

**The Destructive Effects of President Trump's Effort to Overturn the 2020 Election**

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Submitted to the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States  
Capitol, U.S. House of Representatives

March 28, 2022

We submit this testimony as political scientists with decades of collective experience studying democracy in the United States and in countries around the world. Since 2017, we have been the organizers of Bright Line Watch (<http://brightlinewatch.org>), a non-partisan watchdog group that monitors the status of American democracy.

The results we report below come from surveys we conducted both immediately before and after the November 2020 election among representative samples of the public and experts from the political science faculty of U.S. universities.

We make four key points:

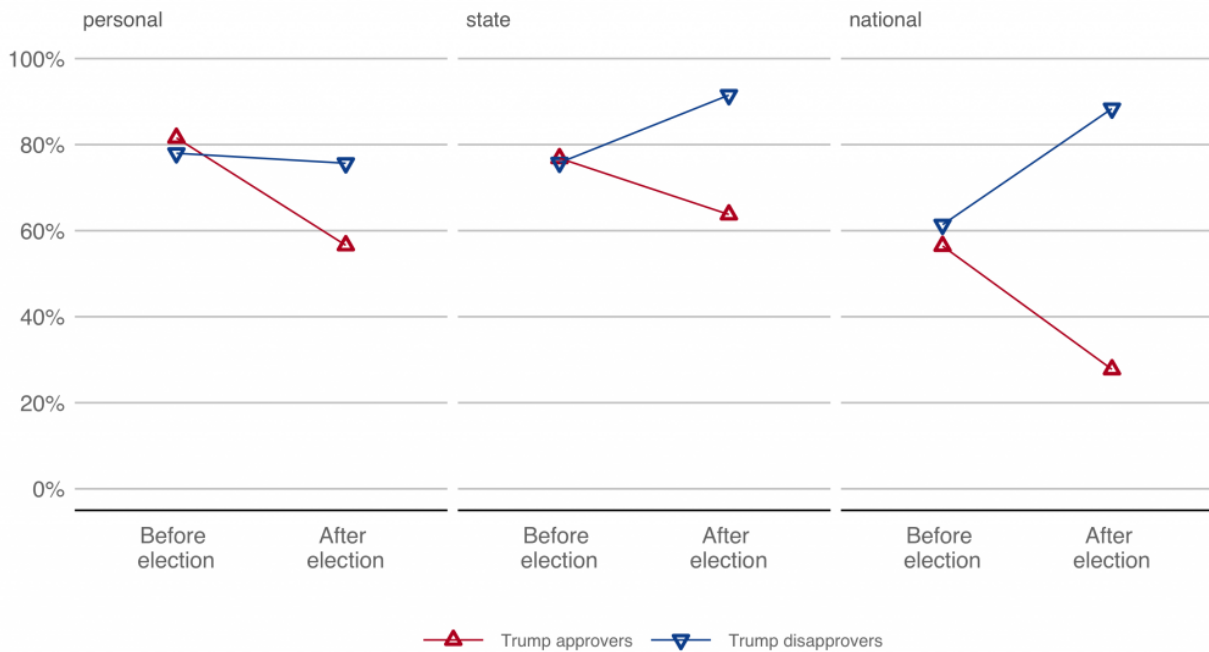
1. After November 2020, confidence in the legitimacy of the election diverged sharply between supporters of President Trump, who expressed less confidence in the election system, and his opponents, who expressed more confidence.
2. This shift created a partisan gap in election trust that has not narrowed since the election.
3. Randomized survey experiments show that Republicans will punish elected officials who vote to affirm the legitimacy of the 2020 election, creating perverse incentives for GOP candidates.
4. Experts regard Trump's effort to overturn the 2020 election as a grave or serious threat to democracy.

### **Confidence in elections diverged by party after the election**

We asked the public about their confidence in the election system in pre- and post-election surveys in [October](#) and [November 2020](#), respectively. The figure below shows the percentage of Trump approvers (red) and disapprovers (blue) who express confidence about votes being counted as intended in our pre-election and post-election surveys.

