

Whom Can I Trust?

Exploring the American Public's Favored Sources of Election Information

Katie Harbath, Collier Fernekes, Rachel Orey, Mara Suttman-Lea, Michael Wagner

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This paper explores the relationship between American voters' preferred sources of election information and their confidence election results. We draw from a nationally representative survey conducted in October of 2022, with an oversampling of registered voters Colorado, Georgia, and Wisconsin. The centerpiece of this survey was a set of questions that asked respondents to choose three preferred messengers and sources of election information from a list including their local election official, their state election official, social media, blogs, podcasts, and more. This question was asked three times about different pieces of election-related information: how to vote, election processes, and election results.

The key question we consider in this paper is whether there is a relationship between respondents' preferred messengers and sources on each dimension of election information and overall voter confidence. We focus specifically on developing and testing expectations for whether respondents who selected state and local election offices as their preferred sources of information have greater confidence in ballot counting, but also examine these relationships for other preferred sources selected by respondents.

The goal of this analysis is to establish whether there is a link between the sources respondents *choose* or *prefer* for election information and confidence in ballot counting at the personal (voters' personal or community's votes) and national (state or national results) levels. We focus on these two levels of voter confidence because of the established gap between them; on average, individuals are far less likely to trust that ballots cast across the country were counted as intended, relative to their own vote. We anticipate that individuals who preferred state and local election officials as official sources of information will be most likely to express confidence in ballot counting for both measures of confidence, relative to their counterparts who selected other sources of information.

Timeline

<i>October 2022</i>	Conduct survey (survey instrument)
<i>November 2022</i>	Initial analysis released before midterms
<i>December 2022 - January 2023</i>	Clarifying hypothesis and conducting regression analysis (<i>we are here!</i>)
<i>January - March 2023</i>	Comparing dataset against other research and surveys done around the midterm election, concluding analyses, and drafting academic papers

Initial Findings

State and local chief election officials are highly preferred for delivering election information across political party affiliation, age, and other key demographics relative to other messengers for information about voting and how elections are run. For information about who won an election, voters are most likely to look to national television, local television, or a search engine. ([Appendix A](#))

Initial regression analysis reveals that selection of a state or local election official as a preferred source of election information does not have a consistent, statistically significant relationship with confidence in state or national election results, but may improve confidence at the local level. Other factors, such as party affiliation and education, have consistent statistically significant relationships with voter confidence at the local and national levels. Among Republicans, affiliation with the MAGA movement has a statistically significant, negative relationship with confidence.

Republicans exhibit lower trust across messengers, even when the messenger is from their own party. Voters nationally are more likely to agree with a statement that election results can be trusted when it is made by their chief state election official, rather than a Republican or Democratic party leader. Even when the statement that 'Election results can be trusted because they reflect an accurate counting of valid votes' is made by a Republican party leader, only 34% of Republicans agreed with the statement (with 36% disagreeing, with the remaining neutral or unsure). We anticipate that much of our subsequent analysis will focus on exploring the relationship between preferred messengers and intraparty rifts in voter confidence among Republicans.

Next Steps

The richness of the dataset provides a litany of potential avenues to explore. Thus far, our analysis has focused on partisan trends in voter confidence and the relationship between selection of an election official as a preferred messenger and confidence in results. Moving forward, we hope to assess the potential role of alternative messengers and explore state-specific trends in Colorado, Georgia, and Wisconsin.

Over the coming months, we will develop a paper for submission to an academic journal exploring our primary hypothesis about election officials as preferred sources of election information. We will also develop a series of smaller forum pieces investigating other themes for submission to Public Opinion Quarterly.

We also plan to develop a paper in which we will merge these survey data with state and local election official communications to explore whether the *messages* election officials are sharing in their capacity as *messengers* of election information impact voter confidence. Specifically, we will examine the relationship between state and local election official use of the National Association of Secretaries of State #trustedinfo2022 campaign, voter confidence, and preferred sources of election information.

