

# Identity fusion and support for political authoritarianism: Lessons from the U.S. insurrection of 2021

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## Abstract

The recent surge in political authoritarianism has triggered interest in the factors that regulate its rise and fall. We explored these phenomena in the time around the January 6, 2021, insurrection in the United States. Identity fusion (synergistic union) with Trump predicted the perception that Democrats represented an existential threat to the American way of life; higher perceived threat, in turn, predicted endorsement of authoritarian actions against Democrats. Biden supporters did not display analogous effects. Among Trump supporters and, to a lesser extent, Biden supporters, fusion with the United States *negatively* predicted both the perception that out-party members represented an existential threat and endorsement of authoritarian actions against them. These findings provide unique insight into the role of identity in the nation's closest brush with authoritarian takeover in over a century.

## KEYWORDS

authoritarianism, group processes, identity, identity fusion

The only good Democrat is a dead Democrat

—A Retweet by Former President Donald Trump

Political authoritarianism is on the rise throughout the world (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022). Yet if this much is clear, understanding why it is rising and what can be done about it is not. We address these issues in this report. We propose that identity fusion (i.e., a synergistic union) with authoritarian leaders causes followers to perceive members of the opposition as existential threats. Strongly fused persons consequently react to threats by endorsing authoritarian actions against outgroup members. In contrast, fusion with the superordinate category

“America” will diminish the tendency to see members of the out-party as existential threats. As a result, those who are strongly fused with America will refrain from endorsing authoritarian actions against rivals. We tested these predictions in a three-wave panel study run around the insurrection of January 6, 2021, in the United States. To contextualize this research, we focus first on recent developments within the American right-wing that have eroded support for American democracy and fomented the rise of political authoritarianism and Donald Trump. We then consider the potential role of identity fusion (Swann et al., [in press](#)) in these developments.

## The decline of democracy in contemporary America

Although support for democracy is declining throughout the world (Foa & Mounk, [2016](#)), the decline in the United States has been particularly striking. For example, whereas 75% of Americans born in the 1930s considered democracy to be essential, only 30% of Americans born in the 1980s considered it essential (Foa & Mounk, [2016](#)). This precipitous decline in support for Democracy is likely associated with a more general drop in faith in the political system. Most Americans (61%) contend that significant changes are needed in the fundamental design and structure of American government (Pew, [2018](#)). Many also believe that the government is corrupt, with 72% asserting that money buys political influence (Pew, [2018](#)).

The erosion of trust in the political system among Americans is compounded by a widening partisan divide. Most Republicans and Democrats believe that few—or no—good ideas come from the other party (Pew, [2019](#)). Disdain for the opposing party extends beyond policies. For example, members of opposing parties no longer agree about “basic facts” (Pew, [2019](#)) and are increasingly reluctant to date or marry across party lines (Iyengar et al., [2019](#)). Researchers have even coined a term for this extreme partisan division: political sectarianism, or the tendency to adopt a moralized identification with one political group and against another (Finkel et al., [2020](#)).

To be sure, loss of faith in one's government and partisan rancor do not automatically lead to the embrace of political authoritarianism. Nevertheless, these phenomena may increase openness to alternative political systems. Of particular relevance here, these developments have recently encouraged some Americans to embrace the authoritarian sentiments of former president Donald Trump.

## Donald Trump and the ascent of political authoritarianism

As president, Donald Trump expressed hostility toward outgroup members as illustrated by his endorsement of the tweet with which we opened this report, “the only good Democrat is a dead Democrat” (Folley, [2020](#)). He also called for authoritarian actions against those who disagreed with him. For example, he ordered a harsh crackdown on progressive protesters in Portland during the Summer of 2020 (BBC, [2020](#)) and oversaw the use of tear gas to remove predominantly peaceful protesters from a location near the White House (Bender & Gurman, [2020](#)).

Trump has also displayed a knack for attracting supporters who are sympathetic to authoritarian messages and denigrations of outgroups. Trump supporters scored higher in authoritarian aggression and group-based dominance than supporters of other 2016 presidential candidates (Womick et al., [2019](#)). Moreover, Trump supporters endorsed disproportionate killing of enemy civilians using nuclear weapons in a hypothetical war (Slovic et al., [2020](#)). Furthermore, outgroup hostility was a stronger predictor of voting for Trump than economic insecurity, education level, and other variables (Fording & Schram, [2018](#); Schaffner et al., [2018](#);

Smith & Hanley, 2018). Finally, Trump supporters' self-reports suggested they are drawn to aggressive, intolerant leaders who promised to restore the “rightful” societal order that placed White males at the top (Smith & Hanley, 2018).

