Whom Can I Trust? Exploring the American Public's Sources of Election Information

MIT Election Data & Science Lab: Learning from Elections Final Grant Report

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In the midst of the ongoing threats of mis-, dis-, and malinformation to public perceptions of elections, it is essential to identify whether there are election information sources that can bolster attitudes towards the electoral process. This project addresses this need head on, identifying the most prominent messengers the public looks to for information about elections and how their choices shape perceptions of election legitimacy.

To explore these questions, a nationwide survey conducted six weeks prior to the 2022 midterm election served as the cornerstone of this investigation. We asked a representative sample of American voters (with oversamples in Georgia, Colorado, and Wisconsin) what their top three sources of election-related information are, in addition to specific questions about respondents' confidence that their vote—as well as votes in their community, state, and nationwide—would be counted accurately in the 2022 midterm elections.

Our findings confirm that voters view election officials as information leaders and shore up the importance of trust-building social media activity by election offices in incubating voter confidence. Moving forward, the survey provides a useful baseline for over-time assessments of the public's preferred sources of election information in an evolving election information ecosystem.

Grant amount: $121,000.

Per contract agreement, financial report will be submitted at the end of September alongside the final invoice.

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Summary of Accomplishments

This project achieved significant milestones in understanding where the public looks to for election-related information. Our findings confirm the central role that state and local election offices play in voters' information choices, and that the choice of these sources for election-related information bolster confidence in the ballot counting process.

Key accomplishments, further detailed in the Impact section below, include:

1. **Election Officials are Information Leaders**: The nationwide survey (N=2,002) with oversamples in Georgia (N=809), Colorado (N=805), and Wisconsin (N=501), revealed that state and local chief election officials are voters' top choice for election and voting information. This finding transcends political affiliations and demographics.

2. **Confidence Patterns**: Our work validates existing research in its finding that voters' confidence in vote counting accuracy is highest "close to home" and decreases as one progresses from considering one's own vote to considering the accuracy of votes counted at the local, state, and national level.

3. **Local Information Ecosystems are Important**: Additional analyses confirmed that seeking information sources closer to home—such as local election offices and local media outlets—may further enhance confidence in ballot counting in one's community, but may also affect confidence of ballot counts at the state and national level.

4. **Social Media Dynamics**: We found that trust-building efforts by state election officials on social media platforms enhance post-election confidence in ballot counting.

5. **Working Papers**: The project generated two working papers that delved deeper into the roles of state election officials as both information and opinion leaders and explored the impact of local sources of information on voter confidence. Both papers are currently under peer review for publication in academic journals.

Products

The survey was fielded between October 14-15 of 2022, approximately three weeks before the 2022 midterm elections.

Our survey is the first of its kind that attempts to measure voters' preferred sources for election-related information (rather than information about politics in general) and to explore how these choices differ when comparing state chief election officials to local election officials. Additionally, our survey establishes a baseline barometer of prospective voter confidence, allowing us to compare confidence pre- and post-election and to track public attitudes towards election integrity in the context of election information sources over time.

You can access the survey instrument and datasets here.

Our first written product was the production and dissemination of a high-level summary of the takeaways from the survey on November 2, 2022: New Survey Data on Who Americans Look to for Election Information.

Top takeaways included:

1. State and local chief election officials are highly trusted for delivering election information across political party affiliation, age, and other key demographics.
2. 76% of voters (89% of Democrats and 67% of Republicans) are confident that their votes will be counted accurately in the 2022 midterm election.
3. Voters nationally are more likely to agree with a statement that election results can be trusted when it is made by their chief state election official, rather than a Republican or Democratic party leader. Republicans exhibit lower trust across messengers, even when the messenger is from their own party.

To further explore the relationship between election officials' efforts to educate voters and voters' information seeking behavior, BPC partnered with Drs. Mara Suttmann-Lea (Connecticut College) and Lia Merivaki (Mississippi State University), election science researchers whose research focuses on nonpartisan voter education and voter confidence. They have since drafted two working papers merging BPC's survey with other data sources to maximize the potential for actionable conclusions. In one working paper, *Staying Close to Home: Preferred Sources of Election Information and Voter Confidence*, they draw from BPC's survey to test whether voters who report that their election officials are among their top three sources for election-related information would be more likely to express confidence that their vote would count in November of 2022. They find that confidence was higher among voters who reported seeking information from sources that they label as "close to home": local election officials, local and regional TV, and print media. Their findings hold even for voters who report voting for Trump in 2020.

