

COMMUNICATING WITH VOTERS TO BUILD TRUST IN THE U.S. ELECTION SYSTEM

BEST PRACTICES AND NEW AREAS FOR RESEARCH

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SUMMARY

The stability of democracy depends in part on public belief in the legitimacy of elections, which has been called into question in the U.S. We review the factors that affect confidence in elections, identifying relevant findings from academic studies conducted here and around the world and discussing the limitations of existing research.

Attitudes toward elections are based on people's experiences and what they hear from the media, elites, and experts. Losers are more prone to distrust election results, but the level and persistence of distrust is shaped by elite messages and electoral expectations.

One approach to reducing distrust would be to strengthen election security, but public opinion is only weakly responsive to changes in policy or outcomes, especially for low salience issues. The effects of such changes on the behavior of elites are thus crucial.

Messages about elections can affect public confidence, but it seems easier to damage confidence than to strengthen it. Promising approaches include affirming messages from co-partisans, factual information about election security, and non-partisan observers.

Reporting of election results faces challenges given delays in counting and shifts in vote margins that are

often highlighted in news coverage. Explaining the timelines on which votes are counted and the reasons for delays are important steps to take and to study.

Finally, Black Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities often express lower trust that their own vote was counted accurately. However, their confidence in the national vote count varies with respect to other groups depending on the electoral context.

We highlight several areas in which more research is needed. In particular, we know little about the real-world effects of various proposed reforms and messages on voter trust. We suggest that collaborations between election officials and academics would be a fruitful way to provide this much-needed evidence. These collaborations would marry the real-world context of reforms with the power of randomized experiments.

1. INTRODUCTION

The stability of democracy depends in part on public belief in the legitimacy of the elections that determine who holds power. Those beliefs have been undermined in recent years in the U.S., enabling an unprecedented effort to overturn a presidential election that culminated in a violent insurrection. Though power was eventually transferred to a new administration, the effects of the attack on the election system continue to linger. Despite the lack of any evidence of widespread fraud, one recent survey found, for instance, that only 36% of Republicans accept Joe Biden as the rightful winner of the 2020 election and that 58% say it is appropriate to describe the events of January 6, 2021 as a legitimate protest (Bright Line Watch 2023).

In this white paper, we therefore first review the factors that promote or undermine public confidence in election results as well as election systems more generally. We then consider the likely impact of three different approaches to improving public confidence in elections: seeking to improve public confidence by making elections objectively more secure, providing messages to the public about election security and the lack of widespread fraud, and improving the manner in which election processes and results are communicated to the public. In each section, our goal is to provide a frank assessment of the theoretical and empirical evidence for or against the interventions that relevant officials and institutions—such as election administrators, tech platforms, and news outlets—could undertake. We provide citations where possible to ground our conclusions in the scientific literature, drawing from research on U.S. elections as well as findings from other democracies.

In general, our findings highlight the influence of elite messaging in creating partisan distrust of elections and the challenges of overcoming it. Communications stating that U.S. elections are secure and reforms designed to further strengthen security are important to undertake, but their effects are likely small on average. It is therefore vital for election officials to partner with scholars to systematically test the effects of such interventions in randomized controlled trials when possible, and to develop and test new interventions that could have larger substantive effects. We discuss directions for future research along these lines below.

Given existing levels of partisan distrust, it is important to pursue realistic goals. First, do no harm—some efforts to promote public trust may be counterproductive. Without systematic evidence, we do not know

which interventions election officials should pursue. Second, election officials should contribute to cumulative flows of accurate information. No single statement will restore public trust in elections, but together they can help on the margin. For instance, as evidence has accumulated against claims that the 2020 election was stolen, the percentage of Republicans who say their belief that Joe Biden was not the legitimate winner is based on “suspicion only” doubled from 15% to 30% while the percentage who say it is based on “solid evidence” declined from 54% to 33% (Blake 2023). Finally, election administrations and civil society should seek to promote resilience against efforts to undermine the legitimacy of elections. For instance, improving election administration may not directly increase public trust, but it could reduce the number of errors and problems during elections that could be exploited by bad-faith actors (e.g., what happened in Antrim County, Michigan in 2020). Similarly, efforts to promote accurate information about elections in partnership with the media may increase public understanding of the process and thereby reduce the impact of future attacks.

Any interventions should further be situated in a context of structural and institutional features that may work against their effectiveness at building trust in elections. In particular, the U.S. is marked by a partisan media environment that may foster unreasonable expectations about the outcomes of elections, a polarized two-party system that increases the stakes of electoral outcomes, and a decentralized election administration system that creates disparities in electoral procedures and performance across state and local contexts. Decisions about which interventions to pursue should account for these specific features.

Before we proceed further, we wish to provide a clarification on the scope of this review. Our discussion largely focuses on how to address new threats to public trust and confidence, which are currently oriented along partisan lines. We acknowledge the long history of disenfranchisement of marginalized communities, the distrust it has created in the election system, and recommend other sources that address the causes of distrust in these communities and its consequences for political participation and democratic legitimacy (e.g., Fraga 2018). We discuss these issues further in the final section below.

2. SOURCES OF CONFIDENCE AND CAUSES OF DISTRUST IN ELECTIONS

We begin by summarizing the factors that shape individual confidence in elections. People’s attitudes are based in part on their own experiences with the electoral process and election administration. What they do not experience firsthand, they learn about from the news media, elites, and experts. They must process what they learn as they confront two potentially conflicting goals. As work on information processing tells us (Kunda 1990), individuals may be motivated by “accuracy” goals (acquiring factually correct information) or “directional” goals (acquiring information that is politically congenial). They might thus strive to hold correct beliefs about an election’s integrity, but may also be motivated to rationalize the fortunes of a preferred candidate or party (e.g., blame an election loss on fraud).

Democracy depends on the losing side accepting the legitimacy of the outcome, but this process is not simple (Anderson et al. 2005). People express systematic differences in electoral trust after elections depending on whether they win or lose. Studies across a wide variety of contexts show a consistent “winner-loser gap” in which supporters of the winning party or candidate express more confidence in an election’s outcome than supporters of the losing party or candidate.

Scholars propose different mechanisms to explain the winner-loser gap. The confidence of winners may be a product of *egocentric thinking* in which people infer that the outcome is fair because they expected their candidate or party to attract widespread support or represent the expression of positive emotions generated by victory. Correspondingly, the relatively weak confidence that losers express in elections could be the result of egocentric thinking—people expect their preferred candidate or party to attract widespread support and so a loss must be the result of a flawed process—or emotions generated from the failure of one’s candidate or party. These tendencies can be exacerbated by people’s direct experiences and what they hear from external sources, but a loss alone is enough to generate a winner-loser gap in the absence of elite cues (Reller et al. 2022) or when described in a hypothetical setting (Bush and Prather 2022, p. 223). Note that existing evidence on electoral distrust in 2020 as a function of expressive responding is generally weak; belief in pervasive fraud in that election appears genu-

inely held among supporters of Donald Trump (Fahey 2022, Graham and Yair 2023).

The size of the *winner-loser gap* can vary depending on several factors such as elite confidence in the election system and alternation in power (for cross-national evidence, see Maldonado and Seligson 2014). Temporal dynamics are likely to be especially important as well. Losers may initially report low confidence in the aftermath of an election, but their confidence may rebound as time passes and co-partisan elites affirm the legitimacy of the outcome. For example, a survey of Americans conducted before and after the 2018 midterm elections showed that Democratic distrust in the midterms was much higher than Republican distrust before the election, yet there was no winner-loser gap or partisan difference in levels of trust after the election (Bush and Prather 2022, p. 221-222). This points to two possible mechanisms for a reduction in the winner-loser gap. First, as described before, Democrats lost the presidential election in 2016, but gained back the House in 2018. This may have given Democrats more confidence and is evidence of the rebound effect that follows repeated elections. Additionally, the potential for divided government in American legislative institutions may alleviate the winner-loser gap when power-sharing occurs. On the other hand, the winner-loser gap can grow or persist after repeated losses or when elites reinforce the losing side’s distrust (Anderson et al. 2005). More longitudinal studies of the winner-loser gap are needed.

Additionally, much of the winner-loser gap focuses on how to increase confidence among supporters of the losing party or candidate. While reducing distrust is valuable, there may be cases in which winners have undue confidence in the election or refuse to accept the need for reforms out of fear that doing so would undermine the legitimacy of their victory. For example, Republicans expressed significant trust in the 2016 presidential election after the victory of Donald Trump, but were 30 percentage points less likely than Democrats to say that foreign countries attempted to influence the result of the election despite the consensus of the U.S. intelligence community of such an influence campaign (Bush and Prather 2022, p. 239). Similarly, the polarization of attitudes toward elections that followed the contentious 2020 cycle was as much a result of Democrats becoming more confident as Republicans becoming more distrustful. Further research should also consider which messages best convince winners to improve the electoral process and increase election security.

More recently, it is critical to determine if the recent decline in voter confidence in the U.S., especially among Trump voters after their loss in the 2020 election is unusually persistent. Polling data provides reason for concern. Before the 2020 election, the polling firm Morning Consult found that Republicans had more confidence in U.S. elections than Democrats (Yokley 2022). However, after the 2020 election, the parties switched positions following the winner-loser gap dynamic: Donald Trump lost, and Republicans' confidence in the election decreased relative to Democrats. Strikingly, however, that winner-loser gap persisted through the 2022 midterms despite Republicans taking back control of the House. Panel data show that Republicans expressed increased confidence that votes were counted as intended at the state but not national level (Bright Line Watch 2022).

