

Christopher M. Federico\*, Christina Farhart, Joseph Vitriol and Agnieszka Golec de Zavala

## Collective Narcissism and Perceptions of the (Il)legitimacy of the 2020 US Election

<https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2022-2046>

**Abstract:** Recent work suggests that collective narcissism—an exaggerated, unrealistic belief in an in-group’s greatness that demands constant external validation—is a reliable predictor of authoritarian-populist hostility toward democratic norms, processes, and outcomes. In the present study, we use a recent survey of American adults to examine the relationship between collective narcissism and perceptions that the 2020 election in the US was illegitimate. We find evidence that those high in national collective narcissism are more likely to endorse a number of beliefs about the illegitimacy of the 2020 US election, including greater perception of fraud, procedural unfairness, and inaccurate vote counting. Importantly, we find that this relationship is strongest among those whose identities were most threatened by a loss of power due to the 2020 presidential outcome, i.e., Republicans and conservative identifiers.

**Keywords:** election fairness, legitimacy, collective narcissism, conspiracy theories

A few months prior to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, then-President Donald Trump issued a warning to his supporters that “they’re trying to steal the election, and everybody knows that. Because the only way they’re going to win is by a rigged election” (Jacobsen and Sherman 2020). Similar discourse was common among Republican party leaders throughout the presidential campaign (e.g., Czachor 2020; Gardner, Tom, and Josh 2021; Rizzo 2020; Wines 2020). These allegations of a “rigged election” are certainly false (Baker 2020; Cassidy 2021; Nyhan 2014; Parks 2020). Yet such rhetoric functioned, perhaps deliberately, to cast as illegitimate any future electoral outcome that failed to secure Trump’s

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\***Corresponding author: Christopher M. Federico**, Departments of Political Science and Psychology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA, E-mail: federico@umn.edu  
**Christina Farhart**, Department of Political Science, Carleton College, Northfield, MN 55057, USA, E-mail: cfarhart@carleton.edu

**Joseph Vitriol**, Department of Political Science, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY 11794-4392, USA, E-mail: joseph.vitriol@stonybrook.edu

**Agnieszka Golec de Zavala**, Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths, University of London, London SE14 6NW, UK, E-mail: a.golec@gold.ac.uk

re-election (Keenan and Golec de Zavala 2021; Hasen 2020). Indeed, this speech was not the first time Trump deployed rhetoric that implied he alone is deserving of political power, that his electoral loss could only be possible with fraud committed by his opponents, or that “real” America is the province of his supporters (Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2021; Golec de Zavala, Lantos, and Keenan 2021; Viebeck 2020). Nor would it be his last.

Immediately after the results of the election were known, Trump and his political allies worked to delegitimize it (Benner 2021a). Efforts across the country sought to overturn or litigate the results in local jurisdictions, to characterize the vote count as fraudulent, to challenge the certification of Electoral College votes, or to undermine public confidence and instead advance conspiratorial explanations for the outcome of the election (Benner 2021b; Fuchs and Cameron 2021; Hakim and Fusset 2021; Keenan and Golec de Zavala 2021). These efforts culminated in a political rally in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021, where Trump declared, “We won in a landslide . . . This is the most corrupt election in the history, maybe of the world . . . if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore. Make no mistake, this election was stolen from you, from me and from the country” (Naylor 2021). Shortly thereafter, thousands of agitated Trump supporters mobbed the US Capitol, threatening violence against elected officials and attempting to interfere with the certification of the election results (Penaloza 2021).

As the events above demonstrate, perceptions of electoral unfairness invite political discontent. Unfortunately, doubt in the integrity of electoral processes and outcomes are now widespread among large swaths of the American public. For example, polling conducted since President Joe Biden was inaugurated indicates that large majorities of Republicans regard the election as illegitimate and many still believe Trump remains the “true” president (Block 2021; Brown 2021; Page and Elbeshbishi 2021). While a majority of Americans trust the fairness of US elections, this view is held by only a minority of Republicans in response to the 2020 election (Montanaro 2021). Perhaps because of the type of rhetoric and actions undertaken by Republican and conservative leaders and officials surrounding the 2020 presidential election (Clayton et al. 2020; Keenan and Golec de Zavala 2021; Hasen 2020; Webster 2021), Americans’ confidence in democratic norms, processes, and outcomes are now polarized along partisan and ideological lines (Bartels 2020; Kingzette et al. 2021).

Understanding the political and psychological factors that lead to perceptions of electoral unfairness and illegitimacy is of clear importance. In this paper, we examine how national collective narcissism—an exaggerated, unrealistic belief the nation’s greatness that demands constant external validation—relates to beliefs about the 2020 U.S. presidential election, including perceptions of fraud, procedural unfairness, and inaccurate vote counting.

# 1 Perceptions of Electoral Unfairness in the Era of Polarization

As the polling data reviewed above suggests, the polarized nature of the present political era increasingly extends to views of electoral integrity and legitimacy, reaching a fever pitch in the wake of the contentious 2020 presidential election. Consequently, core political predispositions like partisanship and ideology are among the most important predictors of whether citizens regard the 2020 election as tainted, with Republicans and conservative identifiers expressing greater suspicion (Filindra 2022; Levy 2021). The reasons for this expectation are numerous and well-documented. Though losing parties and factions in democracies often still perceive elections as more fair than unfair, they express greater doubt than winners (Anderson et al. 2005; Easton 1965; Levy 2021)—a pattern that is likely to be bolstered by processes of partisan motivated reasoning that encourage citizens to draw conclusions favorable to their political team (Cohen 2003; Huddy, Mason, and Aaroe 2015; Lodge and Taber 2013; see also Kahan 2013; Leeper and Slothuus 2014; Van Bavel and Pereira 2018). In the present context, this expectation is also strengthened by research on conspiratorial theories about election fraud, which connects belief in the latter (on the right, in this case) to political loss (e.g., Albertson and Guiler 2020; Berlinski et al. 2021; Edelson et al. 2017; Enders et al. 2021; Miller, Farhart, and Saunders 2018; Uscinski and Parent 2014).

Moreover, citizens with different partisan and ideological predispositions may take cues from partisan elites about the nature of political reality (Abramowitz 2010; Zaller 1992). To the extent that Republican elites—former President Donald Trump above all—are more likely than Democratic elites to suggest that the 2020 election was illegitimate and marred by unfairness, these perceptions are likely to diffuse to Republican and conservative identifiers in the mass public. This effect is likely to be further amplified by signals from partisan-aligned media about election fairness (Daniller 2016). Thus, citizens' basic partisan and ideological identities are likely to be central to evaluations of the fairness and legitimacy of the 2020 election, as the examples in our introduction suggest.

