

# The Majoritarian Threat to Liberal Democracy\*

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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 focuses on polarization. We propose instead that many voters are *majoritarian*, in that they view popularly elected leaders' actions as inherently democratic—even when those actions undermine liberal democracy. We find support for our argument in two original survey experiments, arguing that this desire to give wide latitude to elected officials is an important but under-studied threat to liberal democracy in the United States, and arguably elsewhere.

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Scholars have long recognized that voters provide an essential safeguard against the subversion of liberal democracy by incumbents (Almond and Verba, 1963).<sup>1</sup> Institutional constraints like checks and balances are necessary but insufficient protections against power grabs; the same is true of politicians' own self-restraint (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Tushnet, 2004). Rather, liberal democracy requires citizens who police and punish incumbents' inevitable attempts to usurp power (Weingast, 1997).

But voters often respond to power grabs with apathy or even acquiescence (e.g. Dunning et al., 2019; Bermeo, 2016, 10–13). Why? Recent explanations focus on two classes of voters: (1) *autocrats*, who simply prefer a non-democratic system of government (Foa and Mounk, 2016); and (2) *militants*, who knowingly sacrifice their democratic principles in pursuit of partisan objectives (Graham and Svobik, 2020). We introduce an overlooked third type: *majoritarians*, or those who grant tremendous license to popularly elected incumbents. Power grabs do not violate what majoritarians hold as the preeminent democratic principle: that candidates elected by the majority should rule, even if that ends up undermining democratic institutions.

Autocrats, militants, and majoritarians all fail to punish incumbent *power grabs*, or attempts to wield influence in ways that are formally legal but informally proscribed. But they do so for different reasons. Autocrats recognize that power grabs are inconsistent with democracy but support them anyway. Militants also recognize that power grabs are inconsistent with democracy, but support them when attempted by a co-partisan

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<sup>1</sup>By “liberal democracy,” we mean a system with electoral competition, turnover, checks and balances, and guarantees of civil and political rights, as in Kaufman and Haggard (2017, 417).

(Graham and Svobik, 2020). Majoritarians, in contrast, view power grabs as consistent with democracy and support them accordingly—even when perpetrated by the opposing party. Majoritarians enable power grabs not in spite of their democratic ideals, but because of them. For them, “democracy” is not synonymous with “liberal democracy” (Mounk, 2018); they prioritize elected incumbents’ power over horizontal accountability.

We test this argument using a survey experiment in the United States. We show respondents vignettes inspired by recent power grabs perpetrated by elected state-government officials (Wines, 2017; Chappell, 2018; Astor, 2018; Millhiser, 2020; Levy, 2019), experimentally varying the partisanship of the incumbent and her justification for usurping power. We find that while militants do enable co-partisan power grabs, majoritarianism also plays a major role: a significant fraction of respondents condone power grabs *even when attempted by an opposing party*. 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 popularly elected officials, even at the expense of checks and balances and other features of liberal democracy. For these voters, a popularly elected incumbent exercises power democratically 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). We also echo classic insights about the challenge of voter consensus and coordination in policing incumbents (McClosky, 1964; Weingast, 1997; Fearon, 2011), as well as recent work on incumbents who disguise anti-democratic maneuvers

as consistent with democracy (Varol, 2014; Luo and Przeworski, 2019; Nalepa, Vanberg and Chiopris, 2018). To address 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).

**Sample** We conducted our study with Survey Monkey between January 17 and March 9, 2018;  $N = 4,349$ .<sup>2</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 common opt-in convenience samples from firms such as Dynata, ResearchNow, Qualtrics, and Lucid.<sup>3</sup> Consistent with previous research about SurveyMonkey, we find that our sample is demographically similar to the adult population of the United States, though it is slightly more educated and Caucasian (Bentley, Daskalova and White, 2017). Below, we discuss how this might affect our results.

**Study 1: Setup.** We present respondents with a vignette that describes a state supreme court justice who announces their retirement after a new governor 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

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<sup>2</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>3</sup>In Part B of the online appendix, we provide additional details on our sample, including descriptive statistics and balance tests across experimental conditions.

occur until after the end of his term. This power grab typifies a violation of what Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) call *forbearance*: *de jure*, the outgoing governor has the power to fill the vacancy; *de facto*, liberal democratic norms dictate that he not do so. This vignette is based on events in Vermont (McCullum, 2017), and parallels events in Georgia that occurred after our study was fielded (Millhisser, 2020).

