

A significant minority of Americans say they could support a military takeover of the U.S. government

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by German Feierherd, Noam Lupu and Susan Stokes by German Feierherd, Noam Lupu and Susan Stokes February 16



Starlings pass in front of the Washington Monument and the Marine One helicopter, as President Trump returns to the White House on Dec. 21. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

With the administration planning a military parade in the capital and three former generals occupying key posts in the Trump administration, some observers are concerned about the militarization of American politics — or what Larry Summers has called “the Argentinization of U.S. government.” One buttress of civilian control is the public’s commitment to the constitutional order. Presumably, few Americans would tolerate a full-fledged breach of civilian rule.

Or is that so? Our research finds that, in fact, substantial numbers of U.S. adults say they would embrace ruptures in the constitutional order, which is in keeping with Bright Line Watch findings that experts believe that measures of U.S. democracy have declined under President Trump.

How we did our research

We analyzed survey data collected by Vanderbilt's Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). The U.S. survey of the AmericasBarometer uses online interviews with web-based national samples of about 1,500 respondents. Since 2010, LAPOP has asked: "Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified under the following circumstances?"

The possible answers have included "when there is a lot of crime" and "when there is a lot of corruption." LAPOP has also asked respondents whether they "believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Congress and govern without Congress?"

The LAPOP surveys were conducted in March 2010, April 2012, late June and early July 2014 and May 2017.

A significant minority of Americans would support a military takeover or shutting of Congress in the right circumstances

In 2010, 30 percent to 35 percent of Americans said a military takeover was justified if there were widespread corruption or crime. In 2017, that dropped to roughly 25 percent holding these opinions. These views are not confined to supporters of one or the other of the major parties. In 2017, about 25 percent of Democrats and 30 percent of Republicans said they favored a military intervention if the country faced rampant crime or corruption. The figure below shows the average support for a military coup when there is widespread corruption.

However, the proportion of respondents who said that "very difficult times" would justify closing Congress increased from 9 percent of respondents in 2010 to nearly 15 percent in 2017. In 2017, roughly 11 percent of Democrats and 24 percent of Republicans were in favor of shutting Congress down during difficult times.

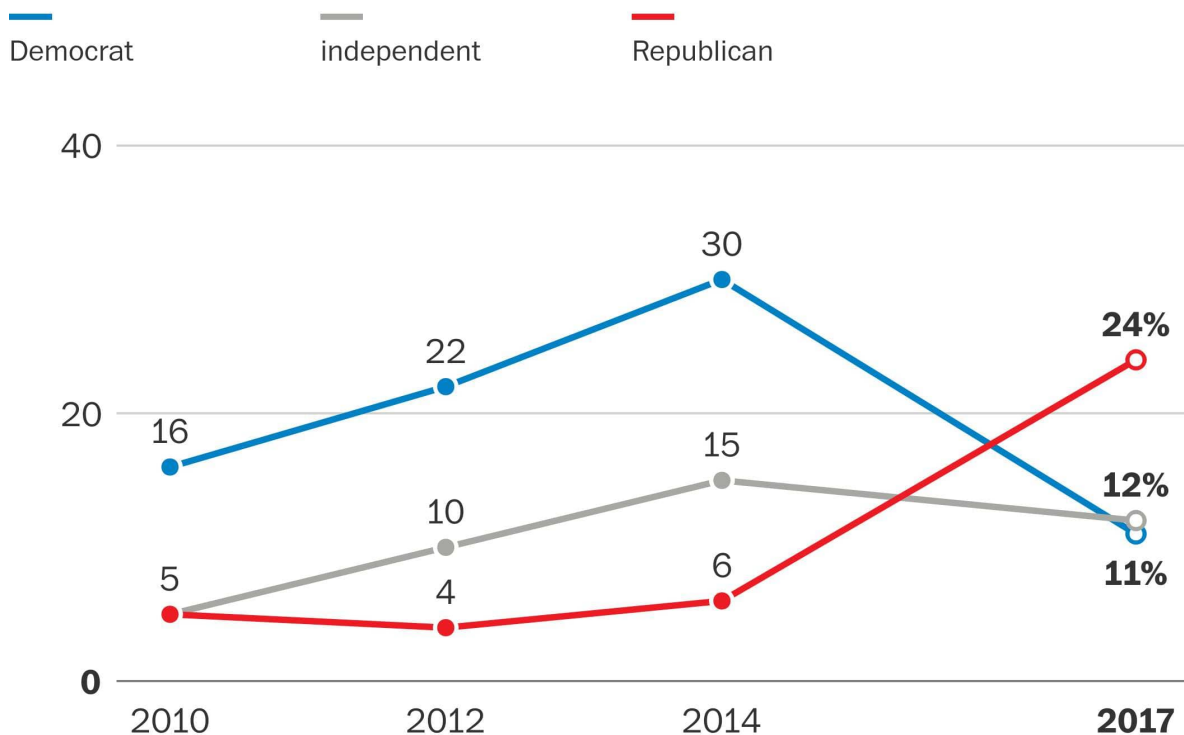
Independents express the strongest support for uninterrupted civilian rule. But even among them, more than 1 in 5 say they would support a military takeover in response to corruption or crime. More than 1 in 10 say they would support closing Congress during difficult times.

