

Why some districts march more: Protest mobilization in the wake of US representatives' election denial

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Journal of Peace Research
2025, Vol. 62(5) 1463–1478
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DOI: 10.1177/00223433251353650
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Abstract

Election denial is a popular tool used by election losers to challenge democratic processes, often with harmful consequences for political stability. While some research suggests that actual fraud serves as a focal point for protest, other work emphasizes citizens' perceptions of fraud and partisanship. This study contributes to the debate by pointing to a possible mechanism for why fraud perceptions and partisanship might matter more for protest mobilization. I argue that local elite endorsement of election denial plays a crucial role in amplifying and localizing national narratives of stolen elections, making them more resonant within specific communities. I test this argument using the case of the 2020 US presidential election, where the widespread election denial narrative by President Trump led to highly uneven patterns of pro-Trump protests across the country. Using novel data on protest activity based on anonymized cellphone records and the timing of public endorsements of fraud claims by members of Congress, I demonstrate that local elite support for election denial significantly increased protest mobilization within their districts, particularly in districts already primed for dissent. This study sheds light on the democratic risks posed by election denial, showing how elite-driven disinformation can intensify and localize mobilization, even in the absence of credible claims of electoral fraud.

Keywords

Electoral fraud, protest mobilization, election denial, local elites, US

Introduction

We haven't come this far and fought this hard to have the election stolen from us.

Representative Paul Gosar (AZ-4) 4 November 2020

The legitimacy of democratic governments rests not only on the integrity of elections but, importantly, also on the widespread acceptance of election results, especially among those who lost (Anderson et al., 2005). When politicians and their supporters reject the outcome of credible elections, they undermine trust in both the government and the electoral system (Edelson et al., 2017; Sances and Stewart, 2015), risking protests (Anderson and Mendes, 2006), civil conflict (Cederman

et al., 2013), and domestic terrorism (Piazza, 2022). The willingness of politicians and citizens to accept electoral defeat is thus crucial for democratic stability.

The violent protests that followed the 2020 US presidential election, based on false claims by the sitting President Trump that the electoral process was fraudulent and that his victory had been 'stolen', are a powerful reminder of this fragile contract. In both 2016 and 2020, Donald Trump encouraged a dual set of expectations among his supporters: he would easily secure victory, and his opponents would resort to unprecedented levels of dirty tricks to stop him (Mongrain, 2023). As

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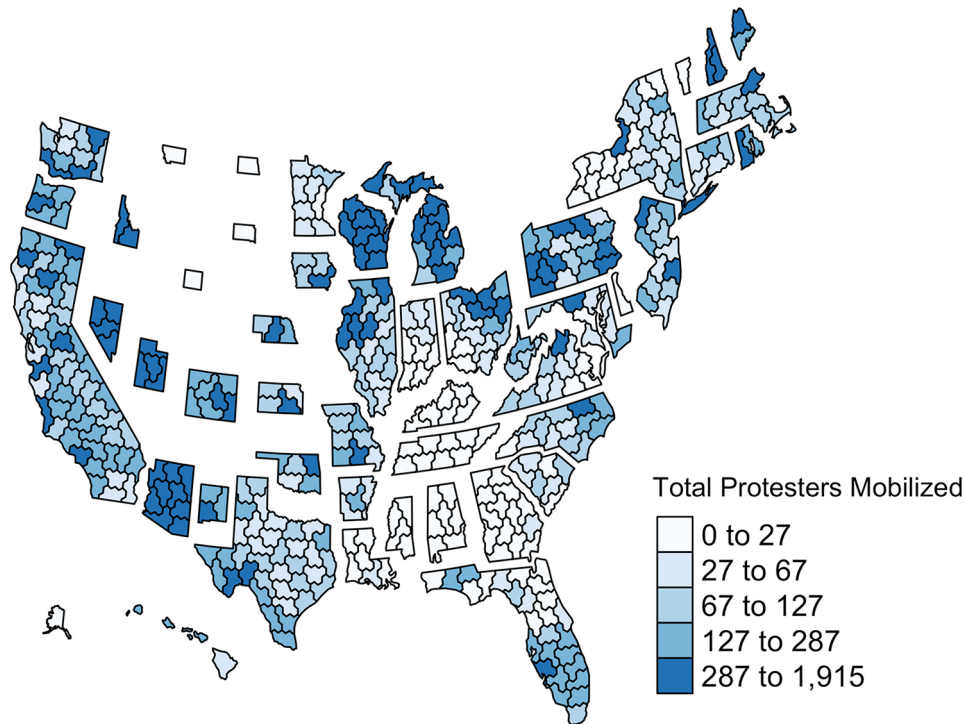


Figure 1. Spatial distribution of pro-Trump protest mobilization in the United States.

Figure shows congressional districts with the number of protesters mobilized in support of Trump that originate in those districts in the study period of 3 November – 22 December 2020.

Eggers et al. (2021: 6) note, '[t]he Trump campaign delivered a blueprint for losing candidates to undermine support for the winner or even steal the election'.

Trump is not the first to cast doubt on the integrity of free and fair elections in democracies. In 2006, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a presidential candidate in Mexico, claimed that election theft had deprived him of victory despite a lack of evidence to support his claims (Idrobo et al., 2022). In Ecuador in 2017 and Brazil in 2014, opposition candidates who lost the presidential election questioned the legitimacy of the election results, which were widely considered credible (Richter, 2014; Stoessel, 2017). This dynamic can have damaging consequences. In Mexico, it spurred months of protests, with millions of people demanding a recount (Tuckman, 2006). In Ecuador, it so thoroughly undermined perceptions of electoral integrity that, in the first round of the subsequent election, the third-place candidate denounced a 'satanic pact' behind fraud (Nodal, 2021).

Yet, not all 'sore loser' narratives are equally successful in rallying the public. Brazil's 2014 presidential election saw no major protests despite fraud claims by opposition candidate Aécio Neves (Peixoto, 2021). Even within countries, responses to electoral denial can vary. Although Donald Trump's narrative of a stolen election

shaped the broader national context and was a central driver of post-election mobilization (Klaus and Turnbull, 2025: 20), his message did not resonate equally across communities. My original data (see Figure 1) shows substantial spatial variation in protest intensity. These patterns suggest that support for Trump alone cannot explain the differences in how strongly regions responded to his claims. For example, both Utah and Louisiana supported Trump with 58% of the vote (CNN, 2020). Still, they experienced very different levels of protest activity, suggesting that additional factors may shape how much communities mobilize in response to the same national message.

