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Status Threat, Political Competition, and the Expansion of Voter Identification Laws in the United States

Francesco Bromo

Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Correspondence: Francesco Bromo (francesco.bromo@bsg.ox.ac.uk)

ABSTRACT
Objective: Voter identification requirements in the U.S. are on a dramatic uptick and are becoming less forgiving. When do states phase in or adopt stricter voter ID laws? I propose an elite-driven explanation. Building on the "racial threat" hypothesis, I argue that these provisions are a legal device exploited by legislators representing white majorities to safeguard the status quo in view of the "threat" posed to the establishment by the growing size of racial minorities, and that this effect is moderated by political competition. I introduce the concept of "majority gap," the surplus of population belonging to the majority in relation to the size of all minority groups combined.
Methods: I test my theory in the context of state legislatures, using two-way fixed-effects regression.
Results: I show that, on average, Republicans present voter identification-related proposals twice as often as Democrats and that governors rarely interfere with these proposals. I find that when Republicans control both chambers of a state assembly, the shrinking magnitude of the majority gap is associated with a significant expansion in ID requirements.
Conclusion: This article contributes to the research on the disenfranchisement of racial minorities by shedding some light on the expansion of voter identification laws as a mechanism for White-controlled legislatures to potentially "gatekeep" the polls.

1 | Introduction

Leader of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives Mike Turzai (R), 2012 "Voter ID, which is gonna allow Governor Romney to win the state of Pennsylvania, done."

Buncombe County (North Carolina) Precinct Chair Don Yelton (R), 2013 "If it hurts a bunch of lazy Blacks that want the government to give them everything, so be it."

Wisconsin Representative Glenn Grothman (R), 2016 "Hillary Clinton is about the weakest candidate the Democrats have ever put up, and now we have photo ID, and I think photo ID is going to make a little bit of a difference as well."

Voter identification laws mandate that citizens present some form of identification at the polls to be able to cast a ballot. These laws are a relatively novel institution in the United States. The requirements can be classified according to their strictness. In the *permissive* case, voters failing to show adequate documentation at the polling station can vote without the need to take additional steps for their vote to be valid. Conversely, in the *strict* case, voters without adequate documentation must undertake further action, or their ballot will be discarded. In addition, states can require either a *no-photo* ID, such as a utility bill or Social Security card, or a *photo* ID, such as a U.S. passport or driver's license. There

are two important observations associated with these provisions. First, they have become vastly more common in the past two decades. In 2000, only 14 states had ID requirements in place, whereas 34 did in 2020. Second, they have become increasingly less forgiving. No state had "strict" requirements in place in 2000, but 10 did in 2020.

From a scholarly perspective, the rapid spread of voter identification requirements seems counterintuitive, given the fact that the literature has argued that these laws can be burdensome for the American electorate. The cost of acquiring the necessary documentation, in terms of resources (money and time), especially in the case of photo IDs, disproportionately impacts racial minorities and low-income voters. The two often coincide (Barreto et al. 2019). The result is the potential disenfranchisement of minorities in the form of reduced political participation and engagement (e.g., Fraga and Miller 2022; Kuk et al. 2022). This, in turn, can hamper representation, both descriptive and substantive.

The apparent contradiction between the potential negative consequences of voter ID laws and their quick expansion is the puzzle that motivates this study. The official justification for the introduction of these provisions is that they act as a tool against voter fraud and boost voter confidence in the democratic process. Yet, many have shown skepticism in response to such claims because there is virtually no evidence of widespread electoral fraud in recent times (e.g., Minnite 2017). The research questions I explore are, thus, the following: What prompted states to adopt identification laws in the first place, and why have these laws become less lenient over time?

Building on existing research (e.g., Hicks et al. 2016; Biggers and Hanmer 2017), I propose an elite-driven explanation for voter identification requirements' diffusion and increasing strictness. I introduce the concept of the "majority gap" in the masses. I define this as the surplus of the population belonging to the majority (White Americans) in relation to the size of all racial minority groups combined. Drawing upon the "racial threat" hypothesis (e.g., Giles and Hertz 1994), I argue that the threat posed to the establishment by the growing size of racial minorities in the United States and the consequent shrinking of the majority gap contributes to explaining the surfacing and toughening of identification provisions, and that this effect is moderated by political competition. Based on this reasoning, ID requirements can be conceived as a weapon exploited by legislators representing white majorities in their constituencies to safeguard the status quo of dominance of the social hierarchy and retain executive and legislative power.

To test my theory, I collected data on the policy proposals related to identification requirements presented in all 50 American state legislatures between 2011 and 2021. I find that, on average, Republicans introduce voter identification-related proposals twice as often as Democrats and that governors rarely interfere with these proposals. Next, I recorded the voter ID laws in all 50 states between 2000 and 2020. I ranked them to create an index that measures the severity of these provisions, ranging from "no ID requirements" to the harsher "strict, photo requirements." I rely on two-way fixed effects regression to investigate how the dwindling size of the majority gap, conditional on partisan control at the state level, affects the expansion of ID laws. I show that

when the Republican Party controls both chambers of a state assembly, the narrowing magnitude of the majority surplus is associated with a significant expansion in voter identification requirements. The results, in line with the existing scholarly literature, hold when taking into account governors as well and are robust to alternative specifications and statistical approaches.

This article contributes to the research on the disenfranchisement of racial minorities by shedding some light on the progression of voter ID laws as a legal device for White-controlled legislatures to potentially "gatekeep" the polls. These relatively recent provisions can work in conjunction with more notorious and well-established repression mechanisms, such as strategic redistricting (Keena et al. 2021). Additionally, identification provisions can foster the introduction of other disenfranchising measures, such as restrictions on the ability to cast a ballot by mail (what McDonald et al. 2015 refer to as "convenience" voting), considering that ID requirements generally do not extend to mail or absentee voting.[1] Understanding the dynamics related to the progression of voter identification laws is especially important, considering that, as of this writing, nearly all American state legislatures fail to achieve racial parity with their own population. In the last 10 years, a majority of state assemblies have either "gotten whiter" or seen no increase in non-white representation (Rayasam et al. 2021).

