

# Electoral Race Card: Voter Fraud, Racial Affective Polarization, and White American Election Confidence

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## Abstract

The 2020 US presidential election not only witnessed an onslaught of accusations that elections were fraudulent, but these accusations implicitly and explicitly utilized racial signals to cast non-White Americans as the perpetrators of voter fraud. Elite rhetoric during and after the 2020 election painted predominantly Black and Latino cities as the epicenters of voter fraud, while also suggesting non-citizens were illegally voting in elections. We argue these racially coded accusations resonated with racially polarized White Americans, decreasing their confidence in the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election. Using individual-level panel data to measure change in voter confidence among White Americans from 2016–2020, we find that confidence decreased between 2016 and 2020, but that this effect was more pronounced among White Americans who harbored greater racial affective polarization, with effects substantively similar to those of political measures of affective polarization. These results suggest that the racialization of election integrity in the 2020 election decreased voter confidence among the racially polarized White electorate. This study adds to a growing literature demonstrating the extent to which election racialization has permeated American politics and perceptions of electoral integrity specifically.

## Keywords

racial affective polarization; voter confidence; voter fraud; White American public opinion

## 1. Introduction

From claims of several major cities having more ballots cast than eligible voters to allegations of rampant non-citizen voting, the 2020 US presidential election witnessed an onslaught of (demonstrably false)

accusations assaulting the integrity of the election (Eggers et al., 2021). However, these claims did not just attempt to illegitimize the election, they often did so by casting Black, Latino, and immigrant communities as the culprits of voter fraud (Phillips, 2020; Summers, 2020). By focusing on accusations of voter fraud against predominantly Black and Latino cities or highlighting non-citizens as illegal voters, the dominant rhetoric during the 2020 election put race, ethnicity, and immigration at the forefront of election illegitimacy. In doing so, elites espousing these conspiracy theories racialized election integrity, linking racial attitudes with perceptions of election legitimacy. The effect of this racialization of election integrity, as we argue and demonstrate below, was to decrease confidence among racially polarized White Americans, likely as they believe (racial) voter fraud is more rampant.

Specifically, we argue that the use of racially coded election rhetoric accusing non-White individuals of perpetrating voter fraud decreased voter confidence among racially polarized White Americans. This occurs as the signal of non-White election fraud is more likely to resonate with racially polarized White Americans (Abrajano & Lajevardi, 2021; Mendelberg, 2001), and these signals of voter fraud then go on to reduce confidence in election integrity (Berlinski et al., 2023). That is, racially affectively polarized White Americans are more willing to accept the premise that voter fraud is occurring when the claims of voter fraud focus on non-White fraud, and these claims then go on to increase voter fraud beliefs, decreasing voter confidence (Coll, 2024).

We test this assertion using the 2016–2020 American National Election Study (ANES) panel study. We leverage the panel design of the repeated sample to measure the within-respondent change in voter confidence between the two presidential elections conditional on racial affective polarization. Using measures of White–(Black/Latino/illegal immigrant) polarization, we find that more racially polarized White Americans were more likely to decrease confidence while less likely to increase confidence between the 2016 and 2020 elections, with effects similar to those of political affective polarization measures, showcasing the substantively large influence of racial affective polarization. These findings suggest that perceptions of election legitimacy are racialized: Using racial signals in claims of voter fraud may deteriorate perceptions of election integrity among those already harboring animosities towards racial out-groups. Given that these same claims can reduce voter confidence and erode democratic norm support (Clayton et al., 2021), these results demonstrate the potential threat to democracy that unfounded claims of racial voter fraud pose.

The remainder of the article continues as follows. First, we overview recent work demonstrating that mass opinions on election integrity are partly driven by elite rhetoric. Next, we review evidence that election integrity as a policy domain has become racialized, highlighting racialized voter fraud rhetoric during the 2020 election. We then incorporate the affective polarization literature to argue that the racialization of the 2020 election decreased confidence among racially polarized White Americans. A description of data and methods is next, followed by analyses and results. The article concludes with a summary of the study and a discussion of implications.

## 2. The Elite Origins of Mass Perceptions of Election Integrity

Elites, defined as persons and organizations that are most influential in shaping political debate and the flow of information to the public (e.g., elected officials, party leaders, interest group leaders, the media), play a

critical role in shaping mass public opinion, especially in areas where the general public lacks direct knowledge or expertise (Zaller, 1992). Political science research has shown that individuals often turn to elites, such as politicians, party leaders, and mass media, for guidance on understanding complex political issues. Specifically, Zaller (1992) argues that individuals form opinions partially by receiving elite messages and accepting those that resonate with their preexisting values, partisanship, or predispositions. This process is especially powerful when issues are obscure or out of sight, technically complex, politically salient, and characterized by elite divisions. When these conditions are present, citizens become more dependent on elite cues to make sense of the political world (Lupia, 1994; Page & Shapiro, 1992; Zaller, 1992).

Like other policies apt for elite influence, election integrity is also obscure and out of sight, technically complex, politically salient, and characterized by elite divisions. While voters can go to their polling place on Election Day and watch the process of voting unfold, they miss the lion's share of the election integrity ecosystem. Voters do not experience voter rolls being maintained, do not see voting machines being security checked, do not know whether ballots are being properly stored, and are not a part of the vote canvassing, auditing, recounting, or election certification processes, to name just a few of the ways election integrity is out of sight of the average citizen. Unsurprisingly, citizens are also largely unaware of the policies governing voter access and election security policies in their state (Stewart et al., 2016, p. 1482). This is despite the highly salient and starkly divided nature of election opinions among Americans (Coll et al., 2022; Sheagley & Udani, 2021) and political elites (Bowler & Donovan, 2016).