Given their affinity for aggressive, intolerant leaders, it is not surprising that some Trump supporters are themselves violent (Swaine & Adolophe, 2019). As of May 2020, court records cited 54 criminal cases in which admiration for President Trump contributed to violent acts and threats of assault (Levine, 2020). This effect appears to be specific to Trump supporters, as no such instances have been reported involving former Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush, or current President Joe Biden. Surely the most notorious instance of violence enacted by Trump supporters occurred on January 6, 2021, when his supporters attempted to stop Congress from affirming Trump's defeat in the presidential election. That said, some Trump supporters refrained from endorsing his attempted coup. This leads one to ask what distinguishes a casual Trump supporter from a “True Believer.” The identity-fusion construct represents one possibility.

### Identity fusion: Accelerant or antidote to political authoritarianism?

Research and theory suggest that when people's personal identities become “fused with” a group, the boundaries between representations of the personal self and the group become porous (Swann et al., 2012). These porous borders make strongly fused individuals regard threats to their group as equivalent to threats to their self. Given this, it is unsurprising that when strongly fused persons express willingness to take strong actions to ward off threats to their group, including violence against outgroup members (Newson et al., 2018) and even fighting and dying for the group (for a review, see Swann et al., [in press](#)).

Identity fusion theory is both similar to and different from the social identity perspective (which includes social identity [Tajfel & Turner, 1979] and self-categorization theory [Turner et al., 1994]). Identity fusion theory draws a key distinction between personal and social identity, as does the social identity perspective. Nevertheless, identity fusion theory rejects the notion that when people align themselves with a group, a sovereign social self eclipses a feckless personal self (the “depersonalization” hypothesis) and the related idea that the activation of social identities competes with the activation of the personal self (the “functional antagonism” hypothesis). Instead, much like other critics of the social identity perspective (e.g., Abrams, 1994; Greenway et al., 2015; Huddy, 2002; Postmes & Jetten, 2006; Simon, 2004), fusion theory assumes that when strongly fused persons join groups, personal identities may remain active and influential. In addition, fusion theory claims that important representations of the personal self are relatively stable and chronically activated. This allows the personal self to work together with the social self to synergistically motivate extreme group behaviors.

Another unique feature of a recent revision of identity fusion theory (comprehensive identity fusion theory, or “CIFT”) is that fusion is not confined to the union of the personal self with the social self; instead, any abstraction that is perceived to be core to one's self-definition can be the target of fusion (e.g., Swann et al., [in press](#)). Consistent with this possibility, researchers have shown that people can become fused to targets other than groups, including values (Fredman et al., 2017; Martel et al., 2021), brands (Krishna & Kim, 2020, 2021; Lin & Sung, 2013), and politicians (Kunst et al., 2019). Because alignments with these targets of fusion do not necessarily involve groups, the social self is not implicated. Instead, fusion is marked by the synergistic relationship between the personal self and the target of fusion, and this synergistic union is exclusively responsible for the behaviors it motivates. This broad characterization of identity fusion suggests that when an endorsement of a value, individual, or other target is simultaneously aligned with other preexisting aspects of the personal self, fusion with those targets becomes more likely. In such instances, people may develop “fusion

clusters” (Swann et al., *in press*) involving multiple congruent targets—such as a Trump, authoritarian values, and animosity toward left-leaning elites—that are mutually reinforcing (see also Mason's, 2018, discussion of nested identities). When threatened, such fusion clusters may motivate attacks against perceived adversaries of the targets of fusion.

Threat-induced authoritarian attacks against outgroup members may not be inevitable, however. Common ingroup identity theory (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) has proposed that when a common identity is salient, members of competing groups will look beyond their differences. This process, dubbed “recategorization,” has been shown to foster more favorable attitudes and behaviors toward outgroups (Gaertner et al., 2016; Mason & Wronski, 2018). For example, a recent study by Levendusky (2018) demonstrated that increasing the salience of a common ingroup (America) reduced partisan animosity between Republicans and Democrats. The common ingroup identity approach has focused on demonstrating the benefits of activating common ingroup identities through recategorization manipulations. Nevertheless, the theory has implications for the influence of existing group allegiances that have not been activated.

Consider that people are often fused to multiple groups that are nested within one another (Mason, 2018). Partisans in the United States, for example, may be simultaneously fused to the United States as well as to the leader of their party. At times these nested group identities may compete with one another. For example, fusion with political leaders (Biden vs. Trump) may exaggerate perceived differences between members of rival parties (Ahler & Sood, 2018). Strongly fused persons may consequently perceive out-party members as existential threats, and this may, in turn, motivate authoritarian actions against them. At the same time, fusion with a higher-level, “superordinate” identity (the United States) may foster feelings of unanimity with out-party members. These feelings of unanimity may make members of rival parties seem less threatening, thereby reducing or eliminating the felt need for authoritarian actions to control them.

