

# The Public's Response to Democratic Backsliding\*

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## Abstract

Self-enforcing democracies require citizens to identify threats to democracy when they occur and punish those responsible by voting them out of office. However, democratic backsliding can proceed incrementally and stealthily, with elected officials gradually subverting democratic institutions under the guise of democratic values. Can citizens identify the actions that lay the groundwork for future power grabs as threats to democracy? I answer this question via large, representative survey experiments conducted in the United States. Consistent with expectations, citizens view “groundwork” actions that make antidemocratic power grabs possible as substantially less threatening than the power grabs themselves. When co-partisan elites justify these groundwork actions as democracy-enhancing, citizens’ threat perceptions are even lower, often translating into majority support for actions that enable in-party power grabs. These findings suggest that citizens’ weak ability to anticipate authoritarian power grabs may explain how elites get away with undermining democracy.

**Keywords:** democratic backsliding, elite cues, public opinion

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# Introduction

Scholars and pundits around the world have expressed increasing alarm about the growing number of established democracies that are experiencing democratic backsliding. This process entails incremental, but ultimately substantial, decay in the basic institutions and rights that sustain democracy, including competitive elections, civil liberties, and the rule of law (Ginsburg and Huq 2018). Indeed, the incremental nature of democratic backsliding is what sets contemporary democratic collapses apart from the sudden, violent coups that characterized most historical regime changes. Today’s democracies “die” at the hands of elected officials, who gradually and stealthily subvert democratic institutions under the guise of democratic values and procedures (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

How do elected officials get away with undermining democracy? A growing literature in political science argues that politicians with authoritarian temptations can get away with dismantling democratic institutions when the various democratic checks that exist to stop them fail. One of these checks is vertical: in “self-enforcing” democracies, voters withdraw their support from leaders who they perceive as threats to democracy, and elected officials avoid challenging democratic norms to avoid backlash (e.g., Fearon 2011; Przeworski 1991; Weingast 1997).<sup>1</sup> If voters do not punish antidemocratic behavior at the ballot box, however, leaders with authoritarian ambitions have little incentive to play by the rules.

Scholars are divided over why voters fail to punish antidemocratic politicians. One body of research argues that voters prioritize democratic values over partisan and ideological payoffs (e.g., Graham and Svobik 2020; Svobik 2020; see also Fossati, Muhtadi, and Warburton 2022; Gidengil, Stolle, and Bergeron-Boutin 2021; Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022). Even if voters value democracy and possess “a solid understanding of what democracy is and what it is not” (Graham and Svobik 2020, p. 393), they do not value it enough to

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<sup>1</sup>The failure of horizontal checks on incumbent behavior—such as institutions, parties, or other elites—also contributes to democratic backsliding (see, e.g., Helmke, Kroeger, and Paine 2022; Horz 2021; Howell and Wolton 2018; Howell, Shepsle, and Wolton 2019; Miller 2021).

sacrifice favorable partisan or policy outcomes. Voters may even employ “partisan double standards,” punishing democratic norm violations that are committed by the opposition but not by co-partisan elites (Graham and Svobik 2020; Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022; Tomz and Weeks 2020; but see Aarslew 2022; Carey et al. 2022).<sup>2</sup> These dynamics are theorized to be most prominent in polarized systems, where voting for an opposition candidate is increasingly unappealing (Aarslew 2022; Graham and Svobik 2020; Svobik 2020; but see Saikkonen and Christensen 2022).

A second body of research acknowledges that citizens may not recognize antidemocratic actions as they unfold. These studies argue that uncertainty about the nature of elite behavior undermines the public’s ability to check antidemocratic elites. Luo and Przeworski (2022) identify an equilibrium in their formal model of democratic backsliding in which an incumbent takes so many small steps towards authoritarianism that by the time the citizens realize that he is an autocrat, he is no longer removable. Miller (2021) argues that democratically committed voters may support authoritarian candidates when their visible actions have unclear democratic valence. Chiopris, Nalepa, and Vanberg (N.d.) similarly argue that citizens may care deeply about democracy but are unaware of the intentions that motivate specific institutional reforms. Once they realize that incumbents intend to undermine democracy, they experience regret for supporting them in the first place. Here, the public is not necessarily *unwilling* to reject aspiring autocrats at the ballot box if it means sacrificing their preferred policy outcomes; instead, voters are unable to identify them until it is too late.

Leveraging evidence from survey experiments conducted on large samples of citizens in the United States, I provide a direct test of the hypothesis that citizens’ failure to act as a vertical check on the behavior that characterizes contemporary democratic backsliding stems from their limited ability to recognize early-stage actions that threaten democracy.

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<sup>2</sup>See Krishnarajan (2022) for a third perspective, which argues that perceptual biases impede voters’ willingness to punish antidemocratic behavior that falls in line with their preferred partisan or policy outcomes.

Theoretically, I bring together rich literatures on the nature of democratic backsliding, on public attitudes toward democracy, and on the political sophistication of the mass public. I then argue that the same public opinion dynamics which characterize citizens’ understanding of complex political issues—including low political attentiveness (e.g., Converse 1964) and an overwhelming tendency to rely on cues or heuristics to form opinions (e.g., Zaller 1992)—apply to the public’s understanding of democratic backsliding as it unfolds in front of them. Against this backdrop, I then argue that two key features<sup>3</sup> of democratic backsliding make it extremely difficult for the public to form accurate judgments about the behavior of elected politicians who seek to undermine democracy:

- **Democratic backsliding can occur incrementally:** Most contemporary democratic backsliding occurs in steps, which means that even citizens who can identify overt democratic norm violations as threats to democracy may be oblivious to the smaller steps—usually in the form of policy changes, institutional reforms, or more subtle norm violations—that lay the groundwork for sweeping power grabs.
- **Elites will often justify antidemocratic behavior as consistent with democratic values:** Since antidemocratic elites anticipate potential backlash to overt norm violations, they tend to emphasize their commitments to democratic values when engaging in behavior that could undermine democracy, making it difficult for the public to recognize democratic norm violations when they occur.

My survey experiments manipulate these features to empirically demonstrate how access to *information* about elite behavior and *heuristics* provided by elites impact the public’s ability to identify threats to democracy. Substantively, I use vignettes that describe real election reform proposals in the United States, a backsliding democracy in which state lawmakers have recently proposed or passed legislation that could lay the groundwork for antidemo-

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<sup>3</sup>A third potentially relevant feature is procedural legitimacy, or the idea that elites who seek to undermine democracy can do so behind a “vener of legality” (i.e., getting approval from the legislature or the courts), which confers legitimacy to antidemocratic actions among citizens who may rely on an elementary understanding of democracy. I intend to examine this feature in subsequent research.

cratic power grabs in the future. Broadly, this research aims to provide a new perspective on the causal effect of different types of information and heuristics on the public’s ability to check the early stages of antidemocratic behavior, which contributes to our understanding of where democracy faces the gravest threats and how to enhance democratic resiliency.

My results show that citizens view groundwork actions that make power grabs possible as substantially less of a threat to democracy than the power grabs themselves. Their support for groundwork actions is also considerably higher than their support for power grabs. When elites justify groundwork actions in “democracy-enhancing” terms, perceived threats to democracy decline further, and support for groundwork actions increases. These patterns persist across partisan lines, although Republicans at baseline report lower perceived threats to democracy and higher support for antidemocratic behavior in its early and later stages. Finally, both Republicans and Democrats exhibit significant partisan hypocrisy. When groundwork actions (with or without justification) are committed by their in-party, comfortable majorities of partisan voters say that they support their party’s actions.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: I first review relevant literature that supports my theory about how the public perceives threats to democracy while backsliding incrementally unfolds. I then offer several theoretical predictions and describe the design and findings of two original survey experiments that I conducted on large national samples of Americans to test my theory. Finally, I discuss the results, outline a series of directions for future research, and conclude.

## **Relevant Literature**

### **The public as a democratic check**

Most scholars agree that democratic stability is most likely when democracies are “self-enforcing” (e.g., Weingast 1997; Przeworski 1991; Fearon 2011). Democracies are self-enforcing when elites exercise restraint and avoid committing transgressions to democracy

because it is in their self-interest to do so. They anticipate that violating democratic norms would cause voters to vote against them in democratic elections, threatening their prospects of remaining in power. Weingast's (1997) model of the public as a democratic check outlines the conditions required for self-enforcing democracy, demonstrating that citizens can only act as an effective check on leaders' behavior if they overcome a coordination dilemma. First, they need to agree about which principles constitute their fundamental rights in a democracy, and second, they need to agree about when transgressions to those principles have occurred. If both criteria are met, citizens will withdraw their support from an elected leader who violates a key democratic principle. If not, leaders may infringe upon citizens' rights without risking a loss of power.

In contemporary democracies around the world, there is evidence that this “vertical” check on the behavior of elected officials is breaking down. The Fidesz government in Poland, Viktor Orbán's rule in Hungary, Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, the election of Giorgia Meloni in Italy, the Philippines under the Marcos-Duterte administration, and the United States under Donald Trump (among others) are clear examples of countries in which there is broad public support for leaders who have sought to restrict civil liberties, silence political opponents, and tip the electoral playing field in their favor. This explosion of democratic backsliding around the globe has inspired a wealth of research on a pressing puzzle: why do citizens support leaders who seek to undermine democracy?

One perspective argues that citizens place greater priority on partisan and ideological commitments than on democratic values. Within Weingast's model, this suggests that democratic principles are not important enough that citizens will defend them at all costs (even if they are aware that such principles have been violated). Graham and Svobik (2020), for example, argue that because of increased polarization, voters will choose candidates who champion their preferred partisan or ideological preferences over candidates who espouse commitments to democracy when the two values come into conflict (see also Svobik 2020). Likewise, Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay (2022) show that partisans are willing to overlook

transgressions to democracy when their preferred party is in power. Several formal models of support for democracy take a similar stance: citizens are willing to support antidemocratic candidates because they rationally value ideological payoffs over democratic commitments (e.g., Besley and Persson 2019; Howell and Wolton 2018; Howell, Shepsle, and Wolton 2019).

Some scholars have advanced an alternative perspective, arguing that citizens can fail to check authoritarian behavior because they are not always aware that democracy is under threat.<sup>4</sup> Here, Weingast's second criteria is not met: even if citizens care deeply about the importance of various democratic principles, they lack clarity on whether and when those principles have been violated. Indeed, Carey et al. (2019) demonstrate that although there is substantial agreement among the American public on the importance of several key democratic principles related to elections, rights, accountability, and institutions, partisans diverge in their perceptions of when and where democratic transgressions are occurring. Luo and Przeworski (2022) acknowledge the stealthy nature of democratic backsliding, identifying an equilibrium in their formal model in which an incumbent takes so many small steps towards authoritarianism that by the time the citizens realize that he is an autocrat, he is no longer removable. Miller (2021) similarly argues that democratically committed voters may support authoritarian candidates when their visible actions have unclear democratic valence. Finally, with a formal model and survey experimental evidence from Poland, Chiopris, Nalepa, and Vanberg (N.d.) argue that citizens may care deeply about democracy but are unaware of the intentions that motivate specific institutional reforms. Once they realize that incumbents intend to undermine democracy, they experience regret for supporting them in the first place.

Taking a broader look at the features of contemporary democratic backsliding and the public opinion dynamics which underlie citizens' understanding of politics, I argue that citizens fail to check antidemocratic behavior because of their limited ability to anticipate authoritarian power grabs. To my knowledge, I provide the first direct empirical test of how

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<sup>4</sup>Krishnarajan (2022) attempts to reconcile these two perspectives, arguing that partisans fail to recognize antidemocratic behavior as inconsistent with democracy when they stand to gain politically from it.

the incremental nature of democratic backsliding and citizens' receptivity to elite cues work together to shape voters' democratic threat perceptions and their support for antidemocratic behavior.

## **The features of democratic backsliding**

Contemporary democratic backsliding proceeds differently from how democracies collapsed historically. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) put it, democracies that fell during the Cold War ended in violent coups that occurred in “spectacular fashion, through military power and coercion” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, p. 3). Today, however, democracies are eroding gradually and slowly. In most backsliding nations, elected officials with authoritarian aspirations take small but steady steps toward consolidating their power.

I argue that two key features of contemporary democratic backsliding make it difficult for citizens to recognize when threats to democracy are unfolding in front of them. The first, as just described, is the incremental nature of democratic backsliding. Elected leaders who ultimately commit authoritarian power grabs will usually start out with more subtle policy changes or institutional reforms that lay the groundwork for them to grab power. Examples of these groundwork actions abound. In Hungary, the government made a series of institutional changes that involved expanding the size of the Supreme Court, changing the nomination rules for justices, and then ultimately appointing party loyalists to the new positions (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, p. 80). The result was a clearly corrupt and politicized court that refused to rule against the party in control, but the steps that made this power grab possible were more subtle. Likewise, in Ecuador, the president filed a defamation lawsuit against a major newspaper, which ultimately cultivated a media environment without a free and independent press. The lawsuit itself, however, was not initially recognized as a grave threat to democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, p. 83).

