

Professed Democracy Support and Openness to Politically Congenial Authoritarian Actions Within the American Public

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Abstract

Elites degrade democracy in part because of incentives that arise from public opinion. We report pre-registered and exploratory tests of which Americans are most likely to support democracy-degrading action, focusing on three distinct democracy attitudes assessed in a large demographically representative sample 5 weeks before the 2020 election. Professed opposition to democracy was relatively rare and most common among citizens who felt disengaged with politics. But a different pattern of findings emerged for attitudes toward (1) flagrant, politically congenial authoritarian policy action and (2) election subversion framed with a pro-democracy justification. These anti-democratic attitudes were relatively common, related to cultural conservatism among both Republicans and Democrats, and – consistent with an “involved-but-ignorant” hypothesis – highest among those who combined strong political interest with low political sophistication. We recommend an increased focus on attitudes toward flagrant, contextualized, and politically cued authoritarian actions, including actions framed in pro-democracy terms.

Keywords

American politics, Democracy attitudes, Authoritarianism, Political psychology, Public opinion

“We are acting not to thwart the democratic process, but rather to protect it.”

-Joint Statement from Senators Cruz, Johnson, Lankford, Daines, Kennedy, Blackburn, Braun, Senators-Elect Lummis, Marshall, Hagerty, and Tuberville. January 2, 2021

As risks to American democracy have become more apparent, scholars have increasingly focused attention on attitudes toward democracy within the American public (Bartels, 2020; Drutman et al., 2020; Zechmeister, 2018). The precise role that public attitudes play in the maintenance of democracy is a matter of debate. However, mass democracy attitudes can influence the incentives that elites face, and shortcomings in the public’s ability to serve as a check on undemocratic behavior would seem to constitute a liability for democracy (Graham & Svobik, 2020). Furthermore, anti-democratic sentiment may motivate or promote sympathy for political violence directed at opponents or those carrying out democratic processes (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022; Sullivan et al., 1983). These types of concerns are no longer just theoretical in the United States, and the nature of anti-democratic sentiment therefore seems to be a matter of pressing normative importance.

But efforts to understand the prevalence and implications of anti-democratic sentiment quickly run into a complication:

there are different kinds of democracy-related attitudes and their distributions, correlates, and normative implications are likely to vary. For instance, substantial majorities of Americans profess support for a democratic system of government (Drutman et al., 2020). But it is well known that some Americans who profess support for democracy simultaneously report being open to authoritarian actions (Voeten, 2017), sometimes rather flagrant ones (Zechmeister, 2018). What is more, support for authoritarian actions rises to even higher levels when these actions are cued as instrumental to favored goals within the context of current political conflict (Bartels, 2020; Drutman et al., 2020; Malka & Lelkes, 2017; McCoy et al., 2018). Indeed, vulnerabilities to American democracy seem to stem less from a weak commitment to the concept of democracy than from an openness to authoritarian actions carried out by favored political leaders to achieve specific goals in a polarized context (McCoy et al., 2018;

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Svolik, 2019). Moreover, elites may justify these actions as necessary for *preserving democracy*, as our epigraph illustrates, thereby harnessing abstract commitment to “democracy” for the goal of degrading democratic institutions and norms.

This research focuses on the distributions and predictors of three distinct democracy attitude dimensions within the American public. These are (1) professed support for democracy, (2) openness to flagrant authoritarian actions undertaken by one’s side to advance its policy goals, and (3) openness to forcibly overturning an unfavorable election outcome based on a partisan appeal implying that such action would serve to protect democracy. We report a mix of pre-registered and exploratory analyses using a large, demographically representative sample of American adults ($N = 6,010$) interviewed 5 weeks before the 2020 American election.

We find that while professed opposition to democracy is both rare and diffusely spread across ideological groups, openness to politically congenial authoritarian actions and election subversion are relatively common and concentrated among the cultural right and those who are uninformed about politics. Indeed, professed democracy support showed only modest negative relationships with openness to politically congenial authoritarian actions and support for election subversion. Thus, an abstract commitment to democracy may do little to weaken appetite for politically congenial democracy subversive action, which is especially attractive to the types of individuals who have traditionally been viewed as vulnerable to anti-democratic appeals (i.e., cultural conservatives and uninformed citizens).

We next consider the role of partisanship. Republican identification was associated with more anti-democratic positions on all three attitude dimensions. However, when it came to openness to politically congenial authoritarian actions and election subversion, the independent effects of party identification were much smaller than those of cultural conservatism. In fact, cultural conservatism was a relatively strong positive predictor of support for authoritarian actions and election subversion among both Republicans and Democrats. Willingness to flagrantly degrade democracy for political ends seems to be less a matter of partisanship than a matter of outlook with respect to traditional versus progressive cultural conflict. This suggests that the Democrats who are most open to authoritarian actions for politically congenial ends are the ones most likely to defect to the Republican Party in a context of culturally infused political conflict.

Finally, we find that the link between political engagement and democracy-related attitudes is more complicated than previously assumed. Specifically, involvement with politics was a relatively strong predictor of professed democracy support, but not of politically congenial authoritarian actions or election subversion. Most intriguingly, the data were consistent with an *involved-but-ignorant* explanation of support for authoritarian actions and election subversion.

That is, the Americans most likely to support such democracy degradation were those who combined low political knowledge with *high* subjective political involvement, a finding that was consistent across Republicans and Democrats. Strong involvement with politics may be favorable for giving lip service to democracy but may also energize support for politically congenial anti-democratic behavior among those who are unsophisticated.

We discuss the implications of these findings for American democracy as well as survey measurement of democracy-related attitudes within the American public.

Measuring Anti-Democratic Sentiment in the American Public

How prevalent is anti-democratic sentiment within the American public and particular subgroups thereof? Different measures tell different stories. One type of measure deals with professed support for democracy using questions containing the word “democracy” without defining this term for respondents. Relatively small minorities of Americans report opposition to democracy on these measures (Drutman et al., 2020; Voeten, 2017).

But it is commonly recognized that citizens may profess support for “democracy” while still supporting authoritarian actions. They might, for example, mis-define democracy (Kirsch & Welzel, 2019), fail to consider circumstances that would push them to favor authoritarian actions (Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016), or prioritize partisan and ideological considerations over the democratic principles they profess (Svolik, 2019). For example, surveys showing little opposition to “democracy” in the American public reveal greater support for rule by an undemocratic “strong leader” (Drutman et al., 2020; Voeten, 2017) or a military coup to deal with lawlessness or corruption (Zechmeister, 2018).

It is clear, then, that measures focused on authoritarian actions or arrangements paint a less comforting picture than those gauging abstract support for the concept of democracy. But even these measures may fall short in capturing the full extent of Americans’ appetite for authoritarian actions. Specifically, these measures lack the contextualized appeals to political goals that characterize authoritarian proposals in the American political context (Bartels, 2020; Drutman et al., 2020; Malka & Lelkes, 2017). This context involves considerable antipathy between opposing partisans, messages warning of existentially catastrophic consequences of opponents gaining power, and even some direct appeals for democracy-subverting action. This political environment risks both engendering a win-at-any-cost mentality (Simonovits et al., 2022) and energizing motivated reasoning processes that enable citizens to justify democracy subversive action as necessary for preserving democracy itself (Braley et al., 2021). Concerns expressed about mass American support for democracy subversion seem to be inseparable from concerns about elite cued and framed anti-democratic appeals within this polarized context.

Confirmatory Tests of Predictors of Anti-Democratic Sentiment

We report the first confirmatory tests to date of where professed democracy support and openness to politically congenial authoritarian actions are concentrated in the American public. This is important to understand because anti-democratic sentiment may be either diffusely spread across groups with different preferences or, more dangerously, concentrated among individuals with similar attitudes who might collectively support democracy subversion aimed at achieving their shared political goals.

