Laboratories of Democratic Backsliding

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Abstract

The Trump presidency generated concern about democratic backsliding and re-
newed interest in measuring the national democratic performance of the United
States. However, the U.S. has a decentralized form of federalism that admin-
isters democratic institutions at the state level. Using 51 indicators of elec-
toral democracy from 2000 to 2018, we develop a measure of subnational demo-
cratic performance, the State Democracy Index. We then test theories of demo-
cratic expansion and backsliding based in party competition, polarization, demo-
graphic change, and the group interests of national party coalitions. Difference-
in-differences results suggest a minimal role for all factors except Republican
control of state government, which dramatically reduces states' democratic per-
formance during this period. This result calls into question theories focused on
changes within states. The racial, geographic, and economic incentives of groups
in *national* party coalitions may instead determine the health of democracy in
the states.

American states, which were once praised by the great jurist Louis Brandeis as "laboratories of democracy," are in danger of becoming laboratories of authoritarianism as those in power rewrite electoral rules, redraw constituencies, and even rescind voting rights to ensure that they do not lose.

—Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (2018, 2)

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The Trump presidency has generated new concerns about authoritarianism and democratic backsliding in the U.S. (Gessen 2016; Dionne Jr., Ornstein, and Mann 2017; Lieberman et al. 2019). Central to this contemporary discussion has been the measurement of national democratic performance. Prominent cross-national measures of democracy from the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem), Bright Line Watch, and Freedom House, which had once ranked the country as a global leader, show a U.S. democracy slipping toward "mixed regime" or "illiberal democracy" status.

Yet there has been less systematic inquiry into *subnational* dynamics in American democracy. This is curious in light of American federalism, a comparatively decentralized institutional system that gives state governments the authority to administer elections, draw electoral districts, and exert police power. Louis Brandeis called the states "laboratories of democracy." But state governments have also been forces against democracy in the U.S., or, in the words of Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 2), "laboratories of authoritarianism." State and local governments directly and indirectly enforced racial hierarchy for most of U.S. history (DuBois 1935; Foner 1988). Many scholars do not consider the United States a democracy prior to the national enforcement of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) against state governments (Mickey 2015; King 2017)—enforcement made more difficult by the U.S. Supreme Court's decisions in *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) and *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee* (2021). Troubling stories abound in recent years, of voter suppression, of gerrymandering, of state legislatures taking power from incoming outparty governors, of the authoritarian use of police powers against vulnerable communities. But there has been little

effort to systematically trace the dynamics of democratic performance in the states in the contemporary period.

In this article, we create a new comprehensive measure of electoral democracy in the U.S. states from 2000 to 2018, the State Democracy Index. Using 51 indicators of electoral democratic quality, such as average polling place wait times, same-day and automatic voter registration policies, and felon disenfranchisement, we use Bayesian modeling to estimate a latent measure of democratic performance. Analysis of the measure suggests that state governments have been leaders in democratic backsliding in the U.S. in recent years.[1] We find similar trends when using broader measures that cover additional components of democracy such as liberalism and egalitarianism.

We then use the State Democracy Index to investigate the causes of democratic expansion and decline in the states. Prominent theories in political science point to partisan *competition* (Keyssar 2000), ideological *polarization* (Lieberman et al. 2019), racial *demographic change*, and the group interests of national *party coalitions* (Hacker and Pierson 2020) as important drivers of democratic change. Partisan competition can incentivize parties to incorporate new voters (Hajnal and Lee 2011; Teele 2018*b*), or generate brinksmanship and scorched-earth tactics (Lee 2009). Polarization erodes norms (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) and increases the ideological cost of one's political opponents taking power (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Finally, national parties that represent business have economic incentives to constrain democracy (Ziblatt 2017). The contemporary Republican Party is a coalition of the very wealthy, some major industries, and an electoral base motivated in no small part by white identity politics (Parker and Barreto 2014). These groups have incentives to limit the expansion of the electorate to new voters with very different racial attitudes and class interests, suggesting that Republican control of state government might reduce democratic performance.

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[1]Rather than a sharp break in regime type, this investigation asks about more granular changes to American democracy that in some ways parallels comparative analysis of "hybrid" regimes that combine elements of democracy with those of authoritarianism and oligarchy (e.g., Levitsky and Way 2010).

We show trends in state democratic performance and test the predictions of these theories with a difference-in-differences design. Across measures and model specifications, the results are remarkably clear: Republican control of state government reduces democratic performance. The magnitude of democratic contraction from Republican control is surprisingly large, about one-half of a standard deviation. Much of this effect is driven by gerrymandering and electoral policy changes following Republican gains in state legislatures and governorships in the 2010 election. Competitive party systems and polarized legislatures do much less to explain the major changes in American democracy in the contemporary period. Moreover, although the Republican Party has capitalized on racial animus in recent elections (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018), racial demographic change within states—whether on its own or in conjunction with Republican control—plays little role in state level democracy. These results point toward national partisan dynamics rather than within-state factors as the driver of democratic change.

As Rocco (2021, 6) writes, "[w]hile uneven subnational democracy is preferable to a situation in which territorial governments are evenly undemocratic, the existence of undemocratic outliers nevertheless helps to undermine democracy as a whole." Just as slavery and Jim Crow in the U.S. South affected the politics and society of the North, democratic backsliding in states like North Carolina and Wisconsin affects other states, and, more importantly, democracy in the United States as a whole. State authorities administer elections; they are the primary enforcers of laws; they determine in large part who can participate in American politics, and how. The policy and judicial landscapes have grown increasingly favorable for policy variation across states in recent years. As a consequence, states may be increasingly important to trends in democracy across all institutions within American federalism. Political scholars, observers, and participants should pay close attention to dynamics in state democracy.

2 Measuring Democracy in the U.S. States

A rich literature has investigated the behavior of U.S. state governments. One important area of focus has been the relationship between public opinion on the one hand, and state legislative votes and policy outcomes on the other (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Gay 2007; Lax and Phillips 2009, 2012; Pacheco 2013; Flavin and Franko 2017; Rogers 2017; Caughey and Warshaw 2018; Simonovits, Guess, and Nagler 2019), including whether state governmental responsiveness to the mass public is affected by the influence of concentrated interest groups and wealthy individuals (Anzia 2011; Rigby and Wright 2013; Hertel-Fernandez 2014). An additional large body of research has asked how state electoral policies affect participation (e.g., Gerber, Huber, and Hill 2013; Burden et al. 2014). These studies have addressed critical questions of democracy in the states, especially whether state policy outcomes are responsive to and congruent with the policy attitudes of citizens. However, there has been less quantitative study into why state governments expand or restrict democracy—why they make their elections more or less free and fair, and why they exert authority in more or less repressive ways.[2]

There is also a literature on the existence of "authoritarian enclaves" within democratic countries (e.g., Benton 2012; Gibson 2013), which are "characterized by an adherence to recognizably authoritarian norms and procedures in contrast to those of the [national] democratic regime" (Gilley 2010, 389). The concept of authoritarian or undemocratic enclaves within partly or fully democratic countries is also seen in historical research on the role of the U.S. states in racially authoritarian and undemocratic governance (Kousser 1974; Mickey 2015; King 2017). Despite such important advances in the comparative and American political development literatures, there is little in the way of systematic quantitative measurement of subnational democratic performance (but see Hill 1994).

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[2]An exception is in the study of state governmental action with respect to the political inclusion of new immigrants (Gulasekaram and Ramakrishnan 2015).

2.1 Conceptualizing Democracy Components

This study follows the conceptual and measurement strategies of comparative cross-national democracy research (e.g., Gleditsch and Ward 1997; Lindberg et al. 2014). Conceptualizing democracy to facilitate differentiation, while avoiding "conceptual stretching" Sartori (1970, 1034), is, of course, challenging. In conceptualizing and operationalizing democracy, we follow scholars in separating the concept into subcomponents. This article focuses mainly on the subcomponent of *electoral democracy*.[3] Electoral democracy captures whether a political system has elections which are free, fair, and legitimate, and is central to historical conceptualization of democracy (Schumpeter 1942; Dahl 2003). The antithesis of electoral democracy is autocracy, but we conceptualize electoral democracy as a continuous rather than binary dimension.

An important normative and conceptual basis for electoral democracy can be found in Dahl (1989)'s discussion of "polyarchy." The necessary conditions for polyarchy, which Lindberg et al. (2014) uses to develop and measure their own cross-national concept of electoral democracy, include elected officials, free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage, the right to run for office, and additional institutional characteristics such as associational autonomy and freedom of expression. While all of these characteristics are important to this particular study, the most important characteristics that vary across states in the contemporary period are free and fair elections—whether members of the polity have an equal ability to influence electoral (and, by extension, policy) outcomes—and inclusive suffrage—whether members of the polity have equal eligibility and access to the ballot.

Most literature in American politics, including on state politics, argues that correspon-

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[3]Conceptualizing electoral democracy as a *subcomponent* of democracy is distinct from its conceptualization as a "diminished subtype" of democracy in some comparative research (Collier and Levitsky 1997, 439). Electoral democracy as a diminished subtype implies that a polity has free, fair, and legitimate elections, but *lacks* other necessary components to make it a "full" democracy, such as civil liberties, much like the diminished subtype concept of "male democracy" contrasts with polities that extend democratic citizenship to both men and women. Thus, the conceptualization of electoral democracy as a subcomponent means it takes us "up" the ladder of generality (Sartori 1970), applying to *more* cases, whereas its conceptualization as a diminished subtype takes us "down" the ladder of generality.

dence between public opinion and policy outcomes is an important indicator of electoral democracy. Incongruent or unresponsive policy outcomes are signs of a "democratic deficit" (Lax and Phillips 2012; Caughey and Warshaw 2018). However, we wish to note the tensions of Wollheim's paradox (Wollheim 2016), in which a legitimate democratic majority supports an undemocratic policy. In such a situation, is it "democratic" to implement an undemocratic policy, such as the disenfranchisement of a minority group, according to the majority will? This paradox is relevant to contemporary policy debates, as surveys find that certain voter suppression policies receive majority support from the American public (e.g., Stewart III, Ansolabehere, and Persily 2016). Furthermore, the theoretical tradition of Burkean republicanism proposes a model of representation in which politicians are "trustees" of the public interest who should act on their own beliefs, in contrast to the "delegate" model in which representatives should be responsive to constituent opinion (Miller and Stokes 1963). In our measures, we attempt to balance both sides of Wollheim's paradox, considering policy responsiveness to public opinion as well as the cost of voting, partisan bias in districting, and other non-opinion based dimensions to be important for democratic performance.

As we address in Appendix Section A5, scholars across disciplines (including the V-Dem team) have conceptualized additional important subcomponents of democracy, such as liberalism, egalitarianism, deliberation, and inclusion (for examples, see, e.g., Phillips 1991; Mills 2017; Michener 2018). We believe that a broader definition of democracy would include these components. We provide two corresponding measurement extensions in the Appendix, where we create and analyze broader measures of democracy in the states. The first extension includes in the additional component of *liberal democracy*. Liberal democracy captures whether a society protects civil rights and liberties (Estlund 2009; Brettschneider 2010), especially for minority populations who have been historically subjugated (Shelby 2005; Glaude Jr. 2017). Liberal democracy can be contrasted with authoritarianism. A key insight of recent literature has been the central role of the carceral state, whether the state represses its citizenry through authoritarian policing and mass incarceration, in shaping

democratic performance (Soss and Weaver 2017). Coercive state authority, seen in extreme forms in authoritarian policing and mass incarceration, are also mostly administered with state level authority (Miller 2008; Soss and Weaver 2017; Weaver and Prowse 2020). Liberal democracy may also include considerations of transparency of decision making and policy information (Shapiro 2009), and, empirically, democracies are more transparent than non-democracies (Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2011).

Importantly, liberal democracy is conceptually distinct from "policy liberalism" (Caughey and Warshaw 2016), "size of government" (Garand 1988), and other concepts that capture the left-right orientation of policy outcomes across political systems. One might worry that ideological and partisan considerations influence the definition of democracy, which would lead to a tautological study of the causes of democratic changes. However, the main measure in this study, with a focus on electoral democracy, is narrowly defined around indicators related to the cost of voting and fairness of districting. In the broader democracy measure used in the Appendix, the indicators of liberal democracy are circumscribed more narrowly than those often found in comparative democracy research (e.g., Lindberg et al. 2014). Furthermore, defining democracy as to ensure the definition is bipartisan puts democracy research at greater risk of tautology and the "argument from middle ground" fallacy, or, in contemporary parlance, "bothsiderism."

In a second extension in the Appendix, we create a measure that combines electoral, liberal, and a third component, *egalitarian democracy*. To varying degrees, have addressed critiques of the concepts of electoral and liberal democracy by emphasizing *equality* of rights under law—and the realization of rights in practice. These debates over helped to conceptualize an egalitarian component of democracy that focuses on material and social equality between individuals and relevant subgroups in the polity (e.g., Przeworski 1986; Brettschneider 2010).

The multi-tiered federal institutional structure of the U.S. presents an additional conceptual challenge to investigating the democratic performance of states. This idea is related

but not identical to what Gibson (2005, 103) has described as the potential for "an authoritarian province in a nationally democratic country" (see also Gibson 2013). Not only are states not separate, atomized polities from each other horizontally; they are embedded in complex relationships with the federal government vertically in a structure resembling more of a "marble cake" than the "layer cake" of classical dual federalism (Weissert 2011). The particular way the cake is marbled is also in flux, changing dynamically based on the preferences of coalitions (Riker 1964, 1975). More specific to this article's inquiry into democracy, state governments may act in ways that expand or contract democracy, but only dependent on federal activity. For example, the Supreme Court in *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) struck down key provisions of the Voting Rights Act, allowing states to implement changes to electoral procedures in ways that threaten the freeness and fairness of elections.[4]

2.2   Democracy Indicators

We then collect indicators of democratic performance. These *democracy indicators* are individual variables that we aggregate into the State Democracy Index measure. For the main State Democracy Index (i.e., electoral democracy) measure, we use 51 indicators. At a level between the indicators and the electoral democracy component, the indicators fit into four meso-level categories: gerrymandering (e.g., the partisan efficiency gap), electoral policies that increase or decrease the eligibility to or cost of voting (e.g., felon disenfranchisement laws), electoral policies that increase the integrity of elections (e.g., requiring post-election audits), and observed democratic outcomes (e.g., policy responsiveness to public opinion and wait times for in-person voting). Importantly, the State Democracy Index combines indicators that capture *de jure* electoral policies and procedures, while others measure democratic *outcomes* like policy responsiveness to public opinion and voting wait times. Together, these indicators capture a large amount of information related to the freedom, fairness, and equal-

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[4]Quantitative studies buttress historical research showing that the Voting Rights Act had profound effects on legislative responsiveness to black voters (Schuit and Rogowski 2017) and on racial inequality in labor market outcomes (Aneja and Avenancio-León 2019).

ity of voice in U.S. elections.

Data on same day voter registration, early voting, voter ID laws, youth preregistration and no-fault absentee voting are from Grumbach and Hill (2021), and data on automatic voter registration is from McGhee, Hill, and Romero (2021). Felon disenfranchisement and prisoner voting policies were collected from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). Additional electoral variables, especially voting wait times and other indicators of state administrative performance in elections, are from the MIT Election Lab.[5] Gerrymandering data, which feature prominently in the democracy indices, are provided by Stephanopoulos and Warshaw (2020), with an additional district compactness measures from Kaufman, King, and Komisarchik (2019).[6] We also use indicators of policy responsiveness to public opinion (separated into social and economic policy domains) based on the state policy and mass public liberalism measures from (Caughey and Warshaw 2018).[7] We list all 51 indicators and their sources in Appendix Table A1.

