

Large numbers of Americans want a strong, rough, anti-democratic leader, say researchers

February 7 2023, by Tarah Williams, Andrew Bloeser and Brian Harward

Across the political spectrum, Americans seek 'tough leaders who will crack down'

Majorities of every political stripe agree or strongly agree with the idea that solving the nation's problems depends on strong leaders who will take action against those who would undermine American values. The exception is those who "lean Democratic" – but still, 49% of them support that idea too.

■ Strongly Agree
 ■ Agree
 ■ Disagree
 ■ Strongly Disagree

Statement: "The only way our country can solve its current problems is by supporting tough leaders who will crack down on those who undermine American values."

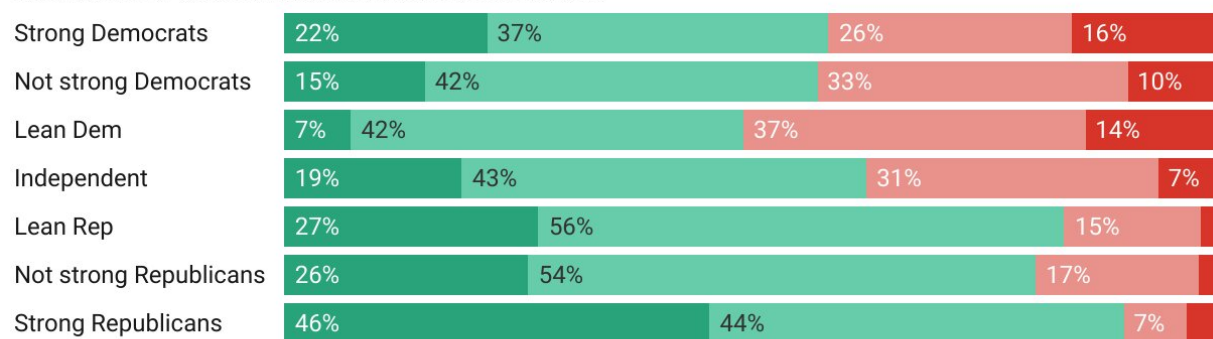


Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: Bloeser, Williams, Crawford and Harward, 2022. • Created with Datawrapper

Credit: The Conversation

It might be comforting to think that American democracy has made it past the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection. But [our research](#) shows that a wide

range of the American people, of all political stripes, seek leaders who are fundamentally anti-democratic.

It's true that many who participated in the insurrection are facing consequences, including [prison time](#). Many candidates for state office who falsely claimed that Donald Trump won the 2020 presidential election [lost their races](#). And the congressional committee investigating the insurrection [voted to refer](#) Trump to the Department of Justice for criminal charges.

But more than 100 members of Congress who [objected](#) to the results of a free and fair election won their reelection campaigns. And at least seven people who attended the "Stop the Steal" rally on Jan. 6 have been elected to [state legislatures](#) and two have been elected to [Congress](#).

As [scholars interested in](#) how committed citizens are to democracy, we wanted to measure whether regular Americans want someone who will abide by democratic traditions and practices or dispense with them.

Using a nationally representative sample of 1,500 respondents, we found that [a large proportion of Americans](#) are willing to support leaders who would violate democratic principles.

Support for anti-democratic leaders

About two decades ago, an important study found that [roughly 1 in 4 Americans](#) supported leaders who are uncompromising and take decisive action. These people said they would also prefer nonelected experts to make decisions. Our study replicates this finding nearly 20 years later but sheds light on a troubling reason for this preference.

At the Allegheny College Center for Political Participation, we, with our former student [Candaisy Crawford](#), asked people about their willingness

to support leaders who promised to protect them by any means necessary, even if that meant violating expected standards of behavior in a democracy, a set of principles often called "democratic norms." We [developed these questions](#) based on existing research about the strategies that leaders with anti-democratic tendencies use to build [public support](#).

