

## INTRODUCTION

# Race and the Capital Riot: How Racial Attitudes Relate to Anti-Democratic Beliefs Following the January 6th Insurrection

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On January 6, 2021, thousands of supporters of President Donald Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol building in an effort to block the certification of the 2020 presidential election. United States Senators and House members had to run for cover and hide as the insurrection became violent, with both extensive property damage and physical violence resulting in loss of life. Scholars of American democracy, elections, and racial/ethnic relations in the U.S. have argued that this event should not be viewed as a political protest that went too far. Instead, January 6th marked a significant departure from political norms related to the peaceful transition of political power, which the U.S. has observed since Reconstruction. This moment in American history, and the movement and ideology that kindled January 6th, deserve an in-depth analysis to unpack the theoretical foundations of the January 6th insurrection and what it signals for America's future. Many insurrectionists often publicly stated that they were motivated by so-called "voter fraud." However, there remains no evidence that widespread illegal voting activities existed in the 2020 presidential election. Where did the insurrectionists' ideas originate? How did they come to accept that the 2020 election was stolen, and who did they believe stole their election? Further, did other Americans beyond those directly involved on January 6th sympathize and support the insurrectionist ideology?

The collection of cutting-edge research represented in this special issue of the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics* demonstrates that the insurrectionists, and their supporters, were specifically motivated to overturn the election because of their conspiratorial views on issues such as voter fraud. The overwhelming empirical evidence suggests these views were in turn closely related to conspiratorial beliefs regarding the political power that Blacks, Latinos, Asians, immigrants, Muslims, and members of the LGBTQ community held or sought to usurp from "true" Americans. Rather than an objective and fact-driven debate over valid or invalid ballots, the January 6th insurrectionists advanced messages of white supremacy, coupled with specific opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement, immigration from Latin America, anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiment, as well as negative

attitudes towards Muslim Americans and the LGBTQ community. Indeed, as the extensive research in this collection documents in painstaking detail, no reader should be surprised that the insurrectionists homemade signs of “Stop the Steal” were being held next to homemade signs reading “Build the Wall,” “All Lives Matter,” and dozens of Confederate Flags. Analysis of the shirts, hats, posters, and flags by CNN<sup>1</sup> reported that white supremacists, xenophobes, and Nazi sympathizers were all part of the January 6th insurrection, and in large numbers.

## Overview of Featured Articles

This issue of the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics*, presents eleven insightful articles authored by expert social scientists. These scholars rely on a wide variety of public opinion datasets from before, during, and after the January 6th insurrection, including the American National Election Study (ANES), the Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS), the Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey, the Political Unrest Study, Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape, and the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAEE). Across more than a dozen different datasets, the empirical and statistical research points to a clear finding: Out-group anxiety, racial resentment, anti-immigrant attitudes, and related constructs are closely correlated with sympathy for the Capitol riot and anti-democratic beliefs. While it is also true that political values such as strident support for Donald Trump and anti-establishment sentiment were at play in 2021, the articles in this issue demonstrate that—above and beyond those factors—out-group attitudes cannot be separated any discounted as among the critical influences of support for the January 6 insurrection and subsequent anti-democratic beliefs in America.

Tye Rush, Chelsea Jones, Michael Herndon, and Matt Barreto examine the extent to which White racial attitudes correlate with perceptions of voter fraud and support for the insurrection. Using pre-election, post-election, and post-insurrection survey data, they find that White Americans who prefer their racial in-group are more likely to express sympathy for the insurrectionists, and to doubt the election results after Trump was declared the loser. Notably, prior to Trump’s election loss this same group tended to express greater trust in elections. John Kuk, Nazita Lajevardi, and Kelsey Osborne-Garth find that racial civic pride has differential effects on the belief in voter fraud claims for White and non-White Americans. Furthermore, they identify that belief in claims of voter fraud has concerning implications, reducing trust in electoral democracy and increasing support for future violence. Ferrer and Palmisano examine the extent to which anti-Democratic beliefs are shaped by exclusionary racial attitudes. They find that racial attitudes towards out-groups correlate with anti-democratic beliefs, and their work contributes to our understanding of the increasing alignment between anti-democratic beliefs and racial attitudes in the U.S.

Kiara Hernandez, Taeku Lee, and Marcel Roman theorize about the short-term anti-Trump backlash within the Republican base post-January 6th. They connect perceived racial status threats due to changing demographics and perceptions of anti-White discrimination as a main reason why White Americans do not hold co-partisan anti-democratic elites accountable.