An interesting potential mechanism for the winner-loser gap in trust is *electoral expectations*. Over the course of an election campaign, citizens form expectations about the eventual outcome of the election: who will win, who will lose, and how large the margin of victory is likely to be. These expectations, of course, may not be the result of a purely objective assessment of the available evidence; partisans may be unreasonably optimistic about the chances that their preferred side prevails (Blais and Bodet 2006, Delavande and Manski 2012). Even absent any outside information, research in psychology suggests that people erroneously estimate that social preferences are closer to their own preferences than they actually are, a phenomenon that has been termed the “false consensus effect” and “social projection” (Ross et al. 1977, Robbins and Krueger 2005). These expectations may be inflated by selective exposure to pre-election polls through news media and/or selective acceptance of poll results (Searles et al. 2016, 2018, Kuru et al. 2020). Regardless of the reasons for expecting a particular outcome, the failure of that outcome to materialize may be taken as indicative of malfeasance.

We note that there is a dearth of empirical research on this point (though see Mongrain 2023 and Hollander 2014). While we are beginning to understand the causal process by which electoral expectations are formed and how to measure them (Erlich 2018, Lee-mann, Stoetzer, and Traunmueller 2021, Stoetzer, Lee-mann, and Traunmueller 2022), there are no experimental studies that manipulate electoral expectations *and* link these expectations to confidence in elections. Nonetheless, the theoretical rationale is strong.

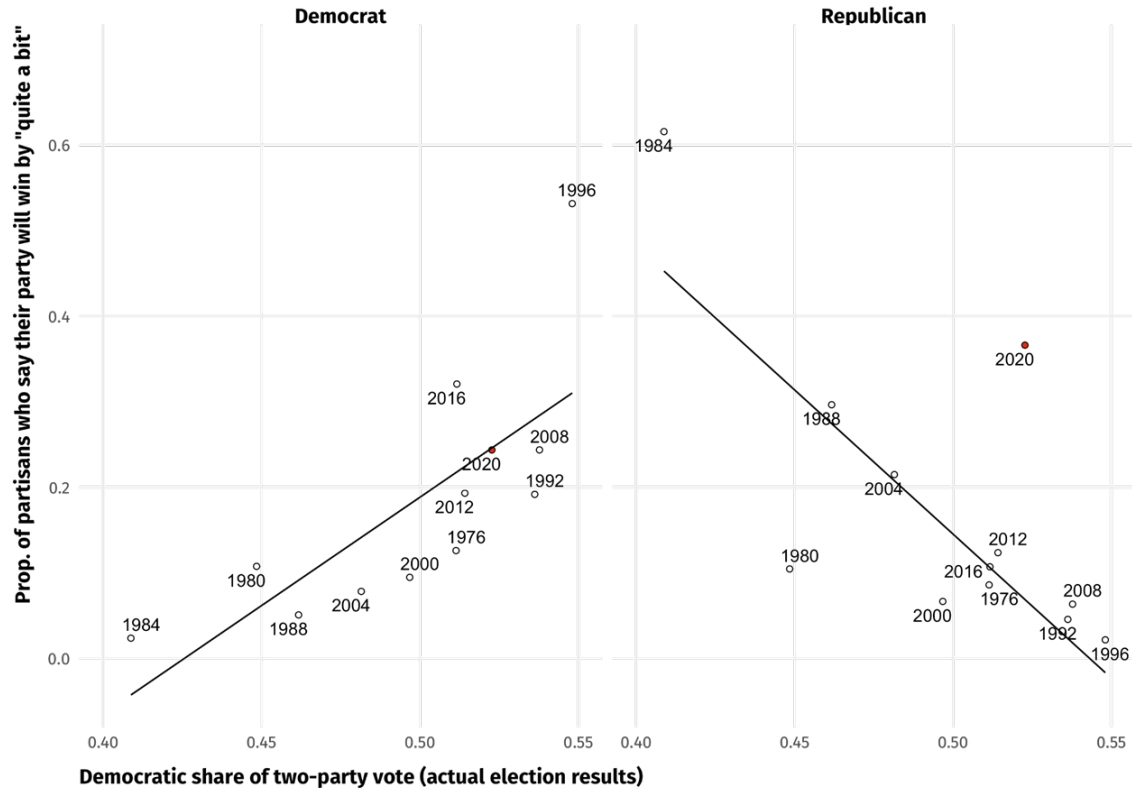
To consider the extent to which partisans have such inflated expectations, we used data from the Ameri-

can National Election Study to examine how accurate Americans' electoral expectations are. Going back decades, the ANES has asked respondents who they believe will win the election and whether or not they expect the winner to prevail by “quite a bit.” For each presidential election, we compared the proportion of Democrats and Republicans who expected a decisive victory by their party to the eventual election outcome as measured as the Democratic two-party vote share for elections from 1976-2020. The results are presented below with lines of best fit (excluding data from 2020).

As expected, there is a strong relationship between partisans' expectations and the eventual election results (e.g., Lewis-Beck and Skalaban 1989). In elections won decisively by the Republican candidate, barely any Democrats forecast a big win in their party's favor; the converse is also true for Republicans. For example, in 1984, 61.6% of Republicans expected a landslide compared to just 2.4% of Democrats; Ronald Reagan ultimately carried 49 states. By contrast, in the 1996 ANES, 53.2% of Democrats expected a Democratic landslide and 2.2% of Republicans expected a Republican landslide; Bill Clinton was reelected with a popular vote margin of 8.5 points. The one case that stands out is the 2020 election: despite Joe Biden's sizable lead in pre-election polls, nearly 37% of Republican respondents expected that Donald Trump would win the election by “quite a bit” —the second largest share since 1976 behind only the aforementioned 1984 landslide. If unexpected losers are particularly likely to doubt the integrity of elections, this data point is concerning.

As we emphasize throughout this report, *elite messaging* is of crucial importance. In the period before election day, Trump claimed he would win easily unless the election was rigged or fraudulent, which he asserted increasingly frequently (Volz and Glazer 2020). Exposure to these messages reduced trust and confidence in elections and increased beliefs that elections are rigged among his supporters (Clayton et al. 2021). This pattern continued after the election. Rather than affirming the legitimacy of his defeat, Trump's rhetoric escalated as he sought to overturn the election result (Ballhaus, Palazzolo, and Restuccia 2021). Trump's rhetoric may have interacted with inflated GOP expectations resulting from selective coverage of favorable polling in conservative outlets such as Fox News (though older evidence is more mixed on the degree of selective coverage of polling on Fox; see Groeling 2008 and Searles et al. 2016).

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In addition to partisan motivations and electoral expectations, research suggests that *personal experiences* can also affect confidence in elections. Positive and negative experiences at the polls are associated with higher or lower confidence in elections, respectively (Atkeson and Saunders 2007). For instance, evidence from the U.S. (King 2020) and other countries (Kerr 2013, 2018) suggests that people who experience delays in their ability to vote or otherwise face systematic obstacles to voting may lose confidence. The means by which an individual votes may also influence their trust in elections (Claassen et al. 2013, Alvarez, Cao, and Li 2021; but see Chapman and Clayton 2023). Future research on the relationship between voting experiences and trust in elections could benefit from longitudinal designs that track experiences and trust among the same respondents over extended time horizons.

While the importance of personal experiences in voting should not be dismissed, we note two important caveats. First, existing evidence regarding the effect of the voting experience on confidence in elections is mostly correlational. As such, the associational findings mentioned above must be interpreted carefully, especially since people with different attitudes toward elections select into different modes of voting. For instance, Democrats have recently embraced mail

voting and Republicans have decried it, confounding any attempt to draw causal conclusions about the effect of vote method on confidence in elections. One approach is to undertake more experimental research. For instance, Bryant (2020) randomly assigns voters in a fictitious election to cast an in-person or absentee ballot and finds absentee voters trust the results less. Chapman and Clayton (2023) prime the experience of voting by mail or in person using videos and find no differences in electoral trust based on voting method. However, it is difficult to combine experimental rigor with real-world stakes, making research in this domain challenging. One approach might be an encouragement design that randomly prompts a subset of participants to vote with one method versus another and surveys them afterward to measure their confidence in their vote. Another potential design could look at the phased implementation of new voting methods across different counties in the same state, ensuring that voters do not self-select into a voting method, again surveying voter confidence after ballots are cast.

The second caveat we highlight is that the vast majority of voters report a positive experience when casting their ballot regardless of the method used. For example, 97-99% of survey respondents who voted in person in six election cycles between 2008 and 2022 indicated that there were no problems with their voter registra-

tion or with the voting equipment (Stewart III 2023). Further, large majorities indicate that things were run “very well” at the polling place where they voted (78-85%) and that the job performance of poll workers was “excellent” (65-70%). Similarly, nearly every respondent who cast an absentee or mail-in ballot say there were no problems in receiving or in completing their ballot (98-99% for both). The few reports of negative personal experiences cannot explain the scale of the distrust that we document in this report. Correspondingly, seeking to reduce the frequency of negative experiences, while desirable, is unlikely to increase trust appreciably; the vast majority of people already have positive experiences.