## 2 National Collective Narcissism and Political Attitudes

Beyond the role of the usual core political predispositions, what other factors are likely to relate to perceptions of the propriety of the 2020 election (and perhaps other elections)? We argue that citizens' beliefs about the status of the nation may

play a role. Recent psychological research suggests that there are multiple ways of feeling positive about one's national identity (Federico, Golec de Zavala, and Bu 2022). On one hand, national positivity often takes the form of a simple belief that the nation and one's attachment to the nation are worthy of pride, a belief that is variously referred to as *patriotism* (de Figueiredo and Elkins 2003; Huddy and Khatib 2007; Kosterman and Feshbach 1989) or *national ingroup satisfaction* (Golec de Zavala et al. 2020; Golec de Zavala and Lantos 2020). On the other hand, affinity for one's nation can take on darker forms. In particular, citizens can experience *national collective narcissism*, an exaggerated belief in the greatness of the national ingroup that requires external validation from others (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009; see also Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar, and Lantos 2019; Golec de Zavala and Lantos 2020). Though national collective narcissism typically correlates with national ingroup satisfaction, it has a number of distinct characteristics that differentiate it from the latter. Due to an exaggerated but vulnerable perception of the virtues of the national ingroup, individuals who are high in collective narcissism demand special recognition and respect for the national ingroup and react aggressively if they do not believe they are forthcoming (Golec de Zavala 2011, 2018).

Perceived slights to their idealized view of national ingroup lead collective narcissists to react with aggression toward outgroups in both observational and experimental studies (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009; Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, and Iskra-Golec 2013; Golec de Zavala et al. 2016; see also Cichocka and Cislak 2020). Individuals who are high in national collective narcissism are primed to see the world as full of hostile actors who seek to undermine the ingroup (Cichocka et al. 2016; Golec de Zavala and Cichocka 2012). This leads those who are high in national collective narcissism to express more intergroup prejudice and hostility than others (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009, 2019; Guerra et al. 2020). Importantly, this tendency toward intergroup hostility is relatively specific to national collective narcissism and is not merely a function of ingroup love or identification (Federico et al. 2022). Consistent with this reasoning, once collective narcissism is controlled for, national ingroup satisfaction is either unrelated or negatively related to aggressive or intolerant political attitudes and behavior (Golec de Zavala 2011; Golec de Zavala et al. 2016, 2020; see also Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar, and Lantos 2019). Thus, collective narcissism can be thought of as the entitled, exaggerated component of love for one's nation, whereas ingroup satisfaction (net of collective narcissism) can be understood as a more realistic and secure belief in the value of the nation.

Naturally, beliefs about the value of the national ingroup in a democratic society may have important consequences for how one evaluates the operation of democracy itself. Both democratic processes and outcomes are tied to national

identity (Anderson et al. 2005), and citizens who hold different beliefs about the nation and its place in the world may evaluate the same electoral events and outcomes in different ways. Given the exaggerated, defensive nature of collective narcissists' beliefs about the nation, we argue that they may be especially inclined to see threats to the integrity and legitimacy of national elections—especially when election outcomes violate their expectations and preferences, or otherwise undermine the perceived respect that the national ingroup is presumed to deserve (Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2021). We elaborate on these points below.

### 3 Collective Narcissism and Discontent with Democracy

Several features of collective narcissism may encourage doubt about election integrity in ways that other positive beliefs about the nation—such as patriotism or national ingroup satisfaction—may not. Importantly, national collective narcissism is associated with a tendency to define the national ingroup in narrow, exclusive terms (Keenan and Golec de Zavala 2021). People high in national collective narcissism see themselves as the “true” exemplars of the nation, in contrast to other ideological, cultural, racial or ethnic subgroups within the nation, who may be regarded as unworthy to represent the national ingroup (Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar, and Lantos 2019). Since collective narcissists believe they and those “like them” represent the nation “better” than others, they see minority or low status groups' claims to the same recognition within the national identity as a threat, contributing to their general sense that the worth of the nation is threatened—this time from within (Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2021; Keenan and Golec de Zavala 2021). Perhaps most concerning is that this belief that the national ingroup is insufficiently appreciated can even lead collective narcissists to abandon their loyalty to the nation.

In turn, this appropriation of national identity contributes to a number of attitudes that work against respect for democratic pluralism. For example, citizens who are high in national collective narcissism tend to be more supportive of authoritarian-populist leaders, movements, and political orientations whose appeal is built around Manichean opposition between a virtuous populace and “evil” elites (Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2021; Keenan and Golec de Zavala 2021). For example, in the United States, collective narcissists were more supportive of Donald Trump in the 2016 election (Federico and Golec de Zavala 2018), whose promise to “Make America Great Again” encapsulated themes shared by populists and those high in collective narcissism—i.e., a nostalgic conception of an idealistic

past, a perceived loss of status among the “deserving,” and a belief in national decline (Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2021). Echoing this, collective narcissism is associated with support for populist leaders and measures in nations as varied as Great Britain, Hungary, and Poland (Bocian, Cichočka, and Wojciszke 2021; Golec de Zavala, Agnieszka, and Simão 2017, 2021; Marchlewska et al. 2018). This pattern is consistent with another inclination of those high in collective narcissism: their tendency to be prejudiced against the ethnic, sexual and ideological minorities that populist leaders often choose as their scapegoats (Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2021; see also Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar, and Lantos 2019, 2021).

Other evidence more directly connects national collective narcissism with hostility toward the democratic process. In both American and Polish samples, Marchlewska and her colleagues (2022) found that citizens who were high in national collective narcissism were more likely to negatively evaluate democracy as a system of government and to instead prefer authoritarian alternatives (e.g. military rule). Extending these results, Keenan and Golec de Zavala (2021) found that Americans who were high in national collective narcissism were more willing to abandon the democratic process in the context of the 2020 election. In a pre-election study, they found that American collective narcissists were supportive of Donald Trump staying in office even if he had to violate the law. Similarly, in data collected after the election, they found that those high in collective narcissism were more supportive of the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol. Importantly, the relationship between national collective narcissism and these outcomes remained statistically and substantively significant even after controlling for partisanship, ideology, and other variables.