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I discuss the impact of ID requirements on racial minorities. In Section 3, I present an overview of the history of these provisions and empirical research on their introduction. In Section 4, I lay out my theory. In Sections 5 and 6, I discuss the data, empirical strategy, results, and some implications.

2 | The Impact of Voter ID Laws on Racial Minorities

The academic debate surrounding the impact of voter ID laws on the electorate in the United States is broadly centered around three questions: (1) Do identification requirements negatively affect voters? If they do, (2) do they impact different societal groups disproportionately? And (3) what kind of political outcomes do they influence? Answering these questions is relevant for multiple reasons, both normative and practical.

First, the very essence of democracy implies the principle of inclusion. It can be conceded that there is a tension between the necessary exclusion of certain categories from the democratic process (e.g., children and nonresidents) and arguments about the depths of this exclusion, that is, its extension to additional categories based on requisites such as sanity, law-abidingness, etc. In the abstract, however, a democracy "must include all adult members of the association" (Dahl 1989, 129). It follows that if ID provisions discourage individuals from engaging in the most fundamental of political activities, that is, voting, the principle of inclusion is not officially but de facto violated. Second, political institutions are not fixed. This means that laws can be made, retracted, and revised as long as the decision-makers support the transition to a new status quo. While culture, values, beliefs, and social norms change gradually, political institutions are "fast-moving" institutions that "do not necessarily change often

TABLE 1 | Voter identification bills (2011–2021).

Year	Introduced	Adopted/enacted	% Adopted/enacted	Failed	% Failed	Vetoed (governor)	% Vetoed
2011	138	13	9	51	37	5	4
2012	188	19	10	127	68	3	2
2013	121	15	12	48	40	0	0
2014	101	7	7	51	50	0	0
2015	115	9	8	62	54	0	0
2016	95	11	12	55	58	0	0
2017	113	6	5	59	52	3	3
2018	102	6	6	64	63	0	0
2019	92	12	13	55	60	0	0
2020	100	13	13	59	59	0	0
2021	164	6	4	78	48	2	1
Total	1329	117	9	709	53	13	1

but can change very quickly" (Roland 2004, 109). If anything, understanding the extent to which these requirements create disparities in the electorate serves as evidence for the need for policy change or the absence thereof.

Before everything else, it is paramount to get a sense of who is responsible for introducing and ratifying legal provisions pertaining to identification requirements. In most cases, proposals related to this matter are introduced by individual members or a group of members in the state assemblies. Less frequently, these proposals are advanced by committees (e.g., House Committee on Rules, Senate State Affairs Committee, etc.). Table 1 presents a summary of all the legislation involving ID requirements introduced in the 50 American state legislatures between 2011 and 2021.[2]

Two main findings emerge. First, state assemblies play the most important role vis-à-vis decisions regarding voter identification laws. This is evident from the fact that governors hardly ever veto these bills. In all 13 instances of veto,[3] the rejection occurred in the presence of a partisanship mismatch between the governor and the member(s) introducing the proposal. More specifically, in all these cases, a Democratic governor vetoed bills presented by one or more Republican members. Second, the proportion of failed bills, often nearing at least half of all the ID proposals presented in a given year, suggests that this issue is not uncontentious, especially in light of the fact that state legislatures were seldom divided in terms of partisan control of both chambers during this period.[4] The implication is that these bills are likely not failing because of a lack of majority in the assembly. Instead, they might be failing for other reasons, such as intraparty dissent and the majority party's struggle with intraparty coalition-building (e.g., Curry and Lee 2020). Indeed, as Conover and Miller (2018) note, "American political elites heatedly disagree over voter identification (ID) laws" (p. 491).

Second, in line with existing research (Bentele and O'Brien 2013; Hicks et al. 2015; Hicks et al. 2016), the role of partisanship of the assembly members introducing voter identification bills is also important. Table 2 presents a summary of the share of proposals

dealing with ID requirements tabled by legislators affiliated with the Democratic Party and that of legislators affiliated with the GOP. Between 2011 and 2021, the Republicans largely dominated, except for the biennium 2019/2020. On average, members of the GOP presented proposals concerning voter identification twice as often as the Democrats, with a peak of a 5-to-1 ratio in 2011.

Having established why it is crucial to understand the impact of identification laws on voters and who the actors involved in decisions related to the introduction and expansion of these provisions are, we can review the existing evidence.

ID requirements are generally viewed as burdensome for the electorate (Barreto et al. 2009, 2019) due to the fact that they effectively place restrictions on the prerogative to vote. The rapid progression of voter identification requirements has spurred a debate on their impact on a host of political outcomes, particularly political engagement and participation. The verdict is not unanimous. For instance, Mycoff et al. (2009) produce null findings with respect to the effect of voter ID laws on turnout. Similarly, Harden and Campos (2023) find a negligible average effect on turnout, but their results indicate that there is some heterogeneity over time. Others have shown evidence of a negative but diminutive effect on participation (Hood and Bullock 2012; Hood and Buchanan 2020). Citrin et al. (2014) present experimental results indicating that informing low-propensity voters of a new identification requirement increases turnout.