A second key feature of contemporary democratic backsliding is the way in which elites tend to justify antidemocratic behavior as consistent with democratic values. Since elites



want to stay in power and anticipate that citizens generally prefer them to follow the most basic tenets of democratic governance, they do not want citizens to know when they are trying to bend or break the rules. Better yet, they may be motivated to convince citizens that their actions are intended to save or strengthen democracy. Politicians who commit democratic norm violations will therefore misrepresent their transgressions to avoid facing voter backlash, framing them as consistent with democratic values. Hungary’s institutional reforms to the courts, as well as the Ecuadorian attacks on the press, were both framed by their proponents as fighting corruption rather than undermining democracy. Likewise, in Poland, a series of controversial judicial reforms passed by the PiS government were ostensibly pitched as enhancing democratic accountability by removing the residual influence of holdovers from the former communist regime (Chiopris, Nalepa, and Vanberg N.d.).

In a similar fashion, election reforms that undermine democracy are often framed as *strengthening* democracy by cleaning up elections or helping to combat voter fraud. In the United States, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis recently signed a highly restrictive voting bill called S.B. 90 into law that experts recognized as a severe attack on individual liberties, voting rights, and free and fair elections in the state (Champion 2022). However, DeSantis’s office explicitly appealed to “the foundation of our democracy” and the defense of voting rights as justification for the passage of the law: “The bill Governor DeSantis signed today will protect our election procedures and provide voters with confidence that our elections will remain accessible, efficient, and secure. The right to vote should never be taken for granted, and we must always strive to improve the processes that establish the foundation of our democracy” (Office of Governor Ron DeSantis 2021).

These two features—the incremental nature of democratic backsliding and the ways in which antidemocratic elites frame their behavior as consistent with democracy—lead many citizens to be oblivious to the threats posed by groundwork actions that pave the way for future power grabs. While they might clearly recognize events such as a coup, a declaration of martial law, or a suspension of the constitution as a severe infringement on key democratic

values, they are less sensitive to actions that have some “democratic face value” (i.e., by manifesting as “business as usual” for elected officials or by being so subtle as to attract little public attention) and may be especially reassured that they have nothing to worry about when elites tell them that such actions are good for democracy. This problem is fully borne out by some of the most basic features of mass public opinion: citizens’ generally low political attentiveness and the role of partisanship in interpreting politics and elite cues.

## **The political sophistication of the mass public**

Decades of scholarship in political science make clear that on the whole, the public suffers from important information deficiencies in the realm of politics (e.g., Converse 1964). While some subsets of the population do show a more nuanced understanding of the political world (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), the majority of citizens are generally unaware and inattentive to the complex workings of their government. Most of what citizens *do* understand about policy reflects what they learn from various cues or heuristics provided by politicians, the media, or other elite sources. Accordingly, their conception of politics reflects biases in the information environment that often fall along partisan or ideological lines (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

In addition to their limited awareness of how the government operates and the substance of important policy issues, citizens demonstrate low sophistication in their understanding of democracy itself. While the public generally agree that democracy is a good thing (Carey et al. 2019; Voeten 2017), citizens hold strikingly different conceptions of the various inputs that comprise liberal democracy. These conceptions range from the presence or absence of majoritarian institutions to realization of favored social outputs to procedurally legitimate forms of governance to robust liberal democratic understandings (Canache 2012; Davis and Zhao 2021; Davis, Goidel, and Gaddie 2022). Focusing more specifically on the many ideals that make up democracy, Carey et al. (2019) document substantial differences in how political science experts and the mass public perceive the importance of different democratic

principles, as well as in their perceptions of how well the United States meets those standards of democratic stability. Survey experimental evidence from Grossman et al. (2022) and Wunsch, Jacob, and Derksen (2022) suggests that divergent understandings of what democracy means impact citizens’ ability to sanction elite norm transgressions, since democratic “violations” may in fact line up with citizens’ perceptions of how democracy should operate.

Low political attentiveness in the mass public—especially with respect to the nuances of specific political issues and a broadly underdeveloped understanding of what democracy means—provide would-be autocrats with opportunities to stealthily bend the rules in their favor. Exploiting the fact that the public believes democracy to be a good thing in the abstract without deeply understanding democracy’s various inputs, elites can convincingly frame antidemocratic actions as consistent with democracy. As democratic backsliding proceeds incrementally, citizens fail to connect various policy changes and institutional reforms to their democratic consequences, which makes it difficult for them to punish the elites who seek to undermine democracy accordingly by voting them out of office.<sup>5</sup>

## **The role of partisanship**

Political (in)attentiveness does not exist in a vacuum. Partisanship plays a key role in shaping what the public knows and does not know about politics and democracy, including policy reforms that may pave the way for future power grabs. A broad literature in political science demonstrates that citizens rely on cues and heuristics from co-partisan elites to understand political issues and take a stance on policies (Zaller 1992). Extensions of this research show how party cues shape diverse facets of public opinion, including factual beliefs and perceptual gaps (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018), acceptance of misinformation and rejection of corrections (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017), and even respect for democratic norms (Clayton et al. 2021; Clayton and Willer 2022), especially under conditions of high polarization (Lev-

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<sup>5</sup>Consistent with this perspective, Miller (2021) argues that it is only under conditions of high information reliability from third party sources such as the media that citizens can discern when elites are trying to mislead them for political gain.

endusky 2010). Applied to elite framing of actions that could ultimately pave the way for authoritarian rule, these dynamics suggest that uninformed partisan voters will be receptive to co-partisan elites who tell them that their undemocratic actions are designed to enhance or strengthen democracy.

Of course, not all voters are misinformed or uniquely responsive to partisan cues. However, even those who are highly attentive to politics may be motivated to reject information that conflicts with their partisan or ideological predispositions (Taber and Lodge 2006), posing challenges for democratic accountability (Little, Schnakenberg, and Turner 2022). When elites take steps toward consolidating their power that benefit their party at the expense of the opposing party, citizens have additional incentives to view these actions in a positive light. They therefore may be especially likely to accept democracy-enhancing justifications for actions that pave the way for future power grabs.

Recent survey experimental evidence shows that partisan motivated reasoning can go so far as to shape citizens' perceptions of democratic reality, fostering beliefs that antidemocratic behavior by the in-party is benign while identical behavior by the out-party is a grave threat (Krishnarajan 2022). Thus, even if hypothetical "groundwork" actions might not fly completely under the radar, those same actions committed by the in-party could fail to raise meaningful alarm. My experiments therefore test how perceptions of incremental democratic backsliding vary based on whether the in-party or the out-party is responsible.

## Theoretical Predictions

Bringing this literature together, I now offer a series of theoretical predictions that I tested in two online survey experiments. My hypotheses and research questions were preregistered at the Open Science Framework prior to data collection (Study 1: <https://osf.io/kwqmh>; Study 2: <https://osf.io/tdrmkn>).

First, focusing on the *incremental* nature of democratic backsliding, I expect that citi-

zens will perceive lower threats to democracy when they encounter information about elite actions that lay the groundwork for future antidemocratic power grabs than when they encounter information about the power grab itself. Put differently, when citizens know that a so-called “groundwork” step in a dynamic democratic backsliding process resulted in an antidemocratic outcome, they will view that sequence of events as more threatening than the groundwork step viewed in isolation. My first survey experiment tests this hypothesis by presenting respondents with vignettes that describe a groundwork action, a groundwork action and a power grab action, or a control action that does not threaten democracy. I then compare perceived threats to democracy and support for the actions across the experimental conditions.

Second, focusing on the ways in which elite cues shape perceptions of antidemocratic behavior, I expect that citizens will perceive lower threats to democracy—and be more supportive of groundwork actions—when they encounter justifications from elites that describe the groundwork actions as strengthening democracy. My second survey experiment tests these hypotheses by varying whether or not the groundwork action tested in Study 1 is accompanied by a statement from a politician that justifies the action in democracy-enhancing terms. I also vary the substantive content of the justification and examine potential heterogeneity in how Republicans and Democrats evaluate different democracy-enhancing arguments.

In each study, I further expect that perceptions of the antidemocratic actions described in the vignettes may vary based on the party committing the action. In each study, I therefore manipulate whether the vignette describes actions taken by Democratic Party or the Republican Party in a hypothetical state legislature. I expect that citizens may be less threatened by actions committed by their in-party vs. their out-party, and more supportive of actions committed by their in-party than their out-party. Acknowledging potential partisan asymmetry in evaluations of antidemocratic behavior—some research suggests that Republicans may be more forgiving of antidemocratic behavior than Democrats, although this evidence is mixed (e.g., Carey et al. 2022; Graham and Svobik 2020; see also Fishkin and

Pozen 2018 and Helmke, Kroeger, and Paine 2022 for perspectives on partisan asymmetries in antidemocratic behavior at the elite level)—I also examine preregistered research questions about how democratic threat perceptions and support for various “groundwork” actions vary by whether the action was committed by the Republican Party or the Democratic Party and by whether the respondent is a Republican or a Democrat.

Finally, there is considerable variation in political attentiveness in the mass public. While elites may exploit the fact that many individuals are generally not attuned to the seemingly small policy changes that can ultimately contribute to democratic backsliding, there are likely to be some subsets of the population that, like experts (Carey et al. 2019), recognize the threats to democracy that “groundwork” actions pose. I therefore test a series of hypotheses and research questions in both studies about how the treatment effects vary by political knowledge and education level, expecting that more politically sophisticated individuals will perceive greater threats to democracy in response to the “groundwork” actions (relative to the control) than less politically sophisticated individuals. I also test whether they are less swayed (i.e., smaller reduction in perceived threats to democracy and/or support for the action) by elite justifications than are individuals with lower political sophistication.

## Study 1

### Sample

To test my hypotheses and research questions, I administered a preregistered online survey experiment among a national sample of 2,914 adults in the United States provided by Lucid Marketplace from August 10–14, 2022.<sup>6</sup> I used quotas to achieve a sample that is nationally representative of the adult population in the U.S. based on age, gender, race, ethnicity, and region. Since some of my analyses focus on partisanship, I also recruited roughly 50% self-

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<sup>6</sup>The study was preregistered at OSF prior to data collection (see <https://osf.io/kwqmh>) and was approved by the Stanford University IRB (Protocol 66628).

identified Democrats and 50% self-identified Republicans according to Lucid’s pre-treatment qualification survey. Table B.9 in the appendix provides information on the demographic breakdown of the sample overall and by treatment condition.

Prior research has demonstrated that demographic and experimental findings obtained from Lucid track well with benchmarks from national probability samples (Coppock and McClellan 2019). However, some studies have suggested that the quality of responses on Lucid has declined over time, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Aronow et al. 2020; Peyton, Huber, and Coppock 2021). To guard against potential respondent inattentiveness, I included two basic attention check questions at the beginning of the survey and screened out respondents who failed to provide the correct answer to one or more of the questions prior to treatment assignment (e.g., Berinsky et al. 2019). The wording of the attention check questions is included in the appendix. The median completion time for the survey was just over four minutes.

## Survey experiment

After consenting to participate in the survey, respondents answered a series questions on their demographics and completed the attention check questions.<sup>7</sup> They were then randomly assigned with equal probability into a control group, a “groundwork” treatment group, or a “power grab” treatment group. Each treatment group read a short vignette (described below).<sup>8</sup> Within each group, respondents were further randomized into reading about an action taken by the Democratic Party or the Republican Party. With the three treatment conditions (control, groundwork, power grab), the party manipulation (Democrat vs. Re-

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<sup>7</sup>Both the pre-treatment qualification survey created by Lucid Marketplace and the main survey included a question on partisanship. Only respondents who indicated that they were a Republican or Democrat in the qualification survey were able to enter the main survey, but a small percentage (2.9%) of respondents indicated that they were an independent or “something else” in the main survey. Of those, partisan leaners (based on an additional question) were grouped with their corresponding party, and true independents who indicated that they leaned toward neither party were screened out prior to treatment assignment.

<sup>8</sup>Two similar versions of the control group were used, although they were pooled for the purposes of analysis; see the appendix for more details.

publican), and the two versions of the control, there are a total of eight groups. Table 1 shows all of the groups and the probability of randomization into each one.

Table 1: Study 1, Randomization scheme

Condition	Probability
Control, Republican (Version A)	$p = \frac{1}{12}$
Control, Republican (Version B)	$p = \frac{1}{12}$
Control, Democrat (Version A)	$p = \frac{1}{12}$
Control, Democrat (Version B)	$p = \frac{1}{12}$
Groundwork, Republican	$p = \frac{1}{6}$
Groundwork, Democrat	$p = \frac{1}{6}$
Power grab, Republican	$p = \frac{1}{6}$
Power grab, Democrat	$p = \frac{1}{6}$

Each of the treatment vignettes provided the same information about a hypothetical “groundwork” action taken by Republicans or Democrats in the state legislature of another state, which is an action that could make a future antidemocratic power grab possible. The “power grab” condition describes what happened next—a secondary and final step in an incremental democratic backsliding process. Substantively, the vignettes each described an election administration measure that would allow a state legislature to review the ballot counting process in the state and accept or reject the results of elections—a measure directly inspired by Arizona’s H.B. 2596, which was introduced in early 2022. Immediately after that bill was introduced, scholars and journalists expressed concern that passing such a bill could pave the way for majorities in state legislatures to reject the results of any election outcomes that they did not like (Levine 2022). By comparing reactions to the “groundwork” step (passing the new measure) and the ultimate “power grab” (which was made possible by the passage of the measure), I can examine how the public perceives subsequent steps in a dynamic and incremental backsliding process.

