

Unconditional Support for Trump's Resistance Prior to Election Day

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ABSTRACT

Using survey data collected less than two weeks before the 2020 presidential election, we investigated why likely Trump voters would support Trump resisting the election results if he lost. We first used an experiment with randomized hypothetical popular-vote margins to test whether support for resistance was contingent on the results of the election. We also directly asked respondents who stated that they would support resistance to explain their reasoning in an open-ended response. In doing so, we gained insight into one of the most turbulent elections in American history and examined how support for resistance existed before the election due to both misinformation about voter fraud and hyperpartisanship that made Trump voters view the electoral process itself as illegitimate.

Leading up to the 2020 presidential election, it was unclear—for the first time since the Election of 1800—whether the incumbent president would accept electoral defeat. In the third debate of the 2016 presidential election, Trump refused to commit to accepting the election results if he lost (Gellman 2020). Soon after, Trump told supporters that he would “totally accept the results [of the 2016 presidential election]...” but followed the statement with “if I win!” (Diamond 2016). Because Trump won the Electoral College, this threat was never tested. However, in the third presidential debate of the 2020 presidential election, Trump again refused to commit to accepting the election results, stating that the only way he could lose would be due to fraud from mail-in ballots used amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Gellman 2020). This threat then was substantiated when Trump lost both the popular vote and the Electoral College but refused to concede.

With the rampant spread of what has become known as “The Big Lie”—which argued that the election was riddled with fraud, particularly due to the use of mail-in ballots—it appeared that Trump was not alone in rejecting the legitimacy of the democratic process. A Reuters/Ipsos poll fielded in October 2020 directly asked voters whether they would accept the election results if their preferred candidate lost. Although minimal context was provided and the question did not ask what the candidates themselves should do, the poll found that 41% of likely Trump

voters would not accept a Biden victory and 16% of all likely Trump voters “would engage in street protests or even violence” (Kahn 2020).

Amid the uncertainty preceding the election, we conducted a survey experiment in October 2020 to examine the extent to which Trump's voters would support him if he lost the election but refused to concede. The results indicate that the Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021, was not a surprise but rather a manifestation of an illiberal and contentious culture surrounding the 2020 presidential election fostered by Trump's divisive rhetoric and misinformation campaign.

We explored the following question: “Would a higher popular-vote margin of victory for Biden increase the acceptance of his Electoral College victory among Trump voters?” If higher popular-vote margins were met with greater support for Trump accepting the election and conceding defeat, this could indicate that his supporters' acceptance of the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election was contingent on the election results. However, if support for resistance was unrelated to the popular-vote margin, this could indicate that the legitimacy of the election and its victor were determined before the vote. Furthermore, to understand the rationale guiding those who would support Trump in resisting the results of the 2020 presidential election, we asked respondents to explain their motivation in their own words.

This study proposes an explanation for one of the most turbulent elections in American history. By probing support for Trump's resistance before the election, we provide insight into how a fundamental tradition of American democracy was almost destroyed. Additionally, we gained an understanding of how messaging from elites, regarding both election fraud and partisan

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affairs, affected Trump voters' respect for the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election. The study highlights how the rhetoric and actions of elites culminated in a disregard for the democratic electoral process among Trump voters.

UNDERSTANDING RESISTANCE

We speculated that there would be two motivations for Trump voters to support him if he attempted to undermine the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election: misinformation about voter fraud or illiberal political motivations to overturn the election results.

"The Big Lie" and the Effects of Misinformation

The spread and severity of misinformation have grown dramatically in the United States, bolstered by Trump's labeling of traditional media outlets as "fake news" (Oehmichen et al. 2019). Baseless allegations of voter fraud in the 2016 presidential election were levied by both right-wing pundits and Trump himself, who claimed that he won the popular vote "if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally" (Wootson 2016). After assuming office, Trump created the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, tasked with investigating voter fraud (Nelson 2017). Trump's claims about voter fraud in the 2016 election established the framework for skepticism about the validity of the 2020 presidential election (Oehmichen et al. 2019).

Misinformation in the 2020 presidential campaign was in full force, with Trump telling his followers that the only way he could lose would be through voter fraud (Badger 2020a). These lies espoused by Trump and right-wing pundits culminated in "The Big Lie," which Trump voters bought into, and ultimately is credited with inspiring the Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021 (Vachudova 2021).