Clearly, election integrity opinions possess many of the key characteristics that allow for elites to influence mass opinions (e.g., obscure, complex, salient, with elite and public division). This has led numerous studies to argue for an elite-driven model of election opinions. For example, Berlinski et al. (2023) show how exposure to unfounded claims of voter fraud espoused by Trump during his first term in office decreased voter confidence among the public, with the effects largest for Republicans and those who approved of Trump. Lyons and Workman (2022) find voter fraud conspiracy rhetoric decreased perceptions of election integrity, and while the effects were largest for respondents sharing partisanship with the group claiming voter fraud, the effects spilled over to even non-politically-congruent elite–respondent dyads. When elites claim voter fraud, it instills beliefs of fraud within the minds of voters, decreasing their confidence in election outcomes (Berlinski et al., 2023; Coll, 2024; Lyons & Workman, 2022). This study builds on past work by arguing that, not only are elite cues about elections influential on perceptions of electoral integrity, but the racialization of elite cues during the 2020 election was especially effective in decreasing voter confidence among those most receptive to such racial cues: the more racially affectively polarized White Americans.

### 3. The Racialization of Election Integrity

Many Americans view political issues as having an implicit racial connotation despite the lack of any actual connection between race and the issue (Gilens, 2009). We define this phenomenon as racialization: when racial attitudes become linked to political judgments and preferences (Gilens, 2009; Sears, 1993). Racialization has become increasingly common in the contemporary politics of the US, even regarding policies that were traditionally considered race neutral. Welfare policy, for example, has no inherent racial dimensions. Yet welfare opposition is inherently linked to White racial perceptions of Black Americans (Gilens, 2009).

In line with previous work (Udani et al., 2024), we argue that election integrity has become increasingly racialized, as individuals link racial attitudes and political evaluations. For example, Wilson and King-Meadows (2016) find that racial attitudes influenced perceptions of electoral integrity in the 2010 election, particularly among those who thought Barack Obama won the 2008 presidential election due to his race. Wilson et al. (2014, p. 355) find that simply showing White respondents a picture of a Black poll worker and voter increases support for voter identification requirements, arguing that the “push for these ostensibly race neutral laws plays upon associations between racial stereotypes and perceptions of voter fraud.” Similarly, Udani and Kimball (2018) find greater support for voter identification laws in areas with larger foreign-born residents, likely as they see identification requirements as a way to prevent illegal interference by their immigrant neighbors. In their study of the racial stereotyping of voter fraud, Udani et al. (2024, p. 757) conclude that the “typification of racially minoritized groups such as Blacks, Latinos, Arabs, and immigrants as illegal voters is widespread and is strongly associated with beliefs about voter fraud, support for restrictive election policies, and harsh punishment of illegal voting.” This work suggests that elections and electoral integrity have become racialized.

The racialization of elections comes at a time when minority communities are often painted as the culprits of voter fraud, claims on full display in the 2020 election. Notably, these claims need not be explicit, such as directly saying people of color are committing fraud. Instead, implicit claims (e.g., highlighting predominantly or stereotypically Black and Latino cities as fraud epicenters even absent directly saying Black and Latino individuals are committing fraud) may be just as, if not more effective than explicit claims (Mendelberg, 2001). Implicit claims work just as well, if not better than explicit claims, because they circumvent personal and societal norms that may result in individuals rejecting explicit racial cues (e.g., norms of racial equality). Blaming predominantly Black or Latino cities as fraud epicenters without directly blaming Black and Latino voters allows the accuser to level their racial accusations against specific communities without seeming overtly racist, subsequently allowing the receiver of the message to adopt that stance without violating personal or societal norms, i.e., without “feeling racist.” According to Mendelberg (2001, p. 20):

Implicit racial appeals convey the same message as explicit racial appeals, but they replace the racial nouns and adjectives with more oblique references to race....They convey a message that may violate the norm of racial equality by submerging it in nonracial context.

This allows the message to circumvent the norms that would otherwise result in rejection of the message as racial or racist.

While there was a litany of claims of voter fraud, everything from voter impersonation and repeat voting to stuffing ballot boxes and stealing absentee ballots, many of these claims linked voter fraud to communities of color. In particular, elite rhetoric painted Black, Latino, and illegal immigrants as the nefarious actors behind the (unsubstantiated [Eggers et al., 2021]) voter fraud epidemic. This was done by focusing voter fraud accusations on areas with larger Black and Latino populations while also accusing illegal immigrants of illegally voting at a time when illegal immigrant identity is often assumed to be Latino in the US. As one former Justice Department official who worked on voting rights stated regarding the 2020 election, “Make no mistake, I see loud and clear that the [voter fraud] lawsuits are based primarily on communities of color....It sure seems like an attempt to teach millions of Americans that there’s a particular group to blame” (Phillips, 2020).

Following the prediction that Biden will win Michigan, Trump tweeted, “In Detroit, there are FAR MORE VOTES THAN PEOPLE [sic],” one of the many Detroit-based voter fraud claims launched by the Trump campaign (Timm, 2020). Notably, Detroit is a city where over 3/4 of the residents are Black. However, no other area in Wayne County nor any of the much Whiter areas of the state received similarly consistent claims of voter fraud. Indeed, these accusations focusing on predominantly Black areas in Michigan led the state’s (Democratic) Attorney General to state, “Really the themes that we see [regarding Trump’s accusations of voter fraud], that persist, are this: Black people are corrupt, Black people are incompetent and Black people can’t be trusted” (Tensley, 2020).

