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**THE COVID STATES PROJECT:**  
**A 50-STATE COVID-19 SURVEY**  
**REPORT #39: PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS**  
**THE STORMING OF THE CAPITOL BUILDING**

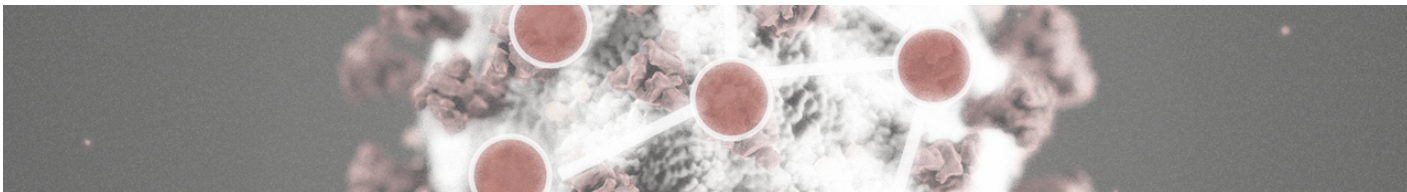
USA, February 2021

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**Report of February 15, 2021, v.1**

***The COVID States Project***

**From:** The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States

***A joint project of:***

Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

**Authors:** David Lazer (Northeastern University); Matthew A. Baum (Harvard University); Katherine Ognyanova (Rutgers University); Matthew Simonson (Northeastern University); Jon Green (Northeastern University); James Druckman (Northwestern University); Adina Gitomer (Northeastern University); Jennifer Lin (Northwestern University); Roy H. Perlis (Harvard Medical School); Mauricio Santillana (Harvard Medical School), and Alexi Quintana (Northeastern University)

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Northeastern University  
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# COVER MEMO

Summary Memo — February 15, 2020

## *The COVID States Project*

**From:** *The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States*

**Partners:** Northeastern University, Harvard University/Harvard Medical School, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

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From April 2020 through February 2021, we conducted multiple waves of a large, 50-state survey, some results of which are presented here. You can find previous reports online at [covidstates.org](https://covidstates.org).

### **Note on methods:**

Between January 13 and January 20, 2021, we conducted a national survey of 2,022 individuals about the events of January 6th. The survey was conducted by PureSpectrum via an online, nonprobability sample, with representative national quotas for race/ethnicity, age, gender, and region (for methodological details on the other waves, see [covidstates.org](https://covidstates.org)). In addition to balancing on these dimensions, we reweighted our data using demographic characteristics to match the U.S. population with respect to race/ethnicity, age, gender, education, and living in urban, suburban, or rural areas. This was the latest in a series of surveys we have been conducting since April 2020, examining attitudes and behaviors regarding COVID-19 in the United States.

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## The two visions of reality in US politics

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The 2020 election produced two distinct perceived realities for the United States public. The first perceived reality holds that the election was conducted fairly, and that Joe Biden won. Individuals who hold this vision of reality feel their votes were counted accurately, and that the [events of January 6th](#) were repugnant. This is also the version of reality for 60-70% of the US population. This reality is documented by court cases, our government officials (Republican and Democratic) in charge of administering the election, and the credible news media.

The second vision of reality holds that the election was essentially corrupt—driven, in particular, by illegal mail-in ballots, noncitizen voting, and voting machine fraud. In this perceived reality, Biden is a usurper to the presidency. Further, the people who stormed the Capitol had a point, although the worst actions were taken by individuals affiliated with Antifa activists masquerading as Trump supporters. This is the expressed reality of former President Trump, certain Republican leaders, a subset of conservative media, and certain corners of the social media ecosystem. This is also the reality for 25-30% of the US population, and roughly half of Republicans.

These two perceived realities are not created equal. The facts, as presented by the fact sorting institutions of the government and media, unambiguously support the first. However, perceptions—especially when they are shared by a sizable number of people and organized in a way that provides access to power—have consequences. The data below suggest that these two perceived realities will continue to define US politics, at least for the near future, because they are clustered around the two parties, and in each perceived reality, the other party is not just an opponent, but an enemy of democracy. In each case, the logical conclusion is that the assumption of power by the other party represents a potentially permanent surrendering of power. Below, we summarize public opinion regarding election integrity and the events of January 6th, and close by discussing the implications of these findings for American politics over the next 4 years.