To empirically test our notion that fusion with nested groups could differentially predict animosity toward outgroups, we conducted a panel study during a particularly volatile time period: the run-up and immediate aftermath of the 2021 insurrection in the United States. In three waves, we examined changes in people's identities and attitudes during this historic time. Waves occurred just before the 2020 U.S. presidential election, soon after the election, and soon after the January 6 insurrection. Participants were limited to supporters of either Trump or Biden. All participants completed measures of three targets of identity fusion: their party's candidate, their party, and the United States. The primary outcome measures were the perception of members of the opposing party as existential threats and the endorsement of authoritarian actions against them. Although the latter items (e.g., “disbanding Congress” and “locking up key members of the mainstream media,” “Cutting off resources for [liberal/conservative] cities or states”) resemble items that researchers have recently dubbed “politically congenial authoritarian” items (Malka & Costello, 2023), in this report we have dropped “congenial” for simplicity's sake.

Our first key prediction was that identity fusion with an authoritarian leader (Donald Trump), would augment the perceived threat from Democrats, and the perceived threat would, in turn, increase endorsement of authoritarian actions against them. We did not expect this pattern as a function of fusion with Joe Biden, as he has no history of endorsing authoritarian activities. Our second key prediction was that, among both Biden and Trump supporters, identity fusion with the United States would diminish the perception of the opposing party as an existential threat, and this would, in turn, diminish endorsement of politically authoritarian actions against them. Finally, we recognized that affective polarization—the degree to which partisans feel warmer toward their party than toward the opposing party—has come under a great deal of scrutiny because of its sharp increase in recent years (Iyengar et al., 2012) and its potential harmfulness to the functioning of democracy (Kingzette et al., 2021, but see

Broockman et al., 2022). To test the possibility that affective polarization rather than identity fusion might motivate authoritarian actions against perceived adversaries, we measured it in our research.

## METHOD

### Participants

We collected three waves of data on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) from supporters of either Donald Trump or Joe Biden. We leveraged the CloudResearch platform (AKA TurkPrime) to enhance the functionality of MTurk (Litman et al., 2017). Wave 1 occurred 1 week before the 2020 American Presidential Election; Wave 2 occurred 1 week after the election; and Wave 3 occurred 1 week after the January 6 insurrection. The original sample in Wave 1 consisted of 1498 voters (575 Trump supporters, 923 Biden supporters). For the remaining waves, we set recruitment goals of roughly 400 per candidate (Wave 2) and 300 per candidate (Wave 3). We met both recruitment goals, such that in Wave 2 we obtained 404 pro-Trump voters and 406 pro-Biden voters, and in Wave 3 we obtained 288 pro-Trump voters and 310 pro-Biden voters.

To implement a longitudinal design using MTurk and CloudResearch, we used participants' unique MTurk worker IDs to track them across waves. Using the enhanced recruitment functionality of the CloudResearch platform, we made the later waves of our survey available only to participants who had completed the earlier waves. To encourage participant retention across waves, we sent messages to eligible participants to let them know the new waves of our study were available. We also increased the participant pay from \$.25 in Wave 1 to \$.50 in Waves 2 and 3. Participants were told in both the MTurk study ad and in the consent form that Waves 2 and 3 were follow-up surveys to a survey they had completed earlier.

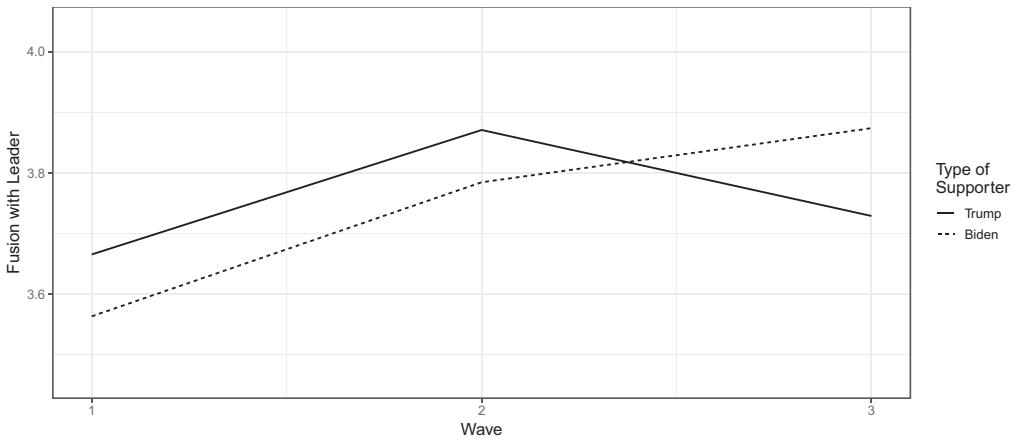
Comparisons of participants who persisted in subsequent samples showed some differences such that those who remained were initially more fused with the United States than those who dropped out (Cohen's  $d = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Likewise, Trump supporters who remained until Wave 3 were more fused with Trump at baseline than those who dropped in Wave 3 (Cohen's  $d = .18$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with a similar pattern occurring for fusion with the Republican Party.

