

# Let the Majority Rule<sup>\*</sup>

Guy Grossman,<sup>†</sup> Dorothy Kronick,<sup>‡</sup>  
Matthew Levendusky,<sup>§</sup> and Marc Meredith<sup>¶</sup>

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## Abstract

Why do voters endorse power grabs? Using original survey experiments, we find that enthusiasm for tyranny of the majority—that is, strengthening the electoral majority at the expense of special interests—is at least as powerful an explanation as partisan polarization or legislative gridlock. We argue that this desire to “let the people rule” is an important but under-studied threat to liberal representative democracy in the United States.

**Key words:** Democratic erosion, populism, polarization

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<sup>†</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania and Member, EGAP [ggros@upenn.edu](mailto:ggros@upenn.edu)

<sup>‡</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania, [kronick@upenn.edu](mailto:kronick@upenn.edu)

<sup>§</sup>Professor, Department of Political Science & Stephen and Mary Baran Chair in the Institutions of Democracy, Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania, [mleven@upenn.edu](mailto:mleven@upenn.edu)

<sup>¶</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania, [marcmere@upenn.edu](mailto:marcmere@upenn.edu)

In recent years, politicians have moved to undermine checks and balances in North Carolina (Wines, 2017), Pennsylvania (Navratil, 2017), Michigan, and Wisconsin (Chappell, 2018), among other states. Voters’ opposition to these power grabs, grounded in support for liberal democracy, is thought to serve as a bulwark against this form of democratic erosion (Almond and Verba, 1963; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Yet voters *do* sometimes endorse power grabs. Why?

The literature proposes several answers. First, Americans might want to weaken checks and balances to overcome the gridlock that pervades contemporary politics (Howell and Moe, 2016). Second, Americans might view power grabs as a reasonable price to pay for blocking the other party’s pernicious policy agenda, especially in a polarized political environment (Svolik, 2018; Graham and Svolik, 2019). Third, voters might endorse power grabs in order to weaken the malign influence of powerful special interests and thereby “let the majority rule” (Acemoglu, Robinson and Torvik, 2013).

We design a pair of survey experiments to evaluate these explanations, and to assess the role of partisanship in generating electoral support for dismantling checks and balances. We find that voters view thwarting special interests as at least as compelling an argument for power grabs as ending gridlock or blocking the other party’s extreme agenda. And while partisanship does lead some voters to endorse power grabs that they would otherwise oppose, a substantial fraction of voters simply view power grabs as consistent with democracy, regardless of the party in power. Moreover, voters who learn that one attempted power grab was successful are slightly more likely to expect that other power grabs will succeed, too—but they do not view the country as any less democratic

as a result.

Taken together, we interpret these findings as evidence that many voters support empowering the electoral majority, even at the expense of checks and balances or other desirable institutional features, in part in order to combat the power of special interests. For these voters, letting the *demos* rule is always democratic. These results echo the literature on political (in)tolerance, which finds that people more easily embrace majority rule than minority rights (Marcus et al., 1995; Gibson, 2013). To anticipate the American public’s response to anti-democratic power grabs, we need to broaden our understanding of what voters consider “democratic” (Carey et al., 2019).

**Experimental Design.** Our survey experiment involved two distinct but related vignettes; for full wording of all vignettes and associated questions, see Part I of our online appendix. The first vignette describes a same-party governor who proposes a ballot initiative that would give him unilateral control of the state budget, cutting out the legislature.<sup>1</sup> The governor provides one of three justifications for his proposal: (a) to overcome gridlock, (b) to prevent the other party from enacting its extreme agenda, or (c) to circumvent the power of special interests, which have captured the legislature.<sup>2</sup> Respondents were then asked whether they would support the governor’s plan.

The second vignette describes a state supreme court justice (in a different state)

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<sup>1</sup>Independents who lean toward a party are treated as partisans; pure Independents are randomly assigned to see either a Democratic or Republican governor.

<sup>2</sup>We do not include a no-justification (control) condition because we found in pre-tests that subjects strongly disliked these scenarios, consistent with work on minimal justifications.

who announces that he will retire after the governor-elect takes office. The incoming governor is from a different party than the outgoing governor, and the outgoing governor announces that he will appoint a replacement—even though the judicial vacancy will not occur until after the end of his term. Respondents in the control condition receive no further information. Respondents in other conditions are told that the appointment is a partisan power grab, and that it violates a norm that new justices are appointed by the incoming governor. These respondents are then shown one of three endings: (1) the governor withdraws his appointment in response to mass protests, (2) a court blocks the appointment, or (3) despite the protest, the governor’s appointment succeeds. We vary the party of the outgoing governor, generating a total of eight conditions ((control + 3 outcomes)  $\times$  2 parties). The two vignettes are randomized independently.