It was not just Detroit, but other cities with large Black populations also faced accusations of voter fraud (Morris & Shapiro, 2025). Black poll workers in Atlanta, Georgia, were accused of passing around a USB drive with votes on it, “like they were vials of heroin or cocaine,” by then-Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani, despite knowing these claims were false (Brumback, 2023). Trump also claimed there was “massive cheating” in Philadelphia (Summers, 2020), where Black Americans comprise nearly the same share of the county population as do White Americans. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, also an area with a large Black population, received claims of voter fraud but in the form of ballot dumping (Summers, 2020). In each of these cases, Republicans, and Donald Trump in particular, focused on predominantly Black cities to further their claims of voter fraud (Morris & Shapiro, 2025). Black Americans were not the only group targeted by Republican efforts to delegitimize elections. Even before the 2020 election, racially coded election rhetoric has been directed at Latino voters, especially those who live in predominantly Latino cities. In 2017, Port Chester Village, whose Latino population is nearly 60% of the total population, poll workers began internally discussing whether to card Latino voters to prevent “illegals” from voting due to concerns raised by White voters in response to a Department of Justice letter alleging Voting Rights Act violations (Smith, 2017). This rhetoric is so pervasive that it has even been utilized to justify investigation in the election of Latino officials. In San Antonio, Texas, whose local population is 64% Latino, State Attorney General Ken Paxton indicted 15 Latino Democrats on allegations that they illegally engaged in “vote harvesting” to benefit Latino candidates (Sandoval & Rocha, 2025). However, it is important to acknowledge the differences in the rhetoric constructed around different targeted populations.

For instance, Latinos have faced a two-pronged campaign to paint them as fraudulent voters during the 2020 election. First, like attacks on areas with larger Black populations, those asserting voter fraud also focused on heavily Latino jurisdictions like Maricopa County, New Mexico, and Clark County, Nevada (Summers, 2020). In Maricopa County, for example, Trump claimed that 168,000 ballots were printed on illegal paper, 74,000 mail-in ballots “magically” appeared, and 11,000 voters were added to the voter rolls and allowed to vote after Election Day, among others (Cooper, 2021). Despite these claims being proven false, Maricopa County, with 31% of its residents being of Latino descent, was painted as one of the epicenters for voter fraud and costing Trump the election.

Second, throughout Trump’s campaign, he frequently stereotyped illegal immigrants as Latino by focusing near-solely on immigration at the Southern border/from Latin America. In doing so, he created a priming link between immigrant identity and Latino ethnicity. Then, when he made non-citizen voting a core platform within his “big lie,” he connected Latino ethnicity with voter fraud via non-citizen voting, such as by claiming that states with large Latino populations were allowing non-citizens to vote. Describing California’s vote-by-mail system, Trump falsely claimed California sent “millions of ballots all over the state. Millions.

To anybody. To anybody. People that aren't citizens, illegals, anybody that walks in California is gonna get a ballot" (Cohen, 2020). This pattern can be further seen in the efforts to require proof of citizenship to register and vote, as well as efforts to clarify that only US citizens can vote, despite the current law stipulating that only citizens can vote, and little evidence of widespread non-citizen voting. Both efforts reflect a belief that non-citizens, particularly Latino immigrants, are illegally voting in elections, furthered by claims of widespread immigrant voting by Republican elites.

These claims were not without influence. By election time, many Americans, but particularly Republicans, doubted the legitimacy of the 2020 election ("Deep divisions in views," 2020). Twenty-six percent of registered voters were not confident in the 2016 election. This increased to 37% in 2020, with lower confidence more prevalent among Republicans than Democrats. White Americans who are biased towards their own group or hold racial grievances have become more doubtful of election outcomes in recent elections (Filindra et al., 2024). Further, much of this came as Americans were more willing to cite issues related to the claims of voter fraud being espoused by elites, including repeat voting, voter impersonation, mail ballot theft, and non-citizen voting ("Deep divisions in views," 2020), with belief in voter fraud then degrading confidence among voters (Coll, 2024). Thus, not only do elites influence perceptions of election integrity, but election integrity has become racialized in recent years, as (particularly Republican) elites frequently frame Black, Latino, and illegal immigrants as the culprits of voter fraud in 2020. We argue these factors are not independent. Instead, these racialized claims of voter fraud likely resonated with more racially affectively polarized White Americans, as they are more willing to accept claims that Black, Latino, and non-citizen fraudsters are interfering in the election, resulting in decreased confidence among the more racially polarized.

#### **4. Racial Affective Polarization, Elite Influence, and the Racialization of Election Legitimacy**

Mass perceptions about election integrity are driven largely by elite rhetoric, and existing elite rhetoric paints threats to election integrity as coming predominantly from communities of color. As such, these signals should reduce confidence in the integrity of elections among White Americans, but especially racially affectively polarized White Americans, as holding greater animosity towards out-groups encourages acceptance of negative stereotypes about that group (Abrajano & Lajevardi, 2021).

