

# Donald Trump and the Lie

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## Abstract

The legitimacy of democratically elected governments rests in part on widespread acceptance of the outcome of elections, especially among those who lost. This “losers’ consent” allows the winners to govern and, when the incumbent is the losing party, it allows for a peaceful transition of power. What happens in a democratic system when one side not only refuses to concede, but actively perpetuates lies about the outcome? This paper studies the consequences of a Donald Trump’s “big lie” using a daily tracking survey, yielding 40-days of polls and over 20,000 responses from American voters. We find that the lie is pervasive and sticky— the number of Republicans and independents saying that they believe the election was fraudulent is substantial, and this proportion did not change appreciably over time or shift after important political developments. In reaction to the lie, and the threat it brought to the transition of power, there was a significant rise in support for violent political activism among Democrats, which only waned after the insurrection of January 6th. Even if these findings merely reflect expressive responding, we nonetheless find significant and potentially long-term consequences to the lie. A conjoint experiment shows that Republican voters reward politicians that perpetuate the lie, giving Republican candidates an incentive to continue to do so in the next electoral cycle.

Keywords: 2020 US Presidential Election | Democratic Legitimacy | Winners-Losers Gap | Losers’ Consent

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The legitimacy of democratically elected governments rests in part on widespread acceptance of the outcome of elections, especially among those who lost. This “losers’ consent” allows the winners to govern and, when the incumbent is the losing party, it allows for a peaceful transition of power (Anderson et al., 2005). Evidence from “consolidating” democracies shows that when politicians and their supporters refuse to accept defeat, it decreases support for the political system and increases the likelihood of attempts to overthrow the government through violent means (Przeworski, 1991, 2005). Consequently, the willingness for incumbent politicians to accept defeat is a crucial test for democratic stability (Huntington, 1991).

Politicians and voters alike do not like to be on the losing side (Anderson et al., 2005; Sances and Stewart, 2015). Voters are sometimes willing to indulge a form of outcome bias in which they judge the integrity of an election based on whether their party’s candidate won or lost (Baron and Hershey, 1988; Cantú and García-Ponce, 2015). As a result, the losing candidate of an election has an incentive to assert that fraud and irregularities explain the outcome, rather than conceding that a plurality or majority of voters have rejected him or her. In countries with weak commitments to democracy, it is not uncommon for incumbents to make dubious charges of fraud when elections do not turn out as they wanted (Schedler, 2001), and their supporters often believe them (Cantú and García-Ponce, 2015). Our point of departure is to consider these dynamics in the United States, one of the world’s long-standing “consolidated” democracies.<sup>4</sup>

The goal of this paper is to study how lies shape voters’ perceptions about election integrity, support for violence, and ultimately, democratic stability. Most of our knowledge

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<sup>4</sup>While there is no widespread agreement on when a democratic system becomes “consolidated” and whether this is even a necessary condition for democratic stability (Schedler, 2001), this concept is nonetheless often invoked as an indicator of democratic stability. The “two-turnover-test” holds that democracy is more or less established after two uncontroversial alternations in power among political parties (Moehler and Lindberg, 2009). Under this definition, the United States should certainly be considered a consolidated democracy in advance of the 2020 election.

about lies and politics comes from the study of authoritarian countries. In these systems, citizens are obligated to live “within the lie” and behave “as if” they believe (Havel, 2018; Wedeen, 2015). Many come to internalize those lies, though some do not, and it is difficult to discern who really believes what (Kuran, 1991; Shen and Truex, 2020). Dictators create an atmosphere in which their regime is continually portrayed as powerful, infallible, and the only viable option (Huang, 2015). Authoritarian regimes often propagate so-called “big lies,” those that are so grand that people believe no one would have the gall to make them up.

It is unclear whether such an approach would be effective in a liberal democratic system like the United States. On the one hand, the presence of robust political competition and a free press often works to limit the ability of politicians to manipulate public opinion (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Zaller, 1992). A cornerstone assumption in American free speech jurisprudence is that in a “marketplace of ideas,” truth wins out over falsehood (Brazeal, 2011). On the other, as partisan polarization transmogrifies into partisan sectarianism in the United States, it provides fertile ground for lies pedaled by politicians to take root and go unchecked by their partisans (Finkel et al., 2020; Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013; Van Bavel and Pereira, 2018).

The 2020 presidential election offers an unparalleled opportunity to study whether a “big lie” spread by mainstream political actors can shape public perceptions in an established democracy. The ritual of losing gracefully is a hallmark of stable, consolidated democracies, including the United States. Breaking with long-held tradition, former President Donald J. Trump refused to accept that he had lost the election to Joe Biden. Even after the courts rejected over 60 lawsuits filed by his campaign, he continued to repeat debunked conspiracy theories about how the election had been stolen from him. In a shocking turn of events, a mob of Trump’s supporters laid siege to the Capitol building while Congress members met to officially certify the election for Biden. Their rampage interrupted the proceedings and ended with the deaths of a police officer and several rioters. Although a transfer of power to President Biden eventually happened as constitutionally prescribed, it did so under heavy

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guard from soldiers. Not long ago, this set of events happening in the United States would have been unthinkable ([Almond and Verba, 1963](#)).

In order to shed light on the dynamics of public opinion before and after the 2020 presidential election, we instituted the Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS), a nationally descriptive online survey implemented by an established survey research firm, Qualtrics panels, between October 27, 2020 and January 29, 2021 ( $n = 20,000$ ). We conducted daily surveys of 500 respondents for a month around the election and then biweekly surveys until nine days after President Biden was inaugurated. This rolling cross section design allows us to see how public opinion about the election unfolded in real time. The project is unusual in that we did not know what the primary “treatment” (the election outcome) would be in advance, only that the election itself would likely feature some degree of contestation after the fact. We put the survey in the field in October knowing that the 2020 election would be critical for the future of American democracy, and our goal was to set up a data collection process to document trends in public opinion as richly as possible.

Four key findings emerge from the data. First, we find that a non-trivial number of Americans, particularly those who identify as Republican, say that they accept the lie that Donald Trump was the rightful victor of the 2020 election. Roughly one in four Americans say that they do not believe the election result was legitimate or identify Joe Biden as the winner. For Republicans, these proportions hover around 50%. Acceptance of the election outcome is lowest for Americans who are older, less educated, and of lower social status.

While there has been a “winners-losers gap” in confidence regarding the vote count in American elections at least since 2000, the majority of voters on the losing side still said that they were “very confident” that the vote count was accurate ([Alvarez, Hall and Llewellyn, 2008](#); [Sances and Stewart, 2015](#); [Sinclair, Smith and Tucker, 2018](#)). The 2000 election offers another benchmark since its outcome was legitimately in doubt. Despite the acrimony over counting ballots, after George W. Bush was declared the winner and Al Gore conceded the election, only 18% of Americans said they believed Bush stole the election ([Carroll, 2001](#)).

It is possible this result reflects some degree of “expressive responding,” wherein many of Trump’s supporters do not really believe the lie but said that they did on our survey as a way to signal their support (Schaffner and Luks, 2018). Even if this were the case, the perpetuation of the lie could still shape how Republican elites behave. We return to this point below.

Second, we observe that the lie is “sticky”— acceptance of the election outcome did not change appreciably over time or move significantly in response to the many dramatic political events that unfolded after the election. Attitudes towards the election in late January were roughly the same as they were in mid-November.

In some of the survey waves, we showed respondents that denied the Biden victory a series of questions of the form, “Would you believe Biden won if...” followed by different hypothetical scenarios. Of the voters that denied the outcome, only 28.7% said they would believe Biden won if Republican leaders like Mitch McConnell were to say that Biden won more votes. About 31.0% would believe Biden won if the Electoral College were to award him a majority of votes, and 42.9% would believe Biden won if there were a Supreme Court decision to that effect. But as those events actually unfolded, we did not observe equivalent increases in acceptance of the election.

Third, in line with evidence from less consolidated democracies (Przeworski, 1991, 2005), we find circumstantial evidence that perpetuating the lie that the election was stolen increased many Americans’ expressed willingness to engage in violent activism aimed at attacking the state. This pattern was most prominent for Democrats, whose willingness to accept violence peaked in early December, when Trump was perhaps most brazen in his attempts to thwart the Electoral College vote. The insurrection of January 6th dampened support for violence among Democrats and nonpartisan voters, though levels remained higher than prior to the pre-election baseline.

Fourth, we find evidence that the lie has the potential to shape the Republican party and American politics for years to come. Starting in January 2021, we began including a

simple paired conjoint design in the survey ([Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014](#); [Hainmueller, Hangartner and Yamamoto, 2015](#); [Teele, Kalla and Rosenbluth, 2018](#)), presenting Republican voters with hypothetical primary candidates for an upcoming congressional race. We find that candidates who maintain Donald Trump won the 2020 election have a distinct electoral advantage, about 6 percentage points, versus candidates that do not. Based on these findings, we expect many Republican candidates will have an incentive to perpetuate the lie in the next election cycle, or at the very least, refuse to refute it.

Even though the United States is the focus of our analysis, our findings have implications for other established democracies. Many democracies are experiencing an increase in polarization and the loosening of universal commitment to democratic norms ([Przeworski, 2019](#)). We do not believe that the United States is exceptional with respect to the possibility that a major political party or actor could profitably forward “big lies.” Our findings also offer additional support to the theoretical position that culture alone cannot sustain democratic norms ([Dahl, 1989](#); [Przeworski, 2005](#)). Even established democracies are fragile, and the strategic decisions made by elites can have potentially dire consequences.

## **Data**

The Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS) was conducted online through the Qualtrics survey platform, an established and respected online survey research firm that recruits participants and verifies their names, addresses, and dates of birth, before inviting them to join their sampling panel. It incentivizes participation in surveys by compensating respondents with money or money-equivalents (e.g., Amazon points), and it conducts validity checks of responses to produce a high-quality sample. Importantly, the data quality and representativeness of Qualtrics samples have been independently verified by scholars to be in line with probability samples like the General Social Survey and the American National Election Studies ([Boas, Christenson and Glick, 2020](#)). We restricted the population to American citizens

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that are registered to vote.<sup>5</sup>

The project employs a rolling cross-section design. We received a sample of 500 new respondents every day beginning October 27th, 2020 through November 20th, 2020. After November 20th we switched to collecting samples on Tuesday and Friday of each week, with some pauses in the data collection for holidays. In total we collected 20,000 responses over 40 daily samples through January 29th, 2021. For each daily sample, we calculated poststratification weights to align the sample with known characteristics of the population. Our weighting scheme was implemented using entropy balancing and included information on gender, age, race, partisanship, education, and region (Hainmueller, 2012). This process resulted in weighted daily samples that all had the same composition on these five core demographic characteristics and also matched the composition of the American electorate.

The Supporting Information contains more discussion of the sample recruitment process and how it compares to relevant population statistics. Figures SI1 and SI2 in the Supporting Information show the composition of the sample over time for demographic covariates of interest. We see stability in the sample composition over time, with some small differences from day to day due to sampling variability. The sample matches the population of registered voters with respect to turnout, gender, and partisanship, but skews younger and more educated than the population. Black voters are slightly over-represented. Departures like these are common in survey research, and the poststratification weights result in daily samples that are tied to population proportion, weighting respondents from underrepresented groups slightly more heavily. The core substantive findings of the paper are not sensitive to this weighting decision. The core questionnaire was kept largely the same throughout the project. Respondents first answered standard demographic questions and provided information on their partisan affiliations and voting history. The next module included questions on the legitimacy of the election. The remainder of the survey included several standard question batteries to

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<sup>5</sup>To ensure some balance in the data, we instituted two quotas in the collection process on gender and partisanship.

