# The Effect of Voter and Election Fraud Misperceptions on U.S. Election Legitimacy

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**Abstract**

This study reports several experiments testing the effects of corrective messages debunking false claims of widespread fraud in the 2020 and 2022 U.S. elections as well as a complementary experiment after the 2022 Brazilian presidential election. We find evidence that prebunking false voter fraud claims with substantive information about election security can reduce misperceptions more effectively than corrections from credible sources. Other results indicate that corrections of specific voter fraud claims fail to generate broader changes in perceptions of election integrity and that party (but not putative candidate race) is the major factor in perceptions of voter fraud at the Congressional race level. (Grant: $164,489.)

**Accomplishments**

Survey instrument design and data collection:

- Fielded a panel survey in the U.S. on YouGov with preregistered experiments embedded in each wave: October 19–November 7, 2022 (wave 1); December 7–20, 2022 (wave 2); January 21–30, 2023 (wave 3)

  - Included participants from a prior two-wave post-election panel studying perceptions of voter fraud in the 2020 election

- Conducted a parallel preregistered survey experiment in Brazil on Netquest with separate external funding (February 24–March 8, 2023)

- Collected YouGov Pulse online browsing behavior data from a subset of participants

Major findings:

- We conducted survey experiments in the U.S. and Brazil evaluating the effectiveness of two types of corrective messages targeting false claims of widespread voter fraud — those in which credible sources endorsed election outcomes as legitimate and those that provided technical, procedural information about election security and administration aimed to "prebunk" common misperceptions. We found evidence that both types of message can be effective in improving confidence in elections and in diminishing misperceptions about electoral fraud. There is some evidence that the prebunking approach can be more effective.

- There is no evidence from our studies that prebunking requires an inoculation forewarning to be effective. The information itself — without alerting people to potential future attempts by others to mislead — appears to increase perceptions of election legitimacy.

- We examined how election characteristics contribute to perceptions of voter fraud and electoral integrity in specific congressional races in the 2022 midterm elections. Contrary to our expectations, the margin of victory and the putative race/ethnicity of the winning candidate did not measurably change confidence in election results. We instead find that there is a substantial "winner's effect" in these races, but only among Republicans, who express much less confidence in results in which the GOP candidate was defeated.

- Correcting false claims that votes were not counted in conservative areas of Maricopa County during the 2022 Arizona gubernatorial election sharply decreased belief in the claim and increased perceptions that the victor, Democrat Katie Hobbs, was the rightful winner. However, the treatment did not measurably affect overall electoral confidence or beliefs about the prevalence of election fraud in the 2020 and 2022 elections more generally.

Outreach and dissemination activities:

- We have presented the paper at three academic conferences: the pre-SPSA MEDSL conference, MPSA, and ESRA. Both MEDSL and especially ESRA featured numerous practitioners and members of civil

society as well. (Reifler was also scheduled to present the paper at the National Conference of the Election Center before a hurricane canceled his plans.)

- Extensive outreach to academic and non-academic audiences is planned as the papers are released publicly and eventually published.

## Products

Working/conference papers:

- "Prebunking and Credible Source Corrections Increase Election Credibility: Evidence from the U.S. and Brazil" (John Carey, Brian Fogarty, Marília Gehrke, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler) [under review]

    - Presented by Brendan Nyhan at the MEDSL Pre-SPSA Workshop (January 2023)
    - Presented by Brian Fogarty at the 2023 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association (April 2023)
    - Presented by John Carey at the 2023 annual meeting of the Electoral Science, Reform, and Administration conference (June 2023)
    - To have been presented by Jason Reifler at National Conference of the Election Center (August 2023; travel canceled by hurricane)
    - Presented by Jason Reifler at the University of Southampton (October 2023)
    - Presented by Brendan Nyhan at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill American Politics Research Group (February 2024)
    - To be presented by Brendan Nyhan at Conference on Democratic "Frontsliding," Center for the Study of Democratic Politics, Princeton University (April 2024)

- "The Limited Impact of a Targeted Correction on Broader Beliefs: Evidence from the 2022 Election" (Elizabeth Chun, John Carey, Brian Fogarty, Leyla Jacoby, Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, and Lilian Sweeney) [under review]

- "What Factors Affect Perceptions of Voter Fraud in Congressional Races?" (Ben Aronson, John M. Carey, Brian Fogarty, Mimi Majumder, Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, Hannah Tanenbaum, Cecile Tobin, and Ethan Weber) [under review]

A fourth planned paper will provide a comprehensive descriptive examination of how and why perceptions of voter fraud and election legitimacy changed during the 2020 and 2022 U.S. election campaigns. It will leverage our paired over-time panel survey data and behavioral web browsing data to examine the correspondence between information flows and public beliefs. Preliminary results shows sharp differences in post-election changes in perceptions of electoral legitimacy that correspond to information flows from elites. We will examine the prevalence of exposure to such information over time in the data and test whether most exposure to such claims came via mainstream news sources rather than untrustworthy websites as we expect (prior research shows the latter are disproportionately consumed by a small fraction of the online news audience).

Datasets:

- U.S. survey wave 1 (YouGov): October 19–November 7, 2022

- U.S. survey wave 2 (YouGov): December 7–20, 2022

- U.S. survey wave 3 (YouGov): January 21–30, 2023

- U.S. survey participant web behavior data (YouGov Pulse): April 2021–January 2023

- Brazil survey (Netquest): February 24–March 8, 2023

## Other participants

- Marília Gehrke is Assistant Professor in Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands and a fellow at the Digital Democracy Center at the University of Southern Denmark. Gehrke jointed the project due to her expertise on Brazilian politics. She collaborated with us on an extension of our U.S. voter-fraud fact-check study to Brazil (funded by Reifler's ERC grant).