For the most part, however, studies have demonstrated that identification laws are more likely to antagonize individuals belonging to racial minorities compared to their White counterparts. Specifically, ID requirements are associated with the potential to disenfranchise Latino, Black, and Asian voters by discouraging participation and hampering representation (Barreto et al. 2007; Sobel and Smith 2009; Hajnal et al. 2017; Darrah-Okike et al. 2021; Fraga and Miller 2022; Kuk et al. 2022). Although a number of researchers have challenged these findings (Burden 2018; Pryor et al. 2019), some go as far as branding identification laws as "the return of Jim Crow" (Rocha and Matsubayashi 2014) or "legacies of segregation" (Shah and Smith 2021).[5]

**TABLE 2** | Voter ID proposals and partisanship (2011–2021).

Year	Introduced	Democratic Party	% Democratic	Republican Party	% Republican
2011	138	23	17	109	79
2012	188	64	34	116	62
2013	121	35	29	80	66
2014	101	40	40	52	51
2015	115	37	32	70	61
2016	95	27	28	60	63
2017	113	39	35	64	57
2018	102	37	36	52	51
2019	92	54	59	37	40
2020	100	47	47	46	46
2021	164	47	29	109	66
Total	1329	450	34%	795	60%

Two main suggestions emerge from the literature on voter ID laws, one regarding their possible depressing effect on political engagement and participation, the other concerning the uneven impact they have on the electorate due to the fact that racial minorities are more likely to suffer from the burdens imposed by these requirements. In practice, one of the primary reasons this is the case is that minority groups have more limited means when it comes to producing forms of identification due to their prohibitive costs, whether in terms of money or time. A 2014 Harvard Law School report illustrates that "the expenses for documentation, travel, and waiting time are significant, especially for minority groups and low-income voters, typically ranging from about $75 to $175. When legal fees are added to these numbers, the costs range as high as $1,500" (Sobel 2014, 2). The report points out that these figures amply exceed the costs of the poll tax outlawed by the 24th Amendment in 1964. In the next section, I present an overview of the progression of voter identification requirements.

3 | The Introduction and Expansion of Voter ID Requirements

Laws that mandate citizens to make themselves known to government authorities to be able to cast a ballot are long-standing institutions. In 1880, at least eight states had personal registration requirements in place. In some cases (e.g., California, Michigan), these requirements extended to the entire population. In other cases, they were limited to the more populous localities. For example, in Kansas, registration laws were only applied to cities with more than 2000 inhabitants. By 1916, the number of states adopting such provisions had more than doubled (Perez 2021).

While voter registration is an established practice, voter identification requirements are a relatively more recent development. Some state departments might ask for a state-issued driver's license or ID for online registration; however, alternative routes are usually available, especially if one opts for mail-in registration. For example, Mississippi has strict, photo identification laws in place, but alternatives such as a utility bill or bank statement are accepted for voter registration, even in the case of first-time
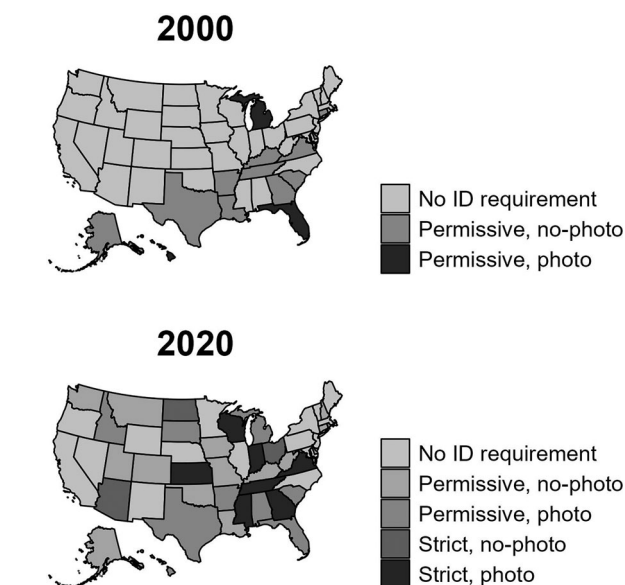
FIGURE 1 | Voter ID requirements in 2000 and 2020.

voters. Similarly, Georgia has strict, photo requirements in effect, but "cheaper" alternatives are accepted for registration. First-time voters in Georgia, in particular, can also provide the last four digits of their Social Security number in place of a photo ID. In other words, identification requirements do not simply mirror registration requirements. It is not necessarily the case that citizens with adequate documentation for registration will automatically possess adequate documentation to vote.[6]

In 2020, 34 states required voters to show some form of ID at the polls, ranging from more permissive, no-photo requirements (e.g., Delaware, Louisiana) to more strict, photo requirements (e.g., Tennessee, Wisconsin). This appears to be in stark contrast with the fact that, as I mentioned in the introduction, merely two decades earlier, in 2000, just 14 of them enforced any kind of voter identification laws, and none had strict requirements in place (Figure 1).[7]

South Carolina was the first state to introduce the possibility of voting conditional on providing a form of identification, as deemed necessary by election officials, in 1950.[8] A voter was asked to produce a signed registration certificate, and they would also sign their name on the spot. The voting official would then compare the signatures and ask for additional identification documents as they saw fit, without any photo requirements. By 1980, five states, including Texas and Florida, had phased in identification requirements. After an attempt on the part of Virginia Governor James Gilmore to implement a pilot program requiring voters to present an ID at the polls in a few selected counties in 1999, overturned by the Democrats, an increasing number of states began designing voter identification laws. This was accompanied by the 2002 *Help America Vote Act*, passed by the Bush administration, mandating all first-time voters to exhibit some form of ID, with or without a photo, upon registration or at the polling station. The common justification for the introduction of identification provisions is, as we shall see, the prevention of voter fraud.

In 2004, Arizona was the first state to demand a state-issued photo ID. In this case, the requirement was framed as the presentation of proof of citizenship status, often noted on photo IDs. The first strict, photo identification requirement was implemented in Indiana in 2005 in anticipation of the 2006 elections. Despite efforts to challenge the constitutionality of the law, the provision was upheld by the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) in the 2008 case *Crawford v. Marion County Election Board*. SCOTUS endorsed the legality of the requirement with the argument that

> Excerpt from Supreme Court opinions dated April 28, 2008[9] "The State has identified several state interests that arguably justify the burdens that SEA 483 imposes on voters and potential voters [...]. The first is the interest in deterring and detecting voter fraud [...]. Finally, the State relies on its interest in safeguarding voter confidence."