Misinformation spread online tactically caters to the political preferences of its viewers, driving polarization over conflict about what is the truth (Enders and Smallpage 2019). This reflects a tenet of misinformation: it is commonly accepted by those whose preexisting beliefs, assumptions, and worldviews conform to the message (Swire et al. 2017). The supply of misinformation, therefore, is received by voters who interpret new information through the lens of motivated reasoning. In doing so, individuals accept new information in ways that they find desirable and reject evidence that contradicts their worldview. This renders partisans especially susceptible to believing misinformation that supports their political preferences, thereby substantially impacting their factual beliefs.

Presented with the same information, partisans interpret that information differently to support their own beliefs (Enders and Smallpage 2019). When interpreting information such as the winner of an election, identity-protective cognition is used. This represents a way to avoid "dissonance and estrangement from valued groups" (e.g., political parties) that leads "individuals [to] subconsciously resist factual information that threatens their defining values" (Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, and Braman 2011, 149; Kahan et al. 2012, 733).

Identity-protective cognition made Trump voters more susceptible to Trump's unfounded claims of voter fraud leading up to—and well after—the 2020 presidential election. Due to the prominence of misinformation catered to the political Right, surveys conducted before Election Day found that Republicans were more likely than Democrats to have concern about the

integrity of the 2020 presidential election (Persily and Stewart III 2021). Furthermore, in a study on the effects of misinformation spread on social media, Berlinski et al. (2021) concluded that exposure to any misinformation significantly reduced Republicans' and Trump voters' confidence in US electoral integrity—no matter how much they were exposed to it.

Therefore, we believed that most respondents who would support Trump resisting the results would justify their position on the grounds of perceived fraud in the election. Specifically, we predicted that most respondents would indicate that Trump would lose due to fraud involving the unprecedented use of mail-in ballots necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Before Election Day, Trump claimed that this would be the only way he could lose to Biden, thereby warranting his resistance in his supporters' view. These respondents thus would be supportive of Trump resisting the results due to misinformation about the integrity of the election spread from elites to the public.

Partisan Motivations for Undermining Election Results

In contrast to those who supported resistance due to concerns about the legitimacy of the election, some respondents may have supported Trump's efforts to resist free and fair election results due to partisan "cheerleading" by purposely basing their responses on information they knew to be inaccurate (e.g., voter fraud and malpractice) merely from a desire to support their party (Bullock et al. 2015). This form of expressive responding persists even when the information presented provides a clear truth. For example, when respondents were presented with photographs of Obama's and Trump's respective inauguration crowds, "the most politically engaged Trump supporters" falsely claimed that Trump's inauguration photograph depicted a larger crowd. In doing so, they provided "expressive responses to a straightforward question related to controversy" in which the factual answer was clear (Schaffner and Luks 2018, 142). These findings suggest that some Trump voters in our survey stated that Trump should resist disappointing results not because they necessarily thought the results were fraudulent but rather to signal their political support for him.

Partisan cheerleading, however, presents a novel issue in our survey. Fundamentally, Trump supporters' engagement in partisan cheerleading in our study is antithetical to the principles of liberal democracy because those respondents expressed a willingness to undermine the democratic electoral process for partisan ends. Indeed, partisan support for undermining free and fair election results is a hallmark of competitive authoritarianism (see, for example, Levitsky and Way 2010; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). As such, it must be examined why partisans would support efforts to undermine the legitimacy of elections by refusing to accept credible results.

We suspected that some Trump supporters may have supported his efforts to resist defeat simply because he was their preferred candidate or because they are opposed to Democratic rule. The latter is an extreme case of negative partisanship and has proven to lead to public support for illiberal actions—particularly in comparative studies of executive aggrandizement (Cleary and Öztürk 2020). In their analysis of American voters serving as a check on undemocratic candidates, Graham and Svobik (2020) found that when two candidates are ideologically opposed, voters are less likely to punish the candidate who aligns with their policy

interests when they exhibit undemocratic behavior. Their findings clearly can be applied to the 2020 presidential election, given that both the candidates and the voters were more polarized in 2020 than in any election in recent history (Jacobson 2021). Thus, in applying Graham and Svulik's (2020) methods to our survey experiment, we expected that some voters—rather than simply tolerate illiberal candidates—would actively endorse their preferred candidate's undemocratic actions rather than tolerate opposition rule.