U.S. public opinion on these questions resembles that of Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, countries with a history of military coups and dictatorships.

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Support for closing the Congress depends on which party controls the White House

Percent who agree that "when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Congress and govern without Congress?"



Source: U.S. sample of Latin American Public Opinion Project

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Because the United States hasn't faced such ruptures in democracy, we wondered whether Americans understand what a military coup is and what "closing Congress" would mean. To find out, researchers at LAPOP tested several alternative wordings of these questions, which clarified that the military would be taking over the U.S. government and explained that constituted a coup. Opinions remained roughly the same.

Why are Americans ready to undercut democracy?

What could be behind this? Partisanship is one factor, we found. Supporters of the sitting president's party are more likely to support closing Congress, maybe because they imagine that would strengthen the president. When Democrat Barack Obama occupied the White House, more Democrats than Republicans were willing to consider closing Congress. By contrast, in 2017, 25 percent of Republicans and only 10 percent of Democrats supported the idea of closing the legislative branch.

But that's not the whole picture. As you can see in the figure below, Americans have become less satisfied with U.S. democracy over the past decade — Democrats, Republicans and independents alike. In 2006, when LAPOP asked respondents how satisfied they were "with

the way democracy works in the United States,” a large majority said they were satisfied or very satisfied. Over 10 years, that proportion declined sharply. Today, half of all Americans are satisfied with our democracy.

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What does this mean for democratic stability?

Public revulsion toward democratic breaches is neither necessary nor sufficient to protect democracy. Many other factors help push democracies into authoritarianism, including economic decline and elites tolerating leaders’ anti-democratic actions, according to participants at a conference organized by Bright Line Watch at Yale University in October.

What’s more, what people say in surveys and how they respond in reality are not necessarily the same. The AmericasBarometer survey asked about hypothetical events. We hope that were a real coup or legislative takeover underway, U.S. citizens would tolerate it less than they might imagine in answering a survey.

Still, public opinion takes cues from political parties and governmental leaders. And political leaders, meanwhile, watch out for what they believe constituents will and will not accept. Even if the proportion of Americans who would support a military takeover hasn’t increased over the past decade, the proportion disappointed in democracy has — and they might well shift into believing that it’s time to let the generals give it a try.

[White racial resentment has been gaining political power for decades]

Hondurans’ satisfaction with their democracy declined precipitously in the late 2000s, leading to a military coup in 2009. In 2009, a large majority of Hungarians also were dissatisfied with their democracy and allowed Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his right-wing Fidesz Party to erode democratic institutions. The fact that more and more Americans are dissatisfied with our democracy is cause for concern and vigilance.

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