For the alternative measures used in analyses in the Appendix, we use indicators covering liberal democracy and freedom from authoritarian control. These liberal democracy indicators can be put into three meso-level categories with a focus on variation in authoritarianism through the carceral state (see Soss and Weaver 2017): criminal justice policies (e.g., Three Strikes laws), carceral outcomes (e.g., the incarceration rate), and civil liberties policies (e.g., protections for journalists with anonymous sources). Indicators related to criminal justice are from the Correlates of State Policy Database (Jordan and Grossmann 2016), as well as the Bureau of Justice Statistics and Institute for Justice. We also include state asset forfeiture ratings by the Institute for Justice "Policing for Profit" dataset.[8]

The State Democracy Index covers the years 2000 through 2018. On the one hand, the

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[5]Available at electionlab.mit.edu/data. We do not include a voter turnout variable in the measure because low turnout could be a sign of democratic problems (e.g., a deficit of political efficacy and inclusion among citizens) or democratic health (e.g., citizens who approve of the status quo Lipset 1960, Ch. VII).

[6]Indicators of gerrymandering that measure one of the two parties' advantage (e.g., efficiency gap) are transformed into their absolute values to measure the extent of partisan advantage in either direction.

[7]Specifically, we use the squared residuals from a bivariate regression of state policy liberalism on state opinion liberalism, which capture how "out of step" a state's policy is with its residents' policy attitudes.

[8]Available at https://ij.org/report/policing-for-profit-3/policing-for-profit-data/

shortness of this time period is a limitation. Variation in electoral democracy across states in the contemporary period, which is the focus of this article, is much smaller than variation during the slavery and Jim Crow periods. However, through voter registration rules, election administration procedures, and laws that unequally increase the cost of voting, states still vary considerably in how inclusive suffrage is. States' gerrymandering of legislative district boundaries has also generated variation in how free and fair elections are, expanding inequality in how much individuals' votes influence election outcomes and reducing the potential for majoritarian rule. Furthermore, there are serious challenges to creating a measure that directly compares interstate variation in democracy in the contemporary period to that of earlier eras, such as the Jim Crow period.[9] By limiting the State Democracy Index to the past two decades, we both capture an era of important contestation over American democracy while avoiding bridging between time periods for which there is very different data availability, and, more importantly, potentially incomparable terms of civil and human rights.

2.3   Measurement Models

For our main State Democracy Index measure, we model democracy as a latent variable (Treier and Jackman 2008). This latent variable analysis lets observed relationships between the democracy indicators determine how each indicator should affect states' democracy scores. This strategy estimates an 'ideal point' on a latent dimension for each state-year that best predicts the values of democracy indicators in the observed data. In particular, we use Bayesian factor analysis for mixed data because the democracy indicators may be binary (e.g., same day voter registration), ordinal (e.g., disenfranchisement of all, some, or no felons), or continuous (e.g., legislative district efficiency gap) (Quinn 2004). The model is based on the equation below. The distribution of democratic performance on indicators

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[9]This challenge is similar to estimating the median legislators' ideal point civil rights in the pre- and post-civil rights eras. Post-1960s legislative contestation was over a much smaller range of the ideological space when it comes to civil rights (Caughey and Schickler 2016).

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for state s in year t, y_{st}^*, is a function of the state's latent democratic performance for that year, θ_{st}, as well as the democracy indicator's discrimination parameter β_j and difficulty parameter α_j.[10] Subscript j denotes different indicators, which are analogous to test questions in the IRT framework. In this equation, N_j is a normal distribution with j dimensions (as there are j indicators). Ψ is a $J \times J$ variance-covariance matrix.

$$y_{st}^* \sim \ N_j(\beta_j\theta_{st} - \alpha_j, \Psi) \tag{1}$$

The main benefit of this factor analysis is that the measure requires little in the way of assumptions from us about how any particular indicator should affect democracy scores.[11] However, this comes at the cost of some loss of control; in some circumstances, the estimated parameters for democracy indicators can be 'wrong' in theoretical and substantive terms. Whether or not you consider this a serious problem is dependent on whether you philosophically interpret these 'errors' as measurement error or bias.[12] In addition, the Bayesian factor analysis model provides estimates of uncertainty for parameters (both state democracy scores and democracy indicator item parameters).

Figure 1 shows the discrimination parameter estimates, β_j for democracy indicator j. In short, the discrimination parameters represent the slope of the relationship between an indicator and a state's latent democracy performance score. Indicators with positive discrimination parameters *increase* a state's democracy score, whereas items with negative parameters *decrease* them.[13] The discrimination parameters in Figure 1 suggest that a small

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[10]The model requires limiting the parameter space for a small number of items; we fix five item discrimination parameters to be positive or negative based on theoretical interpretation. We ran the model with 20,000 Gibbs iterations for the sampler, with a burn-in period of 1,000 iterations. In order to maintain a constant substantive interpretation of how 'democratic' a given indicator is across time, we model time-invariant difficulty parameters in contrast to the policy liberalism measure of Caughey and Warshaw (2016).

[11]Bayesian latent dimension models like this one require the modeler to constrain the parameter space. We do this by assigning a random set of five indicators a positive or negative difficulty parameter based on whether it is theoretically democracy expanding or contracting (for a similar application to state policy liberalism, see Caughey and Warshaw 2016).

[12]It is also worth noting that error in these democracy measures will reduce the *precision* of hypothesis tests, but because we use these democracy measures as dependent variables, this will not induce bias or inconsistency (among many sources, see Angrist and Pischke 2008).

[13]Not shown here, difficulty parameters α_j are intercepts that scales the relationships between indicators

Figure 1: Factor Loadings of Democracy Indicators
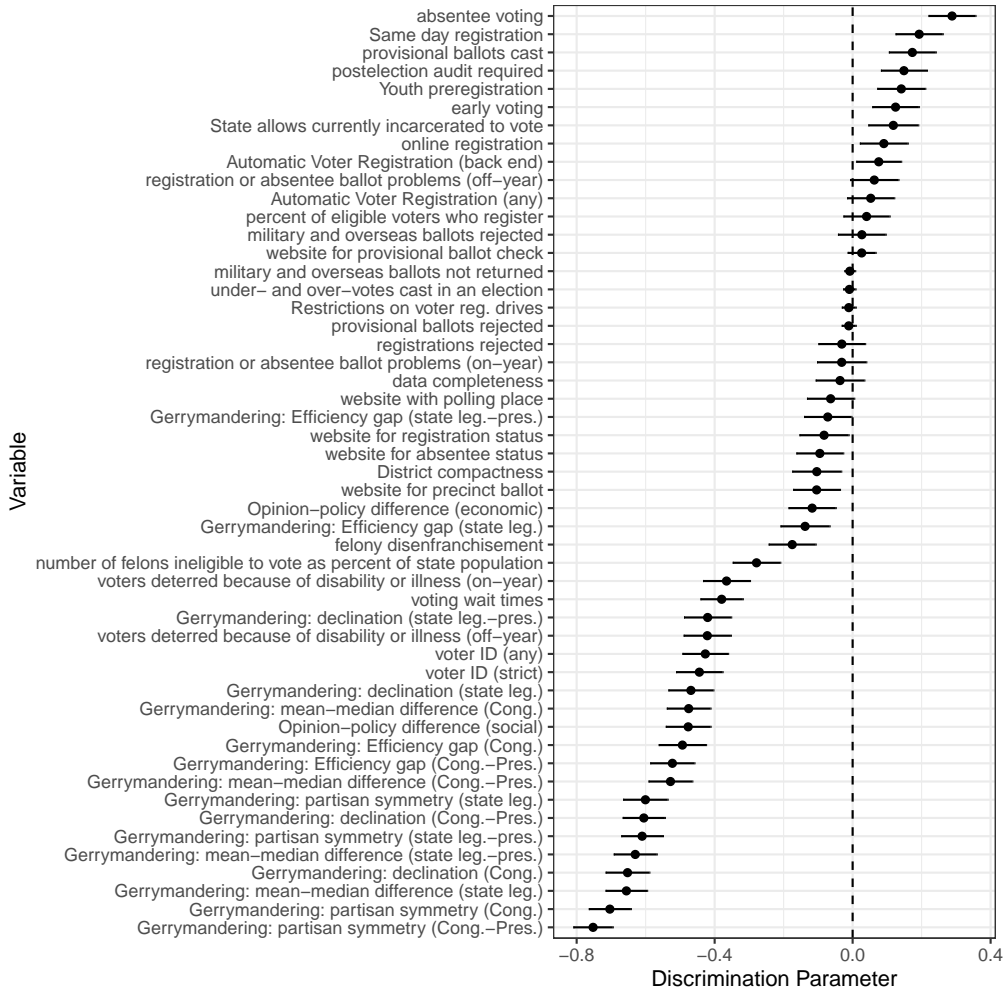
Note: Figure presents the discrimination parameter estimates and Bayesian credible intervals for indicators used in the State Democracy Index.

number of indicators do not load well onto the latent democracy dimension (with discrimination parameters close to zero), such as the number of military and overseas ballots not returned and restrictions on voter registration drives. Overall, however, the item discrimination parameters are consistent with theoretical expectations and suggest that electoral democracy is unidimensional.

When item parameters do not conform to theory, one solution is to directly impose item parameters on the indicators rather than model them. To do so, in addition to our Bayesian

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and democracy scores.

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factor analysis measure, we use simple additive indexing to create an alternative democracy measure. In the additive index, we weight each democracy indicator equally by range scaling each to the [0,1] interval and then take the state average across all the indicators. Policies that are democracy *contracting*, such as felony disenfranchisement, are reverse coded. This is equivalent to adding up all of a state's democracy expanding policies, and then subtracting the sum of democracy contracting policies (for applications of this method to state policy liberalism, see Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Grumbach 2018). The additive measures weight each indicator equally. We provide robustness checks with this additive measure in the Appendix, and the results are very similar to our results with the 'data driven' Bayesian measure used in the main analyses.

We test the validity of the State Democracy Index in different ways. We check construct validation by comparing our measure to measures of related concepts. To our knowledge, the closest analogue to our measure is the Cost of Voting Index (COVI) from Li, Pomante, and Schraufnagel (2018), which is based on seven state electoral policy variables in presidential election years. State democracy, as a concept, is related to the cost of voting. We therefore check our measure's convergent validity by estimating its correlation to this previous measure in Figure A1 in the Appendix, finding a moderately strong correlation of -0.71 (higher values of COVI indicate greater cost of voting). We also show that our measure is positively correlated with state level turnout of the voting eligible public in Figure A2 in the Appendix. We unfortunately have little opportunity to test for convergent validation because of the lack of existing measures of overall state level democratic performance. There is scholarly interest in measuring subnational democratic performance at the *country* level (see Giraudy 2015; McMann 2018), and a small number of quantitative measures of democracy within other countries' political subunits (Harbers, Bartman, and van Wingerden 2019), but we have not found such a measure of democratic performance focused on the U.S. states.

In the next sections, we investigate descriptive trends in state democratic performance, and then turn to explaining these trends with theories based in party competition, polariza-

tion, demographic change, and the group interests of national party coalitions.

3 Trends in State Democracy

With the State Democracy Index in hand, we first explore variation between states, and within states across time, in democratic performance. Figure 2 shows a map of state scores in the year 2000 (left panel) and in the year 2018 (right panel).

Figure 2: Democracy in the States, 2000 and 2018
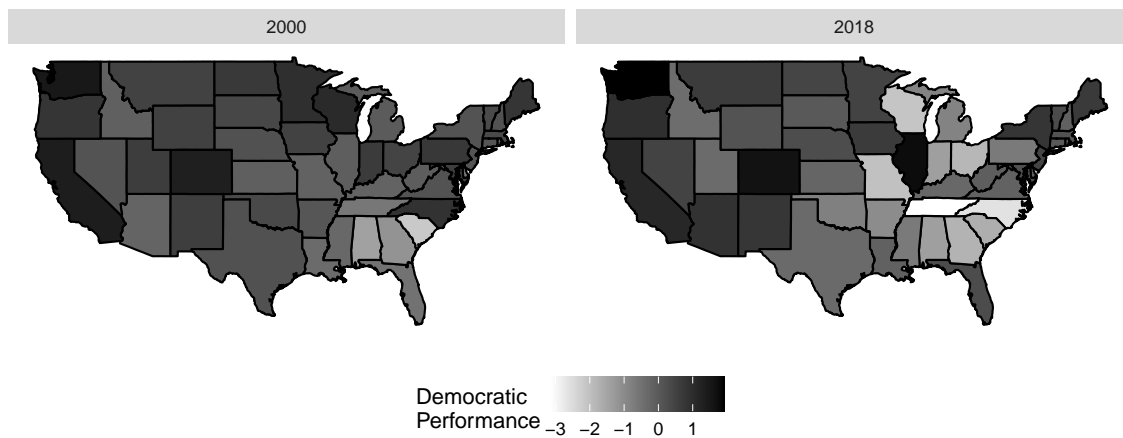
Note: Left panel shows State Democracy Index scores for the year 2000. Right panel shows State Democracy Index scores for the year 2018.

The maps in Figure 2 show some clear regional variation, especially in 2018. States on the West Coast and in the Northeast score higher on the democracy measures than states in the South. New Mexico, Colorado, and some Midwestern states also have strong democracy scores.

The maps also show within-state change during this time period. States like North Carolina and Wisconsin among the most democratic states in the year 2000, but by 2018 they are close to the bottom. Illinois and Vermont move from the middle of the pack in 2000 to among the top democratic performers in 2018.

Figure 3 highlights a case of major change in democratic performance, North Carolina.

While the state was notoriously difficult to democratize in the civil rights period (Mickey 2015)—it maintained its Jim Crow literacy tests for voting until the 1970s—North Carolina had become a leader in expanding access to voting during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The state had expanded opportunities for early voting, as well as implemented policies to expand voter registration, such as same day registration and pre-registration for youth. Voter turnout had increased by over 10 percentage points on average during this time.

Figure 3: The Weakening of Democracy in North Carolina
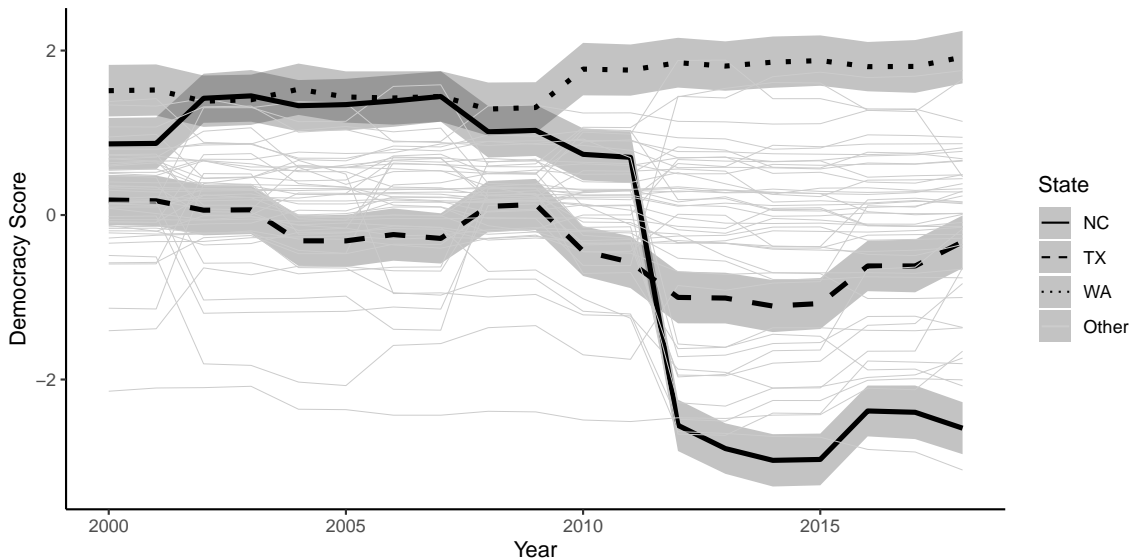
Note: Lines represent the State Democracy Index scores for states (2000-2018). The solid black line represents North Carolina, the dashed line represents Texas, and the dotted line Washington. Shaded ribbons are Bayesian credible intervals.