What explains the variation in protest intensity following Trump's fraud claims, independent of electoral support? I argue that local elite's endorsement of election denial plays a crucial role in amplifying and translating national claims of electoral fraud. Allegations of fraud can be abstract and lack credibility, especially among moderate or undecided citizens. But when echoed by trusted local elites, figures that are embedded in communities and capable of translating national rhetoric into locally resonating frames, such claims gain traction. I do not suggest that local elites are the sole drivers of protest. Instead, their endorsement intensifies mobilization in

their communities, particularly in contexts that are already primed for dissent. Local elites can make abstract fraud narratives actionable by connecting them to local grievances, signaling their legitimacy, and activating existing social networks. In doing so, local elites act as critical intermediaries between nationwide consistent claims and local mobilization, helping to explain why some regions exhibit higher levels of mobilization in response to the same national narrative.

I test my argument by presenting evidence from the US 2020 presidential election. This is a particularly interesting case because the losing candidate disseminated a strong, top-down message of election denial on a national scale, while protest mobilization in support of these claims varied substantially across the country. To analyze this variation, I employ an event-study design with a staggered treatment. This allows me to investigate the effect of local elite endorsement of election denial on pro-Trump protest mobilization at the congressional district-day level between 3 November and 22 December 2020. I created a novel dataset tracking when members of the US House of Representatives publicly supported Trump's fraud claims and measure protest mobilization via anonymized cellphone data. The results show that representatives who endorsed Trump's claims had a statistically significant and substantively meaningful effect on protest activity within their districts. Election denial by a representative increased protest mobilization in their district by more than 11 protesters per day, on average ($p < 0.05$). This effect is stronger in communities with higher baseline support for Trump and in areas where the election was particularly contested.

My findings contribute to the literature on the causes of post-election contention. Earlier studies focused primarily on actual electoral irregularities and their impact (e.g., Howard and Roessler, 2006; Hyde, 2011; Norris, 2014). More recent research, however, has begun to examine cases where elections are widely recognized as free and fair, but losing candidates nonetheless reject the results (Berlinski et al., 2023; Mochtak et al., 2021). This shift has sparked a debate in the literature on protest mobilization: While some studies argue *actual* fraud serves as a focal point for protest (e.g., Kuntz and Thompson, 2009; Tucker, 2007), other work suggests that it is citizens' *perceptions* of fraud, often shaped by partisan loyalties, that play a more decisive role (e.g., Daxecker et al., 2019; Wellman et al., 2018). This article contributes to this debate by identifying local elite endorsement as a mechanism that helps explain why perceptions, rather than objective evidence of fraud,

may be more influential in driving post-election protests. The study is the first to test the impact of fraud allegations on actual, costly protest behavior (Tappin, 2023). While the study does not explicitly look at violent protest behavior, it still adds to our larger understanding of the dynamics of political violence in democracies and the role elites play in mobilizing the electorate. Protest mobilization serves as a crucial first step that can later escalate into violence. My findings contribute to research on the impact of disinformation in democracies, highlighting the risks and potential damages that false allegations pose to political stability and the resilience of democratic institutions.

Election denial and protest mobilization

While the quality of elections has been a scholarly focus for many years, systematic attention to perceptions of electoral integrity, including its causes and consequences, has only emerged recently (Mochtak et al., 2021). Research shows that perceptions of an election's fairness influence levels of trust in the electoral process (Bowler et al., 2023), support for democracy (Clayton et al., 2021), and voter turnout (Fraga et al., 2024; Green et al., 2022; Schnaudt, 2023). Much of this work centers on the so-called winner-loser gap – the idea that supporters of a losing party or candidate are more likely to become distrustful of the electoral process (Anderson et al., 2005; Beaulieu, 2014; Mochtak et al., 2021).

Research linking electoral distrust to protest has primarily focused on actual irregularities, especially in less established democracies and developing countries (e.g., Hyde, 2011; Norris, 2014). These studies show that flawed elections often trigger anti-regime protests and political violence (Daxecker, 2012; Howard and Roessler, 2006; Hyde and Marinov, 2012; Tucker, 2007). For instance, Donno et al. (2022) find that flawed presidential elections increased the risk of conflict in non-OECD countries between 1950 and 2012, particularly in states with a history of civil conflict.

However, less attention has been paid to cases where elections are widely recognized as free and fair, yet losing candidates deny the outcome (Berlinski et al., 2023). Emerging work addresses this gap, showing that election denial can have detrimental consequences for perceptions of electoral integrity (Mochtak et al., 2021). For example, in Latin America, losing candidates' denial of election outcomes reduced trust in the electoral process among their supporters, amplifying partisan divides (Hernández-Huerta and Cantú, 2022). In the US context, survey experiments show that exposure to fraud

claims weakens trust in electoral integrity (Berlinski et al., 2023; Clayton et al., 2021; Justwan and Williamson, 2022) and support for democracy (Bowler et al., 2023; Justwan and Williamson, 2022). Yet, these studies largely focus on attitudinal change, not participation in collective action.

It remains unclear why fraud claims spark more protest mobilization in some areas than in others. Some studies emphasize *actual* fraud as the catalyst for protest (Kuntz and Thompson, 2009; Tucker, 2007), others highlight *perceptions* of fraud, shaped by partisanship, as the more decisive factor (Daxecker et al., 2019; Wellman et al., 2018). For example, Daxecker et al. (2019) use georeferenced data from Nigeria's 2007 elections to demonstrate that individuals' judgments about fraud, not their proximity to verified irregularities, predict protest participation.

This article contributes to the debate by identifying a key mechanism that helps explain why perceptions of fraud, especially those shaped by partisanship, can be more powerful in driving protest than evidence of actual fraud: the endorsement of these claims by local elites. Local politicians and party figures, due to their trusted positions and strong community connections, help frame isolated or unverified complaints as evidence of a stolen election. By sharing 'insider' stories and pointing to district-level irregularities, they transform vague national narratives into real concerns felt at the community level. They amplify perceptions of fraud, increasing their mobilization potential for protest within their constituencies.

