary citizens to democratic norms—especially to loser’s consent. We also examine how parties and voters responded to the post-2020 crisis of democratic legitimacy, finding that both parties prioritized their political interests over democratic health. However, a small number of voters did deviate from normal partisanship and helped to shore up American democracy in the 2022 elections.

Keywords: political parties; polarization; loser’s consent; democratic norms; congressional elections; party activists

Speaking at his “Stop the Steal” rally before his supporters attacked the U.S. Capitol on

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January 6, 2021, President Donald J. Trump proclaimed, “We will never give up, we will never concede. It doesn’t happen. You don’t concede when there’s theft involved” (Naylor 2021). A sitting president’s refusal to accept electoral defeat is one of the most severe tests a democracy can face. Trump’s actions threatened to violate even the most minimal definition of democracy: “a system in which incumbents lose elections and leave when they lose” (Przeworski 2019, 5).

The aftermath of the 2020 presidential election raises profound questions about the role of political parties in contemporary American democracy. Arguably, there is nothing more important for democratic legitimacy than *loser’s consent*, meaning the willingness of losers to “accept their loss” and continue to “affirm their allegiance to the political system” (Anderson et al. 2005, 13). But losing is never easy for parties. What draws and holds a party together is its quest for power. Politicians and activists ally under a common label to win political offices and achieve policy goals. Defeat crushes politicians’ career ambitions and their hopes for policy change. Accepting election loss demands a difficult form of political discipline.

Yet American parties and candidates have maintained an admirable track record on loser’s consent. Since the early 20th century, congressional parties have shown forbearance in handling disputed elections and have respected state electoral and judicial processes rather than settle disputes via party power (Jenkins 2004, 2005). It is the rare losing candidate for any office who refuses to concede. Prior to Trump, all defeated presidential candidates acknowledged their loss, and all those since 1896 have done so via a public concession speech (Vile 2002).

Scholars have traditionally seen political parties as indispensable to democracy (Aldrich 1995; Schattschneider 1942) and their most active members as champions of democratic values (McClosky 1964). Recent scholarship, however, offers a less optimistic view. Partisan “teammanship” discourages legislative consensus-building and hinders governance (Lee 2009, 2016). Partisan media, opponent-demonizing campaigns, and rabid mass-level partisanship have fostered troubling levels of political antipathy (Kalmoe and Mason 2022).

In this article, we consider whether today’s polarized political parties can be relied upon to sustain American democracy. We examine how forces operating throughout the American party system have put pressure on the norm of loser’s consent. We then employ recent survey data to show that, in contrast to earlier research, party activists are often *less* willing than less-active citizens to embrace key tenets of democracy—including loser’s consent. Finally, we take a close look at the behavior of the parties in the aftermath of the 2020 election and President Trump’s refusal to concede his loss. Republicans have borne the lion’s share of the blame for democratic backsliding during the Trump era—deservedly so, as they largely turned a blind eye to the damage done to American democracy. Democrats, too, are not blameless, as they provided financial support to Republican election deniers in the 2022 primaries. Neither party prioritized respect for democratic legitimacy above its interest in winning political power. Yet in 2022, a critical increment of American voters inflicted a penalty on candidates who questioned the legitimacy of the 2020 elections. Despite the parties’

incentives to seek power above all else, American democracy may be able to draw upon a deeper reservoir of resilience in the general electorate.

Parties as Democratic Bulwarks or Vulnerabilities?

Schattschneider (1942, 3) famously remarked that “political parties created democracy . . . [and] modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.” Political science has overwhelmingly agreed. Parties facilitate electoral democracy by appealing to citizens’ interests (Downs 1957), representing important societal groups (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), mobilizing citizens to participate in politics (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), and providing cognitive shortcuts for citizens to navigate the complexities of politics (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). Parties winnow the field of potential candidates by organizing ambitious politicians into potential majority coalitions (Aldrich 1995), aggregate policies into coherent packages from which voters can choose (Schattschneider 1960), and help translate electoral outcomes into policy consequences by providing order in the face of the incoherence endemic to legislative politics (Arrow 1963).

Scholars also have anointed the leaders and most active members of political parties as keepers of the democratic flame. The mass public’s feeble commitment to democratic values is well-documented. Citizens are supportive of democratic values in the abstract but generally are not willing to extend democratic rights and civil liberties to unpopular groups (e.g., Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982 [1993]). Meanwhile, recent research suggests that only a small fraction of Americans prioritize democratic principles over other factors—partisan loyalty, ideological orientations, and policy preferences—in their voting decisions (e.g., Graham and Svobik 2020). Scholarly alarm bells have only grown louder with recent evidence of affective polarization (Kingzette et al. 2021), ethnic antagonism (Bartels 2020), and elite rhetoric (Clayton, Davis, and Nyhan 2021), all undermining Americans’ support for democratic norms. Political scientists view party leaders and activists as an antidote to the electorate’s undemocratic tendencies. In the early 1960s, McClosky (1964) famously showed that “political influentials” are significantly more committed than ordinary voters to basic civil liberties and the rules of the democratic game (see also Dahl 1961; Key 1961). Yet later work suggests differences among elites may exceed elite-mass differences (Sniderman et al. 1996 but see Vengroff and Morton 2000).