Though often specifically used to refer to the gulf of amity between ideological or partisan identifiers, affective polarization generally refers to the relative extent to which individuals like their in-group and dislike their out-group (see Iyengar & Wagner, 2025, for a recent review of affective polarization theory). Affective polarization occurs as individuals sort themselves into groups based on shared ties, with salient and visible ties binding in-group members and delineating out-group members to a greater extent. Affect, or the disposition one holds towards themselves and others, is then promulgated through the ascription of norms, values, behaviors, etc. to in- and out-group members. This occurs as individuals, particularly co-group elites, typify certain behaviors as belonging more towards one group or the other (e.g., via stereotyping). To the extent that the in-group is consistently stereotyped with positive traits and the out-group consistently stereotyped by negative traits, individuals develop positive affect towards their in-group and negative affect towards their out-group, resulting in greater affective polarization (Iyengar & Wagner, 2025).

This greater affective polarization then results in individuals being more willing to accept negative stereotypes about the out-group, as that stereotype coincides with their pre-existing overall negative view of the out-group (Abrajano & Lajevardi, 2021). For example, in *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality* (Mendelberg, 2001), the author demonstrates how campaigns use implicit racial codes to appeal to more racially conservative voters; by implicitly tying race to public policy, candidates can motivate racial conservatives. Similarly, we argue that candidates use (implicitly and explicitly) racially coded election integrity rhetoric to appeal to those individuals already predisposed to accept negative racial stereotypes: those already holding a negative predisposition towards the out-group.

Specifically, the out-of-reach status of election integrity gives political elites the room to drive public opinion. The racialization of election integrity allows elites to convincingly lob racial claims of voter fraud. Those who hold greater racial affective polarization are more willing to accept racialized elite rhetoric. Thus, the use of racial claims of voter fraud during the 2020 election likely resonated most with those willing to accept the racial stereotypes: the more affectively polarized. As the racially polarized accept the racial cues of voter fraud, it decreases their confidence in elections, leading to decreased voter confidence among the racially polarized in the 2020 election:

H1: Voter confidence will decrease more for more racially affectively polarized respondents than less racially affectively polarized respondents.

Additionally, these effects should be greatest among Republicans due to partisan-congruent elite signaling, the winner/loser effect, and conspiratorial thinking. First, the claims of racial voter fraud were spread mostly by Republican elites, including President Donald Trump (Benkler et al., 2020; Phillips, 2020). This partisan congruence between Republicans in the electorate and the elites sending the racial fraud signals suggests that racial affective polarization should decrease voter confidence more among Republicans as they adopt the signals about widespread racial voter fraud (Zaller, 1992), decreasing their confidence to a greater extent.

Second, the winner/loser effect may also exacerbate the effects of this rhetoric. The winner/loser effect refers to the phenomenon where, after an election, those who supported the winning candidate are more confident in election outcomes while those who supported the losing candidate are less confident (Sances & Stewart, 2015; Sinclair et al., 2018). This winner/loser effect occurs, in part, as individuals rationalize their win/loss by praising/blaming electoral integrity. Given that Trump, a prominent Republican, lost the 2020 election, Republicans may be further willing to accept the claims of racial voter fraud as a means to rationalize their loss, decreasing their confidence.

Third, conspiratorial thinking may also drive Republican confidence downward. Uscinski et al. (2016, p. 58) define a conspiracy theory as a “proposed explanation of events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of persons (the conspirators) acting in secret for their own benefit, against the common good.” Clearly, accusations of a racial voter fraud campaign to overturn a democratically sound election against the will of the voters fits within this definition of a conspiracy. As such, conspiratorial thinking may further ease the acceptance of elite signals regarding the propensity of racial voter fraud. For example, a working paper (Stewart, 2023) suggests a substantial proportion of the partisan confidence gap in 2020 occurred, in part, due to conspiratorial thinking. This may be particularly influential for Republicans, who are more likely to believe voter fraud occurs and occurs more frequently (Coll, 2024; but see Uscinski et al., 2016). Taken

together, partisan congruence with the elite messenger behind many of the racial fraud claims, a desire to rationalize the 2020 election loss, and the propensity to subscribe to conspiracy theories surrounding voter fraud suggest racial affective polarization should decrease confidence more for Republicans, as they are more willing to accept the signals and use those signals to rationalize their loss via conspiratorial thinking:

H2: Voter confidence will decrease more for more racially affectively polarized Republicans than more racially affectively polarized Democrats.

Though much of the work on election racialization has focused on racial resentment (e.g., Wilson & King-Meadows, 2016), we explicitly focus on racial affective polarization. While several previous studies have examined the influence of racial resentment on White election integrity attitudes, we know less about the role of racial affective polarization, despite how affectively polarized White American voters have become (Dawkins & Hanson, 2024). And, though both concepts reflect a racialized world view, racial resentment and racial affective polarization are distinct concepts, with the former identifying White American resentment towards non-White socioeconomic and political advancement (Kinder & Sanders, 1996) and the latter reflecting the relative extent to which White individuals hold in-group amity and out-group animosity. As such, racial affective polarization provides a unique mechanism through which White voters react to electoral outcomes.

