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How Research–Practice Partnerships Can Strengthen Experiments Designed to Build Trust in American Elections

Cheryl Boudreau [1], Jennifer Gaudette [2], Thad Kousser [3], Seth J. Hill [3], Mackenzie Lockhart [4], and Laura Uribe [3]

[1] Department of Political Science, University of California – Davis, USA
[2] School of Public Policy, University of California – Riverside, USA
[3] Department of Political Science, University of California – San Diego, USA
[4] Institution for Social and Policy Studies, Yale University, USA

Correspondence: Thad Kousser (tkousser@ucsd.edu)

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Abstract

To address the challenge of declining trust in American democracy in the wake of the 2020 presidential contest, election officials across the nation have undertaken innovative public information campaigns. Academic studies demonstrate that exposure to these messages can increase public confidence but do not show which types of messages are most effective. We report a set of three experimental studies that harness research–practice partnerships with these officials to vary one key aspect of an informational message while holding other features constant. The pre-registered experiments (accessible at: https://osf.io/y38sp; https://osf.io/fya69): (a) compare the impact of messages conveyed through earned versus paid media; (b) ask whether Americans are more responsive to messages from federal or from state election officials; (c) explore the impact of videos and static visuals. Taken together, this set of collaborative experiments demonstrates the unique opportunity that research–practice partnerships allow to test real-world messages through strong causal inference techniques, providing rigorous evidence that can inform practice on the front lines of American democracy.

Keywords

elections; experiments; research–practice partnerships; trust

1. Introduction

The decline of confidence in the accuracy and integrity of elections poses a daunting challenge to American democracy (Stewart, 2021). To meet this challenge, the officials who administer elections are launching strategic communications efforts aimed directly at increasing public trust in elections. In state and local governments across the country as well as at the federal level, these election officials have engaged in messaging campaigns designed to explain the protections on the integrity of vote counting processes (Suttmann-Lea & Merivaki, 2023). These are often designed to counter unsupported claims of voter fraud that have eroded confidence in American democracy (Albertson & Guiler, 2020; Arceneaux & Truex, 2022; Berlinski et al., 2023; Clayton et al., 2021). Experimental tests of the impact of some of these messages have produced promising evidence that they can achieve their intended goal of increasing public trust (Bordeleau, 2025; Brown et al., 2024; Carey et al., 2025; Lockhart et al., 2024; Uribe et al., 2025). Researchers have even partnered directly with the election officials or nonprofit groups who have created these messages in order to evaluate their efficacy (Boudreau et al., 2025; Gaudette et al., 2025; Prather & Kousser, 2024).

While this literature so far has identified messages that can persuade voters to trust elections—at least in the context of a survey experiment, a potential limitation that we discuss more thoroughly in the conclusion—it leaves open the question of which types of communication will be most persuasive. This is the crucial question for practitioners themselves. What kind of message should election officials craft, who should be the messenger, and which medium should they use to spread this information? To answer these questions, we combine the rigor of randomized experimentation with the realism provided by research–practice partnerships (see Coburn et al., 2013). This article presents three independent experiments, each taking its own approach to a research–practice partnership. The first leverages a message co-created with a practitioner, testing the relative impacts of paid versus earned media by having the same messenger record the same message through each type of media. The second harnesses a natural experiment in which parallel videos explaining safeguards on elections processes were produced by the federal Election Assistance Commission (EAC) and by three states, allowing us to isolate the impact of state versus federal messengers. The third is a pre-election experiment designed to inform practice that tested multiple videos and visual messages designed for the same elections office, allowing them to determine which was most effective at increasing trust before they launched a public information campaign.

We begin the article by outlining the methodological approach that unites these three studies: survey experiments designed through research–practice partnerships with American election officials. Then, for each experiment, we provide background that motivates a hypothesis, the study design, results, and a discussion. We conclude by noting both the advantages and limitations of these studies.

2. Methodological Approach: Experiments Designed Through Research–Practice Partnerships

Research–practice partnerships provide a promising path to increasing our understanding of the emerging challenge of declining trust in American elections and for providing actionable data to guide the practitioners who are working to address it. In this realm, they bring together public officials in the elections sphere with scholars to identify relevant research questions and then conduct independent, rigorously designed research

projects to answer them. Research–practice partnerships can thus create a robust basis of evidence to help inform the actions of administrators working to ensure confidence in democratic elections.

Such research–practice partnerships have many strengths. They use real-world messages as the treatments in their experiments, an important step toward external validity. Because they are often driven by the questions posed by practitioners, they are designed to meet their needs and often have direct implications for practice, answering a key question like "Does our message work?" Yet a research–practice partnership that studies an existing intervention such as a message about protections on the integrity of elections also faces key limitations. Constrained to study this message, the researchers lack the level of experimental control that they would typically possess in an experimental design. Scholars would not be able to vary aspects of the message in order to distinguish the mechanisms through which it might work. This is not a purely academic question, because without the ability to isolate the impact of some feature of a message—part of its content, the messenger behind it, or the medium through which it is sent—they cannot give their practitioner partner any guidance about "What type of message works best?"