Though these results are suggestive, no research that we are aware of has examined the relationship between national collective narcissism and an outcome that is likely to contribute to the anti-democratic preferences the aforementioned studies focus on: perceptions of electoral unfairness and illegitimacy. As scholars of democracy have long noted, the consent of segments of the electorate may be withdrawn when electoral procedures and outcomes are believed to be unfair (Easton 1965; Lipset 1959; Nadeau and Blais 1993; Tyler 2006). With this in mind, we examine perceptions of electoral unfairness and illegitimacy in the aftermath of the 2020 election. Given that collective narcissists are prone to a variety of anti-democratic attitudes, we suspect that they will also express cynicism about the integrity of the electoral process—especially since that process resulted in the removal of a populist leader in the 2020 election. This expectation is bolstered by other research suggesting that national collective narcissism predicts conspiratorial beliefs similar to the belief that “they” were trying to “steal” the 2020 election from Donald Trump (e.g., Cichočka et al. 2016; Golec de Zavala and Federico 2018; Marchlewska et al. 2019, for a review see Golec de Zavala 2020).

Thus, all other things being equal, we expect that citizens who are high in national collective narcissism will be more likely to endorse beliefs suggesting that the 2020 election was tainted. However, we do not believe that this positive relationship between collective narcissism and perceptions of electoral illegitimacy will be equally strong across all segments of the electorate. As noted above, collective narcissists construe national identity narrowly and exclusively, and they are especially likely to react with hostility toward outcomes that are contrary to the prerogatives of “true” national exemplars like them and to exaggerate intergroup threats (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, and Iskra-Golec 2013). One such distressing outcome, as alluded to above, is the threat of, or actual removal of, authoritarian-populist leaders of the sort preferred by those high in collective narcissism. Compounding this, political losses are generally associated with greater conspiratorial ideation about politics (as noted above; see Uscinski and Parent 2014). Consequently, we expect that national collective narcissism will be most strongly associated with perceptions of electoral illegitimacy among citizens whose predispositions make Trump’s 2020 loss particularly threatening and offensive: Republican partisans and conservative identifiers.

## 4 Overview and Hypotheses

In the present study, we explore the relationship between national collective narcissism and perceptions of the (il)legitimacy of the 2020 election. Specifically, we examine three hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* Net of controls, individuals high in national collective narcissism should perceive the 2020 election to be more illegitimate.

*Hypothesis 2:* The positive relationship between national collective narcissism and perceptions of the 2020 election as illegitimate should be stronger among Republicans and Independents than among Democrats.

*Hypothesis 3:* The positive relationship between national collective narcissism and perceptions of the 2020 election as illegitimate should be stronger among those who identify as conservative than those who identify as liberal.

We examined these hypotheses using data from an original two-wave national survey of American adults collected in the fall of 2020, focusing primarily on data collected during the post-election wave of the study. To account for other positive beliefs about the national ingroup, we adopt the practice of other studies of collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar, and Lantos 2019) and control for national ingroup satisfaction. In contrast to national collective narcissism, we do not expect ingroup satisfaction to predict increased perceptions of electoral illegitimacy, since ingroup satisfaction does not imply the hostile sense of entitlement embodied in collective narcissism (Federico et al. 2022). We also

consider multiple measures of perceived electoral illegitimacy, including beliefs about the prevalence of fraudulent practices, general election unfairness, and inaccurate counting of votes.

## 5 Data and Methods

### 5.1 Data

The data for our analyses come from a two-wave panel study of American adults, over the age of 18, conducted through Forthright (<https://www.beforthright.com/>), an online research panel operated by the market research firm Bovitz, Inc. A nationally-representative sample was approximated using quota sampling based on recent U.S. Census data (considering age, gender, region, Hispanic background, race/ethnicity, and education). Wave 1 interviewed 1180 respondents between October 23 and November 1, 2020. Following the election, 784 of the Wave 1 respondents participated in Wave 2 between November 12 and 16, 2020. Most of the necessary measures were collected in Wave 2, so only respondents who participated in both waves were used. This resulted in a final sample of  $N = 784$  (49.2% male, 64.5% white,  $M_{\text{age}} = 46.61$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 16.53$ ).<sup>1</sup>

### 5.2 Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all variables were recoded to run from 0 to 1 for ease of interpretation. The summary statistics provided below are based on scales using the 0–1 recoding. Additional details can be found in the appendix.<sup>2</sup>

*Collective narcissism* was measured using a five-item version of the Collective Narcissism Scale in Wave 2 of the survey (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009, 2013). The items were: “If the United States had a major say in the world, the world would be a much better place,” “The United States deserves special treatment,” “It really makes me angry when others criticize the United States,” “Not many people seem to fully understand the importance of the United States,” and “I will never be satisfied until the United States gets the recognition it deserves.” Responses were provided using a six-point scale (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*). Scores were averaged to form a scale. Higher scores indicate greater collective narcissism ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ,  $M = 0.46$ ,  $SD = 0.26$ ).

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1 Sample sizes for specific analyses are smaller due to missing cases on some variables.

2 All data and code needed for replication can be found at: <https://osf.io/vfsm4/>.

To control for other forms of national ingroup positivity (Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar, and Lantos 2019), we measured *in-group satisfaction* using three patriotism items in Wave 2 (Udani and Kimball 2018). The items included: “When you see the American flag flying does it make you feel? Extremely good, very good, moderately good, not good at all?”; “How do you feel about this country? Do you hate it, dislike it, neither like nor dislike it, like it, or love it?”; and “How important is being an American to you personally? Extremely important, very important, somewhat important, a little important, not at all important?” Responses to all items were recoded so that higher scores indicated greater national ingroup satisfaction and were then averaged ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ,  $M = 0.71$ ,  $SD = 0.28$ ).

*Party identification* was measured using standard ANES-style branching items in Wave 2. Responses to these items were used to create a three-category party identification variable. Respondents who indicated that they were Democrats or Republicans on the initial item were coded as such. Respondents who initially indicated that they were independents but indicated that they leaned Democratic or Republican on a follow-up item were also coded as Democrats or Republicans (respectively), and independents who indicated no leaning were coded as independents in the final three-category variable. In the analyses, party identification was entered as two dummy variables, with Democrats as the reference category: one variable contrasted independents with Democrats and one variable contrasted Republicans with Democrats. *Ideology* was measured using a single item in Wave 2: “How would you describe your political outlook?” Responses were given on a seven-point scale ranging “very liberal” (1) to “very conservative (7). Responses were recoded to run from 0 to 1; higher scores indicate greater conservatism ( $M = 0.48$ ,  $SD = 0.30$ ).