## 5. Data and Methods

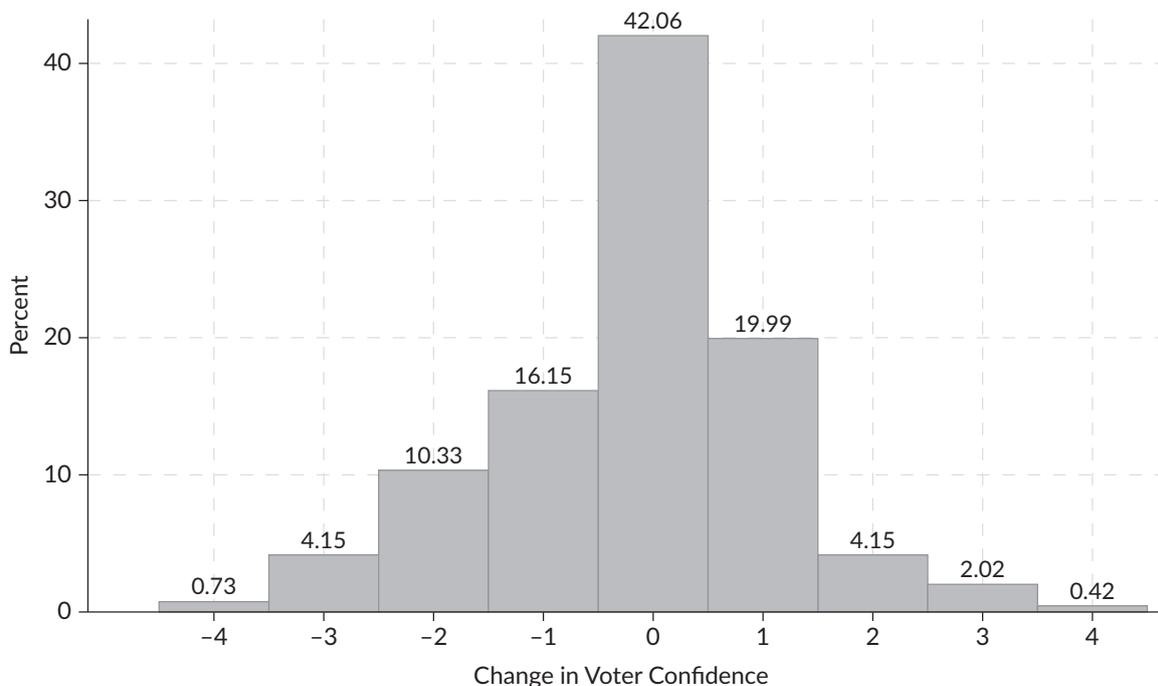
To examine whether and the extent to which racial affective polarization decreased voter confidence among White Americans in the 2020 election, we rely on the 2016–2020 ANES panel study (American National Election Studies, 2021; see also Gibson, 2024). Roughly 1,900 White non-Latino respondents participated in the 2016 and 2020 ANES panels. We examine White Americans specifically because studies indicate they are more likely to express a racial threat response to perceived demographic and hierarchical change (Craig & Richeson, 2014), and previous work suggests election integrity has become racialized among White Americans (Udani et al., 2024; Wilson & King-Meadows, 2016). (Additional analyses examining the full sample and a subsample of non-White Americans can be found in SM D and SM E, respectively, in the Supplementary File.) In both panels, respondents were asked questions gauging voter confidence and affect towards racial groups (among other important covariates). We use these variables to measure change in voter confidence, racial affective polarization, and related covariates.

Starting with perceptions of election integrity, in both years, respondents were asked, “In your view, how often do the following things occur in this country’s elections? Votes are counted fairly: All of the time, most of the time, about half of the time, some of the time, never.” We first created an ordered scale of voter confidence from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*all of the time*) for both years. We then subtracted 2016 confidence from 2020 confidence to create a measure of within-respondent change in confidence between the two elections. Doing so conceptualizes changes in voter confidence as the changes in the extent to which respondents think votes are counted fairly. Using the ANES question wording, voter confidence is conceptualized as how fair one thinks the election is based on whether votes are counted fairly (see also Filindra et al., 2024; Freeder & Shino, 2024; Gibson, 2024, who use the same or similar measures).

Notably, this question wording and conceptualization differs from that used in many recent works on voter confidence (Alvarez et al., 2008; Atkeson et al., 2015; Coll, 2024), particularly those works using data from the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAE), which conceptualizes voter confidence as how confident respondents are that votes were counted as intended. While the ANES measures perceptions of electoral integrity as whether respondents think votes were counted *fairly*, the SPAE focuses on whether votes were counted *accurately*, as intended by the voter. Another notable difference between the two surveys is that the SPAE, due to its focus on voter perceptions of election administration, has a registered voter sampling frame and a sample that is comprised of over 90% (self-reported) voters. However, the ANES, with its focus on attitudes among the American public, has an adult public sampling frame that includes many non-voters. Given that voters tend to be more confident (Alvarez et al., 2008), the SPAE measure may overestimate voter confidence among the nation.

Using the ANES, this study conceptualizes confidence as perceptions of election fairness rather than election accuracy. With these differences in mind, previous work using the ANES measure of voter confidence routinely finds theoretically congruent relationships between political phenomena and voter confidence. Most relevant to this study, Gibson (2024) finds that *political* polarization is tied to decreased voter confidence, and Filindra et al. (2024) find White racial attitudes (White grievance) decreased voter confidence, both measured by the ANES voter confidence question. For more information on perceptions of electoral integrity, see Kerr et al. (in press).

Figure 1 plots a histogram showing the percentage distribution of respondents by change in voter confidence between the 2016 and 2020 elections: 42% of respondents had no change in confidence, just under 1/3 of respondents decreased confidence, and a little over a quarter of respondents increased



**Figure 1.** Change in voter confidence (histogram), 2016 to 2020. Notes: Calculations by authors; negative values represent decreased confidence, positive values represent increased confidence, and zero represents no change in confidence. Source: American National Election Studies (2021).

confidence. However, only roughly 7% of respondents changed confidence by  $\pm 3$  units or greater. To buttress against extreme observations driving results, statistical problems associated with small (conditional) cell count, and for greater statistical precision, we collapse voter confidence into a five-category variable with the three farthestmost categories on either side of the mean collapsed into respective categories as follows: Large decrease ( $-4/-2 = 0$ ); Moderate decrease ( $-1 = 1$ ); No change ( $0 = 2$ ); Moderate increase ( $1 = 3$ ); Large increase ( $2/4 = 4$ ). Additional analyses using alternative dependent variable coding schemes (e.g., the original nine-category scale, see SM B in the Supplementary File) come to similar conclusions.