We randomly assign whether the outgoing governor is a co-partisan of the respondent. We then ask respondents whether they approve of the outgoing governor’s lame-duck-period judicial appointment (on a 4-point scale), and whether they view the appointment as “consistent with democracy” (again, on a 4-point scale). The design allows us to distinguish among autocrats (who support the power grab despite recognizing it as inconsistent with democracy), militants (who support the power grab *for co-partisans only* despite recognizing it as inconsistent with democracy), and majoritarians (who view the power grab as consistent with democracy and support it accordingly), among other types.

We included attention-check and manipulation-check questions. Below, we present results both for all respondents and for those that pass the checks (Berinsky, Margolis and Sances, 2014). We first present pre-registered analysis and then turn to an extension; our pre-analysis plan can be found at <https://osf.io/eaxbw> and our

**Study 1 Results: Pre-registered analyses.** Do respondents who support the governor’s power grab do so despite their democratic principles, or because they view the power grab as consistent with those principles?

To answer this question, we look at the *difference* between these two outcomes, re-

gressing it on an indicator for whether the governor is a co-partisan:

$$(\text{Support}_i - \text{Consistent}_i) = \xi + \delta \text{Copartisan}_i + \eta_i$$

where  $\text{Support}_i$  is an indicator for whether respondent  $i$  approves of the governor’s judicial appointment,  $\text{Consistent}_i$  is an indicator for whether respondent  $i$  reports that the appointment is “consistent with democracy,” and  $\text{Copartisan}_i$  is an indicator for whether the respondent was assigned to the condition in which the governor is a co-partisan.<sup>4</sup>

Unsurprisingly, we find that respondents are much more likely to support the governor’s judicial appointment and much more likely to view it as “consistent with democracy” when the outgoing governor is a co-partisan. This is true both in the full sample (Columns 3 and 5) and in the subset of attentive respondents (Columns 4 and 6). But co-partisanship moves *support* more than it moves perceptions of *consistency* (Columns 1 and 2). These differences allow us to distinguish among different types of voters who support power grabs.

**A Typology of Attitudes Toward Democracy.** Recent work argues that two types of voters pose threats to liberal democracy: autocrats (who dislike democracy generally), and militants (who know that their party is violating norms, but approve nevertheless). This dichotomy overlooks a third type of voter: *majoritarians*, who grant tremendous

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<sup>4</sup> $\text{Support}_i$  is set equal to 1 if the respondent either strongly or somewhat approves of appointing the justice and  $\text{Consistent}_i$  is set equal to 1 if the respondent reports that appointing the justice is either completely or mostly consistent with democracy. Table 13 in the Online Appendix shows similar patterns when instead defining these variables using the full 4-point scale.

Table 1: 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. In columns 3-6 the outcomes are binary.

	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

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

license to popularly elected executives—even when they undermine liberal democratic norms.

While we do not observe the proportions of different types of voters directly in our data, we show in Part C of the Online Appendix that we can estimate them using responses to the judicial appointment vignette. Table 2 presents our estimates. We find that *majoritarians* represent a much larger share of the population than *autocrats* or *militants* who form the focus of previous work.<sup>5</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 our sample. This reveals that there are a substantial number of majoritarians in the population, even if our sample might slightly over-estimate them (due to the aforementioned demographic biases).

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<sup>5</sup>The same is true of *rationalizers*, who re-cast these actions as “consistent with democracy” when the perpetrator is a co-partisan.

Table 2: 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

Tellingly, Table 2 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 (“High WVS”), 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. And among those who express weak support for democracy in the abstract (“Low WVS”), nearly one-third are liberal democrats who oppose the governor’s judicial appointment no matter what. This underscores the notion that support for democracy in the abstract is not the best way to measure real-world support for democratic institutions (Graham and Svulik, 2020).

Our data do not speak to how these fractions have changed over time. But even

if the proportion of majoritarians in the population has declined or remained constant, elites' increasing willingness to engage in power grabs (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018) makes majoritarians a crucial—and, we argue, overlooked—part of the story.

**Study 2: Setup.** Our second study provides additional perspective on majoritarians. Here, we present respondents with a scenario in which a *same-party* governor proposes a ballot initiative that would give him unilateral control over the state budget, cutting out the legislature.<sup>6</sup> This, too, 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>7</sup> The governor provides one of three justifications for his proposal: (a) to prevent the other party from enacting its extreme agenda (Svolik, 2020), (b) to overcome gridlock (Howell and Moe, 2016), or (c) to circumvent the power of special interests, which have captured the legislature (Acemoglu, Robinson and Torvik, 2013).<sup>8</sup> We view the third justification as the most *majoritarian*, in that it evokes empowering an incumbent executive against the extra-electoral influence of a powerful minority.

Respondents were then asked whether they would support the governor's proposal.

