

**Denying Democracy:
Exploring the Electoral Penalty for Election Denial in the 2022 House
Midterms**

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Abstract

It is critical to assess the capacity and willingness of voters to check anti-democratic behaviors by their politicians. For many Americans, former President Donald J. Trump's "Big Lie" regarding the 2020 election represented an unprecedented threat to American democracy. The 2022 midterms were the first nationwide opportunity for voters to hold Republican candidates accountable for endorsing President Trump's anti-democratic behavior following the 2020 election, as 60% of GOP candidates in the 2022 midterms were election deniers. Previous research has either studied which congressmen objected to the electoral college's certification or assessed the electoral penalty in statewide races in 2022. My analysis employs OLS regression modeling to explore and quantify the electoral penalty for election denial across 404 House midterm elections. While I focus on the general election, I also conduct auxiliary analysis on the GOP primaries. I find that Trump's endorsement was strongly related to candidates' support for the "Big Lie." First, using an OLS regression model, I explore the factors that influence whether GOP candidates were election deniers. I find that election deniers were more likely to run in districts that contained voters which were more racially diverse, less educated, and more supportive of Trump in 2020. Second, I find with another OLS regression model that the politicization of election denial and different understandings of democracy significantly blunts voters' capacity to electorally penalize election deniers. As a result, these candidates face a limited electoral penalty. I suggest several explanations for this limited penalty, such as bipartisan pro-democracy messaging from political elites and persuasion effects among independent voters. I also find that the electoral penalty nearly doubled in congressional districts that were either highly competitive or significantly favored Trump in the 2020 presidential election. Third, I find that while election-accepting GOP incumbents do not face significantly more competitive primaries, highly prominent critics of election deniers mostly lost their

primaries. This indicates that GOP voters may not penalize election acceptors unless they are highly visible in their anti-Trump position.

The substantially higher electoral penalty in competitive districts indicates that it may be electorally advantageous for Democratic candidates in these races to highlight their opponent's anti-democratic record. Overall, my findings indicate that despite this limited electoral penalty, the GOP has strong incentives to continue defending Trump's "Big Lie." The primary losses of prominent Republican election acceptors like Liz Cheney further exacerbate the GOP's turn towards election denial.

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Introduction

American democracy faced an unprecedented challenge in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election. On January 6th, 2021, the Capitol was besieged by supporters of President Donald Trump who believed it was their imperative to halt the confirmation of Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election. While their efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, when Congress reconvened, two-thirds of Republicans in the House still objected to the certification of the electoral college's results. This is, by no means, the first time that members of the GOP have embraced anti-democratic attitudes and policies. For instance, in the wake of *Shelby v. Holder* (2013), state GOP parties have successfully passed several measures restricting voting rights, such as eliminating ballot drop-off boxes, instituting strict voter identification laws, and purging voter rolls (to name a few). In 2016, Trump argued that “millions of illegals” were the reason he lost the popular vote in 2016. However, Trump's efforts in 2020 are unprecedented in that they represent the first wholesale rejection of a U.S presidential election's results. These efforts have come to be known in popular discourse as the “Big Lie.”

What exactly constituted this “Big Lie”? Trump cast doubt on the election in the months leading up to November, citing irregularities with mail-in voting. After news organization projected the election for Biden, Trump claimed that Democrats, the media, and “illegal immigrants” coordinated a wide-scale effort to rig the election. For instance, he claimed that “... millions of ballots that have been altered by Democrats, only for Democrats” (Wolf, 2021). While most mainstream news organizations and courts firmly rejected his claims, they flourished online and on conservative networks like Fox, OANN, and Newsmax. Crucial to Trump's argument is that he is merely protecting “election integrity” and that citizens in a democracy have the right to ensure their elections are truly free and fair. However, Trump's perpetuation of

conspiracy theories with limited evidence suggest that his claims are less than genuine (Levendusky, 2023).

Concerningly, the “Big Lie” has not only gained traction with GOP political elites and ardent Trump supporters, but with broad swaths of the GOP voter base. Surveys have consistently shown that about 60 to 70 % of Republican voters believe that the 2020 election was “stolen” from Trump (Bump, 2022). It does not bode well for democratic norms if the overwhelming majority of a party’s voters in a two-party political system believe the other party has significantly rigged the electoral process. This perception of a compliant voter base likely gave license to most GOP elites to continue perpetuating the “Big Lie,” as evidenced by the fact that 60% of Republican candidates in House, Senate, and Governor races endorsed Trump’s election fraud claims (FiveThirtyEight, 2022). In response, Democratic elites have highlighted the threat the GOP poses to democracy. President Biden has delivered several speeches blaming Trump for his attacks on American democracy. The House January 6th investigation hearings, which also included GOP Representatives like Liz Cheney and Adam Kizinger, demonstrated to the American public how Trump developed the “Big Lie” and inspired his supporters to attack the Capital.

The 2022 midterms were the first real nationwide opportunity for voters to hold Republican candidates accountable for endorsing President Trump’s anti-democratic behavior following the 2020 election. In the lead-up to the midterms, several major news organizations closely tracked the stances of candidates on election denial. While the GOP took back the House by a slim margin, the “Red Wave” that many pundits predicted did not materialize. In the election’s aftermath, many proponents of democracy may have sighed a collective breath of relief as news organizations published articles tracking the performance of these election deniers,

often reaching conclusions like “Election deniers overwhelmingly lost in battleground states” (NBC, 2022). To be sure, several of the most prominent election deniers did indeed lose their races; Arizona Gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake, WA-03 candidate Joe Kent, and Pennsylvania Gubernatorial candidate Doug Mastriano, to name only a few. But some pundits have attributed these losses to poor candidate quality and ideological extremity, female mobilization in response to the Supreme Court’s Abortion ruling. Moreover, while Trump continues to reject the 2020 election’s results, the most prominent critics of this myth, like Liz Cheney and Peter Meijer, have been shunned by the Republican party and its supporters.

On January 6th, Trump addressed his supporters at a rally before they stormed the Capitol. Infamously, he instructed them to “fight like hell” to prevent Joe Biden’s certification as President. On November 9th, Vox claimed that election deniers performed surprisingly poorly, concluding that “The midterms showed American democracy won’t go down without a fight.” While it is easy to conceptualize this “fight” as between Trump (and his election-denying affiliates in the GOP) and an amorphous pro-democratic spirit in America, unraveling the contours of the popular backlash against Trump’s “Big Lie” is much more complicated. Who is this fight really between? In what circumstances did GOP candidates support the “Big Lie,” and to what extent? Did most voters conceptualize the “Big Lie” as truly anti-democratic? To what extent did voters prioritize democracy i.e., “fight back”, if they did so at all? Were some groups of voters more or less likely to hold election-deniers accountable? These questions are essential to understanding the complex interplay between parties, voters, and democratic norms in America currently. In this thesis, I grapple with these questions and aim to add nuance to this critical conversation. In a time of intense polarization, it is easy to suspect that American democracy is in a downward spiral, and the warning signs are certainly there. While Trump

perpetuating the “Big Lie” is reason enough to worry that American democracy is credibly threatened, this paper intends to clarify and quantify the extent to which American voters are capable and willing to punish the anti-democratic candidate’s that seek to (ironically) democratically represent them.

The 2022 midterm election was the first nationwide opportunity for voters to hold Republican candidates accountable for endorsing President Trump’s anti-democratic behavior following the 2020 election. I explore the extent to which voters have the capacity and willingness to hold political elites accountable for anti-democratic behavior. I conduct regression analyses with data on election-denying GOP House candidates in the 2022 midterms. I theorize that partisanship transformed election denial into a polarizing issue, and although voters do not overwhelmingly reject election-denying candidates, they do confer a limited penalty. First, I predict that election deniers are more likely to run in districts that were more racially diverse, less educated, and strongly supportive of Trump in 2020. Second, I suggest that the partisan nature of election denial likely blunts the capacity and willingness of co-partisans to hold Republican candidates accountable in general elections. However, my finding reveals that election-denying candidates received a 0.7-point penalty, controlling for Trump’s 2020 district vote share. This penalty nearly doubles in districts either very supportive of Trump or competitive in 2020. I discuss possible explanations, such as the salience of election denial in some races and the relatively bipartisan nature of elite messaging against election denial. Finally, I conduct an axillary analysis of GOP incumbent performance in the 2022 primaries; while nearly all losing candidates prominently defended the 2020 election’s legitimacy, I do not find that election-accepting incumbents faced more competitive primaries than their denying counterparts.

Overview

In the “theory” chapter, I review literature on democratic backsliding, partisanship, and voter behavior, along with accounts of Trump’s attempts to subvert the GOP election, to build my central argument, which holds that election deniers faced a limited penalty due to the politicization of election denial in a polarized nation. While I devote most of this chapter to building this argument, I also aim to understand GOP elites’ fundamental motivations for supporting Trump’s election denial. To this end, I also theorize that candidate’s in racially diverse and less-educated districts were more likely to support election denial. While not my focus, I briefly discuss how my polarization hypothesis explains prominent election-accepting incumbents facing a penalty during their primaries.

In “Data & Methodology,” I lay out the various assumptions underlying my operationalizing of candidates’ support for the “Big Lie.” I also describe the various sources I used to collect data on election results and demographics, as well as some limitations in my methodology. Next, I present my key findings with regards to predictors of election denial and the extent of the electoral penalty in the 2022 House Midterms. I also present some findings on the performance of election-accepting incumbents in the primaries and qualitatively discuss the profiles of key pro-democracy GOP candidates that lost their primaries. In the following section, I synthesize these results and discuss their substantive implications on democratic erosion and partisanship in the US. Finally, I conclude with discussing the future of election denial in the US, its implications for American democracy, and I identify potential areas of future research.

Theory

Chapter Outline

In this chapter, I focus on building my central argument: due to partisan polarization, voters are unlikely to significantly punish anti-democratic candidates because political partisanship has transformed election denial from a “valence issue” on which there is broad agreement to a polarizing political issue.

In Section A, “GOP’s Motivations: Supporting Election Denial,” I draw on literature examining the GOP’s track record on democracy and theorize that Trump’s rejection of the 2020 election’s legitimacy is consistent with broader anti-democratic GOP impulses. Due to Trump spearheading election fraud claims, I also suggest that election-denying 2022 GOP candidates were endorsed by Trump and were also most likely to run in districts Trump significantly won in 2020.

In Section B, I explore “Partisanship Constraints on Voters’ Accountability of Anti-Democratic Elites.” Comparing various models of the American voter, I ground my argument in the rich literature on group identity and partisanship. I also review the literature on voters’ conceptualization of democratic norms and the extent to which they prioritize partisanship over democracy. I theorize that while a combination of partisanship and a flexible conception of democracy significantly blunts the capacity of voters to hold election-denying GOP candidates accountable, bipartisan messaging around election denial may influence some groups of voters to punish them. Moreover, the literature on campaigns and voters in competitive districts reveals that anti-democratic GOP candidates could face greater accountability there.

In Section C, I examine auxiliary hypotheses regarding the role of congressional districts’ racial and educational demographics in determining whether GOP candidates are election

deniers. I contend that candidates' in racially diverse districts were more likely to be election deniers because of the racialized nature of Trump's election fraud claims. Moreover, I suggest that election deniers were more likely to run in less educated districts because election fraud claims were most resonant with low-education voters. While my paper's focus is on the 2022 general election, in Section D, I draw on broader literature regarding accountability in primaries to investigate whether election-accepting incumbents are punished by GOP voters.

A. GOP's Motivations: Supporting Election Denial

What are the motivations of Trump and GOP elites in opposing the legitimacy of the 2020 election? In any representative democracy, elected representatives and political parties agree to a baseline set of rules of the game. If casting doubt on an election's legitimacy can improve future election outcomes for a party, to what extent would they be willing to undermine democracy in pursuit of their partisan ends? Understanding the pervasiveness and stickiness of anti-democratic attitudes in the GOP can contextualize the motivations of election deniers at the organizational level, and how far they are willing to go.

Institutional Constraints Against Democratic Backsliding

The literature on democratic erosion reveals that America has limited institutional constraints against democratic backsliding. When America was founded in 1776, the founding fathers took great care to structure the government to prevent the concertation of power with a tyrant. Through elections and the implementation of separation of powers, America was constructed as a nation of democratic choice as opposed to European monarchies (Of course, this democratic choice eluded non-Whites and women for several generations). Recently, the scholarship has critiqued the "myth of American democracy" (Achen & Bartels, 2016). According to the *Democracy Index* in 2022, America ranks 30th in the world and is rated a "flawed democracy"

based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture. Helmke et al. (2021) have argued that a permissive legal environment and the sorted electorate have allowed the GOP to gerrymander and suppress voting. The weakening of the Voting Rights Act through The Supreme Court's *Shelby v. Holder* (2014) significantly increased the scope of voting restrictions Republicans could implement in states. America's Aziz and Ginsburg's (2017) extensive legal review identifies very thin constitutional and legal constraints against democratic backsliding in America. These constraints were put to the test in the 2020 presidential election.

Trump-appointed Attorney General William Barr noted, on December 1st, 2020, that the Justice Department's review revealed a lack of evidence to support Trump's claims regarding widespread voter fraud. While Trump's challenges to the 2020 election's legitimacy tested American democratic institutions in an unprecedented fashion, these institutions mostly withstood this pressure. According to an analysis by *The Brookings Institute*, Trump challenged the presidential election in 62 lawsuits (in state and federal courts), of which 61 failed. The Supreme Court, with a 6-3 conservative majority (including 3 Trump-appointed justices), also rejected Texas' appeal to temporarily prevent specific swing states from certifying their election results.

In the aftermath of the 2020 election, Republican and Democratic state election administration officials verified the election's legitimacy, and Republican legislatures and governors in states like Arizona and Georgia voted to certify the election's results. This occurred despite Trump's attempts to intimidate election officials and assemble alternative slates of electors. News reports revealed that Trump pressured election officials and Republican Governors to either conduct election fraud or not certify the election. For instance, in a leaked

call, Trump told GOP Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger: “I need 11000 votes” (Politico, 2022). A Grand Jury is currently empaneled in Georgia to investigate Trump’s attempts at election interference. While Georgia Governor Brian Kemp certified the election results, Lieutenant governor Burt Jones was a part of the 16 fake electors in Georgia. At the federal level, although senators like Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz prominently objected to the 2020 election’s legitimacy, Senate Leader Mitch McConnell affirmed the results. A substantial number of GOP leaders at the state and federal level with a commitment to democracy enabled the democratic transfer of power. While this can be interpreted as a testament to the strength of American democratic institutions, it is also a warning regarding the precariousness of the system: a significant number of GOP elites, including the party’s presidential nominee, undermined electoral legitimacy and the transition of power. Moreover, 65% of Republican and 98% of Democratic affiliated judicial votes in 2020 presidential election cases were against Trump. Although this reveals the relatively bipartisan rejection of Trump’s voter fraud claims across America’s legal system, several important court decisions were split by just one vote. In 10 state supreme court cases, five were decided by 4-3 decisions.

Parties play a crucial role, even in a well-institutionalized democracy. Aziz and Ginsburg (2017) note that the continuance of democracy depends, in some part, on whether party leaders and activists choose democracy over partisan agendas or side with a “truly anti-democratic president.” These words ring like prophecy considering GOP activists’ overwhelming support for Trump’s “big lie.” They also note that democracy’s survival depends on the “elusive dynamics of popular and elite mobilization for and against the [democratic] conventions and norms.” Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue that political parties are “democracy’s gatekeepers.” While the masses’ receptiveness to anti-democratic appeals influences the success of these

appeals, the concerted effort, or lack thereof, of political elites to thwart anti-democratic behavior is also significant.