The official rationale behind ID laws is that they protect the state government's interests by acting as a weapon against voter fraud and boosting voter confidence in the democratic process. This explanation is at odds with the fact that even in the *Crawford* case itself, no evidence of in-person fraud was found in recent Indiana history (Sobel and Smith 2009). More generally, while there are some anecdotal accounts of fraud in the form of impersonation, repeat voting, and violence in the mid-19th century (Campbell and Converse 1972), scholars and pundits have mostly condemned these allegations for being "exaggerated by partisan bias" (Cox and Kousser 1981, 662) and for their unsubstantiated nature (Minnite 2017; Berlinski et al. 2023).

But what does the public think of these provisions? A study conducted by Atkeson et al. (2014) in the aftermath of *Crawford* shows that "Republicans are especially concerned about fraud in elections" and that "most voters think that voter ID laws prevent fraud, but many voters think that ensuring access to the polls is more important than preventing fraud" (p. 1381). Furthermore, Wilson and Brewer (2016) find that "emphasizing the harmful effects of the laws on eligible voters reduces support" (p. 391), particularly when emphasizing harm to African American voters.[10]

Identification requirements can be sorted into four categories. First, *permissive, no-photo*. In this case, voters can present no-photo IDs, such as birth certificates, Social Security cards, utility bills, or even a concealed weapon permit, to cast a ballot. However, the inability to produce the necessary documentation does not entail supplementary steps on the part of the voter. For instance, in Connecticut, the voter can sign an official statement that they are the person listed on the district records under penalty of false statement. In Utah, a county clerk may verify the identity and residence of a voter "through some other means." Similarly, with respect to the second category, *permissive, photo*, no further action is necessary, the only difference being the requirement of a photo ID such as a U.S. passport or state-issued driver's license. This is the case, for example, in Alabama, where two voting officials can guarantee the voter's eligibility, provided that both workers sign an affidavit.

Next, we have the strict requirements. The third category is *strict, no-photo*. In this case, a voter must present a form of identification that does not necessarily include a photo. However, unlike the permissive cases, voters failing to provide an adequate ID can vote on a provisional ballot that will be counted only if the elector takes additional steps. Normally, voters must show the correct identification to designated officials within a certain amount of time after the election (e.g., within five business days for an election for federal office in Arizona). Alternatives include, for instance, the provision of the last four digits of the Social Security number. As for the last category, *strict, photo*, analogously, voters must take further action for their vote to be counted, with the difference that a photo ID is required.

Some exceptions exist, including the lack of identification documents due to a natural disaster (Texas) or individuals with religious objections to being photographed (e.g., Kansas, Tennessee). ID requirements typically do not extend to mail or absentee voting. However, this reality is changing. For example, Florida recently introduced identification requirements for mail voting applications. Table S1 in the Supporting Information summarizes the distribution of ID provisions in 2020.

The puzzle that motivates this study is that, as I mentioned earlier, mounting evidence suggests that identification laws negatively impact the electorate, particularly racial minorities. Yet, these requirements have expanded drastically in the past two decades. More than two-thirds of states have adopted some form of voter ID restriction, and the restrictions have become increasingly less forgiving. The 2013 Supreme Court landmark case *Shelby County v. Holder* has, arguably, legitimized this behavior by removing the constraints imposed by the 1965 *Voting Rights Act* that forced certain states and local authorities with a history of discrimination to obtain federal preclearance before making any changes to voting laws (e.g., Arizona, Texas).[11]

As of 2020, there are only three cases (North Carolina, North Dakota, and Texas) where the strictness of identification laws has been de-escalated.[12] Texas is, perhaps, exemplary for the reason that a federal judge ruled that the state legislators had intentionally discriminated against Latino and Black voters by phasing in strict voter ID requirements in 2011 (*Veasey v. Abbott*). After several years with strict, photo requirements in place, the state has (as of 2020) permissive, photo requirements. Figure 2
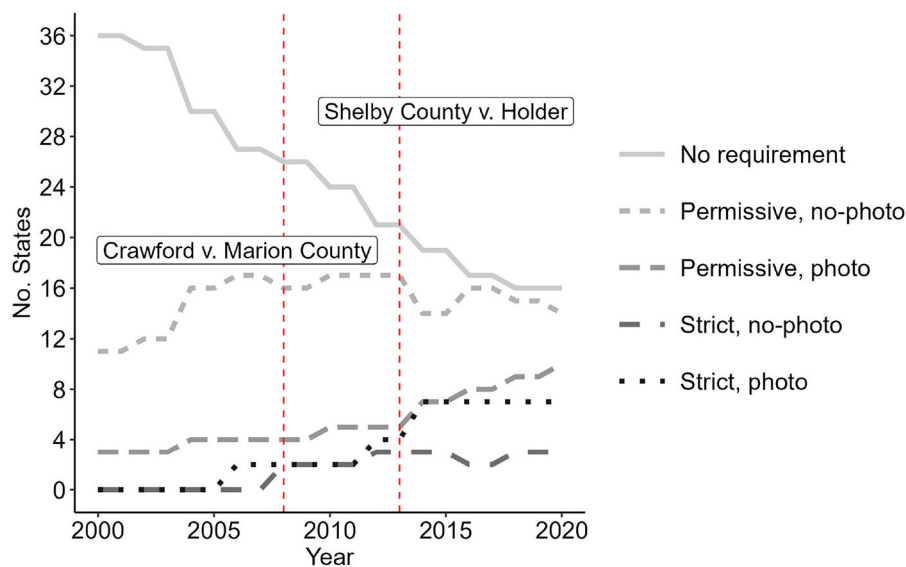
FIGURE 2 | Progression of voter ID laws (2000–2020).

shows the progression of voter identification provisions between 2000 and 2020. We can see that the number of states with no requirements in place has dropped (solid line). Conversely, the number of states introducing voter ID laws, particularly the strict kind, has been on the rise.