This differential attrition cannot explain our main findings. For example, whereas the tendency for participants who were strongly fused with Trump to preferentially remain in the study would predict that fusion with Trump would increase over time, examination of Figure 1 indicates that fusion with Trump actually *decreased* after his defeat. Note also that our regressions assess changes from Wave 1 to Wave 3, so individuals who dropped out were excluded from the analyses. Finally, the presence of a higher proportion of strongly fused Trump supporters in later waves compared to earlier waves could not explain why fusion with country predicted *less* endorsement of authoritarian actions against Democrats.

In any event, Democrats did not display a parallel pattern, as there were no significant differences in overall means across waves between fusion with Biden, fusion with Democratic Party, outgroup existential threat, support for authoritarian actions, or affective polarization. More details on participant demographic information across waves can be found in the online supporting information (SOM-1).

### Procedure

After consenting to take the survey, participants completed a screener question indicating which candidate they supported in the 2020 American presidential election. Only participants who selected Donald Trump or Joe Biden proceeded with the survey. Participants then received all



**FIGURE 1** Fusion with Trump or Biden changing over time.

measures in randomized order, followed by some demographic questions. Items were tailored to participants' political preference (e.g., Trump supporters completed measures of fusion with Trump; Biden supporters responded to fusion with Biden items). After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed. Subsequent waves followed the same procedure. Only participants who completed Wave 1 of the survey were eligible to complete Wave 2, and only participants who had completed both of the first two waves were eligible to complete Wave 3.

## Materials

Participants completed the three measures of fusion (with candidate, party, and United States), perception of opposing party as an existential threat, support for authoritarian actions against opposing party, and affective polarization associated with political party. Brief descriptions of these measures are included below. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach Alphas, and *t*-tests comparing the means of all measures between supporters of Biden and Trump can be found in the online supporting information (SOM-2). A comprehensive list of the items included in each measure can be found in SOM-3.

## Identity fusion

We measured identity fusion using a truncated three-item version (as in Talaifar et al., 2020) of the standard seven-item verbal identity-fusion scale (Gómez et al., 2011). Each fusion scale focused on one of three targets: (1) the preferred presidential candidate (Donald Trump or Joe Biden), (2) the associated political party (the Republican Party or the Democratic Party), and (3) the United States. Example items include “[Donald Trump/Joe Biden] is me” and “I make the United States strong.”

## Outgroup existential threat

We measured the perception that the opposing political party is an existential threat to the American way of life using a five-item measure adapted from Wohl and Branscombe's (2009)

measure of collective angst. Sample items include “I think the future of the American way of life is under threat from [Democrats/Republicans],” and “I believe that [Democrats/Republicans] are purposefully trying to undermine the American way of life.” We modified all items for individual participants so that they always referred to the out-party.

## Support for authoritarian actions against opposing party

We created a six-item measure of the degree to which participants personally supported authoritarian actions designed to benefit their own political party at the expense of the opposing party. On 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*Strongly oppose*) to 7 (*Strongly support*), participants indicated their support for each of six actions: disbanding Congress, using the military to take control of the government, locking up key members of the mainstream media, seeking out help from foreign governments to help win the election, cutting off resources for [liberal/conservative] cities or states, and personally engaging in violent protests.

## Affective polarization toward political parties

Using a feeling thermometer that ranged from 0 to 100 (Iyengar et al., 2012), participants indicated how positively they felt toward both their political party and the opposition party. The difference between these two items constituted the index of affective polarization, with larger numbers indicating greater polarization.

## RESULTS

We were interested in whether identity fusion with a presidential candidate would be associated with changes in support for authoritarian actions, especially in response to threats to that candidate (e.g., losing the election). We began by assessing changes in our key variables in response to the election results. After this analysis, we tested our prediction that perceived threat would mediate the impact of fusion with Trump on support for authoritarian actions. We also asked if, among either Trump or Biden supporters, fusion with the United States would serve as a counterforce, predicting *less* perceived existential threat and *less* endorsement of authoritarian actions against outgroup members. Finally, we conducted an exploratory analysis to determine if affective polarization moderated our key findings.