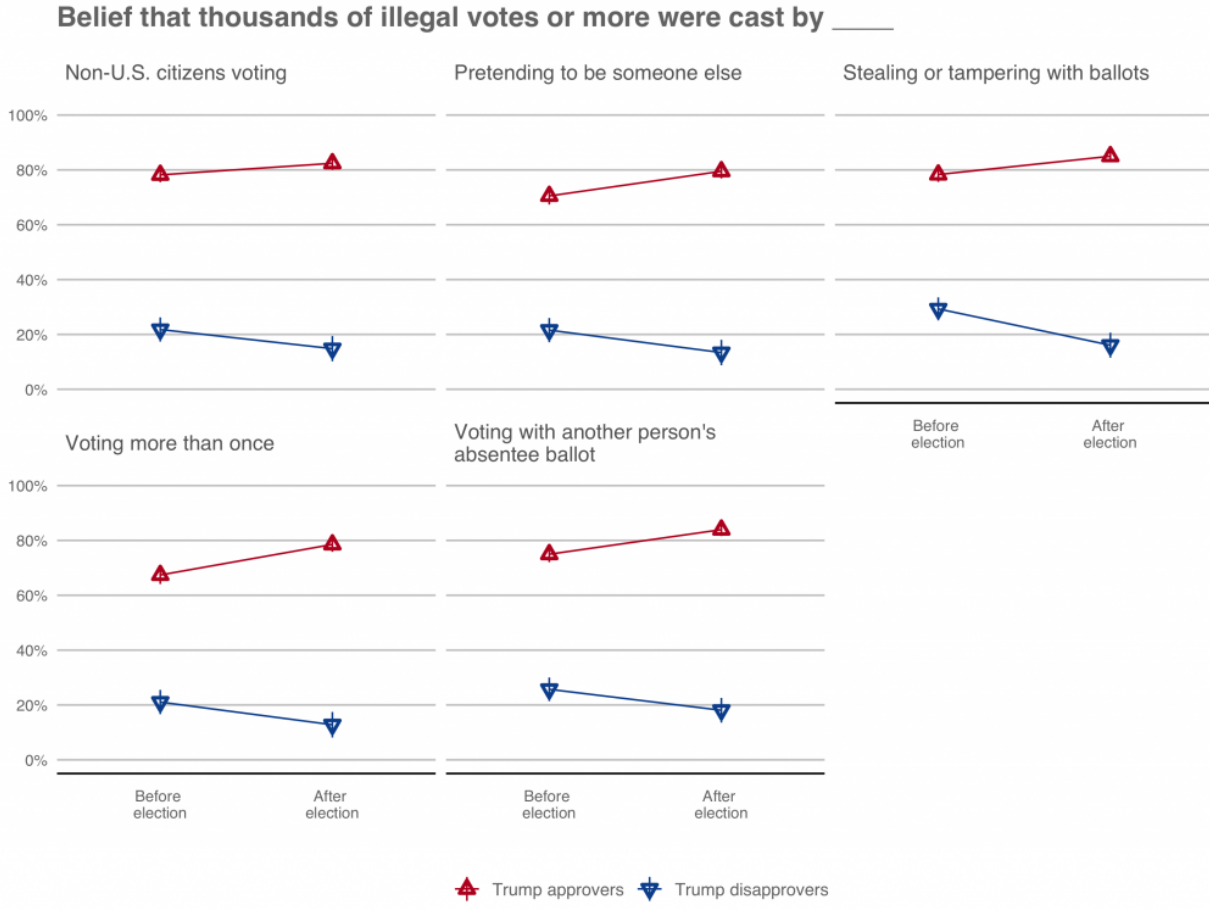
Among Trump opponents, the proportion who expressed confidence that their own vote was counted as intended was unchanged from October to November, but confidence in the integrity of the vote count at the state and national levels rose from 76% to 92% and from 61% to 88%, respectively. By contrast, confidence in the vote count plummeted among Trump supporters from 82% to 57% for the respondent's own vote and from 77% to 64% for voting at the state level. Most notably, however, confidence in the national vote count collapsed from 56% to just 28%. The shift greatly exceeds the customary divergence in election confidence [observed](#) after elections between winners and losers.

