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## Partisan polarization and public perception of electoral legitimacy: Quantitative evidence from the 2020 US Presidential Election

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### Abstract

Democracy is predicated on the general consensus that election results are legitimate and widely accepted by citizens. However, the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election witnessed a historic and unprecedented challenge to this legitimacy, with millions of Americans continuing to dispute the outcome despite clear institutional validation. This research note investigates the factors that most strongly predict the belief that Donald Trump won the presidency legitimately using multivariate modeling and original survey data from the nationally representative American National Election Studies Survey's (ANES) 2024 data. Even after controlling for political interests, political knowledge, and a variety of demographic factors, the findings show that partisan identity and candidate preference by far remain the most powerful predictors of belief in Trump's victory. With significant implications for the well-being of electoral democracy, these findings offer quantitative support for the idea that partisan identity and elite cues play significantly influences how people perceive democratic legitimacy.

**Keywords:** 2020 US Election, polarization, misinformation, elite cues, election legitimacy, partisanship

### Introduction

Stable democracies are characterized by the peaceful transition of power through widely recognized and fair elections (Dahl, 1971; Huntington, 1991, p. 266) <sup>[2, 10]</sup>. However, a sizable portion of the American populace believe that the transfer of power from president Donald Trump to Joseph Biden in 2021 was illegitimate due to concerns about the validity of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election results (Enders *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[4]</sup>. This study asks, what social and psychological factors explain why many Americans believed that Trump was the legitimate winner of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election?

The study uses robust statistical modeling and post-election survey data to examine the social and psychological predictors of belief in Trump's victory. It specifically concentrates on two key mechanisms, specifically partisan identity and candidate preference. These factors have not been thoroughly compared in their effects on belief in electoral legitimacy. Fewer studies have examined how significant these effects compare to other important factors like political interest, political knowledge, institutional trust, and demographic variables in a single, nationally representative electoral framework. To give a thorough explanation of the variables influencing belief in the outcome of the 2020 election, the analysis in this study accounts for the roles of political interest and knowledge, as well as how demographic and attitudinal controls influence belief in democratic legitimacy during times of intensified polarization.

Understanding the fundamental consequences of partisan identity and candidate preference enhances academic theories regarding public opinion, motivated reasoning, and elite influence. It also holds critical practical implications for policymakers, election administrators, and democratic institutions. The findings emphasize the necessity of guided political communication, civic education, and institutional trust-building strategies that extend beyond mere fact-checking.

### Motivated reasoning and elite cues

To understand the reasons behind the skepticism expressed by several Americans regarding the legitimacy of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, it is essential to integrate various significant pieces of political science theory. The foundation of this study comprises two principal frameworks, which are partisan motivated reasoning, elite cue-taking, and the fundamental role of institutional trust. Collectively, these viewpoints clarify the interplay between party identity and elite messaging in influencing public perceptions regarding essential democratic outcomes.

Partisan motivated reasoning posits that individuals frequently engage with political facts without neutrality, but with partiality. Political identities, such as affiliation with the Republican or Democratic parties, constitute fundamental aspects of an individual's social identity, which significantly shapes their interpretation of new information (Green *et al.*, 2002) <sup>[7]</sup>. Partisans tend to agree with information that support their side and dismiss or counter-argue threatening information (Kunda, 1990) <sup>[11]</sup>. This is because they do not want to hear information that goes against their group's interests or threatens their identities. Studies indicate that when political stakes are high, such as during presidential elections (Bartels, 2002) <sup>[1]</sup>. The outcome is not merely a disagreement regarding values or preferences, but a fundamental challenge over reality, which is exemplified by the clearly contrasting partisan convictions regarding the legitimacy of the 2020 election results.

The theory of elite cue-taking builds on this to explain why these splits can get so severe. Many citizens are unable to comprehend the complicated nature of the political process. This prompts them to rely on trusted party elites and leaders for guidance on interpreting significant events (Zaller, 1992; Lenz, 2012) <sup>[16, 13]</sup>. Partisan supporters are more likely to believe and internalize cues when politicians send clear, unified messages, like saying that an election was unfair over and over again. In 2020, President Trump and other prominent Republicans continued to claim that the election was "stolen", which made millions of supporters doubt the result (Enders *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[4]</sup>.

These frameworks reveal why most Americans are inclined to question election legitimacy and the underlying reasons for their skepticism. When leaders consistently communicate messages that align with the group identities of their follower, it creates a self-reinforcing belief system that is largely resistant to corrective information or fact-checking.

### Hypotheses

### This study is based on the following hypotheses:

- **H1:** There will be a strong and positive association between being a Republican and believing that Trump won the 2020 election.
- **H2:** Preferring Trump as a candidate will be strongly associated with thinking he won.

### Materials and Methods

**Data Sources:** This study relies on the first version released of the 2024 American National Election Studies (ANES) survey, a premier dataset for U.S. public opinion research. The ANES conducted its 2024 pre- and post-election interviews with a representative sample of the U.S. adult population, employing both in-person and online components to achieve a diverse respondent base and ensure demographic and geographic representation aligned with U.S. Census standards.