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measure support for political violence (Moskalenko and McCauley, 2009); the need for chaos (Petersen, Osmundsen and Arceneaux, 2018); anxiety and depression (Zigmond and Snaith, 1983); self-esteem (Schmitt and Allik, 2005); and support for democratic norms (Inglehart, 2003). These batteries were presented in random order and the question order was also randomized within each battery. The final module was a short Word Association Test that asked respondents the first words that come to mind for several cues, including Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The wordings for key questions used in this paper are included in the Supporting Information

## Results

### *Perceptions of Legitimacy*

Figure 1 shows perceptions of the election outcome over time. The top panel shows the proportion of registered voters that identified Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election, and the bottom panel shows the proportion that viewed the election as legitimate. These proportions have stayed relatively fixed over time. Only three out of four registered American voters believe Joe Biden legitimately won the election. For reference, we also note the major events that occurred throughout the post-election period.

Not surprisingly, there is a sharp partisan divergence in perceptions of the election. Figure 2 presents the same outcomes as Figure 1, this time breaking out the results by party identification. Shortly after the initial election results came in on the evening of November 3rd, most Democrats identified Joe Biden as the winner and perceived the outcome as legitimate. This proportion rose to close to 100% after the election results were called by most media outlets on November 7th. Republican voters as a group increasingly identified Biden as the winner as the results came in, but this proportion plateaued at around 40% and remained relatively stable even after the results became certified by the Electoral College and then Congress. Voters that identify as independent or members of other parties increasingly



accepted the legitimacy of a Biden win as the results came in from different states, but again, this proportion plateaued. Nine days after Joe Biden was sworn in as President, roughly 25% of unaffiliated voters did not view the election as legitimate.

In order to probe whether particular events could effectively challenge the “big lie,” from November 16th to December 15th we asked respondents who identified Trump as the winner a “Yes” or “No” question of the form, “Would you believe that Joe Biden won the election if...”, followed by a hypothetical political event. Overall, 1245 respondents, the majority of them Republican (76%), saw this question over the 11 waves of the survey it was included. The results are presented in Table 1.

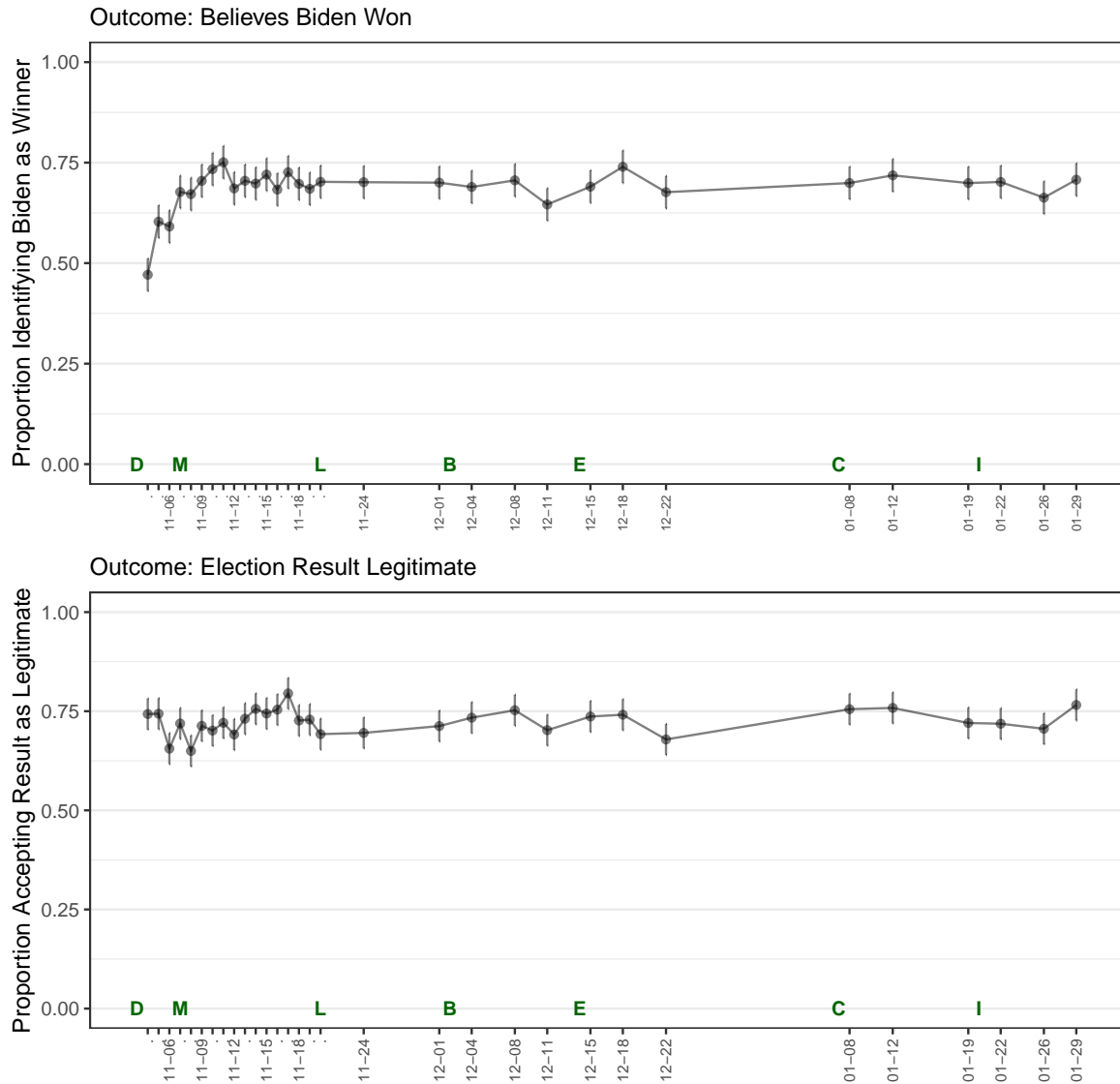


Figure 1: Perceptions of 2020 election outcome. The top panel shows the proportion of respondents that answered “Joe Biden” to the question, “Who do you think won the 2020 presidential election?” The bottom panel shows the proportion that responded “Yes” to the question, “Do you accept the election results as legitimate?” Starting on November 8th, the legitimacy question was preceded by the sentence, “Major news networks have announced that Joe Biden is the winner of the 2020 presidential election.” Letters mark significant political events: D = Election Day, Nov 3; M = Race called by news networks, Nov 7; L = Trump invites Michigan legislators to White House, Nov 24 ; B = Barr says no evidence of fraud, Dec 2; E = Electoral College certifies Biden, Dec 15; C = Capitol insurrection, Jan 7; I = Inauguration Day, Jan 20. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

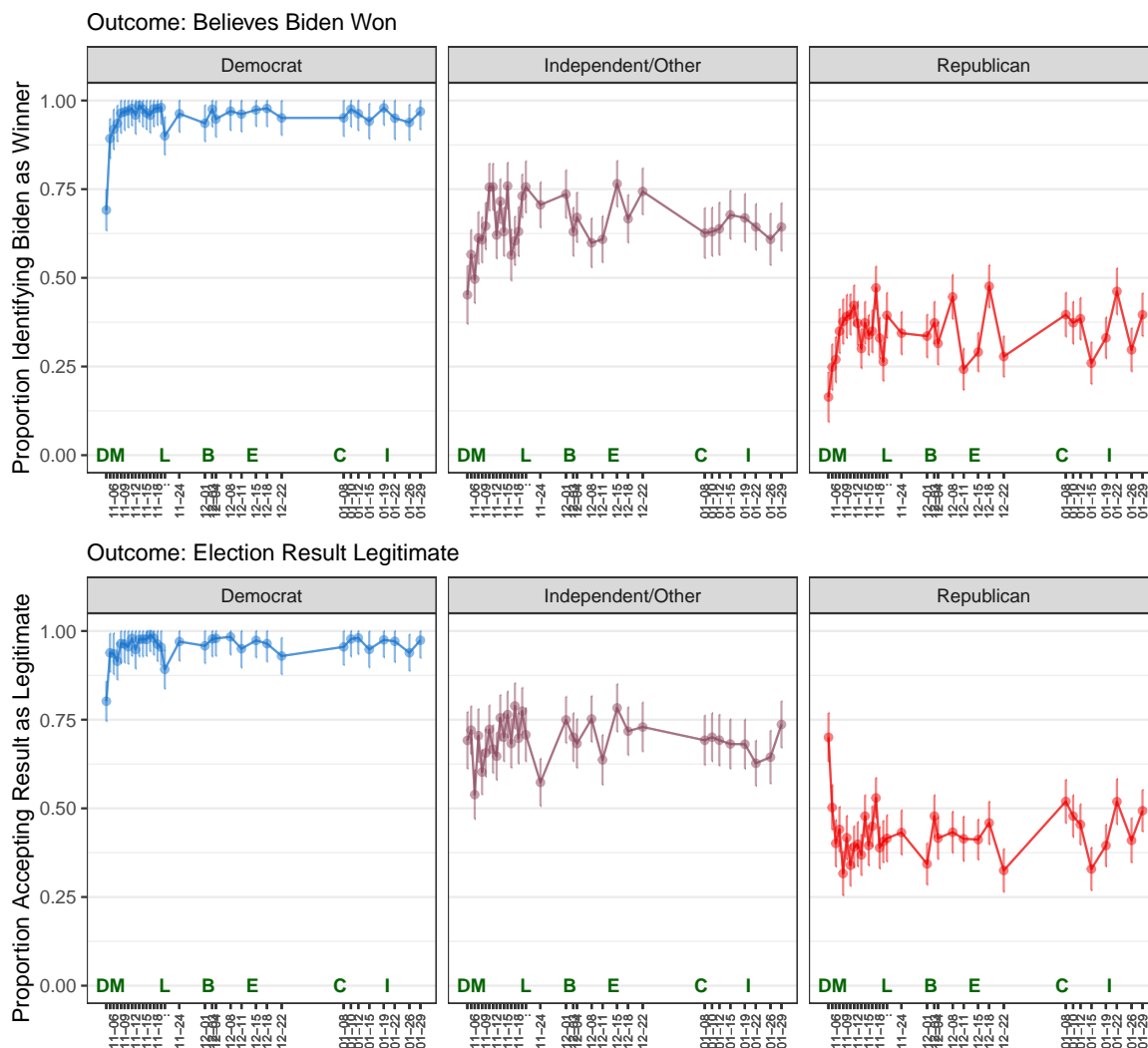


Figure 2: Perceptions of 2020 election outcome by partisanship. The top panel shows the proportion of respondents that answered “Joe Biden” to the question, “Who do you think won the 2020 presidential election?” The bottom panel shows the proportion that responded “Yes” to the question, “Do you accept the election results as legitimate?” Starting on November 8th, the legitimacy question was preceded by the sentence, “Major news networks have announced that Joe Biden is the winner of the 2020 presidential election.” Letters mark significant political events: D = Election Day, Nov 3; M = Race called by news networks, Nov 7; L = Trump invites Michigan legislators to White House, Nov 24 ; B = Barr says no evidence of fraud, Dec 2; E = Electoral College certifies Biden, Dec 15; C = Capitol insurrection, Jan 7; I = Inauguration Day, Jan 20. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

Table 1: What Would It Take to Believe Joe Biden Won

Would you believe Joe Biden won the election if...	% Responding “Yes”
a. Republican leaders, such as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, say that Joe Biden won more votes than Donald Trump.	28.7
b. The Supreme Court rules that Joe Biden won more votes than Donald Trump.	42.9
c. The Electoral College awards a majority of votes to Joe Biden.	30.9
d. The U.S. Congress awards a majority of votes to Joe Biden.	26.6
e. Donald Trump concedes the election to Joe Biden.	45.2
f. Joe Biden is sworn in as President by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court on January 20, 2021.	37.5
n = 1245	

Note: Table shows the responses to a question that was shown to respondents who did not identify Joe Biden as the winner of the election even after the race had been called. The question was only included in the survey from November 16th to December 15th. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

The data indicate a general reluctance to shift perceptions of the outcome even with new political developments. Of the voters that denied the outcome, 28.7% said they would believe Biden won if Republican leaders like Mitch McConnell were to say that Biden won more votes. About 31.0% would believe Biden won if the Electoral College were to award him a majority of votes, and 42.9% would believe Biden won if there were a Supreme Court decision to that effect. About 45.2% of people who identified Trump as the winner would believe Biden won if Trump were to concede. About 33% of respondents who did not view the Biden win as legitimate identified no event that would make them think he actually won.