The main independent variables are racial, ethnic, and immigrant affective polarization, or racial affective polarization for brevity and consistency. As stated above, many of the accusations about voter fraud painted Black, Latino, and illegal immigrant groups as the culprits. As such, we use feeling thermometers to create three measures of racial affective polarization, one that measures the difference between feelings towards White and Black Americans (Racial Affective Polarization: White-Black), one that measures the difference between feelings towards White and Latino Americans (Racial Affective Polarization: White-Latino), and one that measures the difference between feelings towards White Americans and illegal immigrants (Racial Affective Polarization: White-Illegal Immig.). To do so, we subtracted the out-group feeling thermometer rating from the in-group (White) feeling thermometer rating and rescaled each variable to range from  $-1$  to  $1$  for ease of interpretation, with higher values reflecting greater racial affective polarization (see also Gibson, 2024). Using multiple measures of racial affective polarization provides greater confidence in our results and adds additional nuance to our findings.

To benchmark our findings, we also create measures of partisan, party leader, and ideological affective polarization. Partisan affective polarization is measured as the difference between in- and out-party feeling thermometers, party leader affective polarization is measured as the difference between in- and out-party leader feeling thermometers, and ideological affective polarization is measured as the difference between in- and out-ideology feeling thermometers (Gibson, 2024). Leaners are coded as respective partisans/ideologues, given that previous work suggests leaners and partisans hold similar election-related opinions (Coll et al., 2022). Non-partisans and political moderates are omitted from partisan or ideological affective polarization analyses given their less direct applicability, as is common in studies of political polarization (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). These more studied political affective polarization measures have been found to influence public opinion such as support for democratic norms, backsliding, and voter confidence, among other dependent variables (Gibson, 2024; Kingzette et al., 2021). Using these measures allows this study to compare the effects of racial affective polarization with those of political versions of affective polarization. Note that racial and political polarization measures demonstrate low correlations ( $-0.08$  to  $0.17$ ) and load onto separate factors, suggesting distinct concepts.

Table 1 reports the summary statistics for our measures of affective polarization (and all other variables used in this study, excluding state fixed effects). Examining patterns of affective polarization in Table 1 suggests White Americans felt particularly negative towards illegal immigrants but roughly balanced on affect towards Black and Latino Americans. Though feeling thermometer ratings may be influenced by social desirability, previous work suggests online surveys limit the social desirability-inducing effects on feeling thermometer measures (Tyler & Iyengar, 2024). Additionally, if social desirability decreases racial affect responses, as often expected (Feldman & Huddy, 2005), this should result in more conservative results (i.e., greater Type 2 error

and downward-biased estimates). Regardless, however, all racial polarization measures are far outpaced by partisan, party leader, and ideological affective polarization.

We also control for several alternative explanations. First is a set of demographic variables correlated with either the dependent or independent variables: age, education, income, and marital status. Following suit is a suite of political variables, including whether the respondent voted in 2020, partisanship, ideology, political knowledge, political interest, belief in conspiracy theories, and whether they think a voter identification is required to vote in their state. Lastly, we also control for alternative racial attitudes of White identity importance and racial resentment.

Given the ordered structure of the dependent variable, models are estimated using ordered logistic regression. This allows the examination of the probability of within-subject changes in voter confidence. All models are estimated with robust standard errors clustered by respondent and include state fixed effects. For brevity, results are displayed via marginal effects plots and tables, with full models reported in SM A in the Supplementary File. Robustness checks utilizing other modeling approaches (e.g., linear regression with a

**Table 1.** Summary statistics.

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Dependent Variable					
Change in Voter Confidence	1,926	1.87	1.10	0	4
Independent Variables					
Racial Affective Polarization: White–Black	1,926	0.02	0.19	–1	1
Racial Affective Polarization: White–Latino	1,926	0.01	0.19	–1	1
Racial Affective Polarization: White–Illegal Immig.	1,926	0.27	0.32	–1	1
Controls					
Partisan Affective Polarization	1,746	0.54	0.33	–1	1
Political Leader Affective Polarization	1,746	0.62	0.43	–1	1
Ideological Affective Polarization	1,368	0.49	0.34	–1	1
Age	1,926	54.66	16.25	19	80
Education	1,926	4.14	1.56	1	7
Income	1,926	12.43	6.48	1	22
Married	1,926	0.59	0.49	0	1
Voted	1,926	0.90	0.30	0	1
Conservative	1,926	4.23	1.66	1	7
Republican	1,926	0.50	0.50	0	1
Independent	1,926	0.09	0.29	0	1
Political Knowledge	1,926	0.91	0.47	0	2
Political Interest	1,926	2.81	0.96	1	4
Racial Importance	1,926	2.46	1.32	1	5
Racial Resentment	1,926	0.50	0.31	0	1
Thinks State Has Voter Identification Requirement	1,926	0.27	0.84	–1	1
Conspiratorial Thinking	1,926	0.47	0.26	0	1

