

A Research Practice Partnership to Chart Voter Experiences and Test Best Practices for Building Trust in Elections

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in partnership with

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Abstract. We created a research-practice partnership with elections officials in four states – California, Colorado, Georgia, and Texas – to measure voter experiences during the 2022 midterm election cycle, test levels of trust in the accuracy and integrity of the election results, and to test the effectiveness of strategies that officials are pursuing to build trust in elections. We worked collaboratively with these officials to design ten surveys and survey experiments and wrote reports identifying effective strategies for increasing trust in elections, publicizing the results at practitioner meetings, at academic conferences, and to the broader public.

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Accomplishments

The key to our accomplishments in this project has been the close collaboration of election officials. Engagement and feedback from these partners allowed us to write surveys that asked questions relevant to those administering elections and to design survey experiments testing the actual public information videos that they have produced to explain integrity protections. We worked closely with our partners before, during, and after fielding two rounds of surveys reflecting the eligible voter populations of our partners' jurisdictions Colorado, Georgia, Texas, Los Angeles County, along with the nation overall in 2022 and 2023. This research-practice partnership allowed us to advance academic knowledge by studying a highly realistic set of experimental treatments, giving our studies strong external validity.

At the same time, this project has helped inform how election officials conduct their messaging campaigns in the future by providing rigorous evidence of the effectiveness of their communications strategies. The partnership also led us to design questions of particular interest to specific states, such as what sorts of facilities constituents prefer to use as vote centers (libraries, churches, schools, or sports venues?) in Los Angeles, the level of support for different approaches to automatic voter registration in Colorado, which messengers voters rely on for information about the accuracy and integrity of elections in Texas, and voter awareness of new provisions for requesting to vote by mail in Georgia.

As we detail in this technical report, we have produced academic working papers, public reports, and data reports for individual partners that analyze the data in the ten surveys that we conducted over the past year. Our collaboration also led us to ask survey respondents about what disabilities they faced; we are currently completing a report focused on the one third of voters who face some disability, describing their voting experience and levels of trust in the election. We have presented these reports and papers at academic conferences, briefed leading election officials in eight states about them, shared them with the national community of election officials, submitted one article for peer-reviewed publication, and drafted a second article to submit for peer review in the near future. In this report, we summarize our key findings, list our presentations and partnership-building activities, share our products, and detail the initial impact that this project has had so far.

Key Findings:

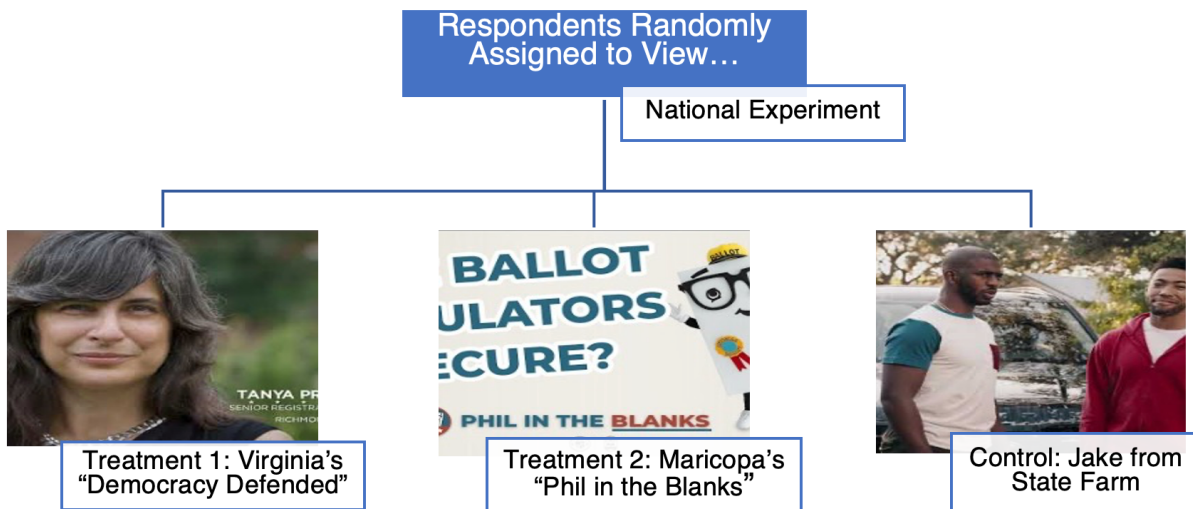
In five surveys drawn to reflect the eligible voter population conducted after the 2022 midterm elections, November 17-27th, 2022, nationally-representative sample of 3,038 Americans, Texas (1,467 respondents), Georgia (1,224), Colorado (1,379), and Los Angeles County (1,230), we found that:

- There is a wide partisan gap in faith in the integrity of the 2022 midterm elections. Democrats are more than twice as likely as Republicans to view the results of this November's election as accurate, while Republicans are more than five times as likely to suspect significant fraud. The counting of mail ballots and the worry that votes are cast illegally are sources of particular concern for Republicans and some independents.

- Regardless of partisanship, respondents have more faith in the integrity of elections in their own state than in other states and are confident that their own ballot will be counted accurately. And while trust in elections is correlated with voter turnout, a significant majority of those who do report distrust in our election system still participate in it.

Survey experiments testing the impact of messages from local election officials found:

- Respondents in our national survey who watched a video from Virginia or Arizona that explained who election officials are or what steps they take to protect elections became more trusting in the accuracy and integrity of elections in other states and less likely to agree that specific types of fraud are common.
- Our survey design, pictured below, randomly assigned 1/3 of our sample to view a video produced by the Virginia Department of Elections (“Democracy Defended”) and 1/3 to view one produced by the Maricopa County (Arizona) Elections (“Phil in the Blanks”), while a control group the remaining 1/3 of respondents were assigned to view a commercial for auto insurance that was unrelated to elections. This experimental design is pictured below:



- In each of our state and county surveys, at least one of the two videos explaining elections in that state increased respondents' trust in their own state's elections. The size of these effects ranged from 5% to 13% increases in the percentage of respondents who said that they trusted elections in their own states "some" or "a lot," after watching the videos.
- These effects did not vary by party, with Republicans and independents no less responsive to the public information messages than Democrats.
- The estimated effects of each video are summarized below, noting any increase in trust that was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

Video	Increase in Trust?
Texas: SOS 101 Voting Systems in Texas	+13.0%
Texas: Secretary of State on Fox News	–
Georgia: Secure the Vote: Voting on Election Day	+7.7%
Georgia: Secure the Vote: Absentee Voting	–
Colorado: Bipartisan Secretaries of State	–
Colorado: Risk-Limiting Audit in Denver	+4.6%
Los Angeles: Official Election Information Sources	+7.5%
Los Angeles: Video from Instagram Posts	–
National: Virginia’s ”Democracy Defended”	+2.5%
National: Maricopa County’s “Phil in the Blanks”	+2.5%

In a second round of surveys completed in May 24-June 14, 2023 with a national sample of 5,037 respondents, Colorado 2,513 respondents, Georgia 2,519, Los Angeles County 2,504, and Texas 2,527, we found that:

1. Not only are voters less trusting of the integrity of elections in other states in general, but trust levels are even lower when evaluating states with strong partisan reputations. Republicans in red states and across the nation have low levels of trust in California election results, while Democrats have low levels of trust in Texas elections.
2. Exposure to videos about election integrity protections in Texas or California leads to an increase of eight to 11 percentage points in trust in that targeted state’s elections.
3. This exposure leads to only marginal increases in trust in “other states” more broadly, confirming that these effects are driven by the substantive information conveyed about California and Texas specifically.
4. Depending on the video that is viewed, exposure can also positively impact three other outcome variables: support for calling on candidates to sign a pre-election pledge to accept final election results, willingness to serve as a poll worker, and intention to vote in the 2024 presidential contest.
5. Independents show the largest increases in trust after watching a video. Republicans are affected as much as or more than Democrats (whose trust still increases by a significant six to nine percentage points), showing that voters of all partisan stripes respond to non-partisan messaging from election officials.