The GOP's History of Anti-Democratic Attitudes

Considering political parties' influential role in maintaining robust democratic norms, the recent rhetoric and actions of GOP members regarding the integrity of the US electoral process are cause for concern. Two-thirds of Republicans in the House of Representatives disrupted the Electoral College Count in 2020. 60% of Republican candidates in the House, Senate, and Governor races for 2022 do not believe in the legitimacy of the 2020 election (Five Thirty-Eight, 2022). How does the vast majority of one party in American democracy come to dispute the legitimacy of democratic processes and the peaceful transfer of power? The scholarship on explanations for democratic backsliding helps contextualize the Republican party's election denial. Malka (2022) notes how the scholarship has traditionally associated a "broad conservative cultural orientation" with an openness to authoritarian governance—crucially, this strong association persists across various formulations of democracy and conservatism.

There are several incentives for the GOP to engage in anti-democratic behavior. Keyssar (2000) notes that, although, in theory, political elites have electoral incentives to make voting accessible, in practice, they can erect counter-majoritarian institutions to keep the other party's base from voting. Liberman (2019) explains anti-democratic behavior as a product of ideological polarization—if a party's members believe the country cannot afford for the other party to come to power, they may not play fair. Grumbach argues that emphasizing historical processes within the GOP most clearly explains its members' motivations for attacking democracy. Hacker and Pierson (2020) characterize the GOP's position as "plutocratic populism": a union of plutocrats who fear democracy as a check on their economic standing and right-wing populists who oppose

democracy's ability to "imperil their electoral standing and their narrowly defined community." Grumbach notes that white identity politics are essential to the GOP's anti-democratic tilt and President Trump embodies the synthesis of plutocracy and populism.

Intertwined: Trump and Election Denial

While the GOP has pursued anti-democratic policies before 2020, Trump's campaign against the 2020 election's legitimacy was unprecedented. The summary of Trump's election delegitimization in the introduction demonstrates that it is difficult to disentangle support for Trump from the belief that the presidential election was rigged against him. I suggest that candidates' perceived electoral popularity of Trump, as well as their proximity to Trump, influenced their stance on election denial. Far from fracturing the GOP, Trump's "brand of hard-edge nationalism" has energized and united GOP activists and voters (Bartels, 2018). Hopkins & Noel (2022) present evidence that GOP activists' perceptions of GOP senators' ideological positions were primarily anchored in their relationship with Trump. Grossman & Hopkins (2015) characterize the GOP as the "agent of an ideological movement whose supporters prize doctrinal purity." If Trump has become a hallmark for this "doctrinal purity," it is no wonder that in 2022, GOP candidates supported election denial to solicit an endorsement from Trump. However, the relationship between election denial and Trump endorsement is likely one where both factors reinforce one another; it is also likely true that candidates who are closer to Trump are more likely to endorse election denial. Despite this complication, I investigate the relationship between Trump's endorsement and the candidates' election denial. While I do not expect to find a clear causal direction, I hope to show why Trump believed he could safely cast doubt on the US electoral system, and why so many GOP elites fell in line.

H1: President Trump was most likely to endorse election-denying candidates, and candidates who were endorsed by Trump were more likely to deny the results of the 2020 election.

The American electorate is highly sorted, and gerrymandering has decreased the competitiveness of congressional districts (Abramowitz, 2018; Morris, 2017; Mann, 2006; see also Engstrom, 2013). Despite this, most congressmen and candidates are still responsive to constituent opinions on local and national issues (Arnold 1990; Carson, Crespin & Madonna 2014, as cited in Lau and Strawbridge, 2023). GOP candidates may reasonably fear that delegitimizing election results may invoke an electoral backlash from their constituents who perceive this stance as anti-democratic and a threat to their vote.¹ However, candidates in districts that Trump performed significantly well in could either feel relatively insulated from such pro-democratic pressure or fear Trump will endorse an election denier in their primary if they do not align with Trump's position. Consequently, I predict that:

H2: GOP Candidates are more likely to support election denial in districts Trump significantly won in 2020

The Role of Candidate Ideology in Influencing Support for Election Denial

The ideology of candidates can also influence their personal support of election denial. Public opinion data suggests some incongruity between the beliefs of Republican candidates and their respective electorates regarding the legitimacy of the 2020 election. Hartnett and Schaffner's (2022) preliminary analysis of survey data reveals no clear pattern within states of 2022 Republican candidates endorsing the "big lie" and the percentage of state voters who believe in the theory. While only 41% of Pennsylvania voters believe in the "Big Lie,"

¹ See pg. X for a fuller discussion of the various possible forms of electoral backlash to election denial.

Republican Gubernatorial candidate Doug Mastriano strongly advocated for it; in Ohio, more than 50% of voters have reservations about the 2020 election, but Frank LaRosa, the Trump-endorsed Republican nominee for Secretary of State, supported the election's legitimacy. Hartnett and Schaffner note that this lack of fit with general election voters implies that "Republican candidates are pushing these claims either on their own or in response to their primary voters." To see whether candidates are "pushing these claims on their own," I explore the influence of candidates' ideological extremity on their support for election denial. While Hopkins & Noel suggest that GOP activists' perception of GOP elites' ideology has shifted from socio-economic ideology to proximity to Trump, more traditionally ideologically extreme incumbents may still decide on an election stance that is somewhat incongruent with their constituency. Hence, I suggest that:

H3: Ideologically conservative incumbents are more likely (than less conservative incumbents) to reject the 2020 election results.

B. Partisanship Constraints on Voters' Accountability of Anti-Democratic Elites

Considering GOP elites' embrace of anti-democratic behavior, in this next section, I explore whether voters are capable of and willing to hold them accountable. I explore three theories explaining the American voter: populist, leadership selection (of which retrospective voting is a key feature), and group identity (Achens & Bartels, 2016)². While accepting the first two models would imply that election-denying politicians would be electorally penalized, I suggest that the polarization of the American electorate and the politicization of election integrity indicates that deniers would face little to no penalty. Literature on voters' perception, and

² While I attempt to summarize these political theories, the literature on democratic theory is far too rich to do justice to in this limited space.

prioritization, of democracy relative to partisanship, further affirms this hypothesis. However, in competitive districts, election-denying candidates may face a greater electoral penalty from Democratic and independent voters.

Two Inadequate Models of the American Electorate

Pluralist Model

Robert A. Dahl (1961) is widely renowned for founding the pluralist or populist theory, which argues that the masses strongly influence policies in a democracy. According to the populist theory, the electoral competition allows voters to “maximize ideological satisfaction” by allowing voters to pick parties that most align with them. Anthony Downs’ (1957) canonical spatial model places voters on an “ideal point” along a unidimensional ideological spectrum. Under this conceptualization of the American voter, voters would severely punish candidates for thwarting the principles of fair electoral competition and attempting to invalidate the source of the voter’s power. However, research has since demonstrated that voters lack political knowledge, and are instead beholden to parties (Campbell, 1960; Converse, 1964).

Retrospective Model

Joseph Schumpeter (1976) defined democracy as “the method by which people elect representatives in competitive elections to carry out their will.” Under this theory, democracy is an arrangement for leadership selection, rather than a straightforward reflection of the popular will. The retrospective theory of voting derives from this conception of democracy. Voters can accept or refuse the leaders who want to rule them; Key (1966) describes the principal role of the electorate “as an appraiser of past events, past performance, and past actions.” This theory undergirds research on the electoral accountability of incumbents and candidates in conditions such as scandal, ideological extremity, and anti-democratic behavior. This theory portrays a

narrower and more realistic conception of democracy than the populist theory. Although Schumpeter was critical of the rational voter theory, the retrospective theory still presupposes that voters can parse candidates' character, actions, and policy positions. Over the past two decades, scholarship has grown skeptical of this characterization of voters. Achen & Bartels (2016) argue that election outcomes are mostly "erratic reflections of the current balance of partisan loyalties in a given political system." While other scholars (see Healey & Malhotra, 2013; Moser & Reeves, 2014) have shown that people are capable of voting in their best interests under certain circumstances, political science scholarship has trended towards a third model of democracy: social identity and group theory.

Partisan Polarization of the American Electorate

I employ group theory and political partisanship to explain how American voters perceive the issue of the 2020 election's legitimacy. Group theory has reemerged in the last two decades as the dominant mode of understanding voter behavior and democracy. Tajfel's (1970) experiments revealed that people can develop in-group biases even when they are designated into arbitrary groups. Since, scholarship in political science shows that voters view their party as an "in-group" and the opposing party as an "out-group" that they must compete with. In this blue-team/red-team dynamic, a group win is a personal win. Scholarship has utilized social identity theory to develop concepts like rural consciousness, linked fate among Black Americans, and Donald Trump's 2016 election.³ This research investigates how elite mobilization can transform group membership into a politicized and salient group identity, which can determine voting behavior. Partisanship is a salient identity in American politics at the elite and public levels. The rich literature on polarization agrees that political elites in America are deeply polarized and that

³ See Cramer, 2016; Dawson, 1994; Sides et. al, 2019.

they influence public polarization (McCarty et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2015). However, some scholars distinguish between polarization on issue positions and “social polarization, which relates to how partisans “feel” about the other party.” (Mason, 2015). While partisan sorting has resulted in greater disagreements between partisans on issues, the effect on social polarization is thought to be greater. Moreover, exposure to political campaigns and negative advertisements during election cycles strengthens partisan identity, affective polarization, and consequently, negative attitudes towards the other party (Iyengar & Westwood, 2019).

The above literature suggests that Trump and other election-denying Republicans can mobilize the partisan identities of Republican voters through in-party cues to influence attitudes on election legitimacy. Levendusky et al. (2023) present strong evidence that voters’ media consumption influenced their beliefs regarding issues like COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and the legitimacy of the 2020 election. News organizations like Fox News, Newsmax, and OANN played a prominent role in amplifying Trump’s claims. The discovery in *US Dominion, Inc. v. Fox News Network, LLC* shows that even though Fox news hosts privately mocked Trump’s claims, they publicly sowed doubts and regularly featured GOP politicians and Trump’s legal team to advance voter fraud allegations. When Fox Anchor Maria Bartiromo asked her producer, Abby Grossberg, whether she should have pushed Trump more on whether he would commit to a peaceful transition of power, Grossberg responded “To be honest, our audience doesn’t want to hear about a peaceful transition” (Confessore & Robertson, 2023). Notably, conservative media outlets recognized that there was a strong demand for election fraud conspiracy theories due to Trump’s opinion leadership. Of course, as Levendusky indicates, catering to this demand was a self-fulfilling prophecy as it reinforced voters’ doubts regarding the 2020 election’s legitimacy.

Polling reveals that Trump's efforts have succeeded in convincing the Republican base that the 2020 election was fraudulent. Monmouth University tracked support for the "Big Lie" since the 2020 election: on November 18, 2020, 70 % of Republicans believed the election was stolen. This belief is sticky: in September 2022, 67 % of Republicans continued holding this belief. Other survey evidence corroborates these estimates (Bump, 2022). In conclusion, the evidence reveals that Trump was relatively easily able to convince most conservative political elites, conservative media personalities, and GOP voters that the American electoral process was fraudulent. Did voters recognize that accepting Trump's claims put them at odds with democratic principles? How did they conceptualize their belief in democracy and square it off with their support for Trump? Next, I discuss how the nature of voters' commitment to "democracy" (an elusive term) makes it relatively easy for them to prioritize their partisan identity.

Prioritizing Partisanship Over Democracy

In advanced democracies, voters represent a "fundamental instrument of democratic self-defense" against anti-democratic efforts by politicians, parties, or governments (Graham & Svobik, 2020). This accountability mechanism requires voters to care about and prioritize democratic principles. Weingast (2014) argues that "bright lines," or clear violations of democratic principles, are like "tripwires," where the public will mobilize to hold anti-democratic politicians accountable. However, a lack of consensus on these norms and conventions is the central issue: Aziz and Ginsburg (2017) note that popular mobilization is hampered by the fact that there will never be "a singular moment" when America transitions from democracy to authoritarianism. Using survey evidence, Carey (2019) finds that although the public broadly agrees about which violations of democratic principles are most important, self-enforcing democracy also needs mutual consensus regarding when leaders violate these

norms. They also note that although official metrics reveal significant democratic backsliding, Trump's supporters disagreed. Given levels of polarization, a consensus on democratic norms seems difficult to achieve.

Graham & Svobik (2020) find that only a limited proportion of the US public prioritizes democratic principles over partisanship, policy extremism, and candidate platform loyalty in its elected choices. Partisans are more likely to punish candidates of opposing parties. The US public faces barriers in holding elected officials accountable for undemocratic action, particularly in states where one party holds a major electoral advantage. Malka (2022) notes that elites in western democracies can easily “assemble sizable coalitions that would accept authoritarian measures to achieve common ideological goals.” Arceneaux & Truex (2022) find that the support for election denial among Republican voters was quite sticky between October 2020 and January 2021, with more than 50% believing the 2020 election was stolen; older, less educated, and low social-status voters were more likely to believe in the “Big Lie.” Support for the “Big Lie” can be an important, yet perhaps imperfect, proxy for willingness to overturn future elections and democratic backsliding.

While most theories focus on partisanship and polarization as explanations for the failure of voters to check democratic backsliding, Grossman et al. (2022) undercut polarization’s ability to explain democratic backsliding. Most literature categorizes voters who authorize power grabs in democracies as either autocrats that prefer non-democratic governance or, like Graham & Svobik (2020), as militants willing to sacrifice democratic principles for partisan objectives. Instead, Grossman et al. (2022) propose that voters are majoritarian— they view the actions of popularly elected leaders as democratic, even when they contradict liberal democratic principles. Through experiments in which the researchers showed vignettes of power grabs to respondents,

they found that a substantial proportion of respondents approved of power grabs even when conducted by the opposing party. While Grossman et al. (2022) undercut partisanship's influence on support for anti-democratic behavior through their majoritarian voter model, partisanship can still be powerful in explaining salient and politically charged issues like election denial. Next, I evaluate the cognitive mechanisms, documented in political psychology, through which partisanship could influence voters' perceptions regarding elite anti-democratic behavior.

Achen & Bartels (2016) assess the nuanced mechanisms by which voters believe they are rationalizing while being driven by partisanship. They posit that parties construct conceptual frameworks that allow voters to understand a coherent political universe. The literature debates two mechanisms through which party loyalty can exaggerate voters' perceptions of a party's alignment with their views. The cognitive balancing theory argues that voters ignore or refuse to learn about their party's views on issues, pretending they match their views. The rational choice model suggests voters "fill in the blanks" by taking on their party's stance on political issues they are unfamiliar with, assuming they would arrive at similar conclusions if they were more familiar (Ferejohn 1986; Rogoff 1990; Banks and Sundaram 1993; Fearon 1999, as cited in Achen & Bartels, 2016). Considering Trump's prominent rebuke of the 2020 election's integrity, the former cognitive strategy is unlikely. Regardless of which strategy voters utilize, powerful forces beyond voters' control influence their political decisions (Lodge and Taber, 2013).

Due to partisan filters, voters even strongly disagree on fundamental facts regarding political issues. Gaines (2007) reveals that even when partisans agree on facts, they often interpret facts to "rationalize their existing opinions" rather than reevaluate their positions. Achens & Bartels' (2016) study of partisan voters' perception of whether the budget deficit was declining in 1996 presents fascinating parallels with the "big lie" in 2020. They note that despite

the “clarity, salience, media coverage, and political significance” of President Clinton shrinking the deficit by half, Republican respondents believed it had increased. Moreover, they posit issues disconnect from voters’ personal experience as another reason for respondents to “figure out what ought to be true, but not to learn what was true.” The “big lie” was also an issue that was both highly politically salient and arguably disconnected from personal experience. The key difference is, unlike the budget deficit issue, in 2020, GOP elites actively propagated disinformation regarding election fraud. Voters likely managed cues from members of both the Republican and Democratic parties, and it is unsurprising that intense disinformation campaigns significantly distorted the political reality of several voters, particularly partisan ones (Levendusky, 2023).