As dependent variables, we created four different indices of the perceived illegitimacy of the 2020 election using items from Wave 2. *Perceived election fraud* was measured using 11 items asking whether different fraudulent practices characterized the election, prefaced with: “Do you believe the following practices occurred in the U.S. elections in November?” Examples of stimulus items included, “Ineligible voters were permitted to vote” and “Political parties or actors intentionally sabotaged mail-in voting.” Responses included “definitely not,” “probably not,” “possibly,” “probably,” “very probably,” and “definitely.” Responses were coded so that higher scores indicated greater perceived fraud and then averaged ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ,  $M = 0.41$ ,  $SD = 0.23$ ). *Perceived election unfairness* was measured using two items: “In some countries, people believe their elections are conducted fairly. In other countries, people believe that their elections are conducted unfairly. Thinking about the last presidential election on November 3rd, do you believe it is very fair, somewhat fair, neither fair nor unfair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair?” and “To what extent do you think the outcome of this

election, in which Joe Biden was elected president, is fair or unfair?” (very unfair, somewhat unfair, neither fair nor unfair, somewhat fair, very fair). Responses were coded so that high scores indicated greater unfairness and then averaged ( $r = 0.75$ ,  $M = 0.34$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ). *Perceived count inaccuracy* was measured using two items: “How accurately do you think the votes were counted for this past election?” (Not at all accurately, Not very accurately, moderately accurately, very accurately, completely accurately); and “How much do you trust that votes were counted accurately when people mail in their ballots for this past election?” (a great deal, a lot, a moderate amount, a little, not at all). Responses were coded so that high scores indicated greater perceived inaccuracy and then averaged ( $r = 0.84$ ,  $M = 0.40$ ,  $SD = 0.35$ ). Finally, a composite index of *perceived election illegitimacy* was generated by averaging these three measures ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ,  $M = 0.38$ ,  $SD = 0.29$ ).

Finally, five *demographic covariates* were considered. All were assessed in Wave 1: *age* (in years), a dummy variable indicating *male* gender (1 = yes, 0 = no), a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was *White* (1 = yes, 0 = no), *education* (five ordered categories, recoded to run from 0 to 1), and *income* (eleven ordered categories, recoded to run from 0 to 1).

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Preliminary Analyses

Correlations among the key study variables are summarized in Table 1. As expected, both national collective narcissism (CN;  $r$ s between 0.24 and 0.31) and national ingroup satisfaction (IS;  $r$ s between 0.32 and 0.36) had significant bivariate relationships with the four indices of perceived election illegitimacy. Moreover, the three indices of election illegitimacy were themselves positively correlated with one another ( $r$ s between 0.78 and 0.88;  $p$ s < 0.001) and with the

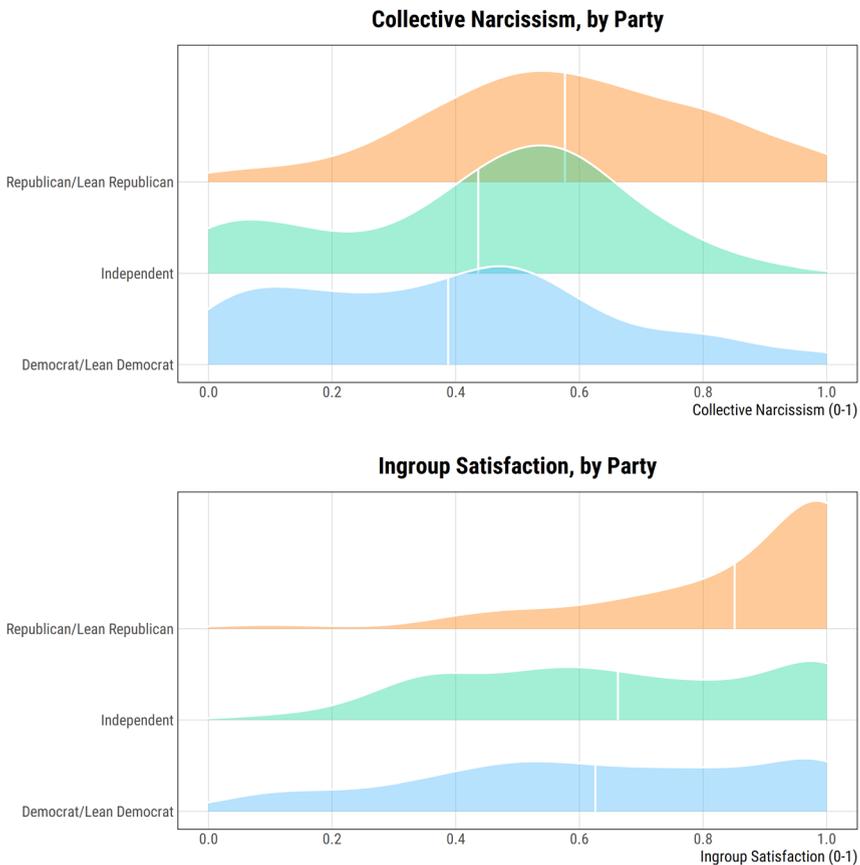
**Table 1:** Conditional effects of national CN within partisan groups, 2020.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. National ingroup satisfaction	1					
2. National collective narcissism	0.59	1				
3. Ideology	0.41	0.43	1			
4. Perceived election fraud	0.24	0.35	0.51	1		
5. Perceived election unfairness	0.31	0.33	0.56	0.78	1	
6. Perceived count inaccuracy	0.28	0.32	0.55	0.79	0.88	1
7. Composite election illegitimacy	0.30	0.36	0.58	0.89	0.96	0.96

Entries are Pearson correlations. All coefficients are significant at the  $p < 0.001$  level.

composite index ( $r$ s between 0.89 and 0.96;  $p$ s < 0.001), suggesting that perceptions of the 2020 election covary with one another. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar, and Lantos 2019), both national CN and national IS were also correlated ( $r = 0.59, p < 0.001$ ).