Prior evidence from national and cross-national surveys suggests that several demographic and attitudinal characteristics meaningfully predict anti-democratic sentiment (Bartels, 2020; Malka et al., 2020; Miller & Davis, 2020). However, these studies have used measurement and analytic strategies that were not pre-registered and did not separately examine correlates of professed democracy support and openness to politically congenial authoritarian actions. Here we report pre-registered tests of directional hypotheses about the predictors of professed democracy support, openness to authoritarian actions, and an anti-democratic sentiment composite combining the two. We also report exploratory (i.e., non-pre-registered) tests of the same hypotheses concerning support for politically congenial election subversion in the name of protecting democracy. Although hypotheses were the same across the democracy attitude measures, we are interested in potential variability in the factors that most strongly predict each one. We describe the hypotheses here.¹

Cultural Conservatism

Classic work within political psychology has emphasized a natural coherence between anti-democratic sentiment and a broad-based cultural conservatism – including traditional sexual morality, ethnic antipathy, and the policy preference manifestations of these (Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1988; cf. Costello et al., 2021). Recent survey evidence shows relationships between such cultural conservatism dimensions and anti-democratic sentiment (Bartels, 2020; Drutman et al., 2018; Malka et al., 2020; Miller & Davis, 2020). This might be because aspects of cultural conservatism and obedience to traditional authority are rooted in similar sources of genetic variation (Ludeke et al., 2013), cultural conservatism and anti-democratic sentiment share motivational and cognitive antecedents (Zmigrod et al., 2021), the desire to exclude disfavored ethnic groups from power underlies anti-democratic sentiment (Bartels, 2020; Miller & Davis, 2020), or some combination of these reasons. Regardless, there is a strong theoretical and empirical basis for predicting that cultural conservatives will, on average, be more anti-democratic than cultural liberals.

The Protection-Based Attitude Package

Recent evidence suggests that cultural conservatives who lean to the left economically might be especially inclined to hold anti-democratic attitudes within the United States and other English-speaking democracies (Drutman, Diamond, & Goldman, 2018; Malka et al., 2020; see also Costello & Lilienfeld, 2020). Malka et al. (2020) argued that this is because such a “protection-based” attitude package reflects a desire for decisive government action to provide both cultural and economic security in a way that is not hampered by democratic constraints on power (see also Carmines et al., 2016; Lefkofridi & Michel, 2017).

College Education

Being non-college educated is often found to correlate with anti-democratic sentiment (Bartels, 2020; Drutman et al., 2018; Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016; Malka et al., 2020; Miller & Davis, 2020). This might be because lack of a college degree reflects pre-existing individual differences – such as low cognitive ability and lack of intellectual curiosity – that prevent one from seeing the value in consistently enforced democratic rules and procedures. Alternatively, education might exert a causal influence on support for democracy by improving one’s understanding of this value.

Age

Prior work suggests that younger citizens are more inclined to display anti-democratic sentiment than are older citizens (Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016; Malka et al., 2020; Miller & Davis, 2020). Foa and Mounk (2017) argued that this is a generational effect that characterizes younger Western birth cohorts, but other scholars contend that this more likely represents a life cycle effect (Voeten, 2017). Younger generations from the United States, in particular, seem to have increased in anti-democratic sentiment over the last two decades (Drutman et al., 2018; Voeten, 2017).

Political Engagement and Knowledge

Classic perspectives on the ‘democratic creed’ within the United States emphasized the role of political involvement and sophistication in support of democratic norms and institutions (McClosky, 1964; Prothro & Grigg, 1960; Sullivan et al., 1983). Those who are more interested in and knowledgeable about politics should be more likely to recognize the purpose and value of such norms and institutions. Indeed, prior evidence suggests that political engagement indicators are generally associated with lower levels of anti-democratic sentiment (Drutman et al., 2018; Malka & Lelkes, 2017; Norris, 2011). However, findings have not been entirely consistent in this regard, with Bartels (2020) reporting

evidence that politically involved Republicans are slightly more inclined to hold anti-democratic sentiment than their less involved counterparts.

In sum, prior literature provides a basis for expecting that cultural conservatism, the protection-based attitude package, not having a college education, youth, low political knowledge, and (perhaps) low political interest will be associated with anti-democratic sentiment. We provide confirmatory tests of these directional predictions, with an eye toward potential differences in the predictors of professed democracy support and openness to politically congenial authoritarian actions. We furthermore provide exploratory tests of these hypotheses with respect to support for politically congenial election subversion.

Exploratory Tests of the “Involved-But-Ignorant” Hypothesis

As discussed above, aspects of political engagement – such as subjective political involvement and objective political knowledge – are usually thought to promote pro-democracy attitudes. But prior work provides some reason to expect that subjective involvement in politics might push individuals toward favoring democracy-subversive action that they view as politically congenial (Bartels, 2020). Indeed, to the extent that openness to democracy subversion stems from desire to promote partisan goals and keep opponents out of power (Graham & Svobik, 2020; Simonovits et al., 2022; Svobik, 2019), those who are most psychologically engaged with politics may be especially drawn to, and inclined to justify, doing whatever it takes to gain power and promote a partisan policy agenda.

That said, aspects of political engagement that reflect an understanding of the importance of democratic rules and norms would be expected to have the opposite effect. Measures of factual political knowledge are often thought to reflect individual differences in a latent political sophistication construct whose content goes beyond the narrow facts assessed in a survey quiz (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Such sophistication might include awareness of how particular partisan actions that at first seem tempting can be antithetical to democracy and potentially harmful in the long run.

These considerations, as well as the findings of the confirmatory hypothesis tests outlined above, led us to propose an “involved-but-ignorant” hypothesis of openness to politically congenial authoritarianism. Specifically, we hypothesized that those who combine strong political involvement with relative ignorance about politics will be most inclined to support politically congenial authoritarian actions and election subversion. It is these individuals, we propose, who both (1) possess the psychological engagement with political conflict that would motivate a win-at-any-cost mentality and (2) lack the political or cognitive sophistication to recognize that politically congenial authoritarian actions are in fact incompatible with democracy. To be sure, the elites who act to degrade democracy are both politically engaged and sophisticated. But

public appetite for authoritarian actions that can shape the incentives of these elites might be most prominent among those who are engaged but unsophisticated. We presently report exploratory tests of this hypothesis.

Method

Respondents and Procedure

A national sample of 6010 American adults completed a multi-purpose survey containing the present study’s measures. This sample was selected from online pools of opt-in internet respondents to represent the American adult population with respect to age, gender, ethnicity, and region. The survey, which contained items for the present study and another unrelated study, was fielded on September 23 and 24 of 2020.² The median amount of time it took respondents to complete the survey was 9.2 minutes.

The sample was recruited by Lucid using the Lucid Theorem sampling tool. This is not a probability sample, and Table A-1 in the Supplementary Material summarizes the demographic composition of the present sample alongside corresponding American adult population benchmarks computed from the 2020 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement. The demographic composition is similar to that of the American adult population, with the average discrepancy across demographic categories being 2.9 percentage points.

Lucid samples are widely used in political science research, and results seem to track well with those of online probability samples (Coppock & McClellan, 2019). We report analyses in Part C of the Supplementary Material which indicate a high level of respondent attentiveness and comparability of basic findings with those obtained with a probability sample survey administered around the same time (the 2020 National Election Studies Time Series sample).

Measures

All question wording and measure formation corresponded with what was specified in the pre-analysis plan, pre-registered prior to the onset of data collection.³ Wording of questions used in the present analyses is presented in Part B of the Supplementary Material and the pre-registration document that contains all questions from the survey is available online.⁴ Respondents were required to answer each question before proceeding with the survey; thus, there are no missing data. All continuous measures were recoded to range from 0.00 to 1.00. Descriptive statistics for the main measures are presented in Table A-2 and correlations among them are presented in Table A-3 of the Supplementary Material.