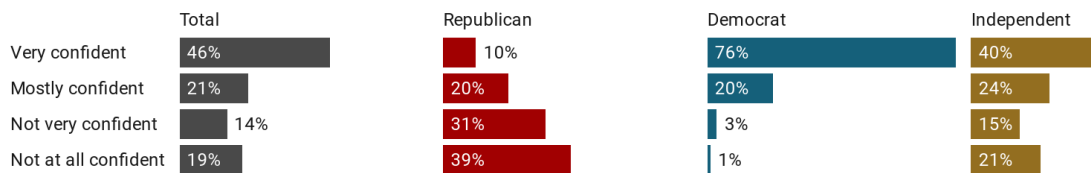
### Perceptions of election integrity

Two-thirds of respondents believe that the election was conducted fairly, while one-third believed that it was not. However, this aggregate pattern obscures enormous partisan gaps. Fully 96% of Democrats reported that the election had been conducted fairly, compared with only 30% of Republicans (see Figure 1).

Overall, 59% disagree and 29% agree with the statement, "If votes were fairly counted, Donald Trump would have won the 2020 election." Among partisans, however, 89% of Democrats disagree, versus only 18% of Republicans and 65% of Republicans agree (see Figure 2).

### Confidence in the fairness of the 2020 US election

How confident are you in the fairness of the 2020 presidential election?



National sample, N = 2022, Time period: 01/13/2021-01/20/2021

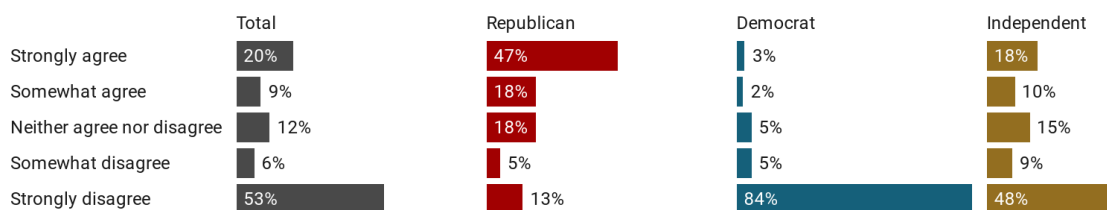
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Figure 1.

### Fraud concerns and 2020 US presidential election results

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

**"If votes were fairly counted, Donald Trump would have won the 2020 election"**



National sample, N = 2022, Time period: 01/13/2021-01/20/2021

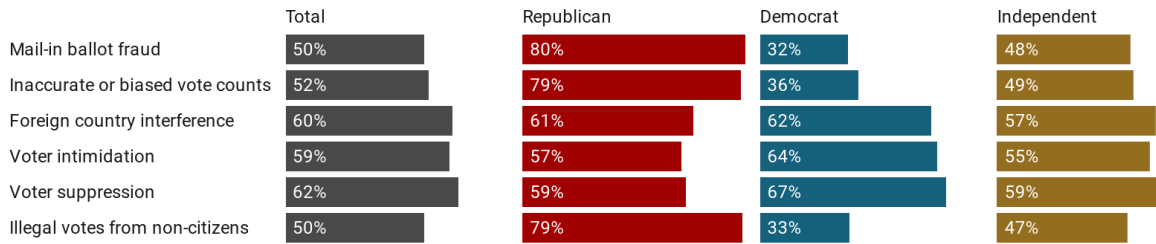
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Figure 2.

Interestingly, while most respondents overall felt the elections were conducted fairly, many nonetheless voiced a variety of concerns about specific election integrity issues. Such concerns arose among *all* partisan groups, but Democrats and Republicans emphasized quite different issues (see Figure 3). Majorities of Democrats and Republicans were worried about measures that would reduce voting (voter suppression and intimidation), with Democrats somewhat more concerned (by 7-8 points). Democrats and Republicans were about equally concerned regarding foreign country interference (62% vs 61%). The big differences between Democrats and Republicans emerged with regard to the integrity of the votes that were cast. Republicans were much more worried than Democrats about mail-in voter fraud (80% vs. 32%), illegal votes from non-citizens (79% vs. 33%), and inaccurate or biased vote counts (79% vs 36%).