In Krishnarajan’s (2022) survey experiments in the US and 22 other democracies, he finds that citizens rationalize their understanding of democracy to accommodate undemocratic action by politicians who promote desired policies. This contrasts with Graham & Slovik (2022) and Grossman et al. (2022), who view voters supporting election-denying candidates as prioritizing party over democracy. Through a “perceptual screen,” respondents either engage in “democratic transmission,” ignoring undemocratic behavior and importing their policy agreement into democratic perceptions, or “democratic elevation,” shifting their understanding of democracy “from procedural rules and norms to what they think is good for the country.” Right-wing respondents even consider undemocratic right-wing behavior equally or more democratic than regular left-wing behavior that does not violate democracy.

Krishnarajan’s explanation of perceptions of democracy shifting to “what they think is good for the country” can explain why co-partisans not just accommodate but reward candidates for anti-democratic action framed as “election integrity.” This shifts our understanding of

undemocratic behavior from being similar to a scandal a candidate may face, a comparison drawn by Graham and Slovik (2020), to a cue for a significant political issue. Krishnarajan warns that a lack of consensus on democratic rules and norms hampers the voters' ability to identify and hold representatives accountable when they cross “bright lines” (Carey, 2019).

a *New York Times* survey from October 2022 revealed that while 71% of voters believed democracy was under threat, only 17% articulated this threat as related to election denial, Donald Trump, or political violence. Respondents felt that corruption was a greater democratic threat, while others raised issues like open borders and race relations. Even voters who agreed democracy was threatened ranked “threats to democracy” low on the list of America’s biggest challenges. In short, voters understand “threats to democracy” to be things they do not like or support. Consistent with Krishnarajan, voters use democracy as a catch-all for various concerns. The poll’s finding casts doubt on the stickiness and pervasiveness of messaging against Trump’s election denial. While the 17 % of voters who noted Trump’s election denial as the most significant threat to democracy could still influence election outcomes, they likely represent highly politically engaged voters who may have voted for a Democratic candidate regardless. While election denial is a highly salient issue, voters’ ability to conceptualize it as an issue at the core of democracy seems limited.

Limited Electoral Penalty for Election Denial

The above literature indicates that the lack of consensus on democratic norms and strong partisanship significantly blunt the capacity and willingness of Republican voters to hold their candidates accountable. However, even if election deniers are not held accountable through whooping bipartisan margins, I discuss other mechanisms by which election denying candidates may face a limited electoral penalty.

First, unlike most Republican voters, Democrat and Independent voters may not as influenced by conservative media regarding election conspiracy theories. Levendusky (2023) presents survey evidence revealing that support for Trump and exposure to conspiracy theories in right-wing media echo chambers (such as Fox, OANN, and Newsmax) increased the likelihood of voter support for election denial. Since centrist and Democratic voters are less likely to participate in these media information environments, they are less likely to believe the 2020 election was stolen. In contrast, when mainstream media sources presented claims regarding election fraud, they typically fact-checked them and framed them as unfounded. While 25 % of unaffiliated voters did not view the 2020 election as legitimate 9 days after Biden was sworn in, more than two-thirds accepted the results (Arceneaux 2022). Since moderate voters may be less susceptible to partisan messaging, they may be more likely to hold election deniers accountable at the ballot. Hall et al. (2022) present compelling evidence that centrists are not merely unsophisticated and ill-informed, as previous literature suggests, but rather “genuine moderates” whose views do not map neatly in any one party’s platform. Moreover, they suggest that these voters are more responsive to candidates’ abilities, ideological positions, and incumbency. If centrists drive electoral selection and accountability, they may be more attentive to bipartisan messaging in defense of the 2020 election’s legitimacy, and consequently, more critical of election deniers. Graham & Slovik (2020) find that centrists are an important “pro-democratic force” because they are less susceptible to viewing politicians’ actions through a partisan filter. If election deniers were penalized in the 2022 midterms, this could be attributed to persuasion effects among centrist voters.

Second, the bipartisan coalition defending the results of the 2020 election could have influenced independent and Democratic voters, along with some disloyal GOP voters, to reject

election-denying candidates. There may not be a consensus on whether Trump's election fraud conspiracies violated democratic norms, either among political elites or the American public. However, there need not be a perfect consensus against an election denier for a meaningful number of voters to turn against them. Perhaps salient messaging against Trump's claims from a (relatively) bipartisan group of political elites influenced the perception of a sizeable number of voters, and consequently, negatively influenced their perception of election-denying candidates. Democratic political elites vehemently attacked Trump's delegitimizing of democracy through election fraud claims and inciting the January 6th riots. Through proceedings like the second Trump impeachment and publicized meetings of the January 6th committee, Democrats increased the salience of the issue and framed election denial as an "assault on democracy." This likely generated an in-party cue for a significant number of Democratic voters. Notable Republican elites, like Mitch McConnell, Liz Cheney, and Mitt Romney, attacked others in the GOP for standing by Trump's claims. Westwood (2021) shows that bipartisan rhetoric from even partisan legislators can increase voter support by catering to voters' expectations of bipartisan law-making. The inclusion of GOP legislators in the January 6th commission further signaled that this was not merely a partisan witch-hunt. Consequently, this discourse may not have been subject to the partisan effects of in-party cues and messaging that are well-documented in the literature (Hemmer, 2016; Guess, 2021; Mutz, 2007; Settle, 2018).

One limitation of this explanation is that Trump attacked politicians like Mitt Romney and Liz Cheney as RINOs, encouraging his loyal supporters to shun them from the party. Trump's pressure also likely caused GOP House Leader Kevin McCarthy to flip his position. He initially attributed responsibility for the January 6th attack to Trump, but after meeting with him in Mar-A-Lago, he revised his statement to claim that the video Trump released calling off the

mob was sufficient. Moreover, McCarthy also reversed his position on creating an inquiry into the January 6th attack after Trump released a statement condemning the bipartisan committee (Porter, 2022). While these factors blunted the bipartisan coalition against election denial, and although strongly partisan Republicans were likely not convinced by them, perhaps a fair share of anti-Trump GOP voters, and independent and Democrat voters recognized Trump's rhetoric and actions as a "bright line." For instance, an *AP VoteCast* survey found that 10 % of Republican voters who don't identify as "MAGA Republicans" voted for Democratic House candidates in 2022. The Lincoln Project, an anti-Trump conservative group, has targeted this voting bloc of anti-Trump GOP voters. Co-founder Rick Wilson noted that this was a narrow but meaningful path to electing "pro-democracy, anti-extremist candidates."

Towards the end of my research process, Hall et al. (2023) distributed a working paper that revealed election deniers faced a 2.8-point penalty in state-wide races in the 2022 midterms. Election denial may be more salient in elections for positions like Secretary of State, Attorney General, and Governor than in House races due to the direct role of state officials in administering the election and designing election procedures. While Congressmembers play a pivotal role in certifying the electoral college's results, congressional candidates' views on election denial may not be as salient to voters.

Having weighed reasons for and against election deniers facing an electoral penalty, I arrive at the most crucial claim within this paper. I do not expect that election-denying GOP candidates will fare significantly worse than election-accepting GOP candidates in the 2022 midterms. In a politically polarized country, partisanship messaging from GOP elites and conservative media outlets transformed election denial from a valence issue to a polarized issue. Voters do not significantly prioritize true democratic principles, and even when they do, GOP

voters can easily rationalize Trump's "election integrity" claims as a defense of democracy itself. However, the bipartisan defense of America's electoral processes, joined by several GOP politicians, may cause mobilizations among Democratic voters and persuasion effects among moderates and anti-Trump GOP voters, resulting in a limited electoral penalty in races where election denial was particularly salient.

H4: Election-denying House candidates face little to no electoral penalty in the 2022 midterm elections.

While I expect election deniers do not face a significant penalty generally, the perceived competitiveness of congressional districts could influence voter mobilizations, and consequently, the success of election deniers on the ballot. While the phrase "electoral penalty" is analytically useful, it is crucial to acknowledge that it is an observable effect we study and not necessarily a single, real-world phenomenon that is fixed across candidates. There is a range of voter behavior that can confer an electoral penalty upon election deniers, and this behavior differs across varying degrees of district partisanship. How could a candidate's election denial meaningfully influence voters against them? A Republican or independent voter could choose not to vote in the election, only vote for other candidates (leaving the House race blank on the ballot), or even vote for the Democrat opponent. A candidate's election denial may also prompt a historically low-turnout Democratic voter to participate in the election. Through comparing voter behavior across districts with varying degrees of competitiveness, I add some clarity to the precise mechanisms by which election deniers are held accountable.

How does voter behavior differ in districts with varying degrees of competitiveness? In consequential competitive races, Democratic and independent voters who care about the GOP candidate's election denial likely feel a stronger incentive to vote for their opponent. McCarty et

al (2018) notes that “swing states” like Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, are not competitive because they are centrist, but rather, they are so symmetrically polarized that electoral outcomes often come down to marginal voters. Moreover, candidates in competitive races are typically more successful at fundraising, and consequently, can spend more on advertising (Hopkins, 2017). Since advertisements have the potential of increasing the salience of electoral battles and voter awareness of candidate positions, voters in competitive races may be more attentive to whether the GOP candidate is an election denier.

In Trump districts, the prevalence of Trump voters could easily blunt any mobilizations against election deniers, and non-Trump voters may be unmotivated because of the lack of influence they perceive they have. Alternatively, the presence of an election denier on a ballot, particularly if they are also ideologically extreme, may prompt non-Trump voters to mobilize more than they did in previous years. In Biden districts, independent and Democratic voters likely do not feel a significant incentive to mobilize against an election-denying candidate because they perceive the Democratic incumbent to be safe. Other factors, such as whether voters could also vote in a more prominent race, like the Senate and Gubernatorial, likely also influence which of these mechanisms are at play. While not a perfect proxy for voter behavior, district competitiveness allows me to narrow down the above possible explanations regarding how voters reacted to election denial.⁴ I posit that election deniers were likely most significantly penalized in competitive districts.

H5: Election deniers face a greater electoral penalty in competitive districts relative to Biden-Heavy and Trump-Heavy Districts

⁴ In the absence of voter file data, I cannot test how having an election denial on the congressional ballot influenced how Republicans, Democrats, and Independents in each district voted. I can also not determine whether persuasion or turnout effects best explain voter behavior.

C. The Role of Districts' Race and Education in GOP Candidate's Stance and Performance

White Status Threat Underlying the "Big Lie"

Mickey & Jardina (2022) find that white voters with stronger racial solidarity are less likely to support multiracial democracy. They suggest that these white voters view increasing democratic processes as diluting their power and a threat to their status. They link this contemporary finding with the history of the elite-led defeat of Reconstruction, which deprived Black Americans of equal democratic participation for a century. Smith and King (2021) find that while Trump did not explicitly endorse white nationalism in his messaging, he endorsed "white protectionism," the idea that whites are especially deserving of government support because they are unjustly victimized by non-white people.

Donald Trump's delegitimized the 2020 election results through conspiracies targeted against racial minorities and immigrants concentrated in urban areas. Biden's victory was fueled by improved margins in white suburbs in key swing states, while Trump outdid his 2016 performance in racially diverse cities like Philadelphia and Detroit. Despite this, Trump exclusively attributed voter fraud to racially diverse cities by playing off common perceptions of racialized urban crime (Summer, 2020). He claimed that illegal immigrants were voting and frequently attacked Stacey Abraham's voter registration efforts, targeted at underrepresented racial minorities, as "ballot harvesting." Tucker Carlson and other far-right media personalities tied election fraud to the "great replacement theory," which purports that Democrats bring in illegal immigrants to improve their electoral prospects. This rhetoric advances the vision of "plutocratic pluralism" that defines the GOP as a narrowly defined "home for white people" (Strawbridge and Lau, 2023).

Levendusky (2023) notes that these appeals successfully take advantage of strong feelings of racial status threat among the white GOP base. He finds that attitudes regarding race, status threat, and the degree of racial discrimination strongly predict the attitude of voters regarding the 2020 election's legitimacy, as well as support for the January 6th riots and political violence. Research has indicated that racial status threat is nationalized instead of being influenced by local demographic changes (Hopkins et al. 2019). However, Strawbridge and Lau (2023) find that Republican legislators in more racially diverse districts were more likely to reject the legitimacy of the 2020 election than those in less diverse districts. By determining legislators' stances from their votes on certifying the election's results, they suggest that these legislators positioned themselves to align with their perceived voter base. In racially diverse districts, the GOP's white voting base likely perceives a greater racial status threat than in less diverse districts. Some legislators who voted on certification may not have had time to completely rationalize their decision by considering the implications of their racially diverse district on their vote. However, by extending this analysis to non-incumbent GOP candidates in the 2022 midterms, I demonstrate how candidates (incumbent and non-incumbent) in racially diverse districts are more likely to reject the 2020 election's legitimacy.

H6: GOP Candidates are more likely to support election denial in racially diverse districts.

Less Educated Voters' Strong Support for the "Big Lie"

Scholarship on polarization reveals that more politically informed individuals tend to be even more polarized as they bolster their identities by rationalizing "their pre-existing preferences." In Achen & Bartel's (2016) study of the 1996 budget deficit, "moderately well-informed Republicans held less accurate beliefs than the least informed." Shani (2006) shows

that voters with more political knowledge about facts enhanced partisan bias about the related facts. However, Arceneaux (2022) found that voters who were older, less educated, and identified with low social status were more likely to believe in the “Big Lie.” This could be because college-educated voters are likely less susceptible to electoral conspiracy theories and are more likely to trust the democratic process. Education is not necessarily an ideal proxy for political knowledge; education can mean any combination of high social status, political knowledge, financial security, and several other variables. However, Pennycook and Rand (2021) find that less educated and informed voters are more vulnerable to “fake news.” They suggest that while people believe the news that aligns with their partisan perspective, individuals’ failure to verify the accuracy of information is the key driver in their susceptibility to misinformation. Hence, I suggest that college-educated voters are more likely to reject election fraud claims, and consequently, more likely to punish election deniers. Consequently, I posit that GOP candidates are less likely to reject the 2020 election’s results in districts where they fear they will face an electoral penalty.

H7: GOP Candidates are less likely to support election denial in districts with higher educational attainment

H8: Election-denying candidates in districts with higher educational attainment likely face a greater electoral penalty.

D. Election-Accepting Incumbent Performance in 2022 Primary Elections

How do election-accepting and denying incumbents fare in the 2022 GOP primaries? While the focus of my analysis is on the general election, primary elections are a crucial first line of defense against incumbents’ anti-democratic behavior. This is particularly true in a polarized,

gerrymandered electoral system where most congressional districts are uncompetitive in the general election (Abramowitz, 2018; Morris, 2017). To theorize regarding this issue, I engage with literature on two related questions. First, to what extent do primaries allow voters to hold incumbent political elites accountable for scandals? Do US House primaries generally produce more ideologically extreme candidates? Considering that the previous section established the power of partisanship in overriding democratic preferences among voters, if primary electorates are more partisan than GOP voters in the general electorate, I would not expect them to punish election-denying candidates, and perhaps even punish election-accepting candidates.

Hirano and Snyder (2019) break new ground in the literature on political accountability, which was previously pessimistic that primaries could remove low-quality or incumbents from office. They show strong evidence that scandalized and low-quality incumbents face more competitive primary challenges and are more likely to lose their primary. They operationalize “scandal” as an investigation by the Justice Department or House Standards Committee, or a discussion of the scandal in the House Quarterly Review. While certain GOP elites like Representative Jim Jordan and Senator Lindsay Graham’s efforts to overturn the 2020 election results meet these criteria, most election-denying elites do not. Consequently, conceptualizing election denial as a polarized issue, rather than a valence issue, compels us to turn to examine the polarization of primary electorates (Stokes, 1963, 1992). Moreover, voters’ awareness regarding candidates’ issue positions is necessary for accountability. While Representative Liz Cheney (WY-AL) suffered electorally due to her opposition to Trump’s election fraud claims and her role in the January 6th committee, other candidates’ acceptance of the 2020 elections’ results may be less known to voters.