Collective narcissism and ingroup satisfaction were also associated with one another in ways that track earlier research (e.g., Federico and Golec de Zavala 2018; Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar, and Lantos 2019). As Table 1 indicates, both variables were correlated with greater conservatism ( $r = 0.41$  with CN,  $r = 0.43$  with IS;  $p$ s < 0.001). Patterns were similar for partisanship; these differences are visualized using ridgeline density plots in Figure 1. National CN was higher



**Figure 1:** Ridgeline density plots for distributions of national collective narcissism and national ingroup satisfaction by party. The vertical white lines in each density indicate the mean of the indicated variable in that partisan group.

among Republicans and Republican leaners ( $M = 0.58$ ) than it was among Democrats and Democratic leaners ( $M = 0.39$ ),  $t(731) = 10.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; and Independents ( $M = 0.43$ ),  $t(731) = 5.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Similarly, national IS was higher among Republicans and Republican leaners ( $M = 0.86$ ) than it was among Democrats and Democratic leaners ( $M = 0.63$ ),  $t(727) = 11.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; and Independents ( $M = 0.66$ ),  $t(727) = 6.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Democrats and Independents differed from one another on neither variable ( $ps > 0.10$ ).

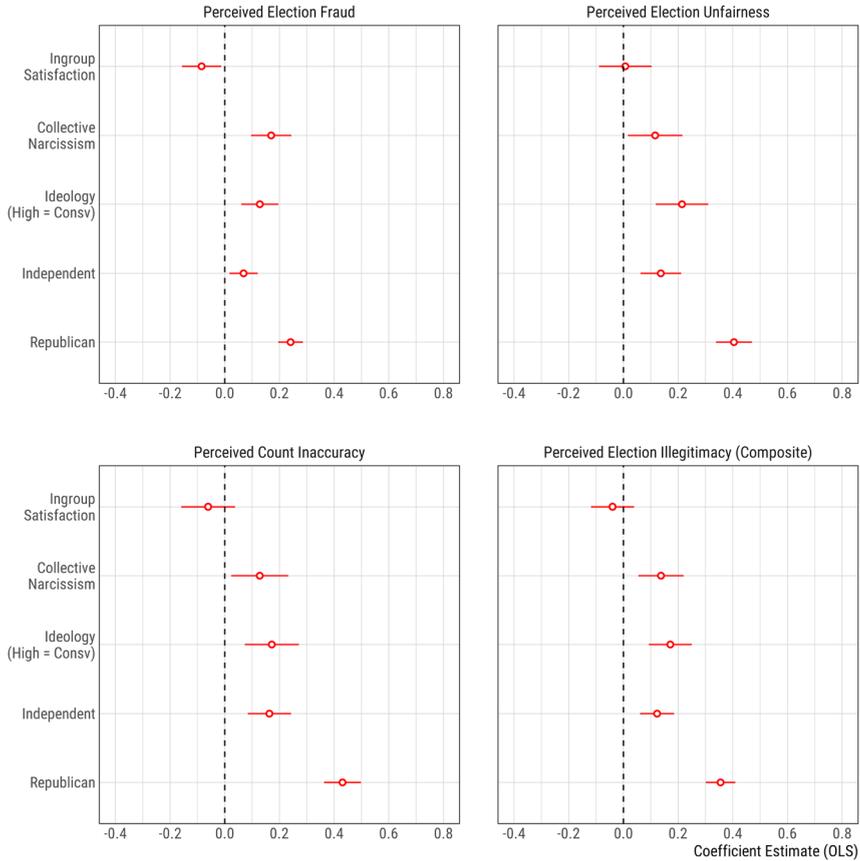
## 7 National Collective Narcissism and Perceptions of Election Illegitimacy

Hypothesis 1 suggests that individuals who are high in national collective narcissism should perceive the 2020 election to be more illegitimate, net of various control variables. To this end, we estimated four ordinary least-squares regression models. In these models, each of the four outcome variables was regressed on national collective narcissism (CN), national ingroup satisfaction (IS), the demographic variables, ideology, and the two dummy variables for partisanship (indicating Independents and Republicans/Republican leaners). To guard against the effects of heteroscedasticity in hypothesis tests, HC3 robust standard errors were used (Long and Ervin 2000).

Five key estimates from these models—for national CN, national IS, ideology, and the two partisanship indicators—are summarized in coefficient plots in Figure 2 for each outcome.<sup>3</sup> As expected, the two political predispositions were associated with the perceived-illegitimacy variables in a predictable and relatively strong fashion: greater conservative identification was associated with higher scores on all illegitimacy measures ( $p < 0.001$ ), and both independents ( $p < 0.001$ ) and Republicans and Republican leaners ( $p < 0.001$ ) scored higher on all illegitimacy measures compared to Democrats and Democratic leaners. As one would expect, the contrast between Democrats and Republicans is especially pronounced in each model: changing a hypothetical respondent's identification from Democratic to Republican is associated with 24%, 40%, 43%, and 35% net increases in each of the measures of perceived election illegitimacy (respectively).

Consistent with H1, national CN was *positively* associated with perceived election fraud ( $b = 0.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with perceived election unfairness ( $b = 0.12$ ,  $p = 0.023$ ), perceived vote count inaccuracy ( $b = 0.13$ ,  $p = 0.016$ ), and higher scores on the composite measure of election illegitimacy ( $b = 0.14$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), net of the

<sup>3</sup> Complete estimates for all models are shown in Table S1 in the Supplemental Materials.



**Figure 2:** Perceived election illegitimacy in 2020 as a function of selected predictors: Cross-sectional estimates. The error bands indicate 95% CIs around the predictions. Predicted values based on estimates in Table S1.

covariates. Given the 0–1 coding of all variables, these estimates indicate that going from the lowest to the highest value of collective narcissism is associated with 17%, 12%, 13%, and 14% net increases in each of the measures of illegitimacy respectively (Baguley 2009). As expected, relationships between national IS and perceptions of electoral illegitimacy were relatively weak. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar, and Lantos 2019), the one significant coefficient we observed indicated a *negative* net relationship between IS and perceived electoral illegitimacy. Specifically, national IS was negatively associated with perceived election fraud ( $b = -0.08$ ,  $p = 0.021$ ), indicating that higher satisfaction was associated with less perceived fraud once CN and other covariates were accounted for. Thus, all other things being equal, national CN is associated with strong perceptions of election illegitimacy, supporting Hypothesis 1.