The full text of each treatment condition is provided below:



- *Groundwork*: Suppose that in another state, [Republicans/Democrats] in the state legislature passed a new election administration measure. Under this policy, the state legislature would be allowed to review the ballot counting process in the state and accept or reject the results of elections.
- *Power grab*: Suppose that in another state, [Republicans/Democrats] in the state legislature passed a new election administration measure. Under this policy, the state legislature would be allowed to review the ballot counting process in the state and accept or reject the results of elections. [Paragraph break.] Now suppose that in the next election, the [Republican/Democratic] Party lost control of the state legislature. With very little evidence, [Republicans/Democrats] in the legislature then claimed that the election had been rigged. Following the new policy, they voted to reject the election results and called for a new election.

## Outcomes

After reading the treatment vignettes, respondents answered an outcome question that captures perceived threat to democracy. My main analyses use a binary version of the outcome (i.e., Would you say that this scenario poses a threat to democracy, or does not pose a threat to democracy in the state? [Poses a threat to democracy/Does not pose a threat]), and additional analyses examine results using a six-point scale (with an additional branched question: How strongly do you feel this scenario [poses / does not pose] a threat to democracy in the state? [Very strongly/Moderately strongly/A little strongly]). They also answered a question on their support for the action taken by the party described in the vignette, which also has a binary specification and a six-point scale version (i.e., All things considered, do you support or oppose what the [Republicans/Democrats] did in this scenario? [Support/Oppose]; How strongly do you [support/oppose] what the [Republicans/Democrats] did in this scenario? [Very strongly/Moderately strongly/A little strongly]).

Respondents then answered a series of additional outcome questions used for exploratory analyses, including their emotional reactions to the scenario they read about, the extent to which they saw the actions as legitimate or not, and the extent to which they believe the party they read about was trying to take control (full text included in the appendix). Finally, they answered a question on political interest and a five-item political knowledge battery.

## Analysis procedure

I use OLS regression with HC2 robust standard errors to test my main hypotheses, and present group means graphically in the main text for ease of interpretation. The outcome variable is the threat to democracy outcome or the support outcome (binary specifications; results using the six-point scales are reported in the appendix). I also compute marginal effects to test the difference between the groundwork and power grab conditions. To examine the effects of various moderators, I include one or more binary interaction terms (i.e., in-party vs. out-party treatment, Republican vs. Democrat, high vs. low political sophistication, etc.). Unless otherwise noted, each model averages over all respondent characteristics and experimental features beyond those specified in the model.

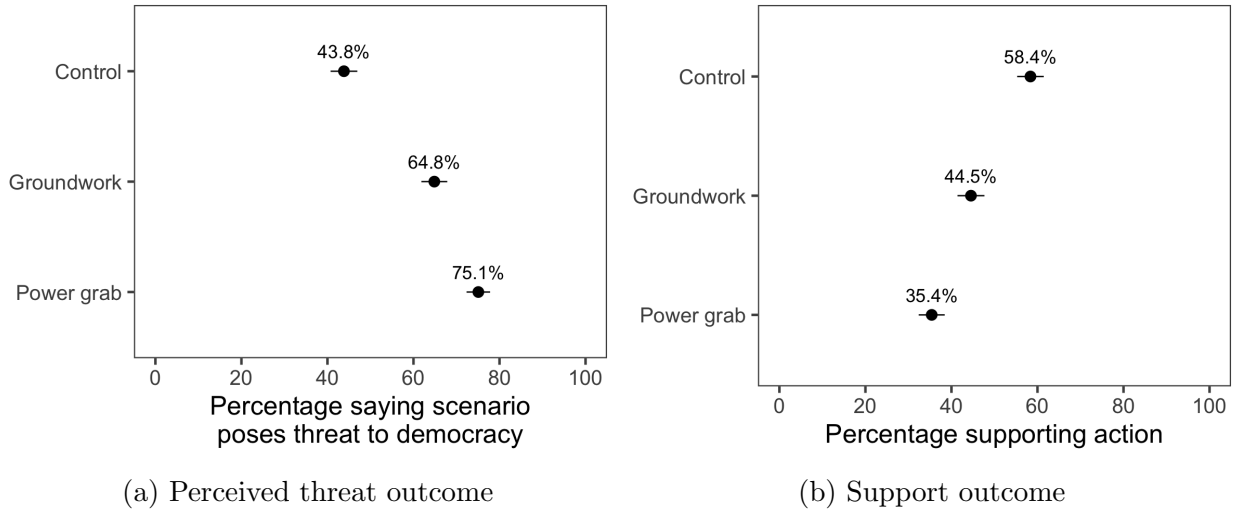
## Results

### Main results

I first examine the effects of the groundwork and power grab treatments on perceived threats to democracy and on support for the actions taken by the party described in the vignette. The results are presented in Figure 1, which shows the percentage of respondents in each treatment group saying that the scenario they read about poses a threat to democracy (binary outcome) on the left, and the percentage of respondents in each group saying that they support what the Democratic or Republican Party did in the vignette they read (binary outcome). In each plot, the dots are point estimates, and the bars on either side of each dot are the 95% confidence intervals. Analogous results in a tabular format obtained from regressing each outcome on an indicator for treatment condition are presented in Table B.1 in the appendix. Per my preregistration, these main analyses pool the Democrat and Republican versions of each treatment condition (control, groundwork, and power grab), so the resulting estimates average over these features.

As the figure shows, perceived threats to democracy are highest in the power grab con-

Figure 1: Study 1, Main results



dition and lowest in the control condition, with the groundwork condition falling between them. Perceived threats to democracy are approximately ten percentage points higher in the power grab condition, which 75.1% of respondents see as a threat to democracy, than in the groundwork condition, which 64.8% of respondents see as a threat ( $p < .005$  for the difference; see Table B.1), and 21 percentage points higher in the groundwork condition than in the control condition, which 43.8% of respondents see as a threat ( $p < .005$ ). The results for the support outcome mirror those for the perceived threat outcome: about third of respondents support the power grab action, 44.5% support the groundwork action, and 58.4% support the control action, with statistically significant differences between the control vs. groundwork and groundwork vs. power grab conditions ( $p < .005$ ; see Table B.1). As Table B.1 in the appendix shows, these results are substantively identical when the six-point scales are used instead of the binary specifications for each outcome.

Notably, these results suggest that actions which lay the groundwork for future power grabs are not entirely flying under the radar, but they set off substantially fewer alarms than the power grabs themselves. Likewise, even when averaging over the in- vs. out-party manipulation, nearly half of respondents support the groundwork action, suggesting that many citizens would not reject a policy change that lays the groundwork for a future power

grab, even if more of them would reject that same policy change if they had more information about potential antidemocratic results of that reform.

### **Examining partisan hypocrisy**

The analyses for the main results pooled both the in-party and out-party versions of the control, groundwork, and power grab experimental conditions. However, there is reason to believe that voters might engage in partisan hypocrisy in the domain of groundwork and power grab actions, holding their own party to a different standard than the opposing party. In Figures 2 and 3, I therefore examine the results by both in-party/out-party and by respondent party identification in order to examine whether there is evidence of partisan hypocrisy on either partisan side (with the analogous OLS regression results reported in Table B.2 in the appendix).<sup>9</sup> The plots on the left in Figures 2 and 3 show the mean percentages for each outcome broken down by whether the vignette described an action taken by the respondent's in-party or out-party (panel columns) and by whether the respondent is a Republican or Democrat (panel rows). The plots on the right show the difference between the in-party and out-party versions of the vignette, once again broken down by respondent party identification (panel rows). In the plots on the right, the dashed line is the zero line, and significant differences are shown in red.

Focusing first on Figure 2, an initial key result is that regardless of whether the vignette describes an action taken by a respondent's in-party or the out-party, respondents tend to see groundwork actions that make power grabs possible as less of a threat to democracy than the power grab. For each of the four cells in the plots on the right, the power grab is seen as between five and 18 percentage points more threatening than the groundwork

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<sup>9</sup>In Tables B.3 and B.4 in the appendix, I also report simpler models that focus on the in-party/out-party manipulation and the respondent party identification moderator independently, pooling over the other feature (respondent party identification or in-party vs. out-party) in each case. Table B.4, for example, shows that Republicans are substantially less threatened by, and more supportive of, both groundwork actions and power grabs committed by either party than are Democrats.

action.<sup>10</sup> The results are similar for the support outcome, presented in the left plot in Figure 3—support for the groundwork action is higher than support for the power grab in all four in-party vs. out-party and respondent party identification contrasts.<sup>11</sup> Taken together, these results suggest that regardless of the party committing an action that paves the way for an antidemocratic power grab, many citizens still fail to anticipate the threats that those actions pose and withdraw their support accordingly.

A second key result captures the extent to which partisans demonstrate “double standards” in their evaluation of groundwork actions or antidemocratic power grabs. My analysis of potential partisan hypocrisy is displayed in the plots on the right side of Figures 2 and 6, showing whether Republicans (top panel row) or Democrats (bottom panel row) differentially perceive actions taken by their own party vs. the opposing party. I find an interesting pattern of mixed results for partisan hypocrisy. In Figure 2, Republicans show evidence of hypocrisy, reporting greater threats to democracy when the out-party commits a groundwork or power grab action than when the in-party does. These results corroborate research documenting partisan perceptual gaps in evaluations of antidemocratic behavior (Krishnarajan 2022), which appear to extend to recognition of whether or not groundwork actions pose a threat to democracy. For Democrats, however, there is no systematic evidence of differences in perceived threats to democracy by whether the action was committed by members of the in- vs. out-party. The differences in percentages of Democratic respondents who say that the scenario they read about poses a threat to democracy are small and statistically insignificant in the in- vs. out-party cases.<sup>12</sup>

Up to this point, the results for the support outcome have largely mirrored those for

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<sup>10</sup>Note that these differences just miss statistical significance in two out of the four comparisons, likely because they are underpowered after sub-setting the data based on both the in-party vs. out-party and respondent party identification features; see Table B.2.

<sup>11</sup>These results once again just miss statistical significance in two out of the four cases; see Table B.2.

<sup>12</sup>As I later show, I do find evidence of partisan hypocrisy among Democrats for the perceived threat outcome in Study 2 and for the support outcome in both Study 1 and Study 2. Future research should seek to determine if the pattern I document for Democrats’ perceived threat to democracy by in-party vs. out-party is a fluke, or a systematic trend that is attributable to the specific design of Study 1.

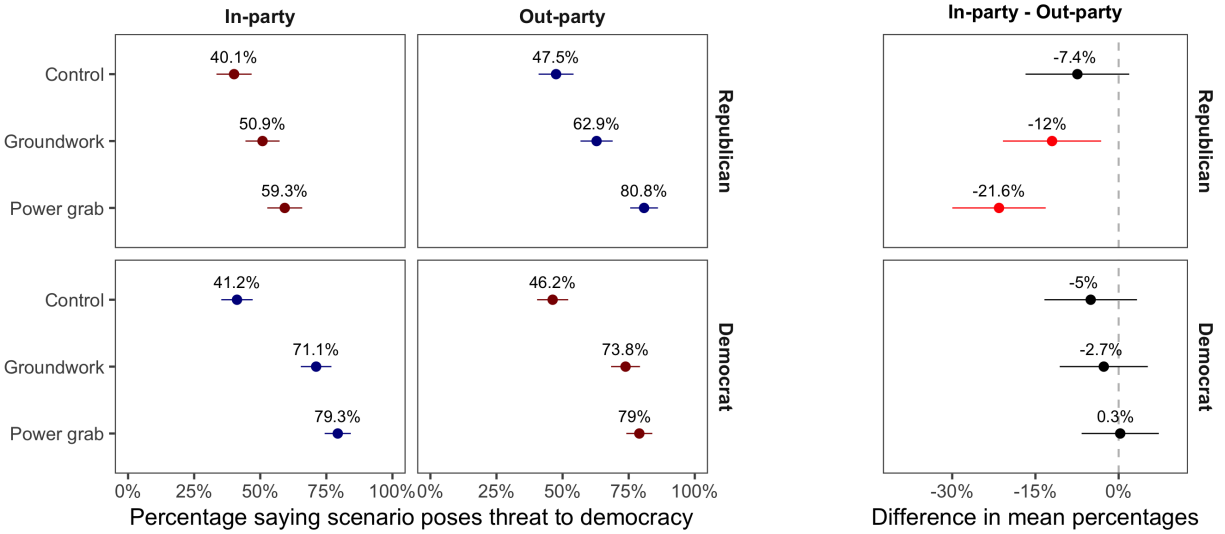


Figure 2: Study 1, Mean perceived threat to democracy and group differences by in-party vs. out-party and respondent partisanship

the perceived threat outcome.<sup>13</sup> When examining support for the action taken, however, I find evidence of significant partisan hypocrisy among both Republicans and Democrats. Across all three treatment groups, support for the action described in the vignette when it is committed by a respondent’s in-party is between 25 percentage points and 45 percentage points higher than when the action is committed by the out-party. Notably, partisan hypocrisy in support of the democracy-undermining groundwork and power grab conditions is higher for Republicans than Democrats (gaps of 44–45 percentage points vs. 25–28 percentage points), but partisans of both stripes are clearly more forgiving of antidemocratic behavior—in its subtle or overt stages—when such behavior privileges their party. Indeed, nearly half of Democrats and over half of Republicans support an in-party power grab, suggesting that under some circumstances, partisans may rationally prioritize partisan gains over democratic values (Graham and Svulik 2020; Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022) or justify in-party power grabs as consistent with democratic behavior (Krishnarajan 2022).