Partnership Building Activities:

To build and sustain strong partnerships with our four partners, who administered elections in three large states and one county with ten million residents, we maintained communication and consultation throughout the project period. We began by conducting at least one initial, hour-long meeting via Zoom between our full research team and each partner in the early fall of 2022 to determine what questions they wanted answered in their states and to learn what communications strategies they were pursuing. After these meetings, we then drafted surveys that responded to their needs and that included questions suggested by the prior literature and our own theories. We shared these survey drafts with each partner so that they could suggest edits. We also worked directly with partners to gain access to their public information videos, including those newly-produced for the 2022 election cycle, in order to include up-to-date and policy-relevant messaging in the survey experiments.

After we completed the surveys, we wrote up individualized reports for each partner that provided full survey results for their state or county and compared them to the national results. We then met with each partner to brief them on results and to learn from their reactions. We followed up with any additional data analysis that they requested. Our partners also provided us with ideas for new questions to ask in our second round of surveys. Once we designed these surveys in 2023, we followed the same process of initial consultation, sharing survey drafts, and providing state- and county-specific reports on the results. We are currently in the process of discussing the results with each partner, either via Zoom or in person. Our partners have informed our study design at all points in the process and have let us know that they are using our findings to help guide their internal strategic planning.

Public Reports and Communication to key audiences

We produced two accessible public reports, described and linked in the “Products” section below. In addition to public releasing and presentation to our election official partners and other practitioners, we also presented in the following venues:

- Preliminary findings at the MEDSL virtual briefing in December 2022. After receiving outreach from a Virginia Board of Elections member who was in the audience of that briefing, we followed up by providing written information about our analysis.
- Key findings to an audience that brought together election officials, foundation program officers, and scholars from across the country at a January 2023 “Future of American Democracy: A Candid Conversation” conference co-organized by UC San Diego and Johns Hopkins University in San Diego, California.
- With election officials through a poster at the Election Center National Conference in Orlando in August 2023.

Academic Papers and Presentations at Professional Conferences

We have produced two full-length academic working papers, described and linked in the “Products” section below, one already submitted and one in preparation for journal submission. We have presented each of them at visible academic venues, including:

- The MEDSL Workshop at the 2023 Southern Political Science Association Conference in St. Petersburg, Florida.
- The 2023 Midwestern Political Science in Chicago, Illinois.
- The 2023 Election Science, Research, and Administration Conference in Florida.
- Two at the 2023 American Political Science Association Meetings in Los Angeles, California.

Products

We have created a Dropbox folder that contains links to each of these products, arranged as follows:

Public Reports

[After the 2022 Midterms, Do Americans Trust Elections?](#) (December 2022)

[Can a Public Information Campaign Restore Trust in American Elections?](#) (March 2023)

[How did Voters Facing Disabilities Experience the 2022 Elections?](#)

Academic Working Papers

[“Can Official Messaging on Trust in Elections Break Through Partisan Polarization?”](#)

[Presented at the 2023 SPSA, MSPA, ESRA, and APSA meetings]

Abstract: Partisan actors in the United States have recently politicized trust in the administration of elections. In combination with inflexible partisan polarization, politicized election administration could undermine an essential condition of democracy: the peaceful transfer of power following elections. Can messaging about trust in elections break through partisan polarization? Partnering with election officials from Los Angeles County, Colorado, Georgia, and Texas, we used messaging experiments with nearly 8,500 Americans following the 2022 US midterm elections to measure the impact on trust in elections. We find that state and local election officials can be strongly effective at increasing trust in their own state elections. Our pooled estimate suggests that one 30-second official message increases trust in local elections by about one-fifth of the pre-treatment difference between Democrats and Republicans. Additionally, videos explaining protections on election integrity in Arizona and Virginia increase trust in elections administered outside each respondents’ own state. Our

results suggest election officials can break through partisan politics and play an important role in rebuilding trust in the democratic process.