In addition to the copious literature on the impact of voter identification requirements, a few empirical studies have explicitly looked at their introduction and expansion. Bentele and O'Brien (2013) look at the factors that influenced the proposal and adoption of restrictive voter access legislation between 2006 and 2011. They conclude that the "proposal and passage are highly partisan, strategic, and racialized affairs" (p. 1088). Hicks et al. (2015) evaluate the likelihood that a state legislature introduces and adopts a restrictive voter ID bill. They find that the enactment of these provisions is driven by both partisan control and the electoral context, where "the prevalence of Republican lawmakers strongly and positively influences the adoption of voter ID laws in electorally competitive states" (p. 18). Hicks et al. (2016) study the behavior of individual legislators (2005–2013). They show the existence of a relationship "between the racial composition of a member's district, region, and electoral competition and the likelihood that a state lawmaker supports a voter ID bill" (p. 411). Finally, Biggers and Hanmer (2017) find that the propensity to adopt identification laws "is greatest when control of the governor's office and legislature switches to Republicans […] and that this likelihood increases further as the size of Black and Latino populations in the state expands" (p. 560). In the next section, I present my theory, which builds on the research mentioned above, and introduce the "majority gap" concept.

4 | The Majority Gap, Declining White Majorities, and Political Competition

The discussion so far highlights the contrast between the seemingly deleterious consequences of voter ID laws and the observation that not only have these requirements proliferated in recent years, but they have also become less lenient. The research

questions that constitute the primary focus of this article are the following: (1) What prompted states to adopt identification provisions in the first place, and (2) why have they evolved to become stricter over time?

I build on Trebbi et al. (2008), who contend that when majorities are faced with an increase in the size of minority groups, it is more effective for the majority to "leverage on its sheer size" (p. 325) rather than concede representation to minority voters. In a similar vein, I seek to explain the diffusion of voter ID laws based on the concept of a "majority gap," defined as the surplus of the population belonging to the majority (White Americans) in relation to the size of all minority groups combined. Specifically, I argue that the threat posed to the establishment by the growing size of racial minorities in the United States (the so-called "racial threat hypothesis"; Blalock 1967; Giles and Hertz 1994; Horowitz 2000) and the consequent shrinking of the majority gap contribute to explaining the surfacing and exacerbation of voter ID requirements. As this surplus decreases, demands for representation from the growing minority groups will increase. In this sense, identification laws are a tool that is exploited by the elites to safeguard the status quo of white dominance of the social hierarchy.

In practical terms, identification requirements are conceived as a legal device for legislators representing white majorities in their constituencies to effectively impose a burden on the more underprivileged members of society, resulting in potential disenfranchisement and reduced political engagement by functioning as a poll tax in disguise. According to this logic, ID laws would serve the purpose of "gatekeeping" the polls to keep white legislatures and congressional districts white, as suggested by the quotes presented in the introduction. This follows from the observation that, in 1990, all states except for Hawaii had a positive majority surplus of (non-Hispanic) Whites. Yet, this is no longer the case. Figure S1 (in the Supporting Information) shows the size of the (non-Hispanic) white group as a share of the total population in the fifty states in 2000 and 2020 based on 2020 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) population
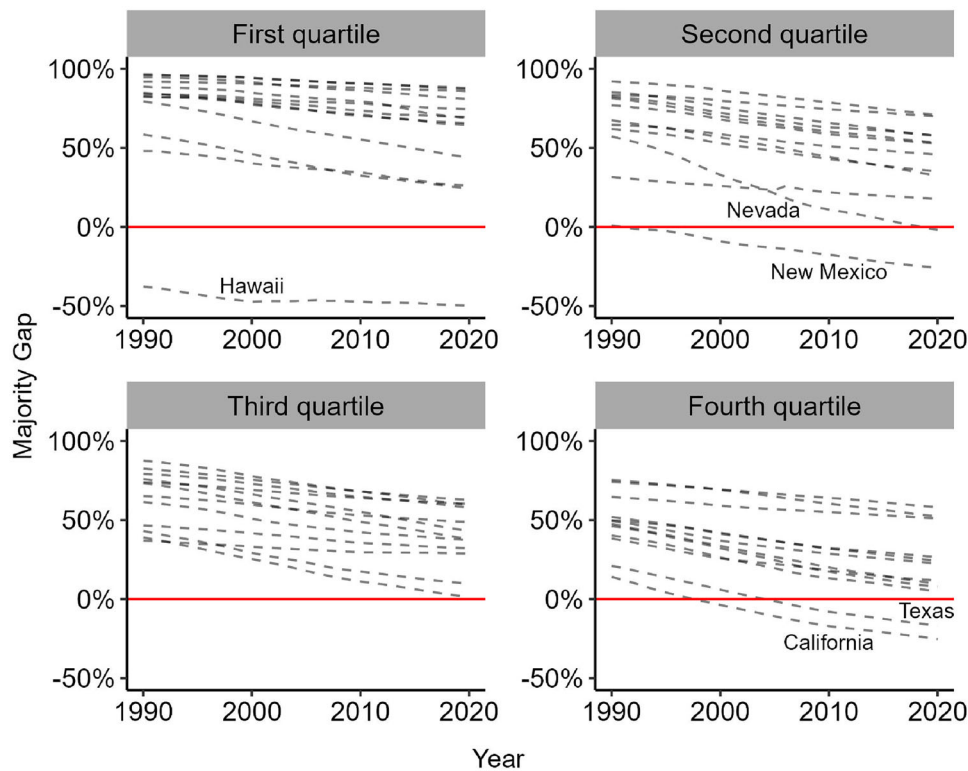
FIGURE 3 | Majority gap 1990–2020.

estimates. Since 1990, the size of the (non-Hispanic) white group has drastically declined.

Figure 3 plots the majority gap trend for each state between 1990 and 2020.[13] For instance, a value of 39% in Maryland in 1990 indicates that, in that particular year, the group of (non-Hispanic) Whites was 39 percentage points larger than all the minority groups combined, that is, the white majority surplus was 39 percentage points. All states consistently exhibit a negative trend. Several states, such as California and Texas, have fallen below 0 (red line), which implies that the share of racial minorities combined is now larger than the white group. Still, for example, in 2023, the Texas State Legislature had a total of 99/181 members identifying as white (16 Democrats and 83 Republicans) and 46/181 members identifying as Hispanic. However, if the legislature were to accurately reflect the racial composition of the Texas population, those numbers would be, respectively, 71 and 73. Thus, although (non-Hispanic) white Texans are not the majority, the majority in the state assembly is white (approximately 55%) (Ura and Astudillo 2023).