The fundamental nature of political parties may make it difficult for them to consent to electoral defeat. Parties exist primarily to win elections (Downs 1957). Parties and officeholders have goals beyond electoral victory (Cohen et al. 2008; Mayhew 2004), but winning elections is necessary to achieving those goals. Parties do not simply want to win; they have to win. Losing elections threatens their very reason for existing.

Yet, aside from Trump and the Republicans in 2020, American parties have conceded electoral defeat almost without fail. Why? Parties may sacrifice success in the short run in order to win more often in the long run (Aldrich 1995).

Adherence to the rules of the game—including loser's consent—means both parties are assured a fair playing field and opportunities to win another day.

Factors Undermining Loser's Consent

Recent developments across the party system have systematically undermined preconditions for loser's consent. Some developments characterize the party system, such as the frequency of close elections and growing ideological polarization. Others describe the capacity of actors with less commitment to the rules of the game to shape party outcomes, including the participatory nature of party nominations, a changing campaign-finance landscape, and the rise of partisan and social media. All give us reason to suspect that party elites may have grown less devoted to democratic norms in recent years.

Close elections

Close elections may present an obstacle to loser's consent. Narrow outcomes afford little sense of a popular mandate, meaning a widely acknowledged perception that the “the people have spoken.” Close elections raise the possibility that mere random chance determined the result, that error or fraud could have shifted the balance, or that particular features of electoral rules—such as voter suppression or gerrymandering—could have unfairly tilted the outcome.

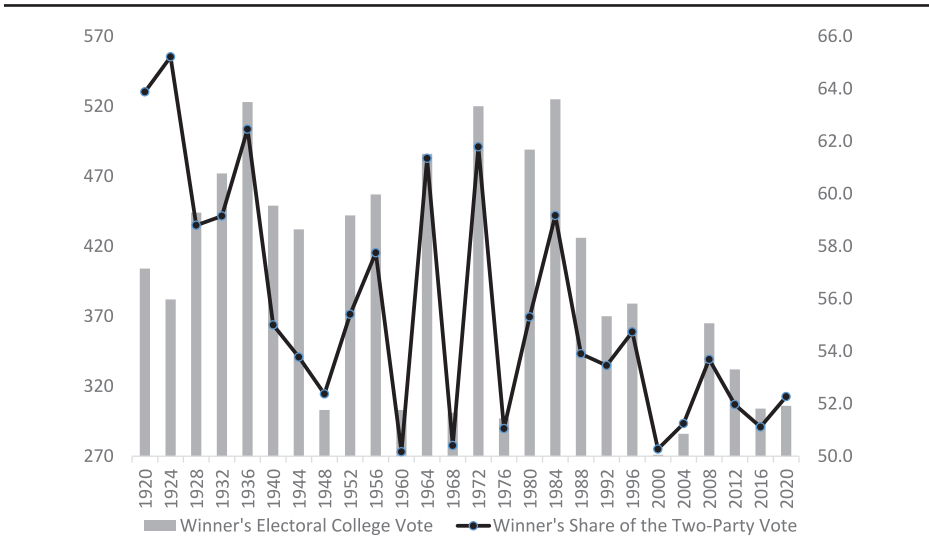
In recent decades, national elections have been considerably closer than was typical through much of the 20th century. Figure 1 displays the winning presidential candidate's share of the Electoral College vote and the two-party vote over the past century. Between 1920 and 1988, the average winning presidential candidate received 57 percent of the two-party popular vote and racked up 425 Electoral College votes. Since 1988, winning candidates have received an average of just 52 percent of the two-party popular vote and only 338 Electoral College votes. There occasionally were close presidential elections between 1920 and 1988 (e.g., 1948, 1960, 1976), but most elections were lopsided. Since 1988, no winning presidential candidate has received 55 percent of the two-party vote or more than 379 electoral votes. By Election Day 2024, it will have been 40 years since the last presidential landslide.

Persistently close elections put the norm of loser's consent to the test. It is presumably harder for losers to accept being governed by the winners when the winners do not command an indisputable electoral mandate.

Partisan ideological polarization

For policy-demanding parties, greater ideological distance between the two parties increases the stakes of election outcomes; victory may reap more ideological rewards, while losing may mean policy outcomes that are particularly repugnant. In this sense, partisan ideological polarization should also make losers' consent more difficult.