To meet these challenges, we argue that the answer is not to abandon research–practice partnerships but to deepen them. In the experiments that we report here, we co-created content with election official partners or collaborated with them to identify tests based on real-world messages that answer key questions to inform their actions. We were able to vary a key aspect of a message but keep other characteristics—such as the medium, the institutional source, the message, or the visual appearance—constant.

We then conducted survey experimental tests to isolate the causal impact of that key aspect, all else equal. We embedded the experiments in large-scale surveys conducted during the 2024 election cycle with samples drawn to reflect the eligible voter populations along the lines of age, gender, education, and race and ethnicity (in the case of the San Francisco Bay Area, we also included county of residence). These surveys first asked respondents about their trust in various aspects of elections before any message was delivered, allowing a "pre-treatment" measure of trust. We next randomly assigned some respondents to view a message about protections on elections and others to view an advertisement that was unrelated to elections. We then asked both groups again about their levels of trust, a "post-treatment" measurement. In our analyses, whenever possible we estimate experimental effects on post-treatment measures, controlling for pre-treatment measures, in order to increase precision (see Clifford et al., 2021). We conducted our surveys through online panels administered by the survey firms Forthright (Bovitz, Inc.) and Cint, which pay respondents $1.50–$3.86 for their participation. To ensure that respondents were engaged with the survey, we included multiple attention check questions throughout the surveys, ensured that they spent reasonable amounts of time viewing the trust-building messages and answering questions, and asked a factual manipulation check question after the message to confirm that they could recall its substance. We pre-registered each of the experiments to ensure rigor.

3. Comparing the Impact of Paid and Earned Media (Co-Created Messaging Experiment)

3.1. Background

Are messages from election officials more effective when they are delivered through public service announcement (PSA)-style paid media campaigns or when they are presented through "earned" media such as

appearances on a television newscast? Election officials have often asked us whether they can communicate to voters through interviews or if they need to engage in expensive ad campaigns when we have presented the results of our initial studies. Because most of them do not have budgets for paid media—but do have longstanding relationships with local media—we analyze whether the medium of media appearance affects the efficacy of PSA-style videos. Understanding this difference (if any) can have major consequences for where election officials invest their time and attention when trying to increase trust in elections.

The idea that earned media is more valuable than paid media is not a new one. Hovland et al. (1953) found that message effectiveness depends on the trustworthiness and expertise of the source, which explains why earned media tends to consistently outperform paid media, where the sources have a vested interest. Similarly, in a 2011 meta-analysis, Eisend and Küster (2011) found that message recipients viewed publicity three times more credible, on average, than advertisements, though the magnified effect is only found for new information, and effects are moderated by prior knowledge. In the case of election integrity, voters tend to have some information about elections. Thus, while we might expect there to be differences in response to an advertisement as opposed to an interview with an election official, how great a difference there might be is unclear.

Our previous work showed that messages about election integrity can have positive effects (Gaudette et al., 2025). However, while our initial studies included both PSA-style videos and media appearances, each video featured different messengers delivering different messages. In the terminology of research design, these were deeply bundled treatments, leaving us with no way to isolate the impact of the medium. To parse out potential differences between earned versus paid media in the context of election integrity messages, we have to test whether the *same* message delivered by the *same* person has different effects when delivered through free (interviews) versus paid media (advertisements).

Our partnership with former Maricopa County Recorder Stephen Richer allows us to test medium effects while holding the message constant. Richer frequently appeared on local and national television to discuss the security of elections in Maricopa County. We chose one of his appearances on a Phoenix television station during the 2022 election in which he provided detailed information about election protections in a roughly minute-long segment in a way that parallels what PSA-style videos often cover. Then, we took a transcript of that appearance and invited him to record a video repeating those lines in a studio setting. He used similar intonation and wore similar clothing. We shot in front of a green screen and then edited in a similar background video (footage of activities at the election facility in which he was interviewed by the newscaster) in order to isolate, as much as possible, the effect of the shift from earned to paid media. This allowed us to conduct pre-registered experimental tests of whether each video increased trust and whether this impact was different for the two types of media. Our pre-registration plan is in the Supplementary File and was posted prior to the launch of our study. Our pre-registered hypothesis is below:

> Hypothesis 1: Respondents who are exposed to a video that discusses election integrity (either through earned or paid media) will increase their level of trust in elections.

In addition to testing the above hypothesis, we will also study variation in messaging type. Specifically, we will look at variation in the impact of treatment effects among respondents who viewed the earned media video versus the paid media video.

3.2. Study Design

We tested the impact of earned and paid media messages on trust using a survey experiment embedded in a national survey with 4,538 respondents. The survey was fielded from October 26 to October 27, 2024 on the Bovitz platform, as part of an omnibus survey including another (independently randomized) experiment.

We compared the two treatment messages (the *earned media* message from TV and the *paid media* PSA-style message) to a neutral control condition (a television commercial advertising Hyundai cars). As discussed above, the earned media message was a TV appearance by then-County Recorder Stephen Richer during the 2022 midterm elections discussing election counting procedures with a news reporter in an election facility. The paid media message used a nearly identical script, modified minimally to fit the PSA video format, with images of vote counting in the background similar to those in the background of the news report.