It is worth noting that as these events actually unfolded, we did not observe equivalent increases in the acceptance of the outcome. In the one month period from November 16th to December 15th, we surveyed 1558 Republican voters, 941 (60.4%) of which refused to identify Biden as the election winner. Based on this estimate, as well as the data from the

hypothetical scenarios shown in Table 1, we would have expected about 585 of those voters to have come around by Inauguration Day, yielding an overall acceptance rate of the Biden win among Republican voters at around 76%. The actual proportion continues to hover around 40%, which suggests a certain stickiness to the lie. Voters who bought into Trump’s stolen election narrative do not appear to readily update their perceptions of events, even when told by Republican elites to do so, and after Biden formally became president.

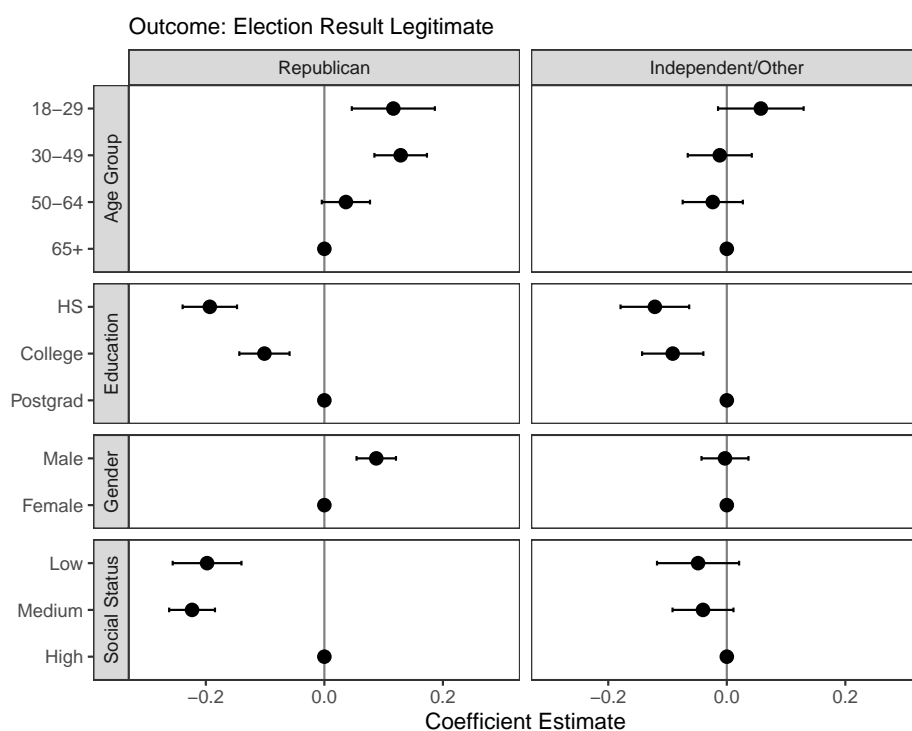


Figure 3: Perceptions of 2020 election outcome by partisanship and demographics. The figure shows the coefficient estimates from a linear probability model where the binary legitimate variable was regressed on demographic covariates of interest. Starting on November 8th, the legitimacy question was preceded by the sentence, “Major news networks have announced that Joe Biden is the winner of the 2020 presidential election” – the estimates in this figure reflect data collected after that date. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Electoral Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

Figure 3 explores who is most likely to reject the election result. The figure presents the results of a simple linear probability model, regressing the binary legitimate variable on demographic covariates of interest. The left panel presents results for Republican voters, and the right panel presents results for voters that identified no partisan affiliation.

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We observe that voters who are older, less educated, and categorize themselves as having lower social status are less likely to perceive the Biden win as legitimate. These relationships hold for both Republican and independent voters, though they are more pronounced among Republican respondents. Independent voters are also much more likely overall to accept the election outcome.

#### *Support for Radical and Violent Political Action against the State*

As the United States has become increasingly polarized, Americans have become more accepting of political violence (Kalmoe and Mason, 2021). Building on this work, we explore whether the perpetuation of the lie potentially mobilized support for violent political action. The ELTS core questionnaire included the Radicalism Intention Scale (RIS), which assesses a respondent's readiness to participate in violent or illegal political action against the legal authorities as a way to achieve their political goals (Moskalenko and McCauley, 2009).<sup>6</sup> The questions measure willingness to participate in a violent protest, attack police forces, encourage others to participate in illegal protests, and go to war on behalf of one's social group, among other behaviors (see the Supporting Information for exact question wordings). Disputes over election legitimacy in consolidating democracies sometimes lead partisans of the losing side to attempt to overthrow the government through violent means (Przeworski, 1991, 2005), and we included the RIS on the survey since it focuses on one's willingness to target state agents. Respondents were asked their level of agreement on a scale of one to five, and their answers were averaged over the five questions in the battery. Higher scores indicate greater agreement and willingness to participate in violence ( $\bar{x} = 2.67, SD = 1.21$ ).

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<sup>6</sup>The RIS is related to but distinct from measures of partisan violence, such as Kalmoe and Mason's (Kalmoe and Mason, 2021). The RIS is specifically about the willingness to be mobilized to use violence against authorities as a way to fight for one's political group, whereas measures of partisan violence focus on the more general acceptance that is justifiable to use violence against opposing partisans.

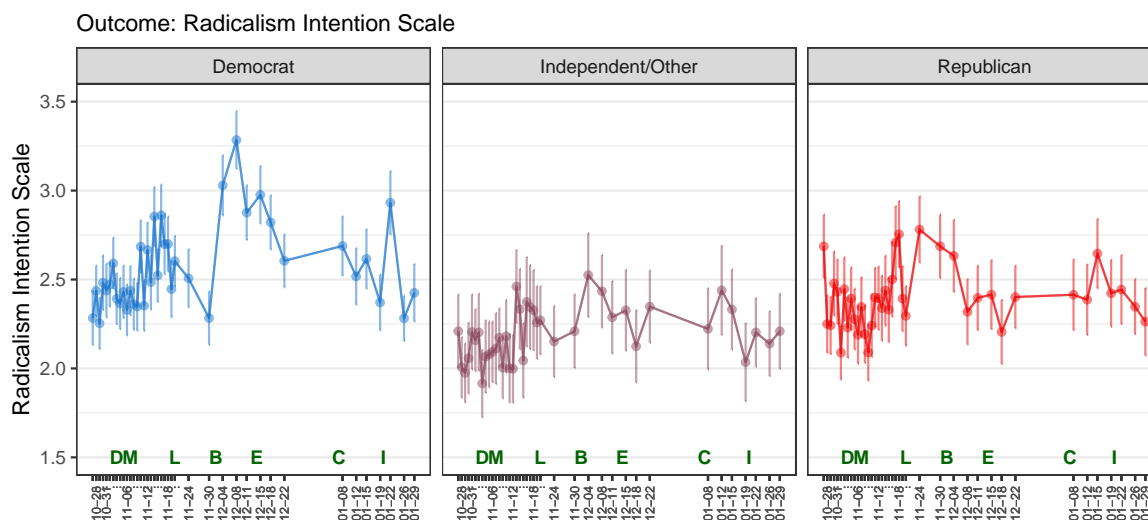


Figure 4: Support for radical and violent political action by partisanship. Letters mark significant political events: D = Election Day, Nov 3; M = Race called by news networks, Nov 7; L = Trump invites Michigan legislators to White House, Nov 24 ; B = Barr says no evidence of fraud, Dec 2; E = Electoral College certifies Biden, Dec 15; C = Capitol insurrection, Jan 7; I = Inauguration Day, Jan 20. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

Figure 4 shows the evolution of support for radical and violent political action over time, again disaggregating the data by partisanship.<sup>7</sup> We observe higher levels of support for radical action among partisans, and a quite noticeable increase in support for radical action against the state among Democrats in the immediate aftermath of the election. This support peaked just before the Electoral College members cast their votes on December 14th, perhaps in response to Trump’s public efforts to pressure local officials and legislators to dismiss votes from key states. Put differently, Trump’s perpetuation of the lie, coupled with his attempts to actually overturn the election result, appear to have pushed Democratic voters into a more radical mindset. This mindset subsided substantially after the election result was secured by the Electoral College vote and the events of January 6th, but support for violence among Democrats remained significantly higher than pre-election levels even after Biden was inaugurated.

Table 2 shows this more systematically. It presents the results of a regression of the

<sup>7</sup>Figure in the Supporting Information shows the aggregate results.

Table 2: Effects of 2020 Election Events on Support for Radical and Violent Political Action

Event	Estimates			
	Overall	Republicans	Democrats	Ind/Other
Pre-election (Intercept)	2.32 (0.018)	2.36 (0.033)	2.43 (0.029)	2.08 (0.033)
+ Post Election Day (Nov 3)	-0.030 (0.032)	-0.055 (0.057)	-0.032 (0.050)	0.0051 (0.057)
+ Post Election Call (Nov 7)	0.150 (0.030)	0.117 (0.052)	0.190 (0.046)	0.116 (0.053)
+ Post Trump Invite MI Legislators (Nov 20)	-0.036 (0.054)	-0.165 (0.096)	0.221 (0.084)	-0.315 (0.096)
+ Post Barr Citing No Fraud (Dec 2)	0.294 (0.060)	0.195 (0.107)	0.254 0.094	0.525 0.108
+ Post Electoral College (Dec 14)	-0.165 (0.043)	-0.109 (0.076)	-0.256 0.067	-0.151 0.078
+ Post Insurrection (Jan 6)	-0.109 (0.043)	0.068 (0.076)	-0.275 (0.066)	-0.039 (0.080)
+ Post Inauguration (Jan 20)	-0.039 (0.042)	-0.057 (0.076)	-0.003 (0.066)	-0.035 (0.078)
Cumulative Effect	0.126 (0.021)	0.029 (0.037)	0.197 (0.033)	0.120 (0.037)
n	19,175	6,407	8,401	4,115

Note: Table shows coefficient estimates from regressions of RIS on event indicators. Standard errors shown in parentheses. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

Radicalism Intention Scale on different event indicators of interest. This allows us to see how specific events moved support for radical action, as well as the cumulative effect of the full election cycle from November through January. We observe that by mid-December, support for radical action among Democrats had risen by about 0.633 points on a five point scale, about half of a standard deviation. The Electoral College vote and the events of January 6th



in turn dampened support for radical action by about 0.254 and 0.201 points respectively. The cumulative effect size of the election for Democrats was about 0.216, a little less than one fifth of a standard deviation.