### Confidence that votes were counted as intended by level of government



Source: @BrightLineWatch

The divide in election confidence between Trump supporters and disapprovers was matched by vast differences in perceptions of the prevalence of voter fraud. We asked respondents in our surveys about the anticipated (pre-election) or actual (post-election) prevalence of five types of voter fraud in the November 2020 election: voting by non-citizens, voting under a false identity, stealing or tampering with ballots, voting more than once, and voting with another person’s absentee ballot. Respondents could answer by selecting a response option on a seven-point scale from “Less than ten” to “A million or more.” The figure below shows the percentage, among each group, that indicated the incidence was “Thousands” or higher for each type of fraud. ([Research](#) shows that the belief in widespread fraud that Trump supporters report in response to questions of this type is overwhelmingly sincere.)

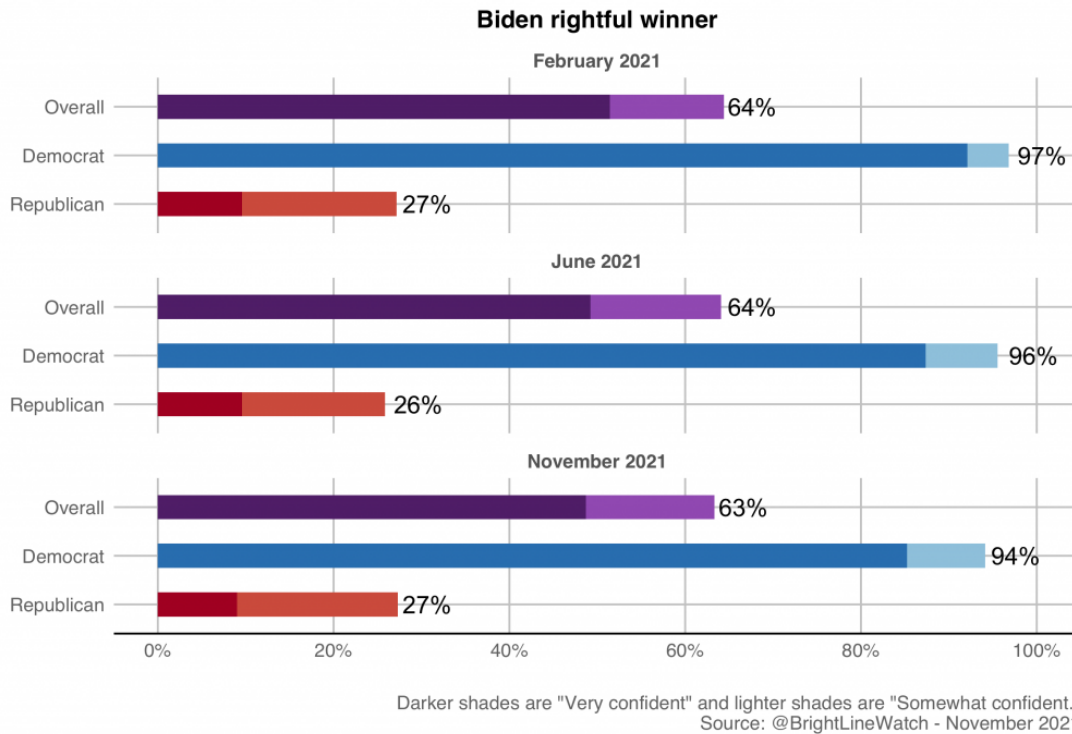


All options: A million or more; Hundreds of thousands; Tens of thousands; Thousands; Less than ten; Less than a hundred; Hundreds. Points are % respondents who indicated "Thousands" or more. Vertical error bars are 95% confidence intervals. Source: @BrightLineWatch

Even among Trump opponents, fraud was perceived to be vastly more common than any credible evidence supports. Perceived levels among Trump supporters were many times higher still. Overwhelming majorities of Trump supporters — between 79% and 85% — regard every form of malfeasance we polled about as having occurred thousands of times or more (up to millions of times) in the 2020 election. The levels of fraud in which these respondents believe are staggering and would require the complicity of thousands of local officials and volunteers, including numerous Republicans. Moreover, the gap in perceived fraud levels between Trump supporters and opponents increased from October to November. Trump opponents came to see each type of fraud as less frequent whereas supporters became more convinced of widespread misconduct.