<sup>13</sup>The two items are moderately correlated, at  $-0.41$ . A mediation analysis examining whether perceived threats mediate the effect of the treatments on support for the action taken by the party described in the vignette is reported in the appendix (Table B.8). The results reveal a partial mediation effect, suggesting that decreases in perceived threats to democracy are responsible for some of the decline in support for groundwork actions and power grabs.

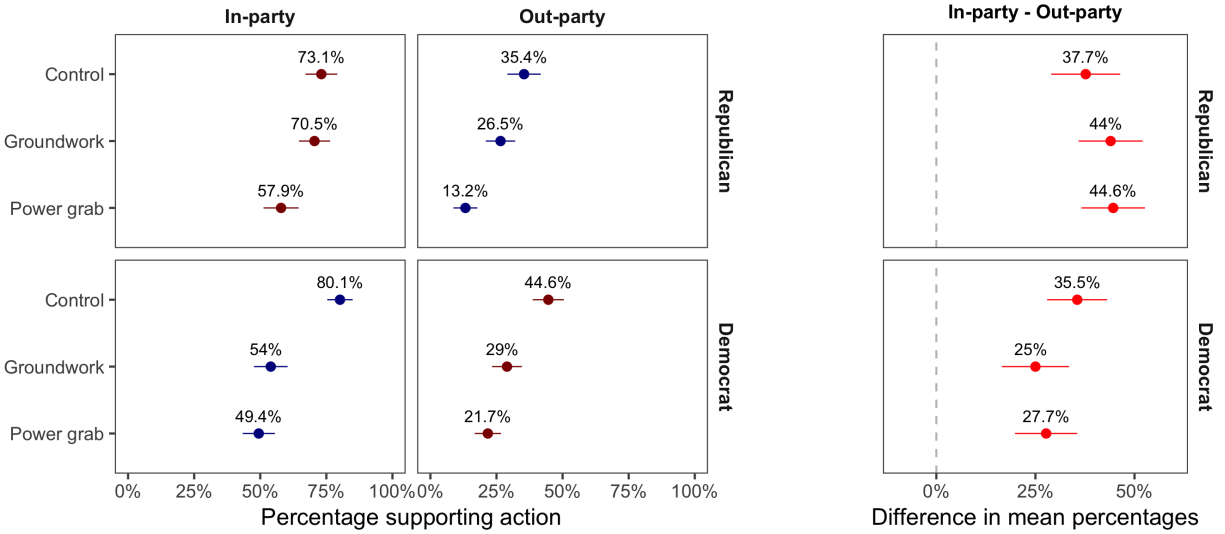


Figure 3: Study 1, Mean support for action and group differences by in-party vs. out-party and respondent partisanship

Even among their base, however, partisan elites appear enjoy a more comfortable majority of support when committing groundwork actions than power grabs, suggesting that incremental backsliding may remain the more electorally strategic option.

### Additional results

Finally, I ran a series of analyses using additional moderators and outcomes. Tables B.5 and B.6 in the appendix show results broken down by respondents' level of political knowledge and their education level, which provides a test of whether individuals who are more politically attentive are more attuned to the threats posed by groundwork actions—and/or less supportive of those actions—relative to the power grab. The results are mixed: for political knowledge, gaps in perceived threat to democracy and support for the action for the groundwork vs. power grab conditions are significantly larger for high knowledge individuals than low knowledge individuals, suggesting that those with more political knowledge identify the groundwork action as more of a red flag (relative to the power grab) than those with less political knowledge. However, mean perceived threats for high and low knowledge individuals in the groundwork condition are about the same, suggesting similarities in baseline threat

perceptions for the groundwork action.

Further, I find no significant differences by level of education: those with and without a college degree responded similarly to the groundwork and power grab vignettes for each outcome, suggesting that these two items tap different dimensions of political attentiveness (Weinschenk and Dawes 2019). Another explanation for these mixed results is that proxies for general political sophistication (i.e., answering basic civics questions directly or holding a college degree) do not moderate citizens' ability to identify the threat of a groundwork action, but a more specific measure of knowledge about the nature of democracy and democratic backsliding would (see, e.g., Barabas et al. 2014 on differences between general and specific political knowledge). Developing such a measure and testing it as a moderator in my studies is an area for future research.

Next, I collected data on a series of additional outcomes to examine how attitudes beyond perceived threats to democracy vary in the groundwork and power grab treatment conditions. Specifically, I was interested in examining respondents' emotional reactivity to the treatment conditions, following a broad literature in political science and psychology that documents the mobilizing effects of emotions such as fear and anger on political behavior and perceived threats (e.g., Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Valentino et al. 2011). To further understand how respondents differentially evaluate groundwork and power grab actions, I also asked respondents about their perceived legitimacy of the action taken by the party described in the vignette, as well as their perceptions of whether the party described in the vignette was trying to take control.

Table B.7 in the appendix shows the treatment effects on all four exploratory outcomes. In each case, I observe a pattern of effects that is similar to the perceived threat and support outcomes: levels of fear and anger, perceptions of the legitimacy of the action, and perceptions that the party in question was trying to take control are highest in the power grab condition and lowest in the control condition. The differences between the control and groundwork conditions, as well as the differences between the groundwork and power



grab conditions, are statistically significant in every case. These exploratory outcomes were measured after the main outcomes and should therefore be interpreted with some caution. Nevertheless, they provide tentative evidence that differences in how respondents perceive actions which make authoritarian power grabs possible, and the power grabs themselves, persist beyond perceived threats to democracy and subsequent support. Indeed, the emotions which might motivate respondents to voice their opposition to antidemocratic behavior appear to be less activated for groundwork actions than power grabs. Moreover, perceptions that actions are illegitimate, or that one party is trying to take control, may not entirely register until one party has become entrenched in power.

## **Study 1 discussion**

Taken together, the results from Study 1 appear to reveal both good news and bad news with respect to public perceptions of incremental democratic backsliding. The good news is that in most cases, majorities see groundwork actions that pave the way for antidemocratic power grabs as threats to democracy and are opposed to such actions. In other words, there is little evidence that elites can commit such acts without the public realizing what they are up to, which suggests that citizens may have a higher capacity to detect groundwork actions as problematic than existing scholarship on democratic backsliding predicts (e.g., Luo and Przeworski 2022).

However, there is also bad news: although the public's ability to recognize groundwork actions as threats to democracy is not absent, it is limited in many cases. When groundwork actions are committed by the in-party, for example, majorities of respondents on both sides of the aisle are in favor of those actions. Moreover, I find systematic evidence that respondents view the eventual power grabs that can result from groundwork actions as significantly greater threats than the groundwork steps, and they are significantly more opposed to power grabs than groundwork actions. This suggests that if citizens *knew* exactly what type of consequences could arise from a groundwork action, their perceived threats and opposition

to groundwork actions could be higher. This consistent and large gap in citizens’ perceived threats to democracy, as well as their subsequent support for groundwork actions and power grabs, implies that elites with antidemocratic aspirations have considerable leeway to take small steps toward consolidating their power.

One important design choice in Study 1 was to feature only a short description of the groundwork and power grab actions in the treatment vignettes, which was intended to isolate the effects of the policy change. However, citizens learn about most political issues—including actions that could ultimately undermine democracy—through the lens of elite frames. Indeed, would-be autocrats actively try to convince voters that groundwork actions are harmless and may even make democracy stronger. Thus, even if majorities in the public can usually identify groundwork actions as bad for democracy when they read about them “objectively,” it remains possible that convincing elite justifications for those actions could dramatically reduce threat perceptions or increase public support. In Study 2, I therefore examine how elite justifications for the same groundwork action tested in Study 1 impact perceptions of that action in the public.

## **Study 2**

### **Sample**

I administered a second preregistered online survey experiment among a national sample of 2,694 adults in the United States provided by Lucid Marketplace from September 30–October 3, 2022. I once again used quotas to achieve national representation on key demographic attributes and targeted roughly 50% Democrats and 50% Republicans. See Table C.8 in the appendix for more details on the demographic composition of the sample overall and by treatment condition. I used an additional attention check in this survey (for a total of three attention checks; see appendix for full wording). The median completion time for the survey was four minutes and twenty seconds.

## Survey experiment

Political leaders and parties who seek to commit antidemocratic power grabs often justify the actions that lay the groundwork for those power grabs in democratic terms. They likely do this strategically in order to maintain public support—if they told citizens outright that they were trying to undemocratically grab power, they could expect to be voted out of office. If they successfully grab power, however, they face less of an incentive to justify their actions because they may be no longer accountable to voters and can hold on to power via more authoritarian means.

For this reason, the experimental vignettes in Study 2 focus only on the groundwork condition described in Study 1, and I manipulate whether the groundwork action is accompanied by a “democracy-enhancing” justification and the nature of that justification. The “no justification” condition, which is identical to the groundwork condition in Study 1, therefore serves as the baseline, and I examine how the treatment effects vary when one of two types of democracy-enhancing statements is used to justify the groundwork action. As in Study 1, I also manipulate whether the action was committed by the in- or out-party, yielding a total of six treatment conditions. Table 2 shows all of the treatment conditions in Study 2 and the probability of assignment into each one.

Table 2: Study 2, Randomization scheme

Condition	Probability
Groundwork + no justification, Republican	$p = \frac{1}{6}$
Groundwork + no justification, Democrat	$p = \frac{1}{6}$
Groundwork + voter fraud justification, Republican	$p = \frac{1}{6}$
Groundwork + voter fraud justification, Democrat	$p = \frac{1}{6}$
Groundwork + voting rights justification, Republican	$p = \frac{1}{6}$
Groundwork + voting rights justification, Democrat	$p = \frac{1}{6}$

Substantively, the “democracy-enhancing” justifications describe themes that prior re-

search has demonstrated resonate with Republicans and Democrats in the context of electoral reform (Ansolabehere and Persily 2007; Atkeson et al. 2014). Specifically, I test statements attributed to a co-sponsor of the new measure that claim that allowing the state legislature to oversee the ballot counting process and accept or reject the results of elections will strengthen democracy by helping to combat voter fraud in the state (*voter fraud* condition), or that it will strengthen democracy by helping to ensure voting rights in the state (*voting rights* condition).

Since the groundwork action was modeled after a real election administration measure proposed by Republicans and justified in terms of election fraud, the voter fraud justification may be more realistic than the voting rights justification. However, it is reasonable to think that Democrats who seek to consolidate power could justify their actions in terms of voter access. An example of this is the recent episodes of partisan gerrymandering by Democrats, which have featured claims that unfairly drawn maps are simply trying to fix issues of representation and access in voting (e.g., Burnett 2021). Given my expectations that Republicans would be more receptive to a voter fraud justification and Democrats would be more receptive to a voting rights justification, and because existing literature tells us little about how the specific *content* of democracy-enhancing justifications could impact citizens' perceptions of groundwork actions, I tested both in a fully-crossed design. This also allows me to evaluate how citizens respond to justifications that match what they might expect in the real world in terms of party and content (i.e., a Republican expressing concerns about voter fraud or a Democrat expressing concerns about voting rights), as well as a more unexpected "opposite" pairing (i.e., a Democrat referencing fraud or a Republican referencing rights). The full text of each treatment condition is included below.

- *Groundwork + no justification*: Suppose that in another state, [Republicans/Democrats] in the state legislature passed a new election administration measure. Under this policy, the state legislature would be allowed to review the ballot counting process in the state and accept or reject the results of elections.
- *Groundwork + voter fraud justification*: [Groundwork text + ] State representative Casey Smith, one of the [Republican/Democratic] co-sponsors of the new legislation,

argued that the measure would strengthen democracy by helping to combat voter fraud in the state. “This measure will enhance the security of our elections: the cornerstone of our democracy. By giving the state legislature the power to review the ballot counting process, we can protect our democracy by making sure that every legal vote is counted,” said Smith.

- *Groundwork + voting rights justification:* [Groundwork text + ] State representative Casey Smith, one of the [Republican/Democratic] co-sponsors of the new legislation, argued that the measure would strengthen democracy by helping to enhance voting rights in the state. “This measure will enhance equality in our elections: the cornerstone of our democracy. By giving the state legislature the power to review the ballot counting process, we can protect our democracy by making sure that no one is prevented from casting their vote,” said Smith.

For outcomes, I measure the treatment effects on the same key outcomes described in Study 1: perceived threat to democracy and support for the action described in the vignette. My analysis procedure in Study 2 is identical to that in Study 1, except the groundwork + no justification condition is set as the baseline (whereas in Study 1, it was one of the treatment conditions). I again present group means graphically for ease of interpretation, and the associated regression tables are included in the appendix.