Figure 5 explores precisely which members of the American population believe radical political action is most justified. As before, the results are disaggregated by partisanship, but the relationships that emerge are actually the same for Democrats, Republicans, and unaffiliated voters. We observe that voters that are younger, male, more educated, and higher social status are more likely to cite that radical action and violence is justified to defend one's group.

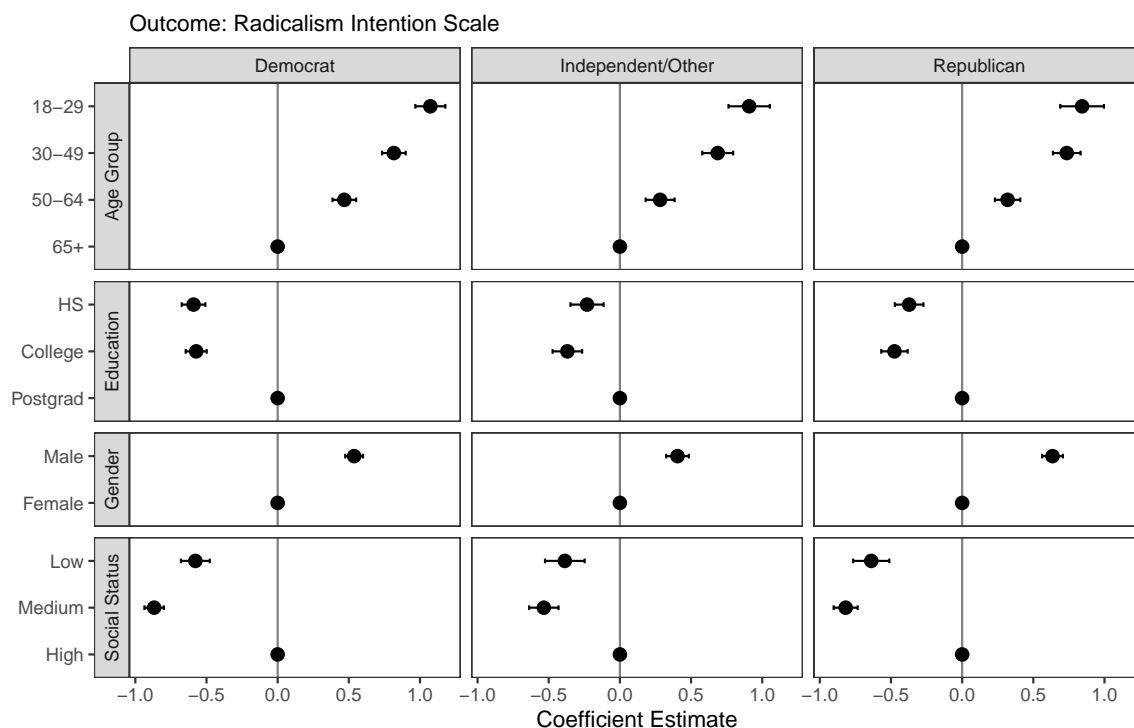


Figure 5: Support for radical political action by partisanship and demographics. The figure shows the coefficient estimates from a linear model where the RIS was regressed on demographic covariates of interest. The estimates in this figure reflect data collected after November 8th. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Electoral Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

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*Electoral Consequences*

To what extent will Trump’s “big lie” continue to affect American politics moving forward? Trump narrowly escaped impeachment for his conduct during the insurrection of January 6th. This vote proved contentious for Republican legislators, and those that did vote to impeach were rebuked by other members of the party.

To assess the electoral consequences of the lie, we included a paired conjoint experiment on the ELTS questionnaire beginning on January 12th ([Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014](#); [Hainmueller, Hangartner and Yamamoto, 2015](#); [Teele, Kalla and Rosenbluth, 2018](#)). The conjoint questions asked Republican and Independent respondents to imagine a hypothetical Republican congressional primary race, presenting them with a choice of two candidates. Respondents then viewed a table of two candidate profiles with randomly assigned attributes like profession, age, ethnicity, and gender. We varied whether the candidate took a position on the outcome of the 2020 election. Either they believed that Biden won and would have certified the result for him, or they believed that Trump won and would have not voted to certify the election for Biden. Figure SI3 in the Supporting Information shows how the profiles appeared in the survey. Respondents evaluated three pairs of candidates each.

Because these attributes were randomly assigned, we can recover the average marginal component effect (AMCE) of the attribute on selection for political office using a simple linear regression, clustering the standard errors at the respondent level ([Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014](#)). After accounting for profession, religion, gender and so on, a candidate who asserts that Trump really won the 2020 election did better than those who say that Trump lost. Among Republican respondents, on average, a “Trump won” candidate is favored by 5.7 percentage points against the opponent. This suggests the lie will have real staying power in American politics, at least for the next election cycle, when it could become a issue that divides Republican primary candidates.

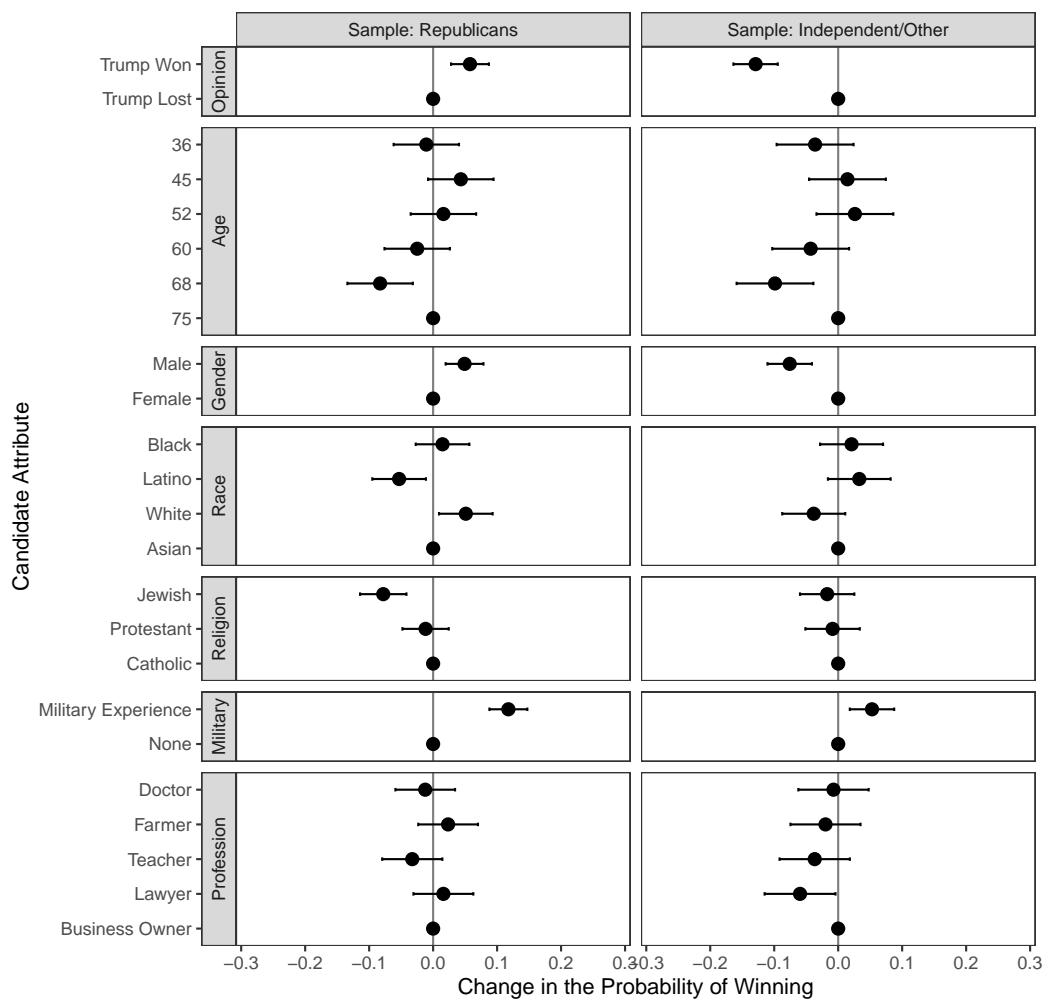


Figure 6: Results of conjoint experiment. The figure shows the coefficient estimates from a linear model where the candidate choice outcome was regressed on the randomly assigned candidate attributes in the conjoint experiment. The estimates in this figure reflect data collected after January 12th. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals, which reflect standard errors clustered at the respondent level. All data drawn from Electoral Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

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## Discussion

Our study systematically documents a new feature of American political life – roughly one fourth of the country, and half of the Republican Party rank-and-file, say that they buy into the idea that the election was somehow stolen from Trump. Across the 40 days of our study, acceptance of this “big lie” was pervasive, sticky, and consequential.

It would be easy to dismiss these findings as partisan cheerleading. After all, the United States is very polarized along partisan lines and people are not always truthful with pollsters. Nonetheless, we believe that our findings have important and potentially troubling implications for American democracy. Even if every single survey respondent who said that the election was stolen from Donald Trump knew that Joe Biden was the legitimate winner of the election, it still has the power to create the impression that “this is what people believe.” To borrow from the authoritarian politics literature, people are behaving “as-if” they believe and choosing to “live within the lie” ([Havel, 2018](#); [Wedeen, 2015](#)).

The results from the conjoint experiment illustrate that whether or not Republicans really believe that the election was not stolen from Trump, they will reward Republican candidates who claim that it was. As a result, it makes it difficult for Republican leaders to take a stand against the big lie and requires them to at least pretend that the foundation of American democracy – its electoral apparatus – is corrupt and broken.

We find this possibility troubling because for four reasons. First, it makes it difficult for Republicans in Congress to work with Democratic counterparts to fashion bipartisan legislation. Second, it provides a rationale for limiting voting rights and for enacting “reforms” that would make it easier to jettison ballots. Third, it sets a precedent that if one does not win an election, claiming fraud will not only go unpunished by the public, it might even help galvanize one’s side. Fourth, if claims of fraud become a regular feature of American elections in the future, it could stoke violence and undermine support for the democratic system.

Democracy often dies with the consent of the people it empowers ([Moehler and Lindberg,](#)

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2009). If voters do not hold their own party's politicians accountable or, worse, egg them on to undo democratic processes, it could accelerate the unraveling of the American democratic system.

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## Supporting Information

The Supporting Information contains the following:

### I. Survey Information

Sample Quality

Table : Comparison of ELTS sample and known population characteristics

Figures SI1 and SI2: Sample composition over time

Question Wording

Figure SI3: Paired conjoint experiment prompt

### II. Additional Analysis

Figure SI4: Perceptions of 2020 election outcome (unweighted data)

Figure SI5: Perceptions of 2020 election outcome by partisanship (unweighted data)

Figure SI6: Perceptions of 2020 election outcome by partisanship and demographics (unweighted data)

Figure SI7: Support for political violence

Figure SI8: Support for political violence by partisanship (unweighted data)

Figure SI9: Willingness to participate in violent protest by partisanship

Figure SI10: Willingness to attack police forces by partisanship

Figure SI11: Willingness to encourage other to join violent illegal protests by partisanship

Figure SI12: Willingness to war to protect rights of group by partisanship

Figure SI13: Willingness to retaliate against members of other group by partisanship

Figure SI14: Results of conjoint experiment (unweighted data)

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## Sample Quality

Probability-based samples, such as those generated through random-digit dialing, have been the gold standard for survey research. Nonetheless, weighted opt-in national surveys like ours have increasingly become a common way to gauge public opinion and voting behavior. Empirical evidence suggests they fare just as well at predicting election outcomes as more traditional methods [Kennedy et al. \(2018\)](#).