Popular narratives regarding polarization have often portrayed primary electorates as composed mainly of ideologically extreme activists that compel candidates to shift away from the median general election voter. However, the evidence is mixed; since primaries long predate the polarization of Congress, other variables must interact with primaries to facilitate polarization. Hirano and Snyder (2019) find that ideologically extreme House members are as likely to be elected in high and low-turnout primaries. Moreover, they find that ideologically extreme and moderate incumbents are equally likely to face serious competition. Sides et al. (2020) affirm that primary electorates are not more polarizing than “the party as a whole.”

In conclusion, primary electorates are unlikely to significantly penalize election-denying candidates. If election integrity is a polarizing issue, primary voters instead may even punish election accepters. This does not imply that a significant number of election-denying candidates lost in the 2022 primary cycle; 60% of Republican candidates in the 2020 general election were election deniers (FiveThirtyEight, 2022). Instead, the structure of primaries themselves has little effect on whether election deniers emerge; we must turn to polarization in the party as a whole to understand whether voters penalized election-denying candidates.

There are two possible mechanisms by which election-accepting incumbents could face a more competitive primary: challenger and voter decisions. Much like scandal-facing candidates in Hirano and Snyder’s analysis, I theorize that incumbents who prominently accepted the results of the 2020 election were likely perceived by potential GOP candidates as vulnerable. Consequently, they were more likely to be challenged since challengers perceived they had an opportunity to wage a campaign attacking the incumbent’s position. If election acceptance is a polarized issue, challenging candidates could have employed it as a proxy for “doctrinal purity” (Grossman & Hopkins, 2022). These challenging candidates could also have emphasized

election denial to secure a Trump endorsement, which could make an otherwise predictable race suddenly competitive. For instance, in a July 2022 virtual campaign event, Trump endorsed Joe Kent in the WA-03 primary, emphasizing that “[Incumbent GOP Representative Jamie Herrera Beutler] voted for the radical Democrats second impeachment hoax where the Republicans stood up tall for me but she didn't.” Of course, Trump’s second impeachment trial directly addressed the culmination of his election fraud conspiracy theories in the events of January 6th. However, not every election-accepting incumbent voted to impeach Trump, so only prominent election accepters likely drew significant challengers. Moreover, considering that about 70 % of GOP voters support election denial, challenger candidates may feel safe to differentiate themselves from “RINO” incumbents on this issue. Challenger candidates may also have perceived an opportunity to fundraise successfully against election-accepting candidates by targeting partisan individual donors (Barber, 2016; Broockman & Malhotra, 2020). However, the extent to which the incumbent’s election acceptances influence the success of challenger candidates is likely determined by the extent to which the incumbent prominently defended democracy. I theorize:

H9: Election-accepting incumbents are likely to face more competitive primaries than election-denying incumbents.

Data & Methodology

A. Operationalizing Election Denial

I use FiveThirtyEight's assessment of election-denying 2022 GOP candidates to determine the extent to which candidates denied the 2020 presidential election results.⁵ While several news organizations, like *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, have independently determined which candidates deny the 2020 election results, FiveThirtyEight is the only one to make its data publicly available. Regardless of this pragmatic advantage of the FiveThirtyEight data, it also possesses methodological advantages over the NYT data. The NYT differentiates between candidates who said the election was stolen or rigged and those who criticized aspects of the election. While FiveThirtyEight categorizes the former group of candidates as "Fully denied," it differentiates between candidates who "raised questions or concerns about the election but haven't outright denied or affirmed it," categorizing these as "Raised questions." For instance, Paul Grossar is considered to have "fully denied" the results of the 2020 election because he voted to decertify results from several swing states and called for the election to be redone after an Arizona audit disproved election conspiracy theories. In contrast, when AZ-04 GOP Candidate Kelly Cooper was asked in an interview whether the 2020 election was stolen from Trump, he replied that there was some ballot harvesting, but did not outright agree that it was stolen. Some candidates were classified as "Accepted with reservations," i.e., accepted Biden's victory but still had issues with electoral fraud in the election. For instance, Rep. Vern Buchanan released a statement justifying his certification of the electoral college results by acknowledging that "I supported President Trump and publicly

⁵ They collected data from news reports, debate footage, campaign materials, and social media, as well as reaching out to nominees.

backed his right to challenge the Nov. 3 results” but “it’s time to move past this election” and “move forward as a beacon for freedom and democracy” (Anderson, 2021). Candidates that either voted to certify the electoral college results or issued statements supporting the legitimacy of the 2020 election were classified as “fully accepted.” This includes prominent GOP defenders of the results like Liz Cheney but also lesser-known candidates like IL-08 GOP Candidate Chris Dargis, who said “Yes” when asked whether Joe Biden won the 2020 election. These categories reflect the nuances of candidates’ positions on election denial. I will assess FiveThirtyEight’s accuracy by checking the “source” and “URL” variables in the dataset for each candidate’s position.⁶

I recode the “Stance on 2020 Election Results” variable to a binary “Election Denial” variable, which equals 1 if a candidate either “Fully denied” or “Raised questions” and equals 0 if they “Fully accepted” or “Accepted with reservations.” While the tiered “Stance” variable allows me to examine how various degrees of anti-democratic attitudes influence candidates’ electoral performance, the binary variable produces a greater sample size for both categories. Considering that most voters do not track candidates’ nuanced political positions closely, the binary variable may better reflect how voters perceive candidates’ beliefs regarding the results of the 2020 election. Moreover, grouping the four Stance response categories into a binary variable also provides me with greater statistical power to examine the effects of election denial on candidate performance.

A limitation of FiveThirtyEight’s data is that 100 GOP candidates (30.6 %) are listed as either “Avoided answering” or “No comment.” Considering that one-third of GOP candidates’

⁶ The FiveThirtyEight dataset also labeled candidates who refused to articulate a position as “Avoided answering” while they categorized candidates who have not made a public comment or responded to their request for comments as “No comment.”

stances are ambiguous, it is critical to address this limitation. They categorized candidates that publicly avoided answering the question (by changing the topic, for instance) as “Avoided answering” (2.6 %); candidates that either did not make a public comment or did not respond to FiveThirtyEight’s inquiries were categorized as “No comment” (26.3 %). While it is unclear whether there is a substantive difference between candidates in the two categories, I examine how these candidates differ by categories such as district competition, trump endorsement, and ideological extremity. I also address missingness through a best-case/worst-case analysis, where I repeat my two main regression models under two different assumptions: all candidates that avoided answering or didn’t comment on the 2020 election results i) fully denied the election results or ii) fully accepted the election results. I analyze the implications and probability of each assumption and demonstrate that my results are robust across these conditions.

While FiveThirtyEight’s four-tiered metric accounts for the extremity of the position candidates hold on election denial, it does not account for voter awareness regarding candidate positions. More voters are aware if candidates publicize their position on election denial, prioritize “election integrity” as a campaign issue, or are routinely criticized by their opponents regarding the issue. It is difficult to accurately capture these factors without a thorough content analysis of each race, so this will likely be a methodological limitation of my research and an opportunity for future research.

Finally, a key limitation of the election denier’s data is that it only contains the stance of GOP candidates in the 2022 midterm elections who won their primary elections. Without data on the stance of all candidates in the GOP primary, my analysis’ ability to explore the effect of election denial on primary election results is diminished. Consequently, my primary election analysis is limited to the performance of 216 GOP incumbents. While the *FiveThirtyEight* data

cannot supply the stances of the 9 incumbents who lost their election, I manually code this data (according to *FiveThirtyEight*'s category descriptions) by finding news articles and information from the "GOP Accountability Project," a website which provides scorecards to candidates based on their behavior regarding the events surrounding the 2020 election.⁷

B. Primary Election Analysis

I use primary election results data published by *FiveThirtyEight* to investigate H9: Election-accepting incumbents are likely to face more competitive primaries than election-denying incumbents. *FiveThirtyEight* collected data from state election officials, organization websites, and social media. The data includes raw election results, vote percentages, runoff results, and indicators for incumbency and race. In the nine races in which GOP incumbents lost, I examine the extent to which election accepters lost to challenging election deniers. I also explore alternative race-specific campaign issues that could explain incumbent losses and loss margins. Considering that incumbents only lost in 9 races, a binary loss/win variable does not permit me enough statistical power to draw substantive conclusions about the effect of election acceptance on incumbent performance. Hence, I use two other metrics to explore the competitiveness of primaries faced by (eventually) winning incumbents: i) the number of challengers an incumbent drew and ii) the margin of victory compared to the candidate with the second-highest vote share. Through an OLS regression, I investigate whether binary election acceptance or either of the two acceptance categories ("Fully accepted", or "Accepted with reservations") increases the number of challengers and decreases the incumbent's winning margin (H9).

⁷ See Appendix A for sample screenshots of GOP Accountability Project's scorecards.

C. Trump Endorsement

H1: President Trump was most likely to endorse 2022 GOP House (General)

candidates who most strongly denied the results of the 2020 election. The election deniers' data also includes a variable indicating whether Trump endorsed a GOP candidate in the midterm election. The possible values are "Yes", "No", and "N/A", where "Yes" indicates a positive endorsement, "No" indicates Trump specifically opposed a candidate, and "N/A" indicates the absence of an endorsement. I recode this into a binary endorsement variable, where 1 indicates an endorsement and 2 indicates a lack of endorsement. This allows me to easily interpret the effect of election denial on Trump's endorsement. Additionally, there are only 20 candidates Trump attacked, so it is unclear whether the difference between Trump not endorsing and disparaging a candidate substantively influences the analysis. Moreover, including all three categories would assume cardinality between them, which may not be reflective of political reality. I conduct regressions to determine whether Trump is more likely to endorse candidates that denied the 2020 election's results.

Midterm Election Results & Determining Electoral Penalty

I requested and obtained data on the 2022 House midterm election results from *Economist* journalist G. Elliott Morris at the Economist. I verified the accuracy of this data by comparing the candidate vote-shares for a random sample of 20 races in the data with results posted on the NYT dashboard. This data also includes the 2020 Biden-Trump presidential vote share. Through a linear model, as well as a model including controls, I investigate whether election-denying candidates suffered an electoral penalty (H4). Through this 2020 vote share variable, I also construct a "district competition" variable, where I categorize districts with a 15+ Trump victory margin as "Trump-heavy," a 15+ Biden Margin as "Biden-heavy," and a margin

within 15 points as “Competitive.” This allows me to explore how candidate election denial (H2) and performance (H5) varied across various degrees of competition.

D. Demographic Analysis: Education & Race

I collect demographic data from the Census Bureau on 118th Congressional districts regarding race and education. While the data on the Census Bureau website is not cleanly formatted for analysis, I acquired formatted and cleaned data on race and education variables (with CD-118 as the unit of analysis) from Proximity One, an election and demographic data blog. To explore the effects of race on whether a candidate denies election results (H6), I select the “White Alone Percent” variable, a continuous variable measuring the percentage of white people in a congressional district. I use “College Graduate Percentage” as a proxy for education instead of “Highschool Graduate Percentage” since both variables highly correlate and most students graduate high school. The education variable allows me to explore whether GOP Candidates are less likely to support election denial in districts with higher educational attainment (H8), and also whether they perform worse (H8).

E. Candidate Ideology

I also examine the effect of ideology on candidates’ election denial. **H6: Ideologically conservative incumbents are more likely (than less conservative incumbents) to reject the 2020 election results, both in primaries and the midterm.** While investigating the effects of supporting election denial, I control for candidates’ ideological extremity. I obtained data on DW-Nominate scores for the 117th Congress, which ran from January 3, 2021, to January 3, 2023, VoteView (Poole & Rosenthal). These ideological scores are calculated using the DW-NOMINATE (Dynamic Weighted **NOMINAL** Three-step **E**stimation) procedure, which

organizes legislators' roll call voting across two dimensions and subsequently ideologically ranks legislators relative to other legislators. DW-1 scores are associated with the traditional socio-economic left-right dimension, while DW-2 scores account for other "residual" issues. However, Poole (2017) finds that since 1987, US congressional votes can mainly be explained through DW-1 due to party polarization. Nevertheless, I use two OLS regressions to investigate whether ideologically extreme (on DW-1 and DW-2 dimensions) GOP candidates were more likely to deny the results of the 2020 election. However, because I only have data on the ideology of incumbents, this approach has two limitations. First, I cannot determine how an incumbent's ideology compares to other GOP candidates in the primary. Second, I cannot measure the ideological distance between the GOP and Democratic candidates in a House race. This relatively smaller sample size also reduces the statistical power of the ideology analysis, explaining the variable's absence from the central model.

Results

A. Trump Endorsement

Table 1: Trump Endorsement and GOP Candidate Election Denial

| | Dependent Variable: | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| | Trump Endorsement | Election Denial | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Election Denial (Binary) | 0.079*** (0.028) | 0.083* (0.043) | |
| DW-1 | | 0.006 (0.133) | |
| Trump Endorsement | | | 0.329*** (0.116) |
| Constant | 0.009 (0.022) | 0.014 (0.067) | 0.615*** (0.028) |
| Observations | 304 | 171 | 304 |
| R ² | 0.026 | 0.025 | 0.026 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.023 | 0.013 | 0.023 |

* p < .1; ** p < .05; *** p < 0.01

Table 1 investigates the relationship between Trump endorsing a candidate and whether a candidate denied the election results. In (1), I find that Trump is 7.9 percentage points more likely to endorse candidates who denied the results of the 2020 election. In (2), I control for ideology as ideological extremity could be an important factor in Trump's endorsement decision-making process. While the effect size increases to 8.3 percentage points when controlling for ideology, accounting for the error reveals that there is a roughly equal chance that either effect size is greater than the other (there is a 50.8% chance that the effect in (2) is greater than (1)).

Even when controlling for candidate ideology, Trump is more likely to endorse candidates that deny the election. In a television interview in the aftermath of the 2022 midterms, Chris Christie, former Governor of New Jersey, claimed that election denial was a “litmus test” for a Trump endorsement— “If you say the 2020 election was stolen, I’m with you, and if you don’t, I’m not and your qualifications or your ability to win don’t enter the evaluation.” The results confirm that whether a candidate denied the results of the 2020 election significantly influenced whether Trump endorsed them. Even controlling for ideology (measured through DW-1 Nominate Score), Trump was more likely to endorse incumbents who supported election denial. However, as mentioned in the theory section, the causal pathway is not entirely certain. In (3), I find that candidates who received a Trump endorsement were 32.9% more likely to deny the results of the 2020 election. I explore this result further in the section on predictors of election denial.

B. Election-Accepting Incumbents' Performance in 2022 Primaries

Table 2: Election Denial Stances of Losing Incumbents and Winning Challengers in 2022 House Primary Races

| District | Winner | Winner Stance | Incumbent | Incumbent Stance | Trump Endorsed | Victory Margin | Candidates in Race |
|----------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|----------------|----------------|--------------------|
| TX-03 | Keith Self | Fully denied | Van Taylor | Fully accepted | N/A | 0.23 | 5 |
| WV-02 | Alexander X. Mooney | Fully denied | David B. McKinley | Accepted with reservations | No | 0.18 | 5 |
| NE-01 | Mike Flood | No comment | Jeff Fortenberry | Fully accepted | N/A | 0.62 | 5 |
| NC-11 | Chuck Edwards | Avoided answering | Madison Cawthorn | Fully denied | Yes | 0.01 | 8 |
| SC-07 | Russell Fry | Fully denied | Tom Rice | Accepted with reservations | No | 0.26 | 7 |
| IL-15 | Mary Miller | Fully denied | Rodney Davis | Fully accepted | No | 0.14 | 2 |
| MI-03 | John Gibbs | Raised questions | Peter Meijer | Fully accepted | No | 0.04 | 2 |
| WA-03 | Joe Kent | Fully denied | Jaime Herrera Beutler | Fully accepted | No | 0.01 | 5 |
| WY-AL | Harriet Hageman | Fully denied | Liz Cheney | Fully accepted | No | 0.37 | 5 |

Notes: *Marry Miller and Alaxander X. Mooney served as members of the 117th Congress (2021-2023) but ran as challengers in neighboring districts due to redistricting.