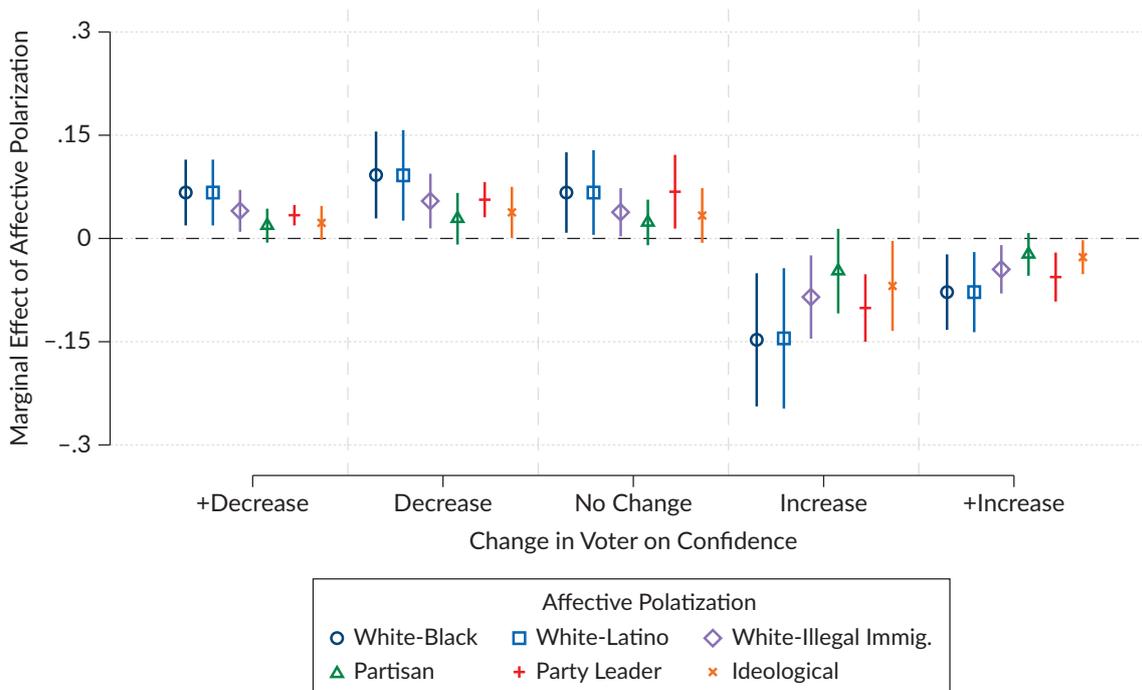
Source: American National Election Studies (2021).

0–1 dependent variable—see SM C in the Supplementary File), alternative coding of the dependent variable (e.g., original scale—see SM B in the Supplementary File), and alternative coding of the independent variables (e.g., testing alternative measures of Republicanism for the conditional test of H2—see SM F in the Supplementary File) come to similar conclusions.

Across robustness checks, results repeatedly affirm the conclusions discussed within this manuscript. Ordered logistic regression results are presented to balance the ease of interpretation with the desire to model the ordered structure of the dependent variable and examine changes by dependent variable levels. For additional interpretation, the linear regression results suggest that a one-unit increase in racial affective polarization (i.e., min to max given the 0–1 independent variable) decreased confidence by 7.8 percentage points (White–Black), 7.0 percentage points (White–Latino), and 5.3 percentage points (White–Illegal Immig.). In comparison, party leader polarization decreased confidence by 4.4 percentage points, while partisan and ideological polarization had no significant effect. Lastly, while the use of panel data alleviates some causality concerns, we are unable to rule out the possibility that there was some factor specific to 2020 (outside of racial voter fraud rhetoric) that may have caused this relationship, and future works should endeavor to isolate the impact of racial voter fraud rhetoric on voter confidence among (more or less) racially polarized White Americans.

## 6. Analyses

For ease of interpretation of the ordered logistic regression coefficients and out of concerns for space, Figure 2 displays a coefficient plot estimating the one-unit marginal effect of our measures of racial and political affective polarization on the probability the respondent greatly decreased confidence (furthest left



**Figure 2.** Change in voter confidence, 2016 to 2020. Notes: Estimates derived from Table A1 in SM A in the Supplementary File.

panel), somewhat decreased confidence (middle left panel), had no change (middle panel), somewhat increased confidence (middle right panel), and greatly increased confidence (furthest right panel; 95% confidence intervals shown). The horizontal line denotes zero on the y-axis, signifying non-significance. Table 2 displays the same information, but numerically, with *p*-values in parentheses, and associated “significance stars.” SM A in the Supplementary File displays the full tables.

**Table 2.** Marginal effect of affective polarization on change in voter confidence, 2016 to 2020.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	4)	(5)	(6)
	White-Black	White-Latino	White-Illegal Immig.	Partisan	Party Leader	Ideological
	b/p	b/p	b/p	b/p	b/p	b/p
Change in Confidence						
+Decrease	0.067** (0.006)	0.066** (0.009)	0.039* (0.010)	0.019 (0.139)	0.034*** (0.000)	0.023* (0.048)
Decrease	0.092** (0.004)	0.092** (0.006)	0.054** (0.007)	0.028 (0.135)	0.057*** (0.000)	0.038* (0.041)
No Change	0.067* (0.025)	0.066* (0.033)	0.037* (0.036)	0.023 (0.171)	0.067* (0.013)	0.034 (0.104)
Increase	-0.147** (0.003)	-0.146** (0.005)	-0.085** (0.006)	-0.047 (0.130)	-0.101*** (0.000)	-0.068* (0.040)
+Increase	-0.078** (0.005)	-0.078** (0.008)	-0.045** (0.009)	-0.023 (0.146)	-0.056** (0.002)	-0.027* (0.042)
Observations	1,926	1,926	1,926	1,746	1,746	1,368

Notes: Estimates derived from Table A1 in SM A in the Supplementary File; b/p = beta/*p*-value; *p*-values in parentheses \* .05, \*\* .01, \*\*\* .001.