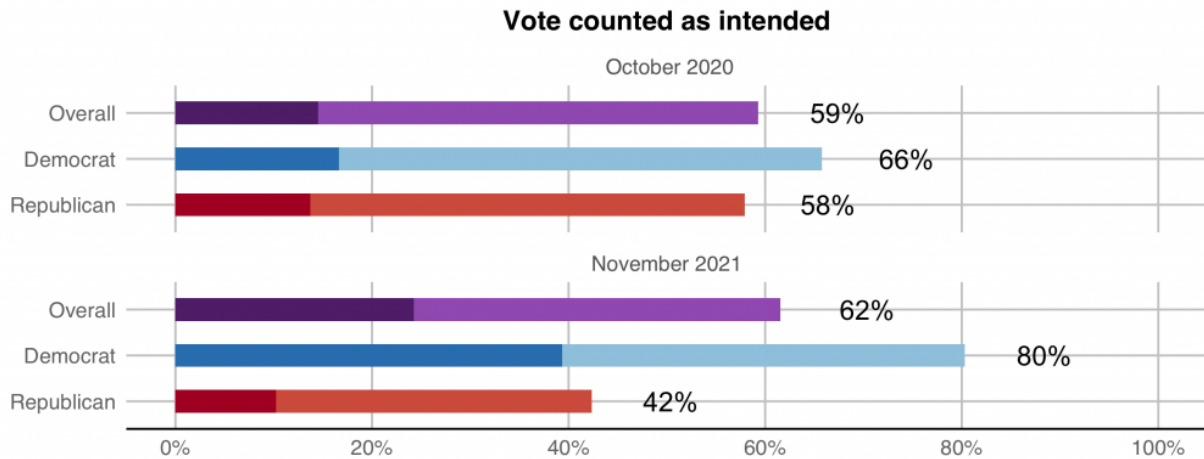
**The partisan gap in election confidence is persistent**

The gap between Trump supporters and opponents we observed in 2020 has translated into a persistent partisan divide in acceptance of the results of the presidential election. We surveyed Americans in [February](#), [June](#), and [November 2021](#) to ask them whether or not they thought Joe Biden was the rightful winner. We report results for the public as a whole as well as the parties.



As the figure above indicates, just 63% of Americans said Biden was definitely or probably the rightful winner — an estimate that is statistically indistinguishable from the 64% we found in our surveys in February and June 2021. Moreover, we continue to see a vast discrepancy between the parties. 94% of Democrats say Biden is the rightful winner compared to just 26% of Republicans — a split that has remained remarkably stable since Biden took office. Despite the continued lack of evidence to support Donald Trump’s false claims of widespread fraud in the 2020 election, the public has not become more accepting of the validity of Biden’s victory over time.

The attacks on the prior election result also appear to be affecting confidence in the 2022 midterm election. The figure below reports the results from [our November 2021 public survey](#). We find that only 62% of Americans said they were very or somewhat confident that votes nationwide will be counted as voters intend in the November 2022 election. This is slightly higher than the 59% who expressed confidence in the 2020 election in our October 2020 public survey, which was fielded just weeks before last year’s election (and in the context of widespread pandemic restrictions). However, divisions along partisan lines have deepened since that time. Even though Trump was already frequently making false claims of widespread fraud back in fall 2020, our survey data showed similar levels of confidence at the time between Democrats (66%) and Republicans (58%) at that time. By now, however, a partisan gulf has opened. Just 42% of Republicans express confidence in the 2022 vote count compared to 80% of Democrats.



