

# Citizens' Perceptions of the Quality of Democracy in the American States

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## ABSTRACT

Theories of democratic backsliding and erosion within Comparative Politics are increasingly applicable to the United States. According to national surveys, many Americans express concern about the direction and quality of democracy at the national level. As states chart their own course for election laws and administration, the quality of democracy can also vary significantly from state to state. How does this state variation manifest itself in public perceptions about the quality of democracy at the state level? Using two original surveys, we examine the relationship between citizens' subjective evaluations of democratic performance in their state and demographic, political, and institutional forces. Citizens who identify with the political party that controls their state government have more positive evaluations, while Republicans (controlling for a litany of covariates) have more negative evaluations of state democratic performance. Strikingly, citizens' perceptions are not related to an objective measure of state democratic performance even when primed with information about where their state ranks in a survey experiment. These findings suggest that assessments of democratic quality are yet another feature of American politics that has become politicized and polarized, with important implications for system support and legitimacy going forward.

**Keywords:** U.S. state politics, public opinion, quality of democracy, election administration

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Democracy in the United States is in trouble according to both public opinion and political scientists. 64% of Americans believe that US democracy is “in crisis and at risk of failing” (Rose and Baker 2022). Many Americans believe democracy is in crisis based on factually incorrect beliefs about the extent of voter fraud in the United States and the “big lie” that the 2020 Presidential Election was stolen. Indeed, this false narrative proved pivotal to mobilizing “insurrectionists [who] attempted to impede Congress’ Constitutional mandate to validate the presidential election and launched an assault on the United State Capitol Complex that resulted in multiple deaths, physical harm to over 140 members of law enforcement, and terror and trauma among staff, institutional employees, press, and Members” (Select Committee 2022). Meanwhile, other Americans are concerned about the state of democracy in the United States due to the rhetoric and actions of former President Trump and his supporters. While many Americans are unable to agree as to *why* democracy is in danger, a majority believe that it is.

Scholars have been sounding the alarm well before the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>. Concepts, perhaps more typically associated with a comparative politics literature, such as democratic erosion and backsliding, were applied to trends among American political institutions and actors (Varol 2015; Huq and Ginsburg 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). More broadly, political polarization has diminished support for democratic norms and legitimacy (Craig et al 2006; Carey et al 2019; Graham and Svobik 2020; Simonovits et al. 2021). However, almost all analyses to date focus on democratic erosion at the federal level. At the state level, few studies have attempted to empirically measure and evaluate the quality of democracy (but see Hill 1994; Grumbach 2022). Yet, how elections are conducted in our federalist system varies by state, as such – the quality of democracy also varies by state.

This presents a puzzle – what factors shape and explain citizens’ assessments of the quality of democracy in their state? Both the person that erroneously believes the election was stolen and the person concerned about efforts to make voting more restrictive both might evaluate the quality of democracy in their state as poor – but for different reasons. Are certain types of individuals more likely to positively (or negatively) evaluate the health of democracy in their state? Are evaluations of democratic performance a function of political (and partisan) forces? Do particular state legal or institutional factors promote more positive evaluations? And, do our subjective evaluations about the quality of democracy have any relationship with the reality on the ground as measured by experts and/or objective factors? As best we can tell, this study is the first to empirically evaluate these questions at the state level.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss state variation in the quality of democracy before developing theoretical expectations about the relationship between subjective evaluations of democracy and demographic, political, and state legal/institutional factors. Next, we describe our methodological approach. Using two original public opinion surveys, we examine the relationship between subjective evaluations of the quality of democratic performance at the state level with demographic, political, and institutional factors. Self-identifying with the dominant political party in one’s state is associated with more positive evaluations of democratic performance, while self-identifying as a Republican is associated with more negative evaluations. Notably, citizens’ perceptions are not related in any discernable way to an objective measure of the quality of democracy in their state and this result holds even when citizens are presented with factual information about where their state ranks in a survey experiment. Together, these findings suggest that assessments of democratic quality and norms

are yet another feature of American politics that has become politicized and polarized, with important implications for system support and legitimacy going forward.

## **DEMOCRACY, BACKSLIDING, AND THE FIFTY STATES**

At its core, procedural definitions of democracy prioritize having regular free and fair elections with voters having the opportunity to participate (Schumpeter 1943; Key 1949, 1956). Elections are meaningful when they are contested and give voters a choice between at least two parties (Dahl 1972). Democracy also is theorized to produce outcomes that are associated with relative political equality and pro-majority policies, especially compared to non-democratic countries (Acemoglu and Robinson 2016). The widespread availability of political and civil rights and liberties are utilized to measure outcome-based approaches to democracy like those utilized by Polity IV and Freedom House. Taken together, how political scientists define and measure democracy is a multi-faceted endeavor that is significantly researched (see Coppedge et al. 2011).