But a major shift occurred after the Republican Party won control of both legislative chambers in 2010. Beginning in 2011, North Carolina made a series of changes to its election laws and procedures. The state redrew its legislative district boundaries. The new districts, which received rapid condemnation from Democrats and civil rights groups, clearly advantaged white and Republican voters. In 2018, for example, Republicans won about 50.3% of the two-party vote in North Carolina—but this bare majority of votes from the electorate translated to fully 77% (10 of 13) of North Carolina's seats in Congress. Scholars of gerrymandering such as Christopher Warshaw have called North Carolina districts "probably

the most gerrymandered map in modern history."[14] After electing a Republican governor in 2012, the unified Republican government then implemented a strict voter ID law and curtailed early voting laws in areas with heavier concentrations of Black voters. These changes are reflected in Figure 3.

Figure 4: Democracy in the States by Party Control of Government
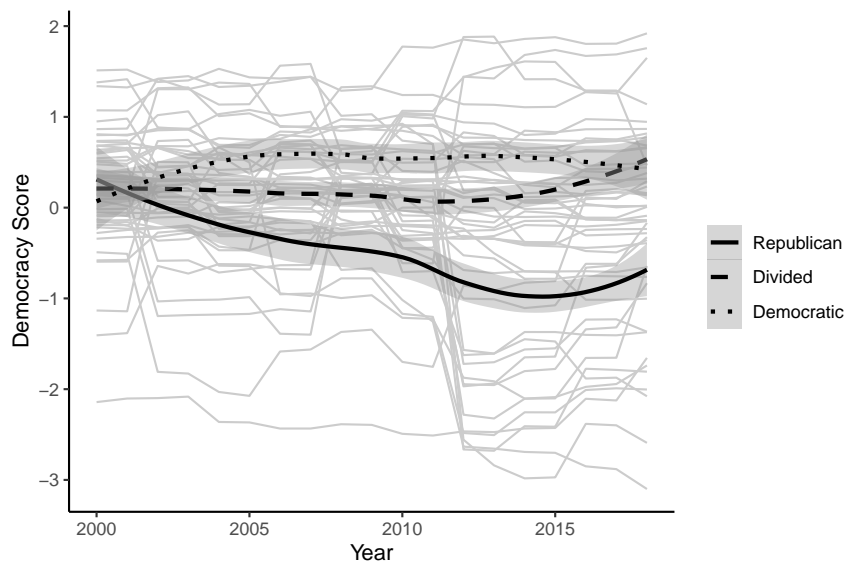
Note: Plot shows average State Democracy Index scores for states under unified Democratic (dotted line), divided (dashed line), and unified Republican (solid line) control. Shaded ribbons are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 4 shows trends in state democracy by party, with red representing unified Republican states, and blue and green representing Democratic and divided states, respectively. The states polarize by party over this time period: the average divided state and Democratically-controlled state become more democratic, while the average Republican-controlled state becomes less democratic. However, the groups of states controlled by each party changes over this time period; we do not know from Figure 4 whether Republican states are becoming less democratic, or less democratic states are becoming more Republican. The partisan relationships could also be confounded by our other potential causes of democratic changes: competition and polarization.

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[14]Tweet on October 30, 2019 (accessed Feb, 2021): https://twitter.com/cwarshaw/status/1189597322331734016?s=20

4   Explaining Dynamics in State Democracy

The *State Democracy Index* measures developed in the previous sections suggest that there have been major shifts in democratic performance within states in recent years. The important question, however, is not simply *how* democracy has changed in the states, but *why.* Luckily, the new democracy measures allow us to test the predictions of competing theories of the causes of democratic changes.

What drives democratic expansions and contractions in political systems? Political science offers some potential explanations. The explanations engage with transformative processes in modern American politics: partisan *competition*, ideological *polarization*, and national *party group coalitions*. Scholars point to the consolidation of a competitive party system to explain large scale expansions of democracy in the U.S. (Teele 2018*a*), Africa (Rakner and Van de Walle 2009), Europe (Mares 2015), and around the world (Weiner 1965). Parties in competitive environments might have incentives to expand the electorate in search of more votes, improving democracy in the process by, for example, expanding the franchise (Keyssar 2000; Teele 2018*b*). On the other hand, however, by incentivizing partisan brinksmanship (Lee 2009), partisan competition can lead a party with a precarious grip on power to diminish democracy by exploiting counter-majoritarian institutions and attempting to prevent their opponents' electoral bases from voting. We follow research that uses measures of legislative and electoral competition within states as key explanatory variables (Teele 2018*b*; O'Brian 2019*b*).

A second theory focuses on polarization—the ideological distance between the parties' agendas. Polarization increases politicians' need to ensure that their opponents do not win office. A party in government in a polarized state will thus have greater incentive to change policies that affect democracy, such as election laws that influence the cost of voting for different groups in the state. As Lieberman et al. (2019, 2) argue, "hyperpolarization magnifies tendencies for the partisan capture of institutions that are supposed to exercise checks and balances but may instead be turned into unaccountable instruments of partisan or incumbent

advantage." It "erodes norms" of institutional behavior, such as the judicious use of executive power and fair treatment on issues such as bureaucratic and judicial appointments—and the levers of democracy, itself (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Polarization may be asymmetric or symmetric (Hacker and Pierson 2005; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006), but polarization is fundamentally about the *distance between the parties*. We follow literature that uses the difference in party medians in state legislatures as a measure (Shor and McCarty 2011).

A third theoretical tradition suggests that the racial demographics of state populations shapes politics and policy (Hero and Tolbert 1996). Of particular importance to this study is the potential for increasing racial diversity to generate "racial threat" and backlash among conservative white voters (Bobo and Hutchings 1996). As states grow more racially diverse due to immigration and internal migration,[15] some voters might demand restrictions on democracy to block the political inclusion and empowerment of new voters of color (Abrajano and Hajnal 2017; Biggers and Hanmer 2017; Myers and Levy 2018). Importantly, racial backlash would not only lead to democratic backsliding on its own; if demographic change leads voters to increasingly elect Republicans to state government, this theory predicts that the *interaction* of demographic change and Republican Party control should produce democratic backsliding.

Finally, a set of theories focuses not on competition, polarization, or demographic change within states, but on the interests of groups in *national* party coalitions. Ziblatt (2017), for instance, points to the importance of conservative parties as historical coalitions of groups with economic incentives to constrain democracy. The modern Republican Party, which, at its elite level, is a coalition of the very wealthy, has incentives to limit the expansion of the electorate with new voters with very different class interests (Hacker and Pierson 2020). In recent years, large firms and wealthy individuals have made major political investments at the state level, providing "legislative subsidies" in the form of model bills, lobbying, and

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[15]During the time period under study in this paper, Latino and Asian American population proportions increased in most states. Furthermore, the Black population of Southern states increased as part of the "reverse" Great Migration since 1975.

organization, as Hertel-Fernandez (2019) shows in the cases of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Americans for Prosperity, and the State Policy Network.

The GOP's electoral base, by contrast, is considerably less interested in the Republican economic agenda of top-heavy tax cuts and reductions in government spending. However, their preferences with respect to race and partisan identity provide the Republican electoral base with reason to oppose democracy in a diversifying country. (Survey evidence from Graham and Svolik (2020) also suggests that American voters have little interest in maintaining democratic performance if it means conceding their partisan or policy goals.) The politics of race are therefore still central to this theory of party coalitions. However, in contrast to the localized racial and political economy conflict of the Jim Crow period, today it is national rather than state or local level racial conflict that is the driver.

Furthermore, increasing economic inequality since the 1970s has caused the economic interests of those at the top to diverge from those of the median voter (Meltzer and Richard 1981). This divergence incentivizes economic elites to either moderate their economic agenda, which the Republican Party has not done—or to appeal to alternative dimensions of political conflict (Hacker and Pierson 2020), the most contentious of which in the U.S. is race, but can also include conflict over gender, religion, sexuality, and culture. Overall, this theory suggests that the current coalitional structure of the national Republican Party, shaped in large part by 20th century racial realignment (Schickler 2016) and large political investments by wealthy individuals and firms (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Hertel-Fernandez 2019), makes the party in government especially likely to reduce state democratic performance in any state in which it takes power.

We are also interested in the *interactions* of competition, polarization, and Republican control. Polarization might only matter in competitive contexts, when the ideologically distant outparty has a real chance of taking power. Similarly, Republican control might only lead to backsliding in a competitive environment where they risk losing legislative majorities and governorships. The interaction of polarization and Republican control might produce

backsliding if backsliding is being driven by the most ideologically extreme Republican state legislatures. Furthermore, the interaction of racial demographic change and Republican control might lead to backsliding if growing minority populations provoke racial threat among white voters, leading them to elect Republicans with a goal of stemming the expanding electoral power of minority voters.

We continue this discussion of the potential causes of democratic expansion and contraction in Appendix Section A7. The next section describes the data collection and empirical strategy for testing these theories of democracy in the states.

4.1 Empirically Testing Theories of Democracy

To empirically test these theories, we collect time-series measures of political competitiveness, polarization, party control, and demographic change. We use data on legislative seat shares from Klarner (2013) to measure legislative competitiveness. Specifically, we calculate states' lower legislative chamber competitiveness as $-|0.5 - D_{lower}|$ where D_{lower} is the two-party share of lower chamber seats held by Democrats, and upper chamber competitiveness as $-|0.5 - D_{upper}|$ where D_{upper} is the two-party share of upper chamber seats held by Democrats.[16] In robustness checks in the Appendix, we use an additional measure of electoral rather than legislative competitiveness from O'Brian (2019b), which we code as $-|0.5 - D_{votes}|$ where D_{votes} is the two-party share of votes in the state's U.S. House election(s) that went to Democratic candidates.[17] As is customary, these measures are smoothed into rolling averages across three election cycles (e.g., Ranney 1976; Shufeldt and Flavin 2012), but we lag them in statistical models such that they capture electoral competition in the three previous election cycles prior to the state's democratic performance in year t.

Legislative polarization measures are from Shor and McCarty (2011). We use the average

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[16]While we might ideally wish for a measure of competition in both state legislatures and executive branches, most studies use legislative majority size as the main measure of competition, whether in the U.S. Congress (Lee 2009) or state politics (Teele 2018b).

[17]O'Brian (2019b) collected vote share data from David and Claggett (2008) and CQ Press's Voting and Election Collection.

distance in the parties' legislative chamber medians within each state.[18] Measures of competitiveness and polarization are standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation 1 for clarity. Republican control is a binary variable that takes a value of 1 if the state is under unified Republican control, and 0 if the state is under Democratic or divided control.[19] State racial demographics are from U.S. Census Bureau's "bridged" 1990-2019 state race population estimates.[20] We measure demographic change in four year rolling averages, but the results are robust to the use of different year increments. State party control data are from Klarner (2013), which we extend through 2018 using NCSL data.[21] We exclude Nebraska from analyses due to its nonpartisan unicameral legislature.

We test theoretical predictions with a difference-in-differences design that exploits within-state variation. While the true causal model between competition, polarization, demographic change, party control, and democratic performance is likely to involve a structure of highly complex feedback relationships, this design eliminates time-invariant differences between states—the main potential source of bias in estimating the relationship between our input measures and democratic performance.[22] We supplement traditional two-way fixed effects models with a generalized synthetic control estimator from (Xu 2017), and alternative methods of aggregating treatment effects from Callaway and Sant'Anna (2020) that avoid potential weighting problems in multiperiod difference-in-differences designs.

5   Results

We present the main results in Table 1. The results of Models 1 through 3 show that, on their own, there is a modest and sometimes statistically significant positive relation-

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[18]The choice of using separate variables for upper or lower legislative chamber polarization, or their average, does not affect results.

[19]Future research can disaggregate partisan control of each legislative chamber, the governorship, and their interactions to study more granular effects of partisan control.

[20]Available at https://wonder.cdc.gov/bridged-race-v2019.html

[21]Available at: https://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/partisan-composition.aspx

[22]The main two-way fixed effects models takes the form following form for state i in year t, in which X is a treatment variable, α_i are state fixed effects, and δ_t are year fixed effects: $y_{it} = \alpha_i + \delta_t + \beta X_{it} + e_{it}$

ship between competition and democracy, and no relationship between polarization and democracy—but a large negative relationship between Republican control and democracy in the states. Across the model specifications, the estimates of the effect of Republican control of government are between 0.442 and 0.481 standard deviations of democratic performance, a substantial amount. The effect of competition, by contrast, is between 0.141 and 0.206 standard deviations, and the effect of polarization is very small and in the unexpectedly positive direction.

Table 1: Explaining Dynamics in State Level Democracy

| | *Outcome*: State Democracy Score | | | | | | |
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Competition	0.200			0.170	0.194	0.169	0.134
	(0.107)			(0.099)	(0.099)	(0.106)	(0.114)
Polarization		0.017		0.024	0.037	0.027	0.028
		(0.131)		(0.119)	(0.111)	(0.126)	(0.121)
Republican			−0.462**	−0.444**	−0.435**	−0.443**	−0.475**
			(0.162)	(0.159)	(0.162)	(0.154)	(0.183)
Competition × Polarization					0.082		
					(0.066)		
Polarization × Republican						−0.013	
						(0.198)	
Competition × Republican							0.110
							(0.206)
Constant	−0.707***	−0.683***	−0.532***	−0.535***	−0.544***	−0.533***	−0.532***
	(0.068)	(0.116)	(0.093)	(0.134)	(0.136)	(0.139)	(0.135)
State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	833	833	833	833	833	833	833
R-squared	0.683	0.676	0.699	0.704	0.706	0.704	0.705
Adj. R-squared	0.656	0.648	0.673	0.679	0.680	0.678	0.679

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05

We are also interested in the interactions of competition, polarization, and Republican control. Polarized parties (or the Republican Party) might only have an incentive to restrict democracy in competitive political environments. However, the results in Table 1 suggest that these interactions do little to explain dynamics in state democracy. The interaction of competition and polarization, is modestly positive, as is the interaction of competition and Republican control—both contrary to expectations (though all of the interaction coefficients are statistically insignificant).

