

Explaining uneven American support for electoral democracy: How partisanship conditions the winner-loser gap

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ABSTRACT

What explains variation in American support for electoral democracy? We argue that the longstanding winner-loser gap in post-election democracy support is conditioned by partisan identity, reflecting a deeper partisan divide in public commitment to electoral democracy. Using CES panel surveys fielded immediately before and after the 2020 and 2024 U.S. presidential elections, we show that election outcomes cause immediate shifts in individuals' attitudes about core elements of electoral democracy *relative* to their pre-election baselines. However, these shifts do not translate into stable differences in *overall* levels of democracy support. In both victory and defeat, Republicans express weaker overall commitment to electoral democracy than Democrats. This diverges from classic winner-loser gap theory, which expects electoral winners to exhibit *greater* democracy support than electoral losers, regardless of which party prevails. We further demonstrate that Americans' near-universal *nominal* support for democracy masks greater fragility and partisan asymmetry in *concrete* support for the core institutional practices that sustain democratic governance.

What explains variation in American support for democracy? This is a central question in contemporary American politics, as scholarship increasingly highlights the threat of democratic backsliding (Foa and Mounk, 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Because the legitimacy of democracy among the mass public underpins its stability as a political system (Claassen, 2020), investigating public support for democracy is key to understanding its durability.

Using data from two nationally-representative panel surveys—which were fielded immediately before and after the 2020 and 2024 U.S. presidential elections—we scrutinize the extent to which the American public is committed to democratic governance. While the vast majority of Americans express a nominal belief that democracy is “the best form of government,” we find that this masks significant variation

in concrete support for electoral democracy. Indeed, our results show sharp divisions within the public regarding the perceived legitimacy of U.S. elections, support for the continued use of elections, and the presumed right of election winners to govern. Crucially, Republicans exhibit markedly less support for these core features of electoral democracy than Democrats, even when the democratic process works in Republicans' favor. Our findings are especially salient given that the incumbent president, Donald Trump, has openly floated canceling the 2026 midterm elections,³ has called for the Republican Party to “take over the voting” in U.S. elections,⁴ and has entertained pursuing an unconstitutional third term in 2028.⁵

Because democracy is a “regime in which those who govern are selected through contested elections” (Przeworski et al., 2000, 13), inconsistent public support for the electoral process signals fragility in

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³ Nik Popli. January 6, 2026. “Trump Floats Canceling the 2026 Elections, Then Insists He Won’t.” *Time*: <https://time.com/7343696/trump-floats-cancelling-2026-elections/>.

⁴ Piper Hudspeth Blackburn and Samantha Waldenberg. February 3, 2026. “Trump Calls on Republicans to Nationalize Future Elections.” *CNN*: <https://www.cnn.com/2026/02/02/politics/trump-calls-on-republicans-to-nationalize-future-elections>.

⁵ Jess Bidgood. October 27, 2025. “It’s Unconstitutional, but Trump Keeps Musing About a 3rd Term.” *The New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/27/us/politics/trump-third-term-politics.html>.

the “attitudinal” consolidation of democracy (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Foa and Mounk, 2017; Graham and Svobik, 2020). This variation, thus, cries out for analysis. Using difference-in-differences models to estimate pre- and post-election support for democracy in 2020 and 2024, we explain how election outcomes and partisanship jointly shape uneven democratic attitudes.

Our theoretical framework connects the classic *winner–loser gap* in democratic attitudes to a growing *partisan gap* in democracy support between Democrats and Republicans (Luttig, 2021; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2023). A wealth of winner–loser gap scholarship consistently shows that after elections, winners exhibit greater overall levels of support for democracy than do losers (Anderson et al., 2005; Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Hansen et al., 2019). Our central claim is that in the contemporary U.S., partisanship conditions whether a winner–loser gap emerges in public support for electoral democracy. When Democrats win elections, they exhibit greater support for democracy’s electoral foundations than do losers, as longstanding theories predict. By contrast, even when Republicans win elections, they still express weaker support for electoral democracy than do losers. This pattern is inconsistent with the expectations of classic winner–loser gap theory.

By surveying the same respondents directly before and after U.S. elections, our panel design uniquely isolates whether election outcomes independently cause within-individual changes in public support for electoral democracy. We then compare these shifts in 2020 (a Democratic victory) and 2024 (a Republican victory), which allow us to further identify whether the consequences of winning and losing elections for democracy support are conditioned by partisan context.

Our results demonstrate that election outcomes produce immediate shifts in *relative* democracy support among winners and losers, but *overall* levels of democratic commitment are more structured by partisanship. Election outcomes generate *relative* winner–loser effects: compared to their own pre-election baselines, winners become more supportive of democracy after an election, and losers less supportive. Yet these *relative* shifts do not consistently translate into a winner–loser gap in *overall* democracy support. After winning unified control of government in 2024, Republicans became more supportive of electoral democracy relative to their own pre-election baselines, but nevertheless remained less committed to it than Democratic losers. This suggests that a core expectation in both comparative and American politics—that winners support the democratic process more than losers—is contingent on partisan asymmetries.

This study offers four contributions to scholarship on democratic attitudes. First, we deepen research on the winner–loser gap in public support for democracy. The finding that citizens who support election winners are “significantly more supportive of the democratic system... than citizens who supported the los[ers]” is extensively documented cross-nationally (Daniller, 2016, 151). Our study complicates this conventional expectation by showing that a different pattern emerges when democratic support is measured as public commitment to the institutions of electoral democracy. We find that, in both victory and defeat, Republicans exhibit less support for electoral democracy than Democrats. Our contribution is not simply to document this partisan divide, but to show that even electoral victory is insufficient to produce the levels of electoral democracy support among Republicans that classic winner–loser gap theories would predict.

Second, our analysis redirects attention from the well-studied problem of *losers’ consent* to the often-overlooked question of *winners’ consent*.⁶ We use the term “winners’ consent” to refer to electoral winners’ willingness to continue supporting the institutions of electoral democracy even after elections deliver their preferred political outcomes. The traditional scholarly focus on losers’ consent assumes that

winners consistently exhibit higher overall levels of democratic support (Anderson et al., 2005), making losers the principal source of democratic vulnerability. By distinguishing *relative* shifts in democratic attitudes from *overall* levels of democratic commitment, we challenge that assumption. Electoral victory can increase winners’ democratic attitudes relative to their own baselines while still leaving them less committed to democracy overall than losers. Under such conditions, electoral winners—not losers—become the principal source of democratic vulnerability because they remain the least supportive of democracy even in victory.

Third, we highlight a meaningful divergence between nominal and concrete support for democracy among the American public. Although Americans consistently report high abstract support for democracy as “the best system of governance” (Easton, 1975), we show that this does not translate into equally robust support for the most basic requirement of democratic rule: the use of elections to select political leaders (Schumpeter, 1942; Przeworski, 1999; Przeworski et al., 2000). Our results contextualize recent work that “find[s] no evidence that attitudes toward democracy are meaningfully different across the two parties” (Hamad and Thornton, 2024, 1). We show that while Democrats and Republicans exhibit similar *nominal* democracy support, *concrete* support for democracy’s electoral foundations is sharply divided along partisan lines. This underscores the importance of disaggregating *nominal* and *concrete* democracy support in future research.

Fourth, we contribute to scholarship on democratic deconsolidation in American and comparative politics (Foa and Mounk, 2017; Wuttke et al., 2022; Christopher and Magalhães, 2023). While we demonstrate that support for electoral democracy is divided along partisan lines, we also observe a substantial decrease in democratic attitudes between our 2020 and 2024 panel studies. In 2020, 78% of Americans strongly agreed that elections were the best way to select the president; this dropped to 48% in 2024.⁷ Although two observations are insufficient to establish a long-term trend, this pattern nevertheless challenges the longstanding notion that diffuse regime support is stable across time (Easton, 1975; Mattes et al., 2016). It also cuts against theories that view democracy—particularly once consolidated—as a self-enforcing equilibrium (Przeworski, 2005; Fearon, 2011; Hyde and Marinov, 2014; Svobik, 2019), that citizens are habituated to accept as the “only game in town” (Linz and Stepan, 1996).

1. Theorizing variation in democratic attitudes

Until recently, the conventional wisdom in much of political science research viewed American citizens as broadly united in their commitment to democratic governance (Almond and Verba, 1963; Dahl, 1966; Norris, 2011). This conventional wisdom is now unraveling, as recent work shows that the American public’s support for democracy is unevenly shared and often conditional in practice (Graham and Svobik, 2020; Simonovits et al., 2022; Christopher and Magalhães, 2023).

In this section, we develop a theoretical framework linking this variation in American support for democracy to election outcomes and partisanship. We first position our study within the winner–loser gap literature and distinguish our conceptualization of public democracy support from existing approaches. We then proceed to theorize how variation in Americans’ support for electoral democracy is shaped by both election outcomes and partisanship. Our focus on election outcomes is motivated by the extent to which “democracy itself has become a ballot question” in the U.S. (Ignatieef, 2024, 19) as well as by the role of Donald Trump’s candidacy in increasing the perceived stakes of winning and losing elections (Jacobson, 2021). We also consider the role of partisanship, following recent work that emphasizes heightened Republican receptivity to elite cues that attack democratic norms (Luttig, 2021; Strawbridge and Lau, 2022; Shaun et al., 2023).