- a. "Resist the results of the election through measures such as discrediting the results as invalid, declaring a state of emergency, and/or taking any means possible to remain in office."
- b. "Concede defeat and commit to a peaceful transfer of power."

We chose to randomly assign the hypothetical popular-vote margin to an integer between 1 and 15 percentage points for Biden based on polling aggregates from *FiveThirtyEight* (Silver 2020), *The Economist* (2020b), and *Real Clear Politics* (2020) in

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Specifically, we assumed that those who identified their partisan affiliation as "strong Republicans" would be significantly more likely to support Trump's efforts at resisting the outcome than Independents or moderate Republicans who voted for Trump, given that their policy interests likely were more aligned with Trump than with those in the latter group. Therefore, the opportunity cost of not having Trump in office was higher for those voters than it was for more centrist voters. In their survey experiment, Graham and Svulik (2020) found that moderate and centrist voters serve as a pro-democratic check on illiberal politicians, thereby confirming our expectation.

Those who supported Trump resisting the election results for partisan reasons likely would provide partisan explanations to our open-ended question. We expected that they would cite either that Trump was their preferred candidate and thus they wanted him to be in power no matter what or that they were highly opposed to Democratic rule and were willing to undermine the electoral process to ensure that such an outcome did not occur.

METHODS AND DATA

We explored our research questions in a survey fielded online to 1,208 American adult respondents recruited via Lucid between October 24 and 25, 2020 (Hartnett and Haver 2022). Post-stratification weights were applied to make the survey nationally representative of American adults by gender, age, region, education, race, and 2016 presidential vote, with targets defined by the most recent five-year American Community Survey.

Respondents were asked if they intended to vote in the 2020 General Election. Those who stated that they planned to vote, probably would vote, had already voted (by either mail or early voting), or were undecided then were asked for their presidential vote choice. Those who already had voted for Trump, planned to vote for Trump, or leaned toward voting for Trump were categorized as Trump Voters ($N=510$).

After the preface—"The following question will ask about a hypothetical outcome of the 2020 presidential election. Please choose the answer that best reflects your preferences"—Trump voters were presented with the following statement: "Biden wins the popular vote by __ percentage points and wins the Electoral College." Each respondent received a randomized popular-vote margin, which ranged between 1 and 15 points. Respondents then were asked: "The Trump campaign should..."

mid-October. At the time of our study, there was less than a 6% chance of Trump winning the popular vote, which warranted our exclusion of such a scenario (Silver 2020). The listed ways by which Trump could resist the results of an electoral defeat corresponded to common tactics used by autocratic leaders in liberal democracies. Gellman (2020) applied these possible tactics to the US presidential election, arguing in September 2020 that Trump could refuse to accept defeat by filing lawsuits to challenge the results, demanding that states send conflicting electors to the Electoral College, or declaring a national emergency to inhibit the peaceful transfer of power.

Using these data, we conducted two logit-regression analyses using generalized linear models. The first model simply tested whether the randomly assigned popular-vote-margin treatment affected likely Trump voters' support for his resistance. The second model analyzed how the demographics of respondents were associated with their support for Trump's resistance, using variables for their age range, level of education, household income, self-reported party identification, and gender. The model also tested the extent to which interest in the news and acknowledgment of racism (Schaffner 2022) impacted their support for resistance.

To respondents who stated that Trump should resist the election results, we asked this follow-up open-ended question: "Why should the Trump campaign resist the results of the election? Please be as specific as possible." We categorized the open-ended responses according to the rationale provided to support resistance and included those that provided more than one reason in multiple categories ($N=183$). Themes observed in fewer than 10 responses were coded as "Other." Respondents who provided bogus responses or did not provide any answer ($N=23$) were removed from the analysis.

The response categories then were categorized according to the theme that motivated respondents' support for resistance: partisanship or negative partisanship, concerns about election integrity, and all other responses. All responses were in one of the three themes, with some included in more than one.