Challenges and requests for input

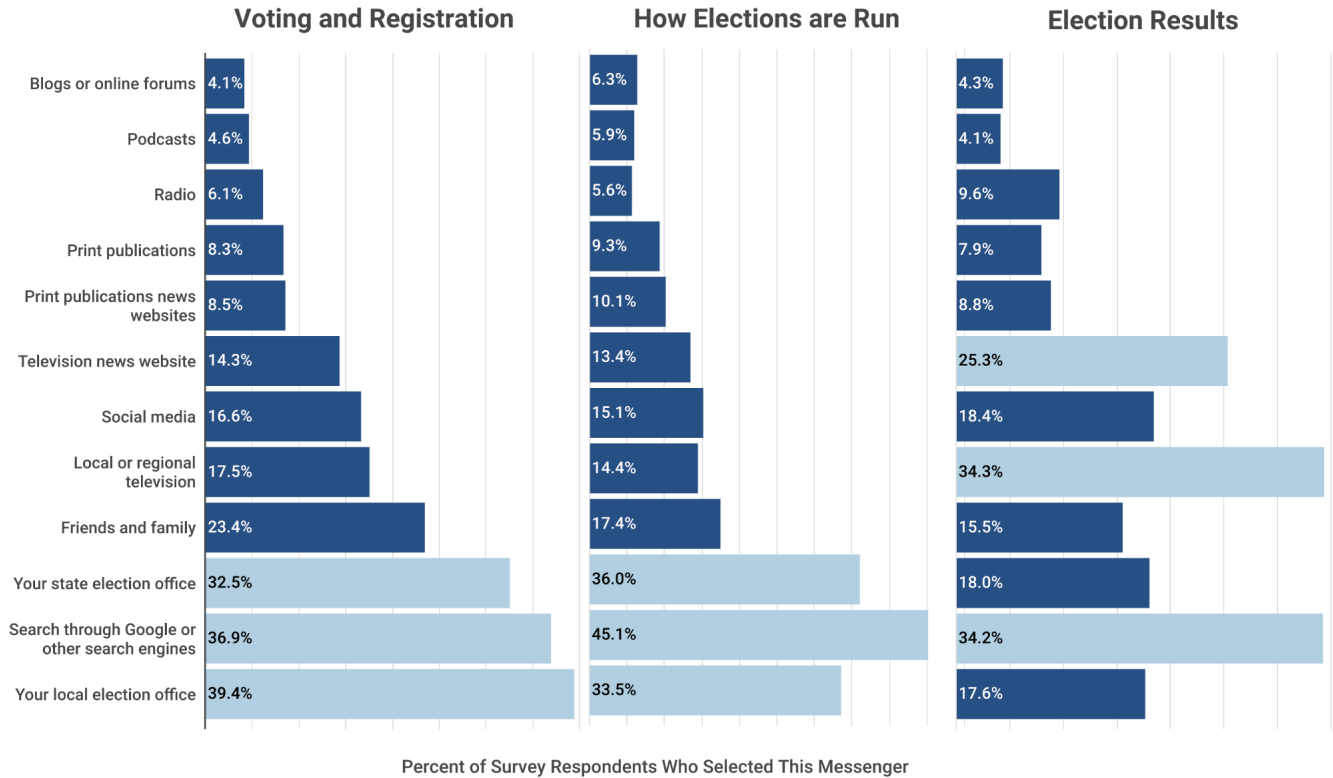
As noted above, the centerpiece of our survey was a series of questions that asked respondents to select three preferred messengers and sources of election information (see questions and full list of messengers and sources in [Appendix B](#)). As we begin our analysis, one challenge we are facing is how to conceptualize different categories of information sources. For example, a search engine or social media platform presents information differently--and, likely, in a more biased manner--than an election office or even television news site. A search engine or social media platform can be a vehicle of election information from a trusted source (like an election office Facebook page), or a vehicle of misinformation.

Additionally, there is likely a notable gap between where voters say they would look to for election information and where they actually receive it on a day-to-day basis. While a survey respondent might prefer to receive information from their state or local election office rather than their family and friends, information received from sources other than those explicitly chosen are still likely to impact confidence.

Appendix A

Where Voters Look for Different Types of Election Information

Respondents were asked where they would look for information on how to register and vote, how elections are run, and who wins an election. They were asked to select up to three options.



Appendix B: Excerpt from Survey Instrument

The same options were given for each question and were presented in a randomized order.

BPC1 In the United States, there is information voters need to register and vote. Where are you most likely to look for this information? You may select up to 3 choices.

BPC3 If you wanted to know more about how elections are run in the United States, where would you be most likely to look for that information? You may select up to 3 choices. .

BPC5 If you are interested in learning about the winner of an election, what source would you be most likely to look to for results? You may select up to 3 choices.

1. National television
2. Local or regional television
3. Radio
4. Print publications, such as newspapers or magazines
5. Print publications news websites
6. Television news website

7. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram
8. Search through Google or other search engines
9. Podcasts
10. Friends and family
11. Blogs or online forums
12. Your state election office
13. Your local election office
14. Other, please specify
15. I do not consume information about how to vote
16. Don't know/ no opinion