While the first vignette provides a clear example of a power grab (a governor trying to change state law to empower himself at the expense of the legislature), the second vignette describes erosion of norms in a way typical of early democratic backsliding, and is based on events in Vermont (McCullum, 2017). It typifies violations that Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) refer to as “forbearance:” elected officials using their power in ways that are legal but violate democratic norms.

After the second vignette, we ask respondents whether they approve of the outgoing governor’s judicial appointment. We then ask whether the appointment is “consistent with democracy.” We expect that respondents will be more likely to approve of the appointment, and more likely to view it as consistent with democracy, when the governor hails from their own party. The design allows us to investigate whether people support

same-party power grabs despite viewing them as undemocratic, or whether people recast power grabs as consistent with democracy when the governor is a co-partisan.

We then ask respondents to recall the governor in the first vignette, and to state how likely they think it is that the governor will succeed in his bid to control the budget. We use these responses to evaluate whether the outcome of the judicial appointment vignette—the outgoing governor alternately failed, succeeded, or succeeded despite opposition—affects respondents’ beliefs about how the first governor will fare (that is, whether respondents update across scenarios). Finally, we asked respondents to assess the current level of democracy in the United States, using wording from the World Values Survey, to determine if the success or failure in our experiments affects perceptions of the overall quality of U.S. governance.

We included attention-check and manipulation-check questions for the two vignettes. Below, we present results both for all respondents and for those that pass the checks (Berinsky, Margolis and Sances, 2014). We conducted our study with Survey Monkey between January 17 and March 9, 2018;  $N = 4,349$ .<sup>3</sup> Survey Monkey maintains a large panel of respondents who take brief on-line surveys such as ours in exchange for donations to charities of their choice. They are not a random sample of the U.S. population, but are similar to other commonly used opt-in convenience samples from firms such as Dynata (formerly SSI), ResearchNow, Qualtrics, and Lucid.<sup>4</sup> Other political scientists have

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<sup>3</sup>Due to issues with the vendor and their platform unrelated to our study, the study was initially fielded between 1/17 and 1/20 ( $N = 508$  respondents), and then data collection paused until 2/27. We find that there is no difference between responses collected before and after this pause.

<sup>4</sup>In Part III of the online appendix, we provide additional details on our sample, including descriptive

also used Survey Monkey data in published work (e.g. Clinton, Engelhardt and Trussler, 2019).

We first present the analysis that we pre-registered (Grossman et al., 2018) and then turn to an extension.

**Results: Pre-registered analyses.** Consider first our question about which justification voters find most persuasive when a governor tries to grab power: (a) gridlock; (b) polarization; or (c) special interest capture. To determine which of the appeals is most effective, we estimate  $y_i = \alpha + \phi_1(\text{Special Interests}_i) + \phi_2(\text{Gridlock}_i) + u_i$ , where  $y_i$  denotes support for the governor’s bid (on a 4-point Likert scale), and  $\text{Special Interests}_i$  and  $\text{Gridlock}_i$  are indicators for whether respondent  $i$  read the corresponding justification for the governor’s proposal.

Table 1: Why do Voters Support Power Grabs?

**Experiment 1 results.** Respondents who read the “circumvent special interests” justification are more likely to support the governor’s proposal than voters who read “block the other party’s extreme agenda.”

	(1) All Respondents	(2) Recall Scenario	(3) Recall Party	(4) Recall Both
Gridlock	0.013 (0.033)	0.029 (0.037)	-0.027 (0.040)	0.007 (0.042)
Special interests	0.055 <sup>+</sup> (0.033)	0.099** (0.038)	0.018 (0.040)	0.082 <sup>+</sup> (0.043)
Constant (Polarization mean)	1.855*** (0.024)	1.755*** (0.027)	1.875*** (0.030)	1.779*** (0.032)
Observations	4349	3114	3073	2410
$R^2$	0.001	0.002	0.000	0.002

Standard errors in parentheses. <sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 1 presents the results. The positive coefficient on *Special Interests* indicates that people found limiting the influence of special interests a more compelling rationale

statistics and balance tests across experimental conditions.

for the governor’s proposal than blocking the other party’s extreme agenda (the baseline category). The difference is small in substantive terms, but it does suggest that at least as many voters respond to arguments about capture as to arguments about gridlock or polarization.