## Results

### Main results

Mirroring my presentation of the results in Study 1, Figure 4 reports the percentage of respondents in each of the three treatment groups saying that the groundwork scenario they read about poses a threat to democracy (left) and the percentage of respondents who support what the Democratic or Republican Party did (right), with dots representing point estimates and the bars on either side of the dots representing 95% confidence intervals (see Table C.1 in the appendix for analogous OLS regression results in a tabular format). The main analyses once again pool the Democrat and Republican versions of the treatment conditions, with the resulting estimates averaging over the party manipulation.

As Figure 4 shows, justifications appear to significantly reduce perceived threats to democracy and significantly increase support for the groundwork action. While 68% of

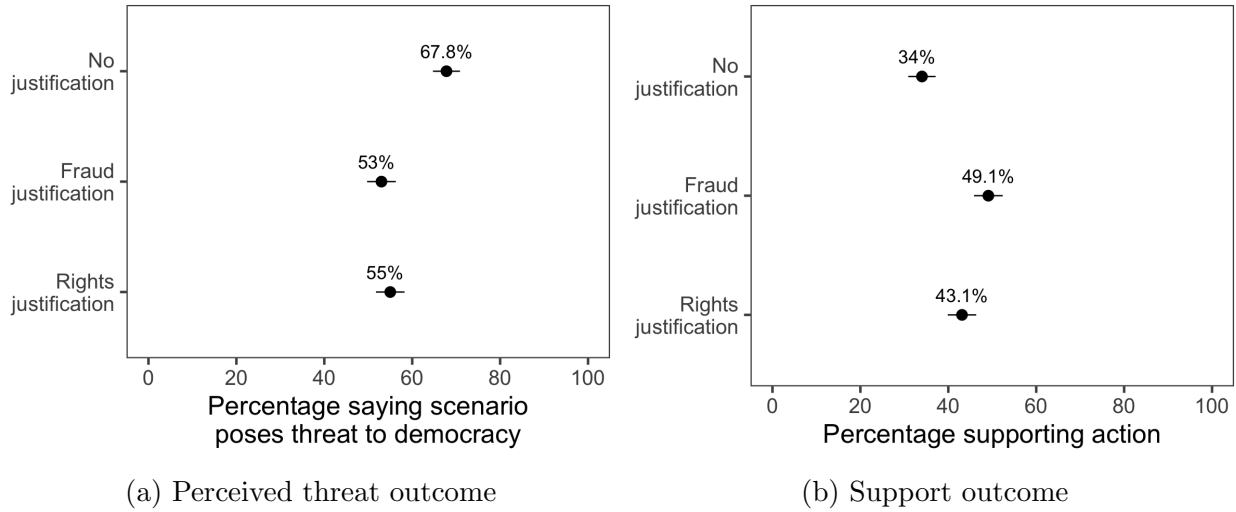
respondents see the groundwork action as a threat to democracy when there is no justification attached to it (essentially mirroring my results in Study 1), just 53% of respondents see it as a threat when a democracy-enhancing justification related to preventing voter fraud is used, and just 55% of respondents see it as a threat when a democracy-enhancing justification related to voting rights is used (the small difference between the voter fraud and voting rights conditions is not statistically significant; see Table C.1). The difference between the no justification condition and each of the two treatment conditions is highly statistically significant at  $p < .005$ .

For support, only 34% of respondents support the groundwork action without any justification, but 49% support it when a voter fraud justification is used and 43% support it when a voting rights justification is used (with the differences from the no justification condition statistically significant at  $p < .005$  in each case). Here, the six percentage point difference between the voter fraud condition and the voting rights condition *is* statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ; see Table C.1), suggesting that overall, a democracy-enhancing justification that focuses on preventing voter fraud has a larger effect on public support than a justification that focuses on enhancing voting rights. All of these results persist when six-point scales are used instead of the binary specification for either outcome (see Table C.1). Taken together, these findings imply that it is significantly easier for elites to “get away” with groundwork actions when they justify them in democracy-enhancing terms.

### **The dynamics of partisanship**

Of course, partisanship plays an important role in how voters evaluate elite cues. First, since the substance of the justifications (voter fraud vs. voting rights) was intended to differentially appeal to Republicans and Democrats based on how their parties have traditionally framed debates over electoral reform (e.g., Atkeson et al. 2014; Ansolabehere and Persily 2007), there is reason to believe that the voter fraud frame would be especially convincing for Republicans and the voting rights frame would be especially appealing to Democrats. Second, elite frames

Figure 4: Study 2, Main results



are most powerful when they come from the in-party instead of the out-party, so we might expect differences in acceptance of justifications based on whether they are provided by an in-party or an out-party member. I therefore first break down the results by whether the respondent is a Republican or a Democrat to test how members of each party evaluated the “substance” of the justifications. I then examine results by both the in-party vs. out-party manipulation and by respondents’ own partisan identification to examine the extent to which Republicans and Democrats each engage in partisan hypocrisy, holding their own party to a different standard than the opposing party.

Table C.3 in the appendix shows OLS regression results obtained from regressing the threat and support outcomes on an indicator for treatment condition and an indicator for whether the respondent is a Republican or a Democrat (averaging over the in-party vs. out-party manipulation). Across all of the outcome specifications (perceived threat and support for the action, binary and scale specifications), the coefficients on the justification treatment conditions (voter fraud and voting rights) and the indicator for whether the respondent is a Republican are large and highly statistically significant, while the interactions between the treatment conditions and the Republican indicator are not statistically significant. In substantive terms, Republicans and Democrats are both less threatened by, and more supportive

of, groundwork actions when they are accompanied by a democracy-enhancing justification, and Republicans are consistently less threatened by and more supportive of groundwork actions regardless of whether or not a justification is used.<sup>14</sup>

Surprisingly, however, there is little evidence that Democrats prefer the voting rights justification to the voter fraud justification—the difference between the voter fraud condition and the voting rights condition is small and statistically significant for the threat outcome, and there is a statistically significant *positive* 6.7-percentage point difference ( $p < .05$ ) in support in the voter fraud and voting rights justification conditions for Democrats (third column of Table B.4, binary specification), suggesting that Democratic support for the groundwork action is actually higher when a voter fraud justification is used than when a voting rights justification is used. For Republicans, the fraud justification is also preferred (i.e. yields lower perceived threat and higher support) to the rights justification, although this difference is only statistically significant for one outcome specification (fourth column of Table B.4, scale version of the support outcome).

These results suggest that contrary to expectations, democracy-enhancing justifications may lower perceived threats to democracy in similar ways for Democrats and Republicans, regardless of the substantive reasoning behind the justification. Potential explanations for this pattern include respondents viewing the voter fraud justification as more realistic given how Republicans in the United States have framed real electoral reform proposals similar to the one described in the treatment; that concerns about voter fraud are actually pervasive among both Republican and Democratic voters, even if partisan elites frame debates over voting and elections in different ways (Durkee 2021); or that individuals may be more motivated to avoid harm (i.e., prevent fraud, a “loss” frame) than seek out additional benefits (i.e., enhance rights, a “gain” frame) (Tversky and Kahneman 1981). In any case, as the next set of results show, partisan cues overwhelm the influence of the fraud vs. rights justification,

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<sup>14</sup>Republicans’ reduced threat perceptions and greater support for antidemocratic behavior also appears in Study 1 (see Table B.4 in the appendix).



pushing back on findings in other domains suggesting that voters use policy information as a heuristic at least as much as they rely on party cues in making political judgments (e.g., Bullock 2011).

Figures 5 and 6 therefore consider the effects of both respondent partisanship and the in-party vs. out-party manipulation, allowing us to evaluate in substantive terms how both Republicans and Democrats perceive groundwork actions with or without justifications when those justifications are provided by their in- vs. out-party (see Table C.4 in the appendix for OLS regression results for this triple interaction model, and Table C.2 for results that focus just on the in-party vs. out-party manipulation; Table C.3 showed results focusing just on respondent party identification as a moderator). Mirroring Figures 2 and 3 from Study 1, these figures show how Republicans (top panel rows) and Democrats (bottom panel rows) evaluate the various vignettes that described actions taken by their in-party (left panel columns, left plots) or the out-party (right panel columns, left plots). The difference in means for the in-party and out-party conditions, broken down by respondent party, is shown in the plots on the right for each figure.

I find pervasive evidence of partisan hypocrisy among both Republicans and Democrats in Study 2. Focusing first on the perceived threat to democracy outcome, shown in Figure 5, mean perceived threats to democracy are between 14.2 and 29.3 percentage points lower when the groundwork action is committed by the in-party than the out-party regardless of justifications. For the support outcome, presented in Figure 6, mean support for groundwork actions taken by the in-party is a whopping 31.7–41.9 percentage points higher than support for the same action taken by the out-party.

The highest partisan hypocrisy that I observe is for Republicans in the “rights justification” condition; among this group, only 33% of respondents see the groundwork action as a threat to democracy when the Republican Party promotes it on the grounds of enhancing voting rights, but nearly twice as many respondents (62%) see the groundwork action as a threat when it is committed by Democrats using an identical justification. Likewise, 73%

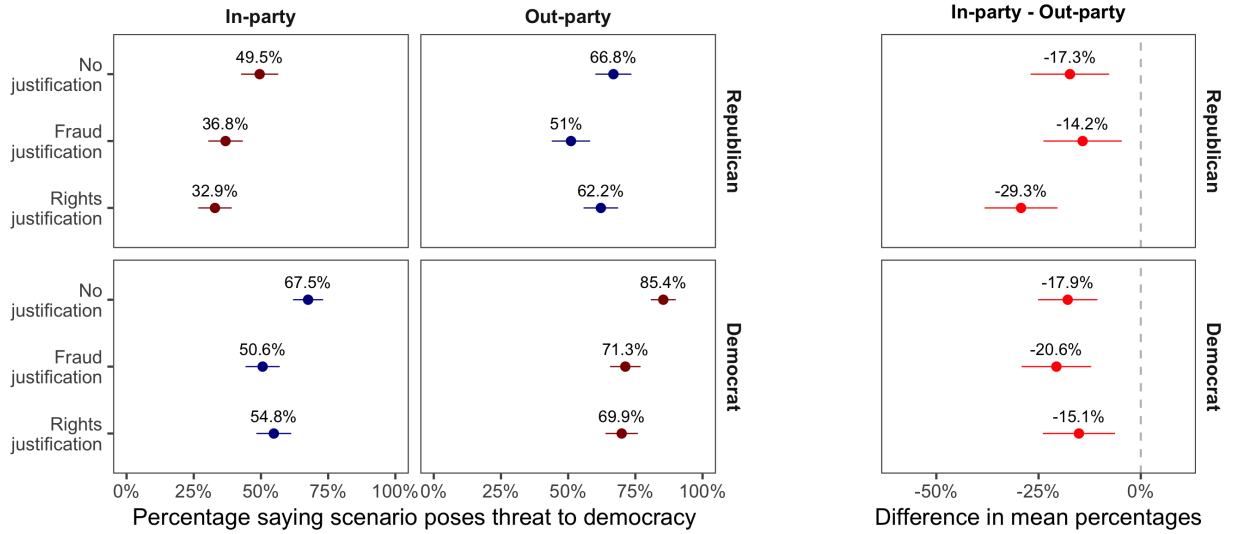


Figure 5: Study 2, Mean perceived threat to democracy and group differences by in-party vs. out-party and respondent partisanship

of Republicans support the action when the rights justification is used by Republicans, but only 24% support it when the same justification comes from Democrats.

By contrast, the largest partisan hypocrisy for Democrats occurs for the voter fraud condition: about half of Democrats believe the groundwork action poses a threat to democracy when Democratic elites justify it as preventing voter fraud, but nearly three-quarters of Democrats see it as a threat when it the voter fraud justification is used by Republicans. Moving to the support outcome, the gap in Democratic support for in-party vs. out-party actions justified on fraud grounds is over 45 percentage points.

This interesting pattern of results suggests that partisans may be especially threatened by—and opposed to—justifications that are regularly promoted by their out-party. They are very willing, however, to accept those justifications when promoted by their in-party, providing further evidence that the substantive content of a democracy-enhancing justification is not the most important factor determining whether partisan voters accept actions that lay the groundwork for future power grabs.