FINDINGS

Our findings confirmed that support for Trump's resistance was independent of the election itself, as shown both quantitatively and through our analysis of our survey's open-ended responses.

Table 1

Trump Voters' Support for Resistance of Election Defeat (Binary Logit Model)

	Dependent Variable	
	Support Resistance	
	(1)	(2)
Popular-Vote Margin	-0.0056 (0.0049)	-0.0072 (0.0051)
Age		
(Baseline: Under 35)		
35–49		0.0240 (0.0645)
50–64		-0.0614 (0.0628)
Over 65		-0.1697** (0.0685)
Education		
(Baseline: No College)		
Some College		-0.0537 (0.0525)
College Degree		0.0307 (0.0770)
Household Income		
(Baseline: Less Than \$25,000)		
\$25,000–\$74,999		0.0041 (0.0525)
\$75,000–\$124,999		0.0165 (0.0708)
Over \$125,000		0.0113 (0.0914)
Party ID		
(Baseline: Not Republican)		
Lean Republican		-0.0029 (0.0814)
Republican		0.0802 (0.0751)
Strong Republican		0.0707 (0.0642)
Male		-0.0552 (0.0458)
News Interest		0.0403 (0.0289)
Acknowledgment of Racism		-0.0245* (0.0134)
Constant	0.4427*** (0.0447)	0.4304*** (0.1332)
Observations	510	501
Log Likelihood	-380.3468	-363.8858
Akaike Information Criterion	764.6937	759.7716

Notes: Table entries are binary logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is coded 0 for "Trump should concede defeat and commit to a peaceful transfer of power" and 1 for "Trump should resist the results of the election through measures such as discrediting the results as invalid, declaring a state of emergency, and/or taking any means possible to remain in office." Self-reported news interest is coded as a continuous variable, with higher values indicating more engagement with the news and media. Acknowledgment of racism is a continuous variable for the extent to which respondents agree that "White people in the US have certain advantages because of the color of their skin," with higher values indicating more agreement. ***=Results are significant at the 0.01 level. **=Results are significant at the 0.05 level. *=Results are significant at the 0.10 level.

won the Electoral College. About 45% opted for Trump to resist when Biden received a margin of victory between 1 and 12 points. Although support for resistance declined when respondents were given a scenario in which Biden won the election by 13 to 15 points, in total, 40% supported Trump resisting the election results. Even when respondents were given a hypothetical scenario in which Biden's large margin of victory would make voter-fraud concerns especially irrelevant, there still was widespread support for Trump to resist the outcome.

These findings were consistent with other polls conducted before the election that probed how Trump voters would respond to a Biden Electoral College victory. Of the scenarios we presented, the most reflective of reality was when Biden won the popular vote by 4%, given that he actually won by 3.9%. Among those presented with this then-hypothetical scenario, 44% responded that they would support Trump resisting the election results.

Despite a slight downward trend in figure 1, we failed to find a statistically significant relationship between the popular-vote margin and support for Trump resisting the election results ($p=0.26$). We also did not find a significant relationship between education, household income, and gender and support for resistance as shown in Table 1. Respondents older than 65, however, were significantly less likely to support resistance than younger respondents. Self-reported partisan identification also proved to have insignificant effects on support for resistance. To an extent, this contradicts Graham and Svolnik's (2020) theory because the application of their model would expect more centrist voters to not support undemocratic actions to the same extent as hyper-partisans. However, this difference may be the result of our model using partisanship as a measure of alignment with Trump's policies, whereas their model used a linear continuum to measure policy alignments with a candidate. Furthermore, measurement of partisanship may not be a sufficient proxy for analyzing alignment with Trump's policies, particularly because Independents and "leaners" typically are actual partisans in their policy preferences (Petrocik 2009). No significant relationship was discovered between respondents' interest in news and current events or their acknowledgment of racism and supporting Trump's resistance.

Why Should Trump Resist?

Table 2 shows the categories of responses to the open-ended question that asked respondents their rationale for support of Trump resisting the election results. The most common response was that Trump should resist because he was the respondent's preferred candidate, which we labeled "Support Trump." Examples of these responses include "[I] am saying this because I am for Trump 2020" and "because he has done more for this country in 4 years than Biden has in 47 years." These respondents justified

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Should Trump Resist?