Qualtrics is an established, respected survey research firm that, similar to firms like YouGov, maintains a large verified online panel of potential survey respondents. It compensates panelists who opt to participate in studies with money-based incentives. It generates diverse samples through quotas that balance the sample with respect to preset demographic targets (e.g., 51% women). We instituted a quota for partisanship, which we tied to the distribution of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans according to the 2016 American National Election Study and gender, which we tied to the distribution of men and women among registered voters. To ensure that our daily samples were comparable, we asked Qualtrics to use a two-step method for study recruitment. First, it drew up a list of panelists necessary to generate a 20,000-person study. Second, it randomly sample participants from this list each day the survey was placed into the field and stopped once it reached 500 completed, quota-balanced observations.

Of course, whether our sample is nationally representative is an open question. To gauge the quality of our sample Table SI1 compare its demographic composition to known benchmarks. Our sample closely matches the population of registered voters in terms of: turnout, gender, identifying as White as well as Latino, education, and identifying as Republican. However, there are some discrepancies. The ELTS over-represents those who identify as Black, those younger than 50, the northeast and the south, and those identifying as Democrat. We address these departures from the population through applying sample weights. The figures below show that the results are essentially the same in the weighted and unweighted data.

Table SI1: Comparing ELTS Sample Characteristics to Population Estimates

Variable	ELTS Sample	Population Estimate
Turnout	87.7%	86.8%
Female	51.9%	51%
Black	15.1%	9%
Hispanic/Latino	6.2%	8%
White	72.8%	75%
Age 18-29	24.4%	11%
Age 30-49	48.4%	30%
Age 50-64	16.5%	29%
Age 65+	10.6%	31%
High School Degree or Less	22.1%	25%
Northeast	22.3%	17.2%
Midwest	18.4%	21%
South	43.2%	38%
West	15.4%	23.8%
Democrat	43.7%	35%
Republican	33.1%	31%

Note: Table compares the unweighted ELTS sample to estimates of the population of registered voters. Turnout among registered voters comes from the US Census Current Population Survey from 2016 (2020 not yet available). Population estimates for demographic variables and party identification come from Pew's Validated Voter data from 2018 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/30/a-voter-data-resource-detailed-demographic-tables-about-verified-voters-in-2016-2018/>).

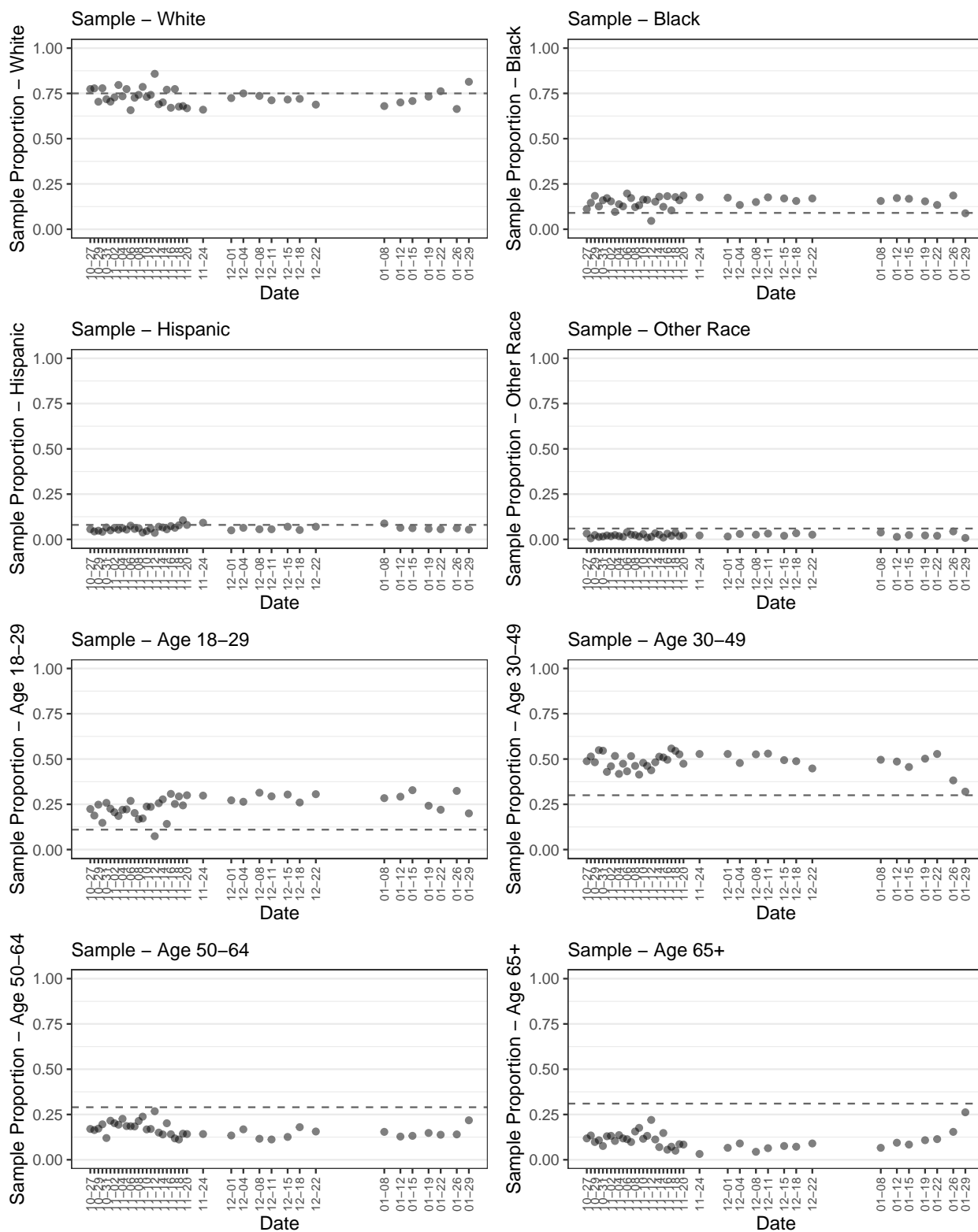


Figure S11: Sample composition over time (1/2). The figure shows different the share of respondents falling into different demographic categories in each daily sample. The dotted line represents the group's share of registered voters. Categories where the points consistently fall above the dotted line are over-represented in the unweighted survey data. Categories where the points fall below are under-represented. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

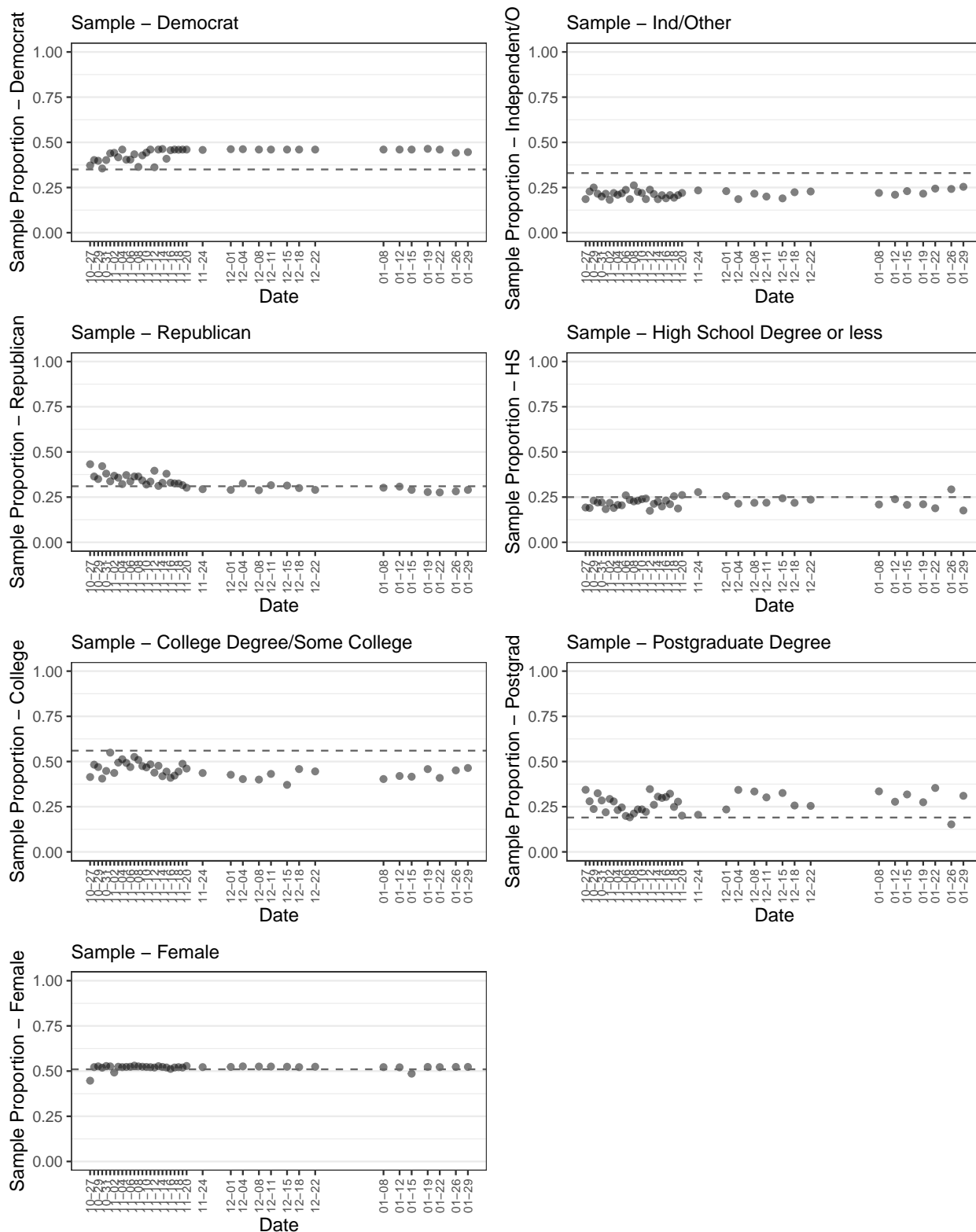


Figure SI2: Sample composition over time (2/2). The figure shows different the share of respondents falling into different demographic categories in each daily sample. The dotted line represents the group's share of registered voters. Categories where the points consistently fall above the dotted line are over-represented in the unweighted survey data. Categories where the points fall below are under-represented. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

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## Question Wording

Module: Radicalism Intention Scale (RIS) [Moskalenko and McCauley \(2009\)](#)

In this section, you will be presented with a series of possible actions that you can carry out to promote your group's political rights and interests. By "your group," we mean the political, religious, or social group that you identify with the most. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements?

V1. I would participate in a public protest against oppression of my group even if I thought the protest might turn violent.

- 1 - Strongly agree
- 2 - Agree
- 3 - Neither agree or disagree
- 4 - Disagree
- 5 - Strongly disagree
- 99 - No answer

V2. I would attack police or security forces if I saw them beating members of my group.

- 1 - Strongly agree
- 2 - Agree
- 3 - Neither agree or disagree
- 4 - Disagree
- 5 - Strongly disagree
- 99 - No answer

V3. I would encourage others to join violent protests against oppression of my group, even if I knew it was illegal.

- 1 - Strongly agree
- 2 - Agree
- 3 - Neither agree or disagree
- 4 - Disagree
- 5 - Strongly disagree
- 99 - No answer

V4. I would go to war to protect the rights of my group.