FIGURE 1
 Presidential Election Outcomes, 1920 to 2020



In contemporary American politics, ideological polarization between the parties is at historically high levels. For decades, the ideological distance between Republicans and Democrats has been growing across every dimension of American politics—in Congress and state legislatures (McCarty 2019), among party activists (Layman et al. 2010), in party platforms (Hopkins, Schickler, and Azizi 2022), in the selection of presidential appointments (Lewis 2008), and in the judiciary (Hasen 2019). With the ideological crevice between the parties growing into an untraversable chasm, party leaders and activists motivated by ideological goals should find it increasingly distressing to concede victory to their ideological and partisan opponents.

Participatory party nominations

The fundamental task of political parties is to select candidates to contest elections, but the American party system has long boasted some of the most open nomination processes in the world—participatory nominations in which ordinary citizens with only loose ties to the parties can participate in choosing party candidates. Since the early 20th century, states have near unanimously used primary elections to choose nominees for all elected offices save the presidency (Ware 2002). Since the Democrats' post-1968 McGovern-Fraser Commission reforms, the number of state parties holding presidential primaries has steadily increased. In 1972, 22 states held Democratic presidential primaries; by 2020, all but two states selected their Democratic convention delegates by a primary election.¹ Republican state parties have followed a similar trend.

The rise and subsequent dominance of primaries are generally understood to be small-d democratic reforms that have opened the nomination process to ordinary citizens. However, scholars have usually viewed the parties as having a strong gatekeeping role that promotes moderation, experience, and adherence to norms (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Rauch and La Raja 2017). The assumption is that party leaders, concerned with reputation and governance, want to steer the nomination toward candidates who are less extreme and more likely to play by the rules. Primary voters, however, are motivated more by hot-button issues and ideology and may be more easily persuaded by populists and demagogues (Roscoe and Jenkins 2021; Wildavsky 1965).

Cohen et al. (2008) argue that, after the nomination reforms of the early 1970s, party elites quickly learned how to retain their influence over presidential nominations by coordinating around preferred candidates. In recent years, however, independent groups that organize around particular policy demands have become increasingly active in recruiting and supporting primary candidates. In a 2017 survey of political consultants, 79 percent indicate that issue and ideological groups have become more important for recruiting and training candidates, while a majority say that the role of parties has stayed the same or decreased (Rauch and La Raja 2017). Issue-driven actors may be less inclined to concede and fight another day.

Campaign finance

A shifting campaign-finance landscape has strengthened the capacity for independent actors, with agendas and goals different from the parties, to influence party nominations and general elections. The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA; Public Law 107-155) prohibited parties from raising and allocating previously unlimited “soft money,” thereby reducing their capacity to select and control candidates. *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (558 U.S. 310, 2010) and related cases gave outside groups the ability to spend unlimited amounts of money to support preferred candidates independent of the parties.

The impact has been dramatic. In the 2002 midterms, the year BCRA was passed, groups independently spent \$16.8 million. In 2014, the first midterm after *Citizen United*, independent expenditures topped \$549.4 million. In the 2022 midterms, independent spending came in at \$1.9 billion (OpenSecrets 2023). Wealthy groups and individuals can now advance specific candidates, including those who seek antidemocratic ends, to a degree previously impossible (Fishkin and Gerken 2015; Kenkel 2019; Rauch and La Raja 2017). Notably, Republican candidates have been more likely than Democrats to benefit from outside spending (Evers-Hillstrom 2022; Montanaro 2022).

Moreover, the ability of celebrity candidates to attract “earned media” (free media coverage as opposed to purchased advertising buys) can divorce candidate viability from traditional sources of party funding (Magleby 2019). Donald Trump—who raised less money than many of his 2016 GOP competitors but

benefited from unprecedented levels of media coverage—is a prime example (Confessore and Yourish 2016).

Changes to the campaign-finance landscape also help explain the rise in amateur candidates. Experienced candidates long had the advantage in fundraising, but in recent years amateur candidates have outraised experienced candidates and have had increased success in winning office. In past decades, three out of every four new members of Congress had previously held elective office; since 2016, that figure has fallen to 50 percent in both parties (Porter and Steelman 2022; Porter and Treul 2023). Those without previous electoral experience may be less committed to the rules of competition, including “loser’s consent.”

Media ecosystem

Key changes in the media environment—the rise of partisan media and social media—contribute to the pressures undermining loser’s consent. This new media environment weakens the ability of parties to “decide” on their own nominees through signals like endorsements and can facilitate the success of ideologically oriented true believers who may resist loser’s consent (Wagner and Gruszczynski 2018). Partisan media—most prominently Fox News on the right and MSNBC on the left—can aid parties in important ways, but they also compete with party organizations to set the party’s agenda and advance particular candidates (Arceneaux et al. 2020; Heersink 2023). The impact of partisan media on loser’s consent is neither hypothetical nor symmetrical (Calvillo, Rutchick, and Garcia 2021): the Dominion Voting Systems defamation lawsuit against Fox News revealed that the network and its anchors knowingly propagated false information about election fraud in the 2020 presidential election and so contributed to Donald Trump’s refusal to recognize President Biden’s win as legitimate (Peters and Robertson 2023).