## 8 Partisan Differences in the Relationship between National Collective Narcissism and Perceptions of Election Illegitimacy

Hypothesis 2 suggests that the positive relationships between national CN and perceptions of election illegitimacy reported in the previous section should be stronger among Republicans and Independents than among Democrats. To examine this hypothesis, we re-estimated the models summarized in Figure 1 and Table S1, this time adding the National CN  $\times$  Independent and National CN  $\times$  Republican/Lean Republican interactions to each model. These interactions contrast the Independent and Democratic slopes and the Republican and Democratic slopes for national CN, respectively. All models were again estimated using OLS with HC3 robust standard errors.

Complete estimates for all four models are shown in Table S2 in the appendix. We only report the key estimates for the interactions here. The National CN  $\times$  Republican/Lean Republican interaction was significant for perceived fraud ( $b = 0.25, p < 0.001$ ), perceived unfairness ( $b = 0.34, p = 0.001$ ), and the composite illegitimacy measure ( $b = 0.27, p < 0.001$ ), and marginally significant for perceived count inaccuracy ( $b = 0.20, p < 0.054$ ). Moreover, the National CN  $\times$  Independent interaction was significant for perceived unfairness ( $b = 0.40, p = 0.009$ ) and composite illegitimacy ( $b = 0.28, p = 0.049$ ), but not for perceived fraud ( $b = 0.19, p = 0.121$ ) or perceived count inaccuracy ( $b = 0.25, p = 0.195$ ).

To break these interactions down, conditional effects for national CN in the three partisan groups for each dependent variable were computed. These conditional effects are summarized in Table 2 and visualized in Figure 3. As predicted, the conditional effect of national CN was consistently weak and non-significant among Democrats ( $ps$  at least  $> 0.10$ ). In contrast, the conditional effect of national CN was positive and consistently larger among Republicans ( $ps < 0.001$ ), indicating that Republicans who were higher in CN were also more likely to perceive the 2020 election to be illegitimate across measures. The conditional effect of CN was also positive and larger among Independents than among Democrats for all dependent variables. The conditional effects were significant for perceived fraud, perceived unfairness, and composite illegitimacy ( $ps < 0.05$ ), but not perceived count inaccuracy ( $p = 0.14$ ). The results for the composite measure of perceived election illegitimacy illustrate this basic pattern. Among Republicans and Republican leaners, going from the minimum to the maximum level of national CN was associated with a 28% increase in perceived illegitimacy; the corresponding estimate for Independents was similar, at 29%. However, among Democrats and Democratic leaners, going from the minimum to the maximum

**Table 2:** Conditional effects of national CN within partisan groups, 2020.

Conditional effect of CN	Fraud	Unfairness	Count inaccuracy	Composite illegitimacy
Democrat/Lean democrat	0.07 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.05)	0.03 (0.06)	0.01 (0.04)
Independent	0.25 <sup>a</sup> (0.12)	0.36 <sup>a</sup> (0.15)	0.28 (0.19)	0.29 <sup>a</sup> (0.14)
Republican/Lean republican	0.31 <sup>c</sup> (0.06)	0.29 <sup>c</sup> (0.10)	0.23 <sup>b</sup> (0.09)	0.28 <sup>c</sup> (0.08)
Total <i>N</i>	687	691	691	687

Entries are ordinary least-squares regression coefficients and HC3 robust standard errors (<sup>c</sup> $p < 0.001$ ; <sup>b</sup> $p < 0.01$ ; <sup>a</sup> $p < 0.05$ ).

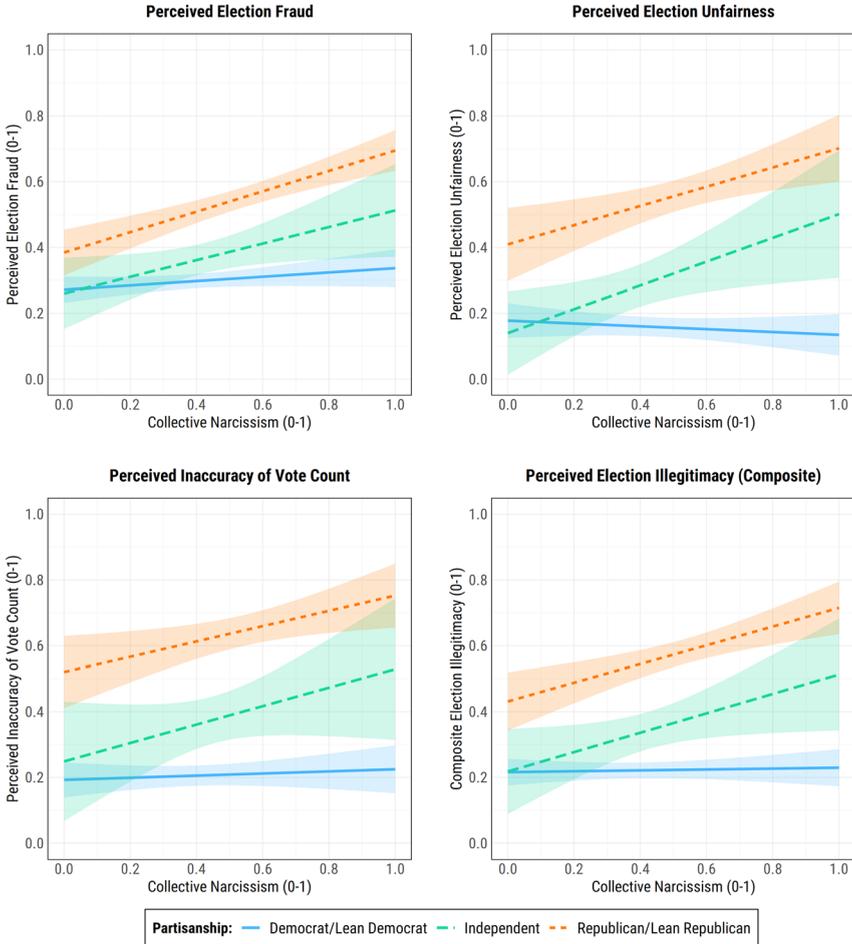
value of collective narcissism was associated with only a 1% increase in perceived illegitimacy.

In sum, the data provide a relatively consistent pattern of support for Hypothesis 2: the hypothesized positive relationship between national collective narcissism and our measures of perceived election illegitimacy varied as a function of partisanship, with stronger relationships observed among Independents and Republicans (compared to Democrats).