Professed Democracy Support. We adapted three commonly used survey questions that gauge professed democracy

support. Respondents rated on five-point scales how good versus bad they believed a “democratic political system” is as a way of governing the U.S., how important it is to them to live in a democratically governed country, and level of agreement with the “Churchill item”: “Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government”. These items were averaged, with higher score representing greater professed support for democracy.

Openness to Authoritarian Actions. Respondents completed a three-item measure of openness to politically congenial authoritarian actions. First respondents were told that they would be asked for their opinions about some actions that “a future United States President might take to pursue the policies they want.” Respondents were instructed to “please assume that the future U.S. President is someone you support and whose policies you strongly favor.” On each of the next three pages respondents were asked a question that took this form, “If a future U.S. President was trying to pursue policies that you strongly favor but [*circumstance*], would you support or oppose [*action*]?”. In the first question the circumstance was, “these policies were being blocked by opponents in Congress” and the action was, “this President dissolving Congress and ruling without Congress”; in the second question the circumstance was, “journalists and political opponents were saying bad things about these policies that you believe to be untrue” and the action was “the arrest of these journalists and politicians”; and in the third question the circumstance was, “these policies were being blocked by the Supreme Court” and the action was “this President dismissing the Supreme Court and ruling without the Supreme Court”. Respondents made ratings on 7-point scales ranging from “Strongly support” to “Strongly oppose”, and these were averaged with higher score representing greater support for authoritarian actions.

This measure has several advantages for gauging individual differences in anti-democratic sentiment in the current American context. First, rather than asking about support of authoritarian actions in the abstract, it signals that these actions are taken to support a political leader and policies that the individual favors. Second, despite the presence of cues signaling political congeniality, the questions are worded in a way that is applicable to individuals with any type of ideological or partisan leaning, accomplishing something along the lines of “content-controlled” measures of political intolerance pioneered by Sullivan et al. (1983). Finally, these items allow respondents to express gradations of support for authoritarian actions.

Anti-Democratic Sentiment Composite. Professed democracy support (reverse-coded) and openness to authoritarian governance measures were averaged to form an anti-democratic sentiment composite. Composite measures including both (low) professed democracy support and (high) support for authoritarian arrangements are commonly used in survey

research on democracy attitudes (e.g., Claassen, 2020; Malka et al., 2020; Miller & Davis, 2020; Qi & Shin, 2011). Therefore the pre-registered analyses involving this composite provide useful confirmatory tests of how well prior findings about the correlates of democracy attitudes replicate.

Authoritarian Election Preference. An item gauging an authoritarian preference with respect to the 2020 election was administered near the end of the survey, 14 items after the last of the democracy attitude items described above. This item queried preference for undemocratically placing one’s preferred candidate in power should they lose the election, and did so in a way that was tailored to Trump ($N = 2677$) and Biden ($N = 2863$) supporters (including leaners; see Part B of Supplementary Material).⁵ Question wording, with wording for Trump supporters *before* the slash and for Biden supporters *after* the slash, was:

Now we have a question about the 2020 Presidential election. Suppose the Presidential election is very close and eventually [Joe Biden/Donald Trump] is officially certified as the winner. If [Donald Trump/Joe Biden] were to say that the election was not valid because of [voter fraud/voter suppression] and that he should [remain/become] President, would you support or oppose the military and the secret service acting to [keep Donald Trump/put Joe Biden] in power?

Response options were arrayed on a 7-point scale ranging from “Strongly support” to “Strongly oppose”. This item was coded so higher score means greater authoritarian election preference.⁶

Cultural Conservatism. Respondents completed three items assessing cultural political attitudes with each item rated on a five-point scale. The items assessed attitudes toward abortion, same-sex marriage, and immigration. These items were averaged with higher score meaning greater cultural conservatism.

Economic Conservatism. Respondents completed three items assessing economic political attitudes with each item rated on a five-point scale. The items assessed attitudes toward levels of government spending and services, government guaranteed jobs and standard of living, and government versus private health insurance. These items were averaged with higher score meaning greater economic conservatism.

Political Engagement. Respondents completed two items assessing political engagement – degree of attention to politics and interest in politics. Respondents were randomly assigned to complete these items with either an agree-disagree or item-specific response scale format and with ascending or descending response options (manipulations relevant to the other study), and in all cases made ratings on a five-point scale. These items were averaged with higher score meaning greater political engagement.

Political Knowledge. Respondents completed a five-item multiple choice quiz assessing political knowledge. In the instructions prior to the quiz respondents were told, “It is important to us that you do NOT use outside sources like the Internet to search for the correct answer. If you do not know an answer, just do your best to guess. It is okay if you get answers wrong; just try your best.” The political knowledge measure was computed as the proportion of questions answered correctly.

Demographics. Demographic characteristics were measured in the Lucid background survey that was administered to respondents within 1 month prior to the present survey. Question wording is presented at the end of Part B of the Supplementary Material. Dummy variables were formed for female gender; college education; White, Black, American Indian, and Asian racial/ethnic groups; and Hispanic ethnicity. Age in years was recoded to range from 0.00 to 1.00.

Weights

A set of weights was computed using a raking procedure based on the demographic categories and the American adult population benchmarks displayed in Table A-1. These weights were trimmed to fall within 0.3 and 3.0, with fewer than 4% of weights falling outside of these bounds initially. Application of weights was not specified in the pre-analysis plan, but applying weights did not yield any substantive changes to the findings. Results are presented with weights applied.

Results

Prevalence of Anti-Democratic Sentiment in the U.S.

As expected, professed support for democracy was, on average, quite high ($M = .74$, $SD = .25$), with relatively small minorities of Americans expressing belief that democracy is a bad system of government (12%), is not better than other systems of government (7%), and is unimportant to them (12%). In all three cases, Republicans were substantially more likely to express these anti-democracy beliefs (20%, 11%, and 17%) than were Democrats (5%, 3%, and 5%).⁷

Meanwhile, the distribution of support for politically congenial authoritarian actions painted a different picture of mass democracy attitudes. Despite the flagrant nature of these actions, average score on the composite was close to the scale midpoint ($M = .46$, $SD = .32$). Large minorities expressed some degree of support for a President whom they favor dissolving an uncooperative Congress (40%), arresting critical journalists (36%), and dismissing an uncooperative Supreme Court (33%). Again, these percentages were substantially higher among Republicans (50%, 49%, and 43%) than among Democrats (36%, 30%, 29%).

In addition to telling a different story about overall levels of anti-democratic sentiment in the population, professed democracy support and openness to politically congenial authoritarian actions were only modestly negatively correlated ($r = -.18$, $p < .001$). Factor analyses, presented in Part D of the Supplementary Material, indicate that the items form two distinct and only modestly correlated dimensions.

Now we turn to the single-item authoritarian election preference measure. Among Trump and Biden supporters, the average level of support for the military and secret service placing their candidate in power in the event of a contested loss was quite high ($M = .60$, $SD = .36$), with 53% of the sample expressing some degree of support for this and only 26% expressing some degree of opposition. Among Trump supporters, 58% expressed some degree of support and 23% expressed some degree of opposition; among Biden supporters these numbers were 48% and 30%, respectively. Support for election subversion was, not surprisingly, strongly correlated with openness to authoritarian actions ($r = .54$, $p < .001$), but was only modestly negatively correlated with professed support for democracy ($r = -.16$, $p < .001$).

Indeed, the findings show that many Americans who consistently profess support for democracy are open to politically congenial authoritarian actions and election subversion. Among the subset of respondents who consistently professed democracy support (i.e., the 60% of the sample that gave a pro-democracy answer above the neutral scale midpoint on all three professed democracy support items), sizable percentages expressed support for dissolving Congress (39%), arresting critical journalists (37%), dismissing the Supreme Court (34%), and overturning an election (50%) when these actions were politically congenial. The corresponding percentages among the 40% of the sample that was not consistently “democratic” were not much different: 41%, 34%, 33%, and 57%, respectively. In fact, 39% of the sample reported both consistent professed democracy support and openness to at least one of the authoritarian policy actions or election subversion.