Table 2 highlights the 9 House primaries in which GOP incumbents lost to challengers.

Losing incumbents overwhelmingly accepted the results of the 2020 election, with 6 incumbents fully accepting the results and 2 accepting with reservations. None of the 9 successful challengers accepted the results of the 2020 election: 6 fully denied the results and 1 (John Gibbs) raised questions. On average, losing incumbents drew 4.9 challengers, compared to all

incumbents in contested races, who drew an average of 3.8 challengers. In 7 of the 9 races where incumbents lost, incumbents drew 5 or more challengers. This can be interpreted as a perception among other GOP politicians that election-accepting incumbents would be electorally penalized in their primaries. In the remaining 2 races, incumbents drew one opponent on the ballot.

In the two races (NC-11, NE-01) where a challenger with an ambiguous stance on the results of the 2022 election won, the incumbents were embroiled in scandal. Jeff Fortenberry (NE-01) was indicted for fraud and suspended campaigning. Madison Cawthorn (NC-11) was endorsed by Donald Trump, but he was a weak candidate. His campaign was plagued by lewd pictures of him, multiple misdemeanors, and fierce opposition from GOP leadership in North Carolina and Congress due to his stories about drug-fueled orgies featuring Congressmen (Vesoulis, 2022).

The table reveals that Trump overwhelmingly opposed primary candidates that accepted the results of the 2020 election. The only losing incumbent whom President Trump endorsed, Maddison Cawthorn, fully denied the results of the election. While his opponent Chuck Edwards condemned his inflammatory comments on January 6th (Edwards was not yet a candidate), his position on election denial is ambiguous, and he did not mention it during the campaign (Dyckman, 2022). In NE-01, where the incumbent fully accepted the election results and the successful challenger did not comment on the 2020 election results, Trump did not endorse any candidate. Since the data does not reveal the stances of all primary candidates, the degree to which Trump endorsed election deniers across all primary races is uncertain.

The limited sample size does not allow me to infer whether election acceptance caused these incumbents to suffer in their respective primaries. However, a closer examination of specific campaign rhetoric can explain the role election denial played in the incumbents' losses

in some of these races. In Wyoming's House race, the legitimacy of the 2020 election was a salient issue because of incumbent Liz Cheney's prominent role in the January 6th Committee. She released a campaign ad focusing on her pro-democracy credentials and criticized her opponent Harriet Hageman for claiming the 2020 election was rigged. Liz Cheney not only drew Trump's ire and staunch opposition for her firm rebuke of Trump's election fraud allegations and the January 6th riots but was also censured by Wyoming's GOP. While electoral legitimacy was uniquely salient in this race, it reveals the mechanisms by which 2020 election acceptance could electorally penalize candidates.

Table 3: Competitiveness of 2022 Primaries with GOP Incumbents

| | Dependent Variables: | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| | # of Challengers (1) | # of Challengers (2) | Difference between Winner and Runner Up Vote Share (3) |
| Election Acceptance (Binary) | 0.146 (0.244) | | -0.036 (0.033) |
| Fully Accept | | 0.440 (0.324) | |
| Accepted with Reservations | | 0.163 (0.300) | |
| Raised Questions | | 0.752** (0.376) | |
| No Comment | | -0.096 (0.276) | |
| Avoided Answering | | -1.221 (0.757) | |
| Constant | 2.862*** (0.151) | 2.721*** (0.163) | 0.393*** (0.021) |
| Observations | 328 | 424 | 219 |
| R ² | 0.001 | 0.022 | 0.006 |
| Adjusted R ² | -0.002 | 0.011 | 0.001 |

* p < .1; ** p < .05; *** p < 0.01

Note: Using the basic OLS regression fit, this table examines the effect of Incumbents' stances on election denial on the competitiveness of their primary, as operationalized through the number of challengers (1 and 2) and the difference between winner and runner-up vote share. Since the election denial variable in (1) excludes the 100 "No comment" and "Raised Questions" responded, the number of observations is lower than in (2). Since (3) only includes contested races, the number of observations is lower than (1) and (2).

Table 3 explores the effect of incumbents' accepting the results of the 2020 election on their performance. (1) reveals that binary election acceptance resulted in incumbents drawing 0.146 more challengers. Of course, challengers are unique individuals and cannot be described in

terms of decimals. Moreover, this coefficient is not statistically significant; the 95 % Confidence Interval ranged from -0.332 to 0.624, so it is unclear whether incumbents who accepted the election 2020 election results drew more or fewer challengers than election-denying candidates. Moreover, even the maximum possible effect size does not rise to the level that would indicate election accepters drew a single more challenger than election deniers.

In (2) I explore how incumbents with various stances on the results of the 2020 election perform compared to incumbents who fully deny the results. While candidates who fully accept or accept with reservations appear somewhat more likely than full election deniers to draw more challengers, the large standard errors indicate that these effects could also be negative. Curiously, candidates who raised questions regarding the election results draw 0.75 more challengers than those who fully denied the results. This result is statistically significant, and the 95 % Confidence Interval indicates the possibility that incumbents who raise questions could even be as high as 1.48 more challengers than full deniers. However, considering the lack of theory supporting this effect and the low R^2 , this effect is likely better explained through other mechanisms unaccounted for in this analysis, such as fundraising and candidate quality.

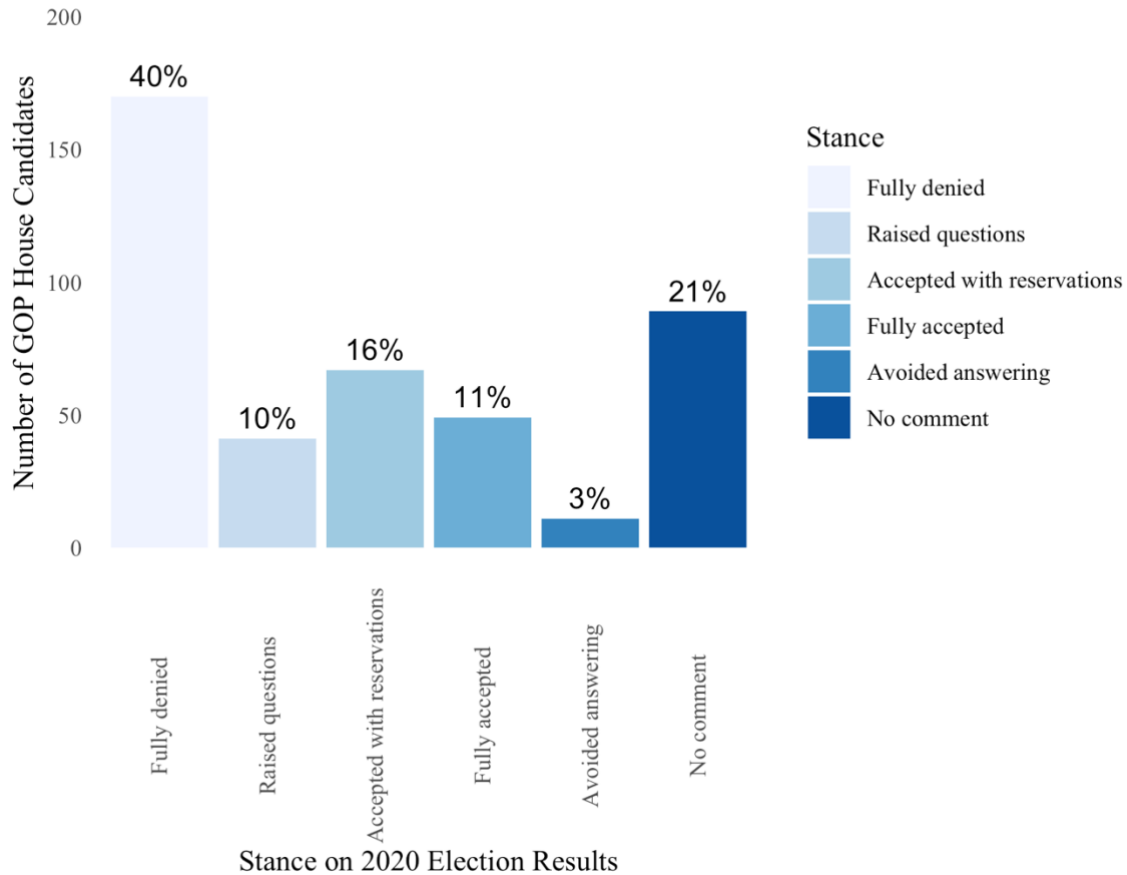
Finally, in (3), I examine whether binary election acceptance reduces the margin between the incumbent and challenger in contested races. While the average margin is 39.3 points, election accepters appear to reduce this margin by 3.6 points. However, the 95 % Confidence Interval reveals an extremely volatile estimate, ranging from -10 to 2.9 points. Election-accepting incumbents who eventually won their primaries likely did not face a competitive primary in terms of the number of challengers or their victory margin against the runner-up.

To the extent that voters punish election-accepting GOP incumbents in primaries, they

likely only punish election-accepting candidates who prominently attack election deniers, since they perceive them as disloyal to the party. The results suggest that election-accepting incumbents do not perform better or worse than election-denying incumbents in primaries. This could be because most election-accepting incumbent candidates do not prominently feature election integrity as a campaign issue. Liz Cheney is exceptional in her campaign ads attacking her opponent's stance on election integrity. Considering polling on GOP voters' beliefs on election denial, it is likely advantageous for most election-accepting incumbents to avoid heavily advertising their position. Consequently, voters are less likely to be aware of their stance, and potential election-denying opponents also have limited ability to attack such incumbents for quietly affirming the legitimacy of the 2020 election. This explains why winning election-accepting incumbents did not draw significantly more challengers or suffer electorally in primaries.

C. Distribution of Election Deniers in 2022 Midterms

Figure 1: GOP Candidates' Stance on Legitimacy of 2020 Election



Among the 427 GOP House candidates in the 2022 midterms, 40 percent fully rejected the results of the 2020 election; a significantly lower proportion, 11 percent, fully accepted the results. Cumulatively, 50 percent of candidates doubted the 2020 election's legitimacy, while only 27% largely accepted the results as legitimate. Moreover, 21% of candidates did not comment on the legitimacy of the 2020 election.

Table 4: GOP Candidate Election Denial (Binary) across Congressional Districts (2020 Presidential Vote Share)

| Stance on 2020 Election Results | District Competitiveness | | |
|--|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| | Biden-Heavy | Competitive | Trump-Heavy |
| Accepted | 28 (34%) | 51 (48%) | 32 (28%) |
| Rejected | 54 (66%) | 55 (52%) | 84 (72%) |
| Total | 152 (38%) | 131 (32%) | 121 (30%) |

Table 4 shows the distribution of GOP candidates’ binary stances on election legitimacy distributed across congressional districts with varying degrees of competitiveness. Trump-heavy districts are where he won by a margin of more than 15 points, Biden-heavy districts are where Biden won by a margin of more than 15 points, and competitive districts are where the margin was within 15 points in the 2020 presidential election. Trump-heavy districts contained the greatest percentage of election deniers, followed closely by Biden-Heavy districts. In competitive districts, there is a roughly even proportion of election accepters and deniers.⁸

⁸ Crucially, these proportions do not include those candidates who did not comment or avoided answering questions regarding their stance. This table is limited to candidates whose stance could be ascertained with certainty. The total reflects the total number of districts in each respective category, including those in which candidates neither rejected nor accepted the 2020 election’s results.

Table 5: Distribution of GOP Candidate Stances on Election Denial across Districts (2020 Presidential Vote Share)

| Stance on 2020 Election Results | District Competitiveness | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| | Biden-heavy | Competitive | Trump-heavy |
| Fully accepted | 11 (7%) | 27 (21%) | 10 (8%) |
| Accepted with reservations | 17 (11%) | 24 (18%) | 22 (18%) |
| Raised questions | 21 (14%) | 13 (10%) | 6 (5%) |
| Fully denied | 33 (22%) | 42 (32%) | 78 (64%) |
| Avoided answering | 6 (4%) | 5 (4%) | 0 (0%) |
| No comment | 64 (42%) | 20 (15%) | 5 (4%) |
| Total | 152 (38%) | 131 (32%) | 121 (30%) |

Note: Table 5 shows the percentages of GOP Candidates with various stances on election denial across Trump-heavy, Biden-heavy, and competitive congressional districts (based on 2020 presidential vote share). For instance, 7% of candidates in Biden-Heavy districts fully accepted the results of the 2020 election. Each column totals 100%.

Table 5 confirms the distribution of candidates' stances in Table 4. In competitive and Trump-heavy districts, a plurality of candidates fully denied the 2020 election's results. As districts become more Trump-heavy, the proportion of candidates that simply raise questions decreases, and the proportion that fully denied the results substantially increases. 64% of candidates in Trump districts fully denied the election results; only 5% raised questions. The nature of election denial was more overt and extreme among candidates in Trump districts. 21% of candidates in competitive districts fully accepted the 2020 election results, while only 7-8% in Biden and Trump-heavy districts did so. This could be because these candidates fear a greater electoral penalty in competitive races for outright rejecting the 2020 election results—they may perceive a risk in alienating moderates that could be crucial to them winning their race. Among candidates who did not comment on the 2020 election's legitimacy, 72% belonged to Biden-heavy districts. Since the candidates in these districts are likely challengers and not incumbents,

they may fear an electoral penalty. While 22 % of candidates in Biden-heavy districts fully denied the election, the high proportion of candidates who did not comment hints at divergent approaches and electoral strategies that candidates took. One potential explanation for these popular divergent electoral stances (choosing not to comment or denying the election) could be that candidates who had more established credentials and voter recognition felt less of a need to compromise their chances in the general election to secure a Trump endorsement in the primary.

D. Model 1: Predicting 2022 GOP Candidates' Stances on 2020 Election Results

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 \dots + \beta_n X_n + \varepsilon$$

Y = GOP Candidate stance (Rejected/Denied) on the results of the 2020 election (where 1 is denial and 0 is acceptance)

X1 = Trump endorsement of a candidate

X2 = District competitiveness (from 2020 Presidential Election Results)

X3 = Education: Percent of college graduates in the district

X4 = Race: Percent of district white majority

In the first model, I investigate hypotheses that attempt to predict GOP candidates' stances on election denial (H3,4,5). By examining the effect of the above variables on election denial, I build a more comprehensive understanding of the circumstances under which candidates reject the results of the 2020 elections. I also segment election denial by district competitiveness to better understand the distribution of election deniers— considering the theory on partisanship, this component is integral to my analysis.

Table 6: Predicting Election Denial among 2022 House GOP Candidates

| | Dependent Variable | | | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| | Election Denial (Binary) | | | | | Full Model |
| | Election Denial (1) | 2020 Vote (2) | Race (3) | Education (4) | Ideology (5) | |
| Trump Endorsement | 0.329*** (0.116) | | | | | 0.407*** (0.114) |
| Biden-heavy District | | 0.140** (0.070) | | | | 0.060 (0.082) |
| Trump-heavy District | | 0.205*** (0.064) | | | | 0.264*** (0.070) |
| % White Pop | | | -0.329** (0.145) | | | -0.610*** (0.197) |
| % College Grad | | | | -0.638** (0.247) | | -0.250 (0.284) |
| DW-1 | | | | | 1.242*** (0.242) | |
| DW-2 | | | | | 0.143 (0.135) | |
| Constant | 0.615*** (0.028) | 0.519*** (0.046) | 0.858*** (0.097) | 0.863*** (0.088) | 0.009 (0.133) | 0.973*** (0.148) |
| Observations | 304 | 304 | 327 | 323 | 192 | 300 |
| R ² | 0.026 | 0.034 | 0.016 | 0.020 | 0.131 | 0.109 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.023 | 0.028 | 0.013 | 0.017 | 0.122 | 0.094 |

* p < .1; ** p < .05; *** p < 0.01

Note: DW-1 and DW-2 refer to DW-nominate scores that measure legislators' political ideology along economic and other dimensions, respectively. In (2), "Competitive Districts" is the excluded baseline variable since candidates in these districts are least likely to deny the election.