## 9 Ideological Differences in the Relationship between National Collective Narcissism and Perceptions of Election Illegitimacy

Finally, Hypothesis 3 suggests that the positive relationships between national collective narcissism and our measures of perceived election illegitimacy should be stronger among those who identify as relatively conservative than those who identify as relatively liberal. To test this hypothesis for each dependent variable, we re-estimated the models summarized in Figure 1 and Table S1, this time adding the National CN  $\times$  Ideology interaction to each model. As before, all models were estimated using OLS with HC3 robust standard errors.

Complete estimates for all four models are shown in Table S3 in the appendix. We only report the estimates for the key interactions here. The National CN  $\times$  Ideology interaction was significant and in the expected (positive) direction for perceived fraud ( $b = 0.38, p < 0.001$ ), perceived unfairness ( $b = 0.32, p = 0.008$ ), and the composite illegitimacy measure ( $b = 0.30, p = 0.002$ ). Though the interaction



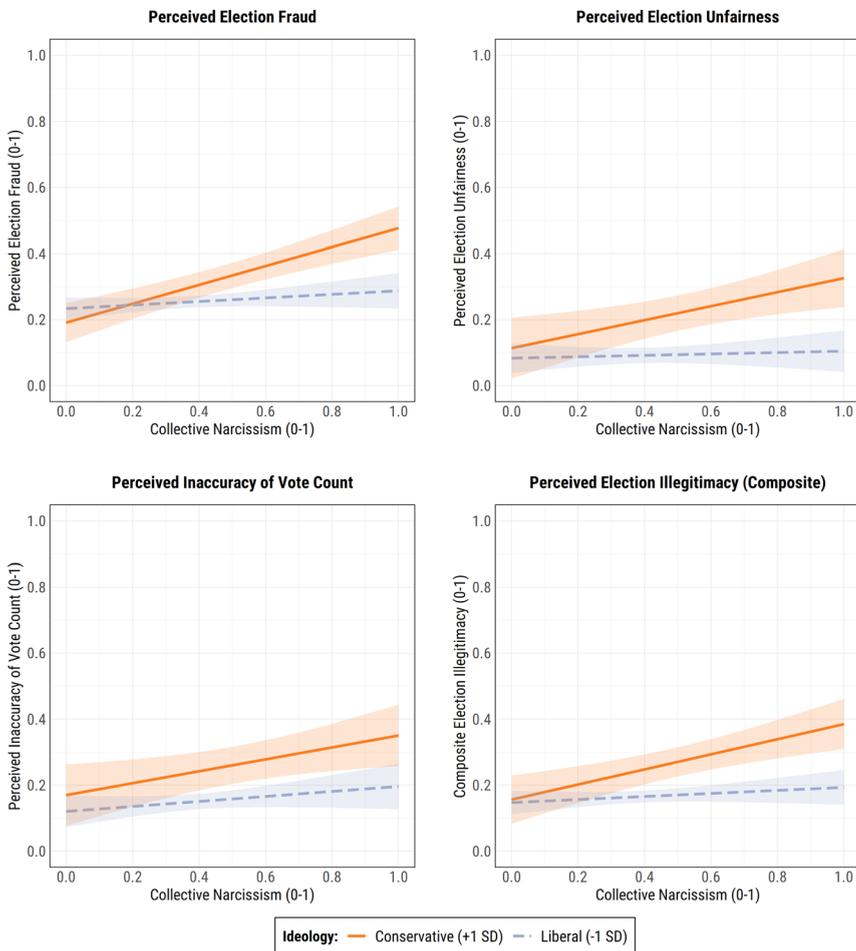
**Figure 3:** Perceived election illegitimacy in 2020 as a function of collective narcissism within partisan groups. The error bands indicate 95% CIs around the predictions. Predicted values based on estimates in Table S2.

was in the predicted positive direction for perceived count inaccuracy, it did not reach significance ( $b = 0.17$ ,  $p = 0.173$ ). To unpack these interactions, conditional effects for national CN among relatively liberal respondents (one standard deviation below the mean for ideology) and relatively conservative respondents (one standard deviation above the mean for ideology) for each dependent variable were computed. These conditional effects are summarized in Table 3 and plotted in Figure 4. As predicted, the conditional effect of national CN was consistently weak and non-significant among relatively liberal respondents ( $ps$  at least  $> 0.15$ ).

**Table 3:** Conditional effects of national CN as a function of ideology, 2020.

Conditional effect of CN	Fraud	Unfairness	Count inaccuracy	Composite illegitimacy
Liberal (-1 SD)	0.05 (0.04)	0.02 (0.05)	0.08 (0.05)	0.05 (0.04)
Conservative (+1 SD)	0.29 <sup>c</sup> (0.05)	0.21 <sup>c</sup> (0.07)	0.18 <sup>a</sup> (0.08)	0.23 <sup>c</sup> (0.06)
Total N	687	691	691	687

Entries are ordinary least-squares regression coefficients and HC3 robust standard errors (<sup>c</sup> $p < 0.001$ ; <sup>b</sup> $p < 0.01$ ; <sup>a</sup> $p < 0.05$ ).



**Figure 4:** Perceived election illegitimacy in 2020 as a function of collective narcissism among liberals (-1 SD) and conservatives (+1 SD). The error bands indicate 95% CIs around the predictions. Predicted values based on estimates in Table S3.

However, the conditional effect of national CN was positive and consistently larger among relatively conservative respondents ( $ps < 0.001$  for perceived fraud, perceived unfairness, and composite election illegitimacy;  $p < 0.05$  for perceived count inaccuracy). These results indicate that high collective narcissism was more strongly associated with perceptions of election illegitimacy among conservatives than liberals. For example, considering the composite-illegitimacy measure, the estimates suggest that going from the lowest to the highest level of national CN is associated with a 23% increase in perceived illegitimacy among relatively conservative respondents, but only a 5% increase in perceived illegitimacy among relatively liberal respondents. Thus, the data provide overall support for Hypothesis 3: collective narcissism predicted doubts about the legitimacy of the 2020 election primarily among conservative identifiers.