Being mindful that democracy is not necessarily a dichotomous concept but a multi-dimensional, continuous concept, countries can become more or less democratic without undergoing a complete regime change from democratic to authoritarian or vice versa (Lust and Waldner 2015; Bermeo 2016). Recent studies have applied these concepts from the comparative study of democracy to the United States to explore the related concepts of democratic erosion or backsliding (Varol 2015; Huq and Ginsburg 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2020). These works both predate and follow President Trump's 2016 Electoral College victory and presidency. While heinous acts of political violence like January 6<sup>th</sup> might be associated with democratic backsliding, each point to several instances of strategic and long-standing practices

that undermine faith in democratic governance. These approaches point to how political actors utilize existing institutions to undermine political and civil rights, reducing opportunities for meaningful competition and participation. Often these reforms or policies are implemented with some degree of public support. However, this backsliding leads to the consolidation of power and weakened support for political institutions and, ultimately, democratic governance.

In the United States, however, many of the core aspects of democratic governance are decided at the state level. Article I, Section 4 of the Constitution mandates that states will generally determine the nature of elections. Historically, discrepancies have existed as states pursue significantly different trajectories in how to conduct their elections (Alvarez and Grofman 2014; Stewart 2014; Brown et al. 2020). Yet, the vast majority of studies that examine quality of democracy assess it at the federal level with a few notable exceptions (see McMann et al. 2021 for more about subnational variation in quality of democracy). Famously, Key (1949) examined state variation in the American South. Hill (1994) assessed the quality of American democracy across the fifty states by comparing the right to vote, the degree of political party competition, and rates of voter participation to create an index of democratic performance. Most recently, Grumbach (2022) created a composite State Democracy Index utilizing 61 different indicators, similar to the type of approach utilized by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (Coppedge et al. 2011).

Relatedly, a recent issue of the *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* is entirely dedicated to the “trouble” American democracy finds itself (Mettler et al. 2022). Election and state politics scholars have engaged similar questions, but rarely speak in the language of democratization and backsliding. For example, two notable measures examine “electoral integrity” across the fifty states include the Electoral Integrity Project (EIP) and the

Elections Performance Index from the Pew Charitable Trusts (see Flavin and Shufeldt 2019).

Other studies have examined the adoption of various convenience voting reforms (Gronke et al. 2008; Hanmer 2009) or more narrowly focusing on the adoption of a specific type of electoral reform, like voter identification laws (Hicks et al. 2015; Biggers and Hanmer 2017).

Even with this increased attention to concerns about democratic performance, to date political scientists have not examined what factors shape how citizens assess the quality of democracy in their state. What sort of forces are associated with more positive evaluations? Do citizens' subjective evaluations about the quality of democracy in their state have any relationship with the objective reality on the ground? Below, we develop our theoretical expectations about what shapes citizen evaluations of democratic performance in the American states.

## **THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS**

Our initial examination considers whether there is a link between certain demographic factors and the subjective evaluations of democracy by state residents. First, it is intuitive to presume there is a link between being in the cultural and/or political majority in one's state and evaluations of democratic performance. For example, politically liberal (or conservative) states tend to produce more liberal (or conservative) policies approximating the general ideological preferences of state residents (Erikson et al. 1993; Caughey and Warshaw 2018) and this relationship holds for several policy-specific opinions as well (Lax and Phillips 2012). And, when policy outcomes match citizen preferences, approval of state legislatures tends to be higher (Langehenning et al. 2019). Conversely, the further policy outcomes are from citizens' preferences, the lower their confidence in state elected officials (Flavin 2013). Moreover, a bevy

of studies have highlighted rising inequality in American and its relationship to biases and deficits in representation (e.g. Bartels 2008; Gelman 2010; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Stepan and Linz 2011; Lax and Phillips 2012; Flavin 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Page and Gilens 2020). As such, it is reasonable to suggest that members of majority and those politically-advantaged should report higher evaluations compared to members of minority groups or politically-disadvantaged groups.