Due to recent concern about the weighting of treatment estimates in multiperiod difference-in-differences analysis using two-way fixed effects (Goodman-Bacon 2018), we use alternative aggregation procedures to estimate the average treatment effect on the treated (ATT) of Republican control.[23] In Panel (a) of Figure 5, we plot the results from three different types of ATT aggregation from Callaway and Sant'Anna (2020): dynamic, group, and simple (group-time). In addition to using different aggregation procedures, the model drops states that were 'treated' (i.e., under Republican control) in the first period, the year 2000.[24] In Panel (b), we plot the effects of GOP control using the generalized synthetic control (GSC) method from Xu (2017). The GSC technique relaxes the parallel trends assumption in the difference-in-differences designs used throughout this article by creating synthetic control units that are weighted averages of the "real" control units, each constructed to closely match the pretreatment democratic performance in states that will eventually be treated by GOP control (for other examples of GSC in political science, see Gilens, Patterson, and Haines 2021; Marble et al. 2021).

Compared to the main state and year fixed effects results in Table 1, the results in Figure 5 show an even larger effect of Republican control. The results in Panel (a) using the Callaway and Sant'Anna (2020) estimators increase our confidence that the Republican control findings are not being driven by the particular timing of 'treatment' (i.e., change in party control) and the time heterogeneity of treatment effects, while the GSC estimates in Panel (b) increase our confidence that the effect is robust to equalizing pre-trends in democratic performance.[25]

In the Appendix, we show that these results are robust under a wide variety of condi-

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[23]Specifically, two-way fixed effects specifications are a weighted average of all possible two-period difference-in-differences estimators, which is vulnerable to bias if treatment effects vary across time in multiperiod designs.

[24]In the Callaway and Sant'Anna (2020) setup, treatment cannot switch back off once it is on. In turn, I assign a state that switches to Republican control a new unit fixed effect once it switches back to divided (or Democratic) control. The results are robust to excluding these state-years.

[25]The specification in Panel (b) of Figure 5 uses seven pre-treatment periods to create synthetic control units. Appendix Figure A3 presents the results of additional specifications that vary the number of pre-treatment periods.

Figure 5: Effect of Republican Control on Democratic Performance

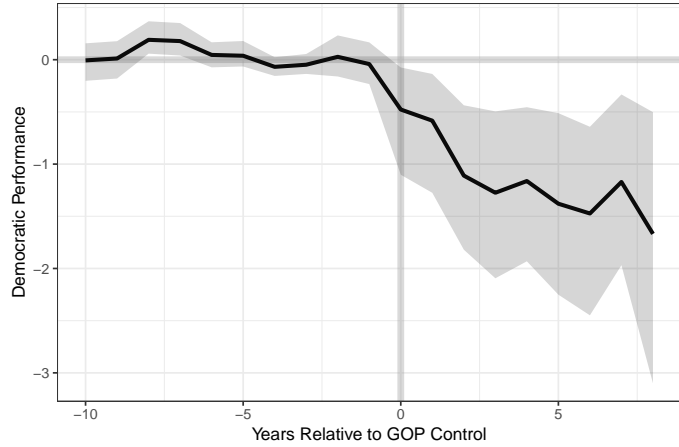(a) Republican Control Effect Using Callaway & Sant'Anna Estimator
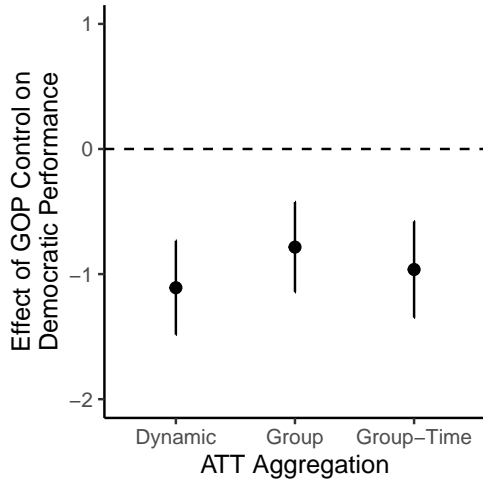
(b) Republican Control Effect Using Synthetic Control

Note: Panel (a) shows results using the Callaway & Sant'Anna Estimator alternative ATT aggregation methods. Panel (b) shows the results of a generalized synthetic control analysis.

tions. First, we replicate these results using the additive democracy index described earlier, in which each democracy indicator is weighted equally. The results in Appendix Table A2 are substantively unchanged. Second, we replicate our main analyses using a measure of partisan electoral competitiveness (i.e., the closeness of elections) rather than legislative competitiveness (i.e, the narrowness of partisan legislative majorities). Table A3 in the Appendix shows results consistent with our main results, but with one important difference. While the effects of competitiveness, polarization, and Republican control remain very similar to the main results, the interaction of competitiveness and Republican control is negative, significant, and relatively substantial in magnitude (-0.262 standard deviations of State Democracy Index scores). Among Republican controlled states, in other words, those whose recent elections have been especially competitive are the states to take steps to reduce their democratic performance.

In Appendix Section A6, we replicate our main analyses with alternative measures of democracy. The first measure covers liberal and electoral democracy (using 61 total indi-

cators), and the second covers liberal, electoral, and egalitarian democracy (using 116 total indicators). The additional liberal democracy indicators extend the measure's coverage to issues of civil liberties and freedom from state authority in areas such as policing, incarceration, and freedom of the press. The egalitarian democracy indicators include measures of economic inequality, women's rights, campaign finance policy, labor rights, and LGBT rights, which scholars have argued are integral to the realization of democracy in practice. The results from the additional analyses are substantively very similar to the analyses using the main (electoral) State Democracy Index measure, with Republican control significantly reducing democratic performance, and little explanatory role for other potential causes of democratic change.

5.1   Racial Demographic Change and State Democracy

Figure 6: Black and Latino Population Change in the States
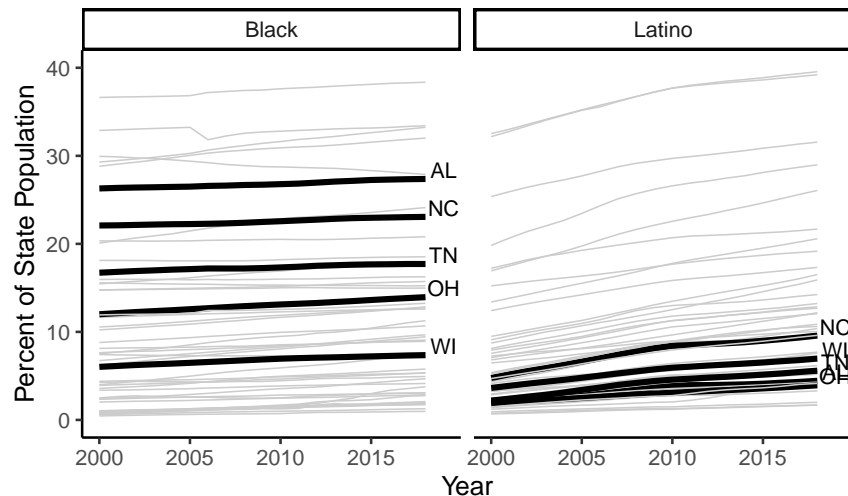
In this section, we turn to the analysis of racial demographic change and its interaction with competition, polarization, and Republican governance. We first assess descriptive trends. Figure 6 plots Black and Latino population change in the five states that experience the greatest democratic backsliding over the time period: Alabama, Ohio, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. These states tend to have above-average Black population shares,

but see little change over time. By contrast, these states have relatively low Latino population shares. Their Latino populations grow gradually over this time period. However, this amount of growth is not out of the ordinary; the trends in these states closely track national averages. This descriptive analysis provides little evidence that local Black or Latino population change matters much for state democratic performance.

Table 2 tests theories of demographic threat with our main difference-in-differences design. The results are consistent with the descriptive analysis: trends in racial population proportions has little effect on state democratic performance. Furthermore, while Republican control still has a large negative effect on democratic performance, the interaction of Republican control and demographic change generally matters little. Unexpectedly, the one statistically significant coefficient involving demographic change is the positive coefficient for the interaction of Republican control and Latino population change, meaning that Republican states with greater Latino population growth reduce democratic performance slightly less than other Republican states (though with a coefficient of 0.325 corresponding to a 1 percentage-point increase in state percent Latino, or nearly two standard deviations, this effect is small in substantive magnitude).[26]

These findings suggest that racial politics *within states* are not central to dynamics in state democracy.[27] This does not mean that race is peripheral to dynamics in state democracy. On the contrary, they are consistent with a central role of race in *national* political conflict, especially at the mass level (Parker and Barreto 2014; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). A number of important studies show evidence of racial threat and contestation at highly localized levels (e.g., Enos 2017). But in an era of highly nationalized American politics (Hopkins 2018), when it comes to state governmental choices over democratic insti-

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[26]In interpreting this result, it is important to consider the considerable political heterogeneity of Latino Americans, and its relationship to geography and national origin group (de la Garza et al. 2019).

[27]This paper's focus on within-state change is also the reason its findings about racial demographics differ from those of Biggers and Hanmer (2017), who find that the interaction of Republican control with percent Black or Latino is associated with the implementation of voter ID laws. This paper's difference-in-differences design suggest that *change* in demographics is not a relevant factor, whether on its own or interacted with Republican control.

Table 2: Racial Demographic Change and State Democracy

	Outcome: State Democracy Score			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Δ % Black	−0.012	−0.105	0.058	0.071
	(0.249)	(0.266)	(0.374)	(0.253)
Δ % Latino	−0.019	0.020	−0.010	−0.174
	(0.202)	(0.189)	(0.207)	(0.186)
Competition		0.317		
		(0.165)		
Polarization			0.007	
			(0.199)	
Republican				−0.726**
				(0.252)
Δ % Black × Competition		0.014		
		(0.280)		
Δ % Latino × Competition		−0.140		
		(0.095)		
Δ % Black × Polarization			0.094	
			(0.226)	
Δ % Latino × Polarization			−0.029	
			(0.130)	
Δ % Black × Republican				−0.140
				(0.280)
Δ % Latino × Republican				0.325*
				(0.156)
Constant	−0.673***	−0.670***	−0.694***	−0.358*
	(0.166)	(0.166)	(0.169)	(0.177)
State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	833	833	833	833
R-squared	0.676	0.685	0.676	0.705
Adj. R-squared	0.648	0.657	0.647	0.678

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$

tutions, the key question is not about racial politics within a state, but whether the state government is part of the national Republican Party.

These findings, therefore, suggest a contrast from the racial politics of Jim Crow. While contemporary state electoral legislation, like that of the Jim Crow era, has been found by courts to have been "motivated at least in part by an unconstitutional intent to target African American voters,"[28] battles over voting rights from the 1890s through 1970s primarily involved battles between large landowners, Black activists, and other "indigenous" pro- and anti-democracy interest in Southern states (Mickey 2015). In such a political economy, states' racial demographics play a central role in explaining variation in subnational democratization. By contrast, the results in this article emphasize the importance of national

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[28]https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/north-carolina-court-blocks-voter-id-law-discriminatory-intent-n1279474

political forces.

6 Conclusion

Despite the national focus of much contemporary discourse about democratic backsliding in the U.S. and abroad, state governments have constitutional authority to structure and administer many of the most important democratic institutions in the American political system. This article creates a new measure of electoral democracy in the 50 states from 2000 to 2018, based on 51 indicators. In the Appendix, we construct additional measures that also cover liberal democracy and egalitarian democracy.

The measure, the State Democracy Index, suggests that there have been dramatic shifts in democratic performance in the American states over this time period. In some states, democracy expanded in inclusive ways, expanding access to political participation, reducing the authoritarian use of police powers, and making electoral institutions more fair. In other states, however, democracy narrowed dramatically, as state governments gerrymandered districts and created new barriers to participation and restrictions on the franchise.

Our measure opens up new opportunities for research on questions related to representation and democracy, as well as federalism and state and local politics. Scholars might be interested in investigating the role of interest groups or money in politics on state democratic performance (Hertel-Fernandez 2016; Anzia and Moe 2017), perhaps by exploiting variation in state campaign finance policy (La Raja and Schaffner 2015; Barber 2016) or election timing (Anzia 2011). Others might study how state democracy is affected by declining state and local politics journalism (Moskowitz 2021), or by voters' attitudes toward democratic institutions (Welzel 2007; Graham and Svolik 2020; Miller and Davis 2020). There is especially great potential for behavioral scholars of race and ethnic politics to investigate the relationship between racial attitudes, attitudes toward democracy, and state democratic performance (e.g., Mutz 2018; Weaver and Prowse 2020; Jefferson 2021). Like comparative and

political economy scholarship on whether "democracy causes growth" (Acemoglu et al. 2019), scholars can also use the State Democracy Index as an explanatory variable to study the effect of democratic performance on economic performance, socioeconomic outcomes among residents, and public attitudes such as trust. Comparative scholars can use our measurement strategy to create new measures of democratic performance in subnational units in one or more other countries, potentially constructing comprehensive cross-national measures of subunit democracy in political federations.

In this article, we use the State Democracy Index to test a set of prominent theories of the causes of democratic expansion and backsliding in the U.S. Drawing on American and comparative democracy literatures, we develop predictions about the drivers of democratic expansion and backsliding. We estimate the effects of political competition, polarization, and racial demographic change on states' democratic performance. The results suggest that none of these factors is central to dynamics in state democratic performance. Republican control of state government, however, consistently and profoundly reduces state democratic performance during this time period.

The large effects of Republican control, contrasted with the minimal effects of within-state dynamics, speak to the nationalization of American politics in recent decades. Political investments by groups in the Democratic and Republican party coalitions have made the party coalitions more nationally coordinated (Hertel-Fernandez 2019; Grumbach 2019; Hacker and Pierson 2020). Voters are increasingly focused on national rather than state and local politics (Hopkins 2018), in part due to the decline of state and local politics journalism (Martin and McCrain 2019; Moskowitz 2021). This transformation means that regardless of the particular circumstances or geography, state governments controlled by same party behave similarly when they take power. The Republican controlled governments of states as distinct as Alabama, Wisconsin, Ohio, and North Carolina have taken similar actions with respect to democratic institutions.

More research is needed to link this issue of state level democratic performance in the

U.S. to micro-level behavioral research on the relationship between social cleavages, the Republican Party, and support for democracy. The findings in this article are consistent with an important role for national (but not state level) racial threat (e.g., Parker and Barreto 2014; Mutz 2018). Bartels (2020, 22752), for instance, finds that "substantial numbers of Republicans endorse statements contemplating violations of key democratic norms, including respect for the law and for the outcomes of elections and eschewing the use of force in pursuit of political ends," and that "[t]he strongest predictor by far of these antidemocratic attitudes is ethnic antagonism—especially concerns about the political power and claims on government resources of immigrants, African-Americans, and Latinos." However, left unexplored in this article is the role of other important social cleavages, including those based on gender, religion, and sexuality.

In contrast to my measures, cross-national measures of democracy sometimes cover much longer stretches of time. V-Dem, for instance, measures democratic performance for countries as far back as the year 1789—though this is not without its challenges (for example, during periods of rapid changes to U.S. democracy, such as during Reconstruction). Still, it is a worthy goal to construct a State Democracy Index that covers the transformational changes to the franchise, civil liberties, and other components of democracy that occurred in earlier periods of U.S. history. Keyssar (2000) and others have engaged in this kind of historical analysis of changes in voting rights.