### Changes in fusion with candidate over time

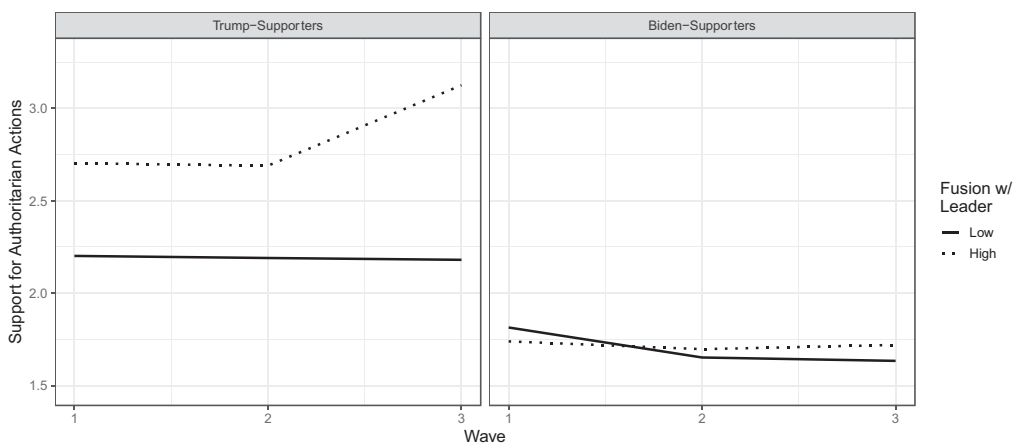
We first estimated linear models with unit fixed effects to determine whether fusion with leader changed over time. We observed change in leader preference as a function of wave while controlling for fusion with the United States and outgroup existential threat. **Figure 1** shows that fusion with leader rose for both Biden and Trump supporters from Wave 1 to Wave 2, ( $B = .124$ , 95% CI [.017, .231],  $t = 2.27$ ,  $p = .024$ ). Although the rise in fusion at Wave 2 (a week after the election) among the losing Trump supporters might seem surprising given his loss, there was sufficient ambiguity regarding the outcome of the election during this period that members of both parties could readily imagine that their candidate was victorious. However, by Wave 3 in mid-January 2021, the outcome had become clear with the result that fusion with Biden increased and fusion with Trump decreased ( $B = .318$ , 95% CI [.147, .489],  $t = 3.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

That said, when one focuses on the period associated with the most change (between Waves 2 and 3), a more nuanced scenario emerges. First, the correlation between fusion with leader during Wave 2 and Wave 3 was substantial among strongly fused (upper tertile) Trump [ $r(88) = .62, p < .001$ ] and Biden supporters, [ $r(102) = .60, p < .001$ ]. These relatively high correlations provide evidence for relative stability, as they indicate that the most and least fused persons generally retained their rank orderings. Second, although the average levels of *fusion with Trump* may have declined from Wave 2 to Wave 3, support for the values Trump espoused (political authoritarianism) actually increased. That is, Figure 2 reveals that strongly fused Trump supporters increased their support for authoritarian actions more than any other group. Further evidence for this conclusion comes from a linear model predicting support for authoritarian actions with unit-fixed effects. This analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction between leader preference, fusion with leader, and wave ( $B = .108, 95\% \text{ CI } [.025, .191], t = 2.54, p = .011$ ), such that support for authoritarian actions increased dramatically at Wave 3 among strongly fused Trump supporters relative to strongly fused Biden supporters. From this vantage point, although Trump's loss may have diminished the degree to which supporters were fused with him, it appears to have actually bolstered the degree to which they were aligned with the authoritarian values he advocated. The election results may have diminished supporters' allegiance to the authoritarian but simultaneously strengthened their allegiance to the authoritarian ideology he promulgated.

Figure 2 clearly illustrates that fusion with Trump versus Biden had very different impact on support for authoritarian actions (for presentational purposes, we split strongly fused and weakly fused participants at the median fusion value, such that participants above the median were considered strongly fused with their candidate and those below the median were considered weakly fused). That is, support for authoritarian actions remained higher among Trump relative to Biden supporters across all three waves (e.g., Biden supporters'  $M_{\text{Wave 1}} = 1.79$  vs. Trump supporters'  $M_{\text{Wave 1}} = 2.42$ , Cohen's  $d = .62, t = 10.84, p < .001$ ).

## Fusion with Trump, outgroup existential threat, and support for authoritarian actions

To test the hypothesis that outgroup existential threat would mediate the impact of fusion with Trump on support for authoritarian actions, we computed mediation models using



**FIGURE 2** Among strongly fused Trump supporters, support for Authoritarian Actions spiked after January 6 but remained moderate among weakly fused Trump supporters and low among Biden supporters.



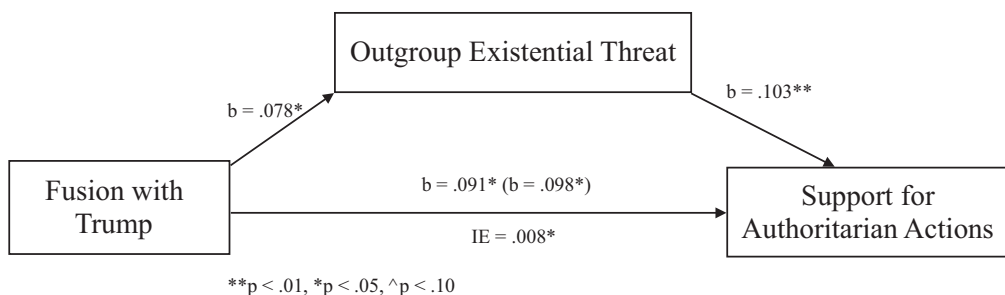
the mediation R package (Imai et al., 2010). We employed bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrapped confidence intervals. To strengthen our (admittedly modest) claims of causality, we controlled for baseline values of the mediator and outcome variables (VanderWeele, 2015). We used fusion with leader during Wave 1 as the predictor, outgroup existential threat during Wave 2 as the mediator, and support for authoritarian actions during Wave 3 as the outcome. We included all participants but examined the interaction of our predictors with fusion with leader separately for Biden and Trump supporters. Figure 3 displays the effects of fusion with Trump. The analysis revealed a positive and statistically significant indirect effect of fusion with Trump through perceived outgroup threat on support for authoritarian actions ( $IE = .008$ , 95% CI [.001, .020],  $p = .044$ ). This estimate suggests 8% of the total effect of fusion is mediated by outgroup threat. This hints at a causal process in which strongly fused partisans became sensitized to the threat posed by the other party and responded by supporting authoritarian actions.