Finally, support for politically congenial anti-democratic actions and election subversion do not appear to have been the consequence of inattentive responding. The mean scores on these among the 93% of respondents who passed the attention check (see Part C of the Supplementary Material) were .45 and .59, respectively, compared to the means of .46 and .60 among the whole sample. The percentage who reported both consistent professed democracy support and openness to at least one of the authoritarian policy actions or election subversion remained 39% when restricting the sample to respondents who passed the attention check.

Overall, the findings described in this section suggest that while it is relatively uncommon for American citizens to oppose “democracy” as a system of government, it is far more common for them to express openness to flagrant and politically congenial authoritarian actions (cf, Bartels, 2020; Drutman et al., 2020; Malka & Lelkes, 2017), and even more

Table 1. Predictors of Democracy Attitudes.

Predictors	Professed Democracy Support	Openness to Authoritarian Actions	Anti-democratic Sentiment Composite	Support for Election Subversion
	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates
Intercept	0.73*** (0.43, 0.52)	0.48*** (0.43, 0.52)	0.37*** (0.35, 0.40)	0.61*** (0.56, 0.67)
Cultural conservatism	-0.06*** (-0.07, -0.04)	0.17*** (0.15, 0.19)	0.11*** (0.10, 0.13)	0.13*** (0.11, 0.15)
Economic conservatism	0.05*** (0.03, 0.06)	0.05*** (0.03, 0.06)	-0.00 (-0.01, 0.01)	0.00 (-0.02, 0.03)
College educated	0.06*** (0.05, 0.07)	0.02* (0.00, 0.03)	-0.02*** (-0.03, -0.01)	-0.00 (-0.02, 0.02)
Age	0.10*** (0.09, 0.12)	-0.11*** (-0.13, -0.10)	-0.11*** (-0.12, -0.10)	-0.11*** (-0.13, -0.09)
Female	-0.05*** (-0.06, -0.04)	-0.01 (-0.02, 0.01)	0.02*** (0.01, 0.03)	0.04*** (0.03, 0.06)
Political engagement	0.12*** (0.10, 0.13)	-0.01 (-0.02, 0.00)	-0.06*** (-0.07, -0.05)	0.04*** (0.02, 0.06)
Political knowledge	0.03*** (0.01, 0.04)	-0.20*** (-0.22, -0.19)	-0.11*** (-0.12, -0.10)	-0.14*** (-0.16, -0.12)
White	0.00 (-0.03, 0.04)	-0.01 (-0.05, 0.03)	-0.01 (-0.03, 0.02)	-0.02 (-0.03, 0.02)
Black	0.04* (0.00, 0.08)	-0.00 (-0.04, 0.04)	-0.02 (-0.05, 0.01)	0.02 (-0.04, 0.08)
American indian	-0.03 (-0.13, 0.07)	0.02 (-0.10, 0.13)	0.02 (-0.05, 0.10)	0.04 (-0.12, 0.20)
Asian	0.00 (-0.04, 0.04)	-0.02 (-0.07, 0.02)	-0.01 (-0.04, 0.02)	-0.05 (-0.12, 0.01)
Hispanic	0.01 (-0.00, 0.03)	-0.01 (-0.03, 0.01)	-0.01 (-0.02, 0.00)	-0.01 (-0.04, 0.01)
Observations	6010	6010	6010	5540
R ² /R ² adjusted	0.196/0.195	0.306/0.305	0.334/0.332	0.131/0.129

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Democracy-attitude outcome variables are coded to range from 0.00 to 1.00, continuous predictor variables are mean-centered and scaled by two standard deviations, and binary predictor variables are coded 0–1.

common for them to support politically congenial election subversion framed in a manner suggesting that this would protect democracy. In addition, professed support for democracy was only weakly related to resisting politically congenial authoritarian actions and election subversion, with sizable proportions of consistently “democratic” respondents reporting support for these. Finally, based on all indicators, anti-democratic sentiment appears to be more common among Republicans than among Democrats.

Ideological and Demographic Correlates of Anti-Democratic Sentiment in the U.S.

What characteristics predict anti-democratic attitudes in the contemporary U.S. public? Here we report the results of pre-registered tests of directional predictions regarding the ideological and demographic correlates of professed democracy support, openness to authoritarian actions, and their composite, and non-pre-registered tests of the same regarding

election subversion attitude. In each case, a democracy attitude dependent variable was regressed on each predictor individually and then all predictors simultaneously along with additional demographic controls. As specified in the pre-analysis plan, continuous predictor variables were mean-centered and scaled by two standard deviations, binary variables were coded 0 and 1, and the continuous outcome variables retained their 0.00–1.00 coding. The results of the analyses with predictors entered simultaneously are presented in [Table 1](#). Results of analyses with predictors entered individually are presented in [Table F-1](#) of the Supplementary Material and results of analyses that only include respondents who passed the attention check are presented in [Table F-2](#) of the Supplementary Material.

First of all, as displayed in column 3 of [Table 1](#) (as well as [Table F-1](#) of the Supplementary Material), results confirmed all of the pre-registered hypotheses about the predictors of the anti-democratic sentiment composite. Specifically, cultural conservatism, not being college educated, youth, low

political engagement, and low political knowledge were all uniquely associated with anti-democratic sentiment, as measured by the composite. Though these results are not of primary theoretical interest because the outcome variable averages across distinct types of democracy attitudes, they do show that conclusions drawn from prior research about the predictors of a broad-based anti-democratic orientation hold up quite well when subjected to a large-sample confirmatory test with pre-registered measurement and analysis strategy.

Of greater theoretical interest, Table 1 also reveals meaningful differences across the professed democracy support measure and the two measures focused on support of politically congenial anti-democratic action. First of all, cultural conservatism displayed only a small negative relationship with professed democracy support ($b = -.06$, 95% CI $[-.07, -.04]$) but larger positive relationships with openness to authoritarian governance ($b = .17$, 95% CI $[.15, .19]$) and election subversion attitude ($b = .13$, 95% CI $[.11, .15]$). Going from one SD below the mean to one SD above the mean on cultural conservatism was associated with a six percentage point drop in professed democracy support but a 17 percentage point increase in openness to politically congenial authoritarian actions and a 13 percentage point increase in support of election subversion.

Meanwhile, college education, widely regarded as a factor that promotes committed democracy support, was not consistently or strongly linked with a pro-democratic orientation. Specifically, while being college educated was associated with a 6 percentage point increase in professed democracy support ($b = .06$, 95% CI $[.05, .07]$), it was associated with a two percentage point *increase* in openness to authoritarian actions ($b = .02$, 95% CI $[.00, .03]$) and was unrelated to election subversion attitude ($b = -.00$, 95% CI $[-.02, .02]$). Youth, as predicted, was associated with more anti-democratic sentiment, and to about the same degree across all indicators (going from one SD below to one SD above the mean in age went with an approximately 10 percentage point drop in each anti-democratic attitude).

It is commonly supposed that political engagement and sophistication are linked with more committed democracy support. Here, however, we see variation in effects across type of democracy attitude and across subjective versus objective measures of political involvement. First of all, subjective political engagement had a relatively strong relationship with professed democracy support, with an increase from -1 SD to $+1$ SD on political engagement going with a 12 percentage point increase in professed democracy support ($b = .12$, 95% CI $[.10, .13]$). But, controlling for the other predictors, being more engaged with politics was unrelated to openness to authoritarian actions and was *positively* related to support of election subversion ($b = .04$, 95% CI $[.02, .06]$). Feeling engaged with politics, like college education, seemed to be good for giving democracy lip service, but not for resisting partisan authoritarian appeals.

Meanwhile, objective political knowledge was a small positive predictor of professed democracy support ($b = .03$, 95% CI $[.01, .04]$) but a large negative predictor of openness to authoritarian actions ($b = -.20$, 95% CI $[-.22, -.19]$) and election subversion ($b = -.14$, 95% CI $[-.16, -.12]$). Those who were actually politically sophisticated, unlike those who felt engaged with politics, were substantially more likely to resist authoritarianism by their own side.