Perhaps more importantly, a longer time frame would contextualize the magnitude of recent shifts in state state-level democracy. This article provides clear evidence of important changes in democratic performance, such as the rapid decline of democracy in states such as North Carolina since 2010. But these recent changes have occurred on a narrower range of the democracy dimension than those in earlier periods, when, for example, states differed in terms of the legality of slavery and the female franchise. Despite some troubling examples in state state-level democracy in recent years, they do not come close to the profound differences in regime type that existed between states in the eras before the 20th twentieth-century civil

rights period. At the same time, a more significant democratic collapse is likely to be presaged by the kinds of democratic backsliding described in this article—which can entrench minority rule, curtail dissent, and limit participation in democratic institutions.

Our study combines what are at times disparate discussions of American democracy. We draw upon scholarship on democratic expansion and backsliding in the U.S. and other nation-states, while also synthesizing many distinct inquiries into state level action in election administration, gerrymandering, and observed democratic outcomes. In our use of a deep well of data, we hope that this study contributes to quantitative measurement and theory testing of large-scale, substantively profound questions in political science and political economy.

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A1 Data Sources

Table A1: Data Sources for Democracy Indicators

Indicator	Source
Automatic Voter Registration (any)	McGhee, Hill, and Romero 2021
Automatic Voter Registration (back end)	McGhee, Hill, and Romero 2021
District compactness	Kaufman, King, and Komisarchik 2019
early voting	Correlates of State Policy
Election data completeness	MIT Election Lab
felony disenfranchisement	Correlates of State Policy
Gerrymandering: declination (Cong.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: declination (Cong.-Pres.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: declination (state leg.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: declination (state leg.-pres.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: Efficiency gap (Cong.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: Efficiency gap (Cong.-Pres.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: Efficiency gap (state leg.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: Efficiency gap (state leg.-pres.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: mean-median difference (Cong.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: mean-median difference (Cong.-Pres.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: mean-median difference (state leg.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: mean-median difference (state leg.-pres.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: partisan symmetry (Cong.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: partisan symmetry (Cong.-Pres.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: partisan symmetry (state leg.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
Gerrymandering: partisan symmetry (state leg.-pres.)	Warshaw and Stephanopolous 2020
military and overseas ballots not returned	MIT Election Lab
military and overseas ballots rejected	MIT Election Lab
No-fault absentee voting	Correlates of State Policy
number of felons ineligible to vote as percent of state population	Correlates of State Policy
online registration	MIT Election Lab
Opinion-policy difference (economic)	Caughey and Warshaw 2018
Opinion-policy difference (social)	Caughey and Warshaw 2018
percent of eligible voters who register	MIT Election Lab
postelection audit required	MIT Election Lab
provisional ballots cast	MIT Election Lab
provisional ballots rejected	MIT Election Lab
registration or absentee ballot problems (off-year)	MIT Election Lab
registration or absentee ballot problems (on-year)	MIT Election Lab
registrations rejected	MIT Election Lab
Restrictions on voter reg. drives	Brennan Center
Same day registration	Grumbach and Hill 2021
State allows currently incarcerated to vote	National Conference of State Legislatures
under- and over-votes cast in an election	MIT Election Lab
voter ID (any)	Grumbach and Hill 2021
voter ID (strict)	Grumbach and Hill 2021
voters deterred because of disability or illness (off-year)	MIT Election Lab
voters deterred because of disability or illness (on-year)	MIT Election Lab
voting wait times	MIT Election Lab
website for absentee status	MIT Election Lab
website for precinct ballot	MIT Election Lab
website for provisional ballot check	MIT Election Lab
website for registration status	MIT Election Lab
website with polling place	MIT Election Lab
Youth preregistration	National Conference of State Legislatures

A2 Additional Construct Validation

Figure A1: Correlation with Cost of Voting Index
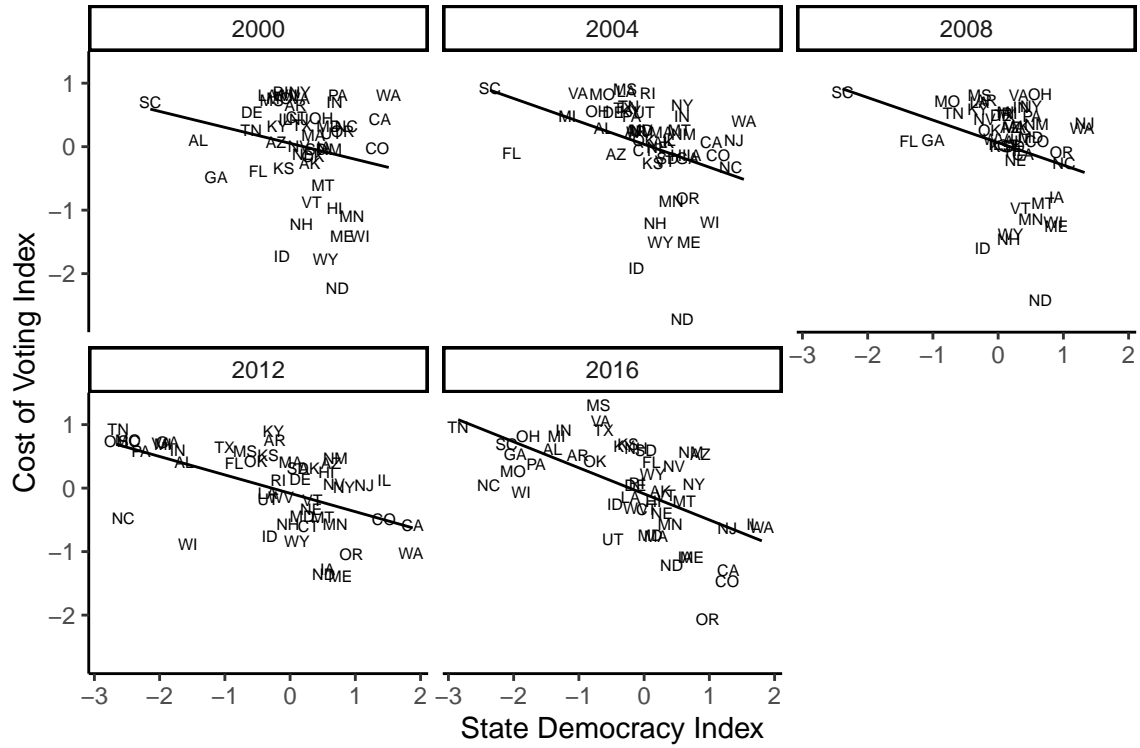
Figure A2: Correlation with Turnout of VEP

State Democracy Index
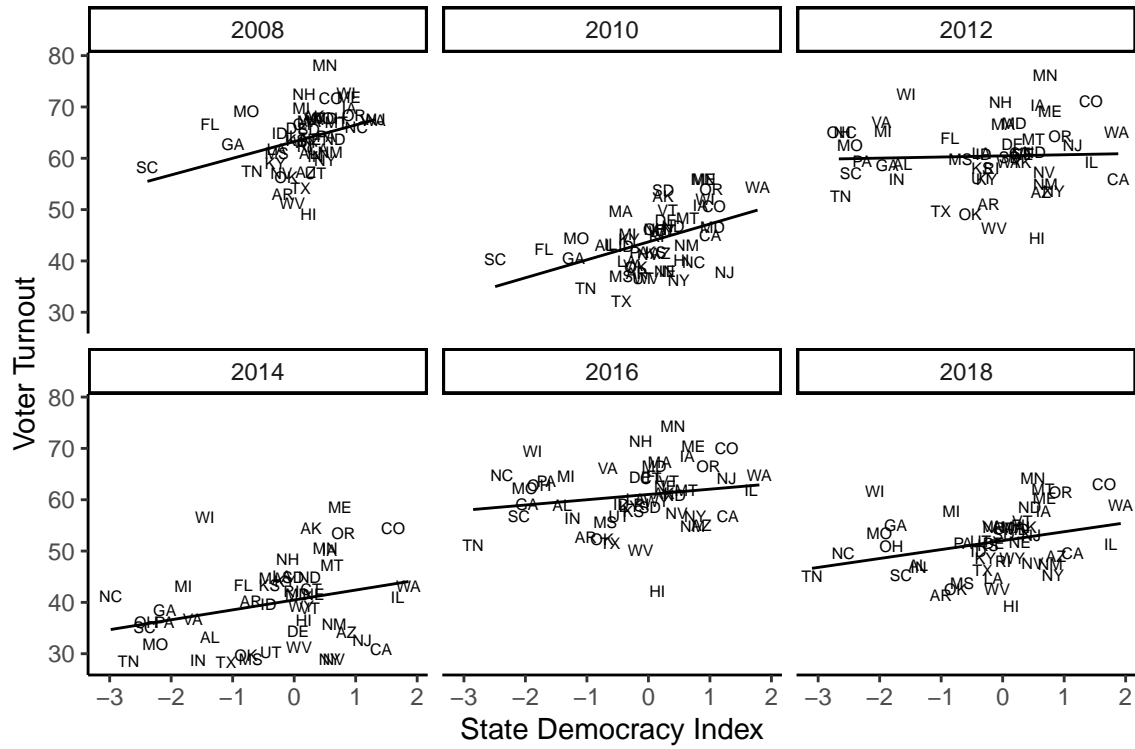
A3 Additional Robustness Checks

A3.1 Additional Synthetic Control Specifications

Figure A3: Effect of GOP Control Using Alternative Synthetic Control Specifications

(a) Min. Pre-Treat Period = 6   (b) Min. Pre-Treat Period = 5   (c) Min. Pre-Treat Period = 4
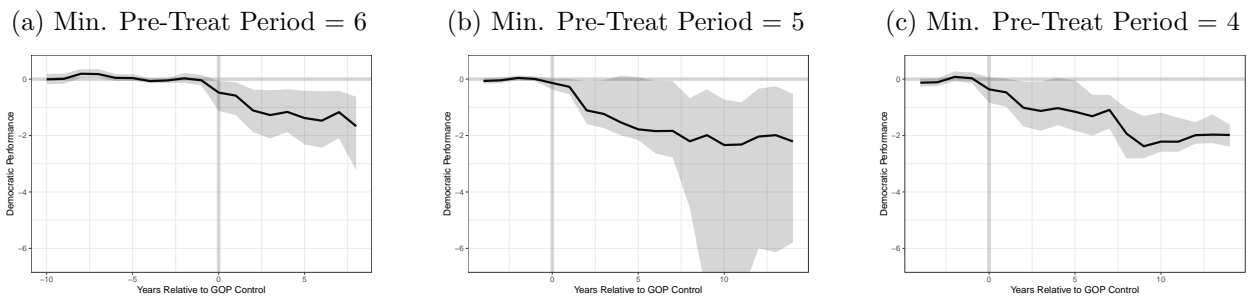
Note: Panels (a) through (c) plot generalized synthetic control estimates, each varying the number of minimum pre-treatment periods required for a state to be included in the analysis.

Figure A4: Synthetic Control Placebo Results
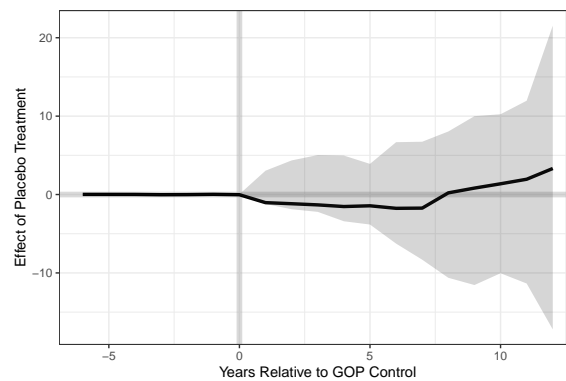
Note: Plot shows results of a generalized synthetic control specification in which a random set of states are assigned a placebo treatment with a probability of 0.5 in a (uniform) random year between 2000 and 2018.

A3.2 Additional Callaway & Sant'Anna Difference-in-Differences Specifications

Figure A5: Effect of Competition and Polarization Using Callaway & Sant'Anna Estimator

(a) Effect of Competition on Democratic
Performance
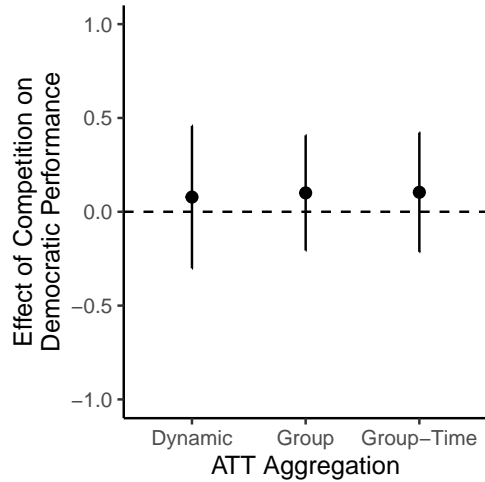
(b) Effect of Polarization on Democratic
Performance
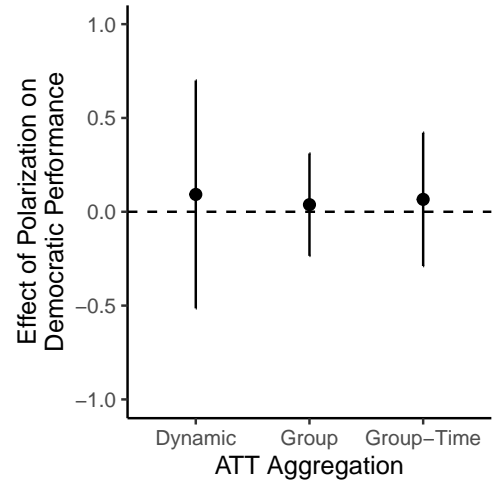
Note: Panel (a) shows the effect of partisan competition. Panel (b) shows the effect of polarization. Both panels use discretized treatment variables and ATT aggregation methods from Callaway and Sant'Anna (2020).

Figure A6: Effect of Demographic Change Using Callaway & Sant'Anna Estimator

(a) Effect of Δ % Black on Democratic Performance
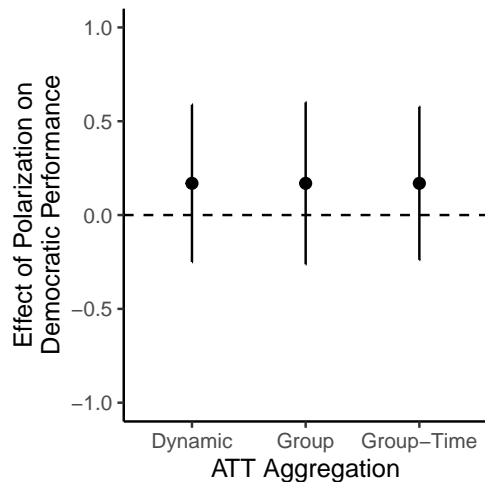
(b) Effect of Δ % Latino on Democratic Performance
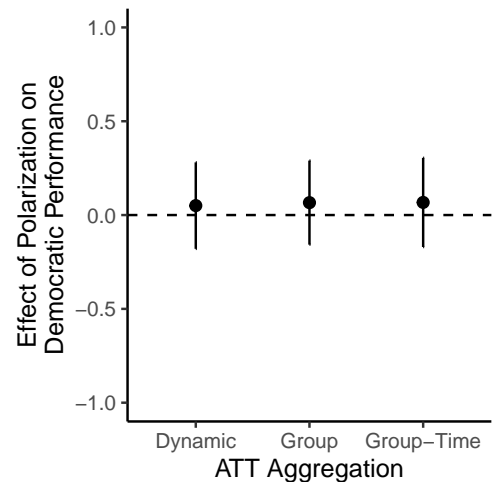
Note: Panel (a) shows the effect of change in Black population. Panel (b) shows the effect of change in Latino population. Both panels use discretized treatment variables and ATT aggregation methods from Callaway and Sant'Anna (2020).