### Affective polarization versus fusion with Trump as predictors of support for authoritarian actions

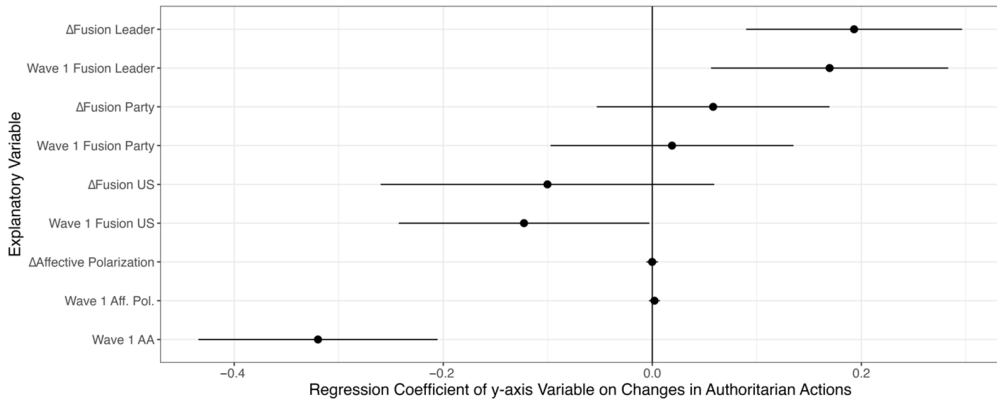
In theory, Trump supporters may have become supportive of authoritarian actions due to affective polarization (i.e., hate for Democrats) rather than identity fusion with Trump. To test this possibility, we used indices of affective polarization and fusion with Trump to predict change in support for authoritarian actions between Waves 1 and 3 while controlling for baseline values of all the variables and using clustered standard errors. The resulting regression coefficients are displayed in Figure 4. Change in fusion with Trump positively predicted change in support for authoritarian actions, whereas change in affective polarization did not. By default, increases in identity fusion with Trump rather than animosity toward Democrats appear to have increased support for authoritarian actions.

### Fusion with United States countered fusion with Trump

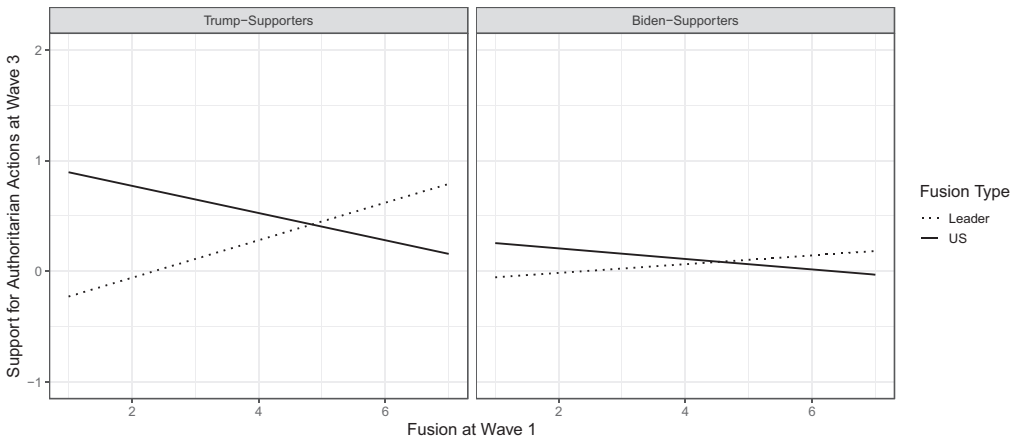
The foregoing data point to some potential dangers of fusion with an authoritarian leader. This does not mean that the effects of fusion are invariably negative, however, as fusion to other targets might attenuate such effects. We hypothesized that fusion with the United States, a superordinate identity associated with shared democratic principles, could offset the effects of fusion with Trump. To test this possibility, we compared the predictive power of fusion with Trump during Wave 1 and fusion with the United States during Wave 1 on support for authoritarian actions during Wave 3. We used the coefficient estimates from the model presented in Figure 4 to generate predicted values. The results are displayed in the left panel



**FIGURE 3** Effect of fusion with Trump on support for authoritarian actions mediated by higher outgroup existential threat.