Our second consideration is whether subjective perceptions are a function of state political (and partisan) forces. Since state governments establish election laws, identifying which party controls state government is particularly relevant. Currently, 37 states have trifectas where one party controls the governorship and both legislative chambers (23 Republican, 14 Democratic). As such, the controlling parties are largely free to conduct their elections as they see fit (Alvarez and Grofman 2014; Stewart 2014; Brown et al. 2020; Schraufnagel et al. 2020). Does partisanship and identifying with the political party in charge of administering elections in your state impact the subjective evaluations of state democracy?

On this question, there is ample evidence that election reform is another policy area where the two parties are implementing increasingly divergent policies (Hasen 2020). As the political parties have nationalized, states controlled by the same political party are increasingly choosing similar paths. Prior research has pointed to the role of partisanship as Democrats report higher levels of support for election reforms making it easier to vote while Republicans oppose such efforts (Bowler and Donovan 2018). Both Hicks et al. (2015) and Biggers and Hanmer (2017) find that Republican control of state government is positively associated with implementing voter identification laws. In his recent analysis of factors that shape the quality of democracy at the state level, Grumbach (2022) argues that Republican control of state

government is the chief determinant in reducing the quality of democratic performance across the fifty states.

However, even during these hyper-polarized times, the relationship between citizen opinion and these types of laws are less clear. While Alvarez et al. (2011) also find a prominent role for partisanship, they find more nuanced results in their state-by-state analysis with some types of policies enjoying overwhelming support (showing a photo identification) but most enjoying mixed support, at best (e.g. vote-by-mail, Election Day voter registration, etc.). A more recent POLITICO/Morning Consult poll indicates majority support for expanding early voting, automatic voter registration, and vote-by-mail, while also preventing partisan gerrymandering (Lizza and Daniels 2022). In sum, it is reasonable to think that there may be some degree of bipartisan agreement at the citizen level about what constitutes sound election policy that promotes better democratic performance in the states.

At the onset of the Trump Presidency, Carey et al. (2019) established the Bright Line Watch (BLW) – a series of iterative surveys of both political experts and the general public to assess the relative importance of various democratic principles and the United States’ performance on them over time. They found a general agreement on the types of democratic principles that are most important (with only minor differences between Trump supporters and opponents), but also uncovered significant differences between Trump supporters and opponents and between the general public and experts in assessing the United States’ performance. For example, they note that “President Trump’s supporters and detractors are increasingly drawing conclusions about the health of our democracy that are not merely disconnected, but reflect an increasingly different understanding of our political reality itself” (Carey et al. 2019, 714). These findings are echoed by Graham and Svobik (2020) who find that while Americans are able to



identify democratic principles, they place less priority on them at the ballot box. Voters only minimally punish anti-democratic candidates choosing to prioritize their partisanship over democratic principles. In particular, voters look the other way on issues like voter identification laws if violating democratic principles aligns with partisan policy preferences (Carey et al. 2022).

More broadly, it is reasonable to presume that subjective evaluations of democracy mirror the preferences of political winners and losers such that supporters of the party in power will evaluate state democratic performance more favorably. This “winner-loser gap” has been examined in previous research at the national level, where scholars have identified that voters who support the losing side report lower levels of efficacy, are less trusting, and less satisfied with democracy (Clarke and Acock 1989; Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Anderson and LoTempio 2002; Bowler and Donovan 2002, 2012a, Anderson et al 2005; Craig et al. 2006; Flavin and Shufeldt 2016; Norris 2019). The gap, however, is lower in countries where the overall quality of democracy is higher – as losers are more satisfied and winners less so (Nadeau et al. 2021). In countries with actual evidence of election fraud, the gap between winners and losers is negligible and non-significant (Fortin-Rittberger et al. 2017). In the U.S. case, doubts about electoral integrity undercut satisfaction with democracy – whether they are factually accurate or not (Norris 2019). So, if perceptions of electoral integrity are biased (and inaccurate) by party, it is reasonable to ask whether winning and losing shapes the relationship with subjective evaluations of state democracy.

In addition, voters are increasingly willing to look the other way and disregard their stated support for democracy if their own political party is in power (Simonovits et al. 2021). This is particularly pronounced for voters with strong partisanship and higher levels of perceived

threat of the opposing political party. Partisans with higher levels of affective polarization – an us vs. them dynamic of partisanship that positively evaluates co-partisans while negatively evaluating opposing partisans – are more likely to be impacted by politicized norms (Kingzette et al 2021). Polarized voters are prone to follow the cues and rhetoric they receive from elites even further undermining democratic norms (Clayton et al. 2021). A segment of the population seems particularly prone to follow a leader with authoritarian impulses and disregard democratic norms: cultural conservatives, economic populists, white Americans with a stronger sense of racial solidarity, and those with more negative views of racial minorities (Drutman et al. 2018; Norris et al. 2019; Malka et al. 2020; Jardina and Mickey 2022). This particular mix of voters were particularly attracted to and form a core base of support for former President Donald Trump, so it is possible (perhaps likely) that Republicans will on net evaluate state democratic performance somewhat less favorably than Democrats.