Table 6 tests the range of hypotheses concerning the effects of various conditions on candidates' stances on the legitimacy of the 2020 election. In a simple linear regression (1), Trump-endorsed candidates are 32.9 percentage points more likely to deny the election. In the full model (6), this effect size increases to 40.7 percentage points. A one-sided test reveals that there is a 68.1 % chance that the effect of Trump's endorsement is greater in the full model. However, as discussed above, the causal direction of the effect between Trump's endorsement and election denial is uncertain.

In (2), I examine the extent to which district competitiveness, defined by the 2020 presidential vote share, influences GOP candidates' either accepting or rejecting the results of the 2020 election. Candidates in Biden districts were 14 percentage points more likely (than those in competitive districts) to be election deniers. While this effect size is somewhat uncertain with a 95 % confidence interval from 0.3 to 27.7 percentage points, it is most certainly positive. However, when controlling for other variables, the effect of Biden-heavy districts on election denial diminishes and it is uncertain whether it is still positive. Candidates in Trump-heavy districts are 20.5 percentage points more likely than those in competitive districts to be election deniers. This effect is highly statistically significant— the probability distribution indicates the effect is at least 8 and at most 33 percentage points. Controlling other variables in the full model (6) results in the coefficient jumping by nearly 6 percentage points to 26.4. Accounting for standard errors, this is a significant difference— a one-sided test shows there is a 99.5 % probability that the effect of a candidate being in a Trump-heavy district (relative to a competitive district) is greater in the full model compared to the linear model. These findings lend evidence to my hypothesis that election deniers were more likely to run in Trump-heavy districts. This could be either because there are more election-denying Trump loyalists in Trump-

heavy districts or because candidates perceived a greater electoral penalty for election acceptance in these districts.

Column (3) suggests that candidates in racially diverse districts are 32.9 percentage points more likely to deny the results of the 2020 election. In the full model (6), a one percent increase in districts' white population results in a 61-percentage point decreases in the likelihood that the district's GOP candidate is an election denier. This lends strong evidence to support H6. Column (4) reveals that a one percent increase in the percentage of college-educated voters in a district results in a 63.8 percentage point decrease in likelihood that a district will have an election-denying GOP candidate on the ballot. However, in the full model (6), education is no longer predictive of election denial. While it appears that a one percent increase in districts' college-educated voters results in a 25-percentage point reduction in the probability of a GOP candidate denying the 2020 election's results, the high standard error renders this effect as not statistically significant due to the high uncertainty in the estimate's distribution probability. Based on a 95 % Confidence Interval, the effect size could be anywhere between -30 to 80 percentage points. While these results somewhat affirm H8, they should be interpreted cautiously.

In column (5), a one-unit increase in DW-1 results in an 18-percentage point increase in the probability that a candidate is an election denier.⁹ However, due to the high standard error, this effect is extremely volatile— with 95 % confidence, it ranges from -28.8 to 66.1 percentage points. DW-2 appears to have an even lesser effect on election denial. This shows that the candidate's ideological extremity, as measured by DW-Nominate scores, was not predictive of

⁹ The standard deviation of DW-1 is 0.15. This is multiplied by the effect size in the table to calculate the true effect size.

election denial. Although one may intuitively characterize election denial as an extreme position, perhaps other conceptualizations of ideology, such as proximity to Trump, are better predictors of election denial (Hopkins & Noel, 2022).

In the full model, Trump endorsement remains the strongest predictor of election denial, followed by the racial diversity of the district, and then, whether the candidate belonged to a Trump-heavy district. I conduct a series of one-sided tests to compare estimates: there is a 0.86-point probability that the effect of Trump endorsement is stronger than the effect of a candidate being in a Trump-heavy district. Moreover, there is a 0.95-point probability that the effect of racial diversity is greater than the effect of a candidate being in a Trump-heavy district. While noise in the full model may explain some of these differences, comparing the effect sizes in linear regressions (in columns 1,2, and 3) confirm that Trump's endorsement is the strongest predictor of election denial.¹⁰

¹⁰ Comparing the linear regression coefficients, there is an 84 percent probability that Trump endorsement has a greater effect than Trump-Heavy district.

E. Model 2: Predicting Election-Denying GOP Candidate's Performance in 2022 Midterm Elections

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \dots + \beta_n X_n + \varepsilon$$

Y = GOP Candidate Vote Share in 2022 Midterm Election

X1 = GOP Candidate Stance (Rejected/denied) on the results of the 2020 election (where 1 is denial and 0 is acceptance)

X1.1 = GOP Candidate Stance (Fully Accepted/Accepted with Reservations/Raised Questions/Fully Denied/Avoided Answering/No Comment) on the results of the 2020 election

X2 = Trump 2020 presidential election vote share

X3 = Education: Percent of college graduates in the district

X4 = Race: Percent of district white majority

In the second model, I explore whether GOP candidates face an electoral penalty in the 2022 midterm for rejecting the results of the 2020 election (H7). I run two variants of the OLS regression. In the first variant, I employ the binary election denial variable, and in the second variant, I use the more nuanced election stance variable. I use Trump's 2020 vote share as an important control in my model as a loose proxy for district partisanship. Since Trump's 2020 vote share likely predicts the most variation in electoral margins of 2022 GOP candidates, this control will allow me to examine whether election denial can explain the remaining variation. I control for districts' racial and education demographics as research shows that they can explain some variation in electoral outcomes because of differential voting patterns across different educational and racial groups. Finally, I divide the data into Biden-heavy, Trump-heavy, and competitive congressional districts and explore whether election deniers perform worse in competitive and Biden-heavy districts. This model is limited in that it does not account for

exogenous variables like candidate quality, campaign funding, and local voter mobilization efforts. I do not account for Trump’s endorsement effect in my central model because it is causally downstream from the effect of election denial; Trump likely endorsed candidate’s after they developed a stance on the legitimacy of the 2020 election.

Table 7: Electoral Penalty Across Competitive and Safe Congressional Districts

| | Dependent Variable: | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| | 2022 Republican Vote Share | | | |
| | All Districts (1) | Biden-heavy Districts (2) | Trump-heavy Districts (3) | Competitive Districts (4) |
| Election Denial (Binary) | -0.007* (0.004) | 0.008 (0.006) | -0.013* (0.007) | -0.013* (0.007) |
| 2020 Trump Vote Share | 1.023*** (0.013) | 1.033*** (0.033) | 0.885*** (0.063) | 1.118*** (0.080) |
| Constant | 0.024*** (0.007) | 0.010 (0.011) | 0.117*** (0.040) | -0.019 (0.039) |
| Observations | 304 | 82 | 116 | 106 |
| R ² | 0.952 | 0.925 | 0.633 | 0.654 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.951 | 0.923 | 0.626 | 0.647 |

p < .1; ** p < .05; *** p < .01

Note: District competition is calculated from 2020 presidential vote share.

Table 7 compares the effect of election denial on candidates’ vote share across various degrees of district competitiveness. Controlling for Trump’s 2020 vote share, election-denying candidates suffered a 0.7 percentage point electoral penalty. The 95% Confidence Interval of this effect ranges from between 0.0008 and -1.5 percent. Although there is a small possibility of the effect size being positive, this is at the end of the distribution. Candidates suffer almost twice the penalty, 1.3 percentage points, in competitive and Trump-heavy districts. A one-sided t test

reveals a 0.77 point probability that the electoral penalty in competitive and Trump-heavy districts is 0.6 percentage points higher than in all districts. In contrast, election deniers did not seem to suffer a penalty in Biden districts. One explanation could be related to the fact that 42% of candidates in these races did not comment on the 2020 election's legitimacy. Moreover, GOP candidates in Biden-heavy districts are almost entirely challengers and not incumbents—voters may not be as familiar with their stances on the 2020 election. Voters also have less of an incentive to pursue knowledge about these GOP challengers' positions because they know that the probability of them winning is very slim.

Table 8: Electoral Deniers Performance in 2022 House Midterms

| | Dependent Variable: | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | 2022 Republican Vote Share | | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Election Denial | -0.007* (0.004) | -0.012*** (0.004) | | -0.010** (0.004) |
| Trump Endorsement | | | -0.030*** (0.008) | -0.023*** (0.008) |
| 2020 Trump Vote Share | 1.023*** (0.013) | 1.132*** (0.021) | 1.037*** (0.011) | 1.131*** (0.021) |
| District White % | | -0.105*** (0.015) | | -0.099*** (0.015) |
| District College Grad % | | 0.052** (0.021) | | 0.050** (0.021) |
| Constant | 0.024*** (0.007) | 0.023* (0.012) | 0.014*** (0.005) | 0.020* (0.012) |
| Observations | 304 | 300 | 404 | 300 |
| R ² | 0.952 | 0.959 | 0.958 | 0.960 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.951 | 0.959 | 0.958 | 0.960 |

p < .1; ** p < .05; *** p < .01

Table 8 compares 3 models predicting the effect of election denial on GOP House candidates' vote share in the 2022 midterms. (1) represents the linear regression model discussed previously; (2) represents a version of Model 2 that excludes Trump's endorsement; (3) shows the effect of Trump's endorsement on candidate performance, while (4) is the full model, inclusive of Trump endorsement. I run models with and without the endorsement effect because a Trump endorsement is potentially later in the causal pathway from election denial to candidate 2020 vote share and could influence results. A statistically significant negative penalty persists throughout all models, with the greatest penalty in (2) and the least in the linear model (1). When controlling for all variables in the model (4), the effect of election denial increases from a 0.7 to 1 percentage point increase in electoral penalty. Column (4) reveals that in addition to Trump's endorsement being associated with a 2.3 percentage point penalty on GOP candidates, election denial imposed an additional 1 percentage point penalty. However, as indicated in the model specification earlier, I hold that model (2), which is not influenced by the downstream effects of Trump's endorsement, is the most crucial model in this paper. Consequently, my key finding is that election deniers in 2022 House races suffered a 1.2 percentage point electoral penalty.

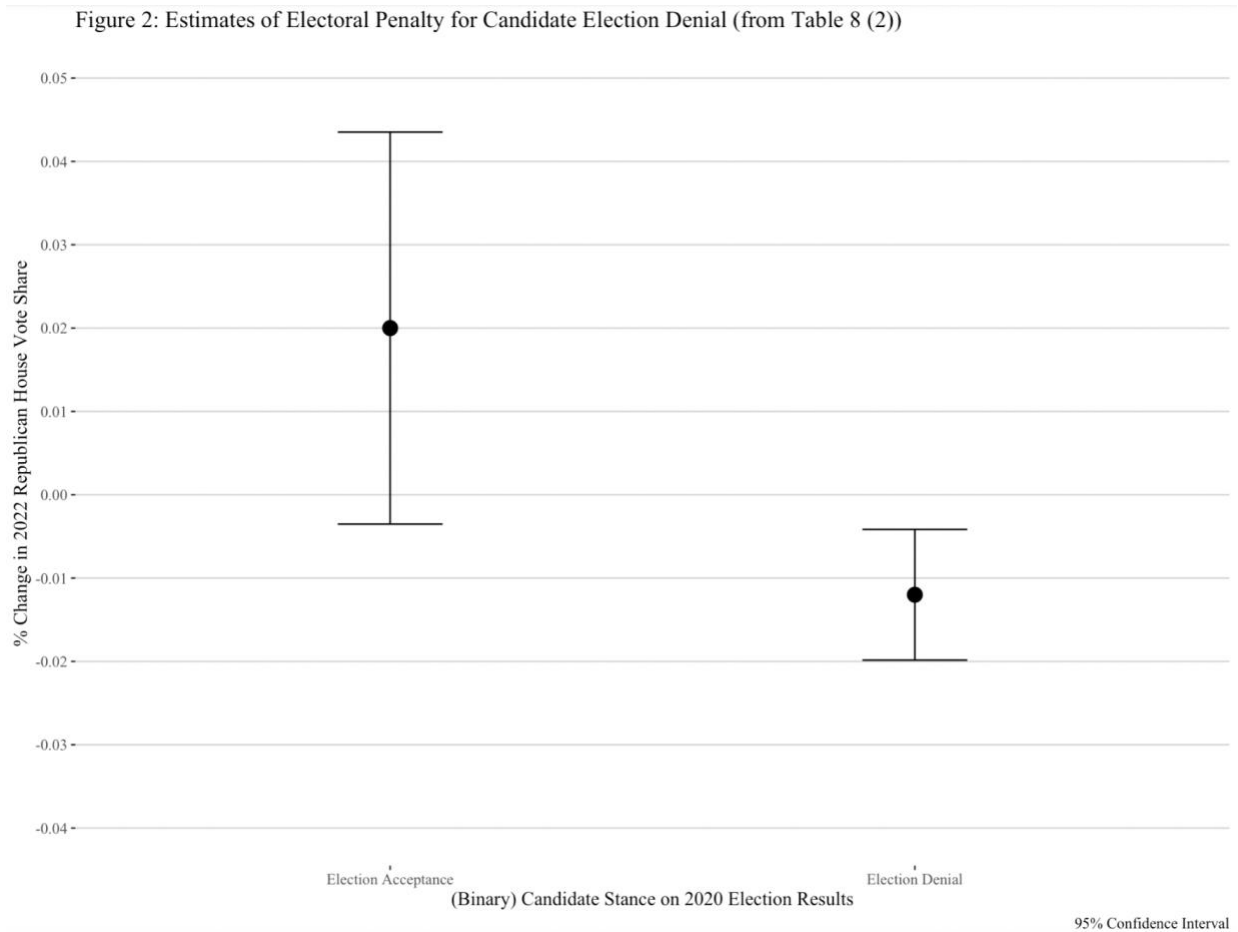


Figure 2 further illustrates that election denial negatively influenced candidate's electoral performance. The 95 % Confidence Interval shows that this penalty could be as high as 2 points. In contrast, the estimate for election acceptance is considerably more volatile, which suggests that the effects of accepting the 2020 election's results are less certain. However, this figure confirms that election denial certainly did not positively influence candidates' electoral outcomes.

Table 9: Electoral Penalty for Various 2022 Candidate Positions on 2020 Election

| | Dependent Variable: | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | 2022 Republican Vote Share | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Fully Denied | -0.005 (0.006) | -0.012** (0.005) | -0.010* (0.005) |
| Raised Questions | -0.010 (0.007) | -0.013* (0.007) | -0.013* (0.007) |
| Accepted with Reservations | 0.002 (0.006) | 0.001 (0.006) | 0.0001 (0.006) |
| Avoided Answering | -0.006 (0.006) | -0.008 (0.006) | -0.006 (0.006) |
| No Comment | -0.017 (0.011) | -0.005 (0.011) | -0.012 (0.011) |
| 2020 Trump Vote Share | 1.025*** (0.012) | 1.104*** (0.020) | 1.119*** (0.019) |
| District White % | | -0.088*** (0.013) | -0.087*** (0.013) |
| District College Grad % | | 0.052*** (0.018) | 0.050*** (0.018) |
| Trump Endorsement | | 0.008* (0.004) | |
| Constant | 0.022*** (0.007) | 0.022** (0.011) | 0.018 (0.011) |
| Observations | 404 | 391 | 400 |
| R ² | 0.957 | 0.964 | 0.962 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.957 | 0.963 | 0.961 |

p < .1; ** p < .05; *** p < .01

Table 9 shows 3 models examining the effect of the multi-tiered candidate election stance variable on candidates' performance in the 2022 House midterm election. Without any controls,

in (1), there do not appear to be any strong effects associated with any response category. However, all stances except “Accepted with reservations” are negatively associated with candidate performance. While Model (2) controls for Trump’s endorsement effect and (3) does not, they both show that candidates who “Fully Denied” or “Raised Questions” about the 2020 election’s results suffered an electoral penalty between 1 to 1.3 percentage points. A one-sided t-test reveals that there is a roughly even (0.476 point) probability that candidates who fully denied the results faced a greater penalty than those who raised questions.