The role of local elite endorsement of election denial

When national leaders reject the results of elections, they fuel political and social grievances within society (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010; Donno et al., 2022; Salehyan and Linebarger, 2015) and contribute to the fragmentation and polarization of society into antagonistic factions (Jacobson, 2021; Piazza, 2020). Aligned with the positions of 'sore leaders' contesting the outcome (Weingast, 1997), supporters of the defeated faction become incensed, fostering resentments against political adversaries, opposing social groups, and the political system along with its institutions (Piazza, 2020).

Motivated by grievances over what they see as their leader's stolen victory, supporters of the defeated faction often turn to protest as a way to make their voices heard. However, individual preferences for political or social

change are insufficient to account for protest participation, as collective-action problems may inhibit mobilization even when grievances are widely shared (Dahlum and Wig, 2021). Consistent with this, previous studies examining the effect of national leaders' election denial on individuals' willingness to protest have found mixed results (Clayton et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2024). I offer a mechanism that helps to explain the variation in the *intensity* of protest mobilization following sore losers' election denial. I argue that local elite endorsement of national election denial strengthens mobilization by helping communities overcome collective action problems and by amplifying grievances that may otherwise remain latent. I do not suggest that local elites are the primary source of protest, meaning that protests can occur in districts without local election deniers. Rather, I argue that their support intensifies existing momentum, leading to higher levels of mobilization in their communities compared to those in which local elites do not amplify these grievances.

In the context of election denial, I argue that the endorsement of national fraud narratives by local elites can help reduce collective action problems. By endorsing national narratives of election denial – whether through online platforms, social networks, or community town halls – local elites provide spaces where their constituents can connect with like-minded individuals in their communities. These interactions build social ties and reinforce community networks, making it easier for people to coordinate and mobilize (Jost et al., 2018). When local elites speak out publicly, they also play a key role in spreading information: sharing updates about upcoming protests, legal rulings, or other developments related to election denial narratives. By signaling to their constituents through public statements and actions that participation in protest and support for the losing candidate are expected and valued, elites increase the reputational costs of not participating in the protest. In doing so, they help address the motivation problem often associated with collective action (McAdam, 1986). Collective action often draws strength from shared identities (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Elite endorsements play a key role in shaping and reinforcing these identities by signaling alignment with the 'stolen election' narrative. When local elites publicly support election denial, they help circulate emotionally charged and motivational content. These include appeals to group identity and messages that build a sense of collective efficacy. These messages lower the barriers to protest participation (Jost et al., 2018).

Local elites should amplify protests within their communities not only by helping to reduce collective action problems but also by intensifying grievances that motivate protest participation. Claims of election fraud may lack credibility among undecided or moderate citizens, making it more challenging to garner broad-based support. Without concrete evidence to validate grievances, these claims risk being perceived as partisan tactics, appealing primarily to a core base of supporters while alienating others. Individuals who distrust the sources of fraud claims may dismiss these narratives entirely, thereby diminishing their mobilizing potential (Berlinski et al., 2023). The claims also lack validation from the international community, including election observers, whose condemnation has historically played a crucial role in sparking post-election contention (Morrison et al., 2025). Election denial may also be more vulnerable to pushback from media fact checking and public discourse, which can undermine its credibility and limit its capacity to sustain widespread mobilization (Cotter et al., 2020).

Building on research on party elite cues, I argue that local elites provide additional credibility and relevance to otherwise unfounded allegations, which intensifies grievances among their constituents. Since the 1960s, when political parties were first recognized as ‘opinion-forming agencies of great importance’ (Campbell, 1960: 128), research has consistently highlighted the substantial impact party elite cues have on citizens’ opinions and attitudes, generally with a unidirectional influence (e.g., Bullock, 2011; Matsubayashi, 2013; Slothuus and Bisgaard, 2021). Party identification plays a crucial role in how individuals relate to politics, often fostering a strong emotional connection between a person and their preferred party. To maintain consistency with their identity and exhibit loyalty to their partisan group, individuals tend to align with the policy positions advocated by their party (Campbell, 1960; Green et al., 2004; Huddy et al., 2015). If local elites’ elites propagate election denial claims, constituents who feel loyal to the party and their representatives will adopt such narratives because they have been advocated for by the elected officials they voted for. This is particularly true in the context of electoral campaigns when people are more attuned to political messages and exposed to the proposals of political elites. Carreras et al. (2025), for example, find that immigration attitudes become more polarized during election periods.

Beyond the inherent importance of partisanship, holding an elected office bestows credibility upon them, a factor instrumental in their influence. Elected officials

frequently possess, or are assumed to possess, access to specialized information not readily available to the general public (Lupton and Webb, 2022). Thus, when local elites reject election results and cast doubt on the newly elected government’s legitimacy, it sends a strong signal to their communities, activating and intensifying their grievances. Local elites also serve as a bridge between broad national claims and the lived experiences of constituents. They increase the salience of election denial by linking it to local grievances and alleged irregularities in their communities, making the claims feel more personal, credible, and actionable.

In summary, local elites’ endorsement of election denial should amplify protests within their communities by lowering barriers to collective action and by amplifying their grievances. Although I do not explicitly test these mechanisms, I argue that if these mechanisms are at play, protest mobilization will be more pronounced in regions in which local politicians support election losers’ election denial after free and fair elections in democracies.¹

Hypothesis 1: Protest mobilization is greater in areas where local elites endorse election denial, compared to areas where they remain neutral or oppose them.

I argue that local elites’ endorsement of national election denial narratives intensifies grievances and supports existing mobilization efforts. As a result, their effects should be especially pronounced in communities that are already more sympathetic to the national narrative. In such settings, where constituents are predisposed to distrust the election outcome or hold stronger partisan commitments, elite cues are more likely to activate existing frustrations and translate them into collective action. These communities are thus more ‘primed’ for dissent, making local elite endorsement a particularly potent mobilizing force.

Hypothesis 2: The endorsement of election denial by local elites will have a stronger positive effect on protest participation in communities with higher baseline support for the losing candidate or where the election denial narrative is more likely to resonate.