The decline of white majorities has certainly not gone unnoticed (e.g., Craig and Richeson 2017; Verdugo and Swanson 2024). A burgeoning literature has been exploring its political and social consequences (see Craig et al. 2018), including higher hostility toward members of immigrant groups and stronger white racial consciousness as driving forces in American politics (Jardina 2019, 2021) and increased salience of racial attitudes (e.g., Reny et al. 2019). In general, partisans are becoming more polarized on matters of race, with heightened levels of ethnic and racial resentment among white Republicans in particular

(e.g., Abramowitz and McCoy 2019; Smith et al. 2020; Jardina and Ollerenshaw 2022). As Jardina (2019) concludes, "Whites' desire to protect their group's interests plays a key role in today's most important and pressing political and social issues […]. Most importantly, white racial solidarity is a pivotal factor in contemporary electoral politics" (p. 4).

Given the dwindling majority gaps, with virtually all states on the path to negative surpluses, I theorize that the surfacing and intensification of voter identification requirements is an attempt at preserving the status quo on the part of the dominant elites in response to the threat posed by the growing size of racial minorities. If this is true, the implication that can be derived is that, as the majority gap shrinks, we should expect to see an expansion in ID laws. However, we should expect to see this effect being moderated by partisanship (political competition). The first clue that partisanship matters is, of course, the data on voter identification proposals discussed above. As we have seen, GOP legislators present, on average, voter ID-related proposals twice as often as Democratic legislators. As Harden and Campos (2023) point out:

> The laws' proponents—primarily politicians in the Republican Party—claim that they prevent voter fraud, while Democratic opponents denounce the disproportionate burden they place on historically disadvantaged groups such as the poor and people of color. While these positions may reflect sincerely held beliefs, they also align with the political parties' rational electoral strategies because the groups most likely to be

> disenfranchised by the laws tend to support Democratic candidates. (p. 1)

Fraga (2018) illustrates that "minority voter turnout is higher when they comprise a sizable share of the potential electorate" (p. 193). This plausibly incentivizes the introduction of more restrictive voting provisions on the part of GOP lawmakers in particular since minority groups tend to overwhelmingly vote for Democratic candidates. Conversely, a majority of White Americans supported the Republican Party in recent elections.[14]

In essence, the fear of "white replacement" and status threat posed by minorities and considerations related to political competition can both factor into legislators' decisions to introduce and/or increase the strictness of voter ID provisions. To be clear, the presence of identification requirements as a potential means to disenfranchise racial minorities does not diminish the relevance of other government-installed instruments that can work toward the preservation of the status quo (majoritarian electoral laws, law-abidingness requirements, strategic redistricting, etc.). For example, as of this writing, in five of the ten states with strict requirements in 2020, ballot drop boxes are not available.[15] In seven strict-requirement states, voting by mail is also not permitted. Restricting the options available to the public, such as the lack of drop boxes or mail voting, and introducing institutional barriers to voting, such as ID laws, make the act of casting a ballot less accessible and more impractical. This is unnerving, considering that, as shown by Federal Reserve data, in 2020, the average household net worth and income (and, therefore, the disposable income) of Blacks and Hispanics was almost six times lower than that of White Americans (Aladangady and Forde 2021). Altogether, these mechanisms might make up a toolkit for white-dominated state legislatures striving to maintain social, executive, and legislative control in the face of growing groups that threaten the majority status of the white group.

5 | Data and Empirical Strategy

My goal is to test the hypothesis that a shrinking majority gap is associated with an expansion in ID requirements and that this effect is conditional on partisanship. I collected data on the types of identification laws in each state between 2000 and 2020 from the National Conference of State Legislatures. My dependent variable is an index that measures the severity of the requirements. The variable ranges from 0 to 4, where 0 = No identification requirements; 1 = permissive, no-photo requirements; 2 = permissive, photo requirements; 3 = strict, no-photo requirements; 4 = strict, photo requirements. Constructing the outcome variable in this way allows me to map cross-sectional differences vis-à-vis ID provisions across states and track their expansion over time (see Figures 1 and 2).

To investigate how the narrowing majority gap affects the severity of ID requirements, I rely on the 2020 CDC population estimate to create a continuous variable that measures the size of the majority surplus. As I anticipated, this variable tells us the extent to which White Americans exceed other racial groups, measured in percentage points (see Figure 3). For example, a value of 0.50 means that, in a given state, in a given year, the white group was 50 percentage points larger than the size of all racial minorities combined. By construction, the variable ranges from −1 to 1, where 0 indicates perfect parity between the share of White Americans and the added share of non-white groups (Hispanics, Blacks, Asians, and Native Americans). It follows that any value above 0 indicates that Whites represent the majority, and any value below 0 indicates that Whites are not (or no longer) the majority.

I also want to explore partisanship's intensifying (or moderating) effect. To this end, I use data kindly provided by the National Conference of State Legislatures on the partisan composition of state legislatures between 2000 and 2020. I created a categorical variable that takes a value of 0 if both the State House and Senate were controlled by the Democratic Party in a given year ("Unified Democratic," the reference category), 1 if both were controlled by the Republican Party ("Unified Republican"), 2 if each chamber was controlled by a different party ("Divided"). In this case, controlling a chamber means holding the majority (50%+1) of seats. Moreover, I employ the dataset on U.S. governors compiled by Kaplan (2021) to produce a variable that records the party of the state governor in a given year. The variable takes a value of 0 for Democratic Governors and 1 for Republican Governors.[16] When two governors were in office in the same year (i.e., election year or replacement), I recorded the party of the governor who was in office on January 1 of that year because gubernatorial elections usually take place in November. Therefore, the outgoing governor is normally in office for the majority of that year.