Examining Figure 2 and Table 2, results strongly support our expectations that the more racially affectively polarized witnessed a greater decrease in voter confidence than the less racially affectively polarized. Specifically, we find that greater White-Black (○), White-Latino (□), and White-illegal immigrant affective polarization (◇) is significantly associated with higher propensities to decrease (two leftmost panels, Figure 2) or have no change in confidence (middle panel, Figure 2) between the two elections, and with lower propensities to increase confidence (two rightmost panels, Figure 2). Said differently, racial polarization is associated with individuals decreasing the propensity to increase confidence, with those individuals filtering into the no change, decrease, and large decrease levels. See SM H in the Supplementary File, which examines the changes in voter confidence as a function of racial affective polarization, to further scrutinize this finding.

Comparing across racial affective polarization measures suggests the estimated effects for White-Black and White-Latino affective polarization tend to be larger, surpass greater significance thresholds, and have less variance than found for the White-illegal immigrant affective polarization measure. However, these differences tend to not be statistically significant. Comparing across levels of the dependent variable, results suggest these effects are driven by decreasing the likelihood that one is slightly more confident in elections than the year before, with those individuals sorting into no change, decreased, and to a lesser extent, greatly decreased confidence. In line with expectations, these results suggest that more racially affectively polarized

White Americans were more likely to decrease confidence between 2016 and 2020. To benchmark these effects, we compare racial polarization effects to partisan ( $\Delta$ ), party leader (+), and ideological affective polarization ( $\times$ ). While we do find political polarization may affect voter confidence (see also Gibson, 2024), we also find some evidence that racial polarization may drive down confidence to the same degree or even more than political polarization, though effects are not always statistically distinguishable.

Lastly, we examine whether the effects of racial affective polarization were greatest among Republicans. To do so, we interact our measures of racial affective polarization with a dichotomous variable denoting whether the respondent identified as a Republican. Contrary to expectations, we find no evidence that racial affective polarization affected voter confidence to a greater extent among Republicans, with insignificant interactions across all models (see SM A in the Supplementary File). The lack of support for the partisan-conditional hypothesis may be due to the racial identity of the elite sending the message mattering more than their political identity, given the racially coded message. This comports with an elite-driven theory of public opinion (Zaller, 1992) but changes the focal identity of the elite from that of partisan congruence to racial congruence. This is supported by past work finding that Trump's claims of voter fraud activated racial grievance and decreased confidence for Republicans *and* Democrats, though effects were larger for Republicans (Filindra et al., 2024). Additionally, models were re-estimated using the full sample (SM D in the Supplementary File) and only among non-White respondents (SM E in the Supplementary File), finding smaller effects in the full sample and no effects among non-White respondents, further suggesting racial congruence between elite messenger and receiver may have conditioned the relationship under study.

## 7. Conclusion

The 2020 election witnessed an unprecedented attack against its legitimacy. Over the course of the election, a widespread voter fraud conspiracy theory campaign unfolded, with (Republican) political elites accusing the election of being illegitimate due to voter fraud (Berlinski et al., 2023). However, these claims of voter fraud were not race neutral. Instead, many of the voter fraud accusations stereotyped non-White Americans as the culprits (Phillips, 2020). This racialized voter fraud rhetoric comes at a time when elections and election legitimacy are becoming highly racialized (Udani et al., 2024), increasing the link between racial attitudes and perceptions of elections. We argue that, like voter fraud claims more generally, racialized voter fraud claims decreased confidence among those willing to accept the racialized premise of the fraud claims; here, racially affectively polarized White Americans.

Using the 2016–2020 ANES panel, we find voter confidence decreased to a greater extent among racially affectively polarized White Americans. This result is in line with the hypothesized expectation that the racial coding of voter fraud claims resonated more with racially polarized White Americans (Mendelberg, 2001). Additionally, we find that the effects of racial affective polarization were on par with political affective polarization, demonstrating the pervasive effect of racial affective polarization on voter confidence.

These results demonstrate that election integrity in the US has been sufficiently racialized: Perceptions of the legitimacy of election outcomes are partially predicated on racial beliefs and rhetoric. As a consequence of this racialization, when elites focus their claims of voter fraud on non-White Americans, they do so at the peril of voter confidence among the more racially affectively polarized. Further, these false claims of voter fraud not only reduce voter confidence but also potentially erode support for democratic norms (Clayton et al., 2021).

Given the lack of evidence for voter fraud in the 2020 election (Eggers et al., 2021) and court findings that those espousing these conspiracy theories were aware they were false (Brumback, 2023), this suggests that political elites may be using racial divisions within society to decrease voter confidence in elections, a potential step towards election de-legitimization and democratic backsliding (Norris, 2014).

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

All materials needed to replicate these analyses can be found at the Harvard Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VHMWLH>

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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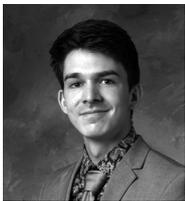
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