Darker shades are "Very confident" and lighter shades are "Somewhat confident."  
Source: @BrightLineWatch - November 2021

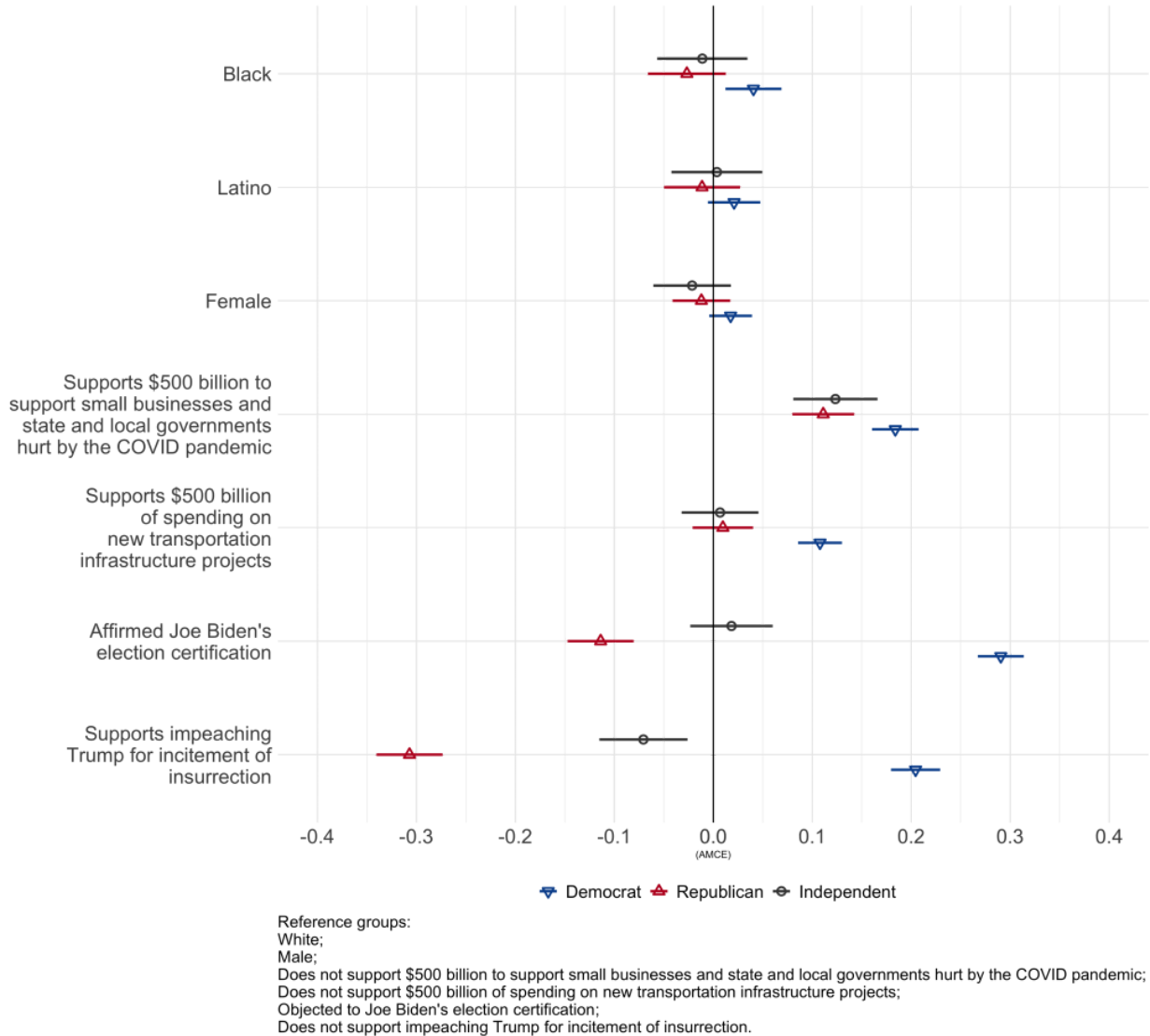
### Republican voters punish candidates who affirm the 2020 election result

The partisan divide over election integrity threatens to affect the choices voters make among candidates, especially in primaries. In particular, GOP candidates and officials who break from their party to defend the integrity of the 2020 election may now face punishment from voters.