**Sample:** The ANES 2024 includes over 5,000 respondents. I analyze only those completing both surveys and identify as Democrats or Republicans, with valid responses (N=2583).

### Key Measures

#### Dependent Variable

Belief that Trump Was the Legitimate Winner (binary: 1="Trump was the legitimate winner", 0 = otherwise).

#### Key Independent Variables

- **Partisan Identity (Party\_ID):** Republican (=1) vs. Democrat (=0)
- **Candidate Preference:** Preference for Trump vs. Harris.
- **Political Attitudes:** Political interest, political knowledge.
- **Controls:** Age, education, income, race (White=1), gender (Male=1).

### Analytical Strategy

Logistic regression models were estimated with weights and standard checks for fit, collinearity, and influential cases.

### Results and Discussions

The descriptive results show that belief in Trump's victory is polarized by party. The regression results in Table 1 (see full results in Appendix/Table A1) highlights statistically significant and marginal predictors. The pseudo R<sup>2</sup> is 0.439 and variance inflation factors (VIFs) ≤ 5 across models indicates strong model fit for this type of outcome, according to established statistical standards (McFadden, 1977; Hair *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[14, 9]</sup>.

**Table 1:** Statistically Significant Predictors ( $p < 0.05$ )

| Variable             | Coefficient | Significance | Interpretation   |
|----------------------|-------------|--------------|--|
| Party_ID             | +1.63       | ***          | Republicans are significantly more likely than Democrats to believe Trump won. |
| Candidate_Preference | +1.91       | ***          | Preference for Trump dramatically increases belief in Trump victory.           |
| Political Interest   | +0.21       | **           | Politically engaged more likely to believe Trump won.                          |
| Income               | -0.015      | *            | Lower-income respondents more likely to believe Trump won.                     |
| Gender (Male=1)      | -0.27       | *            | Men less likely than women to believe Trump won.                               |

Full results in Appendix/ Table A1

### Key Findings

The most significant predictor overall is the candidate preference. Even when party and other factors are taken into account, preference for Trump is linked to a significantly

higher likelihood of believing in his victory.

In addition to candidate preference, partisan identity is the most powerful statistically significant predictor. Strong partisan polarization is evident in the significantly higher

likelihood that Republicans think Trump was the rightful winner.

Political interest raises the likelihood of erroneous beliefs, implying that involvement increases exposure to partisan or deceptive signals. Control variables such as age, education, and race have only weakly significant effects, while income and gender have modest but significant effects.

This study strongly supports previous theories by demonstrating that the main sources of contested belief in electoral legitimacy are partisan identity and elite cues, which are operationalized as candidate preference. This involves deep identity-anchored perceptions as well as vulnerability to false information (Green *et al.*, 2002; Zaller, 1992)<sup>[7, 16]</sup>. A clear example of cue-taking on a fundamental democratic outcome is the widespread adoption of elite signals (Trump's post-election assertions) by Republican partisans, irrespective of institutional consensus or facts.

It is also interesting to note that having greater political interest strengthens rather than weakening belief in Trump's victory. This pattern is consistent with confirmation bias and selective exposure. Even knowledgeable citizens may be at risk when partisan-motivated reasoning takes precedence, according to the null effect of political knowledge.

Belief in Trump's victory is also greatly increased by mistrust of electoral officials and the perceived illegitimacy of the process. However, compared to core partisanship or candidate preference, these effects are less pronounced. It highlights a hierarchy in which identity comes before institutional trust.

Moreover, income, age, education, and gender have small but noticeable effects. Though the effects are minimal when compared to partisan and elite cue variables, men and respondents with higher incomes are less likely to think Trump won.

### Limitation

A significant limitation of this study is its dependence on cross-sectional survey data from the ANES 2024 preliminary release, which restricts the capacity to ascertain causal relationships and monitor shifts in perceptions over time. Future research should use longitudinal designs to track change and test interventions that are designed to alleviate partisan polarization.

### Implications

Rebuilding electoral trust requires strategies beyond fact delivery. Elites, media, and institutions must carefully frame message, given their ever-growing influence. Initiatives for civic education must also go beyond simply filling in factual knowledge gaps by acknowledging and directly addressing the potent role of motivated reasoning and group identity, which frequently fuel skepticism or the rejection of valid results. Democratic societies can more effectively protect the integrity of their political system from polarization and disinformation by combining these strategies.

### Conclusion

This study quantifies the importance of partisan identity and elite cues in shaping beliefs about the 2020 election's legitimacy. Even when political attitudes and demographics were taken into account, Republican identity and Trump preference outweighed other factors in predicting false beliefs about the election winner. Therefore, interventions must address the elite and identity dynamics causing

electoral legitimacy crises in addition to redressing misinformation in polarized democracies.

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