A final noteworthy result that is revealed in Figure 6 in particular is the absolute level of support for groundwork actions in the mass public. Focusing specifically on actions

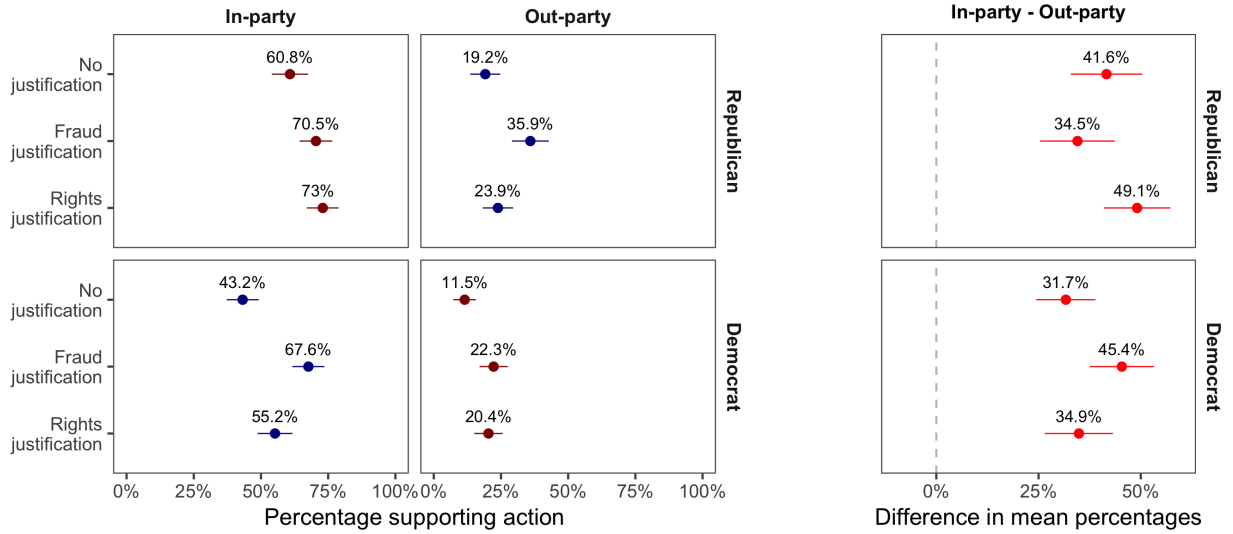


Figure 6: Study 2, Mean support for action and group differences by in-party vs. out-party and respondent partisanship

committed by the in-party, I find that a comfortable majority of both Republicans and Democrats (between 55.2% and 73%) support groundwork actions that are accompanied by some type of justification. If parties are responding to what they believe a majority of their base will support, this yields the troubling conclusion that they can most likely get away with actions that lay the groundwork for future antidemocratic power grabs so long as they justify them in democracy-enhancing terms.

### Additional moderators

Finally, I conducted a series of additional analyses for Study 2 that I present in the appendix. First, I examine whether political knowledge and/or education level moderate the effects of the treatments on either the perceived threat outcome or the support outcome. Table C.5 in the appendix shows that individuals with greater political knowledge are overall less supportive of groundwork actions (with or without justification) than those with less political knowledge, but the effects of the voter fraud and voting rights frames are not significantly different based on political knowledge levels. Perceived threats to democracy are similar for high and low political knowledge individuals. For education level (shown

in Table C.6), perceived threats to democracy and support for groundwork actions with or without justification are nearly the same regardless of whether respondents hold a college degree or not. Like in Study 1, these results once again suggest that scores on a standard political knowledge index and self-reported education levels tap into different attitudinal dynamics, and being “more politically sophisticated” according to either measure fails to produce a systematic tendency to reject antidemocratic actions and/or frames designed to convince citizens that those actions are harmless.

Finally, as in Study 1, I conducted a mediation analysis (Tingley et al. 2014) to examine the relationship between the perceived threat to democracy outcome and support for the action described in the vignette. I find a partial mediation effect for the voter fraud outcome (decreases in perceived threats explain 58% of the effect of the voter fraud frame on support for the groundwork action) and a full mediation effect for the voting rights frame (decreases in perceived threats explain 87% of the treatment effects on support, and the average direct effect of the voting rights frame on support is not statistically significant).<sup>15</sup> This suggests that decreases in perceived threats to democracy may explain a great deal of changes in support of groundwork actions that pave the way for future power grabs.

## **Study 2 discussion**

Study 1 left us with some good news about the public’s ability to see groundwork actions as threats to democracy and withdraw their support for those actions. While it was clear that respondents were more concerned about the power grabs themselves, majorities were usually willing to acknowledge that groundwork actions pose a threat. Study 2, however, suggests that elites can circumvent the public’s potential recognition of groundwork actions as harmful by justifying them in democracy-enhancing terms. When co-partisan elites simply tell their supporters that dangerous reforms are designed to make democracy stronger, their

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<sup>15</sup>Since the mediator, perceived threat to democracy, was measured prior to support for the action, these results should be interpreted cautiously.

base tends to believe them. Taken together, this evidence suggests that public resilience is minimal in the face of would-be autocratic leaders who actively try to convince them that early-stage antidemocratic actions are democracy-enhancing.

## General Discussion

In stable, self-enforcing democracies, elected leaders play by the democratic rules of the game because they anticipate that the public will recognize if they seek to grab power and accordingly withdraw their support in subsequent elections. In order to check elite power, however, voters need to be aware when a rule has been violated. Across two large survey experiments conducted on nationally representative samples in the United States, I tested whether the incremental and stealthy nature of contemporary democratic backsliding provides opportunities for elites to circumvent the public as a check on antidemocratic behavior.

In Study 1, I examined whether elites can get away with antidemocratic power grabs because the public fails to anticipate how groundwork actions—incremental and often subtle policy changes that make power grabs possible—can ultimately allow would-be autocratic leaders and parties to “legally” take control. In Study 2, I then examined the role of elite cues in shaping public perceptions of groundwork actions, testing whether elites can convince the public that groundwork actions are actually intended to strengthen or enhance democracy. In each study, I also explored the partisan dynamics that underlie public perceptions of threats to democracy and their subsequent support for groundwork actions. My key findings are as follows:

- Citizens view groundwork actions that make antidemocratic power grabs possible as substantially less of a threat to democracy than the power grabs themselves, and their support for groundwork actions is considerably higher than their support for power grabs.
- When elites justify groundwork actions in “democracy-enhancing” terms, perceived

threats to democracy decline further, and support for groundwork actions increases.

- At least in the domain of election reform that increases partisan control over the electoral process, Republicans report overall lower perceived threats and greater support for groundwork actions that pave the way for power grabs. However, Republicans and Democrats alike tend to underestimate the threats posed by groundwork actions relative to the power grabs that result from those actions.
- When it comes to support for groundwork actions vs. power grabs, as well as support for groundwork actions that are justified in democracy-enhancing terms, Republicans and Democrats *both* exhibit significant partisan hypocrisy. When groundwork actions (with or without justification) are committed by the in-party, comfortable majorities of partisan voters say that they support their party's actions.
- Partisan hypocrisy persists regardless of the substantive content of democracy-enhancing messages, suggesting that voters are willing to accept different reasoning for groundwork actions so long as the justification comes from their party.
- Finally, on balance, there is little evidence that politically sophisticated individuals are substantially more aware of the potential threats posed by incremental democratic backsliding or less swayed by elite cues. This suggests that interventions designed to overcome the dynamics I document need to be more specific and targeted than striving to increase citizens' civic knowledge and that other measures of democracy-specific political sophistication should be developed and tested as moderators.

Given that this study focused on a single type of groundwork action—an electoral reform that could make it possible for parties to grab power in subsequent elections—these findings should be taken as suggestive rather than conclusive. Future research should ideally test how voters react to a variety of different groundwork actions, including those that may have been proposed or passed by Democrats rather than Republicans in the real world. Follow-up research should also test these dynamics in other democracies around the world to establish whether the trends I document are a general feature of public opinion, or if they are unique

to the social and political context of the United States.<sup>16</sup>

My results also raise questions about how support for various groundwork actions—one of my key outcomes—translates into real voting behavior, including vote choice and voter turnout. At the very least, my finding that majorities of partisan voters tend to support groundwork actions committed by the in-party suggests that these actions would *not* be an issue that demobilizes voters or changes their mind about which party to support. For the minority of voters who *oppose* groundwork actions, however—which I find to be up to 46% in one experimental condition (see Study 1, Figure 3)—it is unclear whether that opposition would be strong enough to make a voter abstain or vote across partisan lines. Whether partisan elites would strategically avoid taking actions that a considerable proportion of their base would oppose remains an open question.

A related question is whether and how political independents would perceive groundwork actions taken by either party. My experiments focused on self-reported Republicans and Democrats only, but there are a wealth of different theoretical expectations for independents that have potentially important impacts on electoral outcomes and strategic choices by elites. On the one hand, independents might be less willing to support groundwork actions and the parties or leaders that commit them, or less swayed by partisan cues. On the other hand, independents may be less politically attentive than partisan voters (e.g. Campbell et al. 1980), which could make it easier for elites to get away with subtle policy reforms that independents simply are not paying attention to. Future research should therefore sample independents in addition to partisan voters.

Another important question for future research is whether and how two-sided rhetoric—e.g., a democracy-enhancing justification from one elite and a countering response from another elite—influences citizens’ perceptions of groundwork actions. As citizens are exposed to more information on either side, especially coming from their in-party vs. out-party, they

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<sup>16</sup>I am currently in the process of conducting survey experiments modeled after the studies described in this paper in nine established democracies: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

may be more capable of making accurate judgments about the nature of elite antidemocratic behavior. On the other hand, they may be more likely to engage in motivated reasoning, accepting justifications that are politically congenial and rejecting information that is not. Experiments that vary the number of justifications, the partisan source of this rhetoric, and the substantive content of any statements made about groundwork actions would provide clearer answers to these questions.

Finally, although I screened out inattentive respondents and used quotas to achieve representativeness on key demographic variables, the limitations of online convenience samples are known. My findings should ideally be replicated on a national probability sample to ensure that the findings hold.

## Conclusion

Across two large, nationally representative survey experiments conducted in one of the world's largest backsliding democracies, I find that the public is slow to react to groundwork actions that make future antidemocratic power grabs possible. To my knowledge, this study is one of the first to experimentally demonstrate how information deficiencies early on in a dynamic and incremental backsliding process make it hard for citizens to check elite power before it is too late. The slow and subtle nature of this process, when combined with the influence of elite messages that confuse and mislead the public, undermine citizens' ability to recognize that a "bright line" or democratic trip wire is being crossed. When a would-be autocrat is elected to power, the contemporary authoritarian playbook—incremental steps away from democracy cloaked in democracy-enhancing justifications—makes it nearly impossible for democracies to be self-enforcing.

These findings suggest that bolstering resiliency to democratic backsliding among the public should focus on intervening at the groundwork stage. Greater scrutiny of elite actions from trusted third party sources—such as voters' preferred media sources, other elites (e.g.,



Clayton and Willer 2022), or even social networks—may increase voters’ perceptions that an elected leader is trying to unravel the fabric of democratic governance. Such interventions should be specific and targeted, and will need to be strong enough to overcome the influence of partisan cues, which may be a significant hurdle in many contemporary democracies. Absent such interventions, there appears to be little stopping elected officials with authoritarian ambitions from abandoning democratic values and entrenching themselves in power.

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# Supplementary Materials

## A Additional Research Design

### Study 1 control description

Two versions of the control group were used in Study 1. Since one of the core outcomes in this study is perceived threat to democracy of a given action described in the experimental vignette, it was important to design a control vignette that would minimize perceived threats to democracy *and* would minimize partisan differences in reactions to the control stimuli. The control would also ideally describe an election-related reform that does not threaten democracy, since the treatment conditions focus on election reforms that do threaten democracy.

I ultimately settled on a reform that would change slightly modify the time window in which absentee ballots could be counted (an election administration measure with considerable variation across states, e.g. National Conference of State Legislatures 2022). I then created two versions of the vignette—one describing an election administration measure which would accept absentee ballots by mail if they are postmarked by election day and received within two days of the election (previously three days), and another which would accept absentee ballots received within three days (previously two days)—anticipating that Republicans might view a reform that slightly makes mail ballot counting slightly more expansive as a greater threat to democracy than one that makes it slightly less expansive, and vice versa for Democrats. All analyses pool the two versions into a single combined control group, averaging over any differences between them.

The full text of the control conditions is provided below (randomized party in brackets):

- *Version A*: Suppose that in another state, [Republicans/Democrats] in the state legislature passed a new election administration measure. Under this policy, the state would accept absentee ballots by mail if they are postmarked by election day and re-

ceived within **three days** of the election. Previously, the state only accepted absentee ballots by mail if they were postmarked by election day and received within **two days** of the election.

- *Version B*: Suppose that in another state, [Republicans/Democrats] in the state legislature passed a new election administration measure. Under this policy, the state would accept absentee ballots by mail if they are postmarked by election day and received within **two days** of the election. Previously, the state only accepted absentee ballots by mail if they were postmarked by election day and received within **three days** of the election.

As expected, there were some differences in how Republicans and Democrats evaluated each version of the control. Table A.1 shows the percentage of respondents who viewed each of the four versions of the control as a threat to democracy (binary outcome; confidence intervals in parentheses), broken down by respondents’ own party identification.