Finally, to account for the potential variation induced by *Shelby County v. Holder*, I generated a binary indicator that takes value 1 for the years following the U.S. Supreme Court decision to eliminate the preclearance requirements and a binary indicator that takes value 1 for the states requiring preclearance under the *Voting Rights Act*. It is possible that the outcome of the Supreme Court case might have (indirectly) affected the states not subject to the preclearance requirements by signaling that challenges may be less likely to be affirmed by SCOTUS, making legislatures potentially more prone to the expansion of identification requirements.[17] These controls are included as a robustness check in the models presented in the Supporting Information.

The structure of the data is state-year. Included are all 50 states (except for Nebraska, due to the nominally nonpartisan nature of the elected legislature) between 2000 and 2020. I estimate a linear model with unconditional effects (model 1), one with an interaction between the majority gap and partisan control variable to capture the hypothesized conditional effect (model 2), and one with the interaction term and the governor's party affiliation variable as a control (model 3). Furthermore, I combined the state legislature and governor's office as an alternative operationalization of partisan control. This new categorical variable takes value 0 if the Democrats controlled both chambers and the governor's office (the reference category), 1 if all three were controlled by the GOP, and 2 if control was divided. This alternative operationalization features in model 4. The majority gap variable is lagged such that a decrease in the surplus of White Americans in state *i*, year *t* would be reflected in a policy change in state *i*, year *t* + 1. All four models include state and year fixed effects to capture potential unobserved heterogeneity and

TABLE 3 | Two-way fixed effects regressions of voter ID requirements.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Intercept	0.62 (1.33)	0.42 (1.28)	0.34 (1.29)	0.11 (1.29)
Majority Gap$_{t-1}$	0.39 (3.02)	0.04 (2.87)	0.28 (2.85)	−0.42 (2.87)
Control:Unified Republican$_t$ (Ref. Unified Democratic)	0.38* (0.20)	1.25** (0.58)	1.15** (0.58)	1.27*** (0.47)
Control:Divided$_t$ (Ref. Unified Democratic)	0.10 (0.15)	0.31 (0.26)	0.28 (0.27)	0.14 (0.10)
Majority Gap$_{t-1}$ × Unified Republican$_t$ (Ref. Unified Democratic)		1.72** (0.86)	1.59* (0.85)	1.48* (0.85)
Majority Gap$_{t-1}$ × Divided$_t$ (Ref. Unified Democratic)		0.54 (0.46)	0.45 (0.48)	0.23 (0.20)
Republican Governor$_t$ (Ref. Democratic Governor)			0.22* (0.12)	
State FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	980	980	980	980
R^2	0.65	0.66	0.67	0.67

Note: State-clustered standard errors are in parentheses.

***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.10$;
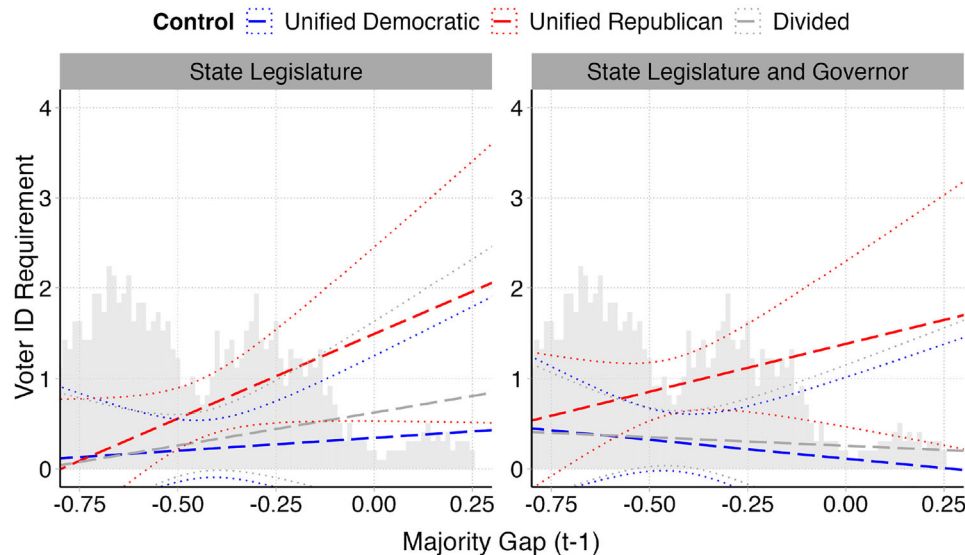
FIGURE 4 | Predicted values of voter ID requirements (90% confidence intervals).

state-clustered standard errors to adjust for the fact that observations within the same state may have correlated residuals.

Table S2 in the Supporting Information presents some descriptive statistics of the variables mentioned in this section. To make the interpretation of my results more intuitive, I reversed the majority gap variable. This way, an *increase* in the majority gap corresponds to a *reduction* in the surplus of White Americans. In the next section, I present the results and discuss some implications.

6 | Results and Discussion

The estimation of the models described in the previous section yields the following results:

Beginning with the constitutive terms (Table 3, column 3), the "Majority Gap" coefficient is positive but not significant at the

conventional level. This means that we cannot confidently conclude that the effect of an increase in the majority gap when both chambers of the state legislature are controlled by the Democratic Party is statistically different from 0. Interestingly, including the office of the governor in the operationalization of unified control (Table 3, column 4) yields a negative estimate, although the coefficient is likewise not significant at the conventional levels. The "Unified Republican" coefficient is, instead, significant at the conventional level and uniform (positive) across models 3 and 4. This suggests that voter identification requirements progress when the Republicans control the state legislature (and the governor's office) in a scenario where racial parity between the white group and the non-white groups is achieved at $t-1$ (i.e., when Majority Gap$_{t-1} = 0$).

To facilitate the interpretation of the interaction terms, I turn to Figure 4. In the left panel (model 3), the plot shows the

predicted values of the dependent variable when control of the state legislature is unified Democratic (blue), unified Republican (red), or divided (gray) across a range of common majority gap values, controlling for the governor's partisanship. The right panel (model 4) shows the predicted values of the dependent variable when control of both chambers of the state legislature and governor's office are united Democratic (blue), unified Republican (red), or divided (gray) across the same range of majority gap values.