To determine the impact on trust, we measure a specific and a series of general outcome variables. Our specific trust measure asked respondents "Think about vote counting in Maricopa County, Arizona. How confident are you that votes in Maricopa County, Arizona will be counted as voters intend?" and asked this measure only after the treatment. Additionally, we measure trust in state level elections and national elections using parallel question formats, as well as turnout likelihood and whether a respondent would be willing to serve as a poll worker. These four measures are measured both pre- and post-treatment.

3.3. Results

We model our outcomes as the change in the level of trust/likelihood for our four variables that have pre-treatment measures (state trust, national trust, turnout, and poll worker willingness) and the post-treatment level of trust for trust in Maricopa County. We then compare how effective each treatment is to the control message using OLS regression. Results are summarized in Figure 1.

We find that both messages increase trust in Maricopa County's elections but not in any of our other outcome measures. The effect size is large, consistent with strong treatment effects in prior work (Gaudette et al., 2025; Prather & Kousser, 2024), increasing nearly 0.3 on a 1–4 scale relative to the control group. The effect of our treatments on broader trust or participation is not distinguishable from zero except for the effect of earned media on trust in national elections and the point estimates are very small in every case. This suggests the effect is concentrated on the jurisdiction that is the focus of the treatment message.

Importantly, we find no significant or substantive differences across our two treatments. In fact, point estimates are virtually identical across outcomes, even when one is significant and the other is not. Neither paid nor earned media is more effective in our experiment, holding the content of the message constant. This finding is remarkable as ours is the first study to directly compare messages that are identical except in their format, and we find absolutely no difference between message types.

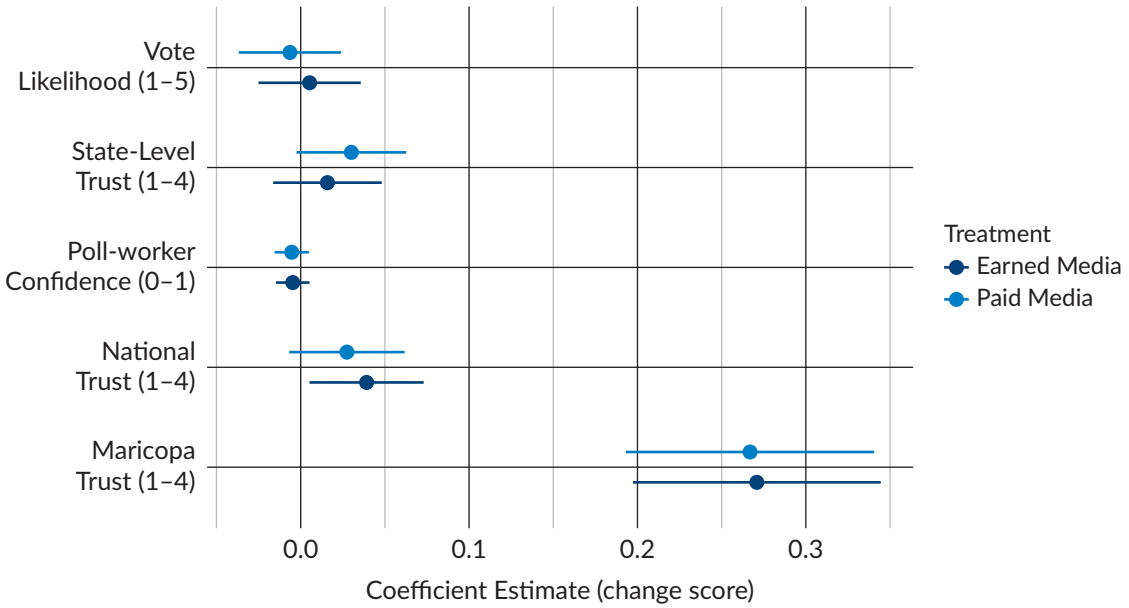

Figure 1. Effect of earned and paid messages on change in measures of trust and behavior outcomes. Notes: Positive values indicate an increase from baseline (post-pre) or, for Maricopa, a higher post-treatment score. Main outcome (Maricopa) not measured pre-treatment; all outcomes are measured post-treatment in Figure 1 in the Supplementary File (results remain similar); 95% confidence intervals are presented in solid lines.

Additionally, we find minimal differences by party (see Table 2 in the Supplementary File). The effects on trust in Maricopa County's elections are slightly larger among Independents than Democrats and Republicans, although this difference is only significant when comparing Democrats and Independents in the earned media condition, otherwise the coefficients are indistinguishable from one another. The effect sizes are larger for Independents than Republicans in all other conditions, but the difference is not statistically distinguishable from zero. The differences are not substantively important for our other outcome measures, and the effects of the treatments are not statistically significant for any subgroup.

3.4. Discussion

We find that both the earned and paid messages increased trust in elections in Maricopa County effectively, with effect sizes similar to those measured in existing research using the same scale. The coefficients for both earned media (0.271) and paid media (0.267) treatments in Maricopa County are quite close to the coefficient representing increased trust in Texas elections generated by a treatment explaining how Texas elections are kept secure (0.213; Gaudette et al., 2025). Additionally, like that work found, we find minimal partisan differences. Our main contribution is to show that when the content of the message is held constant across paid and earned formats, the trust-building effects are the same.