Importantly, personal experiences are only one source of information — voters cannot observe all aspects of an election in their polling place, let alone nationwide. As a result, even voters who have positive personal experiences may instead make inferences about the quality of an election from election rules and regulations (for cross-national evidence, see Birch 2008) such as the ease and prevalence of voting by mail as well as information provided by the media, elites, and experts. As noted above, the news media (Udani, Kimball, and Fogarty 2018) and candidate cues (Vonnahme and Miller 2013) can shape public confidence in elections. Similarly, evidence from the United States and other countries shows that monitoring by independent experts such as election observers can also increase public confidence in elections where warranted (Bush and Prather 2017, 2018, 2022). Most relevantly, a 2016 study that randomized information about capable and unbiased international election monitors increased Americans’ confidence in the presidential election relative to a control of no information about election monitors (Bush and Prather 2022). More recently, 61% of Americans surveyed in 2022 said observation by non-partisan poll watchers would increase their confidence in election results—substantially more than the 43% who said the same about partisan poll watchers (Stewart III 2023).

3. WILL IMPROVING ELECTION SECURITY INCREASE PUBLIC CONFIDENCE?

Given the role that claims of fraud by the losing side play in creating distrust of elections and electoral institutions, one obvious approach to reducing distrust would be to further strengthen election security. Improving election administration might likewise help to improve people’s experiences when voting, increasing public confidence. While implementing such reforms may very well be desirable for other reasons (election officials of course wish to promote security and accessibility in general), these changes will not necessarily change public perceptions as much as reformers might hope.

In general, social science research suggests that factual evidence and objective changes in government processes and policy outcomes can affect public beliefs and attitudes, but the relationship is shaped by information flows from the media and political elites as well as the partisan loyalties of the public. For instance, factual beliefs tend to eventually move toward expert opinion on issues like smoking or climate change (Stimson and Wager 2020), but the process can take decades.

A high-profile example is the economy, the policy domain in which outcomes are most observable to the public. Evaluations of the incumbent party and government evaluations tend to track with the state of the economy and perceptions of it (e.g., Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002, Stimson 2015). However, these perceptions are affected by partisanship (e.g., Ang et al. 2022) as well as media reporting (e.g., Eggers, Ellison, and Lee 2021). Under high polarization, these relationships may break down altogether—evaluations of the economy, for instance, are no longer related to presidential approval among outpartisans (Donovan et al. 2020). As a result, President Biden’s efforts to improve the economy are unlikely to change how Republicans evaluate his performance in office.

The relationships between outcomes and perceptions are likely to be much weaker for issues that are less salient and observable to the public than the economy. For instance, Soroka and Wlezien (2010) find that the “thermostatic” relationship between government spending and demand for more government is weaker on lower-profile issues. Even welfare reform, a major

1990s social policy change, produced few changes in public attitudes, a finding that Soss and Schram (2007) attribute to its distance from people’s lives. Similarly, the Affordable Care Act—the most important legislation in decades in a policy domain that touches the lives of every American—had limited effects on public opinion (Hopkins 2023). Election administration in particular is largely unobservable except for people’s brief experience at the polls and typically produces little news absent a 2020-style crisis. As a result, the link between objective reality and subjective perceptions may be weak and elite cues may play an especially consequential role.

Efforts to change perceptions about election quality or beliefs about the prevalence of fraud are further complicated by federalism, which can diminish responsiveness (Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Election policies and outcomes vary dramatically at the state and local level, contexts that receive very little attention in our nationalized media environment (Hopkins 2018). Effectively publicizing improvements in election security is particularly challenging due to the difficulty of proving a negative (how do you demonstrate there was not widespread fraud?) and the challenges of decentralized election administration (showing fraud is less likely in one jurisdiction may not change people’s views about its likelihood elsewhere).

Despite these points, we do wish to note that improvements in election administration or security may reduce the set of negative anecdotes available to the media and losing elites, reducing the scope for distrust caused by highly publicized isolated snafus and errors. A few weak links in election administration may disproportionately shape public perceptions of elections. The news media does not cover a random sample of events, but instead gives disproportionate attention to events that are considered “newsworthy” (Soroka 2012). The absence of election administration errors is therefore not a news story. As a result, poor election administration in a single county is likely to receive more attention than the more banal reality in which thousands of decentralized units administer secure and fair elections (documenting these imbalances would be a valuable topic for future research on media coverage of elections). Unless news reports on election irregularities provide proper context, the public is likely to infer that such irregularities are more common than they really are.

We saw this pattern play out after the 2020 and 2022 elections, when genuine irregularities or routine errors in a few jurisdictions (e.g., Fulton County, Georgia in

2020 and Maricopa County, Arizona in 2022) received widespread attention.

In contrast to objective evidence, where responsiveness is often limited and partial, elite message flows can have a profound impact on public beliefs and attitudes (Zaller 1993). On climate change, for instance, elite cues have driven public attitudes apart even as the expert consensus demonstrating its existence and consequences grows stronger (Tesler 2018). Similarly, claims of fraud by Trump and his allies in 2020 diminished confidence in elections among his supporters even though experts found the election was free and fair (Clayton et al. 2021). We can therefore infer that losing candidates accepting the legitimacy of elections in which they are losing or have lost is a meaningful and important act for preserving public trust. Further research is necessary to demonstrate this finding, however. To date, the most closely related research looks at policy debates, where Esaiasson et al. (2023) finds that exposure to messages from losers in a policy debate affirming the fairness of the process increases its perceived fairness.

It is therefore critical to evaluate the factors that shape elite behavior. In some cases, the reputational or political costs of holding a position becomes too great and we witness a collapse in support (e.g., what happened on gay marriage in the U.S. between 2004 and 2012). The electoral penalty for denying the legitimacy of the 2020 election could therefore affect the messages that elites send about the security of election administration in future elections (Malzahn and Hall 2023). Under such circumstances, it is possible that modest improvements in election security could provide a pretext for politicians to revise their public positions or help buttress the elite and expert consensus that widespread voter and election fraud does not exist, thereby helping to prevent election denial among wavering candidates in future elections. Such a relationship could help explain why the decrease in trust among election losers is smaller in countries with more secure elections (Mauk 2022)—greater security helps prevent doubts from being fostered by elites. However, the implications of this claim for the U.S. are speculative; to date, we have seen no evidence of comprehensive rejection of claims of widespread fraud in the 2020 election among Republican elected officials or candidates for office.

It is of course possible that responsiveness may vary depending on the policy in question, which could include efforts to strengthen the security of vote by mail (e.g., strengthened identity verification, greater restrictions on ballot harvesting, etc.), improvements to

dropbox security (e.g., video cameras), voter ID laws, risk-limiting audits, requiring paper ballot records, election monitors, and improvements in whether most voters would learn about the policy change in question, what they are likely to hear and from whom, and how likely it is that they would update their views on the election system as a result.

For instance, we lack convincing causal evidence that voter ID laws or other restrictions on eligibility increase public confidence in elections (though see Stewart III, Ansolabehere and Persily 2016). One reason is that debate over the issue is associated with greater belief in fraud, especially among politically interested Republicans (Udani, Kimball, and Fogarty 2018). It is also not clear that the passage of such laws addresses the core issue — deterring elites from claiming widespread fraud when no such evidence exists. Indeed, devoting greater attention to the issue may strengthen incentives for elites to highlight and prosecute isolated cases of fraud. Texas and Florida, for instance, both have voter ID laws and yet have seen widely publicized criminal cases for voter fraud brought by state agencies linked to high-profile politicians (Wines 2022). On the other hand, such laws may increase credit-claiming by politicians eager to tout secure elections. Florida governor Ron DeSantis, for instance, now touts the state as “the national leader in conducting fair and secure elections” (DeSantis 2023).

In general, one of the most important factors shaping public perceptions is the messages that elites send about the security of national and state elections. It would therefore be worthwhile to conduct, for example, surveys of political elites asking them about how they regard various reforms and whether and if they would change their views or public statements about election security. Such studies face challenges in both recruiting elites to participate and in asking participants to consider hypothetical situations, but could nonetheless be valuable.

4. DO MESSAGES ABOUT ELECTION SECURITY INCREASE PUBLIC CONFIDENCE?

Voters generally learn about electoral procedures, election security, and election integrity from elite messengers. A wide body of existing research shows that messages about elections have important effects on public confidence. For instance, claims from elites about voter fraud and election security can erode confidence in elections. Both experimental (e.g., Clayton et al. 2021, Berlinski et al. 2023, Lyons and Workman 2022) and observational evidence (e.g., Pennycook and Rand 2021, Benkler et al. 2020, Arceneaux and Truex 2022) indicates that Donald Trump’s false claims about the security of the 2016 and 2020 elections decreased trust in elections among his supporters. Studies conducted prior to the 2016 election similarly demonstrate the role of candidates (Vonnhamme and Miller 2012), parties (Beaulieu 2014), and campaigns (Wolak 2014) in shaping electoral confidence via rhetoric about election security.