Empirical context: The 2020 US presidential election

I test my argument by presenting evidence from the 2020 US presidential election. Following Donald Trump’s defeat, he and his allies propagated sweeping

and unsubstantiated allegations of election theft, widely referred to as ‘election denial’. These claims encompassed familiar voter-fraud narratives, such as assertions of illegitimate ballots submitted by deceased, and more fanciful conspiracy theories, including the notion that voting machines were part of a plot involving the late Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez (Berlinski et al., 2023).

Trump’s election denial sparked hundreds of protests nationwide. One of the earlier events occurred on 7 November 2020, just four days after Election Day, at the Pennsylvania State Capitol in Harrisburg. More than a thousand pro-Trump supporters, wearing MAGA hats and dressed in red, white, and blue, gathered, chanting ‘Stop the steal!’ At that point, Joe Biden’s lead in the state had surpassed 30,000 votes, and news organizations had begun calling the race in his favor. Protesters included individuals with assault-style rifles and tattoos linked to extremist movements such as the Proud Boys and Three Percenters, groups that were also a prominent fixture at other pro-Trump protest events. The protest also featured local and regional politicians, including Republican congressman Scott Perry of Pennsylvania (Homans and Peterson, 2022). A similar scene unfolded on 12 December 2020, when thousands of Trump supporters gathered in Washington, DC, for a protest in support of the president’s election denial (see Images 10, 11 and 12 in the Online Appendix). By the end of the protest, tensions had escalated, resulting in clashes between rallygoers and counterprotesters. The violence that ensued left four people stabbed and 33 arrested (Slotkin et al., 2020).

The United States presents a particularly compelling case for studying the impact of election denial on protest mobilization in democracies. The scale of false claims, disseminated nationally by a prominent political figure, presents a unique opportunity to study how such allegations can shape costly and contentious political behavior. The substantial variation in protest mobilization across the country offers important insights into how local contexts shape the political consequences of election denial. In addition, election denial by elected officials in the United States has been well discussed and documented (e.g., States United Action, New York Times, FiveThirtyEight, Washington Post). I exploit these granular and rich sources of variation in election denial across the country to examine the impact of local elite endorsement on pro-Trump protest mobilization.

Since the 2016 GOP presidential primary, Donald Trump has made election denialism a central theme of his campaigns and broader Republican politics, encouraging other politicians to adopt the same

stance (Axelrod, 2022). Following the 2020 presidential election, 158 out of 215 Republican representatives in the House of Representatives – out of a total of 435 – either entirely denied the election or raised serious doubts about its legitimacy. While some lawmakers distanced themselves from these claims after the January 6 insurrection in 2021, election denialism remains a persistent feature of political discourse in the United States. As of 2024, 26 election deniers hold statewide office, and 172 out of 535 members of Congress are classified as election deniers (States United Action, 2024). Several of these elected officials have already stated their intention to continue advocating for significant changes to the voting process ahead of the 2026 midterm elections. In interviews, these officials claimed that they would address legitimate concerns about election integrity and propose what they described as appropriate reforms (Eisler et al., 2024).

The success of election denial as an explicit campaign strategy for politicians has been widely discussed, with some arguing that the US electorate largely rejected this movement at the polls, while others point to the significant number of election-denying candidates who have won their races (Malzahn and Hall, 2024). A recent analysis of 2022 primary and general election data for key statewide and federal offices – US Senate, US House, governor, secretary of state, and attorney general – compares the performance of candidates who publicly denied the 2020 election outcome with those who did not. Accounting for partisan differences across states and offices, the average vote share of election-denying Republicans in statewide races was approximately 3.2 percentage points lower than their co-partisans (Malzahn and Hall, 2024).

Methods and data

Local elite endorsement of election denial

To assess whether local elite endorsement affects pro-Trump protest mobilization, I compile an original dataset from various sources. My unit of analysis is the congressional district-day. Following the *Washington Post*, I define elected officials as *election deniers* if they questioned Biden’s victory in the 2020 presidential election, opposed the counting of Biden’s electoral college votes, expressed support for a partisan post-election ballot review, signed onto a lawsuit seeking to overturn the 2020 result, or attended or expressed support for the rally on the day of the January 6 attack on the US Capitol (Blanco et al., 2022). While other data sources

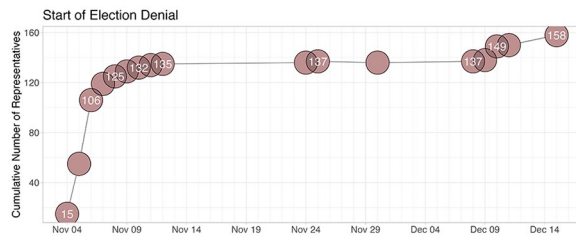


Figure 2. Representatives' election denial onset.

Figure shows the cumulative number of representatives becoming election deniers by date.

on election deniers treat election denial as a static concept, I capture the temporal variation in the stances of elected officials on election denial. I measure active election denial as a binary variable for each representative from 3 November 2020 until 22 December 2020,² coded as 1 starting on the date the representative first publicly denies the election outcome. Once a representative is classified as an election denier, they remain coded as 1 unless they publicly reverse their position.

Figure 2 captures the cumulative onset of election deniers across the study period. In the first week after the 2020 presidential election, we see a sharp increase in representatives starting to deny the election. After 13 November 2020, the number of election deniers remains relatively stagnant until we see a small increase following the release of the Supreme Court Amicus Brief on 10 December 2020.³ In total, there are 158 election deniers in my dataset. Figure 13 in the Online Appendix displays the spatial distribution of election deniers by congressional district. The map shows that there is a large concentration of election deniers in the South and Midwest, with a few states in the Northeast and West also having election deniers in Congress.

Classifying elected officials as deniers of the 2020 election involves a subjective element. Some candidates overtly and consistently rejected the election results in their public statements, making classification straightforward. However, many others expressed varying levels of skepticism or avoided directly addressing the issue. To minimize subjective judgments in borderline cases, I use a dataset from FiveThirtyEight (2021), which identifies elected officials who denied the 2020 US presidential election. This includes both those officials who fully denied the results and those who raised questions about their legitimacy. To capture the temporal variation in election denial – when officials began or ceased denying the election – I draw on multiple sources, including the States United Democracy Center, The Promise Institute of Human Rights at UCLA, the *New York Times*, and

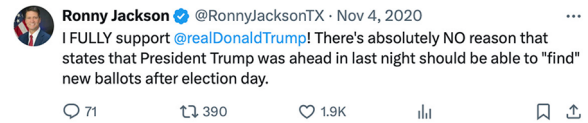


Figure 3. Example of election denial statement.

