

# Do Violent Protests Affect Expressions of Party Identity? Evidence from the Capitol Insurrection

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*The insurrection at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, was the most dramatic contemporary manifestation of deep political polarization in the United States. Recent research shows that violent protests shape political behavior and attachments, but several questions remain unanswered. Using day-level panel data from a large sample of US social media users to track changes in the identities expressed in their Twitter biographies, we show that the Capitol insurrection caused a large-scale decrease in outward expressions of identification with the Republican Party and Donald Trump, with no indication of reidentification in the weeks that followed. This finding suggests that there are limits to party loyalty: a violent attack on democratic institutions sets boundaries on partisanship, even among avowed partisans. Furthermore, the finding that political violence can deflect copartisans carries the potential positive democratic implication that those who encourage or associate themselves with such violence pay a political cost.*

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## What are the consequences of violent protests on political behavior and attachments?

- Relatively little is known about the effects of violent protests on political behavior
- Especially important question in light of the January 6, 2021 Capitol insurrection

## Research questions

1. What are the effects of violent protests on political identity?
2. Are the effects of violence now national?
3. What are the consequences of violent protest when conducted by those on the ideological right?
4. Do the effects of violent protest occur quickly, or only after longer sustained elite politicization?
5. How long do the effects of violent protest last?

## Research question → research design

- What is the January 6 insurrection's effect on expressions of identification with the Republican Party & Donald Trump?
- Examine changes in party ID as captured by changes in people's *social media bios*

**Follow****Joe Biden** ✓

@JoeBiden

🇺🇸 United States government official

Husband to [@DrBiden](#), proud father and grandfather. Ready to build back better for all Americans. Official account is [@POTUS](#).

📍 Washington, DC 🔗 [joebiden.com](#) 📅 Joined March 2007

**48** Following **33.2M** Followers

## A stylized example of the outcome over time

date	profile text
2021-01-04	Proud Texas Republican! Grandmother, mother, Christian, #MAGA
2021-01-05	Proud Texas Republican! Grandmother, mother, Christian, #MAGA
2021-01-06	Proud Texas Republican! Grandmother, mother, Christian, #MAGA
2021-01-07	Proud Texan! Grandmother, Mother, Christian, and proud American
2021-01-08	Proud Texan! Grandmother, Mother, Christian, and proud American
⋮	⋮

## Research design

- Day-level panel data of 3.4 million active US Twitter users
  - Users who follow 1+ major US news media account
  - 1 billion user-day observations

## Measurement of party ID

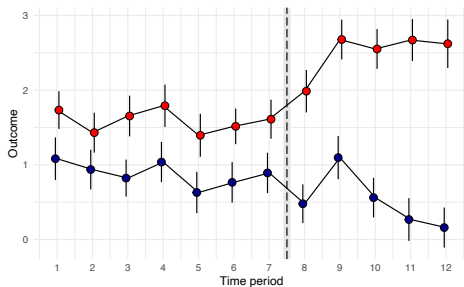
- Start with a keyword “Republican” or “Democrat”
- Machine learning model to expand the keyword list for other terms concerning *explicit* partisanship
  - e.g. #MAGA, #KAG, Trump



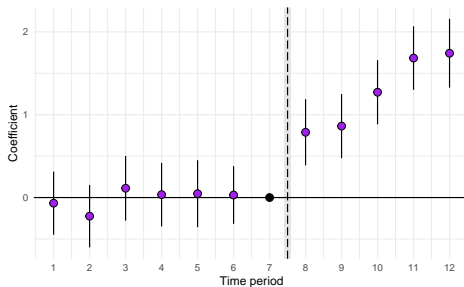
## Causal estimation

- Use a difference-in-differences model
- Model compares the probability of Republicans having a Republican/Trump term in their bio versus that of Democrats having a Democratic term in their bio

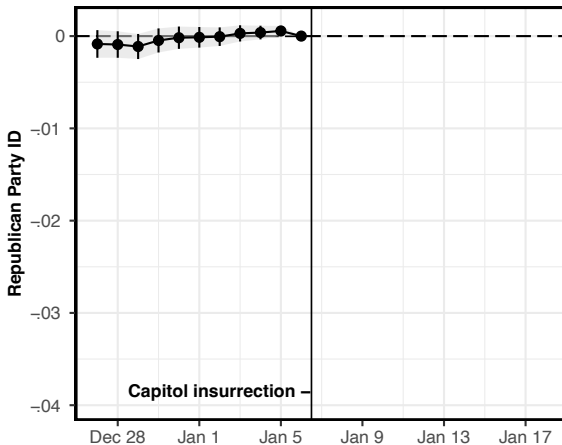
## Difference-in-differences model (graphically)



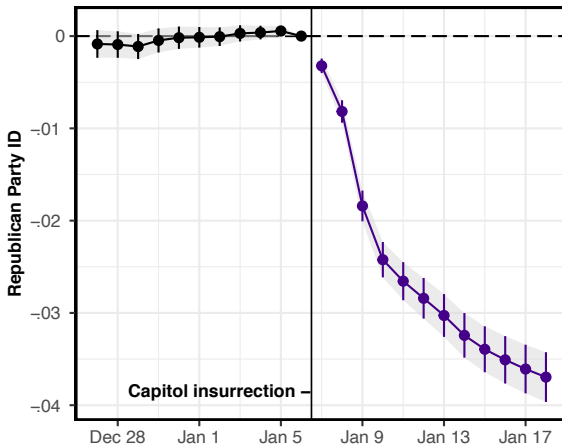
Event study estimates: Separate estimates  $\beta_t$  per period



## Difference-in-differences (event study)

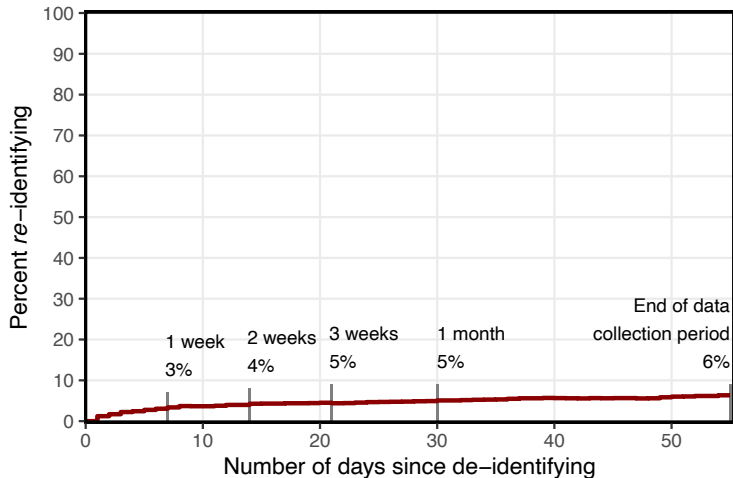


## Difference-in-differences (event study)



\* Not driven by an *increase* in Democratic identification

## But were these effects only short-lived?



## Conclusions

- Within 3 weeks after the insurrection, 1 in 14 previously Republican-identifying users had removed partisan terms
- Democracy-threatening violence can set boundaries on partisanship, even among avowed partisans
- Positive democratic implication that those who encourage political violence may pay a political cost by way of partisan de-mobilization

**Thank you!**