

# Let the Majority Rule\*

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

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## Abstract

Incumbents often seek to wield power in ways that are formally legal but informally proscribed. Why do voters endorse these power grabs? Prior literature points to polarization. We focus on a different explanation: that many voters are *majoritarian*, in that they view elected executives' actions as inherently democratic—even when those actions violate liberal democratic norms. We find support for our argument in two original survey experiments, arguing that this desire to “let the people rule” is an important but under-studied threat to liberal representative democracy in the United States.

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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)

Incumbents often seek to undermine checks and balances. In the United States, state government officials have recently done so in North Carolina (Wines, 2017), Pennsylvania (Navratil, 2017), Michigan, and Wisconsin (Chappell, 2018; Astor, 2018)—to say nothing of federal government officials. These *power grabs*, or attempts to wield influence in ways that are formally legal but informally proscribed, weaken liberal democracy (Zakaria, 1997; Kaufman and Haggard, 2017); they form part of democratic “backsliding” or “erosion” (Beremo, 2016). A large literature would lead us to expect that citizens would oppose power grabs (Almond and Verba, 1963; McClosky, 1964). Instead, voters are often apathetic, if not outright supportive. Why?

Much of the literature points to polarization. In these accounts, voters wish to support democracy, but they tolerate the subversion of checks and balances in order to prevent the other side from taking power (Svolik, 2020; Graham and Svolik, 2020). We focus on another part of the story: that many voters are *majoritarians*, in that they view as legitimate most actions taken by popularly elected incumbents—even when those actions undermine the constraints essential to liberal democracy.

We test our argument using a pair of survey experiments. We find that, while polarization perhaps enables executive power grabs, majoritarianism is an important part of the story: some voters endorse power grabs even when the opposing party is in office. Moreover, voters who learn that one power grab was successful are more likely to think that another will prevail—but they do not view the United States as any less democratic as a result.

We interpret these findings as evidence that many voters support empowering the

electoral majority, even at the expense of checks and balances or other features of liberal democracy. For these voters, letting the *demos* rule is democratic by definition. Our 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, 2008). To anticipate the U.S. public’s response to democratic backsliding, we need to broaden our understanding of what voters consider “democratic” in the first place (Carey et al., 2019).

**Experimental Design.** Our survey experiment involved two distinct but related vignettes; for wording 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> This is a power grab: *de jure*, the governor has the power to propose such a ballot initiative; *de facto*, liberal democratic norms dictate that he not do so.<sup>2</sup> The governor provides one of three justifications for his proposal: (a) to overcome gridlock (Howell and Moe, 2016), (b) to prevent the other party from enacting its extreme agenda (Svolik, 2020), or (c) to circumvent the power of special interests, which have captured the legislature (Acemoglu, Robinson and Torvik, 2013).<sup>3</sup> Respondents were then asked whether they would support the governor’s proposal.

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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>For a discussion of why the power of the purse is essential to separation of powers, see Chafetz (2017).

<sup>3</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.

The second vignette describes a state supreme court justice (in a different state) who announces that he will retire after the governor-elect takes office. The incoming governor is from a different party than the outgoing governor, who announces that he will appoint a replacement—even though the judicial vacancy will not occur until after the end of his term. This is also a power grab: *de jure*, the outgoing governor has the power to fill the vacancy; *de facto*, liberal democratic norms dictate that he not do so.

Respondents in the control condition receive no further information. Respondents in other conditions are told that the appointment 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) × 2 parties). This second vignette is based loosely on events in Vermont (McCullum, 2017). The two vignettes are randomized independently.

Both vignettes describe elected officials using their power in ways that do not violate the law but do violate liberal democratic norms. These power grabs typify violations of what Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) refer to as “forbearance,” or elected officials abstaining from such power grabs. Because these power grabs are so dangerous (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Lieberman et al., 2019; Kaufman and Haggard, 2017), understanding how voters respond is important.

After the second vignette, we ask respondents whether they approve of the outgoing governor’s judicial appointment. We then ask whether they view the appointment as

“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 such violations as consistent with democracy when the governor is a co-partisan.