To better understand these choices, [our January/February 2021 public survey](#) included a candidate choice experiment in which respondents were asked to choose between a series of paired hypothetical Republican candidates in an upcoming election. Each candidate was defined by a profile consisting of a set of personal attributes and stances, including their name (which signaled both gender and race/ethnicity), their partisanship, and their positions on government spending for COVID relief and transportation infrastructure, certification of the 2020 presidential election results, and President Trump’s second impeachment.

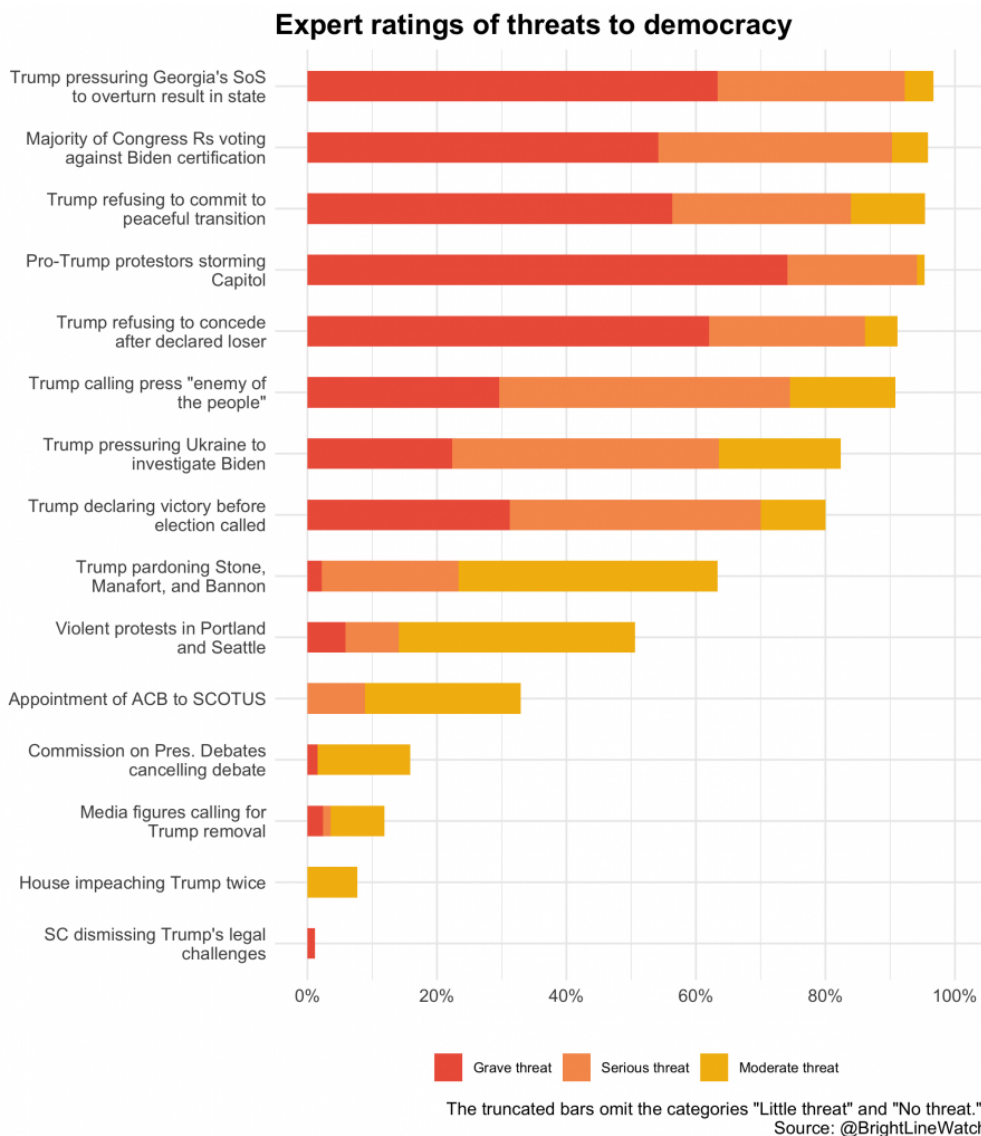
The figure below shows the marginal effect of a candidate’s race/ethnicity (Black, Latino, or white), gender (woman or man), and policy positions (supporting COVID relief, transportation spending, election certification, and impeachment) on the likelihood of preferring one Republican candidate over another for Democrats, Republicans, and independents. The estimates represent the change in the likelihood of voting for a candidate if they move from the baseline category to the category listed in the figure holding all else equal. Thus, the estimates for Black show the difference in the probability of supporting a candidate who is Black rather than one who is white. Most importantly, the estimates for policy position show the effect of shifting from opposition to support on each item — e.g., from opposing impeachment to supporting it.