For practitioners, these findings are reassuring and suggest that there is no reason to prioritize paid or earned media appearances over the other. If election officials lack the funds to buy media attention, partnering with local news can improve trust in elections. But at the same time, if local officials find it easier to reach voters directly with paid media (online or in traditional media), they can focus on these strategies without fear that the messages are less effective in PSA formats. Regardless of how they reach voters, these messages are effective.

This point is worth reiterating given the diffuse nature of the modern media environment and the expense of modern media campaigns. Since the impact of paid media is essentially identical to that of earned media, election officials can feel confident that both options can increase voters' trust in elections in a region, even across partisan lines.

4. Are Americans More Responsive to Messages From Federal or From State Election Officials? (Natural Experiment)

4.1. Background

Are state election officials more effective than national sources in communicating messages designed to increase trust in elections? On the one hand, the resources and reach of the federal government might make it the most trusted authority when it comes to providing information about the safeguards on elections. Since these safeguards are typically quite similar across states (Stewart, 2022, pp. 237–239), a unified messaging campaign from a single national source might be the most effective way to build voter trust. On the other hand, survey evidence shows that trust in government in general is significantly stronger for state governments than for federal governments (Jones, 2023), and specific surveys about trust in elections find that state and local officials are the most trusted source of information (Gaudette et al., 2025). If state election officials engender more trust from the public, then a messaging campaign that highlights state rather than federal sources will be most effective.

Answering this question with rigorous data can help guide practice. Federal bodies such as the EAC often have resources to help provide information to the public about the protections on elections. Should they deploy those resources by communicating directly with the public, or by supporting state officials in doing so? Learning whether the federal government or states are the most effective messengers can help ensure that scarce communication resources are used most effectively, at the same time that it answers the broader question of how Americans view information provided by these two levels of government.

4.2. Study Design

The challenge to answering this question is isolating the impact of the source of the message, while holding constant the content of the message and the medium through which it is conveyed. As we discussed in the example of the paid versus earned media analysis above, the source of the message is often bundled with its content or its medium. A federal agency might communicate about protections on the integrity of the vote while emphasizing different safeguards than an analogous message produced by state officials, and one might feature a video shot in an election facility while another could feature graphical representations of the ballot counting process. With multiple aspects of the message differing between the federal and state communications, the impact of the source would be confounded. An optimal research design, by contrast, would be to study two identical videos produced in the same format, describing the same safeguards on the integrity of elections, with one coming from a federal source and the other from a state.

Fortunately, the EAC provided a perfect testbed for this type of analysis. They produced a video, clearly branded as coming from the EAC and with a map of the nation, that describes the common set of integrity protections that all states employ. But they also made it easy for states to produce a version of this video,

branded with their own state's name and showing the state map, but otherwise providing all of the same information. Three states with varied political profiles, California (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmiwRD7OBRU), Idaho (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDC6tbUFBnc), and Iowa (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIg07_z8Gtk), produced these tailored EAC videos. The screenshots in Figure 2 from the Idaho-specific version and from the EAC national version demonstrate that they provide the same information through analogous visuals, while varying the source. By comparing their impacts on trust, we can see whether a national or a state source is most effective.

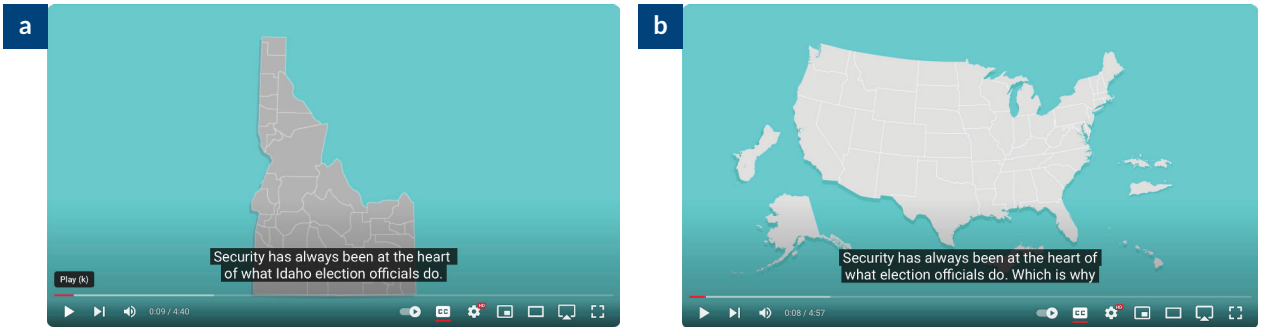

Figure 2. EAC-designed information videos, with (a) state version and (b) national version.

We tested the impact of messages from these sources on trust in the second wave of the survey described in the previous section, with 3,551 respondents surveyed between November 2 and November 4, 2024, using Forthright (Bovitz, Inc.) as the survey firm. These respondents reflected the eligible voter population of the nation as a whole. We pre-registered our experimental design and included the following pre-registered hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 2: Respondents who are exposed to a video from a state messenger that discusses election integrity will increase their level of trust in elections by a larger margin than those who are exposed to a similar video from a national messenger.
>
> Hypothesis 2a – Subgroup Effect: This differential effect will be sharpest for respondents who reside in the same state as the state that is the messenger in the video.