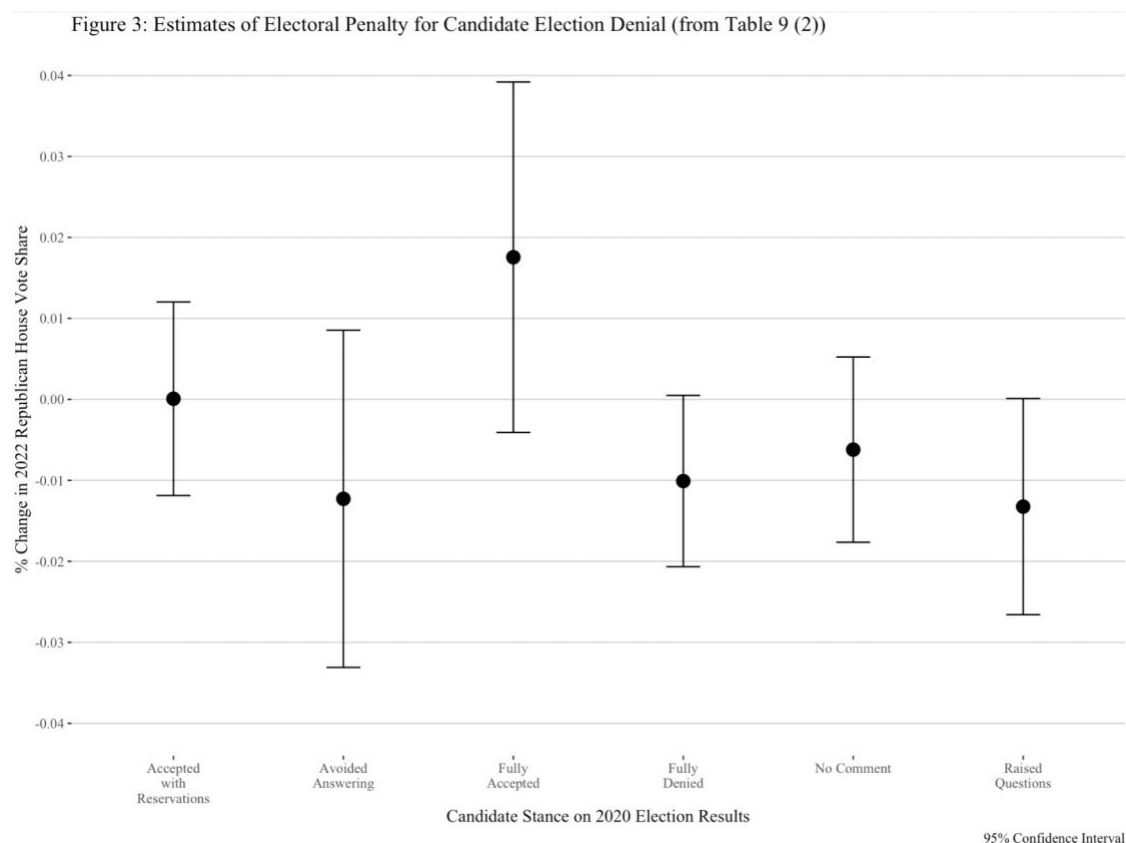


Figure 3 further illustrates that candidates who “fully denied” and “raised questions” faced a similar penalty, although candidates who raised questions could face a greater penalty. It is almost entirely certain that regardless of the extent of election denial, election denial did not positively influence candidates’ election outcomes.

Table 10: Effects of Election Denial on 2022 GOP Candidate Win/Loss

| | Dependent Variable: | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| | 2022 Republican Victory | |
| | Binary Variable | Denial Scale |
| | (1) | (2) |
| Election Denial | -0.017 (0.034) | |
| Fully Denied | | 0.040 (0.047) |
| Raised Questions | | -0.089 (0.060) |
| Accepted with Reservations | | 0.047 (0.054) |
| No Comment | | -0.081 (0.051) |
| Avoided Answering | | -0.186** (0.094) |
| 2020 Trump Vote Share | 2.719*** (0.110) | 2.547*** (0.103) |
| Constant | -0.731*** (0.060) | -0.674*** (0.063) |
| Observations | 304 | 404 |
| R ² | 0.669 | 0.692 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.667 | 0.688 |

* p < .1; ** p < .05; *** p < .01

Does election denial influence whether GOP candidates won or lost their House races?

Table 10 reveals that binary election denial did not influence the outcomes of races in 2022.

None of the stance categories except “Avoided Answering” is associated with win/loss

outcomes. The 18 percentage point penalty imposed by “Avoided Answering” can likely be explained by other factors, since only 9 candidates avoided answering regarding their stance. While one reading of these results may imply that election denial was not very influential, singular variables hardly affect win/loss election outcomes in U.S. elections. However, considering the importance of election outcomes, these results are worth presenting and considering.

In two prominent districts, WA-03 and MI-03, election-denying challengers narrowly beat election-accepting incumbents in their respective primaries but lost in the general election. While there is not enough data to analyze these effects through a regression discontinuity, a closer look at both these races reveals how very salient election denial can contribute to GOP candidates losing in competitive races. In MI-03, far-right candidate John Gibbs beat incumbent Peter Meijer, who voted to impeach Trump in 2021, by 4 percentage points. John Gibbs prominently spoke out against “ballot harvesting” and firmly rejected the election’s legitimacy. While redistricting resulted in the district rating shifting from “Favors GOP” to “Toss-up,” Gibbs’ whooping 12.9 percentage point loss indicates some degree of penalty for loyalty to Trump, which he consistently linked to election denial.

In WA-03, Joe Kent beat Jaime Herrera Beutler by 1 percentage point but lost in the general election by 0.8 percentage points. In 2020, Trump carried this district by 3.7 percentage points and Beutler won it by 13. Redistricting cannot account for these shifts; if anything, post-redistricting, the district shifted from a +9 to +10 Republican lean, according to FiveThirtyEight. These shifts may be attributed to contrasting candidate quality among both Democrat and Republican candidates, and the general electoral environment. Joe Kent’s loss was attributed to his ideological extremity and poorly run campaign. For instance, Kent drew criticism during the

campaign for his close ties to individuals in the Proud Boys group, prominent in the January 6th riots, along with Christian nationalist and white supremacist organizations. However, at least some portion of the drastic 13.8 percentage point swing can be attributed to how Kent prominently featured election fraud conspiracy theories during his campaign. In the lead-up to election day, he appeared on Steve Bannon's war room podcast to instruct his voters to only vote in person on election day. After his projected loss, he successfully fundraised to challenge the results of his election, claiming they had been rigged. This case highlights the complex ways a candidate's position on election denial and the ideological extremity can interact during campaigns. Perhaps Kent's connection to the Proud Boys, who were heavily involved in the January 6th riots contesting Biden's victory, also drew more voter attention to his election denial, causing voters to perceive him as more anti-democratic than other candidates who fully denied the results but less prominently so.

F. Results are Robust to Ambiguity in Election Denial Stance

Table 11: Sensitivity Analysis for Election Deniers Penalty in 2022 House Midterms

| | Dependent Variable: | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---|---|
| | 2022 Republican Vote Share | | |
| | Dropping Unknown (1) | Assuming Unknown Fully Accepted (2) | Assuming Unknown Fully Denied (3) |
| Election Denial (Binary) | -0.007* (0.004) | -0.004 (0.003) | -0.007* (0.004) |
| 2020 Trump Vote Share | 1.023*** (0.013) | 1.034*** (0.011) | 1.023*** (0.013) |
| Constant | 0.024*** (0.007) | 0.016*** (0.005) | 0.024*** (0.007) |
| Observations | 304 | 404 | 304 |
| R ² | 0.952 | 0.957 | 0.952 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.951 | 0.957 | 0.951 |

* p < .1; ** p < .05; *** p < .01

In Table 11, I conduct a best-case/worst-case analysis to investigate how missing data regarding GOP candidates' stances, including "No Comment" and "Avoided Answering" responses, influences my results. If all candidates with ambiguous stances fully rejected election results (3), the effect of election denial on Republican vote share remains roughly the same as the original result. However, column (3) reveals that if I assume unknown candidates fully accepted the results, the effect of election denial on Republican vote share diminishes and is no longer statistically significant. Accounting for the standard error shows that under this condition, the 95 % Confidence Interval is between -0.01 and 0.002. Since the effect size is still negative most of the time, my result's validity still stands, despite the missingness in the data. Moreover, the bulk of ambiguous candidate positions was "No comment", and 72% of candidates holding this

position belonged to Biden-Heavy districts. While these candidates may have believed in the 2020 election's legitimacy but didn't want to offend Trump supporters, it is likelier that they doubted the election's results and were worried about electoral backlash in Biden-heavy districts. Moreover, the influence of candidate positions on election outcomes is relevant so far as voters know these positions— if their positions are unknown, it is unlikely that it influences voters' perceptions of them. One could claim that voters may hypothetically punish GOP candidates for not fully accepting the 2020 election's legitimacy, particularly in races where the democratic candidate presses them on the issue. However, as Table 11 shows, candidates' ambiguous stances do not significantly hurt their electoral performance (Tomz and Van Houweling, 2009).

G. Weak Relationship: District Education Levels & Election Denier Performance

Table 12: Education Denier Penalty by District Education

| | Dependent Variable: 2022 Republican Vote Share |
|---|---|
| Election Denial | -0.016 (0.014) |
| Election Denial*District College Grad % | 0.026 (0.037) |
| District College Grad % | -0.023 (0.030) |
| 2020 Trump Vote Share | 1.020*** (0.015) |
| Constant | 0.034** (0.015) |
| Observations | 300 |
| R ² | 0.952 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.952 |

* p < .1; ** p < .05; *** p < .01

Table 12 investigates whether election deniers faced a greater penalty in districts with a higher proportion of college-educated voters. I find little evidence to support this hypothesis. While the estimate of the interaction effect is positive, the 95% Confidence Interval is volatile, ranging from -0.046 to 0.099. This runs contrary to literature that shows voters with limited education were less likely to believe in election denial. However, those studies (Arneaux, 2022) directly measure voter attitudes through surveys, and my results are merely a proxy for voter attitudes. If low-educated voters do hold strong beliefs in support of election denial, it is not entirely clear it manifests in a reward or penalty for GOP candidates. However, this is not central to my key hypothesis and findings.

Discussion

The results suggest that election-accepting incumbents do not generally perform better or worse than election-denying incumbents in primaries. However, prominent election accepters who attacked election-denying members of the GOP, particularly Donald Trump, suffered electorally. They drew, on average, 1 more challenger than incumbents overall, and 8 out of 9 losing incumbents accepted the 2020 election's legitimacy. This is also likely linked to the emergence of some GOP politicians, like Larry Hogan and Adam Kizinger, being labeled as "RINO" (Republican in name only) by Trump and his supporters. Hopkins (2022) observes that Republican activists' perceptions of senators' ideology are increasingly associated with a senator's perceived ideological distance from Trump. My findings regarding the strong association between Trump's endorsement and the candidates' election denial are also relevant here. This discussion enriches the conceptualization of electoral legitimacy as a polarizing issue: despite high support for election denial among GOP voters, they may not punish GOP candidates in primaries until they reach a specific threshold of disloyalty to Trump, and (increasingly) by definition, the party. This penalty is driven by two factors: GOP voters are more likely to be aware of an election-accepting candidate's stance when the candidate attacks election deniers and are also more likely to perceive them as disloyal. The robustness of this analysis is somewhat limited by the limited number of cases where deniers lost and other race-specific factors that could have influenced outcomes. However, House incumbent losses in 2022 reached a 20-year high, with 9 GOP incumbents losing their primaries (6 Democratic incumbents were also defeated.) Considering incumbents rarely lose primaries, it is noteworthy that GOP candidates who prominently defended the 2020 election's legitimacy lost. While this record can be attributed to the GOP's internal realignment towards Trump, election denial is an integral part of this story.

Whether a candidate was endorsed by Trump was the most significant predictor of election denial. However, this causal direction is somewhat less persuasive than the inverse because Trump likely only endorsed candidates that supported his claims regarding election fraud. Despite this, this effect is relevant because it is plausible that candidates made more frequent or more forceful statements regarding election integrity after Trump officially endorsed them. This could be driven by a variety of reasons, such as being asked by Trump or convincing Trump to attend their campaign. Future research could investigate the complex relationship between Trump's endorsement and election denial, as well as the extent to which candidates' campaign for election denial. Another limitation of this analysis is the lack of data on the stances of GOP primary challengers (except for the 9 winning challengers). Future research can examine how election-accepting incumbents performed relative to election-denying challengers, and vice versa

Does the strong association between Trump's endorsement and 2022 House GOP candidates' support for anti-democratic behavior imply that election legitimacy is just a Trump issue, and is likely to disappear when Trump is no longer an active part of politics? Not necessarily. Many GOP candidates may have denied the election to secure Donald Trump's nomination, particularly non-incumbents who need to stand out in a crowded primary. However, much like Trump's rhetoric opened the door for other Republican politicians to be explicitly racist, I suggest that several candidates were genuinely emboldened by his legitimization of electoral conspiracy theories targeting racial minorities (Sides et al, 2016). In the aftermath of the 2020 elections, election far-right election-denying candidates contested their electoral losses. In Arizona, GOP Governor candidate Kari Lake filed multiple lawsuits and refuses to concede the election, alleging election fraud. In WA-03, Joe Kent maintains his election was rigged. Even in

Republican primaries, losing candidates like Ron Hanks in Colorado parroted Trump's claims of voter fraud. While Trump popularized election fraud theories, the GOP's history with restrictive voting laws and the "great replacement theory" predated him. Hence, GOP politicians may continue promulgating anti-democratic statements because the democratic "bright lines" have been crossed, even when they no longer need to do so to secure Trump's support.

While candidates in Trump-Heavy districts were significantly more likely to reject the 2020 election's legitimacy, the effect is most likely somewhat smaller than the impact of an endorsement from Trump. The difference in the influence of both these factors makes sense because they are both proxies for the candidates' perception of Trump voters supporting them. A Trump endorsement is a more direct proxy while being in a Trump district probably influences candidates' calculus on election denial in a strong, but less direct way. Regardless, the results could indicate that GOP candidates in Trump districts strategically denied the election to gain support and improve their electoral chances. Alternatively, there just be more election-denying Trump loyalists in Trump-Heavy districts because of his endorsements in the 2018 and 2020 primary and general election cycle (since most candidates in Trump districts are likely GOP incumbents). Further research could categorize these candidates by their previous relationship with Trump to better parse out whether incumbents in Trump districts made a strategic choice to signal loyalty to Trump through election denial or if they were loyalists who were highly likely to deny the election, to begin with. Either way, voters in Trump-Heavy districts are the most likely to be represented by an election denier in the House.