### Concerns about potential challenges with the 2020 US election

How concerned, if at all, do you feel about the following issues regarding the 2020 U.S. election?  
 [ Percent respondents who say they were "somewhat concerned" or "very concerned" ]



National sample, N = 2022, Time period: 01/13/2021-01/20/2021

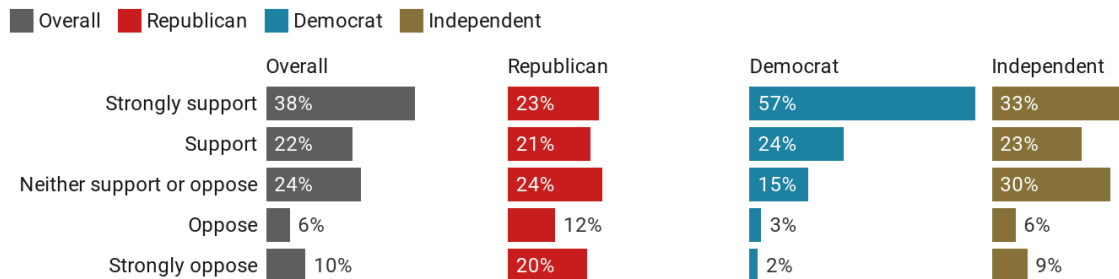
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**Figure 3.**

Perceptions regarding the integrity of the election predated Election Day. Many of the concerns regarding the integrity of the election centered around voting by mail, which President Trump began attacking as a form of voting as early as spring 2020. This caused Republican support levels for voting by mail to fall far below those of Democrats much earlier than November 3rd, as shown in our May survey results (Figure 4).

### Partisan differences in support for making voting by mail easier

Would you support making it easier to vote in November by mail?



National sample, N = 20,333, Time period: 5/2/2020-5/15/2020

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org)  
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**Figure 4.**

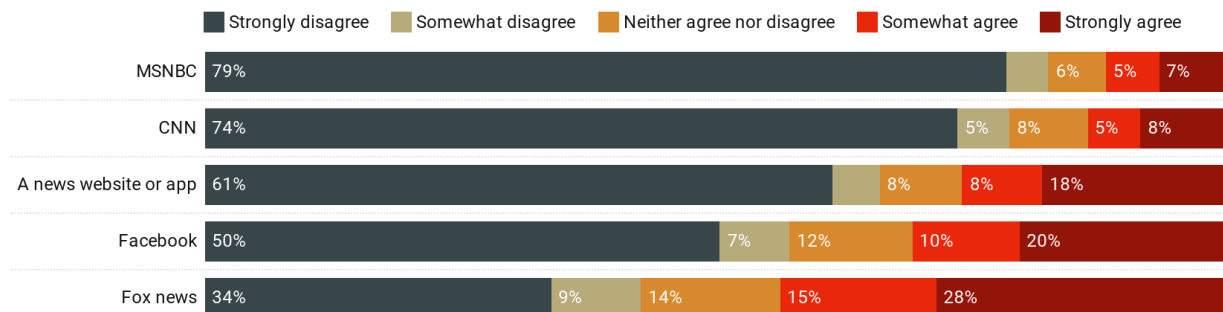
Finally, these perceptions varied systematically with sources of news consumption. For example, among individuals who get news from Fox, 43% believed that Trump would have won if votes had been counted fairly—far more than for consumers of any other news source (Figure 5). And when we compare Republicans who do and do not watch Fox News, there are substantial differences: 73% of Republicans who watch Fox agree that Trump would have won, compared to 56% of Republicans who do not watch Fox News.