In their second working paper, *Are you there, voter? It's me, your election official: Evaluating election officials' efforts to build trust in election integrity*, they merge BPC's national survey with their original dataset of election officials' social media communications during the 2022 cycle to test whether election officials' voter communications on social media increase the likelihood that voters identify their local and state election officials as a top election-related information source. They also tested whether social media communications by election officials increase voters' prospective confidence about vote counting accuracy. In this paper, Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki also use the 2022 Survey on the Performance of American Elections (SPAE) to test their hypotheses in the post-election environment. They found evidence that election officials' voter education efforts help voters identify them as top information sources. They also found that, when it comes to using social media to build trust in election integrity, long-term efforts seem to be more effective, possibly because the issue of ballot counting is more relevant after voters cast their ballots.

Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki presented these preliminary findings at the 2023 Election Science, Research and Administration annual conference, the Election Integrity Project's annual virtual workshop in July 2023, and the American Political Association's annual meeting in Los Angeles, California, in August 2023.

Outreach and Partnerships

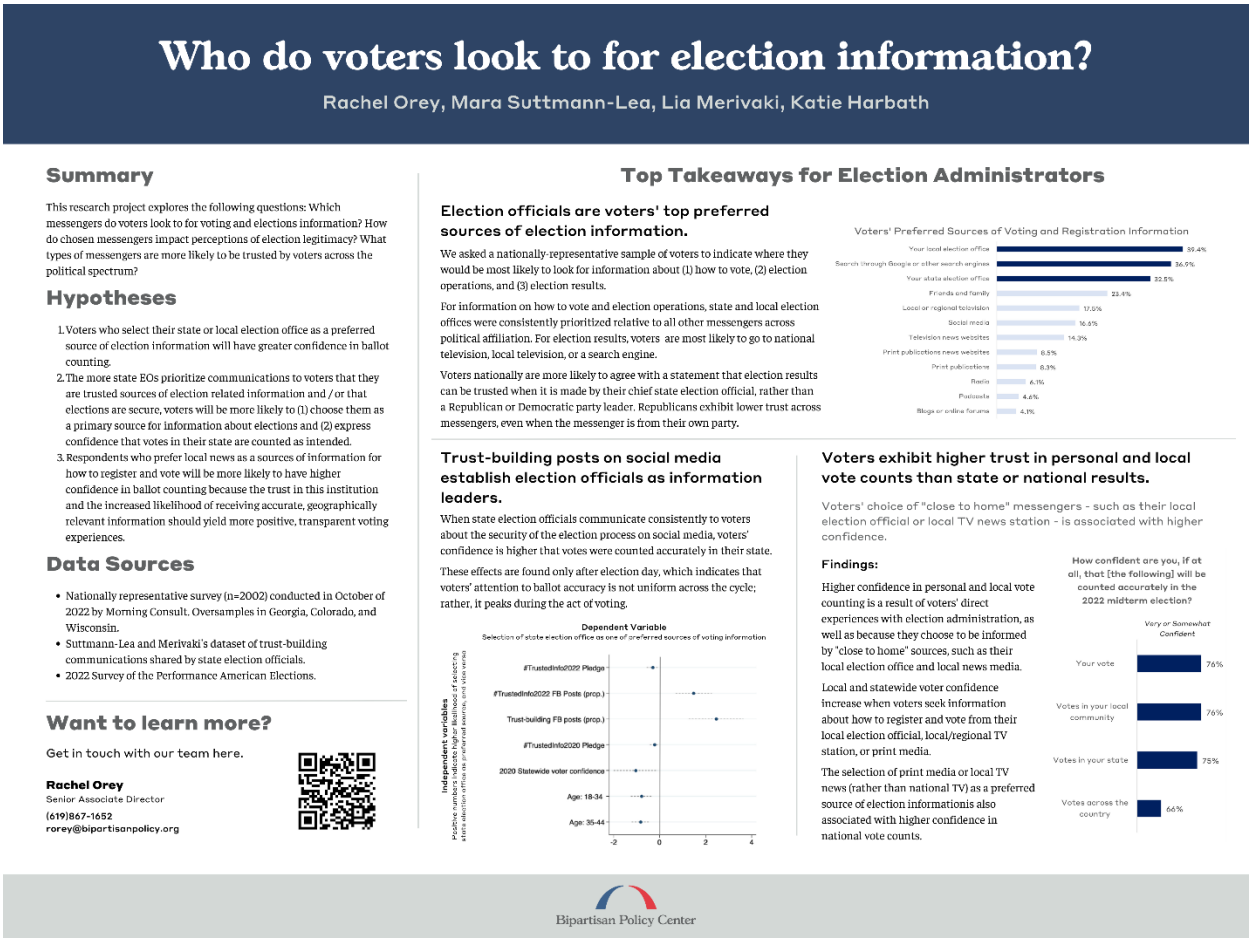
This project allowed us to further cultivate relationships with election officials, practitioners, policymakers, and academics. Our primary focus was to translate our research into cost-effective, reproducible, and scalable recommendations for state and local election officials.