Finally, we 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). We then asked respondents to assess the current level of democracy in the United States, using wording from the World Values Survey. Our objective was to study whether the success or failure of the governors’ power grabs in the vignettes affects perceptions of the state of democracy.

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>4</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

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<sup>4</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.

are similar to other common opt-in convenience samples from firms such as Dynata (formerly SSI), ResearchNow, Qualtrics, and Lucid.<sup>5</sup> Other political scientists have also used Survey Monkey data in published work (e.g. Clinton, Engelhardt and Trussler, 2019).

We first present the analysis that we pre-registered and then turn to an extension; see the Online Appendix for an anonymized copy of our pre-analysis plan.

**Results: Pre-registered analyses.** Consider first our question about which justification voters find most persuasive when a governor tries to usurp the legislatures’ budgetary authority: (a) gridlock; (b) polarization; or (c) special interest capture. 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 the Governor’s Proposal?

**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

<sup>5</sup>In Part III of the online appendix, we provide additional details on our sample, including descriptive statistics and balance tests across experimental conditions.

that people found limiting the influence of special interests a more compelling rationale 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 special interest capture as to arguments about gridlock or polarization. This result echoes longstanding arguments about voters’ antipathy toward lobbyists and special interests (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002).

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 the governor’s power grab *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:  $(\text{Support}_i - \text{“Consistent with democracy”}_i) = \xi + \delta \text{Copartisan}_i + \eta_i$ , 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>6</sup>

Table 2: Partisanship and Support for Norm Violations

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 similar efforts 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 usurp power from the legislature. We find that hearing about a successful power grab 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.

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<sup>6</sup>Table 13 in the Online Appendix shows this result also holds when using binary measures of support and consistency.



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. +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**A Typology of Attitudes Toward Democracy.** Previous literature largely focuses on two types of voters who pose threats to liberal democracy: (1) *autocrats*, who unabashedly prefer a non-democratic system of government (Foa and Mounk, 2016); and (2) *militants*, who sacrifice their democratic principles in pursuit of partisan policy goals (Graham and Svobik, 2020). 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 poses a threat to liberal democracy: *majoritarians*, who grant tremendous license to popularly elected incumbents. *Majoritarians* support power grabs 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 voters, if the majority 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.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, we estimate that *majoritarians*—those who view the governor’s actions as consistent with democracy and support them regardless of partisanship—constitute nearly one-quarter of the population.

The presence of a substantial number of majoritarians reveals the limitation of equating support for democracy with support for liberal democracy. Voters hold diverse ideas of democracy, some of which differ from the ideas held by scholars (Carey et al., 2019). Table 4 reveals only a weak association between beliefs in liberal democracy and support for democracy in the abstract, as measured by questions on the World Values Survey. Among respondents who strongly value democracy in the abstract, more than 20 percent support the outgoing governor’s judicial appointment and view his power grab as “consistent with democracy”—regardless of the party in power.

These findings help us understand why the success of one power grab would lead respondents to think that other power grabs would prevail—without affecting their views of the state of democracy in the United States. What liberal democrats see as backsliding, others see as democratization. Majoritarians may therefore weaken the public backlash against power grabs. Previous literature shows that polarization has likely increased the share of militants, partisans, and rationalizers who support power grabs that benefit their

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<sup>7</sup>The same is true of *rationalizers*, who re-cast these actions as “consistent with democracy” when the perpetrator is a co-partisan.

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

own party. But these individuals make up only about 25 percent of our sample—and only support power grabs from same-party incumbents. Our findings suggest that majoritarians, who view power grabs as consistent with democracy, are at least as important in weakening public opposition to the erosion of liberal democracy.

**Conclusion.** Why do voters support efforts to undermine liberal democracy? Polarization, while an important part of the story, is not the sole explanation. Rather, many voters view nearly any action by a popularly elected government as democratic—even if it undermines liberal democracy. 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 the key features of the liberal democratic system are essential to an effective system of government?

Our results suggest a mixed picture of the health of American democracy. On the one hand, they do sound some 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, suggesting that voters are particularly attuned to this sort of formal usurpation of power. 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 co-partisan. On the other hand, we find that the second-largest group is *majoritarians*, who support power grabs by popularly elected incumbents. We must understand these voters and the challenge they pose to our system of government.

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