Image shows a statement made by a representative regarding the 2020 election which was coded as election denial onset.

the *Washington Post*. Additionally, I supplement this data with public government documents, such as the 6 November 2020, letter to US Attorney General Bill Barr, the 20 November 2020 letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and the 10 December 2020 Supreme Court Amicus Brief. I also analyze representatives' communication channels, including Facebook and Twitter (X) posts, email newsletters, and website statements. Figure 3 provides an example of an election denial endorsement as coded in the dataset. In a Twitter post on 4 November 2020, Representative Ronny Jackson of Texas claimed that states where Trump had been leading the night before were now 'planting' ballots to overturn his lead. By spreading unfounded fraud claims and questioning the legitimacy of the results, his statement represents a clear example of election denial by local elites.

Protesters mobilized

I measure the dependent variable, protest mobilization in support of Trump's stolen election narrative, in two steps. First, I identify pro-Trump protests that occurred following the 2020 US presidential election. Second, I trace the mobility patterns of individuals who attended these protests to determine their places of origin.

To capture pro-Trump protests, I rely on data from the Crowd Counting Consortium, which collects and codes protest events from various sources, including news reports, social media, and organizational websites. These events include fine-grained latitude and longitude coordinates, as well as temporal information, allowing me to match protest events to congressional districts by day.⁴ To identify pro-Trump protests, I adopt and extend Caren (2023)'s issue coding of right-wing protests in the United States. This includes the larger issue categories: (1) Abortion, (2) 2nd Amendment, (3) COVID-19 Restrictions, (4) Police/Racism, (5) MAGA/Fraud/J6, (6) LGBT, and (7) Other. I exclude all events that do not pertain to the myth of the 2020 stolen presidential election. This leaves me with 455 events in two larger issue categories of pro-Trump protests: (1) pro-Trump and MAGA/For Freedom protests after the 2020

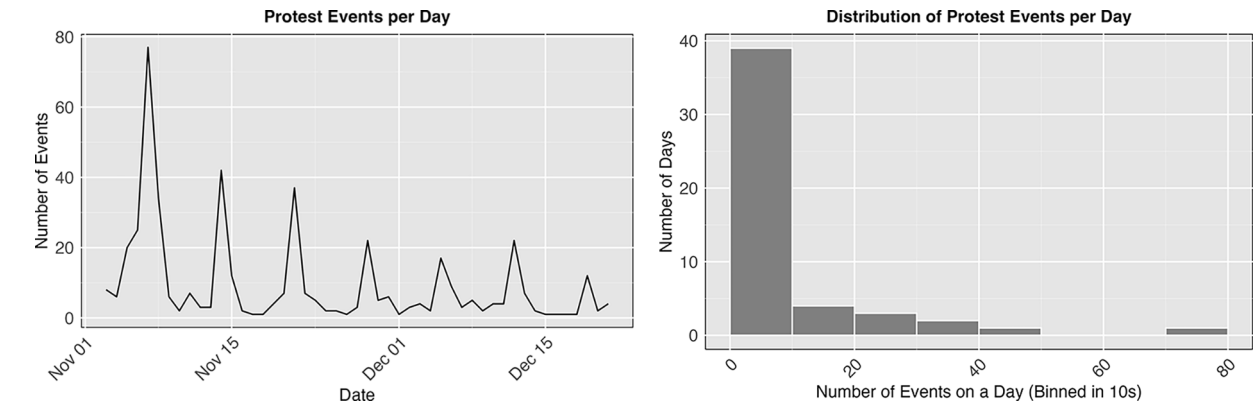


Figure 4. Descriptives on protest events variable. The figure shows the distribution of protest events over time as well as the frequency of the number of protest events.

Table 1. Protest events by Trump 2020 vote.

<i>Trump 2020 vote</i>	<i>Number of protests</i>
No	285
Yes	147

Table 2. Protest events by election denier.

<i>Election denier</i>	<i>Number of protests</i>
No	348
Yes	84

election (MAGA/Trump), and (2) protests against alleged election fraud of the 2020 election (Election Fraud).⁵

Figure 4 displays the distribution of protest events over time and their frequency across the study period. Protest activity declines sharply after the second week following the November 3 US presidential election. Tables 1 and 2 report the number of pro-Trump protests per congressional district, categorized by 2020 Trump vote share and the presence of an election denier, respectively. At first glance, these descriptive patterns suggest no positive relationship between election denial by elected officials and the number of protests: although all election deniers are Republicans, most protests occur in Democrat-leaning districts. Moreover, most protests do not take place in districts with an election denier in office.

To identify individuals who attended these protests and to determine their places of origin, I construct a unique dataset based on the Multiscale Dynamic Human Mobility Flow Dataset in the United States during the

COVID-19 pandemic (Kang et al., 2020). This dataset relies on anonymized mobile phone data provided by SafeGraph, which aggregates origin-to-destination (O-D) visitor flows at the census tract level.⁶ Using geo-coordinates from the protest dataset, I match protest sites to census tracts and trace protester origins to their home tracts, which I then aggregate to the congressional district level. This approach captures both within-district and cross-district protest mobilization. To account for regular commuting flows, I subtract the number of O-D flows from the previous week from those observed on the protest day.

While SafeGraph data offer unique advantages for tracing protester origins, they are subject to sampling bias. Li et al. (2024) find underrepresentation of low-income and low-education populations in SafeGraph data due to multiple layers of sampling. To mitigate this, I control for district-level education and income in the analysis. Despite these limitations, past research has validated SafeGraph’s usefulness in estimating protest participation, showing strong correlations with protest size estimates from news and social media sources (Sobolev et al., 2020). SafeGraph data have also been used in studies on the effects of COVID-related policies and mass gatherings (Abouk and Heydari, 2021; Andersen et al., 2020; Dave et al., 2021: 2; Friedson et al., 2021).

