

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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 this claim in two original survey experiments, arguing that majoritarians' desire to give wide latitude to elected officials is an important but understudied threat to liberal democracy in the United States.

Keywords: Democratic erosion; populism; polarization; democratic backsliding

Scholars have long recognized that voters often fail to prevent the subversion of liberal democracy by incumbents (Almond and Verba 1963).¹ This is a problem: 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). Liberal democracy thus benefits from citizens who police and punish incumbents' inevitable attempts to usurp power (Weingast 1997).²

But voters often respond to power grabs with apathy or even acquiescence (e.g. Bermeo 2016, pp. 10–13; Dunning et al. 2019). Why? Recent explanations focus on two classes of voters: (1) *autocrats*, who simply prefer a nondemocratic 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 focus on an overlooked third type: *majoritarians*, or those who grant tremendous license to popularly elected incumbents. Power grabs do

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¹By “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.

²This is true even if liberal democracy does not *require* vigilance from all voters (Dahl 1961; McClosky 1964).

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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 (Graham and Svulik 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 (as do voters in Grillo and Prato, 2020, though for different reasons). For majoritarians, “democracy” is not synonymous with “liberal democracy” (Mounk 2018); they prioritize 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 (Astor 2018; Chappell 2018; Levy 2019; Millhiser 2020; Wines 2017), 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 majoritarians, 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 (Gibson 2008; Marcus et al. 1995). We also echo classic insights about the challenge of voter consensus and coordination in policing incumbents (Fearon 2011; McClosky 1964; Weingast 1997), as well as recent work on incumbents who disguise anti-democratic maneuvers as consistent with democracy (Luo and Przeworski 2019; Nalepa, Vanberg, and Chiopris 2018; Varol 2014). 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 SurveyMonkey between January 17 and March 9, 2018; $N = 4,349$.³ SurveyMonkey maintains a large panel of respondents who take brief online surveys such as ours in exchange for donations to charities of their choice.

³Due 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 that there is no difference between responses collected before and after this pause.

They are not a random sample of the U.S. population, but are similar to other common opt-in convenience samples from firms like Dynata, ResearchNow, Qualtrics, and Lucid.⁴ Consistent with previous research using 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 his retirement after a new governor takes office. The outgoing governor, who is from a different party than the incoming governor, announces that he will appoint a replacement – even though the judicial vacancy will not 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 (Millhiser 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 preregistered analysis and then turn to an extension; our pre-analysis plan can be found at <https://osf.io/eaxbw>.

Study 1 Results: Preregistered 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, regressing 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 Support_i is an indicator for whether respondent i approves of the governor's judicial appointment, Consistent_i is an indicator for whether respondent i reports

⁴In Part B of the online appendix, we provide additional details on our sample, including descriptive statistics and balance tests across experimental conditions.

that the appointment is “consistent with democracy,” and Copartisan_i is an indicator for whether the respondent was assigned to the condition in which the governor is a co-partisan.⁵

Unsurprisingly, Table 1 shows 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 license to popularly elected executives – even when those leaders 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 the *autocrats* or *militants* who form the focus of previous work.⁶ 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 overestimate them due to the aforementioned demographic biases.

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% 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 Svobik 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

⁵Support_{*i*} is set equal to 1 if the respondent either strongly or somewhat approves of appointing the justice and 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.

⁶The same is true of *rationalizers*, who recast these actions as “consistent with democracy” when the perpetrator is a co-partisan.

Table 1
Partisanship and Support for Norm Violations

	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

Notes: 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. Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2
A Typology of Partisan Attitudes Toward Democracy

Opposition 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	0.36	0.31	0.39
0	0	1	0	Militants	Power grabs are inconsistent with democracy but supported for co-partisans	0.05	0.06	0.04
0	0	1	1	Rationalizer	Power grabs are only consistent with democracy and supported for co-partisans	0.19	0.13	0.21
0	1	0	1	Anti-Majoritarian	Power grabs are consistent with democracy but always opposed	0.08	0.11	0.07
0	1	1	1	Partisans	Power grabs are consistent with democracy but only supported for co-partisans	0.03	0.03	0.04
1	0	1	0	Autocrats	Power grabs are inconsistent with democracy but always supported	0.05	0.07	0.04
1	1	1	1	Majoritarians	Power grabs are consistent with democracy and always supported	0.24	0.30	0.21

Notes: “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.

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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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).⁹ 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

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

where y_i denotes support for the governor's bid, and Special Interests_{*i*} and Gridlock_{*i*} are indicators for whether respondent *i* read the corresponding justification for the governor's proposal.

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 justification tied to polarization (the baseline category).

This result echoes long-standing 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.

⁷Independents who lean toward a party are treated as partisans; pure independents are randomly assigned to see either a Democratic or Republican governor.

⁸See Chafetz (2017) for why the power of the purse is essential to separation of powers.

⁹We do not include a no-justification (control) condition because, consistent with previous work, we found in pretests that subjects strongly disliked these scenarios.

Table 3
Why do Voters Support the Governor's Proposal?

Panel A: DV is a 4-point Likert Scale				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	All respondents	Recall scenario	Recall party	Recall both
Gridlock	0.013	0.029	−0.027	0.007
	(0.033)	(0.037)	(0.040)	(0.042)
Special interests	0.055 ⁺	0.099 ^{**}	0.018	0.082 ⁺
	(0.033)	(0.038)	(0.040)	(0.043)
Constant (polarization mean)	1.855 ^{***}	1.755 ^{***}	1.875 ^{***}	1.779 ^{***}
	(0.024)	(0.027)	(0.030)	(0.032)
Observations	4349	3114	3073	2410
R ²	0.001	0.002	0.000	0.002

Panel B: DV is Binary				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	All respondents	Recall scenario	Recall party	Recall both
Gridlock	0.016	0.022	0.000	0.019
	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.019)	(0.020)
Special interests	0.026	0.038 [*]	0.017	0.039 ⁺
	(0.016)	(0.018)	(0.019)	(0.021)
Constant (polarization mean)	0.218 ^{***}	0.178	0.219 ^{***}	0.178 ^{***}
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Observations	4349	3114	3073	2410
R ²	0.001	0.001	0.000	0.001

Standard errors in parentheses.

⁺ $p < 0.10$, ^{*} $p < 0.05$, ^{**} $p < 0.01$, ^{***} $p < 0.001$.

Voter updating

As a third piece of evidence on 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 the 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 about the governor trying to wrest the power of the purse from the legislature, and to state how likely they

Table 4
Voters Update from Observing Power Grabs

	Will governor's plan pass		How democratic is the United States	
	(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

Notes: 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. Standard errors in parentheses.

+*p* < 0.10, ***p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001.

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 despite protests, or succeeded despite litigation – 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 is to study whether the success or failure of the governors' power grabs affects perceptions of the state of democracy.

We find that the outcome of the judicial appointment in one state leads 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 tolerate 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 a baseline. Understanding majoritarians and the challenge they pose to our system of government is an important objective for future work.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2020.44>.

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