A4 Additional Results

A4.1 Additive Democracy Index

Table A2: Main Results with Alternative Democracy Measure

| | *Outcome*: State Democracy Score (Additive) | | | | | | |
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
competition_allleg_lag	0.141			0.111	0.140	0.103	0.061
	(0.120)			(0.116)	(0.104)	(0.119)	(0.133)
polarization_avg		0.037		0.050	0.066	0.067	0.055
		(0.141)		(0.120)	(0.106)	(0.132)	(0.124)
Republican			−0.440**	−0.430**	−0.418**	−0.424**	−0.472**
			(0.147)	(0.148)	(0.149)	(0.142)	(0.163)
competition_allleg_lag:polarization_avg					0.101		
					(0.080)		
polarization_avg:Republican						−0.075	
						(0.212)	
competition_allleg_lag:Republican							0.153
							(0.166)
Constant	−1.583***	−1.550***	−1.419***	−1.399***	−1.411***	−1.391***	−1.395***
	(0.060)	(0.111)	(0.083)	(0.129)	(0.127)	(0.132)	(0.130)
N	833	833	833	833	833	833	833
R-squared	0.776	0.773	0.791	0.793	0.795	0.794	0.795
Adj. R-squared	0.757	0.753	0.773	0.775	0.777	0.775	0.776

A4.2 Alternative Competition Measure: Electoral Competition

Table A3: Main Results with Electoral Competition Measure

	Outcome: State Democracy Score						
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
competition_votes_lag	0.111			0.065	0.066	0.067	0.139*
	(0.059)			(0.061)	(0.070)	(0.058)	(0.062)
polarization_avg		0.014		0.048	0.047	0.061	0.039
		(0.134)		(0.117)	(0.119)	(0.123)	(0.117)
Republican			−0.470**	−0.450**	−0.450**	−0.444**	−0.415**
			(0.165)	(0.171)	(0.169)	(0.166)	(0.155)
competition_votes_lag:polarization_avg					0.002		
					(0.054)		
polarization_avg:Republican						−0.061	
						(0.197)	
competition_votes_lag:Republican							−0.262*
							(0.123)
Constant	−0.578***	−0.609***	−0.454***	−0.407**	−0.407**	−0.402**	−0.464***
	(0.077)	(0.118)	(0.094)	(0.135)	(0.135)	(0.136)	(0.117)
State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	833	833	833	833	833	833	833
R-squared	0.667	0.663	0.687	0.689	0.689	0.689	0.697
Adj. R-squared	0.639	0.634	0.660	0.661	0.661	0.661	0.670

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05

A5 Conceptualizing Democracy

Democracy is a broad concept, so a helpful way to get conceptual traction is to break its definition into component parts. Mainstream scholars of American politics have tended to conceptualize of democracy through the lenses of *elections* and public opinion most prominently. This is the case among quantitative American politics and political economy scholars (e.g., Downs 1957; Lax and Phillips 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Achen and Bartels 2016), but earlier qualitative Americanists also put their main focus on elections and how they translate into legislative seats (e.g., Dahl 2003).[29]

In this tradition, electoral policies help serve as indicators for how democracy is performing. Some of these are policies and procedures that set the rules of the game. Election laws can make it easy and simple, or difficult and costly, for members of the polity to exercise their most important form of political participation, their vote. Districts can be gerrymandered, compacting and diluting votes in ways to make their influence over who serves in office highly unequal. Other indicators of democratic performance are not rules about democratic inputs, but rather measures of democratic outputs. Prominently, a bevy of studies has investigated the correspondence between the policy and ideological attitudes of constituents on the one hand, and politician behavior and policy outcomes on the other (e.g., Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Gilens 2012; Lax and Phillips 2012; Caughey and Warshaw 2018).

However, other scholars have relied on broader conceptualizations of democracy. With a wider geographic focus, comparativists have put in considerable effort to conceptualize—and measure—democracy and democratic performance. Most prominently, the V-Dem group has conceptualized five different components of democracy: elections, liberalism, participation, deliberation, and egalitarianism. Democracy requires rights, which limit what electoral and legislative majorities can do (Estlund 2009; Brettschneider 2010). This is the *liberalism* component. The most important rights in the liberalism tradition are usually negative rights, that is, freedom from state encroachment in rights to speech, association, belief, and

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[29]A focus on leaders in "competition for votes" is also central to Schumpeter (1942).

other areas.[30]

In this article, we use electoral, liberal, and participatory conceptualizations of democracy, and do not focus on deliberation or egalitarianism. Still, we emphasize that there have been important critiques that liberalism does not capture the realization of rights in practice, and that liberal democratic regimes have depended on national prosperity derived from imperialism, racial exploitation, and the exclusion of nonwhite peoples (Mills 2017).[31]

The richest dive into the democratic performance of states in recent years has been that of Michener (2018), who points to individuals' interactions and experiences with state government as central to democratic performance. This article takes a related but distinct route in empirically investigating democracy in the states, addressing *de jure* laws (e.g., election law), implementation (e.g., gerrymandering), and observed democratic outcomes (e.g., the correspondence between opinion and policy) over time.

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[30]The democratic component of liberalism is especially concerned that a 'tyranny of the majority' would violate the rights of minorities. Shapiro (2009) suggested that "nondenomination," itself closely related to liberalism, be a key tenet of democracy. Feminist theories of liberal democracy suggest that reproductive rights are necessary for women to be equal democratic citizens (Phillips 1991; Craske, Molyneux, and Afshar 2002). Some scholars have also suggested that protecting the owners of capital is also an important minority consideration (North 1981; Weingast 2016).

[31]To varying degrees, scholars in the liberal tradition have addressed such critiques by emphasizing *equality* of those rights under law—and the realization of rights in practice. Smith (1993) emphasized that the disconnect between the liberal understandings of American democracy and historical race and gender hierarchies necessitates the tracing of "multiple traditions" in American civic identity. King (2009) extended this idea, suggesting that dynamics in American democracy could be illuminated by looking at immigration policy and who it determined to be a full member of the polity. These debates over liberalism help to conceptualize the *egalitarianism* component of democracy. Democracy may depend on both procedural rules and substantive outcomes (Brettschneider 2010). Furthermore, the centrality of chattel slavery and racial hierarchy to the history of the United States has led American scholars across a variety of disciplines to focus explicitly on the rights and equities of African Americans as key markers of democratic performance (Foner 1988; Shelby 2005). Such analysis has broadly investigated racial democracy in terms of the right to vote (e.g., Kousser 1974), civil liberties (e.g., Francis 2014), and the distribution of social and economic capital (e.g., DuBois 1935; Glaude Jr. 2017). Further research has linked institutional racism and authoritarianism, both in the Jim Crow era of pervasive lynching (Mickey 2015), as well as the post-civil rights era (Parker and Towler 2019).

A6 Replication with Measures Covering Liberal and Egalitarian Democracy

A6.1 Extending Measure to Liberal Democracy

In section A5, we described the electoral, liberal, and egalitarian subcomponents of democracy. In this section, we develop two new democracy measures that extend coverage to the liberal and egalitarian subcomponents, and use them to replicate our main results. The first of the two alternative measures builds on the original electoral democracy measure by adding indicators of *liberal* democracy. Figure A7 plots the discrimination parameters for the 61 indicators in this measure.

The indicators covering liberal democracy and freedom from authoritarian control come from different sources. Indicators related to criminal justice are from the Correlates of State Policy Database (Jordan and Grossmann 2016), as well as the Bureau of Justice Statistics and Institute for Justice. We also include state asset forfeiture ratings by the Institute for Justice "Policing for Profit" dataset.[32]

The discrimination parameters in Figure A7 suggest that a small number of indicators do not load well onto the latent democracy dimension (discrimination parameters close to zero). Although some indicators related to the carceral state, such as state incarceration rates and asset forfeiture ratings, load onto the democracy index well, others, such as three strikes laws and Black incarceration rates are orthogonal. This is suggestive evidence that that authoritarianism related to policing and incarceration might be a separate dimension of state democracy. A separate carceral authoritarianism dimension would be consistent with the results of Grumbach (2018), who finds that in contrast to many other policy areas (e.g., health care or gun control policy), criminal justice policy in the states has not shown much polarization by party.

Tables A4 and A5 show similar results to those with the main electoral democracy mea-

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[32]Available at https://ij.org/report/policing-for-profit-3/policing-for-profit-data/

Figure A7: Factor Loadings of Democracy Indicators (Electoral and Liberal)
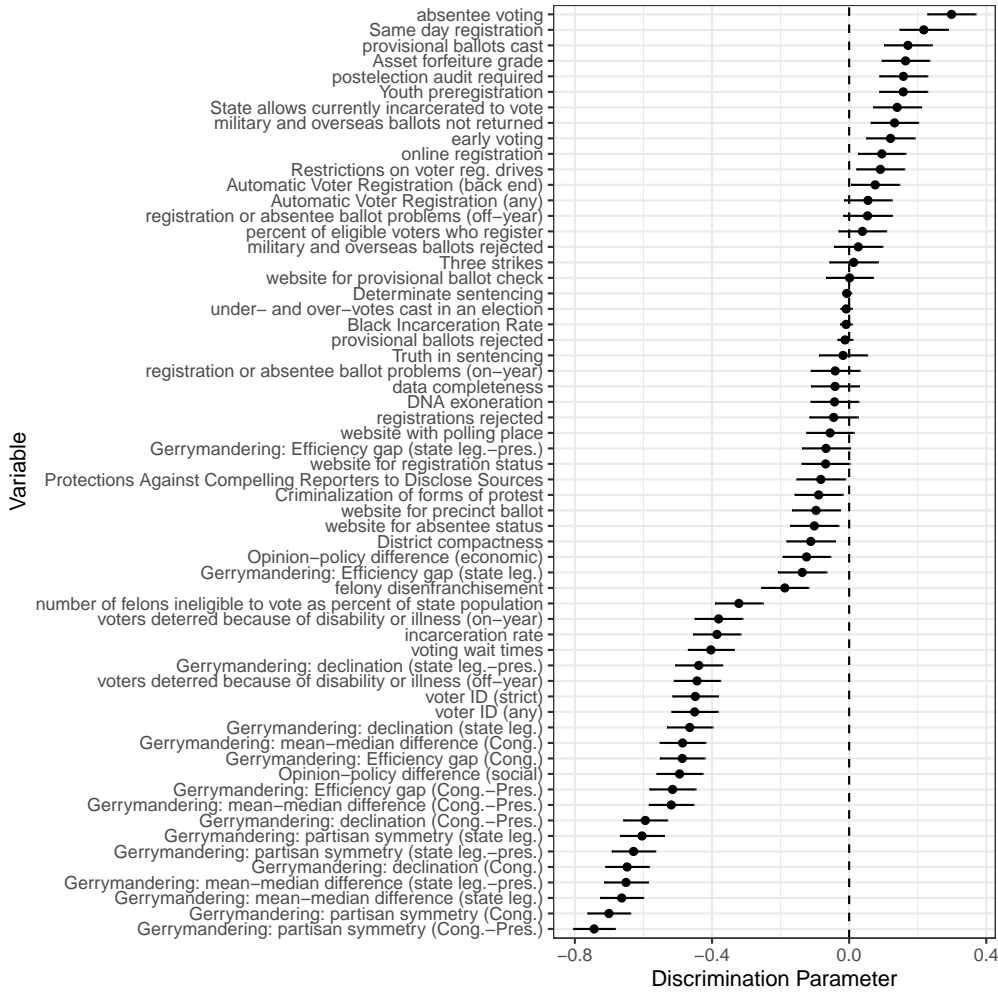
Note: Figure presents the discrimination parameter estimates and Bayesian credible intervals for indicators used in the State Democracy Index.

sure used in the article. The most important substantive difference in the results is that those using this liberal-electoral measure show somewhat smaller (and not as often statistically significant) effects of competition. The similarity of the overall results reflects the fact that the electoral democracy indicators load much more strongly in the measurement model than do the liberal democracy indicators, as seen in Figure A7.

Table A4: Explaining Dynamics in Liberal & Electoral Democracy

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
			Outcome: State Democracy Score				
Competition	0.187			0.159	0.182	0.157	0.120
	(0.104)			(0.096)	(0.095)	(0.102)	(0.110)
Polarization		0.016		0.023	0.036	0.025	0.027
		(0.125)		(0.112)	(0.104)	(0.120)	(0.114)
Republican			−0.443**	−0.427**	−0.417**	−0.426**	−0.459**
			(0.154)	(0.151)	(0.154)	(0.147)	(0.176)
Competition × Polarization					0.081		
					(0.064)		
Polarization × Republican						−0.011	
						(0.187)	
Competition × Republican							0.120
							(0.199)
Constant	−0.785***	−0.762***	−0.617***	−0.620***	−0.629***	−0.619***	−0.617***
	(0.065)	(0.111)	(0.087)	(0.127)	(0.128)	(0.131)	(0.127)
State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	833	833	833	833	833	833	833
R-squared	0.712	0.705	0.727	0.732	0.733	0.732	0.733
Adj. R-squared	0.687	0.680	0.704	0.708	0.709	0.708	0.709

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05

A6.2 Extending Measure to Egalitarian Democracy

The second alternative measure not only broadens the coverage of elements of liberal democracy, but also includes indicators of *egalitarian* democracy. This broader alternative measure is based on a total of 116 indicators. We then fit a model with the 116 indicators using the same Bayesian factor analysis specification as our main State Democracy Index measure.

Table A7 replicates our main analysis using this broader democracy measure. The results once again suggest a central role for Republican control of government, and little effect of competitiveness or polarization. However, unlike the results presented in this article, here the interaction of polarization and Republican control is significant and relatively substantial (-0.150 standard deviations). In addition, the effect of Republican control is modestly smaller with this democracy measure. This is unexpected, because the broader democracy measure includes additional indicators related to liberalism and egalitarianism that correspond more closely to the left-right political spectrum, such as the dimension captured by measures of

Table A5: Racial Demographic Change and State Liberal & Electoral Democracy

	Outcome: State Democracy Score			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Δ % Black	−0.0001	−0.001	0.0005	0.001
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.003)
Δ % Latino	−0.001	0.0001	−0.0004	−0.004
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.003)
Competition		0.274		
		(0.140)		
Polarization			0.028	
			(0.177)	
Republican				−0.720**
				(0.221)
Δ % Black × Competition		0.001		
		(0.004)		
Δ % Latino × Competition		−0.002		
		(0.002)		
Δ % Black × Polarization			0.001	
			(0.003)	
Δ % Latino × Polarization			−0.001	
			(0.002)	
Δ % Black × Republican				−0.004
				(0.004)
Δ % Latino × Republican				0.007*
				(0.003)
Constant	−0.747***	−0.757***	−0.757***	−0.388*
	(0.168)	(0.167)	(0.164)	(0.179)
State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	833	833	833	833
R-squared	0.705	0.713	0.705	0.734
Adj. R-squared	0.680	0.687	0.679	0.710

***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$

"state policy liberalism" (e.g., Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Caughey and Warshaw 2016).