## Perceptions of election fairness among media audiences

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

**"If votes were fairly counted, Donald Trump would have won the 2020 election"**

[ Percent respondents among the audience members who get news from each source ]



National sample, N = 2022, Time period: 01/13/2021-01/20/2021

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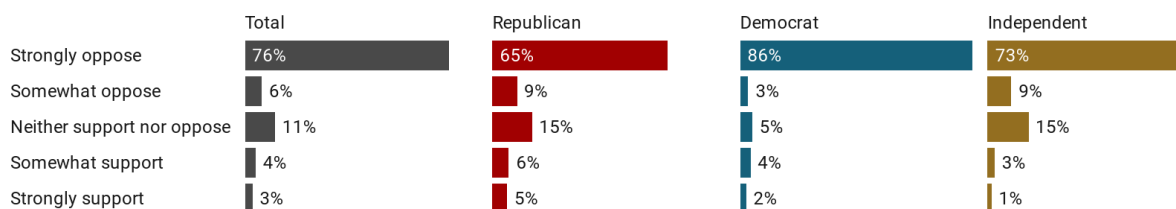
Figure 5.

## Views of the events of January 6th

Large majorities opposed the storming of the Capitol, although opposition was far from unanimous (see Figure 6). Once again, there were very large partisan divides in support for the storming of the Capitol. While 86% of Democrats strongly opposed the storming of the Capitol, only 65% of Republicans did. Among Republicans, 11% somewhat or strongly supported the storming of the Capitol, while another 15% neither supported nor opposed it (for Democrats, the corresponding numbers are 6% and 5%, respectively).

### Public support for the January 6th storming of the Capitol building

Did you support or oppose the storming of the Capitol building on January 6th?



National sample, N = 2022, Time period: 01/13/2021-01/20/2021

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org)  
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Figure 6.



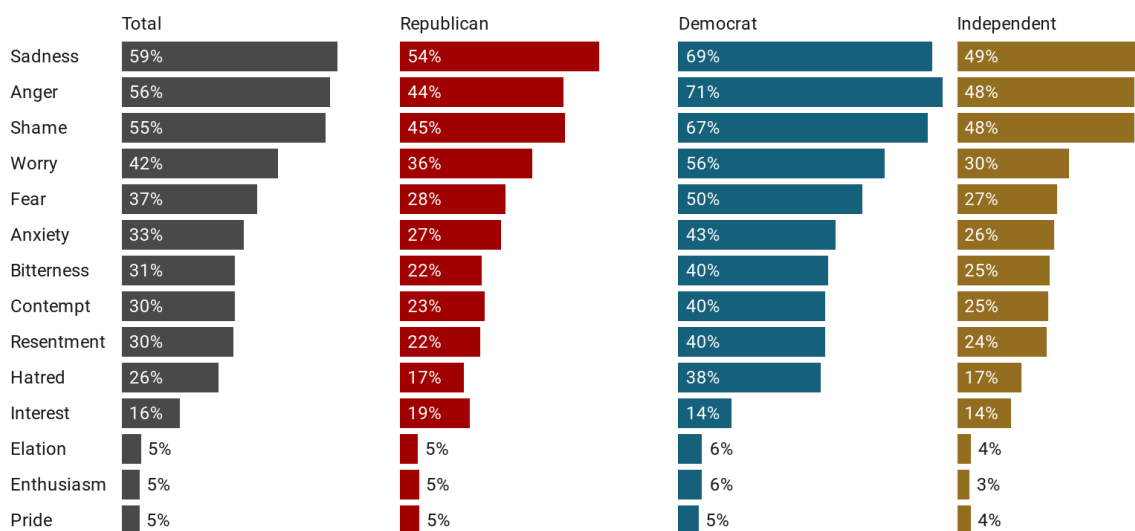
In our open-ended responses regarding how people felt about January 6, the most common response expressed anger, shame, embarrassment, such as this respondent:

*"It was a failed coup attempt and it was embarrassing to our country."*<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, when asked about the range of emotions experienced as a result of the storming of the Capitol building, Americans across party lines were most likely to say they felt *sadness, anger, and shame* (see Figure 7). Overall, more than half of our respondents said those three words described their feelings *quite a bit or extremely* well. Negative emotions were especially dominant among Democrats, more than half of whom also identified *fear* and *anxiety* as something they felt when learning about the events of January 6th.

### How do Americans feel about the storming of the Capitol building?

To what extent do each of the following terms describe your feelings or emotions about the storming of the Capitol on January 6th? [ Percent respondents who respond "quite a bit" or "extremely" ]



National sample, N = 2022, Time period: 01/13/2021-01/20/2021

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**Figure 7.**

However, a nontrivial number of respondents put the blame not on Donald Trump and his supporters, but on Antifa and Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters. In response to an open-ended question, one participant stated:

*"This was not Trump supporters.....they were left wing extremists that wanted the world to think they were Trump supporters."*

<sup>1</sup> Italics added.

