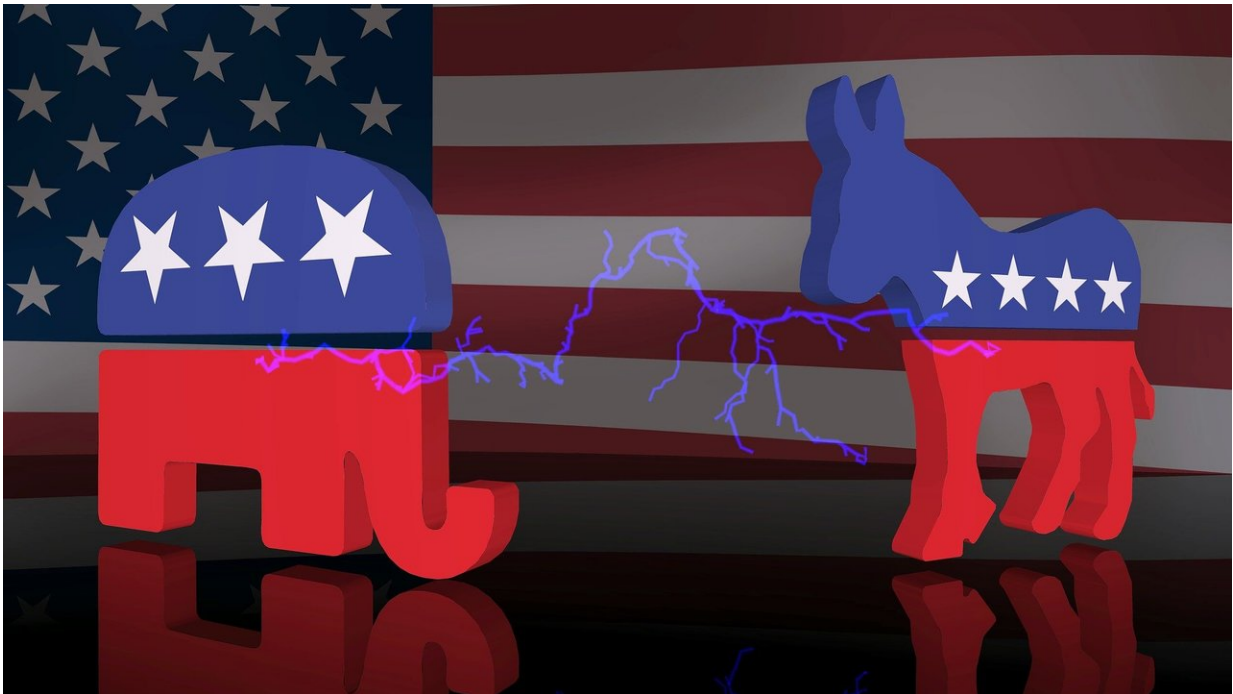


Ethnic fears eroding democratic attitudes among Republicans, new research finds

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Ethnocentric concerns about the growing political power and social influence of immigrants, African Americans and Latinos are undermining Republicans' commitment to long-held democratic norms, according to new research by Vanderbilt University political science professor Larry Bartels. The findings, published Aug. 31 in the research article "Ethnic antagonism erodes Republicans' commitment to

democracy," provide important context for today's political climate as partisan polarization and democratic "backsliding" are on the rise across the U.S. and other parts of the world.

Bartels began by analyzing the responses of 1,151 Republicans and Republican-leaning independents to a January 2020 survey on topics such as violence in pursuit of political ends, respect for the rule of law, and the legitimacy of elections. Instead of asking respondents to think about democracy in the abstract, the survey mimicked real politics, pitting traditional democratic values against other cherished ideals such as patriotism, strong leadership and the so-called "traditional American way of life."

Among the Republican respondents, 50.7 percent agreed with the statement that "The traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it," while 41.3 percent agreed that "A time will come when patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands." Further still, 73.9 percent agreed that "It is hard to trust the results of elections when so many people will vote for anyone who offers a handout."

"Faced with these trade-offs, relatively few Republicans declined the invitation to bend the rules or take the law into their own hands," said Bartels, the May Werthan Shayne Professor of Public Policy and Social Science.

To understand why so many respondents endorsed these ideas, he relied on 127 survey items to measure six potential bases of Republicans' political attitudes: partisanship, enthusiasm for President Trump, political cynicism, economic conservatism, cultural conservatism, and ethnic antagonism. Of the six, he found that ethnic antagonism was by far the strongest predictor of antidemocratic sentiments.

"The antidemocratic sentiments are not primarily products of social isolation or insufficient education or political interest," said Bartels. "Rather, they are grounded in real political values—specifically, and overwhelmingly, in Republicans' ethnocentric concerns about the political and social role of immigrants, African Americans and Latinos in a context of significant demographic and cultural change."

Bartels' measure of ethnic antagonism tapped perceptions that immigrants, African Americans, Latinos and other out-groups have taken more than their fair share of [political power](#) and government resources. The research also explored concerns about African Americans' use of racism "as an excuse" and that speaking English is essential for being "a true American."

While Bartels acknowledges that antidemocratic sentiments exist among both Republicans and Democrats, he argues that "an examination of Democrats' allegiance to democratic values would require somewhat different measures and very different explanations," since ethnic antagonism is much less common among Democrats. (In the same 2020 survey, 98 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents had ethnic antagonism scores below the Republican average, while 98 percent of Republicans had scores above the Democratic average.)

"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," said Bartels. "For those who view demographic change as a significant threat to 'the traditional American way of life,' the political stakes could hardly be higher."

It remains to be seen whether antidemocratic sentiments, fanned by the flames of ethnic [antagonism](#), could impel citizens to take the law into their own hands and use force to protect their way of life. Yet, as Bartels points out, the U.S. already has undergone one devastating civil war and

has a long history of racial violence, suggesting there could be serious implications for his findings, particularly in this extraordinarily divisive moment in American politics.

"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?" asked Bartels. "The simple answer is that no one knows."

More information: Larry M. Bartels. Ethnic antagonism erodes Republicans' commitment to democracy, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2020). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2007747117](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2007747117)

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