Fewer studies have examined how communication about elections could be leveraged to *increase* confidence in elections. One approach is to provide messages from credible co-partisan sources affirming the legitimacy of an election result. Clayton and Willer (2023) and Wuttke et al. (2023) both examine how different types of messages from Republican elites that affirm the legitimacy of the 2020 election impact election confidence among Republicans. Clayton and Willer find that messages from multiple Republican politicians increase Republicans’ trust in elections, but Wuttke et al. find that messages from two prominent Republicans (Arnold Schwarzenegger and Mitch McConnell) are ineffective, suggesting a need for more research on the conditions under which party or elite cues can increase electoral trust. Indeed, party cues may not be uniformly effective given growing conflict within the Republican Party in particular over issues such as the security of the 2020 election (see, e.g., Lee 2018). Future research could attempt to parse out whether the identity of individual elite messengers *within* a party—or cue volume overall (e.g., Berlinski et al. 2023)—underlie public confidence. It would also be worthwhile to better understand the incentives affecting elite behavior in this domain — even if co-partisan messages affirming election results have beneficial effects, many politicians may refuse to make them under current conditions.

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It is possible that messages from government authorities who are not participants in campaigns themselves may have a more consistent impact. For example, Bush and Prather (2022) find that messages from “US Government Security Officials” about the security of the 2018 midterm elections from foreign intrusion improved American confidence in the midterm elections relative to a control group that received no such messages. Similarly, election officials at the state and local level—while they have been at the center of controversies (often unfounded) and the target of violent threats in recent elections—remain a trusted source for information about election integrity. When Americans were asked which sources they trust to evaluate the fairness and integrity of elections, 50.4% chose state and local elections officials — far more than any other source (Gaudette et al. 2022). This finding suggests that election administrators, whether because of the expertise that they possess or the neutral role that they play relative to other sources of information, may be well-positioned to deliver informational messages that build trust in elections.

Especially since the 2020 election cycle, many election officials across the country have been using both traditional and social media to conduct public information campaigns aimed at building trust. These campaigns follow in the mold of public health intervention campaigns, where prior research has shown that government messaging can be strongly effective in changing public attitudes and behavior (Snyder 2006, Anker et al. 2016; but see Nyhan et al. 2014 for evidence that informational campaigns may be ineffective in controversial domains like vaccines).

The messaging approaches that election officials have used vary in their content (presenting factual explanations of election protections versus making emotional appeals to trust the individuals who administer them), in their production approach (from the highly professional to the deeply authentic), and in their messengers (who include partisan, nonpartisan, or bipartisan combinations of election officials, with variation in their race, ethnicity, and gender). Officials are currently experimenting with different approaches; we provide examples of these approaches in jurisdictions across the country in Table 1 below. Studying the potential impact of these messages through survey experiments, which could test whether they are effective, which types of messages are most persuasive, and upon what audiences they have the most impact, is an important area for further study.

One study indicates that messages produced by election officials themselves to explain how the integrity

of the voting process is protected can be effective. Gaudette et al.’s (2023) survey experiments in Colorado, Georgia, Texas, and Los Angeles County show that public information videos produced by election officials in each jurisdiction increase trust in their jurisdiction’s elections among Republicans, Democrats and independents.

Not all message campaigns by state election officials, however, are effective at increasing voter confidence. Merivaki et al. (2023) use data from social media posts by state election officials and survey data collected before and after the 2022 midterm elections to examine how trust-building social media content affects public perceptions of ballot accuracy and public trust in election officials as trusted sources of information. While exposure to social media content was associated with willingness to use state election officials as sources of information on how to register and vote, there was little evidence that trust-building messages increased confidence in ballot accuracy. In some cases, the relationship between statewide ballot confidence and seeing state election officials as top information sources on elections was actually negative.

A report commissioned by Citizen Data (2022) examined message content rather than source and tested how different messages influence beliefs about the intentions of election workers and whether election workers operate elections securely and fairly. The most effective messages focused on affirming the existence of rules and regulations that apply to both parties in the vote count process; affirming the importance of trusting the votes of the people to keep democracy safe; and affirming that trusting election officials to do their job safely and securely is necessary to protect the will of the people. Testing messages like these in a variety of settings and across a variety of outcomes is a useful area for additional research.

TABLE 1: EXAMPLES OF PUBLIC INFORMATION MESSAGES FROM ELECTION OFFICIALS

| State | Level | Title |
|----------------|-------|--|
| California | State | “Election Security in California” |
| Colorado | Local | “Denver: Inside a Risk-Limiting Audit” |
| Colorado | State | “Colorado Election Workers – Your Friends and Neighbors” |
| Florida | Local | “A Quick Intro from the Supervisor of Elections” |
| Florida | Local | “Voting by Mail in Hillsborough County” |
| Florida | Local | “PBS Sit Down with Pinellas Supervisor of Elections” |
| Florida | Local | “PBS Sit Down with Polk Supervisor of Elections” |
| Georgia | State | “Georgia Official: We’ll Defend Election Integrity” |
| Georgia | State | “Georgia Secretary of State Assures Election Process will be Open and Transparent” |
| Idaho | State | “Citizens Voting Guide: Poll Watchers and Challengers” |
| Idaho | State | “Citizens Voting Guide: Registration Management” |
| Michigan | State | “Dead People Don’t Vote in Michigan” |
| North Carolina | State | “North Carolina Logic and Accuracy Testing” |
| Ohio | State | “Ohio Post-Election Audits” |
| Pennsylvania | State | “How Philadelphia will Protect the Vote on Election Day” |
| Texas | Local | “Dallas County: Layers of Security” |
| Virginia | Local | “Democracy Defended” |

Another messaging approach is to provide specific new or corrective factual information. One approach is to improve public understanding of how elections are made secure. Evidence from the Survey on the Performance of American Elections (Stewart 2023) confirms that Americans know little about various election security measures. Across ten items, the share of respondents who indicated that they knew about a given measure ranged from 4-41%. For example, just 15% of respondents were aware that election officials conduct signature verification on mail-in ballots. Future research should assess how messages explaining the means by which elections are secured affect confidence.

An adjacent body of research has examined how various misperception corrections can affect belief in voter fraud and overall trust in elections. Experiments administered in Arizona and Georgia (also by Citizen Data) tested the impact of various types of messaging

strategies including prebunking versus debunking, varied correction dosages (high versus low), the valence of corrections (positive versus negative) and the source of corrections (trusted authority, trusted peer, or no trusted source). Their results showed that high-dose debunking strategies with negative valence were especially effective at reducing belief in election misinformation, while fanning the flames of division and/or focusing on backwards-looking messages (such as those focusing on Donald Trump or the 2020 election) can backfire. Holman and Lay (2018) and Christenson et al. (2021) also document backfire effects for election-related misperception corrections among Republicans, while Jenkins and Gomez (2022) find that explicit journalistic interventions prior to the 2020 election decreased belief in voter fraud among both Democrats and Republicans but the corrective effects disappeared for Republicans after the election.

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In another study that compared a variety of different corrective and prebunking strategies around the 2022 midterm elections, Carey et al. (2023) show that both corrective information from credible sources and prebunking strategies can be effective, and that corrections are more effective at reducing the false beliefs they target than broader views about the prevalence or impact of fraud. They do not find evidence of backfire effects using the corrective methods they test. Together, these and the aforementioned findings suggest that misperception corrections should be used cautiously as strategies to increase confidence in elections; more research is needed to determine the conditions under which corrections are effective.

A final useful study providing preliminary evidence about strategies that could increase (or decrease) trust in elections is the Strengthening Democracy Challenge, a mega-study that tested the effectiveness of 25 different crowdsourced interventions at strengthening Americans' democratic attitudes (Voelkel et al. 2023). The authors measured 2020 election denialism as a secondary outcome and found that interventions which invoked a sense of common national identity or a common exhausted majority identity both reduced denialism. An intervention that appealed to fear of democratic collapse also decreased denialism. By contrast, an intervention that highlighted the extent to which the Democratic and Republican parties overlap on policies increased denialism. While the focus of this study was not electoral confidence (and denialism was measured after a number of other outcomes), this study highlights the need for more research on whether appealing to common identities or invoking fears about the failure of democracy in the U.S. could be useful strategies for building confidence in elections.

As we noted earlier, the vast majority of voters report that casting their ballot was a positive experience with no major issues. Survey data also shows a regular pattern of decreasing trust as respondents are asked about election processes further away from them. One interpretation of this empirical regularity is that people have a hard time trusting what they cannot see. On the basis of their personal experience in casting a ballot, voters can make inferences regarding the probability that their own ballot was counted as intended. However, they do not have first-hand experience of the voting process across the country. Do citizens imagine that voters in other states report more problems? For example, does a Florida resident who trusts the local vote count but distrusts the national vote count believe that voters in, e.g., Arizona report numerous problems casting their ballot? Eliciting these perceptions and correcting them if necessary is a promising

intervention. Similar interventions on “meta-perceptions” in studies of democratic backsliding have yielded encouraging results (Braley et al. 2023, Mernyk et al. 2022, Pasek et al. 2022, but see Druckman 2022). Endorsement of the voting process from people across the country could be especially powerful when voiced by co-partisans. Similarly, the effects of credible, well-trained party monitors issuing joint statements endorsing the voting process should be studied as a potential powerful messaging force.

5. HOW DOES COMMUNICATION OF ELECTION RESULTS AFFECT PUBLIC TRUST?

Political interest and news consumption tends to peak around general elections. As a result, what happens on election night and the days surrounding is likely to exert a strong influence on voter trust. That moment thus represents both an opportunity and a risk. Attempts by election officials to communicate with voters throughout the electoral cycle, which we examined in the previous section, are important but face a difficult obstacle: capturing voters' attention. The time period surrounding a general election—and, most importantly, election night itself—is a crucial opportunity to build trust because the obstacle of attention is largely sidestepped. Tens of millions of Americans watch live coverage of presidential elections and consumption of news coverage peaks during election month (see, e.g., <https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2020/2020-election-hub/> and <https://www.washingtonpost.com/public-relations/audience-traffic/>). However, as previously discussed, the absence of problems in counting ballots and reporting results is not a story that is likely to attract much news coverage. By contrast, any (perceived) issues on and around election night are likely to be a major news story.