Readers may be skeptical, or have normative and theoretical reasons to weight particular democracy indicators differently than the equal weighting in the additive indices and data-driven weighting in the Bayesian factor analysis measures. To assuage this concern, we simulate 100,000 measures using the 51 indicators from the main State Democracy Index, and another 100,000 measures using the 116 indicators from the broader democracy measure. In each simulated measure, we generate randomly generated weights between 0 and infinity for each democracy indicator, such that each simulation produces an additive index with different weighting of indicators. We then run the main difference-in-differences hypothesis tests on each of the simulated measures. Figure A8 plots the distribution of coefficient estimates for the tests using each of the 100,000 simulated measures of each type. The

Table A6: Indicators in Full (Electoral, Liberal, and Egalitarian) Democracy Measure

Electoral Indicators	Liberal & Egalitarian Indicators
absentee ballots not returned	Abortion consent post-Casey
absentee ballots rejected	Abortion consent pre-Casey
absentee voting	Abortion insurance restriction
Automatic Voter Registration	Allows public breast feeding
data completeness	Asset forfeiture grade
District compactness	Ban on sanctuary cities
early voting	Black-white spatial segregation index
felony disenfranchisement	Black Incarceration Rate
Gerrymandering: declination (Cong.-Pres.)	black/white incarceration ratio
Gerrymandering: declination (Cong.)	Corporate contribution ban
Gerrymandering: declination (state leg.-pres.)	Criminalization of forms of protest
Gerrymandering: declination (state leg.)	Determinate sentencing
Gerrymandering: Efficiency gap (Cong.-Pres.)	DNA exoneration
Gerrymandering: Efficiency gap (Cong.)	Dollar limit on individual contributions per cycle
Gerrymandering: Efficiency gap (state leg.-pres.)	Dollar limit on PAC contributions per cycle
Gerrymandering: Efficiency gap (state leg.)	Emergency contraception
Gerrymandering: mean-median difference (Cong.-Pres.)	Fair employment comm.
Gerrymandering: mean-median difference (Cong.)	female/woman governor
Gerrymandering: mean-median difference (state leg.-pres.)	Gestation limit
Gerrymandering: mean-median difference (state leg.)	Hate Crime Law
Gerrymandering: partisan symmetry (Cong.-Pres.)	Higher ed spending
Gerrymandering: partisan symmetry (Cong.)	incarceration rate
Gerrymandering: partisan symmetry (state leg.-pres.)	income per capita
Gerrymandering: partisan symmetry (state leg.)	Inequality in life expectancy by income
military and overseas ballots not returned	interest group density
military and overseas ballots rejected	K-12 spending per pupil
number of felons ineligible to vote as percent of state population	Latino-white segregation index
online registration	legislative professionalism
percent of eligible voters who register	LGB Civil Unions or Marriage
postelection audit required	LGB Non-discrimination
provisional ballots cast	LGB Public accommodations
provisional ballots rejected	Limit on individual contributions
registration or absentee ballot problems	Limit on PAC contributions
registrations rejected	Medicaid covers abortion
Restrictions on voter reg. drives	number of individual bankruptcies
Same day registration	Opinion-policy difference (economic)
State allows currently incarcerated to vote	Opinion-policy difference (social)
under- and over-votes cast in on-cycle election	Parental notice
under- and over-votes cast in off-cycle election	Partial birth abortion ban
voter ID (any)	percent uninsured (health insurance)
voter ID (strict)	percent women in legislature
voters deterred because of disability or illness	Physician required
voting wait times	post-redistributional (post-tax and transfer) gini
website for absentee status	Poverty rate (black)
website for precinct ballot	Poverty rate (Latino)
website for provisional ballot check	Poverty rate (Native)
website for registration status	poverty rate (percent under FPL)
website with polling place	pre-redistributional (pre-tax and transfer) gini
Youth preregistration	Preemption of local minimum wage
	Preemption of local sick leave laws
	Protections Against Compelling Reporters to Disclose Sources
	Public funding elections
	Race discrimination ban public accomodations
	Repealed death penalty
	Right to work
	Same Sex Marriage Ban Constitutional Amendment
	Sodomy Ban
	state equal rights amendment
	state high court professionalism
	State Religious Freedom Restoration Act
	Three strikes
	Truth in sentencing
	unemployment
	union density
	Upward socioeconomic mobility
	Waiting period

Table A7: Main Results with Broad Democracy Measure

| | Broader Democracy Measure | | | | | | |
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
competition_allleg_lag	0.032			0.016	0.032	0.0001	−0.044
	(0.064)			(0.058)	(0.058)	(0.062)	(0.071)
polarization_avg		−0.042		−0.027	−0.018	0.008	−0.020
		(0.080)		(0.063)	(0.056)	(0.066)	(0.066)
Republican			−0.276***	−0.273***	−0.267***	−0.261***	−0.324***
			(0.069)	(0.070)	(0.072)	(0.071)	(0.093)
competition_allleg_lag:polarization_avg					0.056		
					(0.048)		
polarization_avg:Republican						−0.150*	
						(0.065)	
competition_allleg_lag:Republican							0.186
							(0.112)
Constant	−1.543***	−1.567***	−1.444***	−1.463***	−1.470***	−1.448***	−1.458***
	(0.049)	(0.078)	(0.053)	(0.077)	(0.076)	(0.077)	(0.077)
N	833	833	833	833	833	833	833
R-squared	0.936	0.936	0.943	0.943	0.944	0.945	0.945
Adj. R-squared	0.931	0.931	0.939	0.938	0.939	0.940	0.941

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05

"Electoral" measures use the 51 State Democracy Index measures, and the "Full" measures use the broader set of 116 indicators.

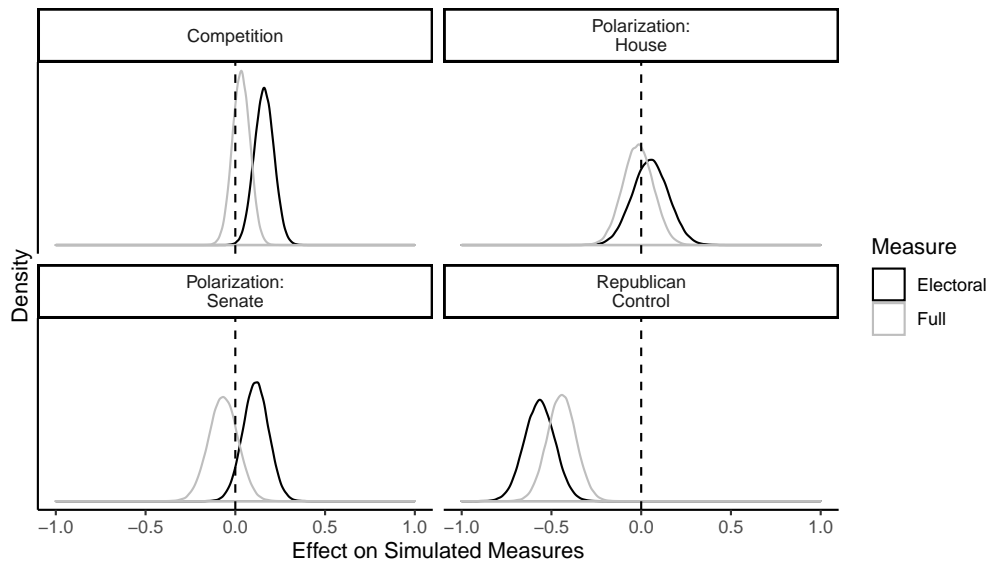Figure A8: Effect of Republican Control on Simulated Democracy Measures

Figure A8 increases our confidence in the main results. Large proportions of coefficients from the hypothesis tests on the simulated measures are close to zero for the competition and polarization measures (an exception is competition's effect on simulated *Electoral Democracy*

measures, which are consistently positive but modest). By contrast, Republican control of government has a large negative effect on democratic performance across the many simulated measures. The results, in other words, are robust to many, many different weighting schemes for the democracy indicators—and many different ways of quantitatively operationalizing the concept of democracy.

A7 Additional Discussion of Theories of Democratic Expansion and Contraction

A7.1 The Role of Competitive Parties

Does a competitive party system help or harm democracy? Schattschneider famously proclaimed that "[t]he political parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties." Scholars point to the consolidation of a competitive party system to explain large scale expansions of democracy in the U.S., Africa (Rakner and Van de Walle 2009), Europe (Mares 2015), and around the world (Weiner 1965). Intense competition for control of state legislatures in the late 19th and early 20th centuries may have provided crucial incentives for state governments to expand the franchise to women. As Teele (2018b) argues, politicians have incentives to "enfranchise a new group if they are insecure in their current posts and looking for new ways to win, and if they believe they have a chance at mobilizing the newly enfranchised voters to support their party" (443). Similarly, the more competitive party system in the North is a potential reason for the region's incorporation of white working class and immigrant voters into local and state politics (Keyssar 2000). Beyond its state-sanctioned racial hierarchy, the one-party environment of the "Solid South" during Jim Crow was additionally problematic (Key 1949; Bateman, Katznelson, and Lapinski 2018; Olson 2020).

Furthermore, rational choice and quantitative scholars of American politics highlight the issue-bundling role of competitive parties in democratic systems. By aggregating voters and politicians into groups and reducing the dimensionality of politics (Poole and Rosenthal 1997), parties help solve collective action problems for voters, and social choice problems for legislators (Aldrich 1995). Translating mass preferences into governmental behavior is much more difficult absent this issue-bundling role of parties.[33] Voters rely on party cues in elections, and legislators rely on parties to avoid the "cycling" problem of choice in environments

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[33]The behavioral analogue of this issue-bundling is the concept of "constraint" from Converse (1964).

of multidimensional preferences (Shepsle and Weingast 1981).

On the other hand, party competition might provoke politicians to constrain democracy. The incentives for a party in government to stack the deck in its favor—by violating norms or changing the rules—are greatest when its hold on power is marginal. An important argument from Frances Lee (2009) suggests that these incentives from competition for legislative majorities generates polarization through "partisan brinksmanship." Indeed, much scholarly and journalistic ink has been spilled about this hyperpartisan brinksmanship, in which legislators oppose any proposal from the outparty, no matter how reasonable or minor, using any and all procedural means at their disposal to do so. The precipitous increase in the use of the filibuster in the U.S. Senate over the past two decades might reflect such incentives.

Yet there has been little extension of Lee's theory to dynamics in democratic performance. Not only may parties facing intense competition use procedure to prevent outparty victories, they may have incentives to expand or contract democracy in their polity by manipulating the composition of the electorate or using the power of the state to hamper the ability of groups aligned with the outparty to organize and mobilize. We would not expect, for instance, the same attempts at manipulation in the 2000 presidential election in Florida were pre-election polls suggesting George W. Bush would cruise to a landslide in the state.

In recent years, we have seen many examples of competitive elections for state government that may have gone the other way under different levels of democratic performance. The 2018 Florida gubernatorial election between Democrat Andrew Gillum and Republican Ron DeSantis was decided by only about 30,000 votes out of over 8 million cast for the two candidates. In the same election, voters approved a ballot initiative to restore voting rights to previously incarcerated felons after the completion of their sentence—newly enfranchising over one million Floridians.[34] Had such a law been in effect in the 2018 gubernatorial election, and given the predicted partisanship and turnout of the newly enfranchised Floridians, the winner would have plausibly been Gillum instead of DeSantis. Not only would this have

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[34]In 2019 the Republican-controlled Florida state legislature later passed legislation to preempt this re-enfranchisement; the decision was upheld by the Florida Supreme Court in 2020.

installed a Democratic governor; it would have prevented the unified control of government that currently provides Republicans great opportunity to change policy in the state. By contrast, an uncompetitive party system in Florida would have very different incentives. Republicans in government would not have to worry that reinstating the franchise for ex-felons would flip crucial elections. The same could be said of the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election, where Stacey Abrams lost a close race after a series of potentially consequential polling place closures (Niesse and Thieme 2019).

North Carolina offers another potential case of competition influencing politicians' democratic incentives. Voter turnout in the state had been increasing throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and state legislative and gubernatorial elections were growing increasingly close as the Southern state transitioned from being a member of the 'Solid' South toward a more competitive party system and status as a swing state in presidential elections. In a rare sweep in this competitive climate, the state's new unified Republican government began implementing a series of changes to election policy beginning in 2011 that weakened democracy in the state.

A7.2   The Role of Polarization

While the prospect of the outparty taking power may give politicians incentives to expand or contract democracy, it matters how deep the ideological disagreements are between the parties. As the parties become more polarized, with Democrats becoming more liberal and Republicans more conservative, the partisan stakes of holding power—and the cost of losing it—grow dramatically. Scholars have investigated a number of potential causes of elite polarization, including racial realignment (Schickler 2016), mass polarization (Abramowitz and Webster 2016), and changes in the interest group environment (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Krimmel 2017). But regardless of its origins, the main idea here is that elite polarization, by deepening the divide between the parties' policy agendas, gives parties greater incentive to ensure that they win and their opponents lose. These strong incentives could lead the

parties in government to look for new ways to influence the cost of voting in elections for different groups in their states.

As Lieberman et al. (2019, 2) argue, "hyperpolarization magnifies tendencies for the partisan capture of institutions that are supposed to exercise checks and balances but may instead be turned into unaccountable instruments of partisan or incumbent advantage." It generates conflict about and within oversight agencies and the judiciary. It "erodes norms" of institutional behavior, such as the judicious use of executive power and fair treatment on issues such as bureaucratic and judicial appointments—and the levers of democracy, itself (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Polarization may be asymmetric or symmetric (Hacker and Pierson 2005; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006), but polarization is fundamentally about the *distance between the parties*. This distinction is helpfully illustrated in debates about the political causes of economic inequality. Measures of congressional polarization (e.g., the distance between each party's median legislator), as well as measures of the ideological position of just the median Republican in Congress, are both strongly correlated with economic inequality in the United States. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) argue that increased ideological distance between the parties produces legislative gridlock, which "in turn can affect the government's capacity to reduce inequality" (172). O'Brian (2019*a*), on the other hand, suggests a simpler and more direct explanation for rising inequality is the rightward movement of the Republican Party. In this article, we similarly adjudicate between a polarization-centered and a Republican-centered explanation in democratic performance in the states.[35]

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[35]As McCarty (2019, 12) defines them, "polarization generally refers to differences on policy issues, ideological orientations, or value systems, while...partisanship can be more general in that it may refer to any partiality one feels toward one's own party regardless of whether polarized preferences and attitudes are the source." Although the competition theory is more consistent with partisan incentives and the polarization theory with true ideological polarization, my analysis does not directly adjudicate between the distinct microfoundations of ideology versus partisanship.

A7.3   The Role of Groups and Party Coalitions

The logics behind a competition-democracy relationship or a polarization-democracy relationship are strong. But an alternative theoretical tradition offers a simpler explanation for dynamics in democratic performance focused on the configuration of *interests* within party coalitions. Some interests in society stand to lose (or at least not win as much) by ceding control over the levers of government to a wider circle of people. Economic elites and large business interests may see greater amounts of wealth or profit redistributed to the masses.[36] Groups in favor of racial or gender hierarchies do not wish to expand voting and other participatory rights to African Americans and women. This theory is historically bounded. In contrast to theories that "drop the proper nouns," here our theory leads me to a specific focus on the Republican Party, and the historical processes that led to its modern group coalition.