Social media also interferes with parties’ long-dominant role in shaping citizens’ views of candidates and issues (Hawthorne and Warner 2015). By dramatically reducing the costs of organizing, social media allows previously uncrystallized interests to identify allies and plan political action (Heaney 2020). Social media sites have been used to raise money for election fraud and other disinformation campaigns (Elmer and Ward-Kimola 2022). Social media facilitates the rapid spread of false claims (Chiu et al. 2022), including narratives about election fraud that fueled the January 6th violence (Alvarez, Cao, and Li 2021; The Election Integrity Partnership 2021). There is evidence that conservatives are more likely than moderates or liberals to spread false information (DeVerna et al. 2024; Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019).

Activists versus Voters in Support of Democracy

These political shifts may undermine party activists and leaders as keepers of the democratic flame. Past scholarship finds that most politically active members of

the two major parties were strongly committed to democratic values and civic tolerance (McClosky 1964; Vengroff and Morton 2000), compared to average citizens' limited embrace of such values (e.g., Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982 [1993]). Such patterns may no longer hold in a polarized era where active partisans identify more strongly with their parties and are more ideologically extreme than less-active party identifiers (Layman et al. 2010). When partisan hostilities and the ideological stakes of elections increase, party "influentials" may be more willing to sacrifice democratic values on the altar of electoral success.

To see if party activists are still defenders of democracy, we turn to the 2022 Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey (NDHDS). We first identify party activists through questions asking respondents if, over the past 12 months, they had (1) convinced anyone how they should vote; (2) attended political meetings, rallies, speeches, or dinners; (3) worn a political button, put a campaign sticker on their car, or placed a sign in their window or yard; (4) done any work for a party or candidate; (5) given money to a party or candidate; and (6) posted anything on social media about a party or candidate. We designate anyone identifying with one of the two parties and engaging in two or more of these campaign activities as party activists.

Second, we identify people who may play a more influential role in party nomination processes: caucus/convention attenders, operationalized as respondents who attended a party caucus or a local, state, or national party convention in 2020 or at any point in the past. Many caucus or convention attenders are also active in electoral campaigns. However, to make comparisons between these two types of influential partisans, we place caucus/convention attenders in a separate category so that the "party activists" group includes only activists who have not attended a party caucus or convention.²

We gauge commitment to democratic norms in three different ways. First, the survey replicated some of the questions from McClosky's (1964) famous comparison of the democratic commitments of party "actives" and ordinary citizens. Respondents indicated their levels of agreement (on seven-point scales) with three statements expressing undemocratic sentiments:

- I don't mind a politician's methods if they manage to get the right things done.
- The main trouble with democracy is that most people don't really know what's best for them.
- The true American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it.

These survey items do not tap directly into the loser's consent norm and are open to multiple interpretations. However, we include them to replicate McClosky's analysis in today's hyperpartisan environment. Using these items—all worded as rejections of democratic norms—we create a variable we call "McClosky's undemocratic norms index."³

The next set of questions taps directly into the norm of loser's consent by describing a hypothetical U.S. Senate candidate "in your state who you would

otherwise support” refusing to commit to conceding if they lose the election. Respondents rated the effect of two candidate statements on seven-point scales ranging from “*much less likely to vote for them*” to “*much more likely to vote for them*.” The two statements were:

- If I lose this election, it is only because the system is rigged. I will never concede defeat to my opponent.
- I don’t care if the courts say this election is legitimate. I will decide whether to accept the results or not.

We use these indicators to create our “refusal to concede elections index.”⁴

A final set of questions asks respondents about using violence to ensure desirable election outcomes. A common concern about democratic backsliding is that supporters may resort to violence to ensure what they see as “legitimate” electoral outcomes—precisely what happened on January 6, 2021. Respondents were asked to state their levels of agreement with two statements about election-related violence:

- I support the use of violence to ensure a [Republican/Democratic] party candidate wins the 2024 presidential election.
- I would personally be willing to use violence to ensure that a [Republican/Democratic] party candidate wins the 2024 presidential election.⁵

While we are principally interested in differences between party activists and ordinary party identifiers, there are also reasons to expect interparty differences. Following Trump’s statements and actions before and after the 2020 election and the events of January 6, 2021, many indicators of democratic norms, especially those related to loser’s consent, have taken on a partisan tinge. Moreover, conservatives are more likely to embrace conspiratorial thinking (van der Linden et al. 2021) and to display authoritarian tendencies (Nilsson and Jost 2020). Democrats are more likely than Republicans to grant legitimacy to other-party presidential administrations (Morisi, Jost, and Singh 2019). Accordingly, Republican identifiers should express stronger support than Democrats for various violations of democratic norms.