In August of 2023, BPC had the opportunity to directly engage with election officials and discuss our work at the 2023 Election Center Annual Conference in Orlando, Florida, and presented a brief summary of our work highlighting topline findings most relevant to election officials:

- Election officials are top-preferred sources of information.
- Trust-building posts on social media establish election officials as information leaders.
- Voters exhibit higher trust in personal and local vote counts than state or national results.

Research Poster for Election Center 2023 Annual Conference

View online here.



Who do voters look to for election information?

Rachel Orey, Mara Suttmann-Lea, Lia Merivaki, Katie Harbath

Summary

This research project explores the following questions: Which messengers do voters look to for voting and elections information? How do chosen messengers impact perceptions of election legitimacy? What types of messengers are more likely to be trusted by voters across the political spectrum?

Hypotheses

1. Voters who select their state or local election office as a preferred source of election information will have greater confidence in ballot counting.
2. The more state EOs prioritize communications to voters that they are trusted sources of election related information and / or that elections are secure, voters will be more likely to (1) choose them as a primary source for information about elections and (2) express confidence that votes in their state are counted as intended.
3. Respondents who prefer local news as a sources of information for how to register and vote will be more likely to have higher confidence in ballot counting because the trust in this institution and the increased likelihood of receiving accurate, geographically relevant information should yield more positive, transparent voting experiences.

Data Sources

- Nationally representative survey (n=2002) conducted in October of 2022 by Morning Consult. Oversamples in Georgia, Colorado, and Wisconsin.
- Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki's dataset of trust-building communications shared by state election officials.
- 2022 Survey of the Performance American Elections.

Want to learn more?

Get in touch with our team here.

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Top Takeaways for Election Administrators

Election officials are voters' top preferred sources of election information.

We asked a nationally-representative sample of voters to indicate where they would be most likely to look for information about (1) how to vote, (2) election operations, and (3) election results.

For information on how to vote and election operations, state and local election offices were consistently prioritized relative to all other messengers across political affiliation. For election results, voters are most likely to go to national television, local television, or a search engine.

Voters nationally are more likely to agree with a statement that election results can be trusted when it is made by their chief state election official, rather than a Republican or Democratic party leader. Republicans exhibit lower trust across messengers, even when the messenger is from their own party.

Voters' Preferred Sources of Voting and Registration Information

Trust-building posts on social media establish election officials as information leaders.

When state election officials communicate consistently to voters about the security of the election process on social media, voters' confidence is higher that votes were counted accurately in their state.

These effects are found only after election day, which indicates that voters' attention to ballot accuracy is not uniform across the cycle; rather, it peaks during the act of voting.

Voters exhibit higher trust in personal and local vote counts than state or national results.

Voters' choice of "close to home" messengers - such as their local election official or local TV news station - is associated with higher confidence.

Findings:

Higher confidence in personal and local vote counting is a result of voters' direct experiences with election administration, as well as because they choose to be informed by "close to home" sources, such as their local election office and local news media.

Local and statewide voter confidence increase when voters seek information about how to register and vote from their local election official, local/regional TV station, or print media.

The selection of print media or local TV news (rather than national TV) as a preferred source of election informationis also associated with higher confidence in national vote counts.