In Venezuela, for instance, democratic decline happened gradually. Early on, Venezuela's former president Hugo Chavez was known for using [nationalist](#) language and calling opponents epithets like "[rancid oligarchs](#)" and "[squealing pigs](#)." Later, he [blacklisted](#) those who sought his removal from office through a democratically conducted referendum. Eventually, he went further, [arresting and exiling](#) his [political opponents](#).

These types of tactics have also been used in [other nations](#), such as Turkey and Hungary, by leaders who rose to power through democratic elections.

In our study, we asked about behaviors that foreshadow the early stages of democratic decline. For example, we asked citizens whether they thought that "the only way our country can solve its current problems is by supporting tough leaders who will crack down on those who undermine American values." We also asked about explicit violations of democratic principles, like shutting down news organizations and "bending the rules to get things done."

By design, some of these questions allow citizens to use their own interpretations of actions like "crackdowns" and "bending the rules." These types of practices can take a number of different specific forms, as the cases of Venezuela, Turkey and Hungary illustrate. Our aim was to determine whether citizens were inclined toward leaders who seek power by promising retribution toward some groups and benefits for others, because this rhetorical strategy is often a precursor to explicit violations

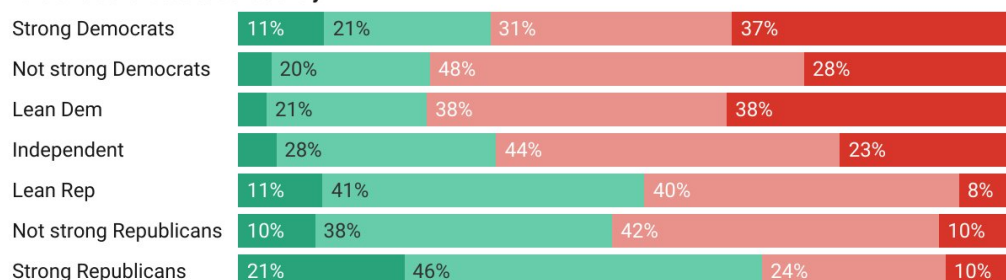
of democratic institutions.

Significant percentages of Democrats, and larger proportions of Republicans, support anti-democratic ideas

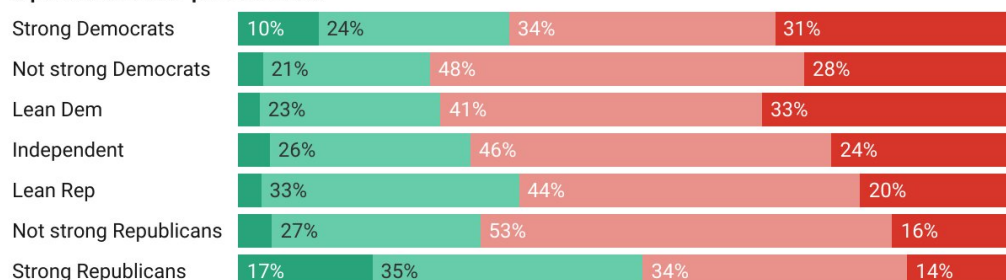
A national study found that large proportions of Americans, regardless of their political preferences, agree or strongly agree with statements that run counter to long-accepted democratic principles of civility, freedom of the press and the rule of law.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

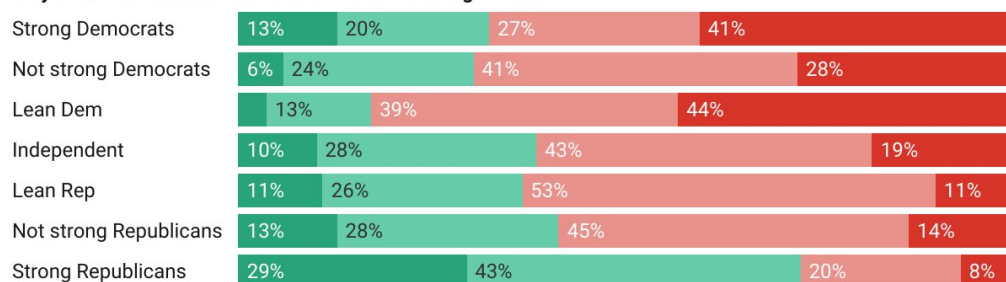
Statement: "Political leaders must sometimes use rough language to criticize entire groups who refuse to work hard and contribute to our country."



