

Racial insecurity helped shield Trump from Republican backlash after Capitol riot, study suggests

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A new study has found that many white Republicans did not reduce their support for Donald Trump after the January 6th insurrection if they believed that white Americans are being unfairly discriminated against. While previous research has documented a short-term decline in Republican support for Trump after the Capitol attack, this new research suggests that racial status threat can blunt that reaction. The findings, published in the [Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics](#), highlight how feelings of group threat can protect political leaders from consequences—even after violent, anti-democratic actions.

The January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol occurred in 2021, when a mob of supporters of then-President Donald Trump stormed the Capitol building in an effort to stop the certification of Joe Biden's electoral victory. The riot followed weeks of false claims about widespread election fraud and was fueled by a rally where Trump urged his followers to "fight like hell." The attack disrupted a joint session of Congress, led to multiple deaths and injuries, and was widely condemned as an assault on American democracy.

The researchers, based at Harvard University, were interested in understanding why some Republicans continued to back Trump after the January 6th attack, despite its unprecedented nature and broad condemnation. Prior studies had already shown that many Republicans did briefly disapprove of Trump after the insurrection, but those changes were relatively small and short-lived. This study set out to explain which members of Trump's base were more likely to remain supportive—and why.

The authors theorized that a key reason for the uneven reaction among Republicans lies in how individuals perceive their group's place in American society. Specifically, they focused on white Republicans' beliefs about whether white people are experiencing growing discrimination and losing their historical dominance in American politics and culture. Previous research has shown that these perceptions, often referred to as "racial status threat," are linked to support for right-wing populism, political violence, and distrust in democracy. The researchers hypothesized that Republicans who feel this kind of threat would be less likely to withdraw support from Trump—even after he encouraged an attack on the U.S. Capitol.

To test their idea, the team conducted a series of studies using multiple datasets. In the first study, they analyzed responses from more than 5,000 white Republicans surveyed just before and after January 6th, 2021. The survey, conducted by the Nationscape project, asked respondents about their support for Trump, including favorability and job approval. Importantly, it also asked how much discrimination respondents believed white people face in society.

The researchers found that among white Republicans who did not perceive much anti-white discrimination, support for Trump dropped significantly after January 6th. But among those who believed white people face a great deal of discrimination, support for Trump remained stable. In fact, the size of the backlash among low-status-threat respondents was nearly canceled out by the unshaken support among high-status-threat respondents, suggesting that this group buffered Trump from broader disapproval.

The second study replicated this pattern using data from the Gallup World Poll, which surveyed Americans both before and after the Capitol riot. In this smaller sample of white Republicans, those who felt economically insecure—a proxy for racial status threat—were again less likely to reduce their support for Trump after January 6th. Interestingly, among those who did not feel economically threatened, approval for Trump dropped by 24 percentage points. Among those who did feel threatened, approval slightly increased.

In a third study, the researchers used panel data from the Pew Research Center to track the same white Republicans over time. They compared Trump approval ratings before and after January 6th and again found that only respondents who did not feel threatened by anti-white discrimination showed a decline in approval. Those who felt threatened did not change their opinions. This approach was especially valuable because it eliminated the possibility that differences were due to the makeup of respondents before and after the attack; instead, it followed the same people.

To determine whether this pattern held over time, the authors examined four additional surveys conducted between 2021 and 2024. Across all these studies, the results were consistent: white

Republicans who expressed strong disapproval of January 6th were generally less supportive of Trump, but that relationship was significantly weaker among those who felt white people were under threat. Even years after the Capitol riot, status threat continued to shape how white Republicans evaluated Trump's actions and political future.

The researchers took steps to rule out other possible explanations. For example, they examined whether political ideology, partisanship strength, racial resentment, or perceptions of voter fraud could account for the pattern they observed. In most models, these factors did not significantly explain the lack of backlash. Even after adjusting for these other variables, status threat remained the most consistent moderator of Trump support.

Importantly, the researchers focused their analysis on white Republicans, the demographic group most likely to support Trump and most relevant to the question of racial status threat. They found that this moderating effect did not appear among white Americans who were not Republicans, suggesting that partisanship and group identity work together to influence reactions to anti-democratic events.

The study's authors argue that their findings have broad implications for understanding democratic accountability. When people perceive their group's status as being under threat, they may be more willing to tolerate violations of democratic norms if those violations are seen as protecting their group. This makes it harder for voters to hold political leaders accountable—even when those leaders encourage violence against democratic institutions.

One limitation of the study is that the effects of status threat were measured using self-reported perceptions of discrimination or economic insecurity. These are subjective feelings that can be influenced by many factors, including media coverage, elite rhetoric, and broader cultural narratives. While the researchers took steps to rule out alternative explanations, it is possible that other unmeasured variables played a role. In addition, while the authors made use of strong research designs, including panel surveys and unexpected-event timing, observational data cannot prove causation as definitively as a randomized experiment.

Still, the study provides one of the most comprehensive and multi-method examinations to date of how group identity and perceived racial decline shape political attitudes in response to anti-democratic actions. Future research might explore how elite messaging and media framing shape the perception of group threat, especially in response to violent events. The authors suggest that political leaders and news outlets have the power to activate or suppress these kinds of identity-based concerns, which in turn can influence how the public responds to democratic breakdowns.

The study, "[How White Status Threat Undercuts Backlash Against Anti-democratic Politicians](#)," was authored by Kiara A. Hernandez, Taeku Lee, and Marcel F. Roman.