Our second experiment considers the role of partisanship. A governor in a different state violates democratic norms—but not the law—by attempting to pack the state supreme court; we randomly assign whether the governor is a co-partisan or not. We then ask whether respondents support the judicial appointment and whether they view it as consistent with democracy. Naturally, we expect that people will be more supportive of the judicial appointment when the governor is a co-partisan. But do they support it *despite* their democratic principles, or because they re-cast it as consistent with those principles?

To answer this question, we look at the *difference* between these two outcomes, regressing it on an indicator for whether the governor is a co-partisan:  $(\text{Support}_i - \text{“Consistent with democracy}_i\text{”}) = \xi + \delta \text{Copartisan}_i + \eta_i$ , where  $\text{Support}_i$  denotes respondent  $i$ ’s support for the governor’s judicial appointment (4-point scale),  $\text{Consistent}_i$  denotes her opinion about whether the appointment is “consistent with democracy” (4-point scale), and  $\text{Copartisan}_i$  is an indicator for whether the respondent was assigned to the condition in which the governor is a co-partisan. Columns 1 and 2 of Table 2 show that co-partisanship moves people’s *support* for the judicial appointment more than it moves people’s perception of whether the appointment is consistent with democracy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Table 13 in the Online Appendix shows this result also holds when using binary measures of support and consistency.

Table 2: Partisanship and Support for Executive Power Grabs

In Columns 1-2 the dependent variable is the *difference* between support for the governor’s judicial appointment (Columns 3-4) and consistency with democracy (Columns 5-6). Odd columns are full sample; even columns subset to attentive respondents.

	Difference		Support Act		Consistent	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Own-party governor	0.079*** (0.014)	0.094*** (0.014)	0.266*** (0.016)	0.292*** (0.017)	0.186*** (0.017)	0.198*** (0.018)
Constant (Out-party mean)	-0.063*** (0.010)	-0.065*** (0.010)	0.293*** (0.011)	0.271*** (0.012)	0.355*** (0.012)	0.336*** (0.012)
Observations	3407	2957	3407	2957	3407	2957
$R^2$	0.009	0.014	0.072	0.087	0.035	0.040

Standard errors in parentheses. <sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

The outcome of the judicial appointment episode leads respondents to update their beliefs about the fate of power grabs elsewhere. In the second experiment, we randomly assigned respondents to scenarios in which the outgoing governor succeeded or failed at making his judicial appointment; we then asked respondents how likely they thought it was (on a 4-point scale) that the governor in the first vignette would succeed in his attempt to grab power from the legislature. We find that hearing about a successful judicial appointment in the second vignette makes voters more likely to expect a successful power grab in the first one (Table 3, Columns 1–2). Strikingly, however, respondents do not then change their views about the state of democracy in the United States (Columns 3–4). The following section investigates why.

**A Typology of Attitudes Toward Democracy.** Previous literature largely focuses on two types of voters who could pose threats to liberal democracy: (1) *autocrats*, who unabashedly prefer a system of government other than democracy (Foa and Mounk, 2016); and (2) *militants*, who sacrifice their democratic principles to pursue partisan policy goals

Table 3: Voters Update From Observing Power Grabs

Respondents who learn that the second governor succeeded in making a dubious judicial appointment are more likely to expect the first governor’s power grab to succeed, but no less likely to view the United States as democratic. Odd columns are the full sample; even columns subset to attentive respondents.

	Will Governor’s Plan Pass		How Democratic is US	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Passed with opposition	0.105*** (0.027)	0.122*** (0.027)	0.040 (0.031)	0.029 (0.032)
Passed without opposition	0.047+ (0.027)	0.072** (0.027)	0.013 (0.030)	0.016 (0.032)
Constant (Did not pass mean)	1.997*** (0.019)	1.926*** (0.018)	2.236*** (0.021)	2.227*** (0.022)
Observations	3991	3410	3991	3410
$R^2$	0.004	0.006	0.000	0.000

Standard errors in parentheses. +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

(Graham and Svobik, 2019). These types are compared to the ideal of the *liberal democrat*, who recognizes the importance of checks and balances and votes accordingly.