Evaluations about the relative health of the quality of democracy in each state may also be a product of the legal or institutional factors associated with each state. States, by virtue of their democratic institutions or the laws their state legislature passes might provide opportunities for citizens to play a more active role in their government and produce outcomes closer to their preferences. For example, twenty-four states possess the citizen initiative which is theorized to be associated with higher levels of political efficacy, trust, citizen engagement, and subjective well-being (Bowler and Donovan, 2002; Smith and Tolbert 2004; Radcliff and Shufeldt 2016). States with citizen legislators, legislative term limits, and more stringent rules that govern lobbying and campaign finance arguably are more likely to have citizens feel that they and not entrenched political interests shape the policymaking process (Squire 1993; Bowler and Donovan, 2012b; Flavin 2015). Whether these institutional features produce these virtuous

benefits is less central to our inquiry, what is more central here is that citizens might believe these features give them more power.

Finally, citizens' evaluations of the quality of democracy in their state may also be tied to objective measures of quality as inventoried by political scientists. Generally speaking, citizens appear to possess enough basic knowledge about state politics and government to secure policy responsiveness and hold elected officials accountable (Lyons et al. 2013; Jaeger et al. 2017). This basic level of knowledge provides citizens sufficient information for their trust and confidence in state government to be tied to state-specific factors (Wolak 2020). If that is the case, it is likely that subjective perceptions and objective conditions will be linked such that citizens will rate the quality of democracy higher in states with higher objective rankings of democratic performance.

On the other hand, especially compared to national politics, most state residents have minimal knowledge about the details of state politics and policy (Songer 1984; Delli Carpini et al. 1994; Hogan 2008). This lack of knowledge is mediated, in part, due to the frequent absence of competition at the state level. In states with less competition for control of government, citizens report lower levels of political knowledge, trust in state government, and political efficacy (Lyons et al. 2013; Flavin and Shufeldt 2016). State politics and elections are also increasingly tied to federal trends as the parties have become increasingly nationalized (Rogers 2016; Mickey 2022). In addition, previous findings from Bright Line Watch report that while there is broader agreement on democratic principles, citizen and expert evaluations of how the United States is performing at the national level tend to diverge (Carey et al. 2019). If this divergence occurs at the state level as well, then it is possible that subjective evaluations and objective measures across the states will not be linked.

## DATA & EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

Several surveys ask the public their attitudes and opinions about American democracy. For example, the Bright Line Watch November 2021 public survey asks a representative sample of Americans whether a series of statements about democratic performance (all citizens have an opportunity to vote, ballots are counted fairly, etc.) “describe the United States.” However, we are not aware of any recent survey that asks respondents to evaluate the quality of democratic performance specifically in their own state of residence. To address this shortcoming, we fielded two original surveys using Qualtrics, one in the summer of 2021 with 635 respondents and one in the summer of 2022 with 550 respondents.<sup>1</sup> In both survey waves, respondents were asked a series of identical questions about state politics from which we derive our two measures of citizens’ perceptions of democratic quality in their state. The first measure is from a single survey question that asks respondents to place themselves on a 0 (Extremely Dissatisfied) to 10 (Extremely Satisfied) scale for the following statement: “How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [state of residence that the respondent indicated]?” Combining the two waves into a single sample, respondents reported the full range of values (0-10) with a mean of 5.81 and a standard deviation of 2.54. This and/or similar single-item questions about satisfaction with democracy have been commonly used in previous surveys and studies of citizens’ perceptions about democratic performance (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Daoust et al. 2021; Nadeau et al. 2021).

Our second measure of citizens’ perceptions of democratic performance in their state is based on a series of items typically included in the Bright Line Watch surveys about the quality

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<sup>1</sup> In both surveys, quotas for region and partisanship were included. For the 2022 survey, a quota for gender was also included

of democracy nationwide (Carey et al. 2019). We introduced this section of the survey by indicating “Now I am going to ask you how well the following statements describe your state...” and then asked respondents to place themselves on a 1-4 scale (My state does not meet this standard, My state partly meets this standard, My state mostly meets this standard, My State fully meets this standard) when presented with each of the following five statements:

- 1) Elections are conducted, ballots counted, and winners determined without pervasive fraud or manipulation.
- 2) The geographic boundaries of electoral districts do not systematically advantage any particular political party.
- 3) Politicians who lose free and fair elections will concede defeat.
- 4) Public policy is not determined by large campaign contributions.
- 5) All adult citizens have an equal opportunity to vote.