The design of our experiment is displayed in Figure 3. Because prior experiments have demonstrated that the national EAC video effectively increases trust, we did not have a pure control group. Instead, we randomized respondents into six equally sized treatment groups. Before randomization, respondents in each group answered questions about their trust in elections at different levels, their willingness to serve as a poll worker, and their intention to vote or not. They answered the same questions after viewing one of the videos, allowing us to conduct a within-subject analysis to maximize statistical power. (The only trust question that we could not ask in advance of the randomization was trust in the target state. That analysis is thus a comparison between randomized treatment groups, which retains the strong causal inference even if it does not maximize statistical power.)

We included three different state versions in this experiment so that the results would not be swayed by the reputations of any specific state. One group watched the Idaho version of the video, and another group watched the national version; each of these was then asked about their trust, including "Now, think about

vote counting throughout Idaho. How confident are you that votes in Idaho will be counted as voters intend?" This measured their trust in the "target state," our key outcome in Table 1. Another pair of treatment groups watched the California version or the national version and then answered about their trust in California elections. The final pair of treatment groups watched either the Iowa or the national version, then answered about trust in Iowa elections (as well as trust in other elections). In Table 1, we averaged the treatment effects of all state-specific versions, compared to watching the national versions of each video.

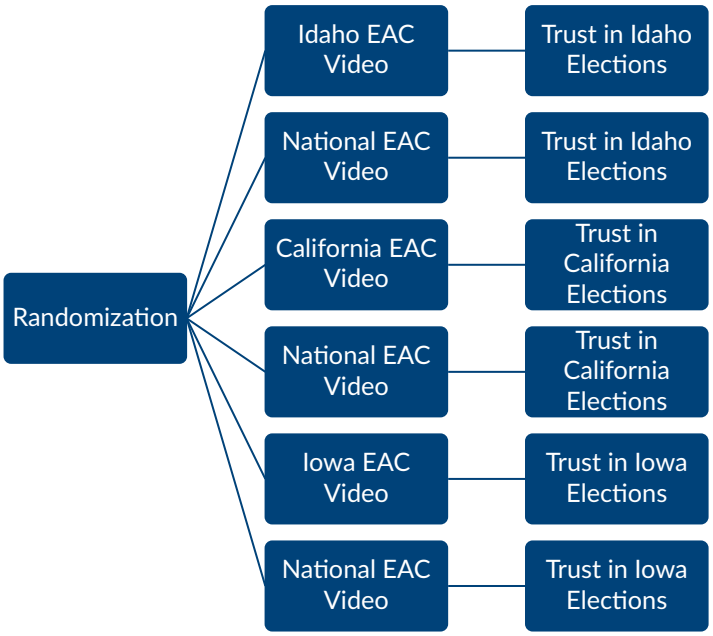

Figure 3. Experimental design for comparison of national vs. state sources.

4.3. Results

Each coefficient in Table 1 is the average difference in trust or intended behavior between those assigned a state EAC video and those assigned the national EAC video. We consider seven response variables: trust in the target state (Idaho, California, or Iowa, pooled), trust in the respondent's own vote, trust in local elections, and trust in state elections, along with intended turnout and poll worker willingness. We did not ask about trust in the target state in the pre-treatment battery to avoid potential demand effects. The model of that outcome variable (column one) only, therefore, does not control for a pre-treatment version of the outcome.

The results show that watching the state version of the EAC video increases trust in the elections of that target state, relative to viewing the national version. By contrast, the state version was no more effective at increasing trust in elections at other levels of government or in changing behavioral intentions. The first column shows that respondents assigned to see the Idaho, California, or Iowa versions expressed greater trust in the vote counting in Idaho, California, or Iowa, respectively, than respondents assigned to the national video. The point estimate is about 0.16 on the four-point scale.

In Appendix Table 3 of the Supplementary File, we present our pre-registered evaluation as to whether respondents assigned to the EAC version of the video in their state of residence were any more or less responsive to that video. The coefficients show that respondents are more trusting of elections in their state

of residence but are not differentially more or less responsive to the EAC video from their state of residence than residents of other states.

Table 1. Effect of state vs. national messages on trust and intended political behavior.

	Dependent variable						
	Target State (1–4)	Own Vote (1–4)	Local Vote (1–4)	State Vote (1–4)	National Vote (1–4)	Poll Worker (1/0)	Vote Likelihood (1–5)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
State Video	0.156***	0.027	−0.002	−0.020	−0.011	0.004	−0.023
	(0.032)	(0.019)	(0.016)	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.007)	(0.017)
Constant	3.092***	−0.071***	−0.006	0.032***	0.071***	−0.007	0.031**
	(0.023)	(0.014)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.005)	(0.012)
Observations	3,104	3,175	3,197	3,212	3,195	2,644	3,335
R^2	0.007	0.001	0.00000	0.001	0.0001	0.0001	0.001

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

4.4. Discussion

We find that state-sponsored messaging increases trust in the elections of that state relative to the general increase in trust of the same message when delivered by federal sponsors. However, the state-sponsored message does not increase trust relative to the federal message in other geographies or in the respondent's intention to vote or serve as a poll worker.