Finally, we predicted that anti-democratic sentiment would be strongest among those who adopt a ‘protection-based’ attitude package combining cultural conservatism and left economic attitudes. In pre-registered analyses testing the cultural X economic conservatism interaction (not displayed in Table 1), the interaction term was indeed positive and significant when the outcome was professed democracy support ($b = .15$, 95% CI $[.12, .17]$ without control variables, and $b = .08$ 95% CI $[.06, .10]$ with control variables) and negative and significant when the outcome was the anti-democratic sentiment composite ($b = -.10$, 95% CI $[-.12, -.08]$ without control variables, and $b = -.05$ 95% CI $[-.06, -.03]$ with control variables). When predicting openness to authoritarian governance, this interaction was only significantly negative as predicted when control variables were excluded ($b = -.06$, 95% CI $[-.09, -.03]$) and not when they were included ($b = -.01$ 95% CI $[-.04, .01]$). The pre-registered tests thus generally supported the hypothesis that cultural conservatism is more strongly linked with anti-democratic sentiment among those on the economic left than among those on the economic right. However, we repeated this analysis (not pre-registered) with election subversion attitude as the outcome, and found, contrary to our prediction, a positive interaction effect ($b = .06$, 95% CI $[.03, .10]$ without control variables, and $b = .09$, 95% CI $[.06, .13]$ with control variables).

As displayed in Figure 1, individuals with a protection-based attitude package were the least democratic when it came to professed support and the anti-democratic sentiment composite. But when it came to openness to authoritarian actions and support for election subversion, individuals with right-wing attitude packages and those with protection-based attitude packages (the two culturally conservative groups) were both highly open to such actions, with right-wingers slightly more so.

Party Identification and Predictors of Anti-Democratic Sentiment

In analyses that were not pre-registered, we added party identification – measured on a seven-point scale ranging from Strong Democrat (low) to Strong Republican (high), and mean-centered and scaled by two standard deviations – as a predictor of the three democracy attitude measures (leaving out the composite). The results of these analyses are displayed in Table 2. Republican identity had its strongest independent association with less professed support for democracy ($b =$

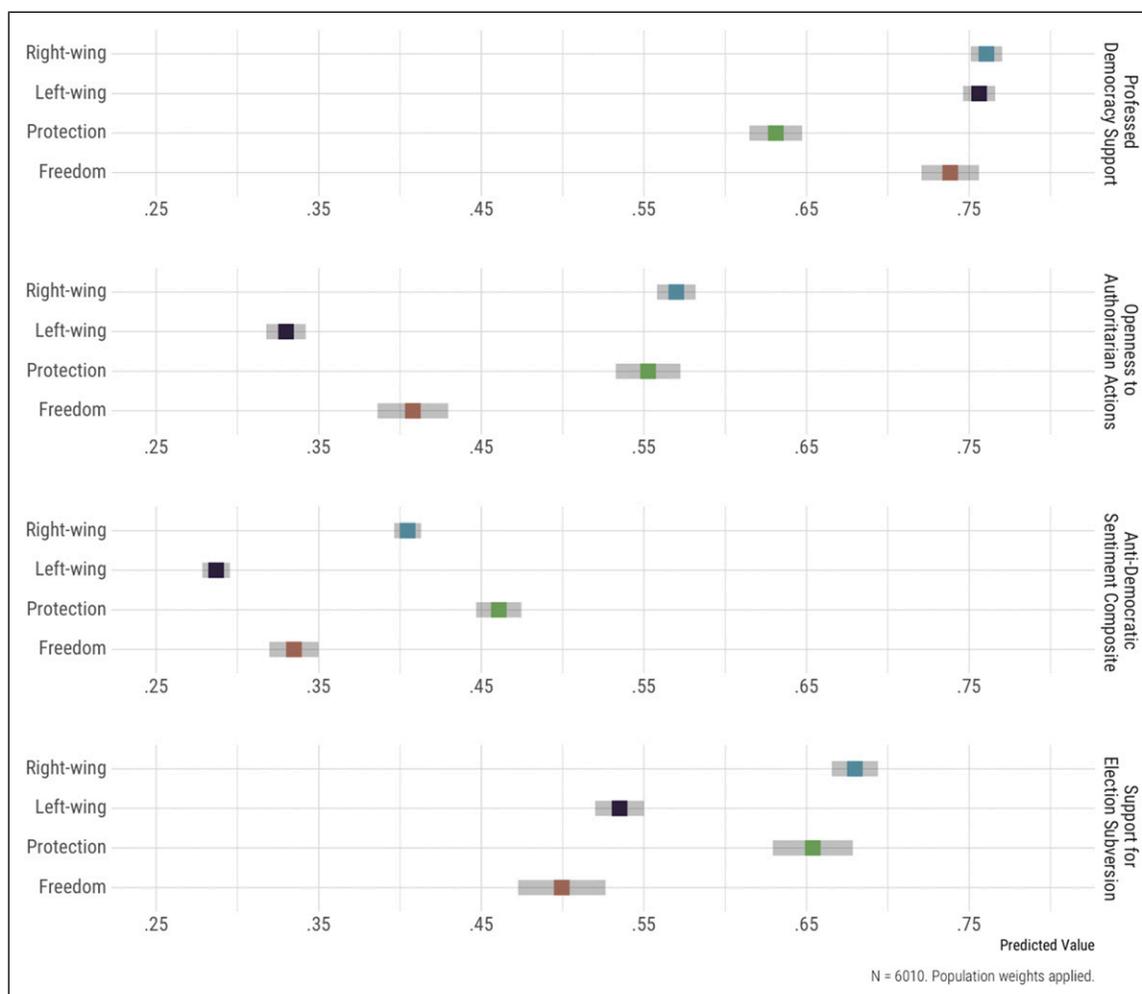


Figure 1. Predicted values of democracy attitudes across ideological groups.

-.12, 95% CI [-.13, -.10]), a weaker independent association with greater openness to authoritarian actions ($b = .06$, 95% CI [.04, .08]), and no independent association with support for election subversion ($b = .01$, 95% CI [-.01, .03]). The addition of party identity did not substantially alter the effects of the other predictors. Of note, when predicting openness to politically congenial authoritarian actions, the independent effects of cultural conservatism ($b = .15$, 95% CI [.14, .17]) and political knowledge ($b = -.20$, 95% CI [-.22, -.18]) far surpassed that of party identification ($b = .06$, 95% CI [.04, .08]). Likewise, when predicting support of election subversion, the independent effects of cultural conservatism ($b = .13$, 95% CI [.11, .15]) and political knowledge ($b = -.14$, 95% CI [-.16, -.12]) far surpassed that of party identification ($b = .01$ [-.01, .03]).

These findings suggest that when it comes to orientation toward politically congenial authoritarian action and election subversion, cultural conservatism matters a good deal more than party identification. In fact, as reported in Table G-1 of the Supplementary Material, cultural conservatism predicted

openness to politically congenial authoritarian actions among both Republicans ($b = .11$, 95% CI [.08, .14]) and Democrats ($b = .17$, 95% CI [.15, .19]). Likewise, cultural conservatism predicted support of election subversion among both Republicans ($b = .15$, 95% CI [.12, .19]) and Democrats ($b = .12$, 95% CI [.08, .15]).⁸ Whereas among Republicans those who are most culturally aligned with their in-party seem to be the most willing to subvert democracy for partisan interests, among Democrats this is not the case. Rather, it is those Democrats who are most culturally aligned with the Republican Party who seem to be the most willing to subvert democracy. At a time when parties have been restructuring along cultural lines, this might have implications for how authoritarians are distributed across the partisan groups.

Tests of the ‘Involved-But-Ignorant’ Hypothesis

We next conducted exploratory tests of whether support for politically congenial authoritarian actions and election

Table 2. Predictors of Democracy Attitudes With Inclusion of Party Identification.