⁶ An exception is Cohen et al. (2023), who examine *winners’ consent* in Brazil, although they use the term to specifically describe democratic skeptics who consent to democracy following authoritarian electoral victories.

⁷ Percentages come from post-election waves of our 2020 and 2024 panel surveys.

We argue that Americans' support for democracy depends upon: (1) whether their preferred side wins elections; and (2) which political party they support, irrespective of electoral wins/losses. Election results should generate *relative* winner-loser effects, with winners becoming more supportive of democracy than before an election, and losers less so. Yet *overall* levels of democratic commitment are more heavily structured by partisanship. Even when Republicans win and their support rises, we expect that they remain less committed to electoral democracy than Democrats.

1.1. *Reevaluating the winner-loser gap in democracy support*

Scholarship on the winner-loser gap emphasizes the importance of losers' consent to democracy (Anderson et al., 2005). For democracy to endure, citizens whose preferred party loses an election must accept defeat and choose to peacefully compete in the future (Anderson and Mendes, 2006; Przeworski, 2015; Leopoldo et al., 2021). But elections are also polarizing events that amplify perceptions of politics as a high-stakes, zero-sum contest (Hernández et al., 2021). Thus, election outcomes tend to "boost support for democracy among winners but cause stagnation or erosion among losers" (Cohen et al., 2023, 262).

Winner-loser gap theories begin from the premise that election outcomes produce *relative* shifts in democratic attitudes: winners grow more supportive of democracy after an election, and losers less supportive. These relative changes are then understood to translate into differences in *overall* democratic commitment. That is, winners should not only increase support relative to their own pre-election baselines; they should also express greater support for the democratic process than losers (Anderson et al., 2005; Daniller, 2016; Daoust et al., 2023; Foa and Mounk, 2025).

This is one of the most consistent findings in political science (Anderson and Tverdova, 2001; Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Esaiasson, 2011; Toshkov and Mazepus, 2023; Janssen, 2024). Some studies observe that the winner-loser gap varies across contexts (Farrer and Zingher, 2019), being less pronounced under proportional representation (Anderson and Guillory, 1997); in stable democracies (Dahlberg and Linde, 2016); coalition governance (Singh and Thornton, 2016); and consensual institutions (Bernauer and Vatter, 2012). Yet, most research still finds that "winners express significantly greater support for democracy than losers" (Delgado, 2016, 76), both cross-nationally and in the U.S. (Banducci and Karp, 2003; Anderson et al., 2005; Craig et al., 2006; Daniller and Mutz, 2019; Enders and Thornton, 2022).

Our study offers new insights by demonstrating that when it comes to public support for *electoral democracy*, the classic winner-loser gap is not a stable phenomenon in the United States, but instead is conditioned by partisanship.

1.2. *Conceptualizing public support for electoral democracy*

Following prevailing practice in comparative politics, we define "democracies" as polities that use competitive elections to select their leaders (Schumpeter, 1942; Przeworski, 1991; Przeworski et al., 2000; Svolik, 2012; Brown et al., 2024). Accordingly, we conceptualize public support for democracy as support for the institutional framework underlying electoral democracy. While much of the existing winner-loser gap literature operationalizes democracy support by measuring "satisfaction with democracy" or political trust, we instead emphasize citizens' attitudes regarding the use of elections to select political leaders. This approach follows Tomic et al.'s (2024) argument that election outcomes have distinct effects on satisfaction with a democratic government's performance, on the one hand, and on support for democracy's underlying institutional principles on the other.

Our decision to specifically analyze public support for principles of electoral democracy—rather than "satisfaction with democracy" (SWD) more generally—is conceptually important because SWD does not reliably capture public commitment to democratic institutions. As Linde and Ekman (2003, 391) observe, SWD is "not an indicator of support for the

principles of democracy" (see also: Damarys et al., 2001; Krishnarajan, 2022; Singh and Mayne, 2023). Rather, it occupies a blurry conceptual middle ground between diffuse regime support and specific support for political incumbents and their performance in office (Blais et al., 2017; Singh and Mayne, 2023). Because citizens differ in what they understand "democracy" to mean (Chapman et al., 2024), responses to the SWD item combine evaluations of democratic ideals, incumbent performance, institutional effectiveness, and recent political events (Damarys et al., 2001; Henderson, 2008; Stecker and Tausendpfund, 2016; Wunsch et al., 2025). Consequently, SWD is better suited to measuring evaluations of democratic performance than diffuse support for democracy as a system of rule.

Our study takes a different approach than most existing winner-loser gap research. Rather than examining whether election outcomes shape satisfaction with democracy, we examine how they shape citizens' commitment to the institutional framework that defines electoral democracy. Specifically, we employ items aimed at better capturing *concrete support for democracy* as a political system: (1) perceptions of election legitimacy; (2) support for using elections to select political leaders; and (3) support for the peaceful transfer of power following elections. We also include a measure of *nominal support for democracy* as "the best form of governance." This enables us to distinguish abstract endorsements of democracy (i.e., *nominal* support) from meaningful commitments to democracy's core institutions (i.e., *concrete* support). In Appendix B, we provide supplementary evidence that our measures capture a construct that is empirically distinct from satisfaction with democracy.⁸

Consequently, our analysis should not be viewed as a replication of the classic winner-loser gap literature on satisfaction with democracy. Instead, we extend that literature to a different dimension of democratic support: citizens' commitment to the institutions that define and sustain electoral democracy as a system of rule. In doing so, our measures more closely correspond to the minimalist conception of democracy that underlies much of comparative politics (Przeworski, 1999). This allows us to better scrutinize public support for democracy's core institutional foundations, rather than just public satisfaction with how a democratic government is currently performing.

1.3. *How election outcomes shape Relative support for electoral democracy*

As detailed above, existing winner-loser gap research largely examines whether election outcomes condition citizens' satisfaction with democratic performance. We argue that the effects of electoral victory and defeat also extend to differentially shape public support for electoral democracy as a system of rule—a more fundamental dimension of democratic attitudes. However, these effects are unlikely to be uniform for *abstract* and *concrete* measures of democracy support.

First, we do not expect *nominal support for democracy* to shift in response to election outcomes. Abstract endorsements of democracy as "the best form of government" are nearly universal cross-nationally, even though individuals often mean vastly different things by the term "democracy" that they claim to support (Teti et al., 2019; Chapman et al., 2024; Chu et al., 2024). Because "democracy" is both normatively attractive and highly elastic in meaning (Norris, 1999), *nominal* support measures do not require respondents to endorse any particular democratic institutions or procedures (e.g., electing political leaders).

⁸ To assess whether SWD captures a different construct than our measures of electoral democracy support, we fielded a follow-up (quota-based) nationally representative Prolific survey of 900 U.S. adults in May 2026. Respondents answered the standard SWD item alongside our four democracy support measures, which we analyzed using confirmatory factor analysis. Consistent with our conceptual argument, including SWD substantially worsens model fit, whereas the four-item model exhibits substantially better fit across conventional indices (e.g., RMSEA, CFI). These results support the view that SWD reflects a related, but conceptually distinct, dimension of democratic attitudes.

Accordingly, nominal support for democracy should remain high and stable regardless of election outcomes.

By contrast, *concrete support* measures require citizens to explicitly endorse the electoral institutions that define democracy as a political system. Election results are focal points that reveal whether electoral democracy delivers citizens their preferred political outcomes. Thus, when their preferred candidates win (lose), we expect that individuals will move upward (downward) from their own pre-election baseline levels of concrete democracy support. Following prior work, we also expect that such winner-loser effects in the U.S. are primarily calibrated according to presidential election outcomes (Anderson and LoTempio, 2002). We, thus, hypothesize that immediately after a presidential election:

Hypothesis 1. Relative Winner-Loser Effects—Americans who support (oppose) the presidential election winner will increase (decrease) their concrete support for democracy.

Crucially, this hypothesis concerns *relative* changes within individuals before and after elections. It does not posit that such changes will produce a consistent gap in *overall* levels of support for democracy between winners and losers. In other words, even if winners become more democratic than before an election, they may still remain less committed to democracy than losers. To grapple with this distinction, we now proceed to theorize how partisanship conditions differences in the overall levels of support for democracy between winners and losers.

1.4. How partisanship conditions Overall support for electoral democracy

Hypothesis 1 predicts that election outcomes produce *relative* shifts in democratic attitudes: winners become more supportive of democracy and losers less so. But in the contemporary U.S., we expect that *overall* levels of support for democracy are primarily determined by partisanship, not electoral fortune. Even when Republicans win elections and increase support for democracy relative to their own baselines, we anticipate that they will still remain less committed to democracy than Democrats.

Our theory is motivated by evidence showing that declining commitments to democratic values are most pronounced within the Republican Party, which some analysts even describe as having “abandoned democracy” (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2023, 92). For instance, public opinion data from Bright Line Watch show that in 2021, 18% of Republicans self-reported believing that a democratic political system is either “fairly bad” or “very bad” for the United States—compared to just 3% of Democrats (see Appendix Figure F1).⁹ Republicans are also less trusting of elections (Bartels, 2020), “less opposed to undemocratic acts” (Touhoun et al., 2023, 199), and more open to political violence (Piazza, 2024). Taken together, these patterns suggest that Republican partisans are less committed to democracy than the broader public.

We argue that this partisan asymmetry is largely driven by sustained exposure to anti-democratic cues from co-partisan elites, which constitutes a key mechanism producing Republicans’ lower overall commitment to electoral democracy (Hall and Druckman, 2023).¹⁰ Indeed,

⁹ These data are from the Bright Line Watch (2021) Jan./Feb. public survey. Appendix Figure F2 shows that this partisan gap persisted even after Donald Trump’s victory in the November 2024 election—with 18% of Republicans reporting a belief that democratic rule was either “fairly bad” or “very bad” for the U.S., compared to only 5% of Democrats (Bright Line Watch, 2024).

¹⁰ We provide additional analysis of this proposed mechanism in Appendix H, which combines multiple forms of evidence consistent with our theoretical expectations. In particular, Republican respondents who are most likely to be exposed to co-partisan elite cues (i.e., those who consume Fox News, report high political interest, and are most ideologically conservative) also exhibit the lowest levels of support for electoral democracy, regardless of whether elections result in Republican victory or defeat. These findings consistently suggest that exposure to anti-democratic elite cues is associated with weaker overall commitments to electoral democracy.

the Varieties of Democracy Project observes that beginning in 2016, Republican elite rhetoric became “more similar to autocratic ruling parties... than to typical center-right governing parties in democracies” (Lührmann et al., 2021, 12).

Partisan rhetoric delegitimizing the democratic process is a plausible mechanism because the American public has a well-documented tendency to adopt cues from co-partisan elites (Zaller, 1992; Lenz, 2012; Barber and Pope, 2019). Consistent with this expectation, recent evidence shows that Donald Trump’s anti-democratic rhetoric erodes democratic norms among his supporters (Hall and Druckman, 2023); reduces their faith in elections (Berlinski et al., 2023); and discourages their participation in the democratic process (Fraga et al., 2025).

Substantial qualitative evidence further supports the mechanism we theorize by documenting the normalization of anti-democratic elite cues in the political environment confronting Republican partisans. And critically for our argument on winner-loser dynamics, these elite cues are not confined to periods of electoral defeat. Republican leaders have continued to sow distrust in the electoral process even after their party wins national elections.

Throughout his 2016 campaign, Donald Trump claimed U.S. elections were rigged (Sinclair et al., 2018), and even after winning he still alleged that “millions of illegal votes” narrowed his margin (Justwan and Williamson, 2022, 462).¹¹ After losing in 2020, Trump promoted the “big lie” that the election was stolen, which was echoed by Republican elites (LaPlant et al., 2024; Malzahn and Hall, 2024). Election skepticism, thus, became “a core ingredient of what it means to be a Republican” (Levendusky et al., 2024, 936; Graham and Yair, 2024). Even after winning in 2024, Trump continued to describe U.S. elections as “extremely dishonest,”¹² alleged the U.S. lacked “basic and necessary election protections,”¹³ claimed election fraud narrowed his margin of victory,¹⁴ insisted Democrats “use illegal aliens to... cheat in elections,”¹⁵ mused about canceling the 2026 midterm elections,¹⁶ and publicly entertained running for an unconstitutional third term.¹⁷ Indeed, even while Republicans controlled the presidency, House, and Senate, President Trump used a nationally televised primetime presidential address to declare that the American election system was “so broken and so vulnerable that no one can possibly defend it; it is not defensible.”¹⁸

For nearly a decade, the leader of the Republican Party—with broad elite backing—has disputed the legitimacy of U.S. elections in both victory and defeat. This continuity of anti-democratic elite cues is central to our theory. Republicans’ lower baseline levels of democratic support alone might simply attenuate the conventional winner-loser gap when

¹¹ BBC News. November 28, 2016. “Trump Claims Millions Voted Illegally in Presidential Poll.” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38126438>.

¹² Sue Halpern. March 12, 2025. “Trump Is Still Trying to Undermine Elections.” *The New Yorker*: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/trump-is-still-trying-to-undermine-elections>.

¹³ Executive Order 14,248, “Preserving and Protecting the Integrity of American Elections.” March 25, 2025.

¹⁴ Donald Trump’s address to the Conservative Political Action Conference. February 22, 2025. <https://www.c-span.org/clip/public-affairs-event/user-clip-too-big-to-rig/5154764v>.

¹⁵ Karen Garcia. June 18, 2025. “Fact-Checking Trump’s False Allegations of Undocumented Immigrants Voting in L.A.” *Los Angeles Times*: <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-06-18/fact-checking-trumps-false-accusations-of-undocumented-immigrants-and-voting-in-los-angeles>.

¹⁶ Nik Popli. January 6, 2026. “Trump Floats Canceling the 2026 Elections, Then Insists He Won’t.” *Time*: <https://time.com/7343696/trump-floats-cancelling-2026-elections/>.

¹⁷ Jess Bidgood. October 27, 2025. “It’s Unconstitutional, but Trump Keeps Musing About a 3rd Term.” *The New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/27/us/politics/trump-third-term-politics.html>.

¹⁸ Zachary Wolf and Annette Choi. July 17, 2026. “Trump’s Speech Claiming US Election Vulnerabilities, Annotated.” *CNN*: <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2026/07/politics/annotated-transcript-trump-speech-us-election-vis/>.

their party wins. We instead expect no such gap to emerge for our measures of concrete support for electoral democracy because the partisan information environment remains profoundly asymmetric regardless of election outcomes. Republican Party elites continue to employ rhetoric encouraging their supporters to distrust American elections even when their party wins, whereas Democratic elites do not provide comparable cues—in content, sentiment, or frequency—in defeat. Thus, even in victory, Republicans remain exposed to stronger and more sustained co-partisan cues against the electoral process that is at the heart of how we conceptualize and measure public democracy support in this study. This persistent asymmetry in the partisan information environment leads to our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. Partisan Conditionality—Democratic Party election victories will generate a winner–loser gap in overall support for democracy, whereas Republican Party victories will not.

2. Research design

We employed two nationally representative panel surveys to examine public support for electoral democracy in the United States, both administered by YouGov through the Cooperative Election Study (CES).¹⁹ The first panel survey was fielded around the 2020 presidential election, with the same respondents interviewed before and after the election.²⁰ The second survey followed the same panel structure around the 2024 presidential election.²¹ This design allows us to estimate within-individual changes in democratic attitudes surrounding each election. The tight spacing between waves—being less than a week apart in both 2020 and 2024—enhances our ability to make causal inferences about how election outcomes shape public commitment to democratic principles (Singh et al., 2012; Sances and Stewart, 2015; Blais et al., 2017; Daniller and Mutz, 2019; Nemčok, 2020).

Our analysis focuses on two recent presidential elections in which Donald Trump was a central political figure. Rather than constituting an aberrational case, this period reflects the contemporary political environment in which democratic attitudes are currently formed and expressed in the United States. Trump is a two-term president who has been a dominant force in American politics for over a decade, reshaping elite rhetoric, partisan identity, and the Republican Party in ways that extend beyond any single election cycle. Interpreting this period narrowly as a temporary anomaly presumes that there will be an eventual reversion to prior patterns, which—as we discuss in the conclusion—is by no means empirically assured.

One potential limitation of our design is that the post-election panel waves begin immediately after each election ends. It is possible that this window is insufficient to capture the full emergence of a winner–loser gap in democratic attitudes. Recent work suggests that in the U.S., winner–loser differences in democratic satisfaction can continue to evolve during the post-election transition period (Whitt et al., 2025). In European elections, Bäckström (2026) finds that this gap often becomes most pronounced weeks after an election, as governments and coalitions are formed.²²

¹⁹ The full text of each survey instrument is provided in Supplemental Appendix A. Sample balance checks and an analysis of attrition within panels are also presented in Appendix A.

²⁰ The pre-election survey was fielded between September 29th, 2020 and November 2nd, 2020; the post-election survey was fielded between November 8th, 2020 and December 7th, 2020.

²¹ The pre-election survey was fielded between October 2nd, 2024 and November 1st, 2024; the post-election survey was fielded between November 6th, 2024 and December 9th, 2024.

²² Most cases in Bäckström's (2026) analysis are proportional representation systems, where: (1) coalition bargaining delays government formation and (2) prior research consistently finds weaker winner–loser dynamics. These institutional differences may postpone changes in democratic attitudes relative to the U.S. presidential context.

Nevertheless, we do not believe this temporal limitation materially affects our inferences for two reasons. First, existing work consistently finds that winner–loser differences begin emerging immediately after elections. Panel studies of democratic satisfaction in Europe (Singh et al., 2012; Blais et al., 2017) and election legitimacy attitudes in the United States (Daniller and Mutz, 2019) all document an immediate post-election divergence. Even the contested 2000 U.S. election fits this pattern. As we show in Appendix Figure G4, partisan attitudes diverged immediately after the Supreme Court's *Bush v. Gore* decision finalized the election outcome.

Second, our data suggest that the principal shift in attitudes about electoral democracy occurs immediately after presidential elections. Appendix G shows that the largest changes in concrete democracy support occur immediately after presidential elections and then appear to remain relatively stable over time. The gap between Democrats and Republicans shifts by double-digit margins immediately after the 2020 and 2024 elections, whereas this gap changes comparatively little during the subsequent four-year inter-election period. This pattern aligns with Dahlberg and Linde's (2017, 625) finding that winner–loser differences in democracy support can exhibit “substantial consistency” across the inter-election period, operating as a “stable phenomenon rather than a short-lived election effect.” Although we cannot rule out additional post-election change beyond the end of our panel waves, the available evidence suggests that it is unlikely that any subsequent changes will substantively alter the patterns we document.

2.1. Dependent variables measuring democratic attitudes

Our primary outcome of interest is public support for electoral democracy, which we measure using four distinct items. Each question was asked immediately before each election and then repeated in the post-election surveys to capture changes over time. We also used the same battery of items in both the 2020 and 2024 panels, which allows us to compare results across election cycles.

As a baseline, we evaluated *nominal support for democracy*, using a standard regime-preference item that asks respondents whether democracy is the “best form of government” on a three-point scale.²³ This measure offers a useful reference point because it is one of the most widely used indicators of democratic support in cross-national research, being regularly included in major survey projects like the Latinobarómetro (Lagos, 2003), Asian Barometer (Chang et al., 2007), Afrobarometer (Doorenspleet, 2012), and Arab Barometer (Teti et al., 2019). In part, the item's popularity reflects a broader critique of more conventional measures, such as *satisfaction with democracy*. As Linde and Ekman (2003, 397) argue, assessing the perceived legitimacy of democracy requires such “items that explicitly ask citizens about the most appropriate form of government.”

At the same time, we emphasize that this first item captures only an abstract, *nominal* endorsement of democracy, rather than a concrete commitment to the foundational institutions of democratic governance. Because the item invokes the term “democracy” without specifying any of the elements that the democratic process entails in practice (e.g., competitive elections), responses may reflect deeply heterogeneous (and perhaps superficial) understandings of democracy across individuals. Accordingly, we only treat *nominal support* as a baseline benchmark that captures broad symbolic attachment to democracy, against which more concrete indicators of support for democracy's institutional foundations can be productively compared. As we show in the empirical results section, this distinction is critical: stable levels of *nominal* support can coexist with—and obscure—substantial variation in *concrete* support for the core institutions that make democratic rule possible.

²³ The possible responses were: “democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government;” “under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable;” and “for people like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.”

Table 1

Dependent variables measuring nominal and concrete democracy support.

Dimension	Survey measure
Nominal support	1. <i>Democracy Best</i> —Belief that democracy is always the best form of government. 3-point scale.
Concrete support	2. <i>Legitimacy of Elections</i> —Belief that elections are fair and legitimate. 3-point scale. 3. <i>Peaceful Transition</i> —Agreement that candidates who lose elections should not unconstitutionally take or retain office anyway. 5-point scale. 4. <i>Electoral Governance</i> —Agreement that elections are the best way to decide who gets to be president. 5-point scale.

To make more reliable inferences about American support for electoral democracy—and to move beyond the limitations of *nominal* measures—we employ three additional items that measure support for what we define as the core institutional features of democracy. Following a long tradition in comparative politics, we conceptualize democracy procedurally as a system in which political leaders are selected through competitive elections (Schumpeter, 1942; Przeworski, 1999; Przeworski et al., 2000; Brown et al., 2024). On this view, support for democracy is best understood not as abstract endorsement of the concept itself, but more specifically as support for the electoral processes that make democratic governance possible. Our empirical focus, therefore, centers heavily on attitudes toward elections as the defining institution of democracy, rather than simply on respondents' subjective and potentially heterogeneous understandings of the term.

Consistent with this approach, we examine three dimensions of *concrete* support for electoral democracy. First, we examine perceptions that *American elections are legitimate* on a three-point scale.²⁴ This item draws on Carey et al. (2019), who find that although Americans hold disparate understandings of “democracy,” nearly all regard fair and fraud-free elections as essential to it. Second, we assess *support for the peaceful transition of power*—a cornerstone of democratic rule—using a five-point agreement scale.²⁵ Third, we measure *public support for electoral governance* using respondents' belief that “elections are the best way to decide who gets to be president,” measured on a similar five-point scale. We tailored each of these items to elicit concrete evaluations of the electoral process without invoking the term “democracy” directly.

This measurement strategy allows us to disentangle *nominal* and *concrete* support for democracy, while still aligning our empirical indicators with a procedural conception of democracy rooted in electoral competition. As Riker (1965, 25) observed, “the essential democratic institution is the ballot box.” In a similar vein, Levendusky et al. (2024, 3) argue that “elections are the sine qua non of a democracy.” By focusing on measuring concrete attitudes about the electoral process, we assess support for democracy in its most minimal and widely accepted institutional form (Table 1).

Our use of survey items measuring concrete support for electoral democracy also offers a practical benefit: it enhances construct validity. Although individuals differ in how they interpret the meaning of

“democracy,” the vast majority consistently agrees that competitive elections are a necessary feature (Chu et al., 2024). This reflects the insight (Daniller and Mutz, 2019, 46) that “a lack of faith in elections is a lack of faith in the most fundamental democratic principles.”

2.2. Empirical approach: difference-in-differences estimation

If election results shape *relative* democratic attitudes (H1), individuals should move up or down from their pre-election baselines depending on whether their side wins or loses. Yet, if partisanship conditions how winning and losing affect *overall* levels of democracy support as we expect (H2), then Republicans should remain less committed to democracy even in victory. To evaluate both dynamics, we first describe partisan differences in democratic attitudes. We then use our panel design to estimate individual-level changes using a difference-in-differences (DiD) approach.

The goal of DiD analysis is to estimate the causal effect of a “treatment” by comparing changes between two groups. In our study, these groups are defined by *partisanship*—Republicans and Democrats.²⁶ The treatment is the realization of winner or loser status once an election result is known.²⁷ We control for individual-level factors plausibly related to both partisanship and responses to winning or losing elections. We restrict controls to variables measured pre-election, ensuring they are not influenced by the outcome (Van der Eijk and Rose, 2021). These include: *age, gender, education, ethnicity, income, political interest, and ideology*.²⁸

3. Empirical results

In this section, we present both descriptive and difference-in-differences results for each of our four variables measuring American democratic attitudes. This approach enables us to trace *relative* shifts in democracy support that occur immediately after elections (H1). It also allows us to evaluate how partisanship structures *overall* levels of support for democracy (H2).

The descriptive results establish the substantive relationships in a transparent way, while the DiD results show that these same relationships persist after accounting for statistical uncertainty, confounding factors, and isolating causal effects.²⁹ This two-pronged approach is useful because it demonstrates that the clear, observable patterns in the raw data correspond to the causal effect identified by the models. We display

²⁶ Partisan leaners are coded as partisans. Because our theory is about a preferred party winning or losing, true Independents are excluded from our analysis.

²⁷ Inferences derived from DiD estimation notably rely upon the parallel trends assumption. In our context, this assumption implies that absent the treatment (the election outcome), Democrats and Republicans would exhibit similar trends in democratic attitudes over the study period. Although partisanship and winner-loser status are not randomized, several features of our research design enhance confidence in the assumptions needed for causal interpretation. First, there is little theoretical basis to expect meaningful changes in democratic attitudes during the short window between our pre- and post-election surveys *absent the treatment of the election itself*, as diffuse regime attitudes are typically stable unless disrupted by significant intervening events (Easton, 1975; Mattes et al., 2016). Second, upon analyzing longer time-series data on democratic attitudes from the AmericasBarometer (LAPOP) and American National Election Studies (ANES) in Appendix D, we find no evidence of preexisting trends around either election period.

²⁸ While our panel data allow for within-respondent comparisons, we include covariate controls rather than respondent fixed effects to properly test our hypotheses. Fixed effects would absorb partisanship, a respondent-level characteristic central to our analysis. For robustness, Appendix C (Figures C3–C6) reports models with respondent-level random intercepts to account for unobserved individual heterogeneity. The results are nearly identical.

²⁹ The models used to produce our DiD results are in the appendix (Tables C1 and C2). Results are robust to using *vote choice* rather than *partisanship* to designate winner-loser status (Appendix Figures C1 and C2).

²⁴ The possible responses were that American elections are: “fair and legitimate,” “somewhat fair and somewhat legitimate,” and “unfair and illegitimate.”

²⁵ In the 2020 panel, this item asked about respondents' level of agreement that “The President should stay in office if he loses an election but disagrees with the results.” After Joe Biden dropped out of the 2024 race, there was no longer an incumbent who could “stay in office.” We revised the item to read: “If the presidential candidate that you support loses the election but disagrees with the results, he/she should mobilize his/her supporters in the government and military to ensure that he/she is sworn in as the rightful president anyway.” For the 2020 and 2024 samples, we invert this agreement scale so that positive values represent a greater commitment to the peaceful transition.

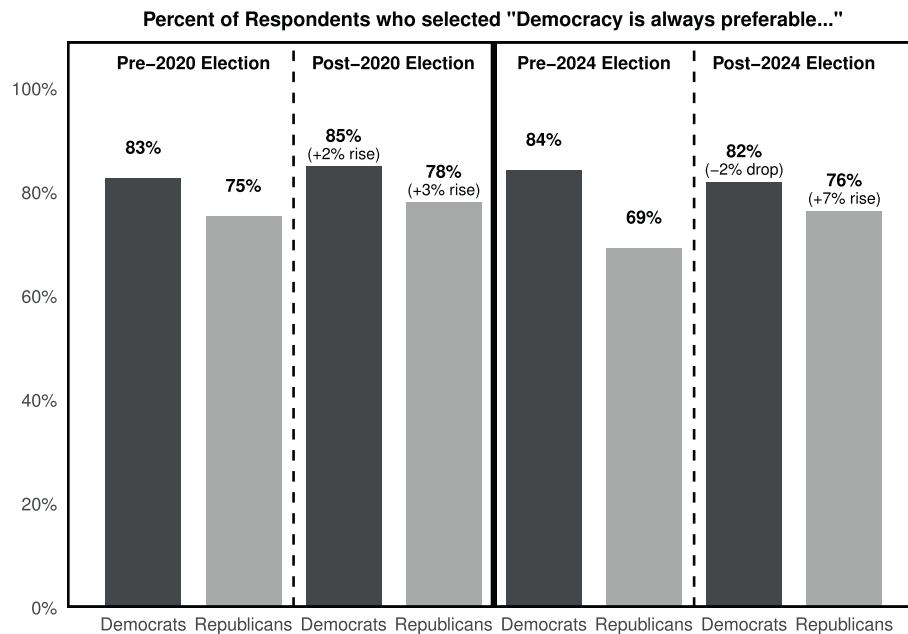


Fig. 1. Trends in nominal support for democracy.

DiD effects graphically here; difference-in-differences estimators are reported in tabular form in the supplemental appendix (Appendix Tables C3–C6).

3.1. Nominal democracy support

We begin by presenting the results for *nominal support for democracy* before and after the 2020 and 2024 elections. Fig. 1 describes the proportion of respondents expressing high nominal support—the belief that “democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government.”³⁰ Nominal support remains high and stable across all waves. But consistent with H2, Republicans express lower democratic commitment than Democrats in both defeat (post-2020) and victory (post-2024). Still, a large majority of respondents in all waves prefer democracy to the alternative.

Next, we assess how election outcomes and partisanship jointly shape *nominal democracy support*, leveraging our difference-in-differences design to estimate within-individual changes between the pre- and post-election panel waves. Fig. 2 shows that *nominal democracy support* remains stable for both parties in 2020 (left panel) and 2024 (right panel). Democrats begin each election cycle with somewhat higher nominal support for democracy than Republicans, but neither winners nor losers exhibit meaningful shifts *relative* to their pre-election baselines. Moreover, we observe no substantive post-election differences in *overall* levels of nominal support.

This aligns with our expectation that election outcomes will affect nominal democracy support less than concrete support for democracy’s electoral foundations. Because abstract endorsements of democracy as the “best form of governance” are normatively attractive and highly elastic in meaning, they appear largely insulated from both election outcomes and partisan divisions.

While *nominal support* captures how much Americans report valuing democracy in the abstract, it does not necessarily reflect commitment to its core institutional practices. To assess *concrete support* for electoral

democracy, we now move on to analyze public attitudes on: (1) the *legitimacy of elections*; (2) the *peaceful transition* of power; and (3) the principle of *electoral governance*. We similarly consider descriptive statistics and DiD estimates for each in turn.

3.2. Election legitimacy attitudes

Fig. 3 reports the share of respondents who view U.S. elections as “fair and legitimate.” Immediately before the 2020 election, Democrats and Republicans expressed nearly identical levels of perceived *election legitimacy*. After Joe Biden won the presidency, attitudes diverged sharply along partisan lines: perceived legitimacy rose by 34 points among Democrats but fell by 20 points among Republicans, consistent with the traditional winner-loser gap. Supporting H2, however, this partisan divide persists *even when Republicans win*. After the 2024 election, only 25% of Republicans viewed U.S. elections as legitimate, compared to 54% of Democrats. While attitudes moved in the expected direction after both elections, attitudinal malleability is not evidence of a gap; Republican winners remain *below* Democratic losers in 2024.³¹

Fig. 4, which shows the DiD estimates, demonstrates that election outcomes have a substantial impact on perceptions of *election legitimacy*. Supporting H1, we observe strong *relative* winner-loser effects. After Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election (left panel), Democrats’ perceived election legitimacy increased by 0.39 points on a three-point scale, while Republicans’ confidence dropped by 0.43 points. This produced a sizable 0.77-point gap between the two parties’ overall assessments of whether U.S. elections are fair and legitimate.

After Donald Trump’s 2024 election victory (right panel), Republicans’ confidence in elections similarly increased *relative* to their pre-election baseline, while Democrats’ confidence declined.

³⁰ For ease of interpretation, the descriptive figures in this section only display the highest level of democracy support for each item. Appendix E reports the full distribution for all items.

³¹ Although Fig. 3 does not directly test mechanisms, this divergence aligns with research showing that Republican elite promotion of the “big lie” polarized partisan views of election legitimacy (Arceneaux and Truex, 2023; Graham and Yair, 2024; Levendusky et al., 2024). While we cannot causally identify this elite cues mechanism, Appendix H provides convergent evidence consistent with it: Republicans most likely to receive co-partisan elite cues (i.e., Fox News viewers, the politically engaged, and strong conservatives) consistently exhibit the weakest commitments to electoral democracy, in victory and defeat.

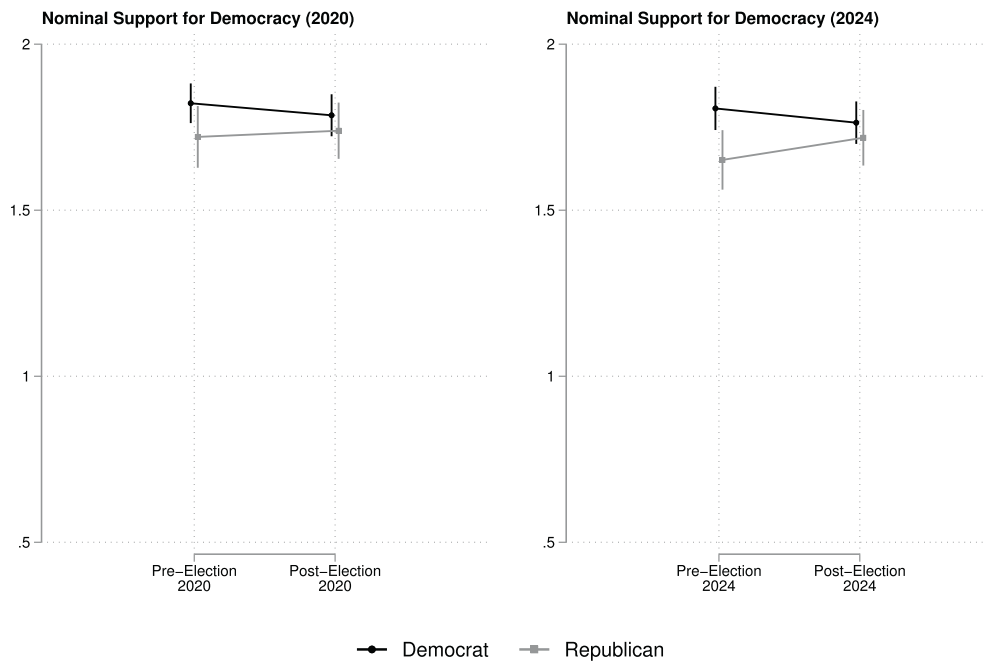


Fig. 2. DiD estimates of nominal support for democracy (3-point scale).

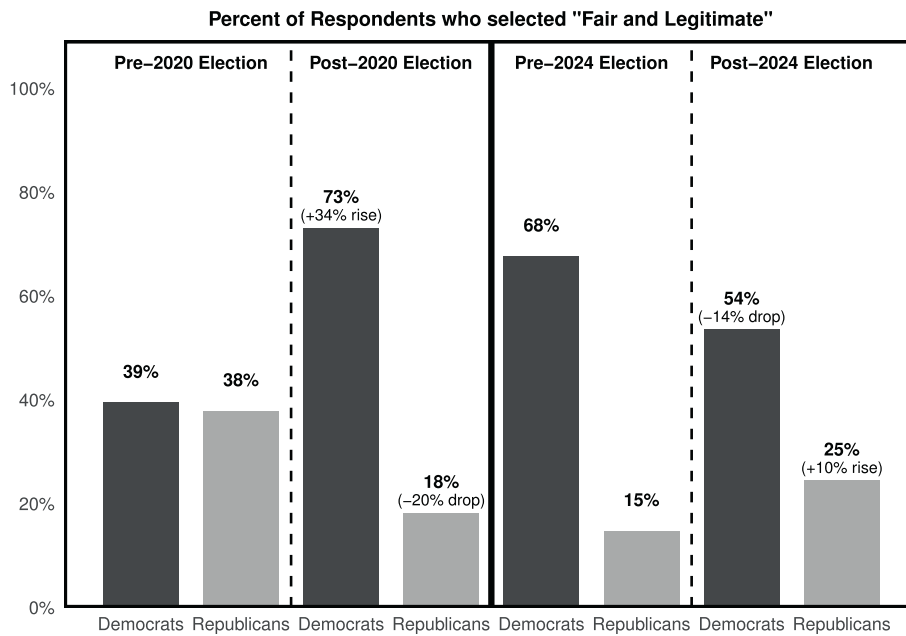


Fig. 3. Trends in election legitimacy views.

However, we observe no winner-loser gap for *overall* evaluations of election legitimacy in 2024. Republicans' (the winners) perceptions of election legitimacy remained an estimated 0.25 points below those of Democrats (the losers). Consistent with H2, Democrats retain higher overall perceptions of election legitimacy than Republicans in both election cycles, regardless of winner-loser status. This indicates that the traditional winner-loser gap in electoral democracy support emerges when Democrats win, but not when Republicans do.

3.3. Support for the peaceful transition of power

Fig. 5 reports the share of respondents expressing "strong support" for the *peaceful transition of power*—the norm that election losers should

not attempt to take or retain office. Although this is a fundamental principle of electoral democracy, public support for it varies along partisan lines. Across all waves, fewer than half of Republicans strongly endorse the peaceful transition of power, regardless of whether their party wins or loses. After Donald Trump's 2024 victory, Republicans' support rose *relative* to their pre-election baseline (H1). But in line with H2, *overall* support still remained markedly lower among Republicans (42%) than Democrats (74%).

Unlike perceptions of *election legitimacy*, partisan polarization over the *peaceful transition* was already evident before the 2020 election. This is likely because Donald Trump repeatedly refused to commit to transferring power throughout that election cycle, which as Przeworski

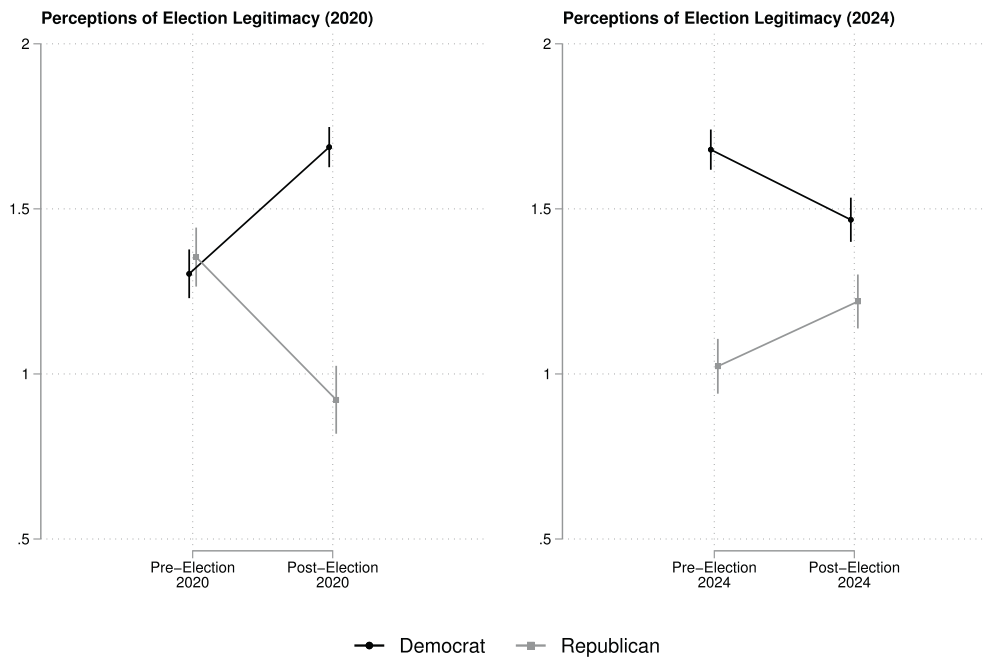


Fig. 4. DiD estimates of election legitimacy (3-point scale).

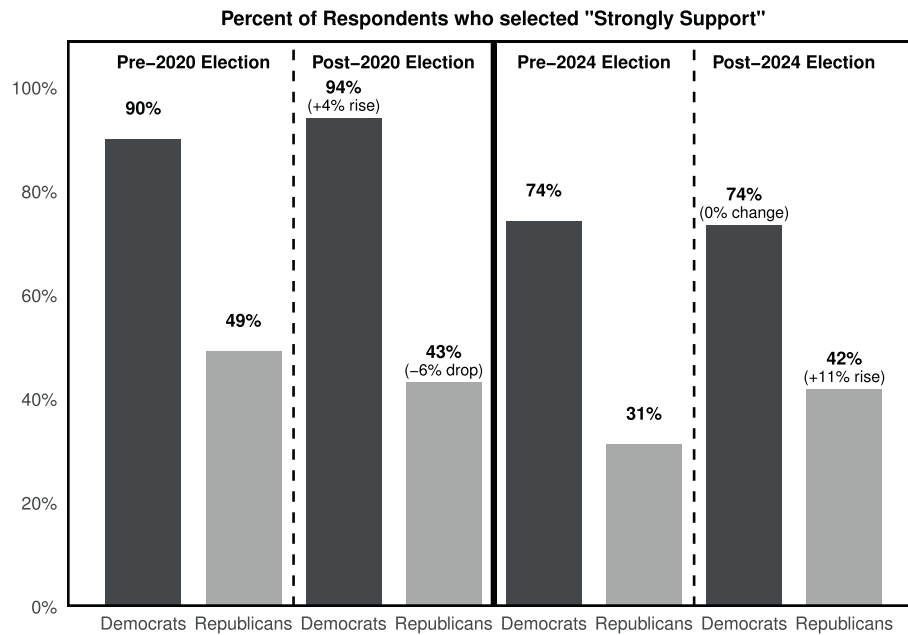


Fig. 5. Trends in support for the peaceful transition of power.

explains “shattered all the historically ingrained expectations” about this American democratic norm.³²

Fig. 6 extends this analysis and displays the DiD estimates for support for the peaceful transition of power. We observe sharp partisan asymmetries. Although Democrats’ overall support for the peaceful transition

declines between 2020 (left) and 2024 (right), their attitudes show little evidence of winner–loser dynamics within either election cycle. In both post-election waves, Democrats’ support remains close to its pre-election baseline. Republicans, by contrast, react strongly to electoral outcomes. Their support for the peaceful transition drops after Trump’s 2020 defeat and rebounds after his 2024 victory, consistent with H1’s expectation that relative shifts are linked to electoral fortunes. However, these shifts still do not bridge the partisan divide in support for the peaceful transition. Regardless of who wins, Republicans remain significantly less supportive than Democrats (H2).

After the 2020 election, Democrats’ support exceeded Republicans’ by 0.91 points—nearly a full step on the five-point scale. Even after

³² See interview between Przeworski and Henry Farrell (September 27, 2020): https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/27/trump-wont-commit-respecting-vote-no-one-knows-what-will-happen-next-few-months/?fbclid=IwAR0sgNDgrbBMRP_nuAuCbpVZ74ZNzkYezbb3Q1Ly4LcrYO5Qn-URUNqHyhs.

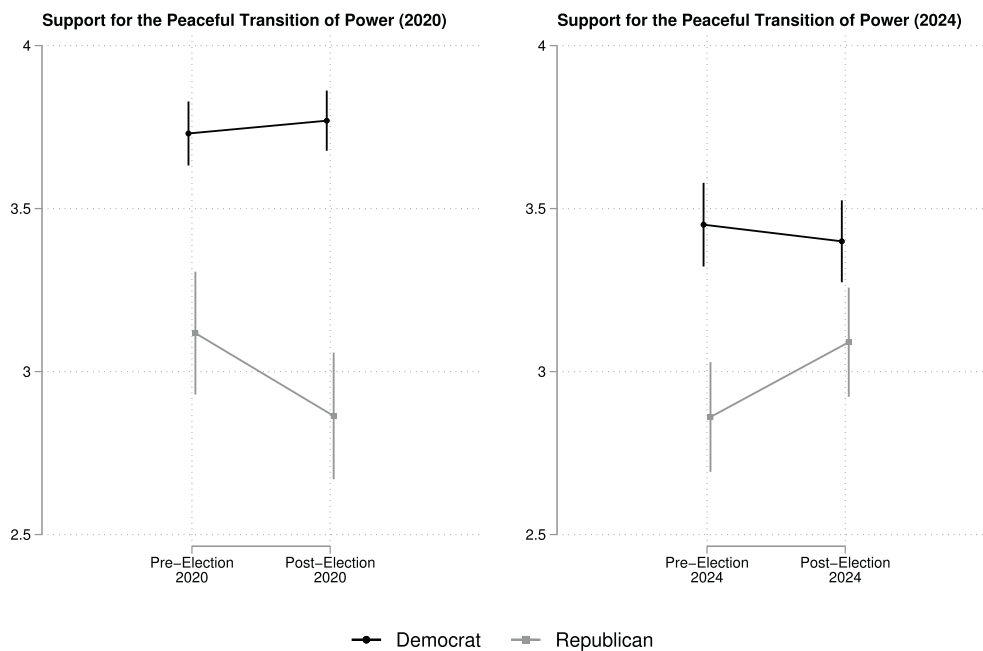


Fig. 6. DiD estimates of peaceful transition (5-point scale).

Republicans' post-2024 rebound, the partisan gap in *peaceful transition* support persisted. Democrats, despite losing, remained 0.31 points more supportive of this core democratic norm than Republicans were in victory. These results indicate that while election outcomes cause *relative* shifts in democratic attitudes (H1), partisan identity conditions whether those shifts translate into a winner-loser gap in *overall* levels of electoral democracy support (H2).

3.4. Support for electoral governance

Lastly, we consider our final measure of concrete support for electoral democracy. Fig. 7 reports the percentage of respondents who strongly support *electoral governance*, operationalized as strongly agreeing that “elections are the best way to decide who gets to be president.”

Before the 2020 election, Democrats and Republicans expressed similarly high support for electing the president. After Biden's 2020 victory, support rose among Democrats but fell among Republicans, consistent with H1. This reversed in 2024, when Republicans increased support for electing the president following Trump's win, whereas Democrats decreased support. Yet in line with H2, these *relative* shifts only produced a noticeable winner-loser gap in *overall* support for elections in 2020 (when Democrats won), but not in 2024 (when Republicans won). After Democrats won in 2020, there was a 13-point gap in overall support for elections. After Republicans won in 2024, support for elections converged to similar levels across both parties.

Finally, Fig. 8 presents the DiD estimates for *support for electoral governance*. Again, we see that election outcomes generate *relative* winner-loser effects (H1).

Following Biden's 2020 victory (left panel), Democrats increase—and Republicans decrease—support for electoral governance *relative* to their own pre-election baselines. Mirroring this trend, Republican support rises after Trump's 2024 win and Democratic support falls.

When we turn to *overall* support for using elections to select the president, a different pattern emerges. The *relative* movements observed after both elections do not translate into a stable winner-loser gap in absolute levels of support for *electoral governance*. Following the 2020 election, Democrats emerged 0.17 points more supportive of *electoral governance*

than Republicans, consistent with the classic winner-loser pattern. After the 2024 election, by contrast, Republicans' (the winners) support for *electoral governance* remained statistically indistinguishable from that of Democrats (the losers). Thus, the manifestation of a winner-loser gap in overall support for democracy continues to be conditional on whether Democrats or Republicans win elections, providing further evidence in support of H2.

Figs. 7 and 8 also display a notable decrease in both parties' support for *electoral governance*. Before the 2020 election, 77% of Democrats and Republicans strongly supported electing the president. After 2024, that fell to roughly 50% in both parties. This decline between our 2020 and 2024 panel surveys aligns with recent scholarship that identifies a broader erosion of democratic values among the American public (Foa and Mounk, 2025).

To contextualize this observation, our results on nominal support for democracy (Figs. 1 and 2) suggest that most Americans value democracy in the abstract. However, when democracy support is operationalized as attitudes about *legitimate elections*, *peaceful transfers of power*, and *electoral governance* (Figs. 3–8), a different picture emerges. Concrete support for these dimensions of electoral democracy is both polarized by partisanship and markedly lower in 2024 than in 2020.

3.5. Discussion

Taken together, our results demonstrate two core points. First, American election outcomes do causally produce *relative* shifts in concrete attitudes about electoral democracy. With few exceptions, winners move up and losers move down on perceptions of *election legitimacy*, support for the *peaceful transition of power*, and support for *electoral governance* (H1). Second, whether these relative shifts generate a winner-loser gap in *overall* democracy support is conditional on partisanship (H2). When Democrats win, they end up more supportive of electoral democracy than Republicans, as classic winner-loser gap theory predicts. When Republicans win, their attitudes improve relative to their own pre-election baselines but remain at or below Democratic levels. Thus, the winner-loser gap in American support for the institutional foundations of electoral democracy does not emerge uniformly across elections,

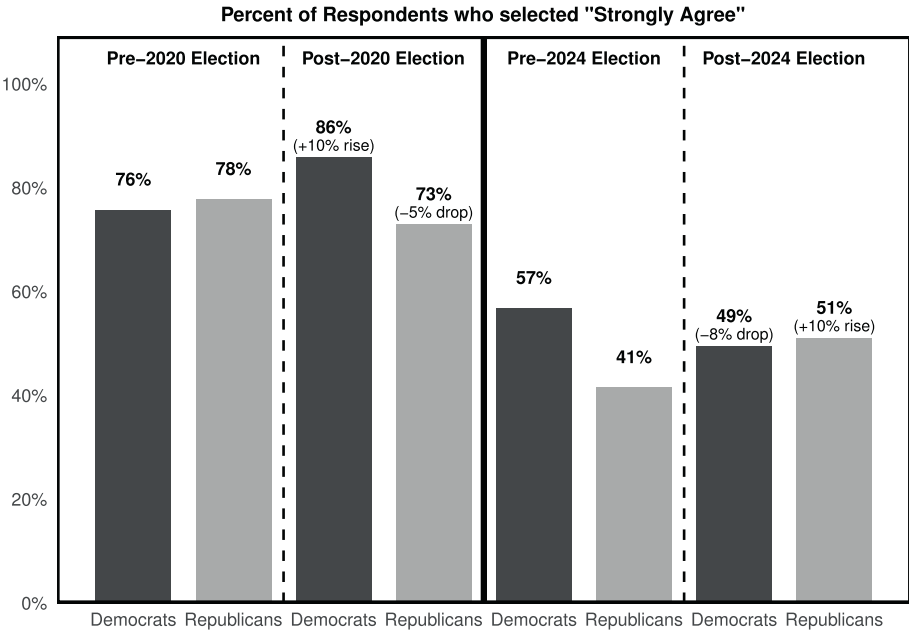


Fig. 7. Trends in support for electoral governance.

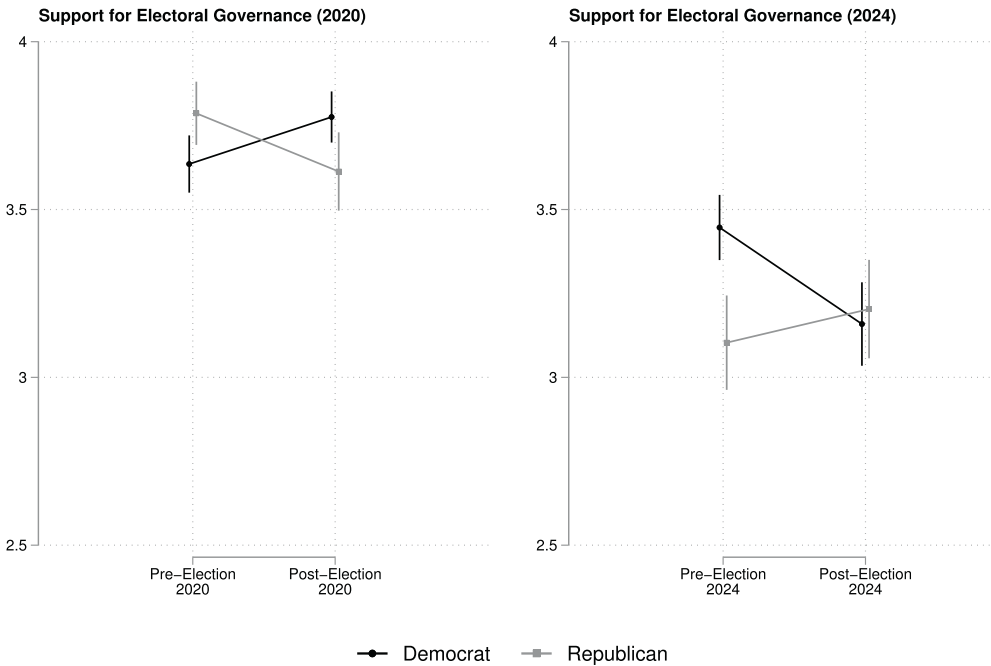


Fig. 8. DiD estimates of support for electoral governance (5-point scale).

but instead appears conditioned by deeper partisan asymmetries in democratic commitment.

Our findings also underscore the distinction between *nominal* and *concrete* democratic support. When asked about democracy abstractly as “the best form of governance,” Americans overwhelmingly endorse it as “the only game in town” (Linz and Stepan, 1996). However, this apparent consensus breaks down when democracy support is operationalized as concrete commitment to the institutional practices that make electoral democracy possible. Our findings indicate that while election outcomes

generate *relative* shifts in democratic attitudes from individuals’ pre-election baselines (H1), partisanship overwhelmingly structures *overall* levels of democracy support. Even in victory, Republicans express lower support for electoral democracy than Democrats (H2).

4. Conclusion

This study shows that American democratic attitudes are jointly shaped by election outcomes and partisanship. By surveying the same

individuals before and after elections, our panel design enables us to identify a clear causal effect: learning the outcome of an election immediately induces within-individual shifts in democratic attitudes. In line with *Hypothesis 1*, winners become more committed to democracy relative to their own pre-election baselines, whereas losers become less committed. Yet, these *relative* winner-loser effects do not consistently produce a durable pattern in which winners express stronger *overall* commitment to democracy than losers. Whether a winner-loser gap emerges in overall levels of support for democracy depends on which party wins.

This finding extends—and complicates—classic winner-loser gap theory. A large body of scholarship has established a conventional wisdom that electoral winners can be counted upon to more strongly support the democratic system that delivered their victory, and that the main threat to democratic stability comes from losers' withdrawal of consent (Anderson and Tverdova, 2001; Anderson and Mendes, 2006; Craig et al., 2006; Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Daniller, 2016; Enders and Thornton, 2022; Daoust et al., 2023; Halliez and Thornton, 2023; Janssen, 2024). As Anderson et al. (2005, 3) put it, “winning an election means a greater share of preferred policies, and there is no reason to expect many regrets about such an outcome or, more importantly, the process that produced it.” Our evidence, by contrast, shows that in the contemporary United States, winners' consent to democracy cannot be taken for granted, nor can it reliably be assumed to exceed that of losers. Extending recent comparative politics insights that show even winners may withhold consent from democratic governance (Werner et al., 2025), we find that their propensity to do so in the U.S. context is strongly conditioned by partisanship.

When Democrats win an election, we observe the familiar pattern of winners' post-election support for democracy exceeding that of losers. When Republicans win, by contrast, their support for democracy improves *relative* to their own pre-election baselines but still remains weaker than the levels expressed by losers. Partisan identity thus conditions whether *relative* movements in democratic attitudes following elections crystallize into a winner-loser gap in overall levels of support for electoral democracy.

Our results also underscore the importance of distinguishing between nominal and concrete support for democracy. On the one hand, nominal endorsements of democracy as the “best form of government” remain high and largely insensitive to who wins or loses elections. On the other hand, concrete support for democracy's electoral foundations—perceptions of *election legitimacy*, support for the *peaceful transfer of power*, and support for *electoral governance*—is both more fragile and more polarized along partisan lines.

Of course, there are limitations to our results. Most notably, our data are specific to two presidential election cycles. In both elections, the Republican candidate was Donald Trump—a one-time political outsider who successfully upended the American political landscape. A narrow interpretation of our findings might therefore attribute the partisan conditionality of the winner-loser gap to a distinct “Trump effect.” Such a finding would be substantively important in its own right, given the extraordinary extent to which Republican Party politics has become personalized around Donald Trump as an individual.

Yet, we do not expect the partisan asymmetry in democratic attitudes that we observe in this study will disappear with the end of the Trump presidency. Our theory identifies anti-democratic elite cues as a key mechanism producing Republicans' weaker commitments to electoral democracy in both victory and defeat, and Republican Party dynamics provide reason to expect that such cues will persist. For instance, Republican elites who most publicly opposed Donald Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 election (e.g., Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger) have been systematically marginalized from national party politics. Meanwhile, those who have risen to and maintained the party's most powerful positions—such as House Speaker Mike Johnson and Vice President J.D. Vance—continue to publicly question the legitimacy of

American elections.³³ Thus, even if the patterns we observe partly reflect follow-the-leader responses to elite cues, Republican Party leaders beyond Trump currently show little indication of changing direction.

While our expectations on future trends are admittedly speculative, they remain grounded in the well-established top-down structure of American mass opinion, whereby citizens tend to adopt the opinions of party leaders. A wide range of Republican elites—well beyond Trump himself—continue to claim that U.S. elections are fraudulent, rigged, or hacked.³⁴ The converse is true as well: as Republicans contest election integrity, Democrats increasingly highlight the importance of democratic norms and election legitimacy. The durability of these dynamics over the past decade suggests that partisan polarization over democratic legitimacy may become a routine feature of U.S. elections, as opposed to aberrational responses to particular candidates or election cycles.

Our findings also carry important implications for upcoming U.S. elections, particularly the 2026 midterms and the 2028 presidential race. At the time of writing, Donald Trump continues to signal openness to pursuing an unconstitutional third presidential term. He has also publicly floated the prospect of canceling 2026 congressional midterm elections.³⁵ Escalating disputes over partisan gerrymandering across the states are simultaneously elevating elite rhetoric that openly prioritizes the value of partisan dominance over election competitiveness.³⁶ The Trump administration has further sought to curtail states' traditional authority over election administration. For example, in August 2025, Trump wrote on social media: “Remember, the States are merely an ‘agent’ for the Federal Government in counting and tabulating the votes... They must do what the Federal Government, as represented by the President of the United States, tells them.”³⁷ As core norms of electoral democracy are increasingly being tested, a central question is whether—and how much—the American public will continue to value basic democratic principles. Our findings suggest that public commitment to democracy shifts in response to electoral outcomes and, critically, that partisan identity conditions how those shifts translate into overall support for electoral democracy.

This is particularly concerning in the contemporary environment characterized by asymmetric, elite-driven doubt in election legitimacy. Beliefs in election fraud are common and related to conspiratorial thinking (Enders et al., 2021).³⁸ When political elites invoke narratives about

³³ Republican establishment officials now commonly refuse to acknowledge that Joe Biden won the 2020 election. Mike Johnson voted against certifying the 2020 election results and played a leading role in organizing support for a lawsuit aiming to overturn Biden's victory (PBS News, 2023). Vance has similarly refused to acknowledge that Trump lost the 2020 election and stated that, had he been Vice President in 2021, he would not have immediately certified the results. Election skepticism is extending throughout the Republican Party at state and national levels: politicians who played leading roles in efforts to overturn the 2020 election have since been elevated to prominent positions and are now leading candidates for governorships in several key battleground states (Merica et al., 2026).

³⁴ The New York Times. November 4, 2025. “Republicans Reprise Unfounded Claims of Widespread Election Interference.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/04/us/election-interference-claims-disinformation.html>.

³⁵ Nik Popli. January 6, 2026. “Trump Floats Canceling the 2026 Elections, Then Insists He Won't.” *Time*: <https://time.com/7343696/trump-floats-cancelling-2026-elections/>.

³⁶ David A. Lieb. ABC News. December 14, 2025. “As Gerrymandering Battles Sweep Country, Supporters Say Partisan Dominance is ‘Fair.’” <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/gerrymandering-battles-sweep-country-supporters-partisan-dominance-fair-128390165>.

³⁷ CNN. August 18, 2025. “Trump's remarkable statement against states' rights.” <https://www.cnn.com/2025/08/18/politics/mail-voting-trump-states-rights-analysis>.

³⁸ Enders et al. (2021) also find that beliefs in election fraud are bipartisan. However, *exposure* and *receptivity* to elite cues about election fraud may still be uneven. As we demonstrate in Appendix H, Republicans most likely to receive elite cues are the least motivated by electoral victory.

election fraud, these appeals may be especially persuasive among individuals predisposed toward conspiratorial thinking. To the extent that such rhetoric is asymmetrically concentrated among certain elites, it offers one plausible explanation for the asymmetric winner-loser patterns we document. Future research should more explicitly integrate these two literatures to examine whether elite rhetoric activates conspiratorial predispositions in ways that shape democratic attitudes.

Beyond the United States, our results also speak to broader questions of public support for democracy in comparative politics. We operationalized democracy in the minimalist electoral sense in a deliberate effort to adhere to what has become the prevailing conceptualization of “democracy” in comparative politics (Przeworski, 1991, 1999; Svolik, 2012; Brown et al., 2024). Yet, a mismatch persists between this prevailing conceptualization of democracy and its empirical measurement in comparative politics research on the winner-loser gap. Most studies measure democratic support through satisfaction with democracy or political trust rather than citizens’ commitment to the institutions and procedures that constitute electoral democracy itself (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Bernauer and Vatter, 2012; Blais et al., 2017; Dahlberg and Linde, 2017; Farrer and Zingher, 2019; Martini and Quaranta, 2019; Bäckström, 2026). By focusing instead on concrete support for democracy’s electoral foundations, our approach helps bridge this conceptual-empirical divide. Our results suggest that comparative studies may uncover different winner-loser dynamics when democratic support is measured through citizens’ concrete commitments to democracy’s electoral foundations. This possibility is particularly salient in democracies where partisan or populist elites routinely challenge the legitimacy of election outcomes or other democratic institutions. In such contexts, partisan asymmetries in democratic commitment may condition whether electoral victory produces the conventional winner-loser pattern, much as we find in the United States.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Miles T. Armaly: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Steven D. Schaaf:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at doi: 10.1016/j.electstud.2026.103162.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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