Table A.1: Study 1, Reactions to control vignette by party

Vignette party	Vignette action	Respondent party	Threat to democracy
Republican	2 to 3 days	Republican	39% [30%, 48%]
Republican	2 to 3 days	Democrat	43% [35%, 52%]
Democrat	2 to 3 days	Republican	53% [43%, 63%]
Democrat	2 to 3 days	Democrat	32% [24%, 40%]
Republican	3 to 2 days	Republican	42% [32%, 51%]
Republican	3 to 2 days	Democrat	49% [41%, 58%]
Democrat	3 to 2 days	Republican	43% [34%, 52%]
Democrat	3 to 2 days	Democrat	52% [43%, 61%]

## Additional question wording

*Emotions (Study 1):* Thinking about the scenario you just read about, how much do you feel each of the following emotions? Please answer on the scale below, where 1 means “not at all” and 7 means “a lot.” [Worried / Angry / Happy / Bored]

*Legitimacy (Study 1):* Do you think that the [Republicans’/Democrats’] actions in this scenario were legitimate or not legitimate? (Legitimate, Not legitimate)

*Intent to take control (Study 1):* Thinking about the scenario you read about, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? The [Republicans/Democrats] were trying to take control. (Strongly agree / Somewhat agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree)

*Political interest (Study 1 and Study 2):* How interested are you in politics? (Very interested / Somewhat interested / Not very interested / Not at all interested)

*Political knowledge (Study 1 and Study 2):* We are interested in how much information about certain subjects gets out to the public. It’s normal not to know some or all of the answers to the next few questions. Please do not look up the answers. We want to see what people already know or can guess.

- In the case of a tied vote in the US Senate, is the deciding vote cast by... (The vice president\* / The president / The Senate majority leader / The Senate parliamentarian)
- How is the number of terms a president can serve determined? (The 22nd Amendment of the Constitution\* / Article II of the US Constitution / Custom and precedent / There is no limit to the number of terms a president can serve)
- The U.S. Electoral College... (Is an assembly that formally elects the president\* / Trains those who run for public office / Is another name for the US Congress / Supervises the presidential debate)
- Which of the following rights is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution? (The right of free speech\* / The right to bear arms / The right to privacy / The right to remain silent)

- In general, which of the following is true? (Republicans are more conservative than Democrats\* / Democrats are more conservative than Republicans)

*Attention checks:*

- Study 1: “Build” is most associated with... (Commander/Find/Assemble/Right/Status)
- Study 1 and Study 2: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?  
1 + 2 = 4 (Strongly agree/Somewhat agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Somewhat disagree/Strongly disagree)
- Study 2: “Find” is most associated with... (Commander/First/Locate/Right/Build)
- Study 2: We would like to get a sense of your consumption of political news. To demonstrate that you’ve read this much, just go ahead and select both every day and never among the options below, no matter how often you watch political news. Based on the text you read above, how often do you watch political news on TV? (Every day/Every week/Once a month/Once a year/Never)

## B Additional Results: Study 1

Table B.1: Study 1, Main results

	Threat (binary)	Threat (6-pt)	Support (binary)	Support (6-pt)
Groundwork	0.210*** (0.022)	0.187*** (0.017)	-0.138*** (0.022)	-0.120*** (0.018)
Power grab	0.313*** (0.021)	0.263*** (0.016)	-0.230*** (0.022)	-0.193*** (0.018)
Constant	0.438*** (0.016)	0.465*** (0.013)	0.584*** (0.016)	0.565*** (0.012)
Groundwork – Power grab	-0.102*** (0.021)	-0.076*** (0.016)	0.091*** (0.022)	0.073*** (0.018)
N	2914	2913	2913	2912

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Cell entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses.

Table B.2: Study 1, Treatment effects by in-party vs. out-party and respondent partisanship

	Threat (binary)	Threat (6-pt)	Support (binary)	Support (6-pt)
Groundwork	0.299*** (0.042)	0.290*** (0.034)	-0.262*** (0.041)	-0.233*** (0.032)
Power grab	0.381*** (0.039)	0.354*** (0.032)	-0.307*** (0.039)	-0.293*** (0.032)
Out-party	0.050 (0.042)	0.080* (0.034)	-0.355*** (0.039)	-0.333*** (0.029)
Republican	-0.011 (0.045)	0.025 (0.036)	-0.070*** (0.039)	-0.086*** (0.028)
Groundwork × out-party	-0.024 (0.059)	-0.072 (0.047)	0.105 (0.058)	0.104* (0.046)
Power grab × out-party	-0.053 (0.055)	-0.076 (0.044)	0.078 (0.056)	0.112* (0.045)
Groundwork × Republican	-0.192** (0.063)	-0.190*** (0.049)	0.236*** (0.059)	0.199*** (0.045)
Power grab × Republican	-0.189** (0.062)	-0.205*** (0.048)	0.155* (0.060)	0.172*** (0.046)
Out-party × Republican	0.024 (0.064)	0.002 (0.050)	-0.021 (0.059)	0.011 (0.043)
Groundwork × out-party × Republican	0.069 (0.088)	0.104 (0.068)	-0.168* (0.084)	-0.135* (0.064)
Power grab × out-party × Republican	0.194* (0.085)	0.175** (0.066)	-0.148 (0.082)	-0.157* (0.064)
Constant	0.412*** (0.030)	0.412*** (0.024)	0.802*** (0.024)	0.771*** (0.018)
N	2914	2913	2913	2912

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Cell entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. Out-party is a dummy indicator that takes on the value of 1 if respondents were exposed to a treatment describing an action taken by the opposing party, and 0 if they were exposed to a treatment describing an action taken by their party. Republican is a dummy indicator taking on the value of 1 if the respondent is a Republican, and 0 if the respondent is a Democrat (partisan leaners included).

Table B.3: Study 1, Results by in-party vs. out-party

	Threat (binary)	Threat (6-pt)	Support (binary)	Support (6-pt)
Groundwork	0.204*** (0.032)	0.197*** (0.025)	-0.149*** (0.029)	-0.139*** (0.023)
Power grab	0.295*** (0.031)	0.262*** (0.024)	-0.238*** (0.030)	-0.216*** (0.023)
Out-party	0.061 (0.032)	0.081*** (0.025)	-0.365*** (0.029)	-0.328*** (0.022)
Groundwork $\times$ out-party	0.012 (0.044)	-0.021 (0.034)	0.021 (0.042)	0.038 (0.032)
Power grab $\times$ out-party	0.035 (0.042)	0.003 (0.033)	0.012 (0.041)	0.415 (0.032)
Constant	0.407*** (0.022)	0.423*** (0.018)	0.770*** (0.019)	0.733*** (0.014)
Groundwork – Power grab (in-party)	-0.091*** (0.031)	-0.064** (0.024)	0.089** (0.032)	0.077*** (0.026)
Groundwork – Power grab (out-party)	-0.114*** (0.028)	-0.089*** (0.021)	0.099*** (0.027)	0.073*** (0.022)
N	2914	2913	2913	2912

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Cell entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. Out-party is a dummy indicator that takes on the value of 1 if respondents were exposed to a treatment describing an action taken by the opposing party, and 0 if they were exposed to a treatment describing an action taken by their party.

Table B.4: Study 1, Results by respondent partisanship

	Threat (binary)	Threat (6-pt)	Support (binary)	Support (6-pt)
Groundwork	0.287*** (0.029)	0.253*** (0.024)	-0.209*** (0.030)	-0.180*** (0.025)
Power grab	0.354*** (0.028)	0.315*** (0.022)	-0.266*** (0.029)	-0.234*** (0.024)
Republican	0.001 (0.032)	0.026 (0.025)	-0.082** (0.032)	-0.081*** (0.024)
Groundwork $\times$ Republican	-0.156*** (0.044)	-0.137*** (0.034)	0.151*** (0.045)	0.131*** (0.035)
Power grab $\times$ Republican	-0.092* (0.043)	-0.117*** (0.033)	0.082 (0.044)	0.094** (0.035)
Constant	0.438*** (0.021)	0.453*** (0.017)	0.620*** (0.021)	0.601*** (0.016)
Groundwork – Power grab (Democrat)	-0.067* (0.027)	-0.062** (0.022)	0.057 (0.030)	0.054* (0.026)
Groundwork – Power grab (Republican)	-0.131*** (0.032)	-0.083*** (0.024)	0.126*** (0.032)	0.091*** (0.025)
N	2914	2913	2913	2912

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Cell entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. Republican is a dummy indicator taking on the value of 1 if the respondent is a Republican, and 0 if the respondent is a Democrat (partisan leaners included).



Table B.5: Study 1, Results by political knowledge

	Threat (binary)	Threat (6-pt)	Support (binary)	Support (6-pt)
Groundwork	0.140*** (0.030)	0.119*** (0.024)	-0.059 (0.031)	-0.054* (0.024)
Power grab	0.208*** (0.029)	0.167*** (0.023)	-0.118*** (0.031)	-0.092*** (0.024)
Political knowledge	-0.147*** (0.031)	-0.121*** (0.025)	-0.006 (0.032)	-0.026 (0.024)
Groundwork × knowledge	0.148*** (0.044)	0.142*** (0.034)	-0.181*** (0.045)	-0.151*** (0.035)
Power grab × knowledge	0.231*** (0.042)	0.210*** (0.033)	-0.263*** (0.043)	-0.238*** (0.034)
Constant	0.507*** (0.022)	0.521*** (0.017)	0.587*** (0.022)	0.578*** (0.017)
Groundwork – Power grab (low knowledge)	-0.068* (0.028)	-0.048* (0.022)	0.058 (0.030)	0.038 (0.024)
Groundwork – Power grab (high knowledge)	-0.151*** (0.030)	-0.116*** (0.024)	0.140*** (0.030)	0.125*** (0.024)
N	2903	2902	2902	2901

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Cell entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. Political knowledge is a dummy indicator that takes on the value of 1 if respondents scored greater than three out of five on a five-item political knowledge index, and 0 if they scored three or lower.

Table B.6: Study 1, Results by education level

	Threat (binary)	Threat (6-pt)	Support (binary)	Support (6-pt)
Groundwork	0.221*** (0.029)	0.193*** (0.022)	-0.132*** (0.030)	-0.118*** (0.023)
Power grab	0.310*** (0.028)	0.256*** (0.021)	-0.217*** (0.029)	-0.176*** (0.022)
College degree	0.039 (0.032)	0.030 (0.026)	0.051 (0.032)	0.051* (0.025)
Groundwork $\times$ college	-0.026 (0.045)	-0.015 (0.035)	-0.015 (0.045)	-0.004 (0.036)
Power grab $\times$ college	0.008 (0.043)	0.019 (0.034)	-0.030 (0.045)	-0.039 (0.036)
Constant	0.422*** (0.021)	0.452*** (0.016)	0.562*** (0.021)	0.544*** (0.016)
Groundwork – Power grab (no college degree)	-0.089*** (0.027)	-0.063*** (0.021)	0.085*** (0.029)	0.058* (0.023)
Groundwork – Power grab (college degree)	-0.123*** (0.031)	-0.096*** (0.025)	0.099*** (0.035)	0.093*** (0.029)
N	2914	2913	2913	2912

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Cell entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. College degree is a dummy indicator that takes on the value of 1 if respondents hold a 4-year college degree or higher, and 0 if they do not hold a 4-year college degree.

Table B.7: Study 1, Effects on additional outcomes

	Worried	Angry	Legitimacy	Take control
Groundwork	0.118*** (0.015)	0.125*** (0.015)	-0.176*** (0.022)	0.124*** (0.014)
Power grab	0.192*** (0.015)	0.191*** (0.015)	-0.025*** (0.022)	0.168*** (0.014)
Constant	0.464*** (0.011)	0.407*** (0.011)	0.648*** (0.015)	0.605*** (0.011)
Groundwork – Power grab	-0.074*** (0.015)	-0.066*** (0.015)	0.074*** (0.023)	-0.044*** (0.013)
N	2891	2894	2912	2908

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Cell entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. “Worried” and “angry” are 7-point outcomes (rescaled 0-1) that take on the value of 1 if respondents feel the emotion “a lot” in thinking about the scenario and 0 if they feel the emotion “not at all.” “Legitimacy” is a binary outcome that takes on the value of 1 if respondents think that the actions taken by the party in the scenario were legitimate and 0 if they think that the actions were not legitimate. “Take control” is a 5-point outcome (rescaled 0-1) that captures respondents’ agreement that the party described in the vignette was trying to take control, where 1 means that respondents strongly agree and 0 means that they strongly disagree.

Table B.8: Study 1, Mediation analysis of perceived threat to democracy and support for action

		Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
<b>Groundwork</b>	ACME	-0.0824	-0.1016	-0.06	0.000***
	ADE	-0.0559	-0.0983	-0.01	0.012*
	Total Effect	-0.1383	-0.1798	-0.09	0.000***
	Prop. Mediated	0.5959	0.4352	0.86	0.000***
<b>Power grab</b>	ACME	-0.119	-0.140	-0.10	0.000***
	ADE	-0.111	-0.155	-0.07	0.000***
	Total Effect	-0.230	-0.272	-0.19	0.000***
	Prop. Mediated	0.515	0.412	0.66	0.000***

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Robust standard errors are used. Models reflect 1000 simulations using Quasi-Bayesian Monte Carlo method (normal approximation). Estimates for “groundwork” reflect a dataset that includes just the control and groundwork conditions; estimates for “power grab” include just the control and power grab conditions. Dependent variable is support for action (binary), explanatory variable is a binary indicator for treatment assignment (groundwork/power grab or control), mediator is perceived threat to democracy (binary). Results obtained using “mediation” package in R (Tingley et al. 2014).