We turn attention to a third type of voter who might pose a threat to liberal democracy: *majoritarians*, who grant tremendous license to popularly elected incumbents. When these voters endorse executive power grabs, they do so not by sacrificing their democratic principles on the altar of partisanship, but rather by expressing what they view as the preeminent democratic principle: that the electoral majority should rule, over and above the objections of courts, a captured legislature, or other institutions. For these individuals, if a majority of voters elected someone, her exercise of power is democratic by definition.

While we do not observe the proportions of these types directly in our data, we show in Part IV of the Online Appendix that we can use our data to estimate them. Table 4 presents our estimates. We find that, in fact, *majoritarians* represent a much larger share of the population than the *autocrats* or *militants* that form the focus of previous work.

Indeed, we estimate that *majoritarians*—those who view power grabs as consistent with democracy and support them regardless of partisanship—constitute nearly one-quarter of the population.

One might have thought that voters who support democracy in the abstract—as measured by questions on the World Values Survey—would be much more likely to show up as *liberal democrats* in our typology. In fact, the correlation is weak. Even among respondents who strongly value democracy in the abstract, more than one fifth are what we call *majoritarians*: they support the outgoing governor’s judicial appointment and view it as “consistent with democracy” regardless of the party in power.

Table 4: A Typology of Partisan Attitudes Toward Democracy

“S” denotes whether the respondent supports the governor’s power grab, and “C” denotes whether the respondent views it as consistent with democracy. In Columns 8–9, we report conditional distributions among people whose support for democracy on the World Values Survey questions is below (low WVS) or above (high WVS) average.

Oppo. Party		Same Party		Label	Description	Proportions		
S	C	S	C			Overall	Low WVS	High WVS
0	0	0	0	Liberal Democrats	Power grabs are inconsistent with democracy and always opposed	.36	.31	.39
0	0	1	0	Militants	Power grabs are inconsistent with democracy but supported for copartisans	.05	.06	.04
0	0	1	1	Rationalizer	Power grabs are only consistent with democracy and supported for copartisans	.19	.13	.21
0	1	0	1	Anti-Majoritarian	Power grabs are consistent with democracy but always opposed	.08	.11	.07
0	1	1	1	Partisans	Power grabs are consistent with democracy but only supported for copartisans	.03	.03	.04
1	0	1	0	Autocrats	Power grabs are inconsistent with democracy but always supported	.05	.07	.04
1	1	1	1	Majoritarians	Power grabs are consistent with democracy and always supported	.24	.30	.21

These findings suggest an interpretation of the updating results in Table 3. Why, we asked, would the success of one dubious judicial appointment lead voters to expect other

power grabs to succeed—but not change their views of the state of democracy in America? The answer, it seems, is that many voters simply view such power grabs as consistent with democracy.<sup>6</sup> Our results suggest that even in an era of extreme elite polarization, polarization is not the only—or even the principal—reason that voters might support executive power grabs. Rather, voters hold widely varying conceptions of “democracy,” some of which differ from the conceptions held by scholars (Carey et al., 2019; Gibson, 2008).

**Conclusion.** Why do voters support executive power grabs that undermine checks and balances? Polarization is not the sole explanation. Rather, many voters simply view executive power grabs as consistent with democracy—even if they undermine checks and balances. This suggests two questions for future work. First, do these results replicate across scenarios, or are they context-specific? Second, to what extent do voters believe that checks and balances allow powerful special interests to influence policymaking?

Our results also sound several notes of optimism. In our first experiment, a mere one quarter of respondents said that they would support the governor’s bid for unilateral control of the state budget. And when we use our second experiment to estimate the proportion of voter types in the population, we find that the largest group is *liberal democrats*: those who recognize power grabs as inconsistent with their own idea of democracy, and who oppose those power grabs no matter what—even when the governor is a

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<sup>6</sup>One objection to this interpretation is that respondents might perceive the scenarios as purely hypothetical, and therefore not use them to update their beliefs about the real world. But we show that subjects *do* update across scenarios, a result difficult to explain if respondents read the vignettes as pure fiction.

co-partisan. These findings echo those who have argued that, contrary to appearances, democracy in America is not as imperiled as it may appear to be (Voeten, 2017).

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