## Support for hypothetical Republican candidates by partisanship



Demographic effects were measurable but small, generating changes of +/- 1-4 percentage points in the likelihood of voting for a given candidate. Policy effects dwarfed demographic ones, moving voting preferences by 11-18 percentage points depending on partisanship of the respondent and the issue in question. Voters were most polarized, however, in their responses to candidate positions on the 2020 election and on Trump's impeachment. Democrats were vastly more likely (by 29 percentage points) to support a candidate who affirmed certification versus one who opposed it. Republicans, by contrast, favored candidates who oppose certification over those who support it by 11 percentage points. Backing impeachment after January 6 increased support among Democrats by 20 percentage points, but decreased support among Republicans by 30 points. These penalties underscore the political risks to Republicans in Congress who bucked their party base and expressed opposition to Trump's challenge to a democratic election. (We replicated this experiment in our [June 2021 survey](#) and the results were the same.)

**Experts rate effort to overturn the 2020 election as a grave or serious threat to democracy**  
 Our [January/February 2021 expert surveys](#) included a battery that asked the experts to gauge the threat, if any, to American democracy posed by recent events. Respondents were asked to rate each event as a grave threat, a serious threat, a moderate threat, little threat, or no threat to democracy. The bar graph below lists the events in order of the total proportion of experts that rated each threat as either grave (red), serious (orange), or moderate (yellow).



More than 80% of experts rated five events related to President Trump’s effort to overturn the result of the 2020 election as grave or serious threats to democracy: pressuring Georgia’s Secretary of State to “find” enough votes to change the result in the state, 147 Republicans in Congress supporting objections to the certification of President Biden’s election, Trump’s refusal



to commit to a peaceful transition of power, pro-Trump insurrectionists' invasion of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, and Trump's refusal to concede the election.

## **Conclusion**

These results underscore the challenge facing our country. President Trump's false claims of widespread voter fraud have undermined public acceptance of Joe Biden's victory and polarized confidence in the U.S. election system. Republicans indicate they are more likely to oppose candidates who would certify Biden's victory, creating incentives for candidates and elected officials to reinforce Trump's claims rather than debunking them. Developments like these threaten the stability of our political system, which is why so many experts rate Trump's attempt to overturn the election — the cause of these trends — as a grave or serious threat to democracy.

## **References**

This testimony is drawn from the following Bright Line Watch reports:

- “A Democratic Stress Test — The 2020 Election and Its Aftermath.”  
<http://brightlinewatch.org/a-democratic-stress-test-the-2020-election-and-its-aftermathbright-line-watch-november-2020-survey/>
- “American democracy at the start of the Biden presidency”  
<http://brightlinewatch.org/american-democracy-at-the-start-of-the-biden-presidency/>
- “Still miles apart: Americans and the state of U.S. democracy half a year into the Biden presidency”  
<http://brightlinewatch.org/still-miles-apart-americans-and-the-state-of-u-s-democracy-half-a-year-into-the-biden-presidency/>
- “Tempered expectations and hardened divisions a year into the Biden presidency”  
<http://brightlinewatch.org/tempered-expectations-and-hardened-divisions-a-year-into-the-biden-presidency/>