It is important to again highlight the benefit of this experiment. The content, visuals, and audio of the message were equivalent between the state and federal version, with the only difference being the geographic specificity of the state versions. This level of experimental control means that we can confidently attribute the increase in trust for elections in the target state to the status of the sponsor and geographic specificity.

For practitioners, these findings indicate that messaging tailored to the geography targeted for communication is more effective than messaging of more generic or ambiguous geography. Consistent with previous research, voters are most trusting of their local election officials. Voters appear to carry that trust to the sponsorship of messages.

5. Can Videos or Images Increase Trust in Elections? Pre-Election Experiment Designed to Inform Practice

5.1. Background

Another research–practice partnership that yielded valuable insights was our collaboration with the former deputy county clerk-recorder for Contra Costa County in California and the Coalition of Bay Area Election Officials (a collaboration of election officials in 12 San Francisco Bay Area counties, including Contra Costa).

These election officials had resources to develop and implement an information campaign about the security of Bay Area elections in advance of the 2024 presidential election. Together with the Stanford Design School, these officials developed three visual images to be displayed in public, shared via social media, and potentially printed in the voter information guide. The deputy county clerk-recorder in Contra Costa County also worked with a public relations firm to develop two videos about the security of elections in Contra Costa County that could be shared with voters via social media. Before disseminating these messages, these election officials sought evidence-based insights about which of the images and videos would be most effective.

In collaboration with these officials, we designed a survey experiment to test whether these messages increased voters' trust in elections and which ones worked best. Previous research indicates that short videos about election security effectively build trust in elections (Gaudette et al., 2025; Lockhart et al., 2024). Thus, we pre-registered a hypothesis that respondents exposed to either video would increase their trust in elections. There is less prior research on the effect of visual images on trust in elections, but one study indicates that one-page informational reports about a particular election safeguard can increase trust (Boudreau et al., 2025). We, therefore, also pre-registered a hypothesis that exposure to the visual images about election security would increase trust in elections. We did not have strong prior beliefs about which visual or video would be most effective, but we explore these questions in our analysis:

> Hypothesis 3: Respondents who are exposed to a poster that discusses election integrity will increase their level of trust in elections.
>
> Hypothesis 4: Respondents who are exposed to a video that discusses election integrity will increase their level of trust in elections.

5.2. Study Design

We fielded a large, pre-registered online survey experiment in 12 San Francisco Bay Area counties from July 4 to July 9, 2024. We used the survey research service Cint (formerly Lucid) to obtain a sample of 1,515 respondents that reflects the demographic characteristics of eligible voters in these counties, with an oversample of voters from Contra Costa County. The survey was available in both English and Spanish.

In the survey, we first ask respondents to express their level of trust that their own vote will be counted as they intend, as well as the extent to which they trust that votes in Contra Costa County, the San Francisco Bay Area, and California will be counted as voters intend. They are then randomly assigned to view one of three visual images highlighting the protections used in Bay Area elections, or one of two control images that are visually similar, but discuss topics unrelated to elections. The images that we tested are shown in Figure 4. After exposure to one of these images, respondents express their level of trust that votes in the San Francisco Bay Area will be counted as voters intend. We compare respondents' level of trust after viewing each election-related image with the level of trust among respondents in the control group who viewed an image unrelated to protections on elections.

Respondents then participate in a second experiment that independently randomly assigns them to watch one of two different videos about election security in Contra Costa County or a Honda car commercial (the control). One election security video, entitled *Your Vote Counts. We Know, We Checked it 4 Times*,

highlights measures like signature verification, voter eligibility checks, and accuracy protections. The other video, entitled *Election Security: 2-Step Verification? Try 48 Steps!* also mentions signature verification and eligibility requirements, but then speeds through 46 other protections in Contra Costa County. After watching their assigned video, respondents express their level of trust in the extent to which votes in Contra Costa County will be counted as voters intend. We compare respondents' level of trust after watching each election security video with the level of trust among respondents in the control group who viewed the Honda car commercial.