Looking at the left panel, the results suggest that when the Republican Party controls the House and the Senate in a state legislature, there is a strong, positive relationship between the shrinking magnitude of the majority gap and a subsequent expansion in voter ID requirements. The coefficient (1.59) is statistically significant at the conventional levels. Substantively, as we move from a scenario where the surplus of White Americans ranges from 75 to 50 percentage points to one where racial parity is achieved, identification requirements level up by almost two categories. The relationship appears to be positive, but considerably less strong, in the case of divided control. However, the "Divided" coefficient (0.45) fails to reach statistical significance at the conventional levels. Looking at the right panel, in which case the operationalization of unified control includes the governor's office as opposed to simply controlling for the governor's party affiliation, we can see that the predictions in the case of unified Republican control are almost identical to the left panel. The coefficient is slightly smaller in magnitude (1.48) and statistically significant at the conventional levels. Conversely, in the divided and unified Democratic cases, the plots show a weak, negative relationship (not significant).

For robustness, I tested several alternative specifications (pooled, state fixed effects only, and state random effects, all three including the post-Shelby and preclearance as additional controls) and a nonlinear approach (ordinal logit). The results, available in the Supporting Information (Tables S3 and S4), are largely consistent with the estimates presented in Table 3.

Overall, this evidence is in line with the existing research on the introduction of voter ID laws (Bentele and O'Brien 2013; Hicks et al. 2015; Hicks et al. 2016; Biggers and Hanmer 2017) and recent literature highlighting the effect of partisanship on state democratic performance (Grumbach 2023) and how changes in the Republicans' positions on issues that threaten White Americans' sense of dominant group status swayed candidate preferences in recent years as opposed to economic well-being (Mutz 2018). Additionally, the evidence complements studies demonstrating how the Republican Party is active on multiple fronts to "leverage on its sheer size." For example, Republican gerrymandering increased dramatically after 2011, and bias was most extreme in states with racial segregation where Republicans drew the maps (Keena et al. 2021). Institutional mechanisms also work in tandem with "softer" strategies scholars have called attention to, such as the fueling of racial resentment (Garcia and Stout 2020) and the consistently reduced support provided by the GOP to minority candidates in primary elections compared to the Democratic Party (Hassell and Visalvanich 2019).

These findings contribute to the research on the disenfranchisement of racial minorities by filling some of the lacunae vis-à-vis the progression of voter ID laws as a legal device for white-controlled state legislatures to potentially "gatekeep" the polls. Taken altogether, the analysis paints a grim picture. Faced with shrinking majority surpluses, Republican State legislators appear to be more prone to the introduction or tightening of ID provisions. As the Democratic and Independent bases grow more racially diverse, the GOP remains primarily white (Newport 2013) and is, as a consequence, more threatened by the loss of the majority status of White Americans. Several additional formal and informal avenues for disenfranchisement deserve further exploration: new requirements for absentee voting, the suppression or relocation of ballot drop boxes, and the exacerbation of law-abidingness requirements, all potential tools that contribute to preserving the racial makeup of state assemblies.

Endnotes

[1] For example, Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued an order limiting ballot drop box locations before the 2020 presidential election. The decision was upheld by the Texas Supreme Court (Killough and Kelly 2020).

[2] Data collected by the author from the State Elections Legislation Database compiled by the National Conference of State Legislatures (https://www.ncsl.org/, last accessed: May 20, 2025).

[3] 2021: Michigan (twice); 2017: Virginia (three times); 2012: Minnesota, New Hampshire, and North Carolina; 2011: Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, and North Carolina.

[4] Of 490 state-year data points (2011–2020), the divided cases are 38 (less than 8%).

[5] Erikson and Minnite (2009) and Grimmer et al. (2018) discuss the challenges associated with evaluating the impact of voter ID requirements; see Highton (2017) for a more comprehensive literature review up to 2017.

[6] North Dakota is, perhaps, the most extreme example, with strict, no-photo requirements to vote (absentee or in person) but no registration requirements at all.

[7] Data collected by the author from the National Conference of State Legislatures.

[8] The history of regulation related to the conduct of elections can be found in the South Carolina Code of Laws, available on the state legislature website: https://www.scstatehouse.gov/code/t07c013.php. Last accessed: May 16, 2025.

[9] https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/553/181/, last accessed: May 16, 2025.

[10] See also Conover and Miller (2018) on partisan framing of voter ID requirements and Gronke et al. (2019) on public attitudes about these laws.

[11] See https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/570/529/, last accessed: May 16, 2025.

[12] Only temporarily in North Dakota. The state transitioned from strict, no-photo requirements to permissive, no-photo requirements in 2016 but restored the strict requirements in 2018.

[13] The states are grouped by population quartiles based on 2020 CDC population estimates. The first quartile includes the least populous states (e.g., Delaware, Rhode Island). The fourth quartile includes the most populous ones (e.g., Florida, New York). Borrowing from the CDC labels, the gap is measured by computing the difference between "non-Hispanic Whites" and "(White) Hispanics," "Blacks," "Asians," and "Native Americans."

[14] https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/07/12/voting-patterns-in-the-2022-elections/, last accessed: May 19, 2025. Election statistics indicate that, between 2018 and 2022, over 90% of Black voters supported the Democratic Party. In 2018, over 70% of Asian and Hispanic voters supported the Democrats, although these numbers dropped to 68% and 60%, respectively, in 2022.

[15] In North Dakota, drop boxes are available in some (but not all) counties.

[16] The three cases of independent or third-party governors (Alaska 2015–2018, Maine 2000–2003, and Minnesota 2000–2003) were coded as a 0, i.e., grouped with the Democratic governors.

[17] See Weinstein-Tull (2016) on federalism and states' discretion over election law.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Table S1: Voter ID Requirement by State (2020) Figure S1: Share of (Non-Hispanic) White Population by State in 2000 vs. 2020 Table S2: Descriptive Statistics Table S3: Alternative Specifications Table S4: Ordinal Logistic Regression of DV