Table B.9: Study 1, Sample demographics and balance across treatment conditions

	Control	Groundwork	Power grab	Total
<i>Age</i>				
18-24	8.3%	10.2%	12.0%	10.2%
25-34	20.0%	19.2%	21.8%	20.3%
35-44	16.4%	15.1%	15.5%	15.6%
45-54	16.8%	16.4%	14.7%	16.0%
55-64	17.0%	16.9%	14.0%	16.0%
65 or older	21.5%	22.3%	21.9%	21.9%
<i>Sex</i>				
Male	49.2%	46.4%	45.6%	47.1%
Female	50.8%	53.6%	54.4%	52.9%
<i>Education</i>				
Some high school or less	2.2%	2.4%	2.6%	2.4%
High school degree	21.3%	22.5%	26.0%	23.2%
Some college	20.2%	21.6%	19.7%	20.5%
2-year degree	14.3%	11.2%	10.9%	12.1%
4-year degree	25.8%	25.7%	25.1%	25.5%
Post-graduate degree	16.2%	16.6%	15.7%	16.2%
<i>Race</i>				
White	80.2%	80.5%	79.3%	80.0%
Black	13.1%	10.9%	15.6%	13.2%
Asian	2.7%	3.0%	1.4%	2.4%
Other	4.0%	5.5%	3.8%	4.5%
<i>Ethnicity</i>				
Not Hispanic	90.7%	89.4%	89.8%	90.0%
Hispanic	9.3%	10.6%	10.2%	10.0%
<i>Region</i>				
Northeast	16.9%	16.1%	16.8%	16.6%
Midwest	20.9%	20.8%	21.9%	21.2%
South	42.2%	41.8%	41.4%	41.8%
West	20.0%	21.3%	19.8%	20.4%
<i>Party</i>				
Democrat	55.7%	50.6%	54.8%	53.7%
Republican	44.3%	49.4%	45.2%	46.3%

## C Additional Results: Study 2

Table C.1: Study 2, Main results

	Threat (binary)	Threat (6-pt)	Support (binary)	Support (6-pt)
Voter fraud	−0.148*** (0.023)	−0.131*** (0.018)	0.151*** (0.023)	0.130*** (0.018)
Voting rights	−0.128*** (0.023)	−0.109*** (0.018)	0.091*** (0.023)	0.083*** (0.018)
Constant	0.678*** (0.016)	0.677*** (0.012)	0.340*** (0.016)	0.350*** (0.013)
Fraud − Rights	−0.020 (0.024)	−0.021 (0.018)	0.060* (0.023)	0.047** (0.018)
N	2694	2694	2693	2693

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Cell entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses.

Table C.2: Study 2, Results by in-party vs. out-party

	Threat (binary)	Threat (6-pt)	Support (binary)	Support (6-pt)
Voter fraud	-0.158*** (0.032)	-0.149*** (0.025)	0.182*** (0.032)	0.154*** (0.024)
Voting rights	-0.158*** (0.032)	-0.134*** (0.025)	0.132*** (0.032)	0.109*** (0.025)
Out-party	0.171*** (0.031)	0.156*** (0.024)	-0.357*** (0.029)	-0.323*** (0.023)
Voter fraud × out-party	0.013 (0.045)	0.031 (0.035)	-0.050 (0.042)	-0.035 (0.033)
Voting rights × out-party	0.050 (0.045)	0.040 (0.034)	-0.061 (0.042)	-0.034 (0.032)
Constant	0.598*** (0.023)	0.604*** (0.018)	0.507*** (0.023)	0.501*** (0.018)
Fraud – Rights (in-party)	0.000 (0.033)	-0.015 (0.025)	0.050 (0.031)	0.044 (0.023)
Fraud – Rights (out-party)	-0.037 (0.032)	-0.024 (0.033)	0.061* (0.029)	0.043 (0.023)
N	2694	2694	2694	2694

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Cell entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. Out-party is a dummy indicator that takes on the value of 1 if respondents were exposed to a treatment describing an action taken by the opposing party, and 0 if they were exposed to a treatment describing an action taken by their party.

Table C.3: Study 2, Results by respondent partisanship

	Threat (binary)	Threat (6-pt)	Support (binary)	Support (6-pt)
Voter fraud	-0.146*** (0.029)	-0.134*** (0.023)	0.159*** (0.030)	0.123*** (0.025)
Voting rights	-0.134*** (0.030)	-0.122*** (0.024)	0.092*** (0.031)	0.082*** (0.025)
Republican	-0.177*** (0.031)	-0.157*** (0.025)	0.118*** (0.032)	0.085*** (0.026)
Voter fraud × Republican	0.001 (0.046)	0.012 (0.035)	-0.021 (0.046)	0.014 (0.037)
Voting rights × Republican	0.030 (0.045)	0.041 (0.035)	-0.013 (0.046)	-0.006 (0.036)
Constant	0.757*** (0.019)	0.746*** (0.015)	0.288*** (0.020)	0.312*** (0.017)
Fraud – Rights (Democrat)	-0.012 (0.032)	-0.012 (0.025)	0.067* (0.032)	0.041 (0.026)
Fraud – Rights (Republican)	-0.041 (0.034)	-0.041 (0.025)	0.059 (0.034)	0.061* (0.026)
N	2694	2694	2694	2693

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Cell entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. Republican is a dummy indicator taking on the value of 1 if the respondent is a Republican, and 0 if the respondent is a Democrat (partisan leaners included).



Table C.4: Study 2, Treatment effects by in-party vs. out-party and respondent partisanship

	Threat (binary)	Threat (6-pt)	Support (binary)	Support (6-pt)
Voter fraud	-0.169*** (0.043)	-0.160*** (0.033)	0.024*** (0.043)	0.188*** (0.033)
Voting rights	-0.127*** (0.044)	-0.128*** (0.034)	0.012** (0.044)	0.108*** (0.035)
Out-party	0.179*** (0.037)	0.166*** (0.030)	-0.317*** (0.037)	-0.294*** (0.031)
Republican	-0.180*** (0.045)	-0.156*** (0.035)	0.176*** (0.046)	0.130*** (0.036)
Voter fraud × out-party	0.028 (0.057)	0.036 (0.045)	-0.137* (0.055)	-0.086* (0.048)
Voting rights × out-party	-0.027 (0.058)	-0.001 (0.046)	-0.032 (0.056)	-0.029 (0.045)
Voter fraud × Republican	0.042 (0.064)	0.040 (0.049)	-0.148* (0.063)	-0.086 (0.048)
Voting rights × Republican	-0.039 (0.064)	0.008 (0.049)	0.001 (0.064)	-0.014 (0.049)
Out-party × Republican	-0.005 (0.061)	-0.013 (0.048)	-0.099 (0.058)	-0.074 (0.046)
Voter fraud × out-party × Republican	-0.059 (0.089)	-0.033 (0.069)	0.208* (0.084)	0.156* (0.066)
Voting rights × out-party × Republican	0.147 (0.089)	0.075 (0.068)	-0.043 (0.083)	0.004 (0.065)
Constant	0.675*** (0.029)	0.671*** (0.023)	0.432*** (0.030)	0.446*** (0.024)
N	2694	2694	2694	2693

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Cell entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. Out-party is a dummy indicator that takes on the value of 1 if respondents were exposed to a treatment describing an action taken by the opposing party, and 0 if they were exposed to a treatment describing an action taken by their party. Republican is a dummy indicator taking on the value of 1 if the respondent is a Republican, and 0 if the respondent is a Democrat (partisan leaners included).

Table C.5: Study 2, Results by political knowledge

	Threat (binary)	Threat (6-pt)	Support (binary)	Support (6-pt)
Voter fraud	-0.159*** (0.034)	-0.152*** (0.026)	0.146*** (0.034)	0.130*** (0.027)
Voting rights	-0.120*** (0.034)	-0.122*** (0.026)	0.083* (0.035)	0.057** (0.026)
Political knowledge	0.046 (0.032)	0.027 (0.025)	-0.117*** (0.032)	-0.109*** (0.026)
Voter fraud × knowledge	0.024 (0.046)	0.043 (0.036)	0.000 (0.046)	-0.007 (0.037)
Voting rights × knowledge	-0.015 (0.046)	0.022 (0.036)	0.015 (0.046)	0.014 (0.036)
Constant	0.654*** (0.024)	0.066*** (0.019)	0.403*** (0.024)	0.409*** (0.020)
Fraud – Rights (low knowledge)	-0.038 (0.034)	-0.030 (0.026)	0.064 (0.034)	0.054* (0.026)
Fraud – Rights (high knowledge)	0.000 (0.032)	-0.009 (0.025)	0.049 (0.032)	0.034 (0.026)
N	2688	2688	2687	2687

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Cell entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. Political knowledge is a dummy indicator that takes on the value of 1 if respondents scored greater than three out of five on a five-item political knowledge index, and 0 if they scored three or lower.

Table C.6: Study 2, Results by education level

	Threat (binary)	Threat (6-pt)	Support (binary)	Support (6-pt)
Voter fraud	-0.185*** (0.029)	-0.166*** (0.022)	0.167*** (0.029)	0.139*** (0.023)
Voting rights	-0.122*** (0.029)	-0.109*** (0.022)	0.095*** (0.029)	0.079*** (0.023)
College degree	0.021 (0.032)	0.004 (0.025)	-0.002 (0.032)	-0.005 (0.027)
Voter fraud $\times$ college	0.106* (0.047)	0.100** (0.037)	-0.042 (0.048)	-0.024 (0.039)
Voting rights $\times$ college	-0.014 (0.047)	0.000 (0.037)	-0.009 (0.047)	0.013 (0.038)
Constant	0.669*** (0.020)	0.675*** (0.016)	0.340*** (0.020)	0.351*** (0.017)
Fraud – Rights (no college degree)	-0.063* (0.029)	-0.057** (0.022)	0.072* (0.029)	0.060** (0.022)
Fraud – Rights (College degree)	0.057 (0.039)	0.043 (0.031)	0.039 (0.039)	0.023 (0.032)
N	2693	2693	2692	2692

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Cell entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. College degree is a dummy indicator that takes on the value of 1 if respondents hold a 4-year college degree or higher, and 0 if they do not hold a 4-year college degree.

Table C.7: Study 2, Mediation analysis of perceived threat to democracy and support for action

		Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
<b>Voter fraud</b>	ACME	0.0873	0.0571	0.11	0.000***
	ADE	0.0638	0.0247	0.10	0.000***
	Total Effect	0.1511	0.1039	0.20	0.000***
	Prop. Mediated	0.5757	0.4270	0.79	0.000***
<b>Voting rights</b>	ACME	0.0793	0.0531	0.11	0.000***
	ADE	0.0117	-0.024	0.05	0.051
	Total Effect	0.0910	0.0449	0.14	0.000***
	Prop. Mediated	0.8736	0.6109	1.45	0.000***

The  $p$  values are as follows: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$  (two-sided). Robust standard errors are used. Models reflect 1000 simulations using Quasi-Bayesian Monte Carlo method (normal approximation). Estimates for “voter fraud” reflect a dataset that includes just the groundwork + no justification and groundwork + voter fraud conditions; estimates for “voting rights” include just the groundwork + no justification and groundwork + voting rights conditions conditions. Dependent variable is support for action (binary), explanatory variable is a binary indicator for treatment assignment (fraud/rights or control), mediator is perceived threat to democracy (binary). Results obtained using “mediation” package in R (Tingley et al. 2014).

Table C.8: Study 2, Sample demographics and balance across treatment conditions

	No justification	Voter fraud	Voting rights	Total
<i>Age</i>				
18-24	5.7%	3.2%	5.7%	4.9%
25-34	19.7%	18.6%	17.3%	18.5%
35-44	16.6%	19.3%	18.3%	18.1%
45-54	17.0%	19.1%	18.7%	18.3%
55-64	19.4%	18.0%	16.6%	18.0%
65 or older	21.7%	21.8%	23.4%	22.3%
<i>Sex</i>				
Male	43.8%	41.7%	43.2%	42.9%
Female	56.2%	58.3%	56.8%	57.1%
<i>Education</i>				
Some high school or less	2.6%	1.8%	2.8%	2.4%
High school degree	20.9%	25.0%	24.1%	23.4%
Some college	24.1%	25.7%	26.4%	25.4%
2-year degree	12.7%	11.8%	11.0%	11.8%
4-year degree	25.6%	23.4%	22.8%	24.0%
Post-graduate degree	14.1%	12.3%	12.9%	13.1%
<i>Race</i>				
White	80.3%	80.9%	80.0%	80.4%
Black	13.8%	11.5%	12.6%	12.6%
Asian	1.6%	2.8%	2.6%	2.3%
Other	4.4%	4.8%	4.9%	4.7%
<i>Ethnicity</i>				
Not Hispanic	95.0%	93.5%	93.0%	93.9%
Hispanic	5.0%	6.5%	7.0%	6.1%
<i>Region</i>				
Northeast	18.9%	17.8%	18.2%	18.3%
Midwest	19.7%	19.6%	21.2%	20.2%
South	43.7%	42.7%	43.1%	43.2%
West	17.7%	19.9%	17.4%	18.3%
<i>Party</i>				
Democrat	55.6%	54.2%	50.7%	53.5%
Republican	44.4%	45.8%	49.3%	46.5%