Another similarly noted:

*"I agree that if needed the people of USA need to let our ELECTED officials know WE are in charge, but I think these people were antifa actors not people that believe in freedom."*

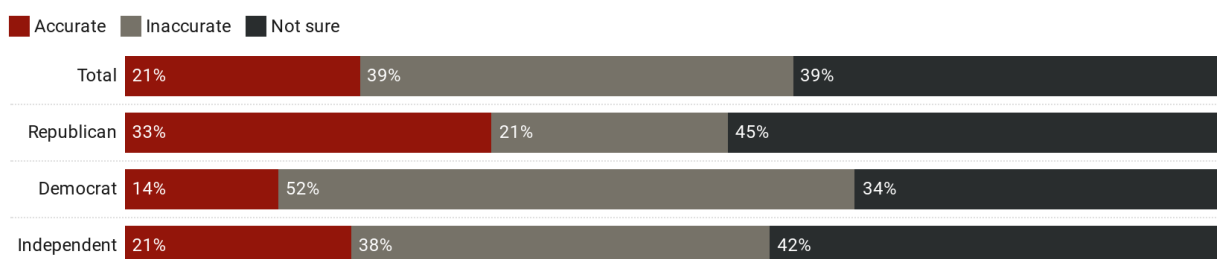
When specifically asked if they believed that the people who stormed the Capitol were undercover Antifa members, 21% of respondents agreed, including 33% of Republicans, 14% of Democrats, and 21% of Independents (see Figure 8).

### Perceptions about Antifa involvement in the storming of the Capitol building

Below are some statements about current affairs. To the best of your knowledge, are those statements accurate or inaccurate?

**"The people who stormed the Capitol building were undercover Antifa members"**

[ Percent respondents saying the statement was "Accurate", "Inaccurate", or "Not sure" ]



National sample, N = 2022, Time period: 01/13/2021-01/20/2021

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**Figure 8.**

Other groups of respondents noted the different reactions of law enforcement to Capitol rioters and BLM protesters:

*"It makes me very mad. I am African American and if a big group of us did this the police would have dogs and shoot."*

Some also equated the storming of the Capitol with BLM protests:

*"[I]t should not have happened just as the looting and violence of the BLM and Antifa should not have happened."*

Finally, there was a small but nontrivial fraction of responses that were approving of the protests:

*"The Democrats cheated and are a threat to democracy. They deserve more than just storming the Capital building!"*

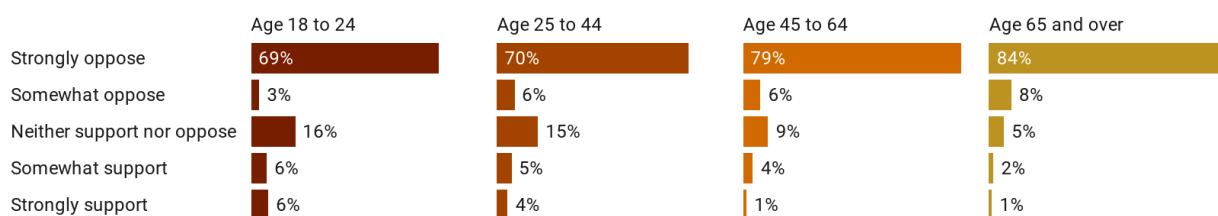
Overall, 7% of respondents expressed some support for the events of January 6, while 11% were neutral.

Several types of individuals were particularly likely to express support: respondents who reported attending a rally or protest in the past 6 months (26% support), respondents who expressed support for President Trump back in November (12%), and respondents who reported someone sick with COVID-19 in the household (11% support).

Gender and age gaps emerge as well: 10% of men expressed support for the events of January 6 compared to 4% of women, and 12% of young adults (ages 18-24) expressed support compared to 3% of those ages 65+. Finally, prior stress levels reported in November are also correlated with support: 9% of respondents who rated their stress levels higher than 5 (on a 1-10 scale) supported the storming of capitol while only 3% of those with lower stress did (see Figure 11).