**FIGURE 4** Linear regression model predicting change in Trump supporters' support for authoritarian actions from Waves 1 to 3.

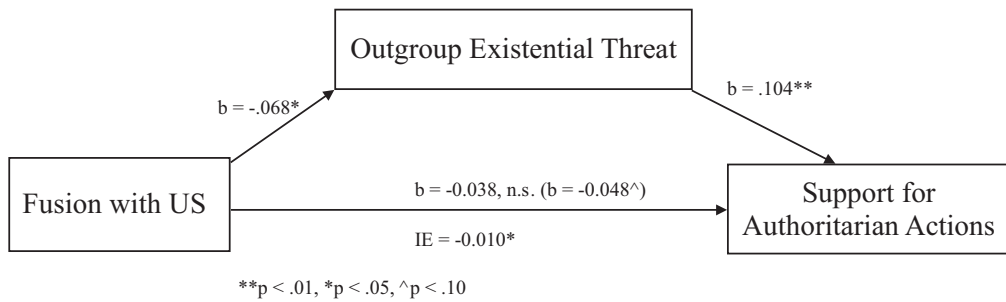


**FIGURE 5** Fusion with Trump and fusion with the United States predict support for authoritarian actions in opposite directions.

of Figure 5. The solid line shows that the more fused participants were with the United States during Wave 1, the *less* supportive of authoritarian actions they were during Wave 3 ( $B = -.123$ , 95% CI  $[-.244, -.001]$ ,  $t = -2.01$ ,  $p = .049$ ). In contrast, the dashed line indicates that the more participants were fused with Trump during Wave 1, the *more* they endorsed authoritarian actions during Wave 3 ( $B = .170$ , 95% CI  $[.054, .285]$ ,  $p = .004$ ). The correlation between fusion with Trump and fusion with the United States was  $.53$  ( $p < .001$ ), suggesting that individual Trump supporters were experiencing a conflict along these lines: “Should I hold fast to my democratic principles as a US citizen or align myself with the person I voted for?”

The right panel of Figure 5 displays predicted support for authoritarian actions during Wave 3 among Biden supporters. The trends paralleled those of Trump supporters but were weaker and nonsignificant. That is, fusion with the United States during Wave 1 had a negative but nonsignificant association with support for authoritarian actions during Wave 3 ( $B = -.047$ , 95% CI  $[-.118, .024]$ ,  $t = -1.327$ ,  $p = .188$ ). In contrast, fusion with Biden was positive but nonsignificant ( $B = .040$ , 95% CI  $[-.059, .138]$ ,  $t = .796$ ,  $p = .428$ ).

The overall pattern of data suggests that fusion with the United States may have kept participants' authoritarian impulses in check by encouraging them to view out-party members



**FIGURE 6** Fusion with the United States' negative effect on authoritarian actions mediated by lower outgroup existential threat ( $\wedge = .100 > p > .050$ ).

as fellow Americans rather than existential threats. To test this possibility, we conducted a regression in which fusion with the United States was the primary predictor, perceived ingroup threat was the mediator, and endorsement of authoritarian actions during Wave 3 was the outcome (controlling for baseline values of the mediator and outcome as well as leader preference and fusions with leader and party). The results plotted in Figure 6 indicate that fusion with the United States during Wave 1 had a negative effect on perceived outgroup threat during Wave 2, which had a positive effect on support for authoritarian actions during Wave 3 ( $IE = -.010$ , 95% CI  $[-.025, -.001]$ ,  $p = .012$ ). Simply put, fusion with the United States tempered support for authoritarian actions by decreasing how threatening participants perceived members of the out-party to be.

## Summary of results

The results of our analyses show a public whose posture toward the candidates was in flux around the 2021 insurrection. This was particularly true after the election results became clear: Average fusion with party leader rose for the winning Biden supporters and fell for the losing Trump supporters. Most strikingly, political authoritarianism rose among strongly fused Trump supporters after the election, as indicated by increased endorsement of authoritarian actions against Democrats. Moreover, outgroup existential threat statistically mediated the effect of fusion with Trump on support for authoritarian actions. Finally, fusion with the United States predicted lower support for authoritarian actions against the out-party, apparently because fusion with the United States made outgroup members seem less threatening.

## DISCUSSION

We conducted a three-wave panel study around the time of the January 6, 2021, insurrection in the United States. Our initial goal was to assess the impact of the results of the November 3, 2020, presidential election on people's sentiments toward the candidates and members of the opposing party. Identity fusion with both Trump and Biden increased between Wave 1 (1 week before the election) and Wave 2 (1 week after the election), when the outcome of the election was still relatively uncertain. During Wave 3 (1 week after the insurrection, roughly 2.5 months after the election), fusion with Trump decreased and fusion with Biden increased. This drop in fusion with the losing candidate and a corresponding increase in fusion with the winner (i.e., Biden) complements parallel evidence from a study of the 2016 presidential election (Misch et al., 2018).