Tables 3 and 4 show the number of protesters mobilized per congressional district, broken down by (1) whether the district leaned Republican or Democrat in the 2020 presidential election, and (2) whether the district was represented by an election denier. Descriptive patterns suggest no clear link between either factor and mobilization levels. Figure 1 shows the spatial distribution of protesters across districts, with notably high mobilization in Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and Wisconsin.

Table 3. Protesters mobilized by Trump vote.

<i>Trump 2020 vote</i>	<i>Protesters mobilized</i>
No	46,682
Yes	35,448

Table 4. Protesters mobilized by election denial.

<i>Election denier</i>	<i>Protesters mobilized</i>
No	61,858
Yes	20,272

Controls

To account for factors that may influence levels of protest mobilization, I include several control variables. First, I control for Trump's potential mobilizing effect using daily data on the number of his election denial or disinformation tweets (Sanderson et al., 2021). I also include the daily national count of representatives denying the 2020 election, and control for the seasonality of protest by including binary indicators for whether an event occurred on a Friday, Saturday, or Sunday. At the congressional district level, I draw on the 5-year American Community Survey (US Census Bureau, 2020) to include controls for total population, percentage with a high school diploma, median household income, and unemployment rate. I further control for Trump's 2020 vote share, whether the Republican candidate won the district, and the Republican candidate's vote share (MIT Election Data and Science Lab, 2017). I also include the CityLab Congressional Density Index, which classifies districts into six neighborhood density types: (1) Pure Rural, (2) Rural-Suburban, (3) Sparse Suburban, (4) Dense Suburban, (5) Urban-Suburban, and (6) Pure Urban (CityLab, 2018). Finally, I control for the number of days since the 2020 election. The final sample consists of 21,750 congressional district-day observations, covering 435 districts over 50 days.

Estimation strategy

My main estimation strategy uses an event-study design with a staggered treatment to analyze the effect of party elites' election denial on collective action against the government. In my design, a congressional district is considered treated for all days after the first instance in which a representative has become an election denier. Once I flexibly control for differential trends in outcomes based

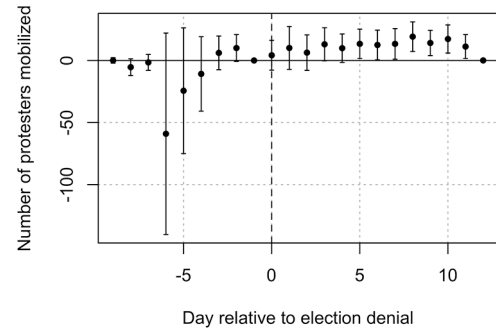
**Figure 5.** Event study (14 days): Election denial and protest mobilization.

Figure shows coefficients from a congressional district-level event-study regression of protest events on indicators for leads and lags of the treatment (an indicator equaling 1 for all days after a representative has become an election denier). Models include congressional district and date fixed effects.

on congressional districts' fixed characteristics, date and congressional districts' fixed effects and the aforementioned control variables, my identification assumption is that given parallel trends, changes in the number of collective action from before to after a representative becoming an election denier, relative to control congressional districts, has a causal interpretation.

Results and discussion

I argued that local elite endorsement of election denial plays a crucial role in shaping subnational variation in protest mobilization following election losers' election denial after free and fair elections in democracies. Figure 5 shows the study's main results. I find that representatives endorsing Trump's election denial claims significantly increase protest mobilization within their districts, confirming the first hypothesis that such endorsement boosts local protest activity. These estimates are based on models that included congressional district and day fixed effects as well as a large number of controls as noted above. To mitigate concerns about reverse causality and spillover effects, I restrict the analysis to a narrow 14-day window following the 3 November 2020 election. While this time frame cannot eliminate all concerns, it reduces the likelihood that representatives' election denial was a reaction to protest mobilization. Empirical research consistently finds that party elite cues shape public opinion and behavior more often than the reverse (e.g., Bullock, 2011; Matsubayashi, 2013; Slothuus and Bisgaard, 2021).⁷

The event-study regression coefficients for the 14-day period support the parallel trends assumption: none of the pre-treatment coefficients significantly differ from zero at the 5% level. In contrast, many post-treatment coefficients are positive and statistically significant (Figure 5). These findings hold across the full time period of the study and a narrower 7-day window, with pre-treatment coefficients consistently near zero and rarely significant (see Online Appendix A.4.1 and A.4.2). The results indicate that local elite endorsement of election denial does not trigger an immediate response, but takes 3–4 days to have an effect on protest mobilization. This delay makes sense, as it may take a few days for citizens to plan their participation in a protest. In addition, since protests typically occur on weekends, the timing of a representative's adoption of election denial may affect when protests materialize. As shown in Table 6 in the Online Appendix, a representative's support of Trump's election denial increased protest mobilization by an average of 11 protesters ($p < 0.05$; 14 days) per day.

Electoral context and the effects of election denial endorsement

I argue that local elites' endorsement of election denial narratives intensifies grievances and amplifies existing mobilization efforts, building on the momentum already present in communities. If this holds, the effect of local elites on protest mobilization should be particularly strong in areas where constituents are more likely to distrust election outcomes or hold strong pro-Trump views. To test this assumption, I divide the dataset into subgroups based on political context during the 2020 election. Specifically, I examine both Trump's 2020 vote share and whether states were widely considered contested during the election.

First, I categorize areas based on Trump's 2020 vote share. The subsets included: (1) regions where Trump received a vote share between 47% and 53%, representing close elections; (2) areas with a vote share below 47%, where opposition to Trump was dominant; and (3) areas with a vote share above 53%, reflecting strong pro-Trump districts.⁸ In defining contested states, I adopt CNN's prediction of battleground states ahead of the 2020 US presidential election.⁹ For each subgroup, I estimate the event-study model using a 14-day window following the election to reduce concerns about reverse causality or geographic spillover.