Figure 1 shows Biden's randomized hypothetical popular-vote margin of victory against the percentage of Trump voters who responded that Trump should resist the election results if Biden

their support for Trump working to overturn the results simply because he was their preferred candidate.

Similarly, opposition to the Democratic Party was common, with respondents perceiving Democrats as ideological radicals.

Figure 1

Support for Trump Resisting the Results of a Biden Electoral College Victory Across Popular-Vote Margins

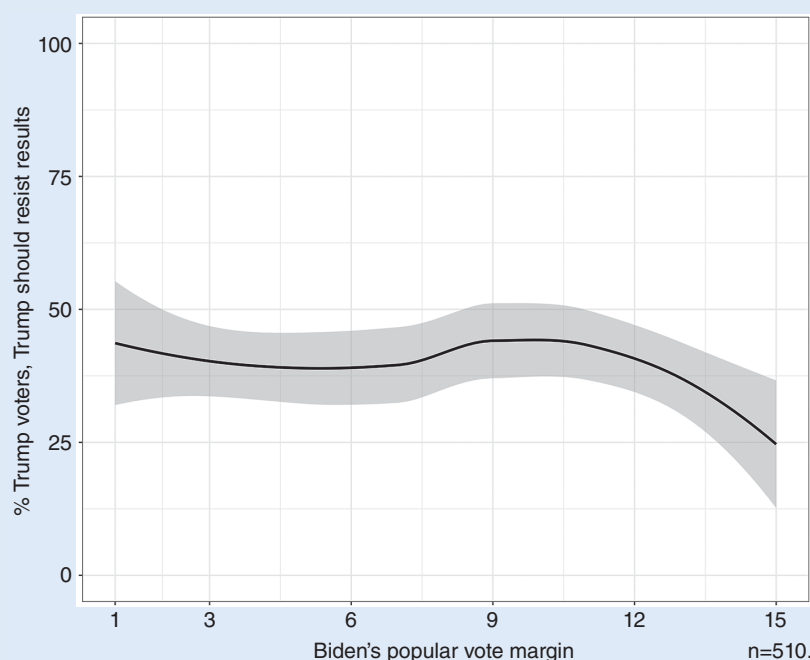


Table 2

Trump Voters' Reasons for Him to Resist Results of Potential Electoral College Loss

STATEMENT	N	% OF RESPONDENTS
Partisanship/Negative Partisanship	73	40%
Support Trump	64	35%
Democrats Are Radicals	14	8%
Concerns Regarding Election	67	37%
Legitimacy	41	22%
Election Irregularities		
Voter Fraud/Mail-In Ballots	31	17%
Other Reasons	65	36%
Democrats Are Corrupt	39	21%
Biden Is Incompetent	11	6%
Other	18	10%
N=183		

Note: Respondents could be coded under more than one category.

"Democrats Are Radicals" was coded for those who suggested that a Biden presidency would undermine their perception of American traditions and values. These responses included general attacks on Democrats' policies and governance, such as "Because the Democrats will ruin America" and "Democraps are destroying our nation"; allegations of Democrats supporting socialism, such as "I don't want to live under Socialism and all that the Democrats

stand for!"; and perceptions of Democratic governance serving an ethnocultural threat, such as "cause we don't want or need a woman of color as the VP!!!"

These two categories reflect hyperpartisanship for Trump and negative partisanship against the Democrats. For this group, the election appears irrelevant to the legitimacy of the presidency, with these respondents instead simply supporting resistance for partisan reasons. In total, this theme of supporting resistance because of hyperpartisanship or negative partisanship was present in 40% of responses.

Responses coded as "Election Irregularities" questioned the legitimacy of the election results without explicitly mentioning mail-in ballots or voter fraud, as well as those that alluded to the election being rigged, such as "there is no way Biden is gonna win the election if the election [is] fair" and "the Democrats are rigging the election." The category "Voter Fraud/Mail-In Ballots" included respondents who mentioned mail-in ballots and cited personal stories speculating that they would be abused, such as "my experience, I've received 2 mail-in ballots and individuals have never lived here," as well as statements arguing that these ballots would be used to commit fraud favoring Democrats. Despite being touted before and after the election—and being the basis for Trump's challenge to the state election results—election irregularities, voter fraud, and issues with mail-in ballots were cited by only 37% of respondents who would support Trump in resisting the election results.