How confident are you, if at all, that [the following] will be counted accurately in the 2022 midterm election?

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Additionally, we leveraged our partnerships with election officials and members of the election community, such as academics and practitioners who are part of BPC's Task Force on Elections, to seek guidance and feedback in the creation of survey questions. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/elections-task-force/

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The Task Force on Elections is comprised of a geographically and politically diverse group of 31 state and local election officials devoted to making meaningful improvements to United States elections. Members were selected to capture the sheer diversity of U.S. election administration: they span municipal, county, and state governments from 22 states capturing all major geographic regions; represent Republican, Democratic, and swing districts; and employ a multitude of election administration policies and practices.

The task force was created on the idea that the voice of the public servants who implement election laws is too often overlooked when state legislatures and Congress consider election reform. The same is true in academic research.

Impact

This project contributes to understanding the complex interplay between election information sources and voter perceptions, paving the way for informed strategies to foster election legitimacy and trust in the democratic process. The data also offer ripe potential for the field of election sciences to develop and enhance their theories of the role of election officials in American politics.

Actionable Takeaways for Election Administration

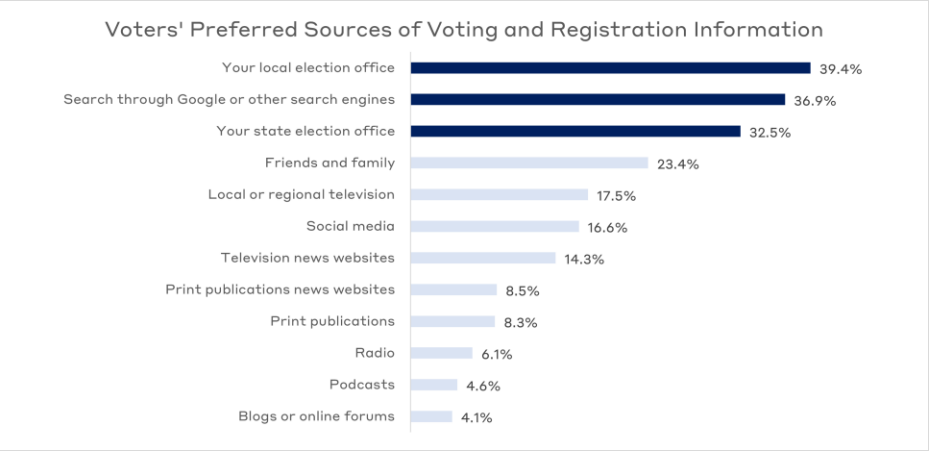
(1) Election officials are voters' top preferred sources of election information.

We asked a nationally representative sample of voters to indicate where they would be most likely to look for information about (1) how to vote, (2) election operations, and (3) election results.

For information on how to vote and election operations, state and local election offices were consistently prioritized relative to all other messengers across political affiliation. For election results, voters are most likely to go to national television, local television, or a search engine.

Voters are more likely to agree with a statement that election results can be trusted when it is made by their chief state election official, rather than a Republican or Democratic party leader. Republicans exhibit lower trust across messengers, even when the messenger is from their own party.

This finding indicates that efforts to establish election offices as trusted sources may be working to achieve an outcome that already exists, and efforts may be better spent on building election offices' communication capacities.