Across the sample, the five items have an alpha scale of reliability coefficient of .75. Because the items hang together well and appear to have a single underlying dimension, we conduct a factor analysis to create a single score for each respondent with higher values indicating a more positive assessment of the quality of democracy in their state. Interestingly, across respondents, this composite measure correlates with the single item measure described above at only .34, indicating that they are measuring similar yet empirically distinct concepts. As such, our analysis proceeds with both the single 0-10 satisfaction and Brightline five-item composite measures so we can better assess the robustness of our findings.

To evaluate what factors shape and explain citizens’ assessments of democratic performance in their state, we model the two dependent variables described above as a function of a series of demographic, political, and state legal/institutional factors. For demographics, we

include a respondent's level of education and income, age, gender, and race/ethnicity. For political factors, we include a measure for whether a respondent is a political "winner" in that state government is controlled by the political party they identify with (coded as 1 if the opposite party controls state government, 2 if they identify as an Independent or a state has divided government, and 3 if the party they identify with controls state government). In addition, we include seven-point measures of partisanship and ideology (Republican and Conservative coded higher), measures of how often a respondent votes in elections and pays attention to state politics, and an objective measure of state political knowledge (whether a respondent correctly identified which party currently controls the House of Representatives in their state). We also include a series of state legal/institutional factors from the Correlates of State Policy database that may shape respondents' attitudes about democratic performance in their state. These include whether a state has legislative term limits, whether it has direct democracy (the ballot initiative process), whether it allows Election Day voter registration, a measure of state legislative professionalism, the number of public corruption convictions, and a measure of the strictness of state campaign finance laws. To account for the possibility that attitudes may be different in 2021 vs. 2022, we also include an indicator for survey wave. All regression estimations report standard errors that are clustered by state.

We then investigate whether citizens' assessments of the quality of democracy in their state are linked to "reality" or objective measures of democratic performance. In a recent study, Jacob Grumbach (2022) conducted a latent variable analysis of 61 different indicators of democratic performance to create a State Democracy Index. The index is computed for each state for 2010-2018. We use state values for the most recent year of 2018 as our measure of objective conditions and assess whether citizens' perceptions correlate with objective conditions across the

states (that is, whether respondents evaluate the quality of democracy in their state higher in states with higher objective scores).

In addition, we assess whether any possible relationship between perceptions and objective conditions is heightened when we provide respondents with factual information about their state. Specifically, in the summer 2022 survey wave, we include a randomized survey experiment. The control group is provided no factual information and is part of the pooled sample (with the summer 2021 wave) described above. By contrast, the treatment group (N=525) was first provided with this prompt: “According to objective evaluations conducted by political and election experts about the quality of democratic performance in each state, \_\_\_\_\_ [respondent’s state] ranks \_\_\_\_\_ [state ranking based on Grumbach’s measure] out of the 50 states for quality of democracy.” Respondents in the treatment group were then asked the same single item satisfaction and five-item Brightline battery as described above. In the analysis reported below, we interact the Grumbach objective measure with a treatment group indicator to assess whether being provided this factual information about where their state ranks in terms of democratic performance conditions/heightens the relationship between citizens’ perceptions of the quality of democracy in their state and objective conditions.

## **ANALYSIS**

What explains citizens’ evaluations of democratic performance in their state? Table 1 presents the results from two regression estimations. Column 1 uses the 0-10 single-item satisfaction measure as the dependent variable and Column 2 uses the factor score from the five Brightline items. Looking first to Column 1, we find that several factors predict evaluations of quality of state democracy. Demographically, respondents with higher levels of education and

Asian respondents rate state democratic performance higher while females rate it lower. Politically, respondents who live in a state that is controlled by the political party they identify with and ideological conservatives rate democratic performance higher while, interestingly, Republicans rate it lower. In addition, respondents who are frequent voters and report paying more attention to state politics rate quality higher. For state legal/institutional factors, we find that respondents who live in states with stricter campaign finance regulations rate state democratic performance more favorably. Moving to Column 2 and the Brightline composite measure (which, recall, correlates with satisfaction at only .34), we find fewer coefficients that are statistically different from zero. However, notably, we again find that political “winners” (those who live in a state where state government is controlled by their political party) rate democratic quality higher while Republicans again rate it lower.