To assess activist-citizen differences in democratic values, we regress our indicators of undemocratic norms on dummy variables for nonactivists (party identifiers who neither attended a caucus or convention nor engaged in two or more campaign activities), activists, and caucus/convention attenders in each of the two parties.⁶

Our results provide little evidence that contemporary party “influentials” are more committed to democratic norms than nonactive partisans. That is particularly true in the Republican Party but describes Democrats as well. Before evaluating interparty differences, we first assessed whether, regardless of party, activists are more likely than nonactive citizens to embrace democratic norms. In that analysis, shown in our online supporting information, there were more instances of activists outscoring nonactivists on our undemocratic norms indicators than the reverse, contrary to the classic McClosky (1964) findings.

In Figure 2, we illustrate interparty and intraparty differences by showing the predicted value of each dependent variable for each party and activism group with confidence intervals around the predicted values.⁷ On McClosky's undemocratic norms index, every group of Republicans is more likely than Independents and all the Democratic groups to embrace undemocratic sentiments and the interparty differences are statistically significant. Among Democrats, both party activists and caucus/convention attenders are less likely than nonactive identifiers to exhibit undemocratic norms, consistent with McClosky (1964). However, the same is not true in the GOP. Republican party activists are no less undemocratic than ordinary identifiers, and caucus and convention attenders are more likely to embrace challenges to democratic values.

Turning to refusal to concede elections, all groups of Republicans are significantly more likely than Independents and all the Democratic groups to say that refusing to promise to accept election results makes them more likely to vote for the candidate. Meanwhile, both Republican activists and Republican caucus-convention attenders are significantly more likely than nonactive Republicans to find the Senate candidate's nonadherence to loser's consent appealing. The differences within the Democratic Party are not statistically significant. However, caucus and convention participants score higher than other activists on refusal to concede.

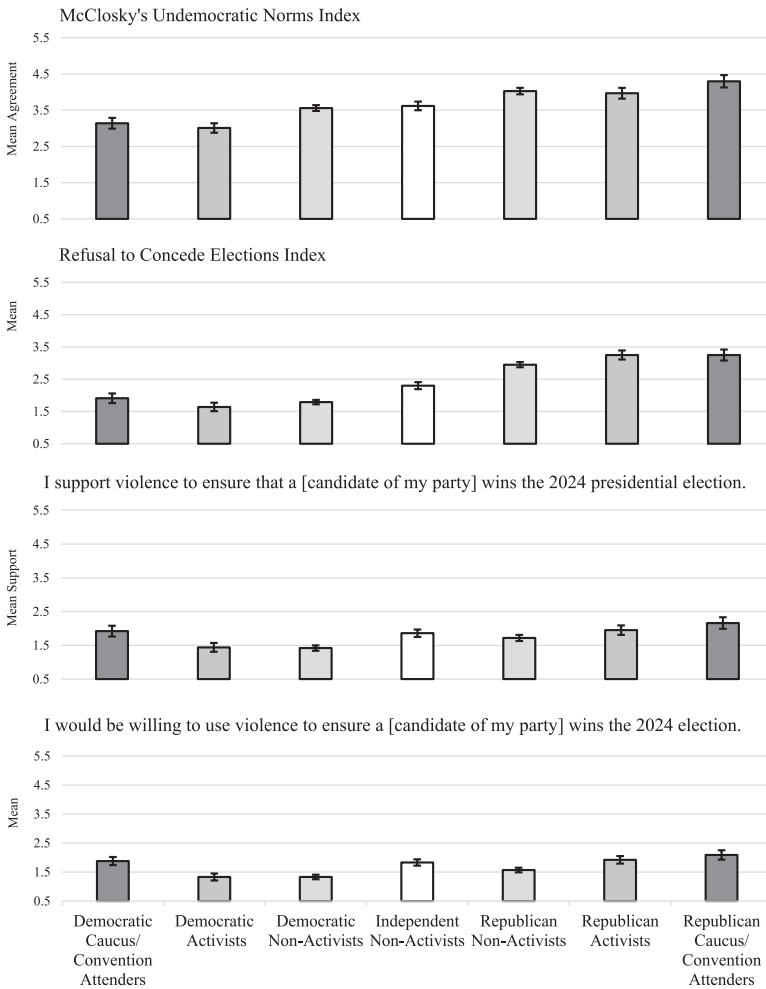
The results for election-related political violence represent possibly our strongest evidence against the idea of political activists as bulwarks of democracy. Here we find no general partisan difference in support for political violence, but we do find clear intraparty differences. Democratic caucus and convention participants are significantly more likely than other Democratic activists and nonactive Democrats to support violence and to say that they would personally be willing to engage in violence to ensure a Democratic victory. Similarly, both Republican caucus and convention participants and other Republican activists are significantly more likely than nonactive Republicans to support violence—and say they personally would commit violence—to ensure a Republican victory.⁸

Our analysis of the NDHDS data suggests that the conventional wisdom that party “influentials” are mainstays of democracy, demonstrating stronger commitments to democratic norms than their less-active fellow citizens do, no longer holds in the hyperpolarized world of contemporary American politics. If we could ever count on the parties' most active members to protect democracy, it appears we can no longer do so.