## 10 Discussion

A feature of polarized political discourse in the United States is the weakening of faith in the fairness of the nation's elections. As we noted at the outset of this article, former President Donald Trump's rhetoric and actions in the wake of his 2020 election loss—echoed by many figures in his party—have deepened partisan and ideological divides in the perceived legitimacy of the 2020 election and elections in general (Brown 2021; Page and Elbeshbishi 2021; Filindra 2022). But beyond the role of core political predispositions like partisanship and ideology, what accounts for variation in the willingness to see the 2020 election as illegitimate? Using data from an original survey of American adults, we explored the role of national collective narcissism, an exaggerated but precarious belief in the fundamental greatness of the national ingroup (Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar, and Lantos 2019). Recent research suggests citizens high in collective narcissism hold a narrow view of national identity that leaves them prone to abandoning democracy when they feel it is not serving the interests of people like them (Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2021). On this basis, we hypothesized (1) that individuals high in national collective narcissism would perceive the 2020 election to be less legitimate; and (2) that this relationship would be strongest among citizens whose predispositions make Trump's 2020 loss particularly threatening: Republican partisans and conservative identifiers.

Our data provided a consistent pattern of support for these predictions. Across four indices of perceived electoral illegitimacy—perceived election fraud, perceived election unfairness, perceived vote-count inaccuracy, and a composite measure of perceived election illegitimacy—individuals scoring higher in national collective narcissism harbored greater doubts about the 2020 election, even

after accounting for a number of covariates. Moreover, the relationship between collective narcissism and three out of four of these outcomes was stronger among Republicans and conservative identifiers. All other things being equal, individuals with an exaggerated sense of national regard were more likely to view the 2020 election as illegitimate, and they were especially likely to do so if they were predisposed by partisan or ideological identity to see Trump's 2020 loss as disconcerting.

Thus, these analyses add to our understanding of mass discontent regarding the 2020 US presidential election. In addition to confirming the existence of sizable partisan or ideological divides in the perceived fairness and legitimacy of the 2020 election (e.g., Brown 2021), our findings suggest that beliefs about the national ingroup may themselves predict election-related perceptions. Even holding partisanship and ideology constant, we found modest but reliable relationships between national collective narcissism and perceived electoral illegitimacy, indicating that views about election integrity are not *merely* a matter of political identity. Nevertheless, we also find that partisan and ideological predispositions play an important role in conditioning the relationship between national collective narcissism and election-related perceptions: individuals who are high in collective narcissism were especially likely to doubt the integrity of the 2020 election if their partisan and ideological predispositions left them receptive to discontent about Trump's loss.

All things considered, our findings suggest that an exaggerated but fragile belief in the greatness of one's nation may leave citizens susceptible to doubts about the legitimacy of electoral procedures and results. Though the political attitudes and behaviors of collective narcissists appear to be driven on the surface by enthusiastic ingroup love, their love is associated with the narcissistic demand that others respect their country's exceptionality and that their fellow citizens conform to their idea of who is truly "worthy" of inclusion in the nation (Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2021; Keenan and Golec de Zavala 2021). These excessive and coercive demands are justified by construing the national identity as threatened from both within and without. As a result, collective narcissists tend to respond with hostility when circumstances threaten their view of the nation. Though the aggression of individuals high in national collective narcissism is often directed outward at other nations or at groups within the nation that are seen as marginal (e.g., Golec de Zavala 2011, 2018), it can also be directed at the institutions of the nation itself. This is the pattern we observed in the present study: citizens high in collective narcissism were more likely to withdraw the assumption of electoral legitimacy in the wake of the 2020 election, especially if they were predisposed to dislike the outcome of that election.

In this vein, our results thus echo a number of other findings in political psychology. For example, recent studies have suggested that individuals who are high in national collective narcissism are more supportive of authoritarian populist leaders and movements that challenge democratic norms (e.g., Bocian, Cichocka, and Wojciszke 2021; Federico and Golec de Zavala 2018; Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2021; Marchlewska et al. 2018), more likely to doubt the value of democracy as a form of government (Marchlewska et al. 2022), less supportive of democratic leaders and more supportive of efforts to overturn democratic outcomes (Keenan and Golec de Zavala 2021), and less loyal to the nation when personal gain is available. The present study extends this pattern to the relationship between national collective narcissism and doubts about electoral processes and results. Insofar as national collective narcissism reflects a form of insecurity, our results also echo classic political science findings indicating that various indicators of psychological defensiveness are associated with a willingness to abandon support for democratic values (e.g. regarding civil liberties; see Marcus et al. 1995; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982). The findings of the present study build on this classic idea by suggesting that psychological variables relating to defensiveness regarding politically relevant social identities (i.e. national identity) may also have implications for democracy-related beliefs.

Insofar as diffuse support for the electoral process is necessary for democratic stability (e.g. Anderson et al. 2005; Easton 1965), both our results and those of the aforementioned studies imply that exaggerated but precarious forms of love for the nation may increase the potential for discord in the context of elections. As such, this body of research points to the potentially destabilizing effects of populist discourse that heightens themes that invoke collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2021; Golec de Zavala, Lantos, and Oliver Keenan 2021). Nevertheless, our results also suggest that national collective narcissism is not invariably associated with perceived electoral illegitimacy. Rather, it predicted doubts about elections and their results primarily among those predisposed to be unhappy with President Trump's democratic ouster from office. An important question for future research is whether collective narcissism is generally associated with electoral illegitimacy among losing partisan or ideological factions, is unique to or exaggerated for Republicans and conservatives, or whether the emergence of this association depends on the presence of elite rhetoric that explicitly alleges fraud, unfairness, or cheating. Along the latter lines, evidence suggests a robust association between collective narcissism and conspiracy theories and generic conspiratorial thinking, regardless of the particular content (Golec de Zavala, Bierwiaczonek and Ciesielski 2022). On the other hand, much research on elite opinion leadership, both in general (e.g. Zaller 1992) and with respect to the diffusion of political misinformation (e.g. Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016)

implies that leader rhetoric suggesting an unfair election may spread to mass partisans (Webster 2021). Given that Donald Trump's direct allegations of malfeasance played a significant role in the spread of (unfounded) doubts about the 2020 election (Page and Elbeshbishi 2021), it is important that researchers explore whether this kind of rhetoric—above and beyond the effects of mere partisanship—is necessary for the activation of collective narcissism in mass publics.

**Research Funding:** The authors would like to thank the Research Foundation for The State University of New York, the Stony Brook Foundation, Inc., and the College of Arts and Sciences at Stony Brook University for providing the resources needed to collect the data used in this research.

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**Supplementary Material:** The online version of this article offers supplementary material (<https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2022-2046>).