[Table 1 about here]

To compare the relative substantive effects of different factors, we compute a series of predicted effects (with 95% confidence intervals) when moving from one value to another using the coefficients from Column 1 of Table 1. These substantive effects are presented in Table 2 and highlight that two political factors stand out as having the largest substantive effect on evaluations of state democratic performance: whether a respondent is a political “winner” in their state and a respondent’s political partisanship. These findings are interesting for two reasons. First, they suggest that attitudes about the quality of democracy in one’s state are largely driven by the familiar political forces of whether “your team” controls government or not. Second, they also suggest that Republicans, even after accounting for a host of alternative explanations, generally rate the quality of democracy in their state lower than Democrats, perhaps as a lasting effect of claims about fraud and malfeasance during the 2020 election.



[Table 2 about here]

Having established that evaluations of state democratic performance are driven primarily (though not exclusively) by individual political factors, are perceptions of quality in any way related to objective measures? To assess this question, we use Grumbach's (2022) State Democracy Index as a measure of objective democratic performance in the states and model the two perceptions of democratic quality dependent variables as a function of this measure. If citizens' perceptions are linked to objective conditions, we expect that the coefficient for Grumbach's State Democracy Index will be positive and statistically different from zero, indicating that respondents evaluate the quality of democracy in their state higher in states with higher objective scores. In Table 3, we first present bivariate regressions with only the State Democracy Index (Columns 1 and 2) and then regressions with the full complement of covariates from the analysis above (Columns 3 and 4). Looking across the four columns, the coefficient for State Democracy Index is never statistically different from zero. Simply stated, citizens' perceptions of democratic performance in their state do not seem to be linked to an objective measure of performance in any discernable way.

[Table 3 about here]

To further probe a possible linkage between citizens' perceptions and objective conditions, we conducted a randomized survey experiment whereby the treatment group was prompted with factual information about where their state ranks on the State Democracy Index before being asked the single-item satisfaction question and the five-item Brightline battery. We model those two dependent variables as a function of the interaction between the State Democracy Index and a treatment group indicator to assess whether being provided this factual information about where their state ranks in terms of democratic performance

conditions/heightens the relationship between citizens' perceptions of the quality of democracy in their state and objective conditions. We first include only the interaction term and main effects (Columns 1 and 2) and then, similar to above, the full series of covariates (Columns 3 and 4). The results are presented in Table 4 and show that the interaction term is never statistically different from zero. Strikingly, even when citizens are provided immediately prior with factual information about where their state ranks in terms of democratic performance, their perceptions of performance are completely divorced from that information. We interpret this finding as further evidence that citizens' evaluations of the quality of democracy in their state are driven primarily by individual political considerations.

[Table 4 about here]

## CONCLUSION

This paper is the first attempt to empirically investigate citizens' perceptions about the quality of democracy specifically in their state. Using two original public opinion surveys, we find that citizens who identify with the political party that controls their state government tend to have more positive evaluations of the democratic performance, while Republicans (controlling for a litany of covariates) tend to have more negative evaluations. Perceptions of state democratic performance are also linked, in various ways, to whether citizens vote and pay attention to state politics and whether their state has certain institutional/legal features like stricter campaign finance regulations. Importantly, we then find that citizens' perceptions are not related to an objective measure of the quality of democracy in their state even when first primed with factual information about where their state ranks in a survey experiment. Together, our analysis suggests that assessments of democratic quality are yet another feature of American

politics that has become politicized and polarized and seem divorced from actual conditions on the ground.

Future research in this area should explore the contours of positive evaluations among political winners, negative evaluations among political losers, and asymmetric partisan patterns. One promising strand in particular is to examine how polarization or extremity in policy outcomes shapes evaluations. Similarly, are our findings on the winner-loser gap related to election administration and democratic performance legislation or do they persist regardless of how parties govern in the majority? A second potential outlet for future research is to explore the dynamic nature of partisan control of state government. Both of our surveys were conducted between the 2000 presidential and 2022 midterm elections. While elections and control of state legislatures often are not competitive, some chambers could potentially change hands after the 2022 elections such as Alaska, Maine, Michigan, and Minnesota (Jacobson 2022). Do voters immediately update their evaluations in response to changes in state government party control, or are evaluations sticky in the short term? Finally, future studies should also further examine how national forces can shape citizens' evaluations at the state level. For example, if Republicans reclaim the House of Representative in 2022 or the White House in 2024, would our findings flip whereby Democrats are more likely to negatively evaluate performance? Or has a strategy of undermining confidence in American elections left Republicans to negatively evaluate the functioning of democracy regardless of who wins and regardless of which party controls government?