In this section, we consider how election results are reported and how these practices may influence voter trust. We focus on practices adopted by both election officials and the news media, though we recognize that the incentives that each group faces are different. Naturally, there are also resource constraints that limit what can be done. Overall, the available data allows us to provide a detailed description of how election results are reported (e.g., how rapidly ballots are counted or how the media covers election night). However, there is little research on the effects of different reporting practices.

The National Task Force on Election Crises (2022) lists a set of practices that state and local elections officials have considered employing in the counting and reporting of ballots to build trust that includes: (a) pre-election communication by officials to “open the black box” of how elections are administered through site tours, official websites, social media, and engagement with local media; (b) conducting public “logic and accuracy tests” of voting equipment before elections; (c) requiring video surveillance of the rooms in which ballots are processed and tabulated; (d) facilitat-

ing observation by poll watchers who are authorized, credentialed, and offered training; (e) preparing the public in advance for a rolling reporting of vote totals; and (f) conducting transparent post-election audits.

We note that when considering suggested practices, the costs and benefits of each must be kept in mind. Regarding the former, some suggested practices imply substantial financial costs, such as the acquisition of new equipment or the hiring of additional staff, while others require fewer resources to implement, such as collaborations with local media to explain the election administration process. Reforms may also imply non-financial costs. For instance, setting earlier mail deadlines may speed up the vote count, but may also lead to lower participation and disenfranchise some voters. These costs must be weighted against anticipated benefits, for which there is often a substantial degree of uncertainty. In many cases, there is a lack of solid empirical evidence regarding the likely effects of proposed practices. We highlight areas that need further research and attempt to provide theoretically-informed intuitions on the likely effects of suggested reforms.

5.1. COUNTING BALLOTS AND REPORTING RESULTS

Americans have become accustomed to the timely communication of election results. Indeed, the history of election reporting in the United States is interwoven with technological progress: in a bid to capture Americans' attention, news organizations have long sought to exploit the latest machinery to gather and communicate the most up-to-date information on the nation's decisions at the polls (Chinoy 2010). Prior to 2020, the only presidential election in recent memory that had not been decided in a matter of hours was the 2000 election, which is today remembered for poor administration that likely influenced the outcome (Wand et al. 2001).

Surveys of the American electorate show that voters expect results of elections to be reported swiftly. In a survey conducted by Voting Rights Lab (2020), 52% of respondents indicated that they expected the winner of a presidential election to be announced within three days of the election. After a week, most said that it would be hard for them to trust the final results. Similarly, a 2022 Yankelovich Center Survey found that the length of time required to count ballots was reported to be a source of distrust by 41% of Republicans and 29% of independents (but just 8% of Democrats) in a national sample of eligible voters (Gaudette et al. 2022).

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It is not clear why many Americans find rapid processing of ballots to be so valuable. Voters may have organically developed a desire to know election results shortly after the polls close because they are eager to learn about the future direction of the country. Other voters, especially Republicans in contemporary U.S. politics, associate (perceived) delays with fraud. Of course, taking longer to count ballots and certify a winner is not necessarily related to malfeasance, but many voters appear to perceive a linkage. It is also unclear whether delays in reporting within a jurisdiction relative to expectations or variance in the timing of reporting across jurisdictions drives the relationship between reporting and trust. Examining these attitudes in more detail is an important task for future research—what exactly do voters imagine when they associate delays with fraud?

Importantly, American political institutions do not require that the winners of elections be identified particularly quickly. In a presidential system with a fairly long lame-duck period between an election and the subsequent swearing-in, the need to determine winners and losers is less urgent than in a parliamentary system that relies on caretaker governments with limited authority. To be sure, election integrity groups across the world have promoted swift counting of votes as an international standard since delays are thought to allow incumbents more opportunities to manipulate the vote count. However, in the U.S. context, delays represent a nuisance more than a genuine danger. Some of the measures that can be implemented to speed up ballot counting, such as earlier deadlines for mail-in ballots, entail substantial costs. In this context, better measurement of Americans' attitudes toward vote counting and their views of these tradeoffs is an important task for future research.

There is some empirical evidence that transparently communicating the challenges involved in election administration—and how these can delay the reporting of results—can help reduce distrust. In Australia, following the 2016 federal election, which saw a four-week delay before the final outcome in the upper chamber was determined, Karp, Nai and Norris (2018) report that 70% of survey respondents considered that a four-week delay was unacceptable. However, providing reasons for the delay modestly reduced Australians' dissatisfaction: when informed that there was a delay “because of the time it takes to count the ballots,” 62% of respondents considered the delay unacceptable. This share dropped further to 56% when respondents were told that there was a delay “because many people voted by post and the Electoral Commission must allow time for the postal ballots to be returned.” Given

the recent political polarization regarding mail-in ballots in the United States, it is doubtful that these results would hold in the U.S. context. But the results remain striking given the weakness of the experimental treatment in the study (the fact that it takes time to count ballots is hardly surprising). We believe that this is a fruitful avenue for future research.

We also wish to highlight the role that the media play in helping to set expectations regarding the communication of election results. In the runup to the 2020 presidential election, numerous media outlets preempted accusations of fraud related to perceived delays in reporting results by publishing stories that explained the process of counting ballots and warned that, unlike in past elections, the result of the election were unlikely to be known within hours of the polls closing. There are reasons to doubt the efficacy of these “pre-bunking” messages. Most notably, voters who select into consumption of news outlets that produce these stories are likely to be more trusting of elections. Still, measuring the effects of such stories in future research would be worthwhile.

These challenges are reinforced by how little Americans know about election administration. To be sure, poor knowledge is the rule, not the exception, when it comes to politics (see, e.g., Lupia 2016). Nonetheless, even in the lead-up to the 2020 election, which saw unprecedented media coverage of election administration procedures, most Americans did not know how news organizations make election night calls. In an October 2020 Pew survey, just 44% of respondents correctly stated that news organizations decide to announce who has won the presidential election in a state when “they feel confident based on vote returns and other information.” 30% of respondents said they were not sure, and 26% incorrectly stated that news organizations would only call races when state officials would be ready to formally certify the results after counting ballots.

Finally, we note a crucial distinction between (a) the actual speed of vote counting (i.e., the cumulative proportion of ballots counted as time passes) and (b) the decisions by major news organizations to “call” races. It is likely that voters' overall perceptions of the process are shaped by observable processes and digestible information, which would make the latter more important than the former. All else constant, a faster pace in counting ballots enables news organizations to call races more quickly, but there are myriad other factors that influence the various “decision desks.” For instance, in the 2020 and 2022 elections, large uncertainty regarding turnout and the arrival of mail-in and

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absentee ballots led to delayed calls that, under similar circumstances in regular elections, would have been called earlier.

Are votes being counted more slowly in recent election cycles? Prior to 2020, the only presidential election in living memory whose results were not known within a day was the 2000 contest between George W. Bush and Al Gore. In terms of the share of “overtime votes”—those votes that were tallied and reported after election night—the 2020 election does not stand out compared to other recent national elections (Curiel et al. 2021). However, this metric is not salient to voters; instead, what likely matters most are the decisions of news organizations to project winners. In the 2020 presidential election, the four-day period between the election and the announcement of a Biden win by major news organizations drew much scrutiny.

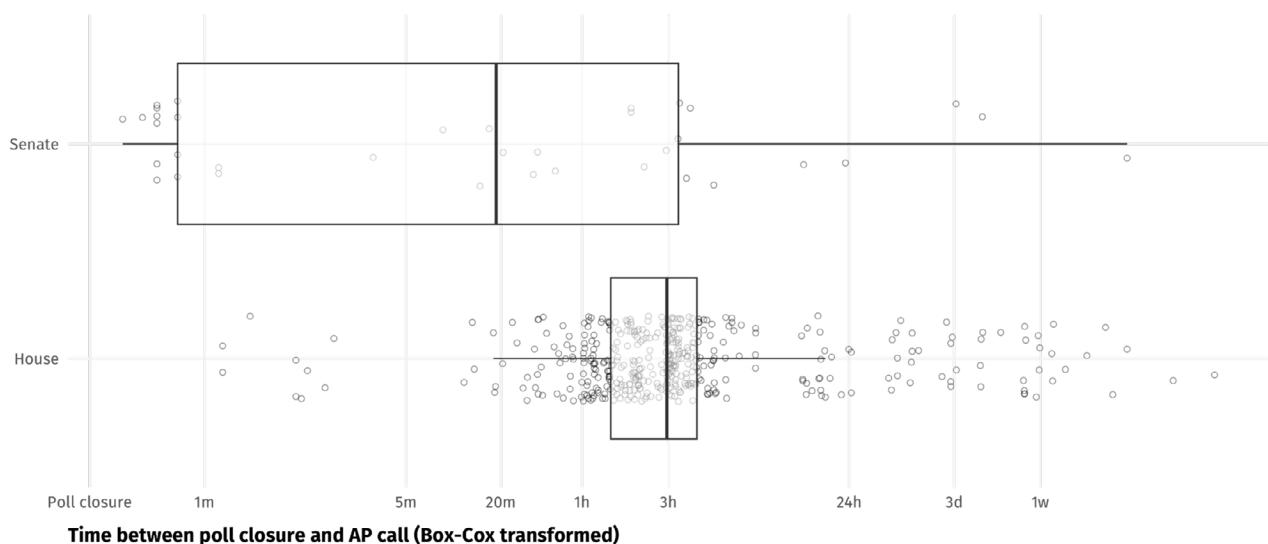
Following the 2022 midterm elections, we scraped data from the Associated Press website that indicated when each race for the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate was officially called by the organization. Given the authoritativeness of the AP’s decisions, this data speaks to how quickly elections are “resolved” in the public’s mind. Separately, we collected data on poll closure times in each state and congressional district. Below, we present an analysis of the delay between poll closure and the AP race call for all congressional elections. Each election is represented by a hollow point. The x-axis represents time since poll closure in each race (which has been logged due to the highly skewed

nature of the distribution); boxplots that summarize the distributions are overlaid. The poll closure time for the Senate election in Georgia is from the runoff election on December 6.