We estimate

$$y_i = \alpha + \phi_1(\text{Special Interests}_i) + \phi_2(\text{Gridlock}_i) + u_i$$

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<sup>6</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>7</sup>See Chafetz (2017) for why the power of the purse is essential to separation of powers.

<sup>8</sup>We do not include a no-justification (control) condition because, consistent with previous work, we found in pre-tests that subjects strongly disliked these scenarios.

where  $y_i$  denotes support for the governor's bid, 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 3: Why do Voters Support the Governor's Proposal?

**Panel A: DV is a four-point Likert scale**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	All Respondents	Recall Scenario	Recall Party	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 <sup>**</sup> (0.038)	0.018 (0.040)	0.082 <sup>+</sup> (0.043)
Constant (Polarization mean)	1.855 <sup>***</sup> (0.024)	1.755 <sup>***</sup> (0.027)	1.875 <sup>***</sup> (0.030)	1.779 <sup>***</sup> (0.032)
Observations	4349	3114	3073	2410
$R^2$	0.001	0.002	0.000	0.002

Standard errors in parentheses

<sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.10$ , <sup>\*</sup>  $p < 0.05$ , <sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.01$ , <sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.001$

**Panel B: DV is binary**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	All Respondents	Recall Scenario	Recall Party	Recall Both
Gridlock	0.016 (0.016)	0.022 (0.017)	0.000 (0.019)	0.019 (0.020)
Special interests	0.026 (0.016)	0.038 <sup>*</sup> (0.018)	0.017 (0.019)	0.039 <sup>+</sup> (0.021)
Constant (Polarization mean)	0.218 <sup>***</sup> (0.011)	0.178 <sup>***</sup> (0.012)	0.219 <sup>***</sup> (0.014)	0.178 <sup>***</sup> (0.014)
Observations	4349	3114	3073	2410
$R^2$	0.001	0.001	0.000	0.001

Standard errors in parentheses

<sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.10$ , <sup>\*</sup>  $p < 0.05$ , <sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.01$ , <sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.001$

**Study 2: Results.** The positive coefficients on *special interests* across both panels and all columns of Table 3 reveal that people found limiting the influence of special interests

at least as compelling a rationale for the governor’s power grab as blocking the other party’s extreme agenda (the baseline category). The difference is small but not negligible in substantive terms: 3.9 percentage points, or 22% more than with the polarization justification (the baseline category).

This result echoes longstanding arguments about voters’ antipathy toward lobbyists and special interests (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002), in part because they represent a privileged minority whose interests are antithetical to those of the majority. This finding, too, is consistent with our argument that understanding public support for power grabs requires looking beyond partisan polarization.

**Voter Updating.** As a third piece of evidence documenting the role of majoritarians, we study whether and how one power grab leads voters to update their beliefs about other power grabs—and about the state of democracy in the United States. After respondents read both vignettes, we told them that the governor’s judicial appointment violates a norm that new justices are appointed by incoming governors. We then showed respondents one of three outcomes: (1) the governor withdraws his appointment in response to mass protests, (2) a court blocks the governor’s appointment, or (3) despite the protest, the governor’s appointment succeeds. Respondents in a control condition received no further information.

We then asked respondents to think back to the vignette from the second experiment—about the governor trying to wrest the power of the purse from the legislature—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 appoint-

ment vignette—the outgoing governor alternately failed, succeeded, or succeeded despite opposition—affects respondents’ beliefs about how the other governor will fare. Finally, we ask 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 affects perceptions of the state of democracy.

Table 4: 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.

	<b>Will Governor’s Plan Pass</b>		<b>How Democratic is US</b>	
	(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

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

We find that the outcome of the judicial appointment in one state led respondents to update their beliefs about similar efforts elsewhere. Specifically, hearing about a successful power grab in one vignette makes voters more likely to expect a successful power grab in the other (Table 4, Columns 1–2). Strikingly, however, respondents do not then change their views about the state of democracy in the United States (Columns 3–4). Our focus on *majoritarians* helps explain why. What liberal democrats see as backsliding, majoritarians see as consistent with democracy, which mutes the public backlash against power grabs. Arguably, this explains 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.

**Conclusion.** Why do voters support power grabs? Polarization, while an important part of the story, is not the sole explanation. Rather, we argue, many voters grant tremendous license to elected incumbents, perceiving incumbent behavior as “consistent with democracy”—even if it undermines checks and balances or other aspects of liberal democracy. While future work is needed to explore the robustness of these results, our findings establish an important baseline. Understanding majoritarians and the challenge they pose to our system of government is an important objective for future work.

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