From a normative and democratic theory perspective, it is highly problematic if election administration and electoral integrity becomes further polarized and if political parties significantly deviate on definitions of what constitutes a democracy or what makes one healthy.

In our federalist system, the patchwork nature of election laws is ripe for future problems and controversies. If parties only believe democracy is functioning well when their particular set of election reforms are in place (or, even more bluntly, when they win), we are likely to see more highly questionable lawsuits like *Texas v. Pennsylvania* where states attempt to regulate, influence, and diminish the election administration and performance of another state. The U.S. Supreme Court (in the upcoming *Moore v. Harper* case) could further exacerbate the problem by giving carte blanche to state legislatures alone to design election laws to ensure their desired outcomes without any oversight from the other branches of state government. Moreover, it is likely that democracy will continue to backslide when elected officials and a political party strategically harass and publicly undermine and question the legitimacy of elections for partisan gain. If the parties are unable to identify a shared vision for democracy going forward, we are more likely to see the sorts of anti-democratic efforts and acts of political violence that have characterized our politics of late – then there will be no doubt that democracy is in crisis. Therefore, it is crucial to continue to better understand citizens’ attitudes about the quality of American democracy.

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**Table 1: What predicts citizens' evaluations of the quality of democracy in their state?**

<i>Perception of quality measure:</i>	(1) <i>Satisfaction (1 item)</i>	(2) <i>Brightline (5 items)</i>
Income	0.048 [0.081]	0.013 [0.020]
Education	0.129* [0.050]	-0.022 [0.021]
Age	0.007 [0.004]	0.003 [0.002]
Female	-0.390* [0.147]	-0.064 [0.067]
Black	0.030 [0.221]	-0.020 [0.067]
Hispanic	0.304 [0.258]	-0.141 [0.111]
Asian	0.736* [0.281]	-0.012 [0.118]
Respondent's party controls state government	0.760* [0.082]	0.238* [0.026]
Partisanship (Republican coded higher)	-0.280* [0.038]	-0.040* [0.012]
Ideology (conservative coded higher)	0.231* [0.092]	-0.010 [0.025]
Frequency of voting	0.229* [0.082]	0.050* [0.023]
Knowledge of state politics	-0.151 [0.168]	0.026 [0.044]
Attention to state politics	0.331* [0.059]	-0.008 [0.026]
State has term limits	0.505 [0.276]	0.060 [0.096]
State has direct democracy	-0.451 [0.279]	-0.080 [0.094]
Legislative professionalism	-0.076 [0.038]	-0.016 [0.017]
State has election day registration	0.044 [0.182]	-0.023 [0.064]
# of public corruption convictions in state	-0.000 [0.003]	0.000 [0.001]
State campaign finance stringency	0.040* [0.017]	0.014 [0.008]
2022 survey wave	0.582* [0.160]	-0.150* [0.046]
Constant	0.779 [0.476]	-0.442* [0.181]
R <sup>2</sup>	0.221	0.084
N	1,146	1,146

Dependent variable listed at the top of each column. Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors clustered by state reported beneath in brackets. \* p<.05, two-tailed.

**Table 2: Comparing substantive effects**

<b>Explanatory variable</b>	<b>Change on satisfaction with state democracy score (0-10)</b>
<i>Share partisanship of state government?</i> Opposite (“loser”) → Same (“winner”)	1.51 [1.20, 1.83]
<i>Partisanship</i> Strong Democrat → Strong Republican	-1.68 [-2.13, -1.25]
<i>Ideology</i> Extremely liberal → Extremely conservative	1.41 [.38, 2.56]
<i>Frequency of voting</i> Never → Every election	.91 [.27, 1.60]
<i>Attention to state politics</i> Never → Always	1.33 [.87, 1.74]
<i>Gender</i> Male → Female	-.39 [-.69, -.11]
<i>Education</i> High school or less → Post-graduate	.50 [.11, .90]
<i>State campaign finance law stringency</i> Minimum → Maximum	.62 [.10, 1.16]

Cell entries are the predicted change in the satisfaction with state democracy score (0-10, mean = 5.81, standard deviation = 2.54) using the coefficients estimated in Column 1 of Table 1. The 95% confidence interval for the predicted change is reported in brackets beneath the estimate.