The Post-2020 Crisis of Legitimacy

We conclude by examining how parties and voters responded to the post-2020 crisis of legitimacy in American politics. The parties did little to bolster faith in American elections, seeking to exploit the crisis for their own electoral interests.

FIGURE 2
Support for Undemocratic Norms by Party and Level of Activism



NOTE: Bars are predicted levels of agreement/support. Bracketed lines are 83.5 percent confidence intervals.

Instead, it was average voters who helped to shore up American democracy in the 2022 midterms.

How the parties in government responded to 2020

Republican leaders made little effort to guard the legitimacy of American elections against Trump's attacks. Although few Republicans in Congress affirmatively endorsed Trump's stolen election claims, they also avoided contradicting

him. The stance of most Republicans was simply to offer “no comment” in response to media questions about their views of the 2020 elections. When *The Washington Post* polled Republican members of Congress on whether Biden had been legitimately elected, only two members said no, 37 said yes, and the rest just refused to answer (Washington Post Staff 2020). Within a month of January 6, 2021, 90 percent of Republican members had settled into a pattern of refusing to answer questions about Trump's claims (Kahn et al. 2021). Republican elected officials largely declined to confront their many supporters who gave credence to Trump's assertions.

Not surprisingly, Democratic elected officials denounced Trump and other Republicans who denied the legitimacy of the 2020 elections. However, the Democratic Party also intervened strategically to help election deniers win Republican primary nominations in the belief that elevating such candidates increased their chances of flipping Republican-held seats. Democrats spent nearly \$19 million to bolster election-denying candidates in the 2022 Republican primaries, often by running television ads implying that a far-right candidate was “too conservative,” thereby making those candidates more attractive to Republican primary voters (Linskey 2022). The strategy paid off; Democrats won most of these races (Wilkins 2022). Still, the party's willingness to employ such a strategy indicated that it would sacrifice the moral high ground of defending democracy in its quest to win power. In short, neither party prioritized defending democracy over winning elections.

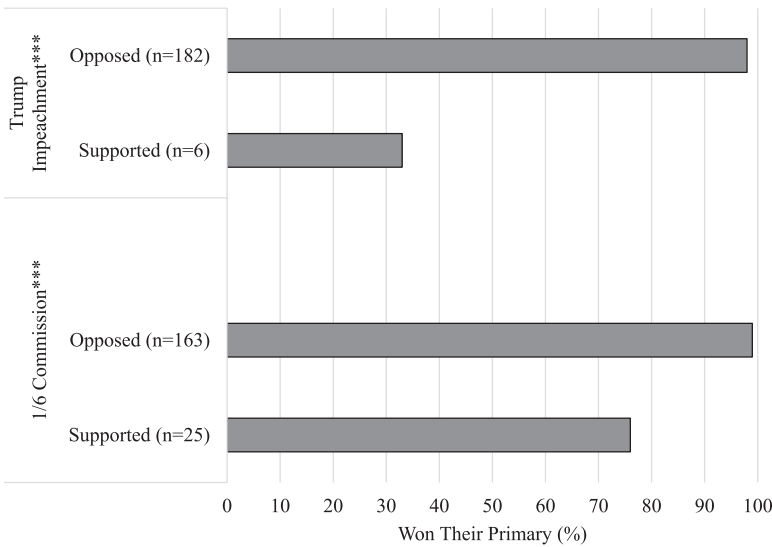
How Republican primary voters responded to 2020

Republican primary voters generally sided with Trump and election denialism. In addition to the 10 House Republicans who voted to impeach Trump for his role in the January 6th attacks, 35 House Republicans voted to support the creation of an independent commission to investigate the attack on the Capitol. Figure 3 demonstrates that House members who voted for Trump's impeachment and the creation of the January 6th independent commission were markedly more likely to lose their primaries than other Republicans ($p < .001$). Nearly all Republicans (98–99 percent) who did not cross Trump on either of those issues won their primaries, but only 76 percent of Republicans voting for the commission won their primaries and only 33 percent of Republicans voting to impeach Trump won theirs.⁹ Long-standing Republican members were denied renomination, including Rep. Tom Rice (R-SC, first elected in 2012) and Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler (R-WA, first elected in 2010). Republican primary voters demanded that Republican members of Congress stay loyal to Trump despite his violations of democratic norms.

How voters responded to 2020

Conventional wisdom in political science does not expect critical support for democratic values to come from voters at large rather than from party activists

FIGURE 3
2022 Republican Primary Outcomes and House Members' Votes on the Trump
Impeachment and the January 6th Commission



*** $p < .001$.

and elected officials. However, our analysis of the NDHDS data and the outcomes of the 2022 midterms suggest that the conventional wisdom may need revision.

In 2022, a small but critical increment of voters may have prioritized democratic values above their usual partisan and ideological preferences. The overwhelming majority of voters stuck with their preferred party, regardless of concerns about the health of American democracy. However, the marked underperformance of candidates active in questioning the 2020 election outcome suggests that a slice of voters was willing to impose an electoral penalty on candidates who refused to adhere to fundamental norms around loser's consent.