Predictors	Professed Democracy Support	Openness to Authoritarian Actions	Support for Election Subversion
	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates
Intercept	0.72*** (0.69, 0.76)	0.48*** (0.44, 0.52)	0.61*** (0.56, 0.67)
Party identification (High = Republican)	-0.12*** (-0.13, -0.10)	0.06*** (0.04, 0.08)	0.01 (-0.01, 0.03)
Cultural conservatism	-0.02** (-0.04, -0.01)	0.15*** (0.14, 0.17)	0.13*** (0.11, 0.15)
Economic conservatism	0.08*** (0.06, 0.09)	0.03*** (0.01, 0.05)	0.00 (-0.02, 0.02)
College educated	0.06*** (0.05, 0.07)	0.02* (0.00, 0.03)	-0.00 (-0.02, 0.01)
Age	0.10*** (0.09, 0.11)	-0.11*** (-0.13, -0.10)	-0.11*** (-0.13, -0.09)
Female	-0.05*** (-0.06, -0.04)	-0.01 (-0.02, 0.01)	0.04*** (0.03, 0.06)
Political engagement	0.11*** (0.10, 0.12)	-0.01 (-0.02, 0.01)	0.04*** (0.02, 0.06)
Political knowledge	0.02*** (0.01, 0.04)	-0.20*** (-0.22, -0.18)	-0.14*** (-0.16, -0.12)
White	0.02 (-0.02, 0.05)	-0.02 (-0.06, 0.02)	-0.02 (-0.08, 0.03)
Black	0.02 (-0.02, 0.05)	0.01 (-0.03, 0.05)	0.02 (-0.03, 0.08)
American indian	-0.03 (-0.12, 0.07)	0.01 (-0.10, 0.13)	0.04 (-0.12, 0.20)
Asian	-0.01 (-0.05, 0.03)	-0.02 (-0.06, 0.03)	-0.05 (-0.12, 0.01)
Hispanic	0.00 (-0.01, 0.02)	-0.00 (-0.02, 0.02)	-0.01 (-0.04, 0.01)
Observations	6010	6010	5540
R ² /R ² adjusted	0.236/0.234	0.312/0.311	0.131/0.129

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Democracy-attitude outcome variables are coded to range from 0.00 to 1.00, continuous predictor variables are mean-centered and scaled by two standard deviations, and binary predictor variables are coded 0–1.

subversion would be strongest among people who combine low political knowledge with high subjective political involvement – that is, the *involved-but-ignorant hypothesis*. The results of these analyses are reported in Table 3.

We first regressed openness to authoritarian actions on political engagement, political knowledge, and their interaction, both without and with control variables. The interaction term was negative and significant in both models ($b = -.19$, 95% CI $[-.22, -.16]$ without controls, and $b = -.18$, 95% CI $[-.21, -.15]$ with controls). Repeating these analyses with election subversion attitude as the outcome variable, the interaction term was again negative and significant in both models ($b = -.15$, 95% CI $[-.19, -.11]$ without controls, and $b = -.15$, 95% CI $[-.18, -.11]$ with controls). Adding quadratic terms for political engagement and political knowledge did not alter the findings (see Table H-1 of the Supplementary Material), nor did restricting the analyses to respondents who passed the attention check (see Table H-3 of the Supplementary Material).

Figure 2 displays predicted values of openness to authoritarian governance (Panel B) and support for election subversion (Panel C) for individuals with all combinations of high (+1 *SD*) and low (–1 *SD*) political engagement and political knowledge. These plots show that people low in political knowledge are far more supportive of politically congenial autocratic actions than people high in political knowledge. What they also show, however, is that political engagement has directionally opposite links with such autocracy support across those high in political knowledge (where it is associated with reduced autocracy support) and those low in political knowledge (where it is associated with increased autocracy support). Indeed, consistent with the ‘involved-but-ignorant’ hypothesis, the combination of being low in political knowledge and high in subjective political involvement was associated with the highest levels of support for politically congenial autocratic actions.

This was not true of professed democracy support, however. As displayed in Figure 2, being subjectively

Table 3. Political Engagement X Knowledge as Predictor of Democracy Attitudes.

Predictors	Professed Democracy Support	Professed Democracy Support	Openness to Authoritarian Actions	Openness to Authoritarian Actions	Support for Election Subversion	Support for Election Subversion
	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates
Intercept	0.74*** (0.74, 0.75)	0.73*** (0.69, 0.76)	0.48*** (0.47, 0.48)	0.50*** (0.46, 0.54)	0.62*** (0.61, 0.63)	0.63*** (0.57, 0.68)
Political engagement	0.14*** (0.13, 0.15)	0.12*** (0.10, 0.13)	-0.01 (-0.02, 0.01)	-0.01 (-0.02, 0.01)	0.03** (0.01, 0.05)	0.04*** (0.02, 0.06)
Political knowledge	0.08*** (0.06, 0.09)	0.03*** (0.02, 0.05)	-0.27*** (-0.28, -0.25)	-0.24*** (-0.26, -0.22)	-0.20*** (-0.22, -0.18)	-0.16*** (-0.18, -0.14)
Political engagement* political knowledge	-0.04** (-0.06, -0.01)	-0.04*** (-0.06, -0.02)	-0.19*** (-0.22, -0.16)	-0.18*** (-0.21, -0.15)	-0.15*** (-0.19, -0.11)	-0.15*** (-0.18, -0.11)
College educated		0.06*** (0.05, 0.08)		0.01 (-0.01, 0.03)		-0.01 (-0.03, 0.01)
Age		0.10*** (0.09, 0.11)		-0.08*** (-0.09, -0.06)		-0.09*** (-0.11, -0.07)
Female		-0.05*** (-0.06, -0.04)		-0.04*** (-0.06, -0.03)		0.02* (0.00, 0.04)
White		0.00 (-0.03, 0.04)		0.00 (-0.04, 0.04)		-0.01 (-0.06, 0.05)
Black		0.04 (-0.00, 0.07)		0.00 (-0.04, 0.05)		0.03 (-0.03, 0.09)
American indian		-0.03 (-0.12, 0.07)		0.01 (-0.11, 0.13)		0.04 (-0.12, 0.20)
Asian		0.00 (-0.04, 0.04)		-0.02 (-0.07, 0.03)		-0.05 (-0.12, 0.01)
Hispanic		0.02 (-0.00, 0.03)		-0.01 (-0.03, 0.01)		-0.02 (-0.04, 0.01)
Observations	6010	6010	6010	6010	5540	5540
R ² /R ² adjusted	0.131/0.130	0.188/0.186	0.215/0.214	0.235/0.234	0.091/0.091	0.108/0.10

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Democracy-attitude outcome variables are coded to range from 0.00 to 1.00, continuous predictor variables are mean-centered and scaled by two standard deviations, and binary predictor variables are coded 0–1. Interaction term formed by multiplying mean-centered and scaled predictors.

engaged was associated with greater democracy support among both those low in political knowledge and those high in political knowledge. This suggests that politically involved-but-ignorant Americans are likely to profess strong support for democracy while also being the most open to politically congenial autocratic action and election subversion. As reported in [Tables H-2 and H-4](#), and displayed in [Figures H-1 and H-2](#), of the Supplementary Materials, this was true of both Democrats and Republicans.

Discussion

Democratic stability in the United States will depend on the behavior of political elites who are responsive to incentives arising from public opinion. It is therefore important to understand the nature and distribution of American attitudes toward democracy. The present research provided a mix of

pre-registered and exploratory tests of the distributions and correlates of key anti-democratic sentiment constructs within the American public.

Consistent with prior evidence, we found that few Americans report opposition to “democracy” as a system of government. But we also found that openness to politically congenial and flagrant authoritarian actions was far more prevalent than opposition to “democracy” (cf. [Drutman et al., 2020](#); [Frankovic, 2021](#); [Kahn, 2020](#)). Meanwhile, action that would overturn an unfavorable election outcome based on a pro-democracy justification was supported by an even larger share of the public. In the case of all three indicators, anti-democratic stance was more prevalent among Republicans than Democrats.