- 1 - Strongly agree
- 2 - Agree
- 3 - Neither agree or disagree
- 4 - Disagree
- 5 - Strongly disagree
- 99 - No answer

V5. I would retaliate against members of a group that had attacked my group, even if I couldn't be sure I was retaliating against the guilty party.

- 1 - Strongly agree

- 2 - Agree
- 3 - Neither agree or disagree
- 4 - Disagree
- 5 - Strongly disagree
- 99 - No answer

Module: Election Outcomes

E1. Who do you think is most likely to win the presidential election? [administered preelection]

- 1 - Definitely Joe Biden
- 2 - Probably Joe Biden
- 3 - Both Joe Biden and Donald Trump are equally likely to win
- 4 - Probably Donald Trump
- 5 - Definitely Donald Trump
- 99 - No answer

E2. Who do you think won the presidential election? [administered postelection]

- 1 - Joe Biden
- 2 - Donald Trump
- 99 - No answer

E3. Major news networks have announced that Joe Biden is the winner of the 2020 presidential election. Do you accept the election results as legitimate?[administered postelection]

- 1 - Yes
- 2 - No
- 99 - No answer

Module: Candidate Identification

P5b. In the 2020 general election, who did you vote for?

- 1 - Donald Trump
- 2 - Joe Biden
- 3 - Someone else
- 4 - I am not sure
- 5 - No answer

P4. On each of the next several pages you will be presented with a statement. Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statement on each page.

P4b. When people criticize [P5b piped text], it feels like a personal insult.



- 1 - Strongly agree
- 2 - Agree
- 3 - Neither agree or disagree
- 4 - Disagree
- 5 - Strongly disagree
- 99 - No answer

P4f. When people praise the [P5b piped text], it makes me feel good.

- 1 - Strongly agree
- 2 - Agree
- 3 - Neither agree or disagree
- 4 - Disagree
- 5 - Strongly disagree
- 99 - No answer

(1/3) Suppose you are voting in a primary election between two Republican candidates who are running for Congress. Which candidate do you prefer?

<b>Candidate 1</b>	<b>Candidate 2</b>
Profession <b>Farmer</b>	Profession <b>Farmer</b>
Military Service <b>Did not serve in the military</b>	Military Service <b>Did not serve in the military</b>
Religion <b>Catholic</b>	Religion <b>Protestant</b>
Race/Ethnicity <b>Black</b>	Race/Ethnicity <b>White</b>
Gender <b>Female</b>	Gender <b>Female</b>
Age <b>52</b>	Age <b>75</b>
Election Opinion <b>Maintains that Donald Trump won the 2020 election and says that they would have voted against certifying the election for Joe Biden</b>	Election Opinion <b>Maintains that Donald Trump lost the 2020 election and says that they would have voted for certifying the election for Joe Biden</b>

Figure SI3: Paired conjoint experiment prompt. The figure shows how the conjoint experiment appeared to respondents in the Electoral Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

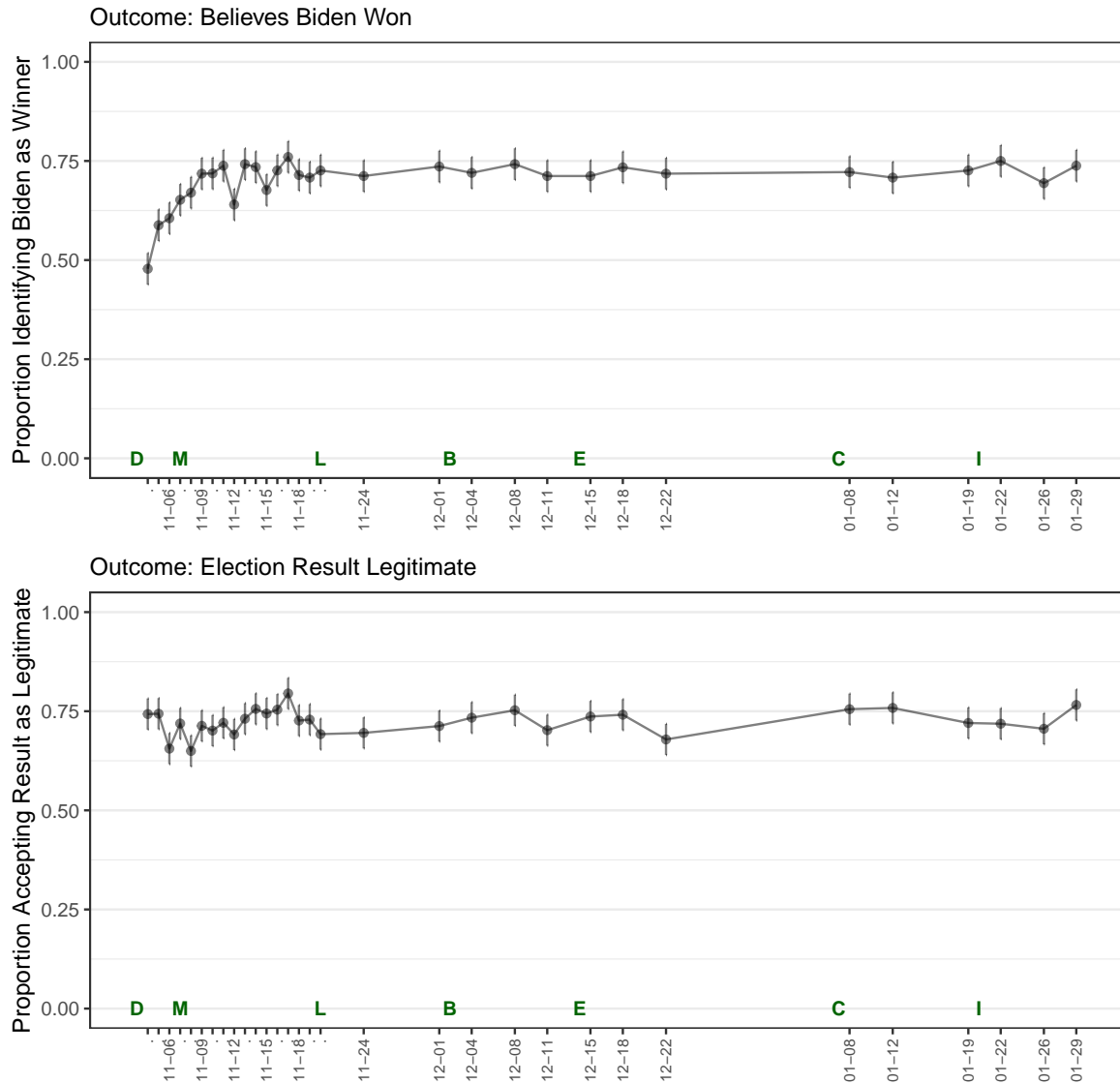


Figure SI4: Perceptions of 2020 election outcome (unweighted data). The top panel shows the proportion of respondents that answered “Joe Biden” to the question, “Who do you think won the 2020 presidential election?” The bottom panel shows the proportion that responded “Yes” to the question, “Do you accept the election results as legitimate?” Starting on November 8th, the legitimacy question was preceded by the sentence, “Major news networks have announced that Joe Biden is the winner of the 2020 presidential election.” Letters mark significant political events: D = Election Day, Nov 3; M = Race called by news networks, Nov 7; L = Trump invites Michigan legislators to White House, Nov 24; B = Barr says no evidence of fraud, Dec 2; E = Electoral College certifies Biden, Dec 15; C = Capitol insurrection, Jan 7; I = Inauguration Day, Jan 20. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

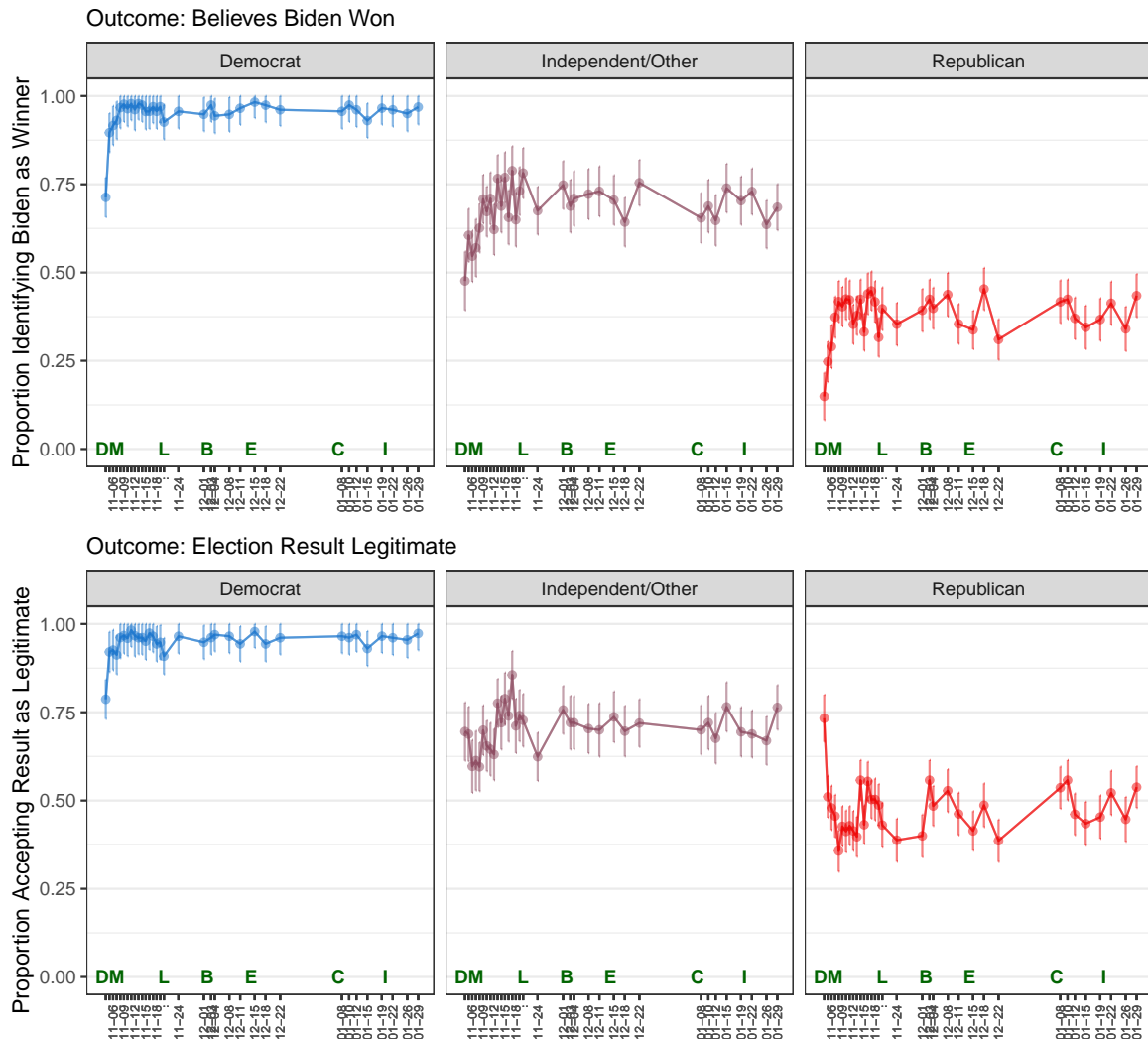


Figure SI5: Perceptions of 2020 election outcome by partisanship (unweighted data). The top panel shows the proportion of respondents that answered “Joe Biden” to the question, “Who do you think won the 2020 presidential election?” The bottom panel shows the proportion that responded “Yes” to the question, “Do you accept the election results as legitimate?” Starting on November 8th, the legitimacy question was preceded by the sentence, “Major news networks have announced that Joe Biden is the winner of the 2020 presidential election.” Letters mark significant political events: D = Election Day, Nov 3; M = Race called by news networks, Nov 7; L = Trump invites Michigan legislators to White House, Nov 24 ; B = Barr says no evidence of fraud, Dec 2; E = Electoral College certifies Biden, Dec 15; C = Capitol insurrection, Jan 7; I = Inauguration Day, Jan 20. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