Responses coded as "Democrats Are Corrupt" included "the Democrat party is totally corrupt" and "I personally think there is a hidden agenda, I never thought that way until I saw the so-called [first] impeachment process and saw how absolutely corrupt the

Democratic party is.” Those who levied ad hominem attacks against Biden and his capacity to govern but did not reference his policy positions were coded as “Biden Is Incompetent.” These included statements such as “because in reality Biden isn’t fit” and “because Biden is an idiot and there is no way he can lead this country as president.”

The variance in responses reflected conflicting rationales for supporting Trump’s resistance. Those who stated that Trump should resist because he was their preferred candidate or because they disliked the Democratic Party appear to be motivated by hyperpartisanship or negative partisanship. For those respondents, their support of Trump resisting the election results was not inspired by concerns of electoral malpractice; instead, they simply did not care for the election itself and wanted Trump in power no matter what. In contrast, those who cited reasons concerning the legitimacy of the election were inspired largely by misinformation—notably, The Big Lie—which likely led them to believe that the election would be rigged and fraudulent. Despite expecting issues concerning the legitimacy of the election

would not admit it and by misinformation, for those respondents who legitimately believed that Trump won when accounting for perceived voter fraud (Badger 2020b).

Nevertheless, the high level of support for Trump resisting defeat, as he did in the months following the election, is staggering when viewed in the context of contemporary American electoral history. With 40% of Trump voters in our study stating that Trump should resist the election results even in a scenario in which Biden won by a large popular-vote margin, the precedent of a peaceful transfer of power in American elections was shaken even before the election. Furthermore, the rationale behind the respondents’ eagerness for Trump to resist electoral defeat reflects the erosion of democratic norms. As such, it appears that misinformation pertaining to voter fraud and the use of mail-in ballots cannot explain all of the support for Trump’s resistance and that hyperpartisanship and negative partisanship also prompted voters to disregard entirely the democratic electoral process to support their preferred candidate in his quest for office by any means possible.

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to be the most common reason cited by respondents, we failed to find that it was cited more often than reasons guided by partisanship or negative partisanship ($p=0.74$).

As a result, we cannot conclude that support for resisting the election results was driven primarily by misinformation about election fraud. Instead, a significant percentage of respondents supported resistance for partisan reasons, indicating that the declining legitimacy of the electoral process was not caused by misinformation alone but also by a lack of tolerance for the opposition and hyperpartisanship.

DISCUSSION

Although the Trump administration allowed a transition to begin on November 23, 2020, Trump refused to concede until after the January 6 Capitol insurrection. Before his account was suspended, Twitter flagged more than 200 tweets by the former president for false or disputed information pertaining to the election (Spangler 2020). It is undeniable that Trump’s lies about voter fraud as well as his disrespect for the democratic process led to the insurrection.

The public support that we found for Trump resisting hypothetical election results grew after his loss became reality. According to a poll conducted between November 15 and 17, 2020, only 12% of Trump voters believed “Biden legitimately won the election” compared to 57% of all voters (*The Economist/YouGov 2020a*). *The Economist/YouGov* (2020) also found that 79% of Trump voters believed Trump should not concede, 75% believed “Trump should not start the transition process,” and only 48% believed that a peaceful transfer of power was likely to take place. This increase in support for resistance was likely the result of both partisan cheerleading for those who knew that Biden won but

Our findings confirm the troubling consequences of the 2020 presidential election. Trump’s resistance to the election results had support before the election even took place. This has persisted as Trump continues to espouse The Big Lie. At a rally in Arizona in January 2022, Trump lambasted: “I ran twice, I won twice...we did much better the second time.... Get out and vote. Make sure it’s not a rigged vote, please” (*C-SPAN 2022*). For Republican primary hopefuls in the 2022 midterm elections, The Big Lie is proving successful: in a December 2021 survey, 55% of Republicans stated that they were more likely to vote for a GOP congressperson who doubts Biden’s victory (Hagan 2021). Ultimately, US democracy faces a critical junction, with elites working to subvert it, cheered on by the masses since even before the 2020 presidential election.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/YNUE8B>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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