

Would Americans ever support a coup? 40 percent now say yes.

That percentage jumped significantly since 2017 and includes more than half the Republicans we surveyed.



Supporters of President Donald Trump take over balconies and inauguration scaffolding at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, in Washington. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

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Recently, for the first time, the United States was [added](#) to a list of “backsliding democracies,” by the Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. [Other](#) similar [organizations](#) have also reported that the United States’ democratic institutions have eroded.

Former president Donald Trump’s effort to undermine the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election, a campaign that culminated in the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S.

Capitol one year ago, looms large in these assessments. Many — including top military officers — [feared](#) a coup on U.S. soil. Some experts [consider](#) the insurrection itself to have been an attempted coup. Since then, some Trump allies, including former national security adviser Michael Flynn, have openly [embraced](#) the idea of a military takeover, and high-profile political observers now argue that U.S. democracy is deep into [a constitutional crisis](#) and that the “[next coup has already begun](#).” Would Americans accept a forceful takeover of the state? Our research provides some troubling answers.

Peaceful transfers of power and trust in elections lie at the heart of democracy

A basic tenet of functioning democracies is that those who lose an election accept defeat. Election losers are willing to play by the rules if they believe they can win the next time around. The key to a strong democracy, wrote political scientist Adam Przeworski, is a form of “[institutionalized uncertainty](#)” — as long as we cannot know who will win the next election, both sides have good reasons to preserve the system that allows them to compete.

All this also rests on the premise that elections are fair and that both sides see them as legitimate. Political scientist Pippa Norris has [found](#) that when the public loses its faith in elections, citizens stop voting, turning instead to protesting and other forms of expression, and increasingly embrace other ways to change the political regime. This seems to be happening in the United States.

Americans’ support for coups has increased sharply

For over two decades, our research team, [LAPOP Lab](#) at Vanderbilt University, has been studying democratic attitudes and values across the Americas, using nationally representative surveys that we field every other year. The U.S. survey uses online interviews with Web-based national samples of 1,500 respondents.

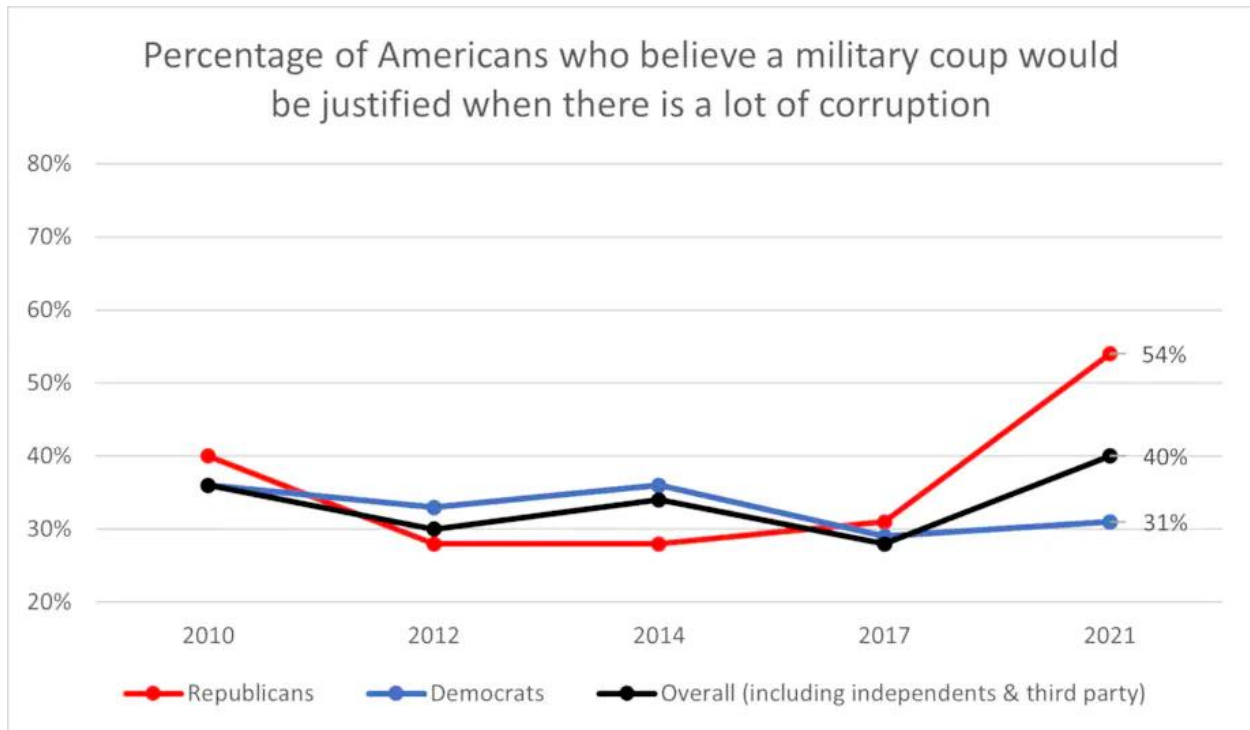
Since 2010, the survey has asked a question that reads, “Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d’état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified when there is a lot of corruption?” Respondents could answer either “yes, it would be justified” or “no, it would not be justified.”

For a number of years, a sizable minority of Americans, just over [1 in 4](#), said yes, a military coup would be justifiable. That figure cut [across party lines](#), with both Democrats and Republicans expressing slightly more support than independents. It seemed surprisingly high for a country with a well-established tradition of civilian rule, but further testing revealed that respondents fully understood what a military takeover of the state would mean.