Angela Elena Gutierrez, Christine Slaughter, and Erik Hanson evaluate the extent to which race plays a key role in political perceptions, even among those who hold similar political ideologies. The authors find that White liberals are less angry about race relations in the aftermath of January 6th, and—while they viewed January 6th as an insurrection and blame Trump and Republicans in Congress for their role—they are less likely to say that racism and White supremacy motivated the insurrectionists. Gabriel R. Sanchez, Michael Rocca, and Mercedes Herrera examine the impact of demographic changes on political perceptions, specifically attitudes towards the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol. The authors examine how changes in county-level nonwhite populations influence whether individuals label the event as a protest or an insurrection. They find that respondents in counties with moderate increases in nonwhite populations are more likely to view the event as an insurrection, while those in counties with substantial increases tend to see it as a protest.

To explain the seemingly paradoxical behavior of Henry “Enrique” Tarrio, the former Afro-Latino leader of the Proud Boys, a right-wing extremist group, Angela X. Ocampo, Angie N. Ocampo-Roland, and Laura Uribe posit that aspirational status and racial resentment can help explain this phenomenon. They find that Latines who aspire to an ethnocultural status that approximates whiteness, and those who distance themselves from Black Americans, are more likely to be supportive of the January 6th insurrection. Darren Davis and David C. Wilson examine the extent to which the January 6th insurrection and its aftermath of denial and obfuscation influence African Americans’ racial resentment. Their results show how the racialized January 6th events were connected to heightened African American racial resentment.

Crystal Robertson, Alexandria Davis, Joyce Nguy, Claudia Alegre, Samyu Comandur, and Lorrie Frasure examine the predictors of public opinion for an understudied intersectional group – men of color. Extending literature on anger and racial efficacy, they find that these predictors varied in their relationship with perceptions of the insurrection across men of color groups, underscoring the importance of intersectionality in the study of public opinion. Kayla Wolf, Chaerim Kim, Laura Brisbane, and Jane Junn examine the cross-pressures and intersections between race and gender to demonstrate the importance of attitudes supporting right-wing authoritarianism in explaining how Americans perceive the “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) agenda. Through a comparison of women across races, their analyses reveal that despite the notion that women are less supportive of a MAGA agenda, this expectation does not apply to white women. This study challenges monolithic narratives of women voters and voters of color and highlights the advantages of an intersectional approach to analyzing contemporary politics.

From a survey methodology perspective, Conner Martinez and Ricardo Ramirez explore the role of race and gender in influencing item non-response to questions about feelings towards January 6th insurrectionists. They found a persistent pattern of item non-response among all racial groups when asked to provide their feelings towards insurrectionists. However, women were significantly more likely to refuse to share their feelings—warm or cold. In addition, amongst non-whites, racial attitudes were also a predictor of January 6th item non-response. Their research highlights the importance of the intersection of race and gender in conversations

about democratic norms, racial attitudes, and withholding views about polarizing events.

For historians and scholars of contemporary American politics, the January 6, 2021 insurrection represents more than just a devastating day for democracy, as nearly all commentators and politicians have routinely stated. The January 6th insurrection signaled a deep and difficult truth for America to confront—that millions adhere to a racial and ethnic status anxiety that causes them to view our country in us-versus-them terms. Parker and Barreto (2013) documented the roots of this current movement as reactionary conservatism rejecting the election of America's first Black President amidst rapidly changing racial demographics, immigration, and LGBTQ equal rights, aptly titled *Change They Can't Believe In*. More than a decade after the rise of the far-right Tea Party, the man who championed the racist birther movement against Barack Obama, found himself championing an anti-democratic movement to overturn election results they can't believe in, couched in themes of white nationalism, election conspiracies, and anti-immigrant rhetoric during his infamous Ellipse speech hours before the Capitol riot commenced.

After winning the 2024 presidential election, Donald Trump followed through on his campaign promise to pardon many of the January 6th insurrectionists who had been charged and found guilty of criminal offenses against the United States. These pardons created a renewed narrative that the Capitol rioters were righteous and justified in their actions and beliefs and that this dark moment in American history was simply an expression of their patriotism. Rather than moving forward, Trump and his supporters were insistent on looking backwards and vindicating hundreds of criminals who had vandalized the U.S. Capitol and attacked members of Capitol Police who sought to stop them. The insurrection thus remains a political flashpoint and incredibly salient even four years later.

## Note

**1** Simon, Mallory and Sara Sidner, "Decoding the extremist symbols and groups at the Capitol Hill insurrection," CNN, January 11, 2021 <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/09/us/capitol-hill-insurrection-extremist-flags-soh/index.html>

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