As the figure shows, the median House race in 2022 was called by the Associated Press within three hours of the polls closing, while the median Senate race was called within twenty minutes. These delays are well within the range that voters say is a reasonable time period for the results of an election to be announced. However, there is wide variation: some races were called as soon as the polls closed, while others were not resolved until days or even weeks afterward.

Much of this variation is related to a specificity of the U.S. election system: the highly decentralized nature of its election administration. From a comparative perspective, the United States stands out for its wide variation in the practices adopted by state and county authorities (Arceneaux 2018). Scholars of election law have debated whether or not this feature of the U.S. system is desirable. We do not take a position on this issue, but we note that the decentralized administration of elections has resulted in appreciable variation in performance across the fifty states. For instance, since the 2000 debacle, Florida has improved its election procedures and has consistently reported election results in a timely manner. In the 2022 midterm elections, the A.P. had declared winners in all U.S. House seats in Florida within 113 minutes of the polls closing. By contrast, in the same time span following poll

TIME UNTIL AP CALL AFTER POLLS CLOSE BY CHAMBER



closure, only 15 of California's 52 House districts had a declared winner; 36 hours after poll closure, just 31 races had been called.

These discrepancies in performance across states are of course not evidence of fraud. Furthermore, some may think that policies that tend to result in slower ballot counting are worth the associated costs (e.g., setting later mail ballot deadlines and allowing more lenient ballot curing procedures). However, most voters are, understandably, not familiar with the intricacies of election administration. Wide variation in ballot processing across states may well strike them as odd. The Australian data presented earlier suggests that simple explanations of the causes of (perceived) delays can help improve trust in the process. As noted above, more work on this question is required. In particular, asking voters about tradeoffs between the speediness of the vote count and other goals should be informative. In a survey conducted in early 2020 by Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies in California, 64% of registered voters stated that it is more important to "maximize opportunities given Californians to register to vote" than to ensure a faster vote count. Among Republican respondents, 39% said the same. In the abstract, voters want election results to be communicated quickly, but there are signs that highlighting the costs of speediness can make voters more understanding of (perceived) delays.

Once again, the issue facing election administrators may be a weak link problem. In consuming news reports about elections, the American public will not encounter a figure like the above, which plainly shows that most congressional races are called in a timely manner. Instead, they are likely to hear disproportionately about the extreme cases—for instance, the handful of House races in California on which control of the House of Representatives depended in 2022. Indeed, the 218th seat that House Republicans captured, which secured their majority in the chamber, was not called until eight days after election night even though the final margin exceeded six percentage points.

A separate but related issue is the so-called "blue shift," or the tendency of the votes reported after election day to skew Democratic and thus to shift the advantage to Democratic candidates (Foley 2013). For instance, in the 2008 presidential election, Democratic candidate Barack Obama led in Ohio by approximately 205,000 votes. Weeks later, the final results certified by the state showed that Obama's margin of victory was nearly 259,000 votes. Foley (2013) and Foley and Stewart (2020) show that these large blue shifts are a recent phenomenon that began with the 2004 election.

Such shifts may or may not change the ultimate outcome of an election. In the case of the 2008 election in Ohio, overtime votes (those votes counted after election day) proved inconsequential: Obama had won the presidency in a decisive manner and the blue shift only grew his lead in the state. In other instances, such as the 2022 U.S. Senate election in Nevada, the outcome of an election may hinge on the votes that arrive and are processed after election day. These latter cases have figured prominently in discussions of election integrity.

The "blue shifts" are not indicative of malfeasance. Instead, depending on the specific procedures in different counties and states, ballots are not counted in random order: ballots cast in person—which currently lean Republican—may be counted before mail-in and absentee ballots. The reality that ballots are not processed in random order is a regular feature of election night coverage: as the first returns come in, anchors often explain that an early lead may not be meaningful. It also featured prominently in pre-election coverage, when media outlets nationwide warned of a "red mirage" on election night. Still, the concept is likely a difficult idea for voters to understand. Furthermore, political elites have exploited it: in a court filing after the 2020 election, the state of Texas, the plaintiff in the case, stated that the probability of Biden winning all of Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin given the state of the race as of 3 AM on the night following the election was "less than one in a quadrillion" (Bump 2020).

In the 2020 presidential election, the absolute size of the "blue shift" was similar to that in 2016. However, the variance of the blue shift across the fifty states was much wider, creating more opportunities for politically-motivated actors to pick and choose examples. However, larger variance also implies that there were more red shifts as well. For instance, in 2020, Democratic candidate Joe Biden held a lead in North Carolina with more than 80% of ballots counted; Republican candidate Donald J. Trump ultimately won by approximately 74,000 votes. Documenting the existence of both "blue" and "red" shifts and testing the effects of learning about them could be valuable in future research.

Misunderstandings regarding the non-random processing of ballots and subsequent surprise to see margins change likely cause distrust in elections. Bright Line Watch, an organization co-founded by one of the authors of this report, conducted an experiment after the 2022 midterm elections examining confidence in the results of the Nevada race for U.S. Senate (2022).

Five days after election night, media organizations announced that Democratic incumbent Catherine Cortez Masto had won reelection. This race was notable because it became the 50th seat held by Democrats in the U.S. Senate, which ensured that they would keep control of the chamber. As a result, there was strong media interest in the outcome of the race in the days following election night. Furthermore, as more mail-in ballots from Clark County came in and were counted, Republican challenger Adam Laxalt's apparent lead gradually disappeared, which fueled accusations of malfeasance. Among Republican respondents, there was little difference in confidence in the Nevada Senate vote count between a baseline condition (45%) and a condition that mentioned the delay in announcing a winner (43%). In a condition that mentioned the delay as well as the fact that Cortez Masto trailed "until the last day of the count," just 39% of Republicans expressed confidence in the results.

5.2. INCREASING THE TRANSPARENCY OF THE VOTE COUNT

A second approach we consider is to increase the transparency of the vote count. The National Task Force on Election Crises (2022) reports that jurisdictions such as Maricopa County, AZ, Shasta County, CA, and Philadelphia, PA provide live streams from ballot processing and counting facilities of counts and/or post-election audits. These efforts could help enhance voter confidence following two distinct mechanisms. First, it may be the case that the information made public through these efforts can help convince individuals who have doubts about the integrity of elections. For example, one could imagine that a voter who follows ballot processing on a live stream can witness the procedures put in place to ensure the integrity of the process.

Alternatively, it may be that the process of increasing transparency itself can enhance voter confidence regardless of whether people are exposed to the information being provided. In this scenario, transparency acts as a heuristic: if election authorities are transparent, they must have nothing to hide. Given what we know about people's engagement with politics, the latter mechanism appears more plausible. Once again, we have limited empirical evidence to help assess various proposals. A Bright Line Watch survey found that providing information about the official audit in Maricopa County following the 2020 election caused Republicans to become much more trustful of the vote count in that county, from a baseline of 22% to 48% (2021).

As we discuss above, however, evidence that elections are being administered in a safe and secure manner may not always translate into greater public confidence. Stewart III (2022) draws the distinction between the "trustworthiness of election results (a legal construct)" and "trust in elections (a psychological construct)." Reforms that increase the trustworthiness of election results may, in some cases, not lead to an increase in trust in elections. Transparency may even backfire in some cases. Indeed, practices and events that appear mundane to election administrators can be misinterpreted, particularly by actors who are predisposed to accept claims of fraud. One example is the public release of video footage from ballot counting facilities. Rather than reassure doubtful voters of the integrity of the process, these videos have sometimes been used as "evidence" of fraudulent practices. For instance, in the 2020 presidential election, footage from Fulton County that showed routine processes was misinterpreted by motivated actors to promote claims of fraud. In such cases, the goal of improving transparency can have unintended consequences. To date, beyond such anecdotes, we do not have enough solid empirical evidence to assess the likely effects of transparency on confidence in elections.

5.3. ENHANCING DIGITAL COMMUNICATION BY ELECTION OFFICIALS

Partnerships with technology companies, online voter information centers, and other forms of digital communication by election officials are a third option whose impact is not well understood. Suttman-Lea (2022) conducted a census of the digital presence of every local election office in the nation during the 2020 election cycle, searching for an official website as well as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts. She found that the vast majority of local election offices (89%) have websites but fewer are active on social media, with 33% active on Facebook, 9% on Twitter, and 2% on Instagram. Such communication efforts are more common in Democratic-leaning areas.