Still, several facts provided reassurance. For one, the U.S. rate in 2017 (the last year the question was asked before 2021) was one of the lowest out of all the countries in the Americas; in six countries, including Canada, more than 2 in 5 said a coup could be justifiable. And the share of Americans who said they could tolerate a coup appeared to be declining.

Our [newly-released](#) 2021 survey found something different.

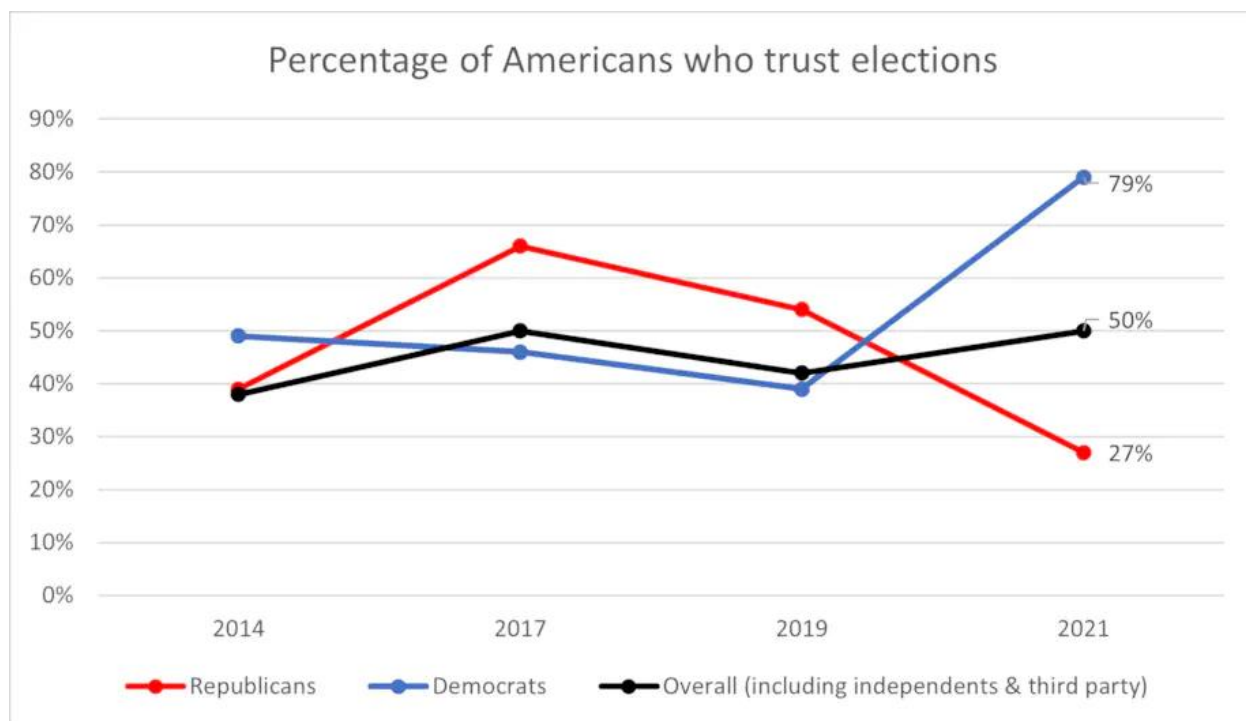
The share of Americans willing to tolerate a coup increased from 28 percent in 2017 to 40 percent in 2021. That's a 43 percent increase, and the highest rate we've seen in the United States since we began asking the question more than a decade ago. It's also one of the largest increases we've seen in this measure across the Americas. Compared to other countries we study, the U.S. now ranks near the middle on this measure, just higher than Brazil and Mexico — countries with relatively recent histories of authoritarian rule.



Anti-democratic attitudes and trust in elections are now deeply divided by party

Another particularly striking finding from our 2021 study is that tolerance for coups has become quite different by party. In each of four previous rounds of our survey, the share of Democrats and the share of Republicans who believed a military coup could be justified differed by less than 10 percentage points. In 2017, the gap was only two percentage points, with 31 percent of Republicans and 29 percent of Democrats agreeing. That division widened considerably in 2021. Now, 54 percent of Republicans express tolerance toward a military takeover of the state, compared to just 31 percent of Democrats.

Another of our survey questions, asking respondents if they “trust elections in this country,” also documents a growing gulf between parties. Those who identify with the party of the sitting president typically trust elections slightly more, but this round, that gap widened considerably. In 2021, 79 percent of Democrats reported that they trust elections while just 27 percent of Republicans did. That's a gulf of 52 percentage points — a dramatic difference from the 14 percentage points just two years ago, in 2019, when 40 percent of Democrats and 54 percent of Republicans said they trusted elections.



What makes a coup possible?

Recent coups in [Sudan](#), [Mali](#) and [Myanmar](#) have made headlines, as have stories about democratic erosion in countries like [Brazil](#), [India](#), [Nicaragua](#), and [elsewhere](#). Democracies backslide when [institutions and norms degrade](#) and those who anticipate being on the losing side of elections subvert electoral processes and democracy itself. Our data reveal that Americans are increasingly tolerant of such antidemocratic moves, and this tolerance is concentrated among the most recent electoral losers, Republicans. Although democratic institutions were able to ensure a peaceful transfer of power in 2021, our findings suggest that — among the mass public — American democracy may not be as resilient as many had previously thought.

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