The event-study coefficients indicate that in areas with high Trump support (vote share $>53\%$), the endorsement of election denial by local elites had a statistically significant and substantively meaningful

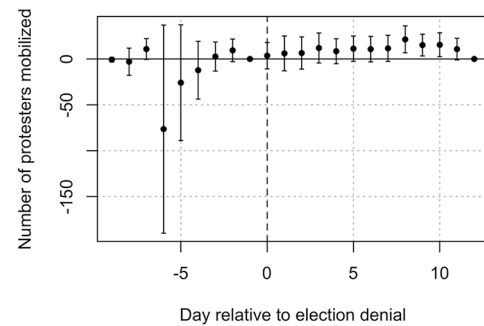


Figure 6. Event study (14 days; majority Trump): Election denial and protest mobilization.

Figure shows coefficients from a congressional district-level event-study regression of protest events on indicators for leads and lags of the treatment (an indicator equaling 1 for all days after a representative has become an election denier). Models include congressional district and date fixed effects.

impact on protest mobilization. A clear increase in protest activity emerges 8–10 days after the endorsement (see Figure 6), a delay that plausibly reflects the time required to organize collective action in response to the endorsement. In contrast, districts with close election results or lower Trump support do not exhibit significant effects (see Online Appendix A.7).¹⁰ These findings are consistent with the expectation that in communities more aligned with Democratic or moderate Republican preferences, elite endorsements of Trump's stolen election narrative are less likely to translate into increased protest mobilization. The results also show that parallel trends hold: none of the pre-treatment coefficients significantly deviate from zero at the 5% level.

When examining contested versus non-contested states, the results of the event-study regressions show that, in both the sample that includes only contested states and that excludes contested states, we observe some positive and statistically significant post-treatment coefficients. For contested states, local elite endorsement of false fraud claims prompts a behavioral response in days 8–10 following the treatment (see Figure 7). In contrast, for non-contested states, we can only see a positive effect of local elite endorsement on protest mobilization on day 5 after a representative becomes an election denier (see Figure 8). The assumption of parallel trends holds, as the pre-treatment coefficients are clustered around zero and are seldom statistically significant, indicating that there are no systematic differences in trends before the intervention. The mobilization effect of local elite endorsement of election denial claims appears to be more pronounced in contested states.

Overall, the event-study analyses of Trump's vote share and contested states support my second

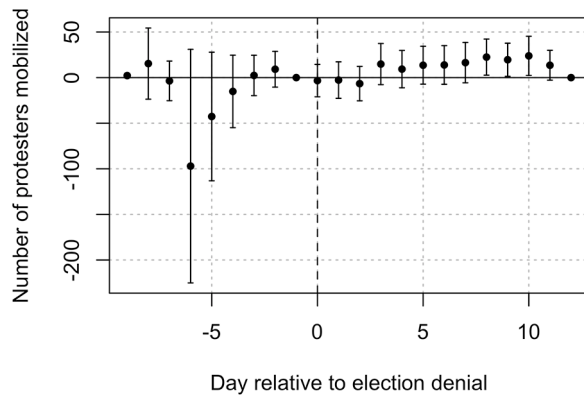


Figure 7. Event study (14 days; contested states): Election denial and protest mobilization.

Figure shows coefficients from a congressional district-level event-study regression of protest events on indicators for leads and lags of the treatment (an indicator equaling 1 for all days after a representative has become an election denier). Models include congressional district and date fixed effects.

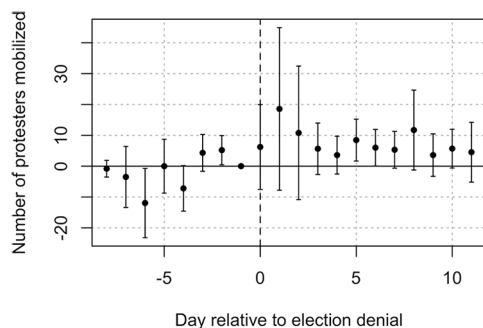


Figure 8. Event study (14 days; non-contested states): Election denial and protest mobilization.

Figure shows coefficients from a congressional district-level event-study regression of protest events on indicators for leads and lags of the treatment (an indicator equaling 1 for all days after a representative has become an election denier). Models include congressional district and date fixed effects.

hypothesis: local elites' endorsement of Trump's election denial narrative has a more substantial mobilizing effect in communities already primed for dissent, particularly those with high levels of Trump support. However, the added mobilizing effect of such endorsements is less distinct when comparing contested states to non-contested ones. At the same time, this suggests that protest mobilization is not solely driven by the electoral dynamics specific to contested states.

Robustness checks

I carry out several robustness checks. First, I perform tests for Granger causality in bivariate series to address

concerns of reverse causality. My results indicate that the lagged number of election deniers has a highly significant effect, suggesting that the number of election deniers is a strong predictor of future protest events. In contrast, the null hypothesis is not rejected for the reverse relationship, leading to the conclusion that the number of election deniers Granger causes the number of protest events (see Online Appendix A.3).

Second, I employ matching for causal inference on time-series cross-sectional data, utilizing Covariate Balancing Propensity Scores (CBPS) to improve pre-treatment covariate balance and ensure a more accurate estimation of treatment effects. I restrict the data to the first 14 days to balance having sufficiently large subsets for meaningful analysis while also mitigating concerns about reverse causality and potential spillover effects. Overall, my findings remain substantively robust, showing small positive effects of election denial on protest mobilization in days 7–9 after the treatment occurs (see Online Appendix A.8). Third, I recode the treatment variable by transforming the local elite endorsement of election denial into a binary indicator without time variation. This new variable reflects whether elites supported the losing candidate's claims, without considering the timing of the election denial. If a representative denied the election at any point in the dataset, their congressional district is classified as treated for the entire duration of the study period. The results of the fixed-effects regression model indicate that local elite endorsement, without considering its timing, does not affect the number of protesters mobilized in support of Trump (see Online Appendix A.10). These results alleviate concerns that certain districts may have been predisposed to experiencing protests, regardless of when local elites endorsed election losers' unfounded fraud allegations. I also conduct an event-study analysis using protest events as the dependent variable. My findings show that local elites' endorsement of election denial does not significantly impact protest numbers within their constituency. I interpret this lack of effect as reflecting the geography of protests, where people often travel to larger cities for demonstrations. I believe these results do not undermine my broader findings but highlight the complexities of protest mobilization and its subnational dynamics.