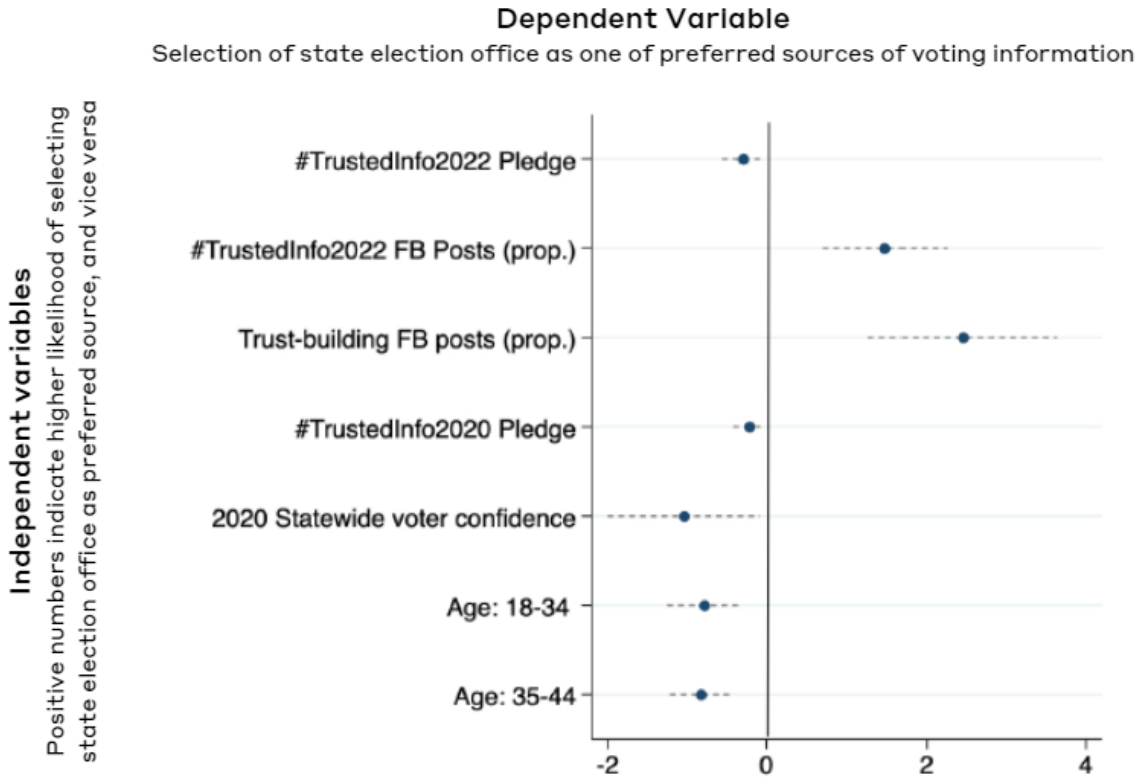


(2) Trust-building posts on social media establish election officials as information leaders.

When state election officials communicate consistently to voters about the security of the election process on social media, voters' confidence is higher that votes were counted accurately in their state.

These effects are found only after election day, which indicates that voters' attention to ballot accuracy is not uniform across the cycle; rather, it peaks during the act of voting.

This finding can be used to better advocate to state and federal policymakers for robust communications funding within election offices.



(3) Voters exhibit higher trust in personal and local vote counts than state or national results.

Voters' choice of "close to home" messengers—such as their local election official or local TV news station—is associated with higher confidence.

Higher confidence in personal and local vote counting is a result of voters' direct experiences with election administration and the preference to be informed by "close to home" sources such as their local election office and local news media.

Local and statewide voter confidence increases when voters seek information about how to register and vote from their local election official, local/regional TV station, or print media.

The selection of print media or local TV news (rather than national TV) as a preferred source of election information is also associated with higher confidence in national vote counts.

This finding indicates that voter education efforts should be locally oriented and aimed at connecting voters with their local election office and local media sources.

Impact on Election Sciences

To our knowledge, data on who the public looks to for information related to elections—how to register and vote, election results, or election administration processes—has not been collected at the scale achieved by this project. The data from the 2022 election cycle will be a valuable resource for scholars in election sciences interested in examining the relationship between information choices and voter attitudes towards election administration in the United States. While our report focuses primarily on respondents' choice of state and local election officials as information sources, the survey itself offers multiple information source avenues for exploration, including a list of other common information sources such as political candidates, television, and social media. Importantly, it also offers scholars the chance to explore which *messengers*—such as key political figures, celebrities, and news anchors—may be more effective choices of election-related information for supporting robust public faith in the democratic process.

Our surveys' measure of the public's *choice* of messenger for election-related information also provides theoretical and empirical opportunities for scholars of election science. While there are a range of survey and field experiments that allow for assessment of an individuals' *exposure* to different messengers, measuring the impact of the public's *choice* of election-related information is a different theoretical and empirical question which, to our knowledge, remains relatively underexplored. These are just a few examples of the additional theoretical and empirical questions that may be answered by this data, as reflected by our working papers. They further our understanding of where election officials and other sources of election-related information fit into a broader literature that considers the relationship between institutions that are close to home, opinion and information leaders, and public attitudes towards American democracy.