Suttman-Lea and Merivaki's (2023) analysis correlates election official communications over Facebook in the run-up to the 2020 November election with measures of trust in elections, finding that this form of digital communication is associated with greater confidence that voters' own ballots and those of others are counted accurately. This is a promising line of research that should be complemented with field or survey experiments.

The recommendations of the Bipartisan Policy Center's (BPC) report "How Tech and Election Officials

Can Protect Elections Online” also provide potential avenues for future study (Fernekes, Harbath, and Buck 2022). The report notes that disinformation in future elections is likely to be spread more via niche social media platforms and ones in which content is designed to disappear. If technology companies and election officials take up the BPC’s recommendation of collaborating in threat-planning scenarios well in advance of an election—especially those tied to the launch of new social media platforms or products—case studies of these collaborations and the communication strategies that they produce could help to improve both future studies and real-world practices.

The BPC report also highlights the role of online disinformation on the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol, noting that “Tech companies’ election efforts cannot end on election night, either. The companies must continue to enforce content and security policies and engage with the election community in the post-election period.” This point provides a helpful reminder to scholars that studying both online disinformation and the digital communication efforts of state and local election officials after an election can be as valuable as analyzing their communication as elections approach.

5.4 REPORTING PRACTICES AND VOTER CONFIDENCE

Fourth, the manner in which journalists report election results may impact public confidence. While some groups have recommended best practices to guide reporting, rigorous study of the potential impact of these practices is lacking. Over Zero’s “Reporting In Contentious Times: Insights for Journalists to Avoid Fanning the Flames,” for instance, provides guidance such as “Embed the idea of a wait period into stories about the election process” and “Use terms like ‘Election Week’ or ‘Election Season’ (to include the early voting period), not just ‘Election Day/Night’” (Over Zero in collaboration with Anna Szilágyi, 2022). Scholars could conduct survey experiments that vary the framing from Election Day to Election Week to Election Season, while reporting the results of elections that have been called by news organizations multiple days after the last day to cast ballots, to determine whether these different framings affect public trust in the accuracy of election results. Future studies could also ask whether actual news stories that introduce the idea of a wait period, including the many legitimate reasons why a full and accurate counting of ballots takes days or weeks, bolsters public confidence when the results of a close election are not called for days or weeks.

5.5. BALLOT TRACKING AND VOTER CONFIDENCE

Finally, the adoption of online ballot tracking, which has greatly accelerated in recent election cycles, could provide a new avenue to increase voter trust. Much like transparency of ballot counting, this innovation could enhance voter confidence through two mechanisms. First, it can work directly, by providing voters with the information that their ballot has been mailed to them (if they vote in this manner), received by a local election official, and counted. This confirmation should increase people’s confidence that their own ballot has been counted accurately. Second, online ballot tracking could have positive indirect effects as well. Voters who take part in a ballot tracking program will know that other voters can do so as well, increasing their confidence that those voters will get alerts at the same stages of the process and thus can contact election officials if, for instance, they do not receive a ballot that was mailed to them. This knowledge could increase their confidence that the votes of others in their area and in any jurisdiction that uses a ballot tracking program will be counted accurately.

The adoption of ballot tracking is now widespread: 40% of Americans who voted by mail reported that they used online ballot tracking in the last election cycle (Stewart III, 2023). However, there is as yet no clear evidence that tracking changes attitudes or behavior. The main study to date finds null results on validated turnout from a field experiment informing registered voters in California about the state’s “Where’s My Ballot?” ballot tracking program (Biggers et al. 2022). It is important to determine if that result is attributable to widespread knowledge about the program (the treatment was not novel) or a null effect of the knowledge itself. As more states and counties put ballot tracking programs in place, further field experiments or staggered implementation studies could gauge the effect of tracking both on voter turnout and on trust in the accuracy of elections.

6. TRUST IN ELECTIONS AMONG MINORITY RACIAL AND ETHNIC GROUPS

Throughout America's history, some groups of voters have faced significant barriers to political participation, electoral regulations designed to dilute their voting power, and/or laws that have led to partial or complete disfranchisement. The most egregious example of this, of course, is the treatment by national, state, and local governments of Black Americans. Even after the end of the slavery and the passage of the 15th Amendment, election-related violence against Black voters and candidates was widespread (Keyssar 2000). States in the American South soon passed laws such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and the White Primary to remove access to the ballot box. After the civil rights movement won victories that again allowed Black voters to participate across the nation, the adoption of racial gerrymanders, at-large elections, and other mechanisms have diluted Black voting power, often leading to their reversal through legal challenges brought under the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Bunche 1941, Kousser 1974, Anderson and Bolden 2019).

Today, Black voters are more likely to experience long wait times at polls than members of other racial and ethnic groups. There is evidence that long wait times are associated with depressed turnout in subsequent election cycles, which may contribute to the persistently lower turnout among Black Americans (King 2020, Pettigrew 2017, Chen et al. 2022, Cottrell, Herron, and Smith 2021). In addition, other groups of voters, including Latinos, Asian-American and Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans, have encountered election laws, such as at-large elections, gerrymandering, polling place locations, and vote by mail procedures, that limit their influence (McCool, Olson, and Robinson 2012, Fraga 2018, Schroedel, Rogers, Dietrich, Johnston, and Berg 2022, Rogers, Schroedel, and Dietrich 2023). Members of disability communities also face barriers to participation (Schur and Kruse 2021).

Among groups that have faced government-sanctioned disfranchisement, what do we know about generalized trust, trust in government, and trust in elections? A broad literature in sociology summarized in Smith (2010) finds that generalized trust—an “expectancy held by an individual that the word, promise, oral or written statement of another individual or group can be relied on”—varies along racial and ethnic lines. Generalized trust is lower among members of racial

and ethnic minority groups than it is among whites, with trust especially low among Black Americans. Much of the gap in generalized trust can be explained by historical and contemporary experiences of discrimination and by indicators such as neighborhood disadvantage. These findings suggest that experiences of political discrimination could affect trust in elections.

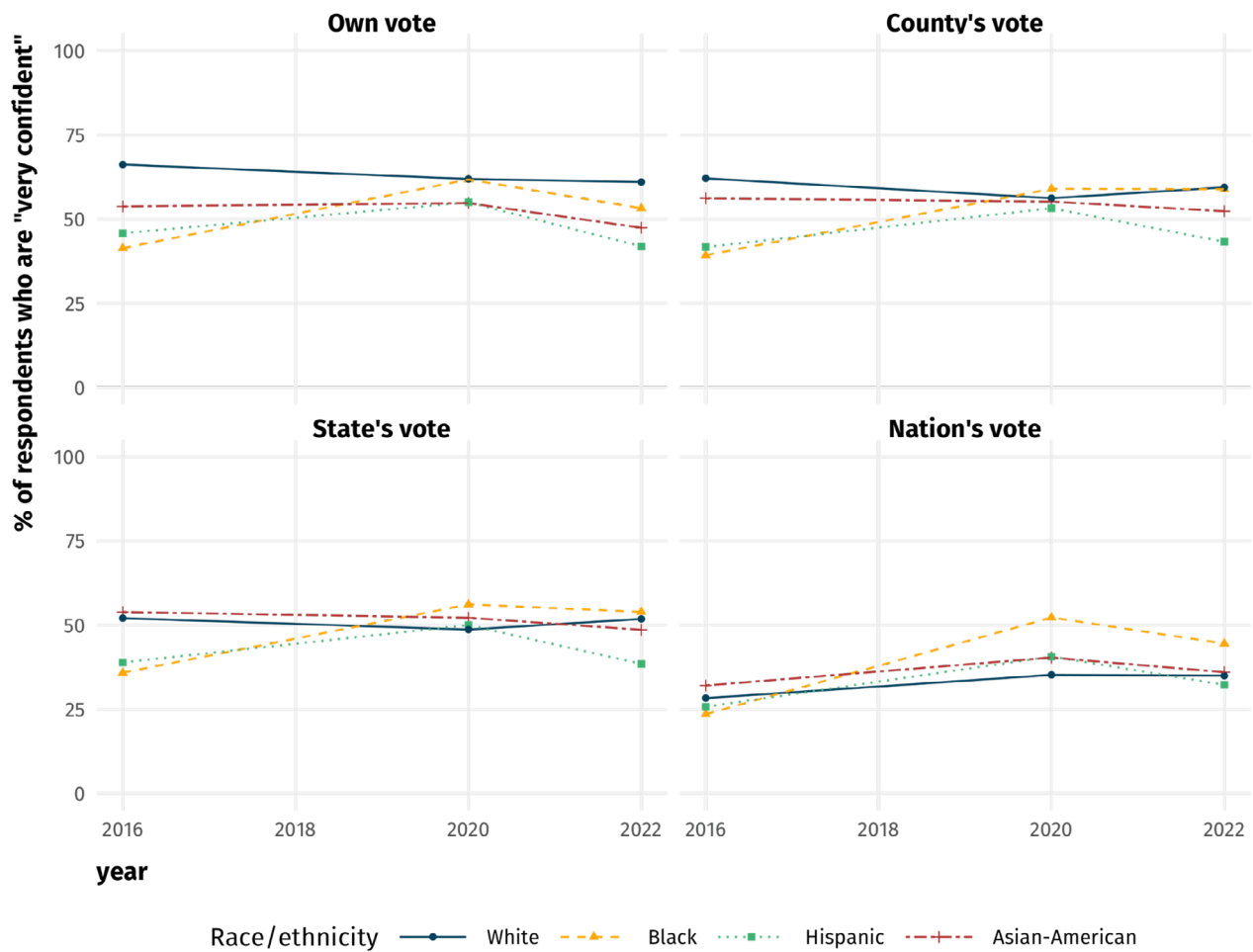
Abrajano and Alvarez (2010) analyze data from the 2004 and 2008 National Annenberg Election Studies to explore the links between experiences of discrimination among minority groups and trust in government. Among Latinos (who register higher levels of trust in government than white or Black Americans in these surveys), those who experience general discrimination are less likely to trust in government. Among Black Americans, those who experience workplace discrimination are less likely to trust in government. Relying on the same Annenberg surveys, Koch (2019) finds that, although race does not exert a consistent effect on race-neutral “trust in government” questions, questions that ask specifically about trust in white decisionmakers revealed a strong divide: “When citizens are asked whether Caucasian government officials make decisions on spending and hiring to advantage whites to the disadvantage of blacks and Hispanics, racial minorities state that they expect racial bias. American Indians reveal levels of political trust similar to those held by other racial minorities.”