In intervening in the 2022 midterms, Trump sought to punish Republicans who would not countenance his efforts to overturn the 2020 results. His chief criteria for endorsing candidates were their stance on the 2020 election and their "willingness to confirm election fraud" (Shin, Beesch, and Narayanswamy 2022). Given that, we can use Trump's endorsement as a rough proxy for candidates who tolerated his violations of democratic norms. The regression analysis in Table 1 examines the effect of a Trump endorsement on Republican vote share in the 2022 midterms, controlling for district partisanship.

As the table's left column indicates, midterm outcomes were almost entirely ($R^2 = .95$) a function of district partisanship, as gauged by Cook's Partisan Voting Index (PVI) (an average of the district's vote relative to the rest of the country across the two preceding presidential elections). Trump's endorsement had no

TABLE 1
Effect of Trump Endorsement on Republican Candidates' Vote Share, 2022 Elections
for the House of Representatives

	All Districts <i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Excluding Safe Democrat Seats <i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)
Cook's Partisan Voting Index	0.98*** (0.02)	0.80 (0.04)
Trump endorsed	0.35 (0.52)	0.90 (0.64)
Competitive race		-2.92*** (0.90)
Trump endorse × competitive race		-3.41** (1.11)
Constant	50.12*** (0.27)	52.96***
<i>N</i>	401	239
Adj. <i>R</i> ²	.95	.85

SOURCE: Data obtained from Philip Wallach.

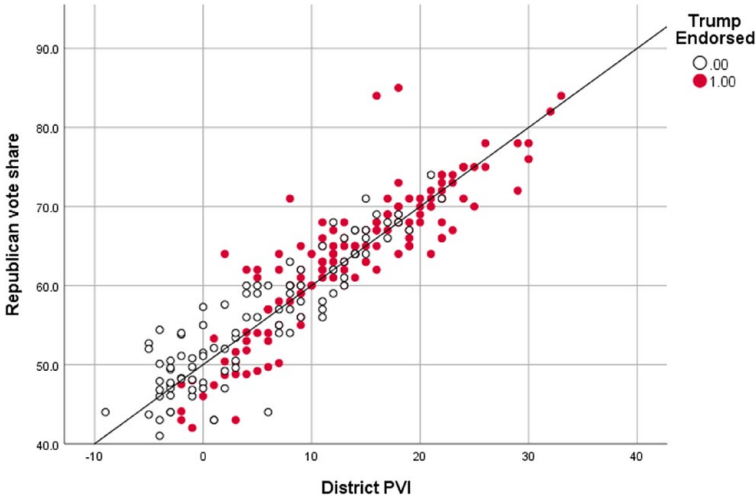
NOTE: Dependent variable is the vote share won by the Republican candidate. Races which did not feature one Republican against one Democrat are excluded.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

systematic effect on election outcomes generally. The right column highlights the effect of Trump's endorsement on Republican candidates running in races that were not classed as "safe Democratic." The indicator for "competitive races"—all the remaining races not rated as "safe" by forecasters in advance of the elections¹⁰—is interacted with Trump's endorsement. Trump's endorsement had no effect in uncompetitive races. But the negative, statistically significant coefficient on the interaction term shows that Trump-endorsed Republicans running in close races systematically underperformed. Such candidates on average won 2.5 fewer percentage points of vote share than would have been predicted by their district's partisanship. A similar analysis of statewide candidates for governor, secretary of state, and attorney general estimates that the penalty for election denialism was 2.3 to 3.7 points, and the loss of five to seven races (States United Democracy Center 2023).

Illustrating our findings for the House, Figure 4 plots Republican vote share against district partisanship, with Trump-endorsed candidates shown in red. For most Republicans, Trump's endorsement neither benefited nor harmed them. But for candidates running in swing districts (less than +5R PVI), Trump's endorsement exerted a visible drag on performance. Among these competitive races, candidates with Trump's endorsement tended to underperform the district's underlying partisanship while candidates without Trump's endorsement

FIGURE 4
Effect of Trump Endorsement on Republican Vote Share, by District Partisanship



SOURCE: Data obtained from Philip Wallach.

NOTE: Races that did not feature one Republican against one Democrat and races rated as Safe Democrat are excluded ($n = 239$).

generally overperformed. The “Trump penalty” was likely decisive in a handful of districts.

The failures of Trump-endorsed candidates clearly affected the 2022 midterms overall. Despite a very favorable political environment for Republicans—featuring low approval ratings for President Biden and large majorities seeing the country as on the “wrong track”—the projected “red wave” failed to materialize. Republicans barely secured a House majority and failed to win control of the Senate. Postelection analyses blamed Trump-endorsed candidates for much of this underperformance (Cohn 2022; Wallach 2022).