### Support for the storming of the Capitol building by age

Did you support or oppose the storming of the Capitol building on January 6th?



National sample, N = 2022, Time period: 01/13/2021-01/20/2021

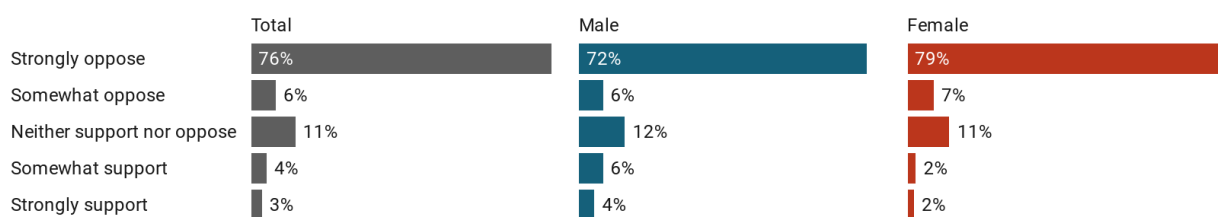
Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University)

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Figure 9.

### Support for the storming of the Capitol building by gender

Did you support or oppose the storming of the Capitol building on January 6th?



National sample, N = 2022, Time period: 01/13/2021-01/20/2021

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University)

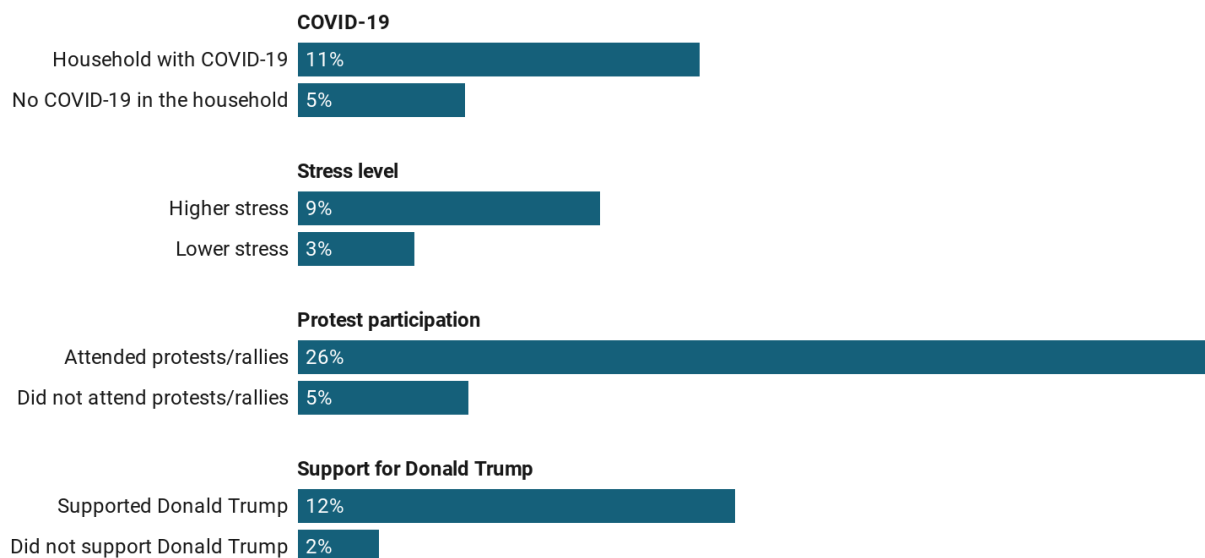
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Figure 10.

## Group differences in support for the storming of the Capitol Building

Did you support or oppose the storming of the Capitol building on January 6th?

[ Percent respondents who say they "somewhat support" or "strongly support" the storming of the Capitol building ]



National Sample, N=1777. Time period: 1/13/21-1/20/21. Support for Trump, stress, and COVID-19 questions asked prior to January 6 storming (11/3/20-11/30/20). Lower stress is 1-5 (out of 10) and higher stress is 6-10.