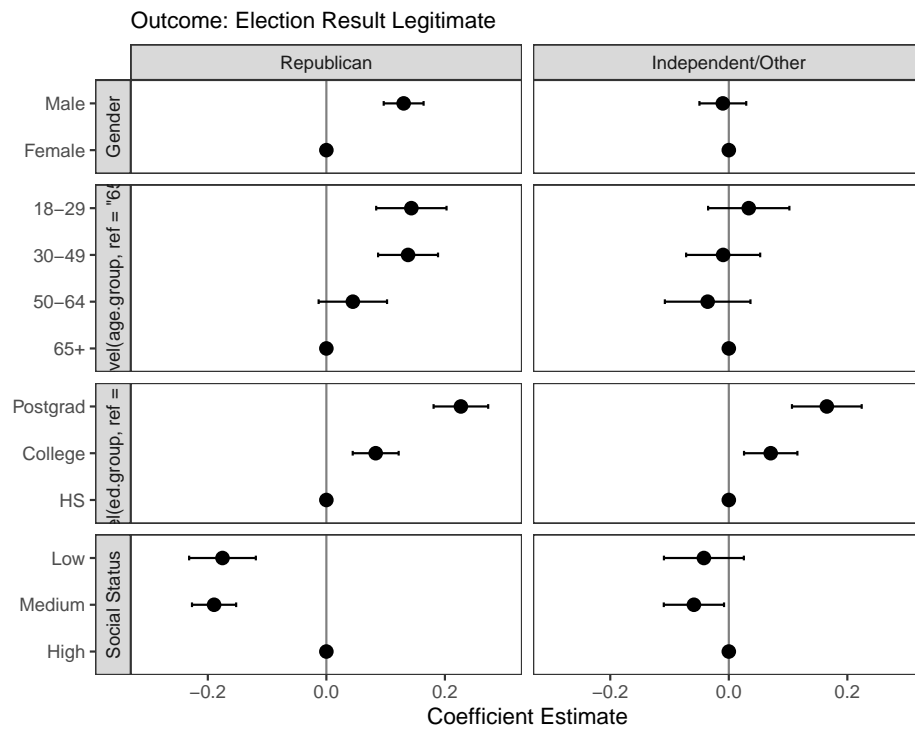


Figure SI6: Perceptions of 2020 election outcome by partisanship and demographics (unweighted data). The figure shows the coefficient estimates from a linear probability model where the binary legitimate variable was regressed on demographic covariates of interest. Starting on November 8th, the legitimacy question was preceded by the sentence, “Major news networks have announced that Joe Biden is the winner of the 2020 presidential election”—the estimates in this figure reflect data collected after that date. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Electoral Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

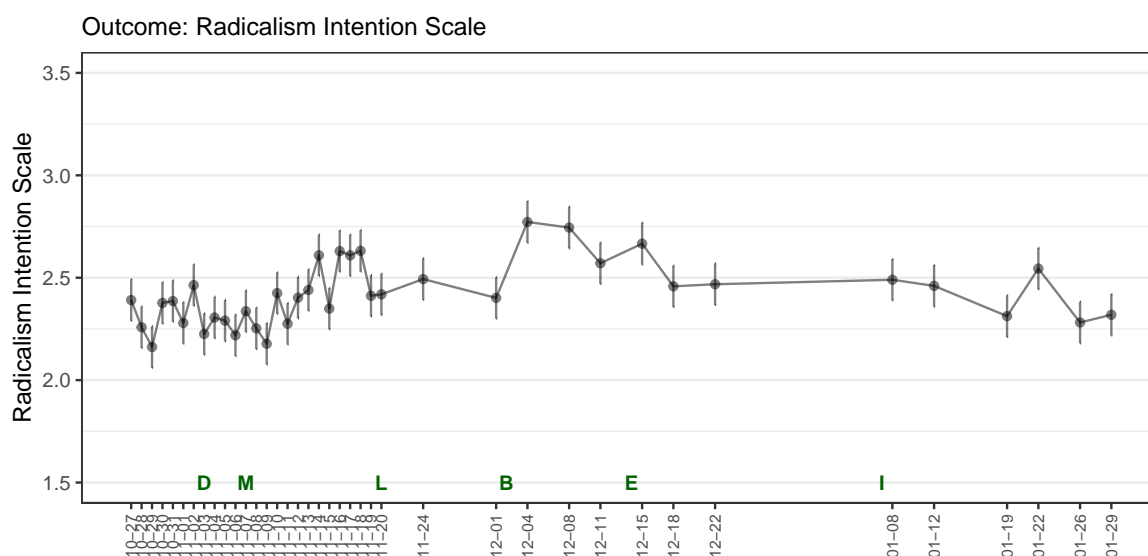


Figure SI7: Support for political violence. Letters mark significant political events: D = Election Day, Nov 3; M = Race called by news networks, Nov 7; L = Trump invites Michigan legislators to White House, Nov 24; B = Barr says no evidence of fraud, Dec 2; E = Electoral College certifies Biden, Dec 15; I = Capitol insurrection, Jan 7. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

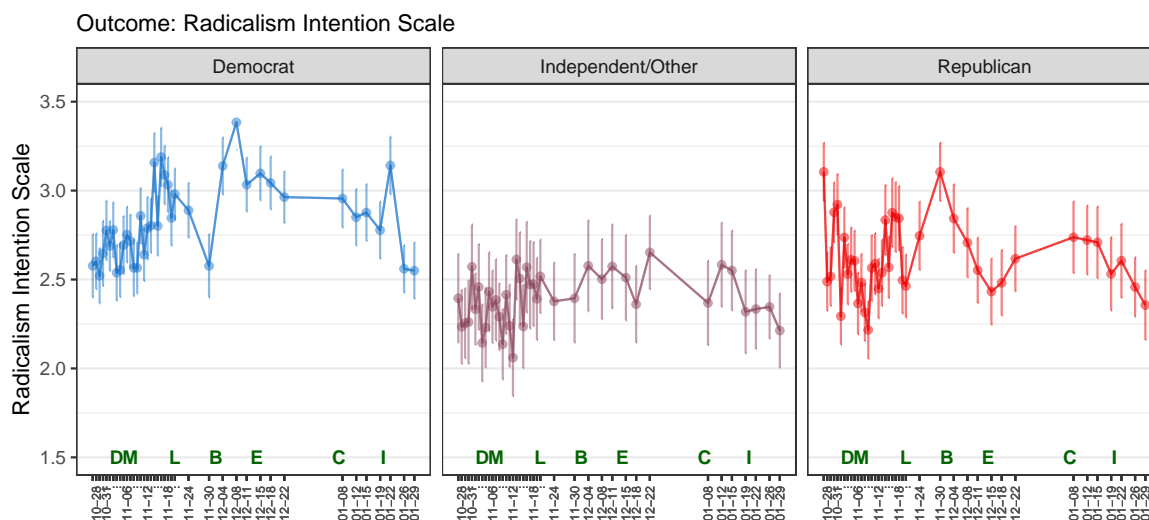


Figure SI8: Support for political violence by partisanship (unweighted data). Letters mark significant political events: D = Election Day, Nov 3; M = Race called by news networks, Nov 7; L = Trump invites Michigan legislators to White House, Nov 24 ; B = Barr says no evidence of fraud, Dec 2; E = Electoral College certifies Biden, Dec 15; C = Capitol insurrection, Jan 7; I = Inauguration Day, Jan 20. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

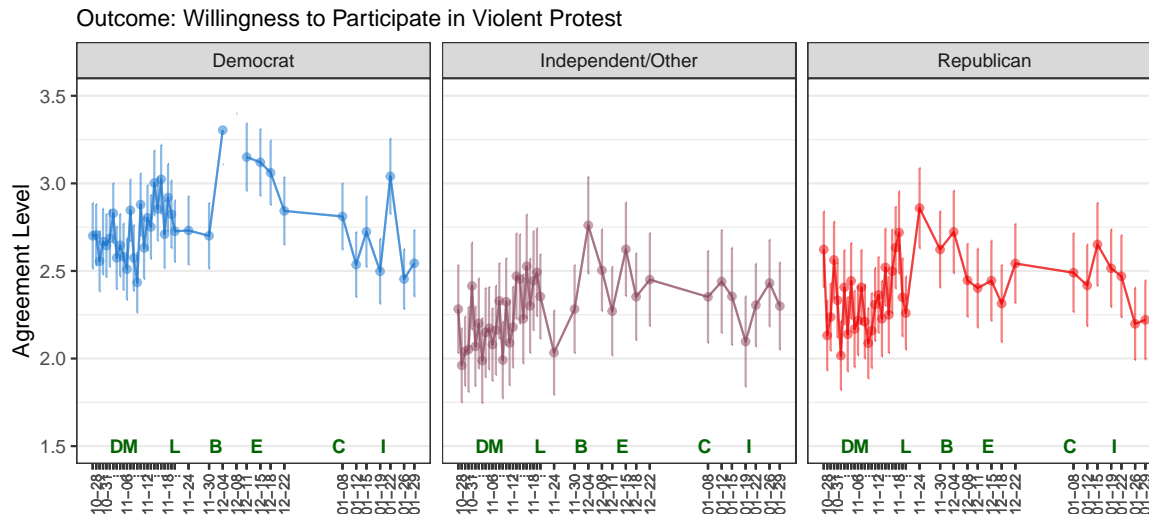


Figure SI9: Willingness to participate in violent protest by partisanship. Letters mark significant political events: D = Election Day, Nov 3; M = Race called by news networks, Nov 7; L = Trump invites Michigan legislators to White House, Nov 24 ; B = Barr says no evidence of fraud, Dec 2; E = Electoral College certifies Biden, Dec 15; C = Capitol insurrection, Jan 7; I = Inauguration Day, Jan 20. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

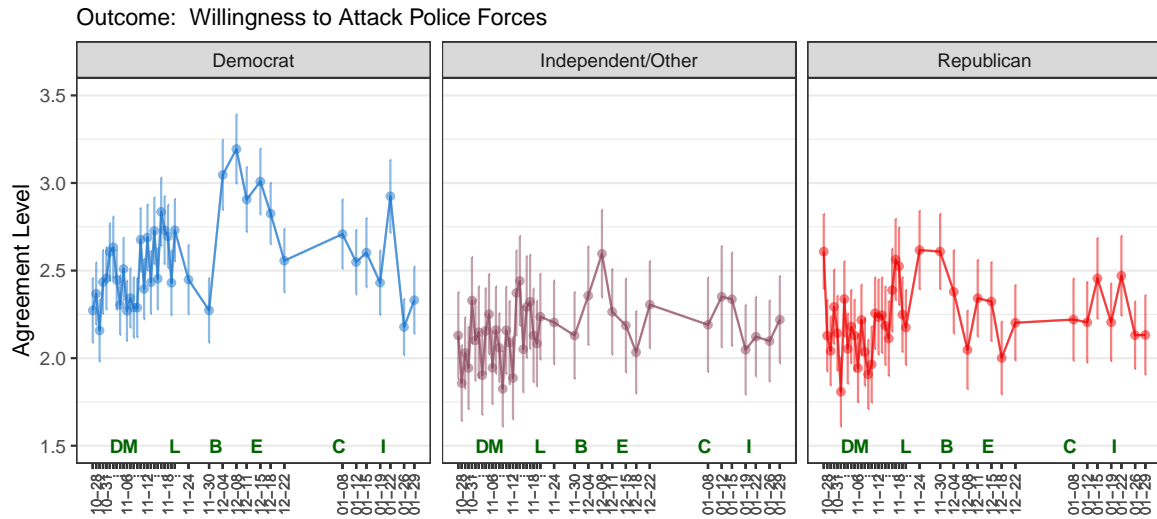


Figure SI10: Willingness to attack police forces by partisanship. Letters mark significant political events: D = Election Day, Nov 3; M = Race called by news networks, Nov 7; L = Trump invites Michigan legislators to White House, Nov 24 ; B = Barr says no evidence of fraud, Dec 2; E = Electoral College certifies Biden, Dec 15; C = Capitol insurrection, Jan 7; I = Inauguration Day, Jan 20. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