**Table 3: Are citizens' perceptions of the quality of democracy in their state linked to an objective measure?**

<i>Perception of quality measure:</i>	(1) <i>Satisfaction</i>	(2) <i>Brightline</i>	(3) <i>Satisfaction</i>	(4) <i>Brightline</i>
Grumbach's State	0.059	0.006	0.118	0.021
Democracy Index	[0.097]	[0.040]	[0.069]	[0.033]
Income			0.047	0.013
			[0.081]	[0.020]
Education			0.127*	-0.023
			[0.050]	[0.022]
Age			0.007	0.003
			[0.004]	[0.002]
Female			-0.388*	-0.064
			[0.147]	[0.067]
Black			0.052	-0.016
			[0.220]	[0.068]
Hispanic			0.282	-0.144
			[0.258]	[0.112]
Asian			0.712*	-0.016
			[0.279]	[0.119]
Respondent's party			0.756*	0.237*
controls state government			[0.082]	[0.026]
Partisanship			-0.276*	-0.039*
(Republican coded higher)			[0.037]	[0.011]
Ideology			0.228*	-0.011
(conservative coded higher)			[0.092]	[0.025]
Frequency of voting			0.229*	0.050*
			[0.083]	[0.023]
Knowledge of state politics			-0.160	0.024
			[0.168]	[0.043]
Attention to state politics			0.335*	-0.007
			[0.059]	[0.026]
State has term limits			0.636*	0.083
			[0.309]	[0.105]
State has direct democracy			-0.598	-0.107
			[0.302]	[0.097]
Legislative professionalism			-0.090*	-0.018
			[0.042]	[0.018]
State has election day			0.003	-0.030
registration			[0.174]	[0.061]
# of public corruption			-0.002	0.000
convictions in state			[0.003]	[0.001]
State campaign finance			0.035*	0.013
stringency			[0.017]	[0.008]
2022 survey wave			0.586*	-0.149*
			[0.159]	[0.045]
Constant	5.816*	-0.002	0.918	-0.417*
	[0.084]	[0.033]	[0.485]	[0.183]
R <sup>2</sup>	0.001	0.000	0.222	0.085
N	1,169	1,170	1,146	1,146

Dependent variable listed at the top of each column. Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors clustered by state reported beneath in brackets. \* p<.05, two-tailed.

**Table 4: Does being told where your state ranks in quality of democracy increase the accuracy of citizens' perceptions?**

<i>Perception of quality measure:</i>	(1) <i>Satisfaction</i>	(2) <i>Brightline</i>	(3) <i>Satisfaction</i>	(4) <i>Brightline</i>
Information treatment x State Democracy Index	0.144	0.076	0.075	0.084
Information treatment	[0.198]	[0.075]	[0.167]	[0.066]
State Democracy Index	-0.166	-0.058	-0.159	-0.046
Income	[0.161]	[0.057]	[0.142]	[0.050]
Education	0.025	-0.005	0.023	0.039
Age	[0.143]	[0.077]	[0.132]	[0.059]
Female			0.061	-0.015
Black			[0.076]	[0.030]
Hispanic			0.020	-0.038
Asian			[0.060]	[0.027]
Respondent's party controls state government			0.005	0.006*
Partisanship (Republican coded higher)			[0.006]	[0.002]
Ideology (conservative coded higher)			-0.406*	-0.140
Frequency of voting			[0.166]	[0.072]
Knowledge of state politics			-0.370	-0.198*
Attention to state politics			[0.207]	[0.072]
State has term limits			-0.194	-0.207
State has direct democracy			[0.195]	[0.110]
Legislative professionalism			0.521	0.087
State has election day registration			[0.377]	[0.136]
# of public corruption convictions in state			0.598*	0.160*
State campaign finance stringency			[0.072]	[0.037]
Constant	6.265*	-0.048	-0.266*	-0.047*
R <sup>2</sup>	[0.116]	[0.055]	[0.033]	[0.015]
N	1,055	1,055	0.258*	0.010
			[0.083]	[0.034]
			[0.085]	[0.032]
			-0.053	0.019
			[0.144]	[0.058]
			0.289*	-0.010
			[0.067]	[0.030]
			0.419	0.167
			[0.436]	[0.170]
			-0.258	-0.150
			[0.423]	[0.165]
			-0.085*	-0.049*
			[0.040]	[0.015]
			0.229	-0.008
			[0.216]	[0.076]
			0.005	-0.001
			[0.004]	[0.002]
			0.004	0.014
			[0.025]	[0.009]
			2.793*	-0.387
			[0.584]	[0.213]

Dependent variable listed at the top of each column. Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors clustered by state reported beneath in brackets. \* p<.05, two-tailed.