Conclusion

I investigated the variation in the *intensity* of protest mobilization following election losers' narratives of stolen victories after free and fair elections in democracies.

I focused on the context of the 2020 US presidential election, where the losing candidate propagated a strong, top-down narrative of election denial on a national scale, treating all citizens with these national-level cues. Despite this widespread messaging, the degree of protest mobilization in support of these claims varied significantly across the country.

Much of the existing research on post-election contention focuses on actual irregularities and their effects on protest behavior. Less attention has been paid to situations in which elections are widely deemed free and fair, but losing candidates nevertheless reject the results. While earlier studies have shown that actual fraud can serve as focal points for mobilization, more recent work suggests that perceptions of fraud and partisanship are more important in driving protest participation. This article contributes to the debate by offering a mechanism that helps explain why perceived fraud and partisanship provoke stronger protest responses than actual fraud. I argue that local elite endorsements of national election denial narratives amplify existing grievances and activate partisan commitments.

My findings suggest that despite strong national cues, individual politicians at the regional or local level can still have a significant effect on how strongly citizens respond to disinformation. Representatives supporting Trump's election denial had a statistically significant and meaningful positive effect on the number of protesters mobilized within their districts. A representative becoming an election denier increased mobilization of pro-Trump protesters within their district on average by more than 11 protesters per day ($p < 0.05$). Further, local elites' endorsement of Trump's election denial narrative had a more substantial mobilizing effect in communities already primed for dissent, particularly those with high Trump support.

Election denial can have damaging long-term effects on democratic stability, including increased anti-government protest activity and declining public trust in electoral integrity. It is thus important to know which mechanisms, including and beyond local elite endorsements of fraud claims, might amplify its negative consequences in specific contexts. At the same time, future research should consider the dynamics of elite opposition to disinformation. Just as local elites can amplify the effects of disinformation, the actions of elites who reject fraudulent narratives could play a crucial role in reducing protest mobilization and counteracting the harmful effects of disinformation within their communities.

My study contributes to ongoing debates surrounding the causes and implications of the US Capitol insurrection (Bartels and Carnes, 2023; Eady et al., 2023; Krakowski and Morales, 2025; Malzahn and Hall, 2024). While this study does not directly trace the pathway from earlier mobilizations to the events of 6 January 2020, it is not far-fetched to suggest that the widespread endorsement of Trump's election denial among local elites, the rhetoric connected to this, and the protest activity unfolding in the months prior played a meaningful role. Several smaller protests in the lead-up to 6 January had already turned violent, and many of the groups involved in organizing those earlier events were also present in Washington, DC, on that day (Slotkin et al., 2020). This pattern suggests a potential escalation dynamic, in which repeated elite endorsement of disinformation, combined with the growing organizational capacity of protest groups, contributed to the scale and intensity of the Capitol insurrection. This connection warrants further investigation and is best considered in the broader context of how disinformation and elite cues can fuel longer-term mobilization trajectories.

In contrast to some studies that examine the aftermath of the Capitol insurrection (Krakowski and Morales, 2025; Malzahn and Hall, 2024), my study does not find any punitive outcomes for elites who engage in election denial. Instead, their endorsement of such narratives is validated by their constituents and contributes to increased protest mobilization within their constituencies. The diverging findings on public responses after 6 January 2021 might suggest that this constituent support has its limits; while voters may initially follow and are motivated by politicians who engage in election denial, complicity in such escalatory events as the Capitol insurrection might eventually reduce public support for these politicians. We need more research to understand when election denial benefits politicians and when it backfires, and how the severity and visibility of anti-democratic actions influence the public's willingness to tolerate them.

Replication data

The dataset, codebook, and R-code for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the Online Appendix, are available at <https://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets/>. All analyses were conducted using R.

Acknowledgements

I thank Sabine C Carey, Amelie Freiberg, Aline Greiner-Filsinger, Carlos Gueiros, June Jung, Kathleen

Klaus, Krzysztof Krakowski, Valentin Lang, and Marc Ratkovic, as well as the participants of the 2024 Workshop on Political Violence in Democracies at the University of Amsterdam for helpful feedback and guidance. I also thank the three anonymous reviewers and the guest editors-Ursula Daxecker, Neeraj Pressad, and Andrea Ruggeri-for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by the Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences at the University of Mannheim, Germany.

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Notes

1. Some local politicians may influence voters beyond their constituencies, but this does not undermine or contradict the local dynamics. Despite possible spillovers, I still expect elite endorsements to have a localized impact on protest intensity, helping explain variation in mobilization around election denial.
2. I exclude the January 6 events from the analysis, as most election denial statements by representatives occurred before December 16, after which developments tapered off due to the holiday season. This makes it difficult to isolate their mobilizing effect on the Capitol insurrection. Furthermore, the Capitol attack sought to violently disrupt the certification of Biden's victory and falls outside the scope of protest behavior considered here. It should be treated as a distinct phenomenon, meriting separate analysis.
3. A total of 126 representatives backed a lawsuit from Texas to the Supreme Court seeking to overturn the results of the election in the states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Georgia.
4. The Crowd Counting Consortium does not categorize events by their topical focus. Instead, it provides details about the event topic, including the title ('title' column), if applicable, and the political grievances or demands ('claims' and 'issues' columns).
5. See Online Appendix A.2.3 for a verification of the protest data by comparing it with ACLED data.
6. SafeGraph data are collected via mobile apps with location permissions and used to compute daily origin-to-destination (O-D) flows at the census tract level. 'Origins' are defined as the 153×153m area where a user's phone most frequently pinged between 6:00 pm and 7:00 am during a six-week baseline period; 'destinations' are the locations they visited Dave et al. (see 2022).
7. In addition, Table 2 indicates that most pro-Trump protests occurred outside the districts of election-denying representatives. While this does not rule out the possibility that constituents of election deniers participated in protests elsewhere, it suggests that representatives were unlikely to observe direct protest activity in their districts. This makes it less plausible that election denial was adopted in reaction to visible local mobilization.
8. These thresholds follow prior work such as Malzahn and Hall (2024).
9. These states include Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin (CNN, 2020).
10. While the Average Treatment Effect on the Treated (ATT) is positive in close elections, it does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. This could be due with the small sample size of 350 observations.

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