- Mathieu Lavigne is a SSHRC postdoctoral fellow in the Program in Quantitative Social Science at Dartmouth College. Lavigne joined the project due to his expertise in computational social science and is collaborating with us on the analysis of YouGov Pulse and over-time survey data for the planned fourth paper described above.

- Ben Aronson, Mimi Majumder, Hannah Tanenbaum, and Ethan Weber are Dartmouth undergraduates who worked on research with Nyhan as James O. Freedman Presidential Scholars during the 2022–2023 academic year. They assisted in drafting and data analysis of a working paper analyzing the results of a descriptive study examining how perceptions of election integrity vary by the winner's party, putative race/ethnicity, and vote margin.

- Elizabeth Chun, Leyla Jacoby, and Lilian Sweeney are Dartmouth undergraduates who are working on research with Nyhan as James O. Freedman Presidential Scholars during the 2023–2024 academic year. They assisted in drafting and data analysis of a working paper analyzing the results of an experimental study examining how fact-checking false claims of electoral fraud in Maricopa County, Arizona affected perceptions of electoral integrity both in the Arizona gubernatorial race in 2022 and nationally.

## Impact

Our studies to date have generated several key findings of relevance to the field of election science and election administration:

- We find encouraging results for prebunking-type interventions relative to corrections from credible sources. Prebunking is, at minimum, no less effective — and appears in most instances to be more effective — than credible source corrections in reducing unfounded beliefs in election fraud. This finding should reassure election administrators that they can engage in public-facing communications about election security without being perceived as interjecting themselves in partisan politics. Election administration officials can proactively communicate reasons to trust elections even if they might not want to, or be able to, rely on elected officials or other political figures to convey that message.

- The fact that prebunking factual corrections were just as effective without a prior inoculation message as with such a message may also be reassuring for administrative officials who feel they can best best serve their communities by staying above the political fray. Public messaging does not necessarily need to refer to efforts by any other political actors to mislead; it can simply deliver reliable factual content about election administration and security measures.

- Other results from our studies are less encouraging. For example, we found that interventions to correct beliefs about specific, false claims of election fraud do not always extrapolate to improve accuracy about broader beliefs in fraud incidence or to strengthen confidence in elections. In addition, we found no difference in perceptions of fraud at the House race level by putative candidate race/ethnicity, but we found that Republican respondents expressed less confidence in election results where their party lost irrespective of candidate characteristics or even election margin.

## Changes and/or problems

For our two post-election survey waves, we sought to use voter and election fraud claims made about the 2022 midterms as the basis of the treatment stimuli. However, fewer high-profile fraud claims were made after the 2022 midterms than after the 2020 presidential election. For wave 2, our survey experiment therefore tested the effect of fact-checking on the highest-profile case — false claims made by Republican gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake that ballot printing errors only occurred in conservative areas of Maricopa County, Arizona. By wave 3, attention to these claims had subsided and no high-profile election "audits" occurred as we anticipated. We therefore pivoted in wave 3 and conducted a second experiment following up on the experiment we tested in wave 1, which was conducted before the election. The findings of that study suggested that prebunking misinformation by providing information about how election security is maintained was possibly more effective than corrective information from a credible source. We therefore sought to replicate and extend that finding by testing the same approach in wave 3 but with new stimuli and by randomizing the provision of warning information about future misinformation.

We also decided to conduct an experiment in Brazil soon after due to the prevalence of false voter fraud claims there during that country's 2022 presidential election in which incumbent Jair Bolsonaro was defeated. This experiment was designed to mirror the design of the wave 1 survey experiment from the United States, allowing us to test if our findings would replicate in another country. They overwhelmingly did.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that, although the beliefs and attitudes we measured in the United States pertain to both presidential elections (in 2020 and 2024) and to a midterm (2022), our experiments were conducted in the context of the 2022 midterm. Presidential elections present a distinctly different context, with more intense voter attention and engage-

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ment and a heightened media environment. Future research should examine whether the relative effectiveness of intervention strategies we measured in 2022 (and early 2023) can be replicated in the context of a presidential campaign. Importantly, we find that the approaches we examine to increase confidence in election administration are at least as effective among the populations that are most receptive to misinformation about the topic. As a result, though Trump will likely continue to make unfounded claims about fraud as the 2024 election nears, we are hopeful that these correction strategies will continue to be effective with vulnerable subgroups.

We likewise cannot fully disentangle our findings in the U.S. from the presence of Trump, but the fact that we observe similar results in Brazil increases our confidence that our findings will provide relevant evidence for the U.S. after 2024 and in other countries. In general, the rise of populist-leaning politicians around the globe making similar claims demands a more systematic cross-national approach. It would be worthwhile to measure the effectiveness of these corrective interventions across different contexts in the U.S. as well as in other democracies.[1]

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[1] An important extension of this type of work would examine different institutional responses. For example, the response of key figures and institutions to Trump's election challenge in the U.S. (failing to convict after his second impeachment and the Supreme Court preventing states from removing him from the ballot in 2024) is vastly different than in Brazil (where Bolsonaro has been barred from running for office until 2030).