How does abstract commitment to democracy relate to tolerance of actual authoritarian steps undertaken by one’s side? Professed democracy support was only modestly

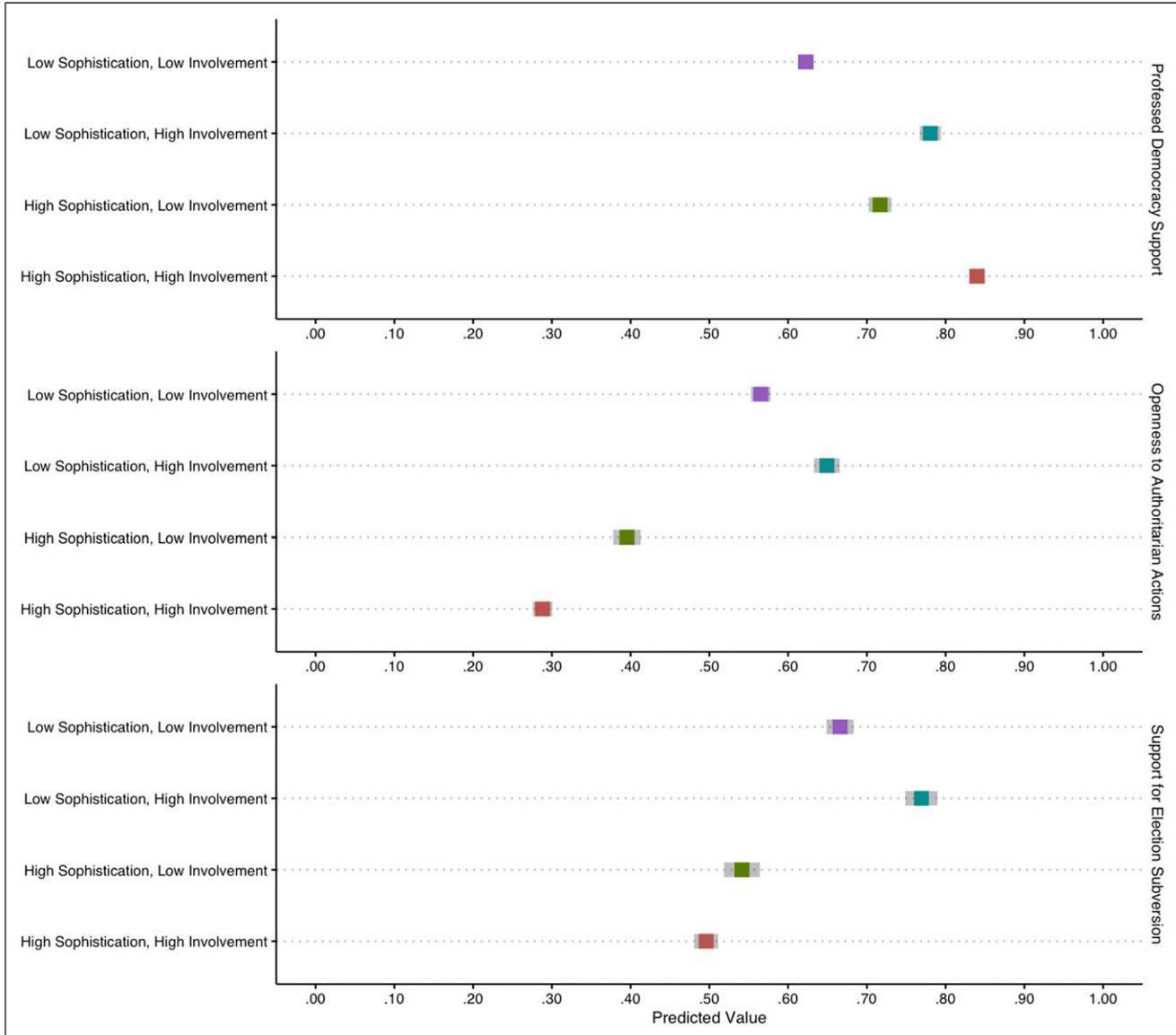


Figure 2. Predicted values of democracy attitudes across high/low political knowledge and involvement.

negatively correlated with openness to authoritarian actions and support of election subversion. Support for these politically congenial autocratic steps was sizable not only among citizens who failed to consistently profess support for democracy, but also among citizens who did consistently profess such support. Thus many Americans seem to combine lip service to democracy with readiness to degrade it for politically congenial purposes. It is unclear to what extent this reflects misdefinitions of democracy, inaccessibility of pro-authoritarian considerations when responding to questions that only ask about “democracy” (Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016), or a simple prioritization of partisanship over sincerely held and adequately understood pro-democratic sentiment (Graham & Svolik, 2020). Future research might sort this out. Regardless, this finding suggests there is little reason to take comfort in the

fact that strong majorities of Americans say that they support “democracy”.

As for attitudinal correlates, while professed democracy support was lowest among those cross-pressured with culturally conservative and economically left-wing attitudes, openness to authoritarian actions was highly concentrated among cultural conservatives on both the economic right and left. The effects of cultural conservatism on favorability toward authoritarian governance and election subversion far exceeded those of party identification, and were present among both Republicans and Democrats. These findings suggest that openness to politically congenial and flagrant authoritarian actions is both fairly common in the United States and more concentrated among a subgroup of the population that is likely to combine politically as the parties re-

orient along a dimension of cultural conflict. Put another way, the present findings suggest that the growing emphasis on cultural conflict in American partisanship may consolidate the most anti-democratic citizens within the Republican camp.

As for links between political engagement indicators and different kinds of democracy attitudes, we found evidence that engagement with politics is not uniformly beneficial for a pro-democratic orientation. Individuals who were subjectively politically engaged were very likely to profess democracy support, regardless of whether they had high or low political knowledge. However, individuals who combined high subjective political engagement with low knowledge were the singularly most inclined to support authoritarian action aimed at promoting favorable policy and election outcomes. We expect that this finding reflects politically engaged but unsophisticated citizens misunderstanding the incompatibility of partisan authoritarian actions with democracy. However, we do not know if this is the case because we did not directly measure such perceptions of compatibility. Future research might do so. Regardless, this finding suggests that strong political involvement can be harnessed by anti-democratic elites to get the least sophisticated of their supporters to endorse actions that degrade democracy.

We recommend an increased focus on attitudes toward flagrant, contextualized, and politically cued authoritarian actions among Americans, including actions framed in pro-democracy terms. Political commentary sometimes dismisses findings with these types of measures as politically irrelevant artifacts of the survey context that merely reflect motivation to express support for one's team (e.g., Barro, 2017). We believe this is precisely backwards. Public opinion-based threats to American democracy are very likely to be rooted in identity-based commitments to parties, politicians, ideological labels, and associated social groups. These identities both (a) motivate people to support actions cued to be associated with their side and (b) structure thinking about which types of actions are pro- and anti-democratic (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022; Malka & Adelman, 2022; Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). Many survey items, meanwhile, artificially cleanse democracy attitude measures of the party, politician, ideological, and other cues and (often distortive) frames that accompany anti-democratic appeals in the real world. This is perhaps done with the goal of removing partisan bias from the survey response process, but it is a recipe for making survey responses less, not more, diagnostic of the orientations toward democracy that are likely to matter in the real world (Malka & Adelman, 2022). Given that partisan cues and frames accompany anti-democratic appeals in the real world, we think it is beneficial for both experimental and observational research to employ democracy attitude measures that are contextualized and partisan (e.g., Broockman et al., in press; Drutman et al., 2020; Malka & Lelkes, 2017; Voelkel et al., 2021).