Statement: "To protect the interests of the people they represent, political leaders must sometimes attack the reputations of their political rivals."



Statement: "If political leaders believe that a news organization is attempting to undermine American values, they should take action to shut down that news organization."



Statement: "To protect the interests of people like you, political leaders must sometimes bend the rules to get things done."

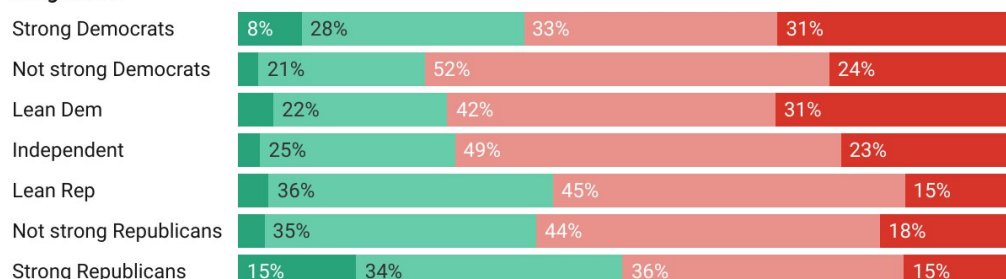


Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: Bloeser, Williams, Crawford and Harward, 2022. • Created with Datawrapper

Credit: The Conversation

Likewise, the phrasing of our questions is designed to allow respondents to rely on their own ideas about the meaning of "American values," and "people like you." Our interest was in what people would enable leaders to do to protect their idea of America and the Americans with whom they identify.

We found that people who want this type of protective but anti-democratic style of leadership were by far the most inclined to want leaders who would take uncompromising, decisive action. These people did not merely want their side to win a political competition for power. They were literally willing to say they would "bend the rules" to do it, a clear violation of the democratic ideal that everyone must follow the same rules.

For each item, we found that at least a third of the people we polled agreed or strongly agreed with these subtle or explicit violations of democratic norms.

Across the political spectrum

Anti-democratic statements are embraced by members of both U.S. parties, but more commonly by Republicans.

For example, around 90% of Republicans would support tough leaders who crack down on groups that "undermine American values"—however the survey respondents define those values. More than half of Democrats take the same position. Perhaps even more notably, nearly half of

citizens who strongly support the Republican Party and over a third of those who strongly support the Democratic Party endorse the view that it is acceptable to "bend the rules" for people like themselves to achieve political goals.

This echoes other research that has found Americans, on both sides of the political aisle, are [willing to sacrifice](#) democratic principles and practices if it means their political party wins elections.

An appetite for protection

The key to understanding these views, we believe, is [a desire for protection](#).

Many Americans view those in the other party as existential [threats to the country](#)—and [closed-minded, dishonest, immoral and unintelligent](#) too. All this coexists with growing evidence that more people are willing to support political violence under [certain circumstances](#).

Many citizens prefer [leaders](#) who are willing to undermine democracy if it means protecting people like themselves from groups that threaten their values or status. Although most Americans do not subscribe to these beliefs, a substantial portion of the country does.

Leaders who actively promise anti-democratic action may come and go, but we fear the appetite of many Americans for such actions may always be a persistent threat.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Large numbers of Americans want a strong, rough, anti-democratic leader, say researchers (2023, February 7) retrieved 11 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-02-large-americans-strong-rough-anti-democratic.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--