This theory applied to the modern Republican Party is closely related to what Hacker and Pierson (2020) call "plutocratic populism":

> Plutocrats fear democracy because they see it as imperiling their economic stand-
> ing and narrowly defined priorities. Right-wing populists fear democracy because
> they see it as imperiling their electoral standing and their narrowly defined com-
> munity. These fears would be less consequential if they were not packaged to-
> gether within one of the nation's two major parties.

Rising economic inequality, which puts the economic interests of plutocrats increasingly at odds with those of an increasingly large majority of voters, weakens the wealthy's commit- ment to democratic institutions. It also means that the plutocratic coalition cannot simply appeal to its electoral base on economic and policy grounds. Instead, it must reach out to right-wing populists with appeals based on ethno-racial, religious, and national identity cleavages. (Indeed, parties that pursue the economic interests of a narrow slice of society

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[36]The Founders explicitly cited that this protection of "property" as a justification for counter-majoritarian institutions in the Constitution (see, e.g., Beard 1913; Dahl 2003).

in a democratic system need an agenda that is at least somewhat popular, hence right-wing populism.) Donald Trump, himself, provides a clear example of this process. Republican elites dislike many things about Trump, but they very much enjoy that he mobilizes voters and signs high-end tax cuts. Trump, on the other hand, has little in the way of a policy agenda outside of enriching his family, general anti-immigrant rhetoric, and, for lack of a better phrase, "owning the libs;"[37] he is a vehicle that allows plutocrats to more effectively partner with voters who enjoy his appeals to right-wing populism.

The most consequential forms of right-wing populism, both historically and in the contemporary U.S., are, of course, based in racism. Slaveowners and, later, wealthy white landowners and businessmen, stood to lose from solidaristic interracial movements, and made efforts to attract poorer whites into their political coalitions with the enticement of a "psychological wage" based in their position above black people in the racial hierarchy (DuBois 1935). On the other side of this struggle, civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bayard Rustin, as well as labor leaders such as A. Philip Randolph and Walter Reuther, emphasized the linkages between race, class, and democracy, arguing that powerful interests exploit racial divisions for political gain (Frymer and Grumbach 2021).[38] Although psychological racism is pervasive in the American public and historical moments of interracial solidarity have been rare,[39] major *shifts* in how racism affects politics and policy require additional mechanisms, such as entrepreneurial elites who strategically exploit mass racism.

Indeed, political candidates and elites in the contemporary period have made racial appeals that tap racism in the mass public (e.g., Mendelberg 2001; Hutchings and Jardina 2009; Haney-López 2015), and these racist attitudes are associated with reduced support for democratic institutions (Miller and Davis 2020). Elites can similarly "racialize" policy

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[37]Ahler and Broockman (2017) provide evidence that to the extent Trump support is related to policy views, it is on the issue of immigration.

[38]As Martin Luther King argued, "the coalition that can have the greatest impact in the struggle for human dignity here in America is that of the Negro and the forces of labor, because their fortunes are so closely intertwined" ("Letter to Amalgamated Laundry Workers," January 1962).

[39]The *New York Times*' "1619 Project" surmises that "for the most part" black Americans "fought alone" in their struggle for justice (available from https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html).

in many contexts, as is especially prominent in the politics of welfare (Gilens 2009; Brown 2013) and health care (Tesler 2016, Ch. 5). Republican-aligned elites seized the opportunity presented by the presence of the first black president. Despite Barack Obama's avoidance of racial discussion and consistent promotion of black respectability politics (Gillion 2016; Stephens-Dougan 2016), his presidency, rather than signaling the emergence of a "post-racial America," was met with a Republican Party that made gains by radicalizing on issues of race and immigration (Parker and Barreto 2014). In the contemporary period, elite racial appeals and frames are facilitated by a sophisticated conservative media ecosystem that consolidates the mass elements of the Republican Party (Martin and Yurukoglu 2017; Martin and McCrain 2019).

Other commentators have focused instead on the forces of "tribalism," a psychological process in which people hunker down into identity groups in a (real or perceived) zero-sum conflict with outgroups (Fukuyama 2018; Chua 2019). The rise of this "tribalism" has also been employed as evidence of the dangers of democracy and the benefits of elite rule (Geltzer 2018). An argument from a very distinct political tradition, but one that is similarly 'bottom-up,' comes from scholars who consider psychological proclivities toward white supremacy (or, more narrowly, anti-blackness) to be an existential features of human civilization. Historical ebbs and flows of "tribalism," however, are difficult to explain with a primary focus on the evolutionarily-derived wiring of the Homo sapien brain. While the context of demographic trends and the first black president may have been necessary conditions, the recent racial radicalization of the GOP appears is centrally about the elites who help to activate latent mass racism by stoking racial threat and resentment.

Finally, the plutocratic-populist partnership is viable in the contemporary period because of the institutional and human geography of the United States, where Republican votes 'count' more than Democratic votes due to Republican voters' geographic dispersion across legislative districts and prevalence in small states. This longstanding electoral advantage for more geographically dispersed voters is distinct from gerrymandering, where governments

redraw district lines to create electoral advantage. Instead, in plurality electoral systems like that of the U.S., geographic clustering, or what Chen, Rodden et al. (2013) call "unintentional gerrymandering" (see also Rodden 2019), creates premiums or penalties by differing rates of "wasted" votes. Wasted votes are any votes beyond what it takes to win the election, 50% plus one in a two-candidate contest. The geographic dispersion of voters by party can be formally modeled to predict the legislative seat premium or penalty for a given party (Calvo and Rodden 2015).

Table A8: Explaining Democratic Expansion and Contraction in the States

Theory	Measures	Predicted Effect on Democracy
Competition	Competitiveness of elections or legislative majority	+ or -
Polarization	Distance between party legislative chamber medians	-
Racial threat	Change in state % Black and % Latino	-
Party	Republican control of government	-

The GOP has the geographic opportunity—based in patterns of slave and free state borders, among other deep historical roots—to win state and federal elections with a nearly all white base.[40] While any party might be theoretically advantaged under an alternative geographic distribution of voters, in the U.S., the party more supportive of racial hierarchy has tended to be more geographically dispersed, and thus advantaged by electoral geography in a competitive two-party context (Calvo and Rodden 2015). This modern geography is the result of long term political-economic patterns of Indian removal (Frymer 2017), the slave plantation economy (Rothman 2005), and, in the 20th century, the rise of suburbanization and its interaction with race (Self 2005; Kruse 2013; Trounstine 2018)—which have combined to make white votes more pivotal in recent elections.[41]

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[40]The only Republican presidential candidate since George H.W. Bush to win the popular vote, George W. Bush in 2004, won 44% of the Latino vote.

[41]Despite headlines about a "big sort" of Americans into ideologically homogeneous communities (Bishop 2009), there is a large body of evidence that residential choices are constrained and dominated by non-ideological preferences (Mummolo and Nall 2017; Martin and Webster 2018). Current geographic dispersion

Under this theory, the coalitional partnership between plutocrats and voters motivated by white (and related cultural) identity politics,[42] buttressed by electoral geography, leads to a clear prediction: Republican control of government will be democracy-reducing.

Table A8 summarizes the predictions of the three major theories of democratic dynamics that I test.

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and "unintentional gerrymandering" are mostly not the result of residential sorting.

[42]we do not wish to downplay the importance of gender, sexuality, religion, and even cultural identities such as being a gun owner, to mass attitudes. They are important in their own right, and in their interaction with beliefs about race (Filindra and Kaplan 2016).

A7.4 Robustness Checks with Measure Excluding Voter ID

Figure A9: Factor Loadings of Democracy Indicators (Excluding Voter ID)
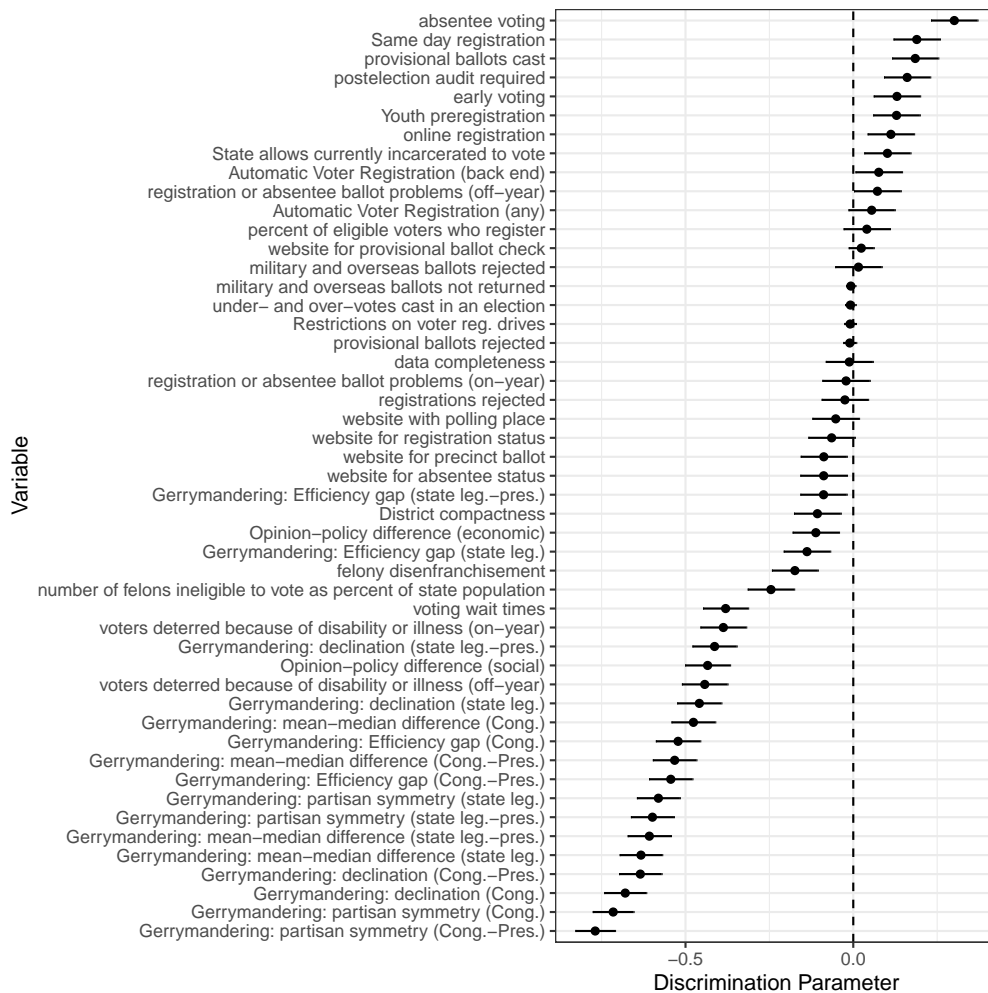
Note: Figure presents the discrimination parameter estimates and Bayesian credible intervals for indicators used in an alternative measurement model that excludes indicators of voter ID.
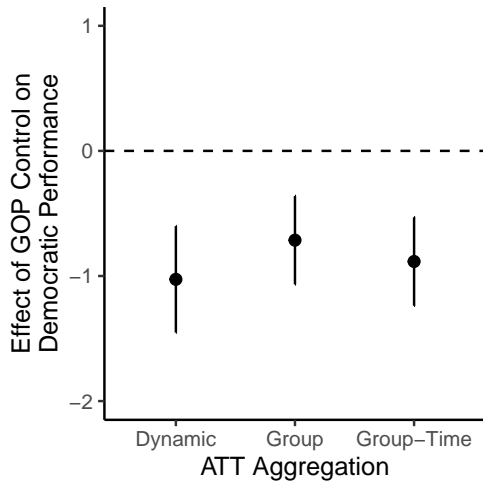
Table A9: Results Using Democracy Measure that Excludes Voter ID

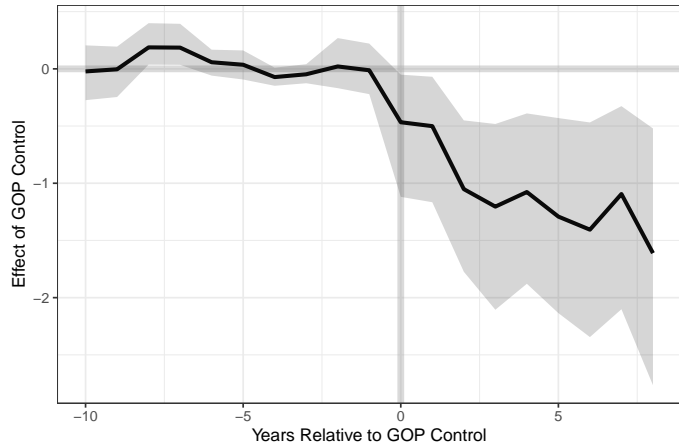| | democracy_novoterid | | | | | | |
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
competition_allleg_lag	0.220*			0.190	0.215*	0.191	0.160
	(0.102)			(0.097)	(0.100)	(0.105)	(0.111)
polarization_avg		0.058		0.061	0.075	0.060	0.064
		(0.144)		(0.135)	(0.126)	(0.136)	(0.137)
Republican			−0.441**	−0.422*	−0.412*	−0.423**	−0.448*
			(0.169)	(0.165)	(0.168)	(0.159)	(0.189)
competition_allleg_lag:polarization_avg					0.087		
					(0.068)		
polarization_avg:Republican						0.003	
						(0.208)	
competition_allleg_lag:Republican							0.092
							(0.207)
Constant	−0.664***	−0.613***	−0.495***	−0.476***	−0.486***	−0.476**	−0.474***
	(0.074)	(0.122)	(0.101)	(0.143)	(0.144)	(0.148)	(0.144)
N	833	833	833	833	833	833	833
R-squared	0.644	0.635	0.656	0.663	0.665	0.663	0.664
Adj. R-squared	0.614	0.604	0.627	0.634	0.635	0.633	0.634

***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$

Figure A10: Effect of Republican Control on Democratic Performance Using Measure that Excludes Voter ID

(a) Republican Control Effect Using Callaway & Sant'Anna Estimator

(b) Republican Control Effect Using Synthetic Control

Note: These estimates use a democracy measure that excludes voter ID. Panel (a) shows results using the Callaway & Sant'Anna Estimator alternative ATT aggregation methods. Panel (b) shows the results of a generalized synthetic control analysis.

Table A10: Results Using Democracy Measure that Excludes Voter ID

| | democracy_novoterid | | | |
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
pct_black_change	0.062	−0.026	0.132	0.133
	(0.266)	(0.282)	(0.400)	(0.270)
competition_allleg_lag		0.324*		
		(0.158)		
polarization_avg			0.032	
			(0.208)	
Republican				−0.708**
				(0.256)
pct_latino_change	−0.033	−0.003	−0.015	−0.182
	(0.218)	(0.208)	(0.219)	(0.202)
pct_black_change:competition_allleg_lag		0.006		
		(0.284)		
competition_allleg_lag:pct_latino_change		−0.122		
		(0.094)		
pct_black_change:polarization_avg			0.100	
			(0.233)	
polarization_avg:pct_latino_change			−0.014	
			(0.129)	
pct_black_change:Republican				−0.101
				(0.299)
Republican:pct_latino_change				0.310
				(0.167)
Constant	−0.635***	−0.629***	−0.639***	−0.329
	(0.174)	(0.176)	(0.177)	(0.180)
N	833	833	833	833
R-squared	0.635	0.646	0.636	0.662
Adj. R-squared	0.604	0.614	0.603	0.631

***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$