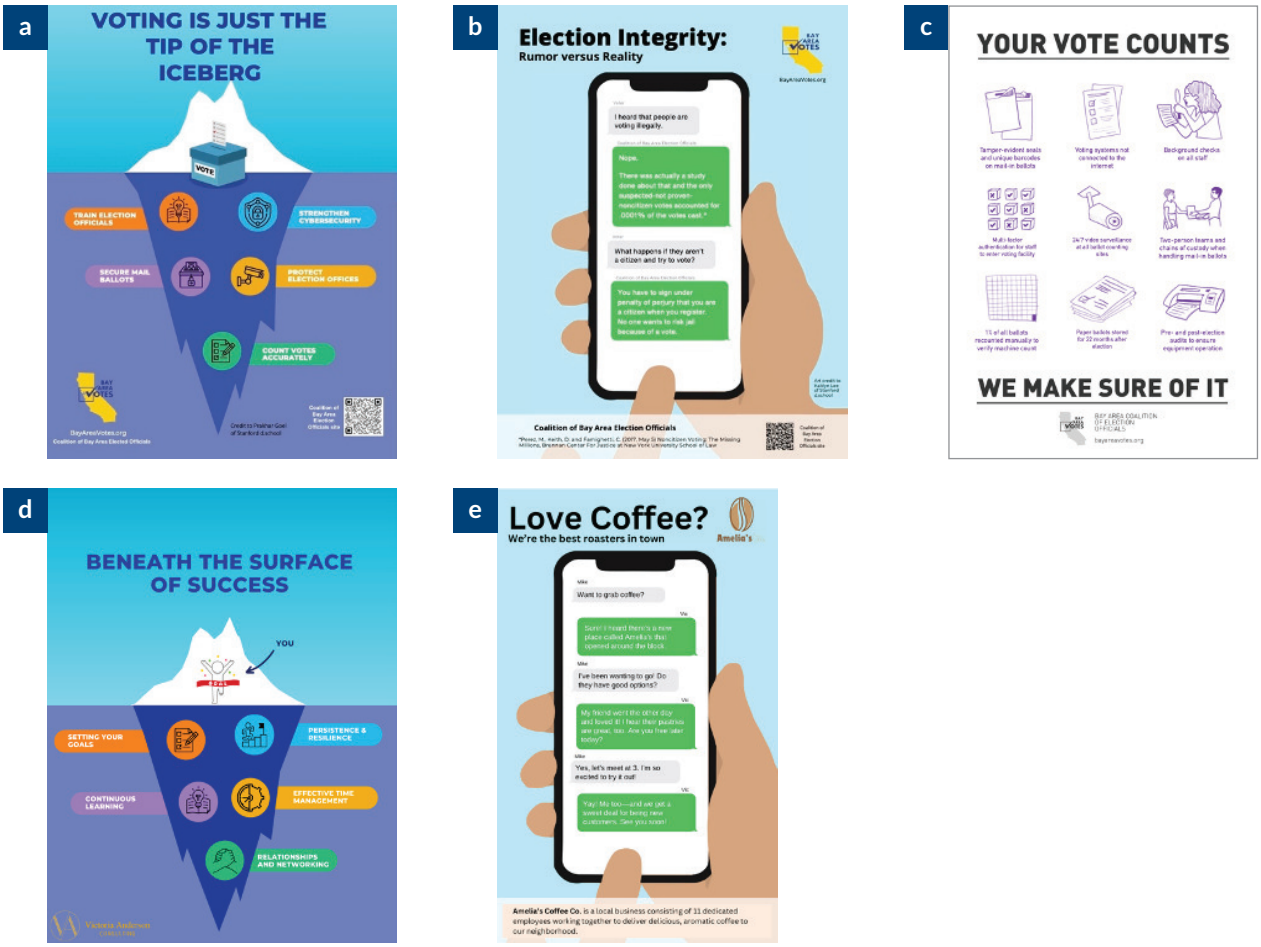

Figure 4. Treatment (a, b, c) and control (d, e) visual images.

5.3. Results

Contrary to our expectation in Hypothesis 3, none of the three treatment images produced statistically significant increases in trust, relative to the pooled control images. We also pre-registered hypotheses for other outcomes of interest: willingness to serve as a poll worker, sign a petition, vote in the 2024 presidential election, and visit a website about protections on elections. Contrary to our expectations, none of the visual images or videos significantly affected these outcomes. Table 2 shows that these images have null effects on respondents' trust that votes in the San Francisco Bay Area will be counted as voters intend. The absence of treatment effects suggests that these static visual communications, at least in a controlled experimental environment, may not have the strength or produce the necessary engagement to

meaningfully alter beliefs about election integrity. We shared these findings with our partners, which then shaped their marketing strategy in lessening the roll-out of these visual images.

Table 2. Effect of visual image treatments on post-treatment trust levels.

	Trust in Bay Area Elections
(Intercept)	0.79***
	(0.05)
Treatment—Ballots	0.02
	(0.04)
Treatment—Cell Phone	0.02
	(0.04)
Treatment—Iceberg	−0.00
	(0.04)
Pre-Treatment Trust in Bay Area Vote	0.76***
	(0.01)
R^2	0.66
Adj. R^2	0.66
Num. obs.	1,441

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

In contrast, Table 3 shows the effectiveness of video interventions at increasing trust in elections, supporting Hypothesis 4. Both election security videos increased trust, though to differing degrees. The video that emphasized checking ballots *4 Times* significantly elevated trust in Contra Costa County votes being counted accurately. Similarly, the *48 Steps* video was effective in boosting trust in Contra Costa County elections. However, the effects of the *48 Steps* video on trust in Contra Costa County elections were significantly smaller in size than the *4 Times* video ($p < 0.05$). One reason could be that information density may reduce the efficacy of the video: Enumerating a long list of protections could dilute the emphasis on the most salient safeguards.

Table 3. Effect of video treatments on post-treatment trust levels.