Tracing trust in government over a longer time period, Wilkes' (2015) analysis of American National Election Studies from 1958 through 2012 finds that “For Black Americans, trust is reflective of a deep malaise with the political system reflecting decades of political exclusion and violence.” Yet Wilkes (2015) also finds that the impact of race on trust in government varies with political context, warning that a single-year sample might reflect optimism about a recent election result rather than a long-term trend—a vital factor to consider when looking at trust in recent election results. Further work by Wu, Wilkes, and Wilson (2022) shows that the racial gap in trust in government varies over time, and that at some points, trust among Black Americans has been higher than among whites. Their argument is that when members of minority groups perceive that there are “greater opportunities for racial progress, which signal that widespread harm can be repaired,” their trust in government will rise. This research picks up on the theme that experiences of discrimination underlie the gap in trust across racial and ethnic lines, but again serves as a reminder that this relationship can vary based on recent election results and hope for future progress.

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With these conclusions in mind, we present data taken from our analysis of the Survey of the Performance of American Election surveys from the 2016, 2020, and 2022 election cycles in the figure below. (These data are made available on the [SPAЕ's Dataverse page](#).)

CONFIDENCE IN VOTE COUNT BY LEVEL AND RACE/ETHNICITY



Each graph in the figure shows the relationship between a voter's race or ethnicity and their level of confidence in the counting of their own vote or the votes of others in their county, state, or the nation as a whole. These are simple bivariate relationships that do not attempt to control for the many other factors that are related to race and ethnicity. We report confidence among white, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian-American voters in three election cycles. (We do not include multiracial, Middle Eastern, Native American, or other voters, though each of these groups deserves focused study.)

Looking at voters' confidence that their own vote is counted accurately, we find that there is often a large gap in trust between white voters, who consistently register the highest levels of this form of trust, and the levels of each other group, which can be as many as twenty percentage points lower. In some recent elections, fewer than half of Black Americans, Asian-Americans, and Hispanic/Latino voters have reported that they are "very confident" their vote was counted accurately. The causes and potential consequences of these low levels of personal trust clearly need further study.

Another clear lesson from this analysis is that the gaps along racial and ethnic lines look very different when we move from considering voters' trust that their own vote is counted accurately to looking at confidence in the votes of others. For confidence in the nation's vote, we see that the gap has narrowed and even reversed in recent elections. After the 2020 contest, confidence that the nation's vote was counted accurately was highest among Black Americans and lowest among white voters.

A third lesson is that the electoral context can influence relative levels of trust. After the 2016 election, white voters registered among the highest confidence that votes were counted accurately for their own ballots as well as at state, county, and national levels. After 2020, their level of trust was equal to or below the level of trust reported by Black voters in each category. Both the winner effect and elite cues appear to impact the links between race, ethnicity, and trust. That dynamic is echoed in the 2022 Yankelovich Center post-election survey, which found that trust that the midterm results accurately reflected the vote was higher among Asian-Americans (74%) and Black Americans (68%) than among white (59%) or Latino (59%) eligible voters (Gaudette et al. 2022).

Given the history of disenfranchisement and voting right violations in America, it will be important for future research to study trust in elections among these groups as well as others who face barriers to participation, including Native Americans and voters with disabilities. The call for such research issued five years ago by Adona and Gronke (2018)—“We further encourage studies of voter confidence in communities of color, as well as other communities likely to experience particular problems with the voting process (e.g., military and overseas voters, voters with disabilities, and voters requiring language assistance)—is just as relevant today.

7. CONCLUSION

Partisan distrust of elections has hardly abated in the years since the 2020 election. Whether the next presidential contest leads to a peaceful transfer of power is anything but guaranteed. It is therefore crucial to understand Americans' attitudes toward elections. In this white paper, we have reviewed existing evidence on sources of voter confidence in elections and highlighted several areas in which more research is needed.

First, across a wide variety of contexts, election losers are less likely to trust that ballots were counted accurately than election winners. The United States is no exception. This empirical regularity is important to keep in mind in order to contextualize the successes and failures of election officials' efforts to communicate with the public, as it is likely that there will always be some baseline level of distrust.

Second, there is a hierarchy of trust whereby voters report more confidence in ballots counted near them – their own vote, the vote of their county – than in faraway ballots. Relatedly, the vast majority of voters report positive experiences when casting their ballot. Though encouraging, this finding implies that voters form attitudes not from their own direct experience, but rather from inferences about what casting a ballot *must be like* in other parts of the country. As a result, seeking to improve the voting experience is unlikely to produce drastic changes in attitudes.

Third, given the decentralized nature of election administration in the U.S. and the news media's focus on events that are considered newsworthy, it is likely that election trust is a weak link problem: (perceived) errors in a single county will attract more attention than well-performing systems in hundreds of counties. In this sense, despite the decentralized nature of election administration, there is also an inescapable interdependence: any given locality is vulnerable to what happens – or what is perceived to happen – in others.

Fourth, most Americans know little about the minutiae of election administration. Before designing more complex messages, election officials who seek to improve trust in elections should pick the proverbial “low-hanging fruit” by telling voters about steps that they have already taken to secure elections. Some will find these to be insufficient or unconvincing but many voters are not aware of them. Officials should also expect the link between objective performance – i.e., whether or not elections are *actually* safe – and voters'

perceptions to be tenuous and frustratingly unresponsive to reforms.

Fifth, the behavior of political elites such as officeholders, candidates, and pundits has an outsized influence on attitude formation among the public, especially in a low-information environment such as election administration. Election officials should, to the extent possible, engage with political elites in order to foster trust. Additionally, systematic measurement of the attitudes of political elites is sorely missing.

Sixth, the information that voters are exposed to about election administration and results is largely filtered through the media. These information flows play an important role in how voters understand voter fraud claims, delays in vote reporting, and changes in vote margins during counting. Election officials should therefore continue to invest time in media outreach to help them better understand and communicate election security procedures, the reasons for long vote counts, and shifts in vote margins. These efforts will typically reach far more voters than, e.g., direct outreach via social media.

Finally, we have little credible evidence on the effects of reforms on voter trust. In response to the unprecedented effort to overturn the election result in 2020, election officials across the country have sought to implement various measures that may improve voter confidence: ballot tracking, live feeds of ballot counting, etc. Before implementing reforms, election officials should consider their likely effects using the theoretical framework we presented in this paper. To summarize, proposals to reform election administration should contend with the fact that few voters will be aware of the changes; those who will are likely to have learned of them through political elites; and voters who are predisposed to believe in voter fraud may misinterpret the effects of the reforms.

Crucially, election officials should aim to test the effects of proposed or adopted reforms, ideally in partnership with academic researchers using randomized designs that exposes a subset of voters to the reform or information about it and measures its effects on their attitudes. Such randomized evaluations are especially important for reforms that could have counterproductive effects – for instance, transparency measures that could lead to misinterpretation or further distrust.

In this review, we highlighted several topics for future research including the following:

- » *Panel studies of election-related perceptions* that assess the role of personal voting experiences, elite message exposure, and electoral expectations in shaping election confidence and the winner-loser gap (ideally including digital behavior data and randomized experiments).
- » *The effects of electoral reforms and practices* on voter confidence including RCTs testing messages explaining how elections are secured as well as randomized exposure to ballot tracking and encouragements to vote using particular methods.
- » *The effects of exposure to specific messages and media coverage* such as reporting explaining the reasons for delays in vote counts and for “blue” and “red shifts,” concessions from losing candidates, and other confidence-affirming messages from co-partisans after an election defeat.

Prior research suggests that the second and third items above are most critical. Personal voting experiences are already rated very positively by the public and election officials have little control over the messages sent by elites or the expectations the public forms about the likely outcome of elections. But it is possible to learn about the effects of the reforms election officials implement and the messages that they and the news media send to the public. We emphasize the value of partnerships between academics and election officials to carry out field experiments when possible. These types of studies enable us to estimate the causal effects of interventions under real-world conditions in a way that is rarely possible with survey experiments (often conducted under hypothetical conditions) or with observational data (where causal relationships are difficult to demonstrate).

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