[“Why American Federalism is a Recipe for Distrust in Elections \(And What to Do About It\)”](#) [Presented at the 2023 APSA Meetings]

Abstract. The Constitution grants power over election administration to the states, but this presents a formidable challenge in our present era when states are polarizing along party lines, diverging in policy, and in near-constant conflict. Although non-partisan election officials use similar methods to protect and verify the counting of ballots across the nation, voters who are unaware of these protections may rely on their knowledge about other policy conflict to determine how much they trust the integrity of other states’ elections. Here we document evidence that federalism and partisan polarization combine to hinder trust in elections across state lines. With a large survey of Americans, we show first that voters trust the integrity of their own state's elections more than the integrity of other states. This divergence is larger for trust in the elections run by California and Texas, states with reputations for one-party ideological control. We then present survey experimental findings showing that non-partisan messaging produced by California and Texas election officials for their own voters can work across state (and party) lines. Texas messaging improves the trust of Californians (and Coloradans) in Texas elections and California messaging builds trust by Texans (and Georgians) in California elections. This improvement does not depend upon the party of respondents; even red-state Republicans and blue-state Democrats increase their trust in California and Texas elections with the messaging. Our experiment provides evidence that a robust public information campaign could help overcome polarized trust in election integrity across state lines.

Datasets

The following ten data files contain the surveys that we conducted in each partnering jurisdiction and with a national sample in 2022 and in 2023. *We request that these datasets be embargoed for one year as our academic papers begin the peer-review process.*

- National Survey, 2022
- Colorado Survey, 2022
- Georgia Survey, 2022
- Texas Survey, 2022
- Los Angeles County Survey, 2022

- National Survey, 2023
- Colorado Survey, 2023
- Georgia Survey, 2023
- Texas Survey, 2023
- Los Angeles County Survey, 2023

Participants

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Jesse A. Harris, Ph.D., MPA, Deputy Director, Elections Division, Georgia
Keith Ingram, Elections Director (at the time the project was launched), Texas Secretary of State's Office
Dean Logan, Los Angeles County Registrar

Impact

We have worked hard to communicate our findings in a manner that is accessible to a broader audience and to put them in the hands of election officials on the front lines of American democracy. Our first report received [press coverage](#) in December 2022 and one of our authors was interviewed about it on Spectrum News' "Inside the Issues" in Los Angeles, NBC-7's evening news in San Diego, on San Diego KPBS television's "Evening Edition," and on KPBS radio's "Midday Edition." In addition to the presentations at the two practitioner conferences mentioned in our "Accomplishments" section, we have discussed results in person and shared reports with Michigan Sec. of State Jocelyn Benson, Minnesota Sec. of State Steve Simon, New Jersey Sec. of State Tahesha Way, and Maricopa County Recorder Stephen Richer. We also prepared a report shared by Pam Fessler at an Election Center meeting in Pasadena in spring 2023 and that the communications director to Texas Sec. of State John Scott shared at a national meeting of his colleagues in other states.

We believe that our project contributes to the field of election science by:

1. Showing the value of the actual public information videos being produced by election officials, rather than messages written by political scientists, in survey experiments on the impact of communication on trust. This is an important methodological approach to ground rigorous election science in the realistic activities of election administrators.

2. Showing that these videos are remarkably effective at increasing trust in elections. In another encouraging finding in our 2022 experiments, we show that these messages work across party lines and that Republicans, independents, and Democrats alike show similar increase in their trust in elections after viewing them.

3. Highlighting the obstacles to trust created by a federal system in which states independently run elections during an era when state legislative control, policy, and reputation are polarized along partisan lines. Although election officials in red and blue states typically use the

same methods to protect the integrity of the vote count, Americans who see politics through partisan lenses may not know about these protections and assume that elections administered by the other party cannot be trusted. Yet the hopeful message that our 2023 experiments provide is that non-partisan messaging from election officials appears able to partially overcome the challenge of federalism plus polarization. When residents of red states watch a video from blue-state election officials explaining integrity protections, they become much more trusting of that state's results, and when residents of blue states watch a video from red-state election officials explaining integrity protections, they become much more trusting of that state's results. Our newest academic paper both highlights a challenge in American democracy that had not to our knowledge before been elucidated and points the way toward practical solutions to meet this challenge.