Importantly, the slice of the electorate deviating from partisan preferences is exceedingly small, perhaps too small to isolate via public opinion polls. Nevertheless, the outcome suggests that the defense of American democracy after the crisis of 2020 came more from voters’ surprising choices in the 2022 midterms than from those of party leaders or Republican activists in primaries. It seems that American democracy took new strength from an unexpected source.

Safeguarding Democracy: Voters versus Parties

While Trump-endorsed candidates underperformed in 2022, Republicans still managed to take the House and, as a result, put an end to the historic speakership of Nancy Pelosi (D-CA). In her farewell speech from the House floor, Pelosi praised the American voters for their defense of democracy:

Last week, the American people spoke, and their voices were raised in defense of liberty, of the rule of law and of democracy itself. With these elections, the people stood in the breach and repelled the assault on democracy. They resoundingly rejected violence and insurrection, and in doing so gave proof through the night that our flag was still there. (Pelosi 2022)

Our analysis supports Pelosi's claim. In recent years, close elections, ideological polarization, participatory primaries, campaign finance, and social and partisan media have conspired to increase the pressures on parties and candidates to violate the democratic principle of losers' consent. Polling indicates that party activists long believed to uphold democratic values no longer do so, particularly among Republicans. But in 2022, enough voters punished election deniers to help stem the antidemocratic tide. Even if only a few voters are willing to prioritize democratic values over their political preference (Graham and Svulik 2020), they can be enough to decide close elections.

In the aftermath of the 2022 midterms, congressional Republicans and Democrats coalesced to institute important institutional reforms to help prevent another crisis like the one Trump provoked after the 2020 elections. In what legal scholar Sunstein (2022, 1) describes as "a phenomenal achievement," the Electoral Count Reform Act (ECRA) of 2022 clarifies and articulates processes for Electoral College vote counting and election contestation. Of the ECRA, Sunstein (2022, 2) writes, "For the first time in U.S. history, the ECRA succeeds in ensuring the supremacy of the rule of law in presidential elections, by limiting the risk of on-the-spot, ex post maneuvering in either the states or Congress." Supported by a bipartisan coalition, the ECRA reaffirms the interest of both parties in clear rules and procedures to minimize the potential for partisan competition to undercut the norm of losers' consent.

The events of January 6, 2021, represented an existential threat to American democracy, and we do not seek to downplay that threat. Nevertheless, our analysis points to some unexpected hopeful developments amidst an array of structural challenges to democratic norms in today's polarized, intensely competitive context.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Data obtained through communication with Josh Putnam, founder of FHQ Strategies LLC, via Twitter/X direct message, February 23, 2023.

2. With this coding decision, party activists represent 18.7 percent of the sample and caucus/convention attenders represent 12.7 percent.

3. This index is the mean of each respondent's nonmissing values on each indicator. In a principal components factor analysis, all three indicators loaded strongly on a single factor. The reliability (alpha) coefficient for the index is .63.

4. The index is the mean of each respondent's nonmissing values on the two indicators (alpha = .83).

5. The party mentioned in each political violence statement was matched to the party identification of the respondent, including for partisan leaners. For pure (nonleaning) Independents, the survey randomized whether they were asked about a Democratic or Republican candidate. We did not create an index from these two indicators because their correlation is quite weak (.17), possibly because responses are heavily skewed toward disagreement.

6. The regression models control for race, sex, age, income, region, guidance from religion, and a dummy variable for born-again Christians. The comparison category for the party and activism dummy variables was pure Independents who were neither activists nor caucus/convention attenders.

7. To compute the predicted values, we held the control variables at their actual values and averaged across all observations. We employ 83.5 percent confidence intervals because when using the overlap of confidence intervals to assess whether two means are statistically different, attaining a conventional type I error probability of .05 necessitates the use of confidence intervals of approximately 83.5 percent (Maghsoodloo and Huang 2010).

8. Interestingly, Independent nonactivists were significantly more likely to indicate a willingness to use violence to ensure that the candidate of the party randomly assigned to them than nonactive Democrats or Republicans were on behalf of their own party—and also significantly higher than nonactive Democrats on support for election-related violence. We suspect this indicates the Independent antipathy toward parties and the political system that Klar and Krupnikov (2016) demonstrate. Nonactive Democrats in this survey rated both parties very low on feeling thermometers (a mean of 35.2 for Republicans and 38.4 for Democrats). They were significantly more likely than nonactive partisans to say they did not plan to vote in the 2022 elections (55 percent for Independent non-activists versus 11 percent for nonactive partisans) and to agree with the statement that “the American political system is unfair and cannot be trusted” (a mean of 4.33 on a seven-point scale for nonactive Independents and of 3.87 for nonactive partisans).

9. In calculating the percentages who won their primary, the denominator only includes members who ran for reelection.

10. The ratings of district competitiveness are based on Stirewalt (2022). The indicator for competitive races includes all races denoted as “likely Republican,” “lean Republican,” “toss-up,” “lean Democrat,” and “likely Democrat.”

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