	Trust in Contra Costa Elections
(Intercept)	0.88***
	(0.06)
Treatment—*4 Times*	0.17***
	(0.04)
Treatment—*48 Steps*	0.08*
	(0.04)
Pre-Treatment Trust in Contra Costa Vote	0.72***
	(0.02)
R^2	0.57
Adj. R^2	0.57
Num. obs.	1,345

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

We examined whether there was spillover from the initial visual image experiment to this second experiment on the effects of election security videos. To do so, we compared the effects of the video treatments among respondents who were assigned to the control versus treatment images in the first experiment. We found that the effect of the *4 Times* video was the same, regardless of whether respondents viewed a treatment or control image in the first experiment (no spillover). The effect of the *48 Steps* video, however, was stronger when respondents initially viewed a treatment image in the first experiment.

5.4. Discussion

This research–practice partnership yields three key findings: static visual images—despite their logistical appeal—were ineffective at increasing voters' trust in elections, whereas video interventions succeeded where these visuals failed; further, the video that succinctly communicated the core safeguards on elections had the largest effects on voters' trust in elections.

For practitioners, these results provide actionable insights. Since video-based communications succeed over image-based communications, the allocation of limited resources to high-production-value messaging may prove more effective to their constituencies. This research further underscores the value of partnerships between election officials and social scientists in identifying ways to optimize resource-constrained outreach strategies. Collaborative efforts like this one can bridge the gap between evidence-based principles and operational realities. As election administrators face escalating demands to prove the security of our elections without diverting limited resources from core operations, such partnerships may offer a model for developing high-yield interventions that balance significant results with the prospects of practical implementation.

6. Conclusions

Motivated by the challenges to trust in American elections in recent years, scholars have produced a series of promising studies showing that experimental interventions may be able to increase confidence in the accuracy and integrity of vote counting (Bordeleau, 2025; Boudreau et al., 2025; Brown et al., 2024; Carey et al., 2025; Gaudette et al., 2025; Lockhart et al., 2024). Our work seeks to build on this literature by exerting more experimental control over these interventions. Each of the three survey experiments we report adds an additional research design feature—a co-created message, a natural experiment, or a pre-election experiment designed to inform practice—that allows us to move from testing whether messaging improves confidence in American democracy to asking which type of messages are most effective at this critical task.

While each delivers promising results, there are important caveats on how their estimated impact can translate into real-world effects. First, our experiments show that trust increases in the county or state that is the focus of the trust-building message. This impact, though, is typically confined to that jurisdiction rather than spilling over to trust in the state or county in which a respondent lives or to vote counting in the nation as a whole. Messaging from a single county or state cannot be relied upon to address trust concerns nationwide. This suggests that election officials all across the country should continue their efforts to communicate about the safeguards on elections in their own areas, to build a collective sense of trust. Second, each of our experiments is conducted in the context of a survey, following much of the literature in

this area. Barabas and Jerit (2010) detail the many limitations on the external validity of survey experiments. In order to determine whether messages that appear promising in a survey experiment will be effective in a broader public information campaign in the real world, we urge more work that addresses this question using observational (Prather & Kousser, 2024; Suttmann-Lea & Merivaki, 2023) and especially field experimental (Biggers et al., 2022; Stein et al., 2025) approaches.

Together, all of these studies are part of the larger movement to use research–practice partnerships to help make academic scholarship more relevant to addressing societal challenges (Coburn et al., 2013). The goal of that movement is not to dictate policy but to provide rigorous, reliable data in a timely fashion that offer a body of evidence for policymakers to draw upon. The aim is to be useful both to a direct partner and to the practitioner community as a whole. Discussing the impact of our partnership with Contra Costa, Quarcoo (2025) notes that it fulfilled both goals: Election officials "used those results to make smarter, more effective outreach decisions for the fast-approaching election cycle. The Contra-Costa study built on prior research and is now feeding a broader body of knowledge around effective voter communication practices."

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

Data Availability

Data available at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JVGEAT

Supplementary Material

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

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About the Authors

Cheryl Boudreau is a professor of political science at UC Davis whose research examines whether and when different types of political information help voters to make informed political decisions. She uses experiments in survey, laboratory, and field settings to investigate the effects of political information on voters' decisions.

Jennifer Gaudette is an assistant professor at UC Riverside's School of Public Policy. She received her PhD from the Department of Political Science at UC San Diego in 2025. She was previously a corporate attorney in New York City and Southern California.

Thad Kousser is a professor of political science and associate dean at UC San Diego where he studies American state and national politics, voting reforms, direct democracy, and elections. He is the co-director of the UC San Diego Center for Transparent and Trusted Elections.

Seth J. Hill is a professor and director of graduate studies in the Department of Political Science at UC San Diego, where he studies political participation and vote choice. He is interested in American elections, representation, and citizen learning about politics. His teaching interests include American politics, voting behavior, and political methodology.

Mackenzie Lockhart is an external postdoctoral associate with the Democratic Innovations program at Yale's Institution for Social and Policy Studies. He received a PhD in political science from UC San Diego in 2023. His research focuses on elections, representation, and public opinion, with particular focus on how voters behave in American elections and consequences for representation.

Laura Uribe is a PhD candidate in political science at UC San Diego. She studies racial and ethnic voting behavior in the United States. Specifically, she works to understand how Latine identities are politicized into within-group status hierarchies and its impact on political behavior.