As an investigation of which types of Americans are most likely to display anti-democratic sentiment, this study has

several advantages. One is that it uses a large, demographically representative sample. A second is that measurement and, in many cases, analysis strategy were pre-registered, reducing concerns about over-estimating effect sizes and obtaining false positives. A third is that it separately measured, with multi-item scales, professed democracy support – the most commonly assessed democracy attitude in cross-national surveys – and openness to politically congenial authoritarian actions – the type of democracy attitude that would appear to be most concerning in the contemporary United States.

That said, this study is limited by the fact that it is observational. Conclusions about causal direction cannot be established. For example, it is unclear whether openness to authoritarian actions and cultural conservatism are rooted in common underlying attributes (e.g., Ludeke et al., 2013) or are directly causally related. It is also plausible that the links between low political knowledge and openness to authoritarian actions and election subversion reflect the influence of low cognitive ability on both. But we believe that there is nonetheless great value in observational studies of this sort. Specifically, these studies provide a snapshot of the distribution and correlates of different types of anti-democratic sentiment, which can inform normative matters and guide hypothesis formation in experimental research.

To give one example, the present findings suggest that the Democrats who are most aligned with the out-party's cultural stances are the ones most likely to support authoritarian governance. This would not necessarily be expected given the tolerance of illiberal conduct that is at times displayed among elements associated with cultural progressivism. Importantly, given that American partisanship has in some ways been re-orienting along cultural lines, and given the anti-democratic shift within the Republican Party, this suggests that there is risk that the most anti-democratic Americans will consolidate within the Republican camp. Importantly, this conclusion is not contingent on cultural conservatism causing anti-democratic sentiment or any other causal explanation; it is just a potential consequence of the relationship between these variables among Democrats.

Another limitation of this study is that the analyses predicting democracy attitudes left various potential predictors unmodelled. This includes authoritarian disposition, conceived as an orientation toward obedience, conformity, and social control, and measured in a way that is free of culturally conservative and overtly anti-democratic content (Engelhardt et al., 2021). This also includes personality dimensions within the agreeableness domain, given research suggesting that low agreeableness is related to attraction to populist parties and candidates (Bakker et al., 2016). Also, this may include feelings of low status, as this might attract citizens to dominance-based approaches to regaining a feeling of status through the political arena (Petersen et al., 2020). Finally, it is likely that an enhanced measure of cognitive or political sophistication would account for more variance in anti-

democratic sentiment outcomes, both as a main effect and in interaction with political interest.

It is also important to acknowledge that, as an observational snapshot of the distribution and correlates of democracy attitudes, this study does not inform the extent to which cultural conservatism's link with anti-democratic sentiment is specific to the current American political context. Clearly authoritarian actions have historically been supported by both the political right and the political left. This raises the possibility that the ideological correlates of openness to authoritarian governance are specific to the contemporary American context in which an anti-democratic movement is associated with conservative cultural grievance. That said, prior evidence (and longstanding theory) suggests a more enduring, widespread, and organic connection between cultural conservatism and openness to authoritarian actions (Malka et al., 2020; Popper, 1945/2020). Cultural orientations, after all, often guide interpretations and evaluations of policy-relevant information to an even stronger extent than partisan commitments (Kahan & Braman, 2006). But the context-sensitivity of the ideological correlates of democracy attitudes remains an open matter.

One final objection pertains to our consideration of the authoritarian election preference measure as an indicator of anti-democratic sentiment among both Trump and Biden supporters. The question was tailored to respondents based on their candidate support, with Trump supporters presented with a scenario in which Trump claims large-scale voter fraud and Biden supporters presented with a scenario in which Biden claims large-scale voter suppression. It is important to recognize, however, that these claims are not equally plausible. There does not exist evidence of large-scale fraud impacting U.S. election outcomes (Eggers et al., 2021). And while people may disagree about the threshold for regarding an action as voter suppression, it is quite clear that the Republican Party has been enacting policies that risk disenfranchising Democratic-leaning constituencies (Grumbach, 2021). What these considerations underscore is the importance of considering motives for anti-democratic behavior that are rooted in desire to resist the other side's (perhaps accurately) presumed anti-democratic behavior (Braley et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The United States has been undergoing a period of democratic backsliding in recent years. Elite actions that will determine the country's democratic trajectory will be influenced by political incentives, and these incentives will be influenced by public opinion. The present findings suggest that variation among Americans in self-reported amenability to politically congenial authoritarian actions is important to understand and track. It appears to be concentrated among cultural conservatives, both among those on the economic right and left, as well as among Democrats and Republicans. Furthermore, it appears to be concentrated among those who combine low political sophistication with a strong subjective involvement in politics. Given

that partisanship in the United States has been re-orienting along cultural lines, and that the party representing cultural conservatives now justifies autocratic action in pro-democracy terms, efforts to understand popular support for authoritarianism would benefit from asking about support for flagrant, contextualized, and politically congenial democracy subversive actions. Importantly, this should include questions about authoritarian actions framed with pro-democracy justification.

It is sometimes argued that political cues and frames in survey questions invite "expressive responding", a phenomenon regarded as an artifact of the survey context that produces exaggerated estimates of partisan division (e.g., Prior et al., 2015). But there does not exist evidence that insincere responding applies to attitudes, and evidence for its role in beliefs has likely been overstated (Malka & Adelman, 2022). Nonetheless, the depth of support for politically congenial authoritarian actions reported in surveys merits serious consideration. In this regard it is crucial to point out that survey responses – whether sincere or insincere, and whether motivated by self-expressive needs or not – have real political consequences. Politicians pay attention to polls; indeed, a majority of Republicans in Congress colluded in efforts to overturn a democratic election because of political considerations that were likely informed by polling evidence. Flagrantly anti-democratic actions aimed at helping a popular Republican leader seem to have a strong enough basis in popular support that Republican political elites are incentivized to either support these actions, tread lightly or hedge in their opposition to them, or accept potential sacrifice of their political careers by opposing them. Expressed support for politically congenial undemocratic action matters not only as a reflection of what many partisans actually want, but also as a message to elites about which types of actions are politically advantageous.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The pre-analysis plan was posted on the Open Science Framework prior to data collection. Based on reviewer feedback, we relegated some of the pre-registered tests to the Supplementary Material, and

report additional exploratory analyses in the main text. Throughout the main text and the Supplementary Material we are explicit about which analyses were pre-registered and which were not.

2. Two participants who started the survey during the field period but did not finish it until September 25 and 27 were also included in analyses. The unrelated, and separately pre-registered, study deals with differences in criterion validity across self-report measures varying in response scale format.
3. Economic Conservatism and Professed Democracy Support were presently coded in the reverse direction of what was specified in the pre-analysis plan (“Left Economic Attitudes” and “Low Professed Democracy Support”). Directions of predictions are altered accordingly.
4. https://osf.io/c68py/?view_only=7d9aac3f4d7f469984b7d6a69ca8cb45
5. This measure was not taken among respondents who indicated neither support nor leaning toward Biden or Trump ($N = 470$).
6. Analyses involving this measure were not pre-registered because this measure was originally intended to serve as a component of a ‘revealed anti-democratic preference’ measure. In Part B of the Supplementary Material we provide the full question wording for this revealed preference measure. In Part E of the Supplementary Material we discuss the logic behind this measure and concerns about its usefulness for its intended purpose, and report pre-registered and exploratory analyses involving it.
7. Throughout the paper partisan groups include leaners.
8. As reported in Table G-2 of the Supplementary Material, the pattern of results was the same when we only included those Republicans and Democrats who passed the attention check. We also conducted these analyses separately across Trump and Biden supporters (including leaners) instead of partisan groups, and obtained the same results. Among Trump supporters, cultural conservatism positively predicted openness to authoritarian actions ($b = .10$, 95% CI [.08, .13]) and election subversion ($b = .16$, 95% CI [.13, .19]). Likewise, among Biden supporters, cultural conservatism positively predicted openness to authoritarian actions ($b = .17$, 95% CI [.14, .19]) and election subversion ($b = .09$, 95% CI [.06, .12]).

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