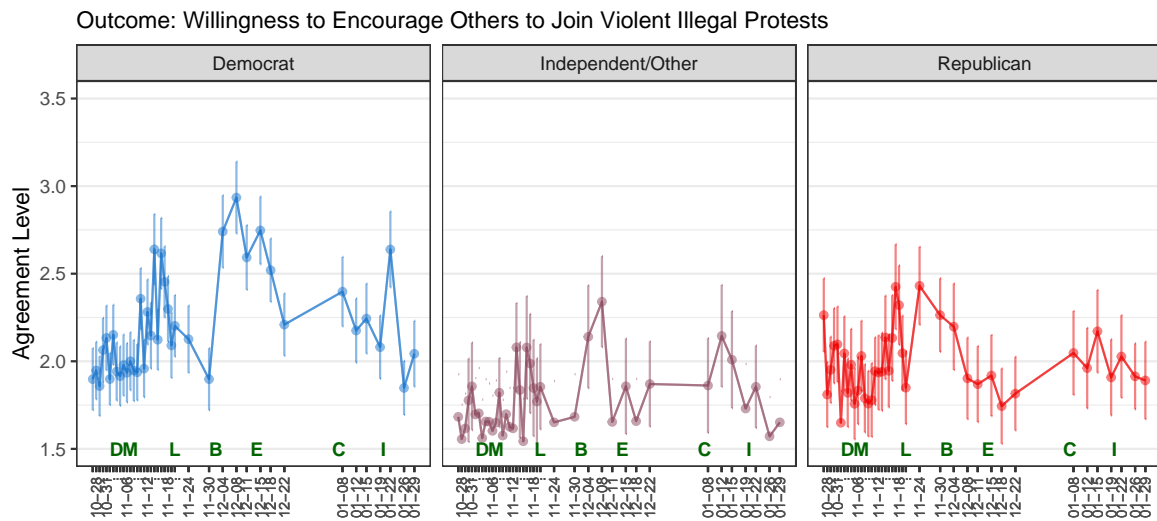


Figure SI11: Willingness to encourage other to join violent illegal protests by partisanship. Letters mark significant political events: D = Election Day, Nov 3; M = Race called by news networks, Nov 7; L = Trump invites Michigan legislators to White House, Nov 24 ; B = Barr says no evidence of fraud, Dec 2; E = Electoral College certifies Biden, Dec 15; C = Capitol insurrection, Jan 7; I = Inauguration Day, Jan 20. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).



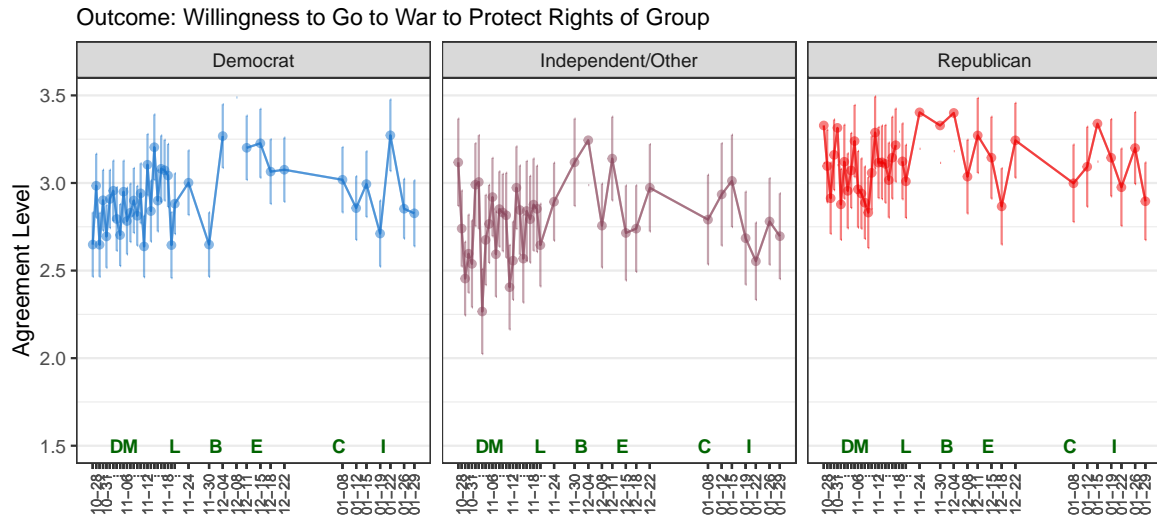


Figure SI12: Willingness to go to war to protect rights of group by partisanship. Letters mark significant political events: D = Election Day, Nov 3; M = Race called by news networks, Nov 7; L = Trump invites Michigan legislators to White House, Nov 24 ; B = Barr says no evidence of fraud, Dec 2; E = Electoral College certifies Biden, Dec 15; C = Capitol insurrection, Jan 7; I = Inauguration Day, Jan 20. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

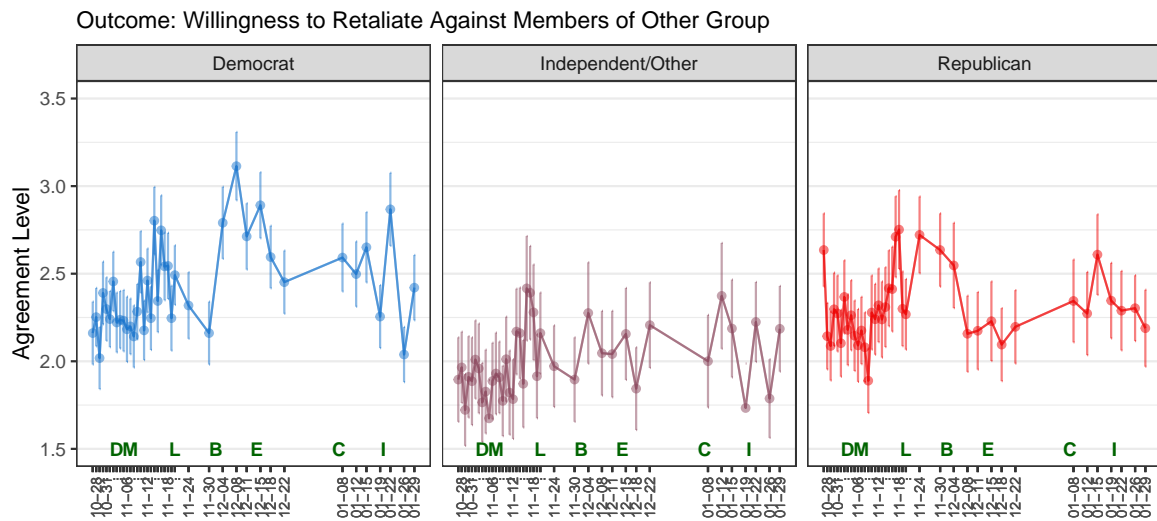


Figure SI13: Willingness to retaliate against members of other group by partisanship. Letters mark significant political events: D = Election Day, Nov 3; M = Race called by news networks, Nov 7; L = Trump invites Michigan legislators to White House, Nov 24 ; B = Barr says no evidence of fraud, Dec 2; E = Electoral College certifies Biden, Dec 15; C = Capitol insurrection, Jan 7; I = Inauguration Day, Jan 20. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals. All data drawn from Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).

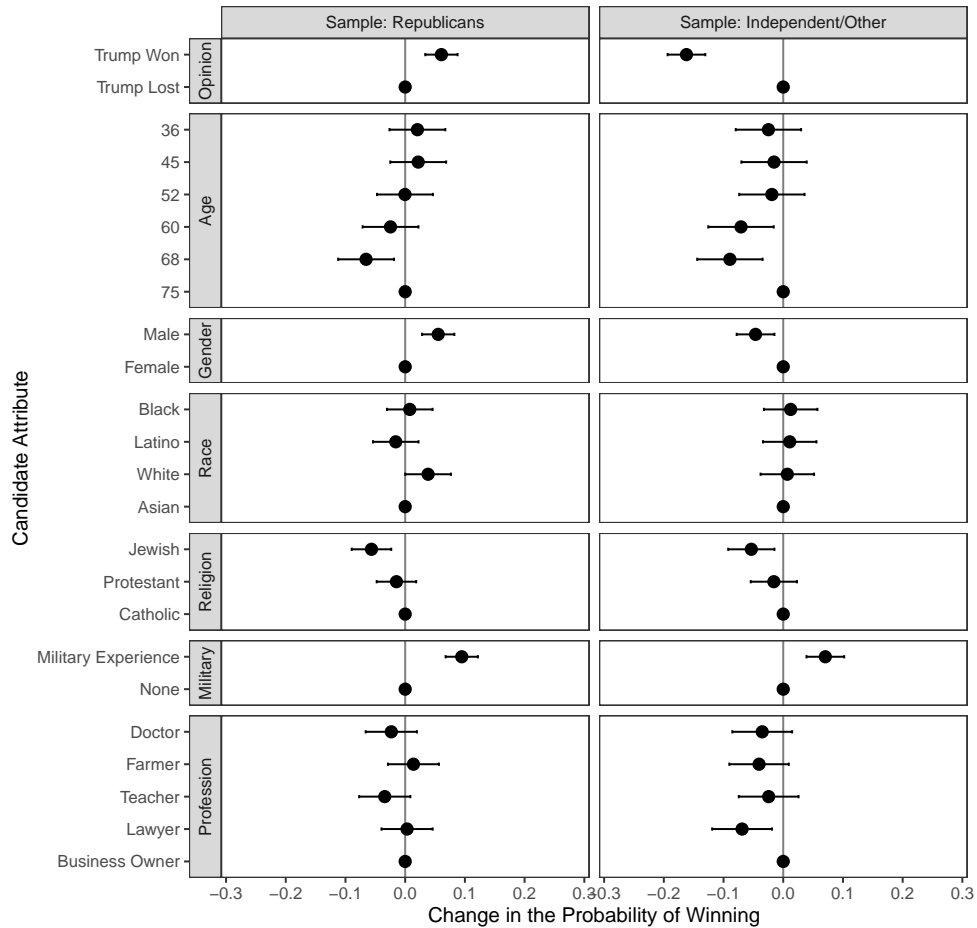


Figure SI14: Results of conjoint experiment (unweighted data). The figure shows the coefficient estimates from a linear model where the candidate choice outcome was regressed on the randomly assigned candidate attributes in the conjoint experiment. The estimates in this figure reflect data collected after January 12th. Line segments represent 95% confidence intervals, which reflect standard errors clustered at the respondent level. All data drawn from Electoral Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS).