Ethnic antagonism erodes Republicans’ commitment to democracy

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Contributed by Larry M. Bartels, July 10, 2020 (sent for review April 29, 2020; reviewed by Donald R. Kinder and Paul Sniderman)

Most Republicans in a January 2020 survey agreed that “the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it.” More than 40% agreed that “a time will come when patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands.” (In both cases, most of the rest said they were unsure; only one in four or five disagreed.) I use 127 survey items to measure six potential bases of these and other antidemocratic sentiments: partisan affect, enthusiasm for President Trump, political cynicism, economic conservatism, cultural conservatism, and ethnic antagonism. The strongest predictor by far, for the Republican rank-and-file as a whole and for a variety of subgroups defined by education, locale, sex, and political attitudes, is ethnic antagonism—especially concerns about the political power and claims on government resources of immigrants, African-Americans, and Latinos. The corrosive impact of ethnic antagonism on Republicans’ commitment to democracy underlines the significance of ethnic conflict in contemporary US politics.

Significance

Growing partisan polarization and democratic “backsliding” in various parts of the world have raised concerns about the attachment of ordinary Americans to supposedly consensual democratic values. Prothro and Grigg found overwhelming majorities endorsing “the basic principles of democracy when they are put in abstract terms” but observed that “consensus breaks down completely” when “broad principles are translated into more specific propositions” regarding, for example, the rights of communists, atheists, or Negroes (ref. 10, pp. 284–286). Less-educated people were especially willing to abandon democratic principles in specific cases; on average, 58% of those with low education but only 36% of those with high education expressed antidemocratic views.

Author contributions: L.M.B. designed research, performed research, analyzed data, and wrote the paper.

Reviewers: D.R.K., University of Michigan; and P.S., Stanford University.

The author declares no competing interest.

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This article contains supporting information online at https://www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.2007747117/-/DCSupplemental.

*Independents who report feeling closer to one party than the other generally think and behave much like partisans (8). Thus, Republican-leaning Independents are included along with Republicans in all analyses reported here.

1The survey was conducted by the online survey firm YouGov. YouGov maintains a large opt-in panel of respondents, using a combination of matching and weighting to produce nationally representative samples. Vanderbilt University’s Institutional Review Board determined that the study posed minimal risk to participants and was exempt from the requirement for informed consent (IRB 192011). All analyses reported here are based on weighted data employing weights constructed by the YouGov staff. Further weighting the data to reproduce the distribution of 2016 presidential votes alters average levels of antidemocratic sentiment and the magnitudes of the key parameter estimates relating ethnic antagonism to antidemocratic attitudes by less than 1%.

 Levels of agreement with the statements in Table 1 are inflated by the general tendency of survey respondents to agree rather than disagree with statements regardless of their content. However, the structure of the survey items arguably reflects the reality of democratic backsliding, which invites ordinary people to acquiesce in norm violations couched in terms of patriotism, tradition, and social order. My statistical analysis takes explicit account of the impact of acquiescence on response to these items.
Graham and Svolik used survey experiments involving fictitious candidates to assess the commitment to democratic principles among the American public. They found that only a small fraction of Americans prioritize democratic principles in their electoral choices when doing so goes against their partisan identification or favorite policies, suggesting that “conventional measures of support for democracy have a fundamental blind spot: they fail to capture voters’ willingness to act on their commitment to democracy precisely when democracy is at stake.” When they limited their analysis to a subset of more realistic candidate pairings, the estimated electoral penalties for norm violations were even smaller—just 3.5 percentage points (ref. 7, pp. 394, 406, 408, 407).

Republicans are not alone in their uncertain attachment to democratic values. For example, Kalmoe and Mason found that majorities of Democrats and Republicans alike viewed the other party as “a serious threat to the United States and its people,” while Democrats were slightly more likely to say that “violence would be justified” if the opposing party won the 2020 presidential election (ref. 14, pp. 18, 19, 23). In the Bright Line Watch surveys, differences in the perceived importance of a variety of democratic norms between supporters and opponents of President Trump were “generally small,” except on specific issues of salient partisan controversy such as foreign influence in elections and partisan gerrymandering (ref. 6, pp. 705, 706). The willingness of both Democrats and Republicans to sanction abuses of democratic procedure is especially clear when survey items refer explicitly to the president. For example, in 2017, with a Republican in the White House, Republicans were twice as likely as Democrats (24–11%) to agree that “when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Congress and govern without Congress.” However, in 2014, with a Democratic president and a Republican majority in Congress, that partisan difference was reversed—30% of Democrats but only 6% of Republicans were willing to countenance the president closing Congress (15).

While antidemocratic sentiments clearly exist in both major political parties, the nature and bases of those sentiments are likely to differ significantly between Republicans and Democrats. The specific survey items in Table 1, with their references to “the traditional American way of life” and politicians offering handouts, tap frustrations that are more common among Republicans than among Democrats. Moreover, the attitudes that turn out to be highly predictive of agreement with these items among Republicans are quite rare among Democrats. Thus, an examination of Democrats’ allegiance to democratic values would require somewhat different measures and very different explanations from those offered here.

In any case, the dramatic shifts in public support for closing Congress underline the extent to which the expression of antidemocratic sentiments is likely to depend on specific political contexts. Perhaps the most important contextual factor facilitating the translation of antidemocratic sentiments into consequential political behavior is political leadership. Because antidemocratic tendencies loom larger in the leadership of the contemporary Republican Party—and especially in the rhetoric of President Trump—than among Democrats, I focus on the willingness of Republicans to countenance violations of democratic norms.

### Table 1. Republicans’ antidemocratic attitudes (YouGov survey) January 2020

| Statement                                                                 | Strongly agree, % | Agree, % | Neither; unsure, % | Disagree, % | Strongly disagree, % |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|---------|--------------------|------------|----------------------|
| The traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it. | 24.0              | 26.7    | 27.7                | 15.2        | 6.5                  |
| A time will come when patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands. | 15.0              | 26.3    | 36.3                | 14.0        | 8.4                  |
| Strong leaders sometimes have to bend the rules in order to get things done. | 12.5              | 34.8    | 29.2                | 17.4        | 6.1                  |
| It is hard to trust the results of elections when so many people will vote for anyone who offers a handout. | 34.1              | 39.8    | 16.2                | 7.0         | 2.9                  |

The survey included Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (n = 1,151).

McClosky found even sharper differences in support for the “rules of the game” between the general public and a sample of “political influentials”—national convention delegates and alternates. (An apparently unintentional echo of this finding appears in a recent study comparing support for a variety of democratic norms between the general public and a sample of “expert” political scientists; ref. 6.) He concluded that “it is the articulate classes rather than the public who serve as the major repositories of the public conscience and as the carriers of the Creed” (ref. 11, p. 374). These findings helped to spawn a substantial literature focusing on political tolerance of disliked groups (12); for the most part, however, the broader issue of public support for McClosky’s “rules of the game” was reduced to a fixation on support for democracy in the abstract, neglecting the crucial distinction between “broad principles” and “specific propositions.”

More recently, the limitations of Americans’ commitment to specific democratic norms has begun to come back into focus. For example, a series of surveys conducted between 2010 and 2017 employing items originally designed for use in Latin America found 23–36% of US respondents agreeing that a military coup would be justified “when there is a lot of crime” or “when there is a lot of corruption.” Researchers concerned that the respondents might be misunderstanding the questions tested a variety of alternative question wordings—for example, specifying that the military would “take power over the U.S. government by removing the president by force.” However, they concluded that “respondents’ opinions are not conditional on clarifying the target and nature of the coup” (13). In another series of surveys conducted in 2017–2018 as part of the Bright Line Watch project, only 73% of Americans agreed that a military coup would be “important” or “essential” that “government does not interfere with journalists or news organizations,” and only 68% said it was “important” or “essential” that “government effectively prevents private actors from engaging in politically-motivated violence or intimidation” (ref. 6, pp. 703–704).

Unlike surveys in which respondents are asked to assess the “importance” of democratic norms in the abstract, the survey items presented in Table 1 mimic real politics in pitting democratic values against other cherished values such as patriotism, strong leadership, and the “traditional American way of life.” Faced with such trade-offs, relatively few Republicans—1 in 4, or 5, or 10, depending on the item—decline the invitation to “bend the rules” or “take the law into their own hands.”

5 Graham and Svolik used survey experiments involving fictitious candidates to assess “the commitment to democratic principles among the American public.” They found that “only a small fraction of Americans prioritize democratic principles in their electoral choices when doing so goes against their partisan identification or favorite policies,” suggesting that “conventional measures of support for democracy have a fundamental blind spot: they fail to capture voters’ willingness to act on their commitment to democracy precisely when democracy is at stake.” When they limited their analysis to a subset of more realistic candidate pairings, the estimated electoral penalties for norm violations were even smaller—just 3.5 percentage points (ref. 7, pp. 394, 406, 408, 407).

6 The key explanatory variable in my analysis, ethnic antagonism, has a mean value of zero and a standard deviation of 0.96 among Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents, and a mean value of –2.21 and a standard deviation of 1.02 among Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents. Only 2% of Democrats would be in the top half of the Republican distribution, while 87% would be in the bottom decile.
Bases of Republicans’ Antidemocratic Attitudes

Fig. 1 shows how Republicans’ antidemocratic responses in the January 2020 survey were related to education, political interest, and locale. These relationships provide only modest support for the hypothesis that allegiance to democratic values is a product of “political activity, involvement and articulateness,” as McClosky had it (ref. 11, p. 374). Although people with postgraduate education were clearly less likely than those with less education to endorse violations of democratic norms, the overall relationship between education and antidemocratic sentiments is rather weak. Similarly, people in big cities were only about 5% less likely than those in rural areas to endorse norm violations, while people who said they followed politics “most of the time” were about 7% more likely to do so than those who said they followed politics “hardly at all.”

Given the distributions of these social characteristics in the Republican sample, the most typical antidemocrats were not “men and women whose lives are circumscribed by apathy, ignorance, provincialism and social or physical distance from the centers of intellectual activity” (ref. 11, p. 375), but suburbanites with some college education and a healthy (or unhealthy) interest in politics.

A more promising place to look for the antecedents of antidemocratic sentiments is in the substance of political attitudes (16). Here, I distinguish six latent dimensions of Republicans’ political attitudes: 1) partisan affect, 2) affect toward President Trump, 3) economic conservatism, 4) cultural conservatism, 5) ethnic antagonism, and 6) political cynicism. These six latent dimensions are tapped by 127 distinct items in the January 2020 survey, with an average of 29 indicators per latent dimension.

The most influential operationalization of ethnocentrism in recent political research (17) focuses on stereotypical negative views regarding the personal qualities of people in specific racial and ethnic groups. My measure of “ethnic antagonism” is broader in scope, incorporating not only unfavorable feelings toward Muslims, immigrants, and other out-groups, but also—and especially—concerns about these groups’ political and social claims. Survey items tapping perceptions that immigrants, African-Americans, Latinos, and poor people have more than their fair share of political power and get more than their fair share of government resources are powerful indicators of ethnic antagonism (with item-scale correlations ranging from 0.671 to 0.788).

The resulting scale is strongly correlated with the more familiar “racial resentment” scale (18–20), but better reflects the multifaceted demographic threat currently perceived by many White
Americans and their specifically political antagonisms toward a variety of salient out-groups.\textsuperscript{11} “Republican affect” is measured by attitudes toward Republican and (especially) Democratic political figures (Obama, Pence, Pelosi), ordinary partisans, and the parties themselves. “Trump affect” is captured by feelings toward President Trump and ratings on a variety of specific traits (“inspiring,” “honest,” “knowledgeable,” “moral,” and the like). “Economic conservatism” entails belief in economic opportunity, a preference for limited government (especially in the provision of social welfare and environmental regulation), and sympathy for rich people and businesses vis-à-vis poor people and labor unions. “Cultural conservatism” includes views about patriotism, traditional morality (including abortion and sexual harassment), and disdain for big cities, rich people, journalists, and college professors. “Political cynicism” reflects beliefs that “people like me have no say” and that government is too powerful, ineffective, and cannot be trusted, as well as negative views about “politicians.”

Not surprisingly, some of these attitudes are strongly correlated, even within the restricted sample of Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents. The largest correlations are between Republican affect and cultural conservatism (0.759), cultural conservatism and ethnic antagonism (0.722), Republican affect and Trump affect (0.699), economic conservatism and cultural conservatism (0.679), and cultural conservatism and political cynicism (0.671). (The complete correlation matrix appears at the end of SI Appendix, Table S1.) In light of these correlations, analyses focusing on some of these attitudes while ignoring others are likely to misconstrue the specific bases of antidemocratic sentiments. Here, I guard against that sort of error by relating antidemocratic survey responses simultaneously to all six sets of attitudes.

In addition to these substantive differences in political attitudes, I take account of acquiescence—individual differences in respondents’ tendencies to agree or disagree with survey items regardless of substantive content. Because all of the items in Table 1 invite respondents to endorse or reject antidemocratic attitudes, each of which is normalized to have a mean of zero and a SD of one within the Republican sample. The apparent importance

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\textsuperscript{11}The correlation between ethnic animosity as measured in 2020 and a three-item racial resentment scale based on responses from the same people in a 2016 survey is 0.754. The racial resentment scale is strongly correlated with specific items in the 2020 survey focusing on African-Americans ($R = 0.596$ to 0.728), but less strongly correlated with items focusing on immigrants, Latinos, and poor people ($R = 0.393$ to 0.540).

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\textsuperscript{**}Acquiescence is estimated from responses to 36 agree/disagree items. Conservative attitudes are tapped by “agree” responses for 16 items and by “disagree” responses for the other 20 items. The correlations between acquiescence and conservative attitudes range from $-0.210$ to $0.243$ and average $-0.012$. The structural equation model used to infer Republicans’ latent attitudes (SI Appendix, Table S1) also includes distinct acquiescence factors for a variety of other survey item formats.
of specific attitudes varies from item to item (across the columns of the table). For example, political cynicism is especially strongly related to distrust of elections, while enthusiasm for President Trump seems to bolster support for strong leaders bending rules and patriots taking the law into their own hands. However, in every case the factor most strongly associated with support for antidemocratic sentiments is ethnic antagonism.

These statistical results suggest that ethnic antagonism has a substantial negative effect on Republicans’ commitment to democracy. For example, holding other attitudes constant at average Republican values, the predicted probability of agreeing that “we may have to use force” to save the “traditional American way of life” increases from 0.226 at the 5th percentile of Republican ethnic antagonism (−1.43) to 0.813 at the 95th percentile (1.58). The corresponding increase in the predicted probability of agreeing that “patriotic Americans” will have to “take the law into their own hands,” holding other attitudes constant at average Republican values, is from 0.153 at the 5th percentile of Republican ethnic antagonism to 0.718 at the 95th percentile. The estimated impact of ethnic antagonism on the probability of agreeing with each item, based on the statistical analyses reported in Table 3, is shown in Fig. 2, Left.

These relationships are not driven solely by extreme high or low values of ethnic antagonism. Fig. 2, Right shows the simple bivariate relationship between ethnic antagonism and the probability of agreeing with each antidemocratic sentiment. (The agreement rates shown in the figure are derived from locally weighted [loess] regressions employing the nearest 500 responses at each point in the Republican distribution of ethnic antagonism.) The relationships are roughly linear—and similar in magnitude to the relationships implied by the multivariate statistical results—except for a noticeable leveling-off of support among the most resentful Republicans for the notion that “strong leaders sometimes have to bend the rules.”

Nor is the strong association between ethnic antagonism and antidemocratic attitudes limited to specific segments of the Republican rank-and-file. Table 4 presents ordered probit regression parameter estimates for ethnic antagonism paralleling those in Table 3 but for a variety of distinct Republican subgroups—men and women, people with and without college education, those in cities or suburbs and in small towns or rural areas, and those more and less favorable toward President Trump, Fox News, and the National Rifle Association (NRA). Some of the parameter estimates are significantly larger for men, people with college education, and (especially) those most favorable toward the NRA. However, in every subgroup ethnic antagonism is strongly related to antidemocratic attitudes, even after statistically controlling for other factors. (The t statistics [based on robust standard errors] for the 48 distinct subgroups’ ethnic antagonism parameter estimates range from 2.45 to 7.59, averaging 4.94. The complete results appear in SI Appendix, Tables S2–S7.)

**Discussion**

The support expressed by many Republicans for violations of a variety of crucial democratic norms is primarily attributable not to partisan affect, enthusiasm for President Trump, political cynicism, economic conservatism, or general cultural conservatism, but to what I have termed ethnic antagonism. The single survey item with the highest average correlation with antidemocratic sentiments is not a measure of attitudes toward Trump, but an item inviting respondents to agree that “discrimination against whites is as big a problem today as discrimination against blacks and other minorities.” Not far behind are items positing that “things have changed so much that I often feel like a stranger in my own country,” that immigrants get more than their fair share of government resources, that people on welfare often have it better than those who work for a living, that speaking English is “essential for being a true American,” and that African-Americans “need to stop using racism as an excuse.” (The average correlations between these single items and antidemocratic sentiments range from 0.330 to 0.262. The average correlation between

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**Table 3. Political bases of Republicans’ antidemocratic attitudes (ordered probit regression parameter estimates and response thresholds)**

| Use force to save traditional way of life | Patriots take law into their own hands | Strong leaders sometimes bend rules | Hard to trust the results of elections |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Republican affect                       | 0.129 (0.083)                        | −0.122 (0.087)                    | −0.023 (0.089)                      | 0.116 (0.090)                      |
| Trump affect                            | 0.042 (0.068)                        | 0.212 (0.065)                     | 0.235 (0.070)                      | −0.097 (0.064)                     |
| Economic conservatism                   | −0.242 (0.078)                       | −0.036 (0.066)                    | 0.116 (0.073)                      | 0.079 (0.069)                      |
| Cultural conservatism                   | −0.049 (0.121)                       | 0.008 (0.129)                     | −0.432 (0.121)                     | −0.087 (0.130)                     |
| Ethnic antagonism                       | 0.547 (0.070)                        | 0.532 (0.069)                     | 0.495 (0.073)                      | 0.440 (0.081)                      |
| Political cynicism                      | 0.141 (0.070)                        | 0.126 (0.072)                     | 0.042 (0.067)                      | 0.318 (0.071)                      |
| Acquiescence                            | 0.352 (0.056)                        | 0.237 (0.055)                     | 0.414 (0.058)                      | 0.347 (0.057)                      |
| Strongly disagree/disagree              | −1.816 (0.076)                       | −1.623 (0.077)                    | −1.749 (0.072)                     | −2.220 (0.102)                     |
| Disagree/neither, unsure                | −0.933 (0.055)                       | −0.888 (0.054)                    | −0.798 (0.052)                     | −1.528 (0.075)                     |
| Neither, unsure/agree                   | −0.028 (0.050)                       | 0.262 (0.047)                     | 0.080 (0.049)                      | −0.768 (0.055)                     |
| Agree/strongly agree                    | 0.854 (0.051)                        | 1.223 (0.057)                     | 1.284 (0.053)                      | 0.491 (0.048)                      |
| Log likelihood                          | −1,549.6                             | −1,538.3                          | −1,558.9                           | −1,348.1                           |
| Pseudo R-squared                        | 0.11                                 | 0.10                              | 0.07                               | 0.11                               |
| n                                       | 1,151                                | 1,151                             | 1,151                              | 1,151                              |

Robust SEs are presented in parentheses.

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††This leveling-off may reflect the fact that ethnic antagonism is strongly correlated with cultural conservatism (R = 0.722), which significantly depresses support for bending the rules. Adding a squared ethnic antagonism term to the ordered probit regression in the third column of Table 3 produces a parameter estimate of −0.030 (with a standard error of 0.030), barely altering the parameter estimates for ethnic antagonism (0.500) and cultural conservatism (0.419). More generally, the statistical results are surprisingly robust to variations in model specification. For example, analyses paralleling those in Table 3 but with ethnic antagonism as the only predictor of antidemocratic sentiments produce probit parameter estimates that are just 4% smaller on average. Adding the acquiescence factor but no political covariates produces probit parameter estimates for ethnic antagonism that are just 4% larger than those reported in Table 3, on average.

‡‡The sample of Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents is too ethnically homogeneous (78.4% non-Hispanic White) to permit separate analysis of Hispanics (12.6%), African-Americans (1.4%), or others (7.6%). Not surprisingly, the average levels of ethnic antagonism among African-Americans (−0.470) and Hispanics (−0.442) are much lower than among non-Hispanic Whites (0.083), with people in other groups in between (−0.039).
the ethnic antagonism scale and antidemocratic sentiments is 0.382.)

The powerful effects of ethnic antagonism on Republicans’ antidemocratic attitudes underscore the extent to which this particular threat to democratic values is concentrated in the contemporary Republican Party. Seventy-eight percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents in the 2020 survey had ethnic antagonism scores below the fifth percentile of the Republican average. The average score among Democrats (−2.21) barely appears in Fig. 2, which excludes the bottom (and top) 1% of the Republican distribution of ethnic antagonism. In this respect, among others, the attitudes of Republicans and Democrats are sharply polarized.99

The strong association reported here between Republicans’ antidemocratic attitudes and ethnic antagonism reflects a specific social and political context. It certainly does not imply that ethnic antagonism is a necessary basis for antidemocratic sentiment, or that ethnic antagonism always and everywhere erodes public commitment to democracy. One of the most politically salient features of the contemporary United States is the looming demographic transition from a majority-White to a “majority-minority” country. Several years ago, reminding White Americans of that prospect significantly altered their political attitudes (21).

Now, President Trump and Fox News remind them, implicitly or explicitly, on an almost-daily basis. For those who view demographic change as a significant threat to “the traditional American way of life,” the political stakes could hardly be higher.

This perspective is forcefully illustrated by an attention-getting essay published pseudonymously during the 2016 campaign on “the Flight 93 election: charge the cockpit or you die” (22). The author, who went on to serve on President Trump’s National Security Council staff, wrote that “a Hillary Clinton presidency is Russian Roulette with a semi-auto. With Trump, at least you can spin the cylinder and take your chance.” He denounced the “tsunami of leftist that still engulfs our every—literal and figurative—shore,” and warned that “the ceaseless importation of Third World foreigners with no tradition of, taste for, or experience in liberty means that the electorate grows more left, more Democratic, less Republican, less republican, and less traditionally American with every cycle.” “Trump, he concluded, “alone among candidates for high office in this or in the last seven (at least) cycles, has stood up to say: I want to live. I want my party to live. I want my country to live. I want my people to live. I want to end the insanity.”

The political impact of this specific instance of ethnocentric alarmism may have been modest, but it is representative of a

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99 While the latent attitudes summarized in Table 2 and detailed in SI Appendix, Table S1 are derived from an analysis limited to Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents, factor scores can be computed from the same indicators for Democrats and Independents as well. The only substantial overlap in attitudes between Republicans and Democrats is on political cynicism. The average factor scores for Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents on the other five dimensions are two to three standard deviations below the corresponding Republican average scores.

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§§ Attitudes toward President Trump and Fox News are more strongly correlated with ethnic antagonism \( R = 0.450, 0.217 \) than with antidemocratic attitudes (correlations ranged from 0.279 to 0.338 and from 0.093 to 0.175, respectively), and the statistical relationships between ethnic antagonism and antidemocratic attitudes in Table 4 are, on average, similar in magnitude regardless of favorability toward President Trump and toward Fox News. Thus, there is no evidence here suggesting that President Trump or Fox News contributes to Republicans’ translation of ethnic antagonism into antidemocratic attitudes. However, detailed data on exposure to specific sources and messages would be necessary to shed light on the impact of political rhetoric on ethnic antagonism, antidemocratic attitudes, and their association.
broadly held and consequential worldview. Analysts of the 2016 presidential election have emphasized the activation of long-standing racial resentment and concerns about immigration as important factors contributing to President Trump’s support (23). The same factors have helped to fuel political polarization more broadly (24). The relationship reported here between ethnic antagonism and expressions of support for violations of key democratic norms suggests that the effects of millions of White Americans’ concerns regarding the prospect of demographic, social, and political change may not be limited to the electoral sphere.

Many people who endorse resorting to force or taking the law into their own hands in the context of an opinion survey are unlikely to engage in actual violence or lawlessness. However, the United States has experienced a cataclysmic civil war and a long history of racial and ethnic violence (25), and currently experiences thousands of hate crimes per year**; thus, it is not fanciful to suppose that expressive support for bending the rules or resorting to force to protect one’s “way of life” is consequential for actual behavior—or that it could become even more consequential under inflammatory circumstances.

It is also possible that antidemocratic attitudes among citizens encourage political elites to engage in antidemocratic behaviors. Systematic attempts to measure democratic performance, while fraught with difficulty, do provide some grounds for concern on this score. For example, Freedom House has reported a significant decline over the past decade in its rating of the quality of American democracy, from 94 on a 100-point scale in 2009 to 86 in 2018 (27). While acknowledging that “political polarization, declining economic mobility, the outsized influence of special interests, and the diminished influence of fact-based reporting in favor of bellicose partisan media are all problems afflicting the health of American democracy well before 2017,” the authors of the report argued that “President Trump exerts an influence on American politics that is straining our core values and testing the stability of our constitutional system. No president in living memory has shown less respect for its tenets, norms, and principles. Trump has assailed essential institutions and traditions including the separation of powers, a free press, an independent judiciary, the impartial delivery of justice, safeguards against corruption, and most disturbingly, the legitimacy of elections.”

How concerned should we be that a president who assails “essential institutions and traditions” of democracy has found millions of followers willing to endorse significant violations of democratic norms, including resort to force in pursuit of political ends, lawlessness by “patriotic Americans,” and casting doubt on the legitimacy of elections? The simple answer is that no one knows.

Antidemocratic forces in well-functioning multiparty systems tend to be isolated in minor parties, shunned as coalition partners and cordoned off from power. In contrast, as the Republican Party establishment learned in 2016, US parties are vulnerable to hostile takeover by political entrepreneurs capable of mobilizing passionate factions. Moreover, the evolution of the Republican Party over the past few years suggests that a hostile takeover may not stay hostile for long, as rank-and-file supporters respond to new leadership and elected officials adapt themselves to new political realities (28).

Frances Lee has enumerated a variety of formidable institutional barriers to the consolidation of “authoritarian power over American national government.” Nonetheless, she concluded that “A racialized party system in an electorate with a questionable commitment to liberal values is a troubling development. It is difficult to manage racial tensions in a democracy in any case, much less when race becomes a principal line of political cleavage” (29). The findings reported here underline the extent to which race—and, more broadly, ethnic conflict—has indeed become a principal line of political cleavage, not only in American electoral politics but also in America’s broader, ongoing struggle to embrace and instantiate democracy.

Data Availability. Survey data, log, and questionnaire files are in the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research openICPSR repository (https://www.openicpsr.org/openicpsr/project/120104/version/V1/view).

Table 4. Translation of ethnic antagonism into antidemocratic attitudes in Republican subgroups (ordered probit regression parameter estimates for ethnic antagonism by subgroups)

|                           | Use force to save traditional way of life | Patriots take law into their own hands | Strong leaders sometimes bend rules | Hard to trust the results of elections |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Some college              | 0.691 (0.091)                            | 0.568 (0.089)                          | 0.478 (0.100)                      | 0.597 (0.108)                          |
| No college                | 0.386 (0.113)                            | 0.480 (0.108)                          | 0.529 (0.110)                      | 0.295 (0.109)                          |
| (Difference)              | 0.306 (0.144)                            | 0.087 (0.139)                          | −0.052 (0.147)                     | 0.302 (0.153)                          |
| Male                      | 0.489 (0.089)                            | 0.632 (0.095)                          | 0.675 (0.112)                      | 0.506 (0.114)                          |
| Female                    | 0.643 (0.113)                            | 0.420 (0.101)                          | 0.350 (0.100)                      | 0.388 (0.106)                          |
| (Difference)              | −0.154 (0.143)                           | 0.212 (0.138)                          | 0.325 (0.150)                      | 0.118 (0.155)                          |
| City/suburb               | 0.600 (0.088)                            | 0.561 (0.095)                          | 0.517 (0.098)                      | 0.438 (0.110)                          |
| Small town/rural          | 0.466 (0.120)                            | 0.471 (0.098)                          | 0.462 (0.110)                      | 0.414 (0.113)                          |
| (Difference)              | 0.134 (0.148)                            | 0.091 (0.136)                          | 0.056 (0.146)                      | 0.024 (0.157)                          |
| High Trump favorability   | 0.521 (0.093)                            | 0.639 (0.101)                          | 0.519 (0.100)                      | 0.413 (0.109)                          |
| Lower Trump favorability  | 0.592 (0.106)                            | 0.425 (0.096)                          | 0.475 (0.103)                      | 0.485 (0.119)                          |
| (Difference)              | −0.071 (0.141)                           | 0.214 (0.138)                          | 0.045 (0.143)                      | −0.073 (0.161)                         |
| High Fox News favorability| 0.467 (0.081)                            | 0.469 (0.085)                          | 0.612 (0.092)                      | 0.449 (0.101)                          |
| Lower Fox News favorability| 0.668 (0.121)                          | 0.589 (0.108)                          | 0.346 (0.115)                      | 0.436 (0.129)                          |
| (Difference)              | −0.201 (0.145)                           | −0.120 (0.137)                         | 0.266 (0.147)                      | 0.013 (0.164)                          |
| High NRA favorability     | 0.586 (0.096)                            | 0.684 (0.096)                          | 0.635 (0.099)                      | 0.590 (0.107)                          |
| Lower NRA favorability    | 0.529 (0.105)                            | 0.397 (0.100)                          | 0.334 (0.099)                      | 0.285 (0.116)                          |
| (Difference)              | 0.057 (0.141)                            | 0.288 (0.138)                          | 0.301 (0.139)                      | 0.306 (0.157)                          |

Robust SEs are presented in parentheses. Complete results are presented in SI Appendix, Tables S2-S7.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. The research reported here was supported by Vanderbilt University’s May Werthan Shayne Chair. Christopher Achen, Katherine Cramer, Marc Hetherington, Cindy Kam, Donald Kinder, Frances Lee, David E. Lewis, Tail Mendelberg, Jeff Mondak, Diana Mutz, Wendy Rahn, Steven Rogers, Michael Shepherd, John Sides, Paul Sniderman, John Zaller, and participants in the Vanderbilt Research on Individuals, Politics & Society (RIPS) laboratory provided invaluable advice and criticism.

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