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University)  
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**Figure 11.**

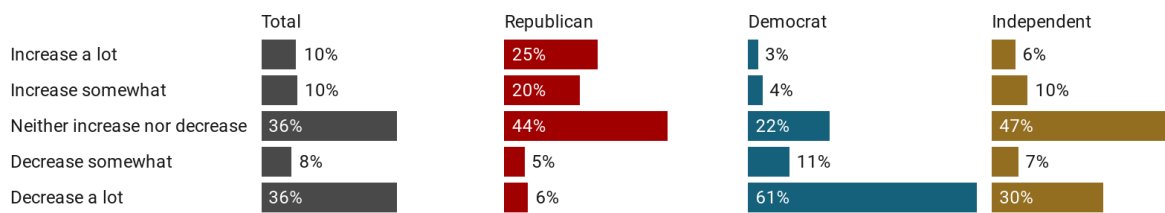
## Donald Trump's continued relevance

We also asked respondents whether an endorsement of a candidate for office from Trump would increase or decrease their likelihood of voting for that candidate. These results are shown in Figure 12. A majority said a Trump endorsement would decrease their likelihood of voting for that candidate. However, this aggregate pattern was substantially driven by Democrats, who would also be quite unlikely to vote for Republicans regardless of Trump's endorsement.

More informative, therefore, are the responses from Republicans—whose votes in primaries might be driven by a Trump endorsement—and independents, whose votes might swing the outcome in close elections. In our survey, 45% of Republicans said a Trump endorsement would increase their likelihood of voting for a candidate, while only 11% said the opposite. Among independents, however, the trend was reversed: 16% said it would increase their odds of supporting a candidate, and 37% said that it would decrease their odds of doing so.

## The importance of Donald Trump's endorsement in future elections

Would Donald Trump's endorsement of a candidate for office increase or decrease your support for that candidate?



National sample, N = 2022, Time period: 01/13/2021-01/20/2021

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org)  
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Figure 12.

## Implications

The majority of the US public views the election of 2020 as fair and Biden as the rightful victor. However, a minority (about 30%) sees Biden as a usurper of an election that Trump legitimately won. These two visions of reality will likely shape US politics for the near future.

Some implications of this split among Americans include:

(1) Many **Republican elected officials will likely continue to acquiesce to the narrative of the stolen election.** The fact that those who believe Trump won are a majority of the Republican Party provide outsized political influence for this alternate “reality”. It means that every Republican will face primary electorates in which a majority or substantial minority of voters believe that Trump was the legitimate victor of the 2020 election. This will make it difficult for elected officials to state the truth: that Biden did, in fact, win the presidential election. This fear of primary electorates can create a reinforcing cycle of elite messaging and public opinion—a prediction which has been borne out since the events of January 6. The decline of competitive congressional districts exacerbates this issue as the main risk that most elected officials face is in losing a primary, not in losing the general election.

(2) **Donald Trump will likely continue to be a major force within the Republican party.** The perception that the election was stolen from former President Trump makes him a continued voice within the party. This is reflected in the fact that a sizable plurality of Republicans indicated that an endorsement from Trump would make them more likely to support a candidate for political office. The loyalty of the base of the Republican party to Trump, in turn reinforces the preceding point: defying Trump creates a serious risk of being primaried.

(3) **The continued embrace of Donald Trump and the narrative of the stolen election creates electoral risk for the Republican Party.** The fact that a majority of Americans reject the narrative of the stolen election, and that independents indicate an endorsement by Donald Trump makes them less likely to vote for a candidate, suggests that this narrative has the potential to hurt the Republican Party. The broad risk for Republicans is that they will be seen as the party that opposes democracy. However, it is unclear how large this threat will loom relative to other issues that will inevitably emerge in the 2022 and 2024 elections (such as how effective Americans think the federal response to COVID-19 has been, or how the economy is doing at the time).

(4) **The Republican party will continue to pursue policies that narrow access to the ballot.** Given the broad acceptance of the presence of voter fraud within the Republican party, it is very likely that the party will continue to work towards policies that will constrict access to the ballot, which will be particularly consequential in potentially competitive states where Republicans are dominant in the legislative process (such as Wisconsin, North Carolina, Georgia, and Texas). However, the fact that there are bipartisan concerns regarding voter suppression does create possible stumbling blocks for such actions. It is also likely that Republican elected officials who are in charge of the electoral machinery will be less likely to acquiesce to a Democratic victory in future elections than was the case in 2020.