The fact that there is a somewhat greater likelihood of election deniers in Biden-Heavy districts (compared to competitive districts, but still lesser than in Trump districts), is somewhat harder to interpret. Since candidates are likely not incumbents, they may have denied the election

to secure Trump's endorsement in a crowded primary. Alternatively, they may not be running to win, but rather to boost their status in the party (Hopkins, 2018). While 34% of candidates either fully denied or raised questions about the 2020 election in Biden-heavy districts, 46 % held ambiguous stances (significantly higher than in competitive (19 %) and Trump-heavy districts (4 %)). Tomz and Houweling (2023) find that ambiguity can be a winning strategy for candidates in partisan settings. They argue that voters "optimistically perceive the locations of ambiguous candidates from their own party without pessimistically perceiving the locations of vague candidates from the opposition." This suggests that these candidates may have pursued ambiguity on election legitimacy as a balancing act, but as I later discuss, candidates with ambiguous positions do not seem to fare any better than their counterparts. The absence of data on the stances of GOP primary challengers limits my ability to test whether more established candidates chose ambiguity because they can afford to forgo a Trump endorsement (even if they cannot electorally afford to outright accept election results). Further research can investigate this hypothesis by measuring candidate quality, past political experience, and fundraising. Researchers could also assess whether Trump has significant sway among GOP primary voters in Biden-Heavy districts.

A roughly even proportion of election deniers in competitive districts denied the election. This suggests a possible moderating effect of perceived competition on a candidate's support of election denial. There are two possible mechanisms of this moderating effect. First, candidates in competitive districts perceive election denial as a campaign liability and strategically chose not to reject the 2020 election's legitimacy. Second, electability is likely a more prominent feature of primaries in competitive districts, particularly when there is no incumbent. Further research can explore the extent to which election denial featured concerns regarding electability in primaries

in competitive districts. While the precise mechanism of competitive districts' effect on election denial is unclear, election deniers were least likely to run in districts where they intuitively faced the risk of the greatest penalty.

Election deniers were at least 0.33 percentage points more likely to run in racially diverse districts.¹¹ This lends some support to Craig and Richardson's (2014) theory regarding perceived racial status threat among White Americans. Moreover, this replicates Strawbridge and Lau's (2023) finding showing that GOP congressmen in racially diverse districts were less likely to decertify election results and vote for the January 6th committee. However, as they note, few GOP congressmen represent racially diverse electorates because racial minorities have historically been a reliable voting bloc for the Democratic party. My analysis also includes non-incumbent GOP candidates, who, unlike incumbents, are more likely to be in districts with significant racial minorities. While Levendusky (2023) shows that status threat motivated voter fears, my analysis indicates the possibility that candidates are aware of this status threat and strategically chose to cater to these fears by doubling down on Trump's election denial. Although Hopkins & Huber (2019) show that status threat is not localized, researchers could explore whether the GOP primary electorate in racially diverse candidates was either more likely to perceive status threat or more likely to prefer election-denying candidates.

My most important finding is the 1 percentage point (in the full model) electoral penalty for election deniers in the 2022 House elections. If an election denier ran in a race instead of an election acceptor, their vote margin could be 0.7 percentage points less. This may appear, at first, somewhat insignificant considering that the number of competitive House races has been

¹¹ While this estimate increases to 0.61 in the full model (controlling for other variables), the full model includes a wide variety of controls. Since the causal pathway between Trump endorsement and candidate election denial is complex, the effects in the full model of other controls should be interpreted with care.

decreasing each cycle— only 32 races in 2022 were decided by less than 5 percentage points. However, this modest penalty could make the difference in some close races. This effect size increases to a 1-point penalty when controlling for Trump 2020 vote share, Trump endorsement, and districts' education and racial demographics. I show that even GOP candidates for elected positions that do not directly deal with election administration face an electoral penalty for election denial. What do these results suggest about the causal mechanisms of the voter penalty? Since election denial does not feature heavily in most House races, I suggest that when some voters penalize election-denying House candidates, they likely attribute the toxicity of the nationalized election denial to the candidate's stance in support of election denial. Of course, this penalty is greater when voters can intuitively link candidates to radical election conspiracy theories by candidates in statewide competition, like Kari Lake in Arizona's Governor's race.

The electoral penalty I identify in House races is somewhat smaller than what Hall (2023) finds for statewide races (2.7 to 3 percentage points). On one hand, federal races (House and Senate) are more salient due to greater media coverage and fundraising. However, the issue of election denial specifically may have been more important in Governor or Secretary of State races considering they are more directly involved with election administration. Given these countervailing hypotheses, can we conclude that the type of electoral race influenced the degree of electoral penalty? Since Hall does not differentiate between Senate and other statewide races (Governor, Attorney General, Secretary of State) in his sample, it is difficult to validate either theory.¹²

¹² Considering the limited sample size of these other races, Hall's strategy is understandable to maintain statistical power.

In Competitive and Trump-heavy districts, candidates suffered a 1.3 percentage point electoral penalty. Voters in competitive races likely receive more campaign messaging, due to greater fundraising and advertising in these races (Hopkins, 2017), and the closeness of the race may motivate them to understand the differences between candidate positions. This is significant because a small electoral penalty is likely to change electoral outcomes most substantively in competitive races. In Trump districts, voters may be more aware of a GOP incumbent's stance on election denial due to greater media coverage of incumbents and the events surrounding January 6th. Future research could investigate voter awareness of their representative's stance on election denial.

My results do not reveal a relationship between a candidate's election denial and whether they lost their election in the 2022 midterms. However, election denial may have been more predictive of electoral outcomes in races where election administration was a more salient issue, such as in Arizona and Michigan. For instance, a survey found that 57 percent of Pennsylvanians said they did not "trust" Mastriano to oversee the state's elections. While further research exploring this could be fruitful, its ability to causally infer the effects of denial on such races is limited by the small sample size and research design limitations. Future research could use other methodologies, such as panel data and campaign communication analysis, to understand the most influential factors in these specific races. Much like prominent election-accepting incumbents lost their primaries, several prominent deniers lost their elections, such as in MI-03 and WA-03. While my analysis of MI-03 and WA-03 hints that the interaction effects between white supremacy, election denial, and candidate quality, further research can better explore the dynamics by which voters perceive these connected beliefs among candidates.

Conclusion

A discussion of the implications of election-denying candidates facing an electoral penalty is incomplete without acknowledging the perception of a penalty. While the current media environment is deeply fragmented and polarized (Mutz & Martin, 2001; Sunstein, 2002; Fletcher et al., 2019), both conservative and liberal media narratives emerging from the 2022 midterm elections strongly blamed the GOP's underperformance on Trumpism, election denial, and candidate quality (all inextricably linked). During the 2022 midterms, most major national news organizations tracked how election deniers performed on the ballot. After results poured in, journalists declared that the public had rejected election denial because election deniers overwhelmingly lost at the ballot. On Nov 9, the New York Times published an article titled "Election Denial Didn't Play as Well as Republicans Hoped." The focus of the coverage was on state-wide races for positions that involved election administration at some level. For instance, NBC news noted that in all 13 races in six battleground states where an election denier was on the ballot for governor, secretary of state or attorney general, they lost.

Concomitantly, most news organizations, regardless of their political ideology, either blamed Trump or seriously reconsidered Trump's whether Trump positively influenced GOP's election day chances. Many outlets (including CNN, NBC, Politico, and AP) advanced a narrative that Trump hurt GOP prospects in the 2020 midterms, possibly costing them the Senate, by picking weak candidates just because they were loyal to him and his election conspiracy theories (Lowrey; McGreal; Kapur, 2022). The *Atlantic* noted that "Trumpism is toxic at the ballot," and pointed to survey evidence showing that 25 to 30 percent of voters in swing states cast their vote in opposition to Trump, a candidate who wasn't even on the ballot.

Public criticism of Trump did not merely come from liberal pundits. Virginia's Republican lieutenant governor, Winsome Earle-Sears, a strong Trump advocate, said Trump had become a "liability" and that it is "time to move on" from the 2020 election (Colvin, 2022). Even Fox News seriously entertained critiques of Trump's midterm endorsements— they published an article titled "Republicans split on Trump's effect on lackluster midterms," and hosted several Republican pundits who attributed the disappointment over the failed "red wave" to Trump's endorsed candidate quality (Keene, 2022). Of course, there has also been pushback from many Republicans in defense of Trump. For instance, in a statement to Fox, New Jersey Rep. Jeff Van Drew noted that most of Trump's endorsements won and emphasized that Republicans won back the House. Trump himself addressed the narrative against him by blaming the abortion issue and insisting that he had a "98.6 % batting record in the primaries." However, the defensive posture of these claims shows that enough GOP elites are weighing whether Trump and his fixation on the 2020 election are helpful to the GOP's future electoral prospects.

Even if candidates did not face a significant electoral penalty, the media narrative surrounding the 2022 midterm results has framed election denial as an even greater liability, and ultimately, an "electability" issue with wide-ranging implications. In the future, GOP primary voters may be more likely to reject election-denying candidates because the results of the 2022 election could persuade them that they are unelectable. Corporate donors may also be less willing to bet on candidates whom they view as holding an unnecessary and unpopular position. While GOP leadership may shift financial and other support for candidates based on their electability, it is unlikely that Leader Kevin McCarthy will punish election deniers in such a way considering his slim majority and loyalty to Trump (Wu et al. 2023).

Finally, this could even influence whether GOP voters support Trump in primaries for the 2024 presidential election. In February 2023, *The Washington Post* published findings from interviews with 150 Trump supporters, revealing that many were fatigued by Trump and had serious concerns about his electability due to the January 6th riots and his fixation on the results of the 2020 election. On February 26th, 2023, Trump posted the following on Truth Social: “Crooked Democrat Prosecutors, many of them Racists in Reverse, are trying to steal a second Presidential Election.” While the issues that will dominate the upcoming presidential primary cycle are unpredictable, Trump remains fixated on his 2020 loss and will likely repeat his election fraud claims in the lead up to the 2024 presidential election.

Even if Trump’s influence over the GOP wanes, anti-democratic attitudes and mistrust in the electoral process may take deeper root in the party. While several election deniers lost their state and district-wide elections, they have turned their attention to gaining power in state GOP parties. The Associated Press (2023) reported that election-denying losers in Kansas, Michigan, Georgia, and Idaho recently won elections for the GOP state party chair. For instance, in Colorado, Tina Peters, who unsuccessfully ran in the primary for Secretary of State, is facing felony charges for accessing confidential voting machine data while she was a clerk in western Colorado’s Mesa County.” She is also currently a front-runner in the race for chair of the Colorado GOP. These losing candidates correctly recognized that the extreme activist voter base for the GOP chair is much more likely to elect them than the GOP primary or general electorate. This affirms Levendusky’s (2023) argument that more extreme Trump supporters who were more engaged in conservative media ecosystems were more likely to deny the elections. As state party chairs, these dangerous election deniers have the power to impact the presidential nominating contest and features of election administration, like recruiting poll watchers. They

could also play a critical role in fundraising for candidates at the state level that more closely align with their conspiracy theories. While Trump may have unleashed election denial, a dedicated minority of GOP activists and elites appear motivated to entrench it within the party and its voters. Conversely, several of the biggest defenders of democracy in the GOP have either been voted out in primaries or retired from politics. Without these prominent democracy defenders in the GOP, it is likely that the election-denying faction can influence GOP elites and activists that are apathetic or neutral towards the issue.

By normalizing and politicizing election fraud conspiracy theories, Trump and election-denying GOP elites may also have created further polarization on voting rights more broadly among the elites and masses. While my findings suggest electoral incentives for the GOP to moderate on election denial, the GOP could implement other anti-democratic measures, like stricter curbs on voting access, in pursuit of similar anti-democratic aims. A third of House election objectors formed the Election Integrity Caucus, which pushes for stricter curbs on voting rights and hosts speakers from Trump's election legal team (Eder et al. 2022). The popularization of election fraud conspiracies in the mainstream could energize the Republican voter base to support greater restrictions on voter rights. Alternatively, threatening out-party cues from the GOP could also persuade Democratic voters to conceive of expanding voter access as a crucial democratic issue. Increased polarization on voting rights would also likely make bipartisan compromise in legislatures difficult. Further research should examine the influence of Trump normalizing election conspiracy theories on voter attitudes regarding voting rights measures. I encourage other researchers to study the influence of the "Big Lie" on voters' support for a battery of voting rights measures.

As America becomes increasingly racially diverse, the GOP may increasingly rely on anti-democratic policies to mobilize a threatened white minority (Grumbach, 2022). While the Voting Rights Act (1964) shrank the gap between Black and White voter registration from 20 to 8 percent within the first 20 years of its passage, the *Shelby v. Holder* (2013) Supreme Court decision upended this progress. In the aftermath, GOP controlled state legislature have passed a plethora of restrictions on voting rights (Brennan Center for Justice, 2019). Feder & Miller (2020) find that Black voters were purged at a substantially higher rate post-Shelby. While Shelby created a permissive legal environment for the GOP to disenfranchise Black voters, the popularization of election conspiracy theories in 2022 create an even greater electoral incentive for the GOP to cater to its base by passing measures that further disenfranchise minorities. Further research could track how rhetoric from the “Big Lie” influenced the passage of restrictive voting measures at the state level and the effects of these curbs on equal access to voting.

This discussion illustrates that democratic erosion is a continuum and not a binary between autocracy and democracy. The GOP does not need to successfully reject a Democrat winner’s electoral college results for the “Big Lie” to succeed in eroding American democracy. It is not all too difficult for autocrats to rise to power in a democracy when an amorphous majority is faced with a well-organized minority. While my findings indicate that there was some electoral penalty for election denial, it is uncertain whether this penalty will significantly harm the GOP in the future. For American democracy to be resilient to Trump’s “Big Lie,” voters must recognize it as deeply undemocratic and bipartisan political elites must continue to restore faith about the electoral process. However, the increasingly undemocratic makeup of the GOP does not bode well for the future of American democracy. Whether or not the GOP pursues a

strategy of wholesale rejecting future election's results, the "Big Lie" lay the groundwork for voters' to support other anti-democratic policies. American democracy may not go down without a fight, but rising polarization increasingly sharpens the threat posed by anti-democratic elites in America.

Appendix

Appendix A: Candidate Election Denial Scorecards



← GOP REPORT CARD / LEGISLATOR PROFILE



CHAMBER: House of Representatives
TERM ENDS: 2023

Rep. Mary Miller

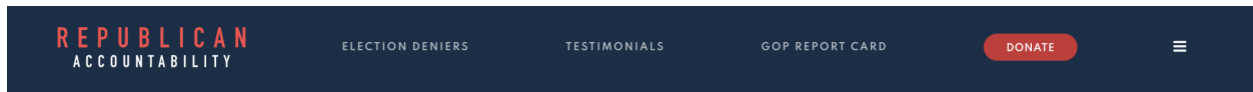
ILLINOIS - DISTRICT 15

DEMOCRACY SCORE

[Details →](#)

F VERY POOR

- Not in office when Texas amicus brief was signed
- Objected to certification of electoral college votes in one or more states
- Made false and/or irresponsible public statements against democratic system
- Voted against impeachment or conviction of Donald Trump for inciting an insurrection
- Voted against creating an independent commission to investigate the Jan. 6 attack
- Voted against holding Steve Bannon in contempt of Congress



← GOP REPORT CARD / LEGISLATOR PROFILE



CHAMBER: House of Representatives
TERM ENDS: 2023

Rep. Bob Gibbs

OHIO - DISTRICT 7

DEMOCRACY SCORE

[Details →](#)

F VERY POOR

- Signed Texas amicus brief
- Objected to certification of electoral college votes in one or more states
- Made no public statements about the election, or was evasive
- Voted against impeachment or conviction of Donald Trump for inciting an insurrection
- Voted against creating an independent commission to investigate the Jan. 6 attack
- Voted against holding Steve Bannon in contempt of Congress

Appendix B: Summary of Variables

Descriptive statistics: Key Variables

| Statistic | Election Denial (Binary) | 2022 Republican Vote Share | 2020 Trump Vote Share | % White Pop | % College Grad |
|-------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| N | 327 | 404 | 404 | 440 | 440 |
| Mean | 0.65 | 0.49 | 0.46 | 0.62 | 0.35 |
| St. Dev. | 0.48 | 0.16 | 0.15 | 0.19 | 0.11 |
| Min | 0 | 0.10 | 0.09 | 0.13 | 0.10 |
| Max | 1 | 0.84 | 0.80 | 0.94 | 0.78 |

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