The tendency for strongly fused participants to report changes in fusion over time challenges Swann et al.'s (2012) contention that fusion remains highly stable over time. In fact, there

are now at least three studies indicating that fusion (with Spain) changes in response to historic national events (Vazquez et al., 2017) and state fusion with Spain changes in response to laboratory manipulations (Gómez et al., 2020). In part, such evidence prompted Swann et al. (in press) to create a revised fusion theory (comprehensive identity fusion theory, or “CIFT”) in which fusion is understood to be quite resilient but nevertheless responsive to change in response to compelling events (Greene, 2004; Oakes, 2002).

Our findings also indicated that among Trump supporters, fusion with Trump during Wave 1, as well as changes in fusion with Trump between Waves 1 and 3, predicted support for political authoritarian actions toward the opposing party. In contrast, neither fusion with Biden during Wave 1 nor changes in fusion with Biden between Waves 1 and 3 predicted perceptions of existential threat nor support for authoritarian actions against Republicans. Further, in mediational models using fusion with Trump during Wave 1 as the predictor, outgroup existential threat during Wave 2 as the mediator, and support for authoritarian actions during Wave 3 as the outcome, 8% of the total effect of fusion on authoritarian actions was mediated by perceived outgroup threat. These findings provide initial evidence that fusion with Trump elevates perception of existential threat, and this perception, in turn, foments support for authoritarian actions.

The foregoing findings notwithstanding, there were also hints that identity fusion may have socially beneficial effects. In particular, among Trump supporters, the more fused they were with the United States, the *less* supportive they were of political authoritarian actions against Democrats in subsequent waves. Fusion with the United States was distinguished from partisan fusion by its tendency to predict *less* rather than *more* perceived existential threat from the opposing party and *reduce* rather than *elevate* endorsement of authoritarian actions. Apparently, fusion with the United States promotes allegiance to Americans of all stripes whereas fusion with Trump fosters allegiance to him and animosity toward his opponents. This pattern was weaker and nonsignificant among Biden supporters, likely because they displayed low rates of endorsement of existential threat and support for authoritarian actions to begin with. The takeaway point here, however, is that fusion with the United States appears to suppress the political authoritarian impulses of those who were most inclined to have such impulses (e.g., Trump supporters).

In contrast to identity fusion, affective polarization was a weak and nonsignificant predictor of endorsement of authoritarian actions against the opposing party. This finding is generally consistent with previous indications that identity fusion is a stronger predictor of extreme behaviors than related constructs such as group identification (Gómez et al., 2020) and sacred values (Martel et al., 2021). Of course, this is not to say that affective polarization does not have merit as a useful predictor of political attitudes or behaviors (see Iyengar et al., 2019; Kingzette et al., 2021; Levendusky, 2018). Rather, we are merely noting that, relative to affective polarization, identity fusion was a stronger predictor of support for *extreme behaviors that we examined*.

Our findings build upon previous evidence that fusion with Trump is associated with endorsement of the persecution of immigrants, Muslims, and Iranians (Kunst et al., 2019). In addition to demonstrating that fusion predicts authoritarian actions against coequals (i.e., out-party members), our findings also show that shifts in fusion have predictive value and that the effects of fusion are mediated by perceived existential threat posed by the outgroup. Furthermore, all our findings emerged in the context of an event of historic proportions—the insurrection following the 2020 American presidential election. Our evidence that Trump supporters whose identities were strongly fused with him were more supportive of authoritarian actions compared to weakly fused persons, coupled with the rise in support for authoritarian actions among the strongly fused during the course of the election cycle, provide a chilling empirical parallel to the events that occurred in Washington D.C. during this period.

Our most hopeful finding involved indications that identity fusion may be a solution as well as cause of the partisan polarization that has recently gripped the United States. Whereas fusion with Trump predicted the perception that members of the opposing party were an existential threat who should be subjugated through authoritarian actions, fusion with the United States diminished the desire to take authoritarian action against opposing party members. The latter finding points to a mechanism through which fusion may foster harmony rather than strife between parties. Even so, we acknowledge that promoting fusion with the United States might be a double-edged sword. Although our data suggest that fusion with the United States might reduce the partisan divide within that country, it might also sew divisions between the United States and other countries. The danger is that fusion-related patriotism, a love of one's nation, could morph into nationalism, which involves the conviction that one's nation is superior to others.

From this vantage point, attempts to bolster national identity should avoid encouraging patriots to perceive that their nation competing with others, for this will simply encourage them to replace an internal, intracountry, conflict with an external, international one. The larger point here is that the relationship of identity fusion to political considerations is surely a highly nuanced and complex one. Future research should probe more deeper into the highly complex role that identity fusion plays in the delicate interplay between individual identity and the social environment that it both shapes and is shaped by.

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