

Ballots and Beliefs: Diverging Views on Election Integrity From the Public and Officials

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Abstract

Public opinion about election integrity and election administration is frequently cited in policy debates in the United States. Due to their role in administering elections, local election officials (LEOs) provide an authoritative voice on election-related matters. Yet it remains unclear whether differences between LEO and public opinion reflect compositional differences between these groups or fundamentally distinct ways of evaluating election integrity and reform. We compare the main predictors of opinions about election administration for LEOs and the public in the United States on election integrity, voting values, and election reforms using national surveys from 2020 and 2024. We find that LEOs report higher confidence in election integrity and lower belief in fraud than the public, even after accounting for partisanship and demographics. We find similarities between public and LEO opinions on election security and reform proposals, including significant partisan differences. Partisan differences in confidence and reform preferences are larger among the public than among LEOs, indicating that professional expertise moderates, but does not eliminate, partisan polarization. In a polarized democracy, professional expertise can maintain election integrity but does not ensure public trust, highlighting the limits of technocratic authority in restoring confidence in democratic institutions when partisan narratives dominate.

Keywords

election administration; elections; local election officials; public opinion; voter confidence

1. Introduction

The United States (US) has a highly decentralized election system, unique among contemporary democracies, with nearly all election functions conducted at the state and local level. In this article, we compare mass public opinion on election reform and election administration to the most important actor in US elections, local election officials (LEOs). LEOs include approximately 8,000 officials who engage in election administration. LEOs have been described as the “stewards of democracy” (Adona et al., 2019) and street-level bureaucrats connecting election laws, policies, and procedures to hundreds of millions of voters (Kimball & Kropf, 2006). They provide an authoritative voice on election-related matters and are part of the connective tissue that links citizens to government. Their regular interactions with constituents, candidates, political parties, and elected leaders position them as key intermediaries between government institutions and the public.

LEOs occupy a unique bureaucratic position. Elections are more than just “delivered” to voters; elections undergird the foundations of US’ democracy. As administrators, LEOs are directly involved in elections and are more knowledgeable about voting laws and procedures than the average citizen. That role as elites may lead LEOs to hold a different set of values and a different structure to their opinions about election integrity and reform than the mass public. LEOs are exposed to the same politicized discourse regarding voter fraud and election integrity, though their professional expertise and close proximity to the electoral process should lead them to hold perspectives that diverge from those of the general public, who are more reliant on elite rhetoric and media narratives to form their opinions. Even though they are elites, LEOs may display some of the same partisan and demographic patterns as the public, particularly when they evaluate election administration nationwide.

Public opinion is a critical force in American politics, and public beliefs about election procedures are frequently cited in policy debates. Politicians and advocates claim that reforms like online and automatic voter registration, voting by mail, and photo ID requirements have some level of public support and will positively impact voter confidence in election integrity (Hasen, 2012; Minnite, 2010; Udani & Kimball, 2017). The extent to which LEOs’ views align with those of the broader public remains underexplored and can affect policy legitimacy, administrative trust, and election administration. At the same time, LEOs face growing threats and political pressure as they administer elections in a highly polarized environment. Despite this, there is a dearth of research systematically comparing LEOs’ and the public’s perspectives on election integrity and reforms.

In this article we examine a unique set of parallel mass–elite surveys to identify where American LEOs and the public converge and diverge on their opinions about electoral reforms and administration in 2020 and 2024, two polarized US elections with one Democratic winner and one Republican winner. We find substantial partisan divisions among the public and LEOs on election confidence and reform proposals, with larger partisan gaps among the mass public. Our findings suggest that in the current polarized environment, professional expertise moderates, but does not eliminate, partisan divides in beliefs about election integrity. Our analysis offers new insights into the role of election officials in navigating the tension between professional expertise, the political environment, and public opinion, as well as the perspectives of trust in elections and potential reforms held by voters and administrators in the American electoral system. By comparing the views of citizens and LEOs, this study contributes to theories of elite–mass opinion divergence.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1. *Elite-Mass Opinion*

Research on political attitudes has long distinguished between the preferences of elites and those of the mass public, with classic accounts focusing on elite leadership guiding both normative expectations about democracy and the standards by which we meet them. Elites are typically defined as actors who hold institutional authority or possess domain-specific expertise and may consist of elected officials, bureaucrats, journalists, or policy specialists (Kertzer, 2022). The mass public consists of ordinary citizens with fewer informational resources and less exposure to policymaking processes (Shapiro, 1998). Under this theory, greater political knowledge, stronger ideological constraint, and higher levels of engagement with public affairs privilege elite opinions over the public's, which relies more heavily on heuristics and partisan identity (Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992). Elite influence is magnified in areas where elites have more policy or subject-matter expertise, such as foreign policy (Holsti, 2004; Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017). Mass political polarization is another area in which public divisions are often interpreted as reflecting elite sorting and partisan messaging (Lenz, 2012; Levendusky, 2009).

Subsequent work complicates this dichotomy, highlighting the limits of elite opinion leadership. In cases where the public has direct knowledge of an issue, public opinion may be more resistant to elite influence (Feldman et al., 2014). Other work shows that some differences between elites and the mass public have been substantially overstated and are in some cases a product of compositional differences between the groups (Kertzer, 2022). There are anomalies that top-down models cannot account for, showing that the mass public can learn from one another and feel pressure to conform to perceived opinions of social groups, particularly other partisans (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017). Extant scholarship establishes the reality of elite opinion leadership, but leadership is highly contextualized by the nature and composition of the elites and competing sources of information that may influence public opinion (Iyengar et al., 2019; Kertzer, 2022; Leeper & Slothuus, 2014; Shapiro, 1998). Elites embedded in policy domains, like LEOs, are more likely to evaluate proposals through the lens of feasibility, legality, and administrative capacity, whereas members of the public may respond more strongly to symbolic frames, partisan narratives, and perceived threats to democratic norms.

2.2. *Where Does Local Election Administration Fit?*

Where does public opinion about elections and local election administrators fit into this framework? LEOs occupy a distinct bureaucratic position that in many respects positions them to serve as elite opinion leaders. LEOs are “stewards of democracy” who often define their job in terms of customer service (Adona et al., 2019). Even though nearly half of LEOs are elected, one-quarter of these in partisan contests (Gronke et al., 2025), they tend to avoid partisan rhetoric and partisan interpretations in the implementation of election policies (Suttman-Lea & Gronke, 2024). Their professional training, experience with election procedures, and exposure to audits, litigation, and federal guidance provide them with informational advantages relative to the public. Elite-mass opinion theory, therefore, suggests that LEOs' attitudes toward election integrity and reform should reflect both technocratic considerations and partisan identities, but that their assessments will be structured differently from those of ordinary citizens.

LEOs are not the only source of elite cues about elections. Most notably, after the 2020 election, President Trump and his allies, including conservative media outlets and elected officials, propagated a narrative of massive voter fraud and attempted to undermine trust in voting by mail, while Democratic politicians argued that certain anti-fraud policies suppress voter participation. On January 6, 2021, following the deadly riot at the US Capitol, 147 Republican members of Congress voted against certifying the Electoral College vote, sending a message that the election was illegitimate. At the same time, Republican state and local election officials have consistently said that the 2020 election was free and fair, and there is no evidence of widespread voter fraud. Reports from the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice confirm that there was not systematic fraud in the 2020 elections, and certainly not enough to change the outcome of the election (Kirby, 2020). The conflicting narratives from political elites, particularly Trump versus election officials in recent years, likely shaped the views of LEOs and the public in different ways. We suspect that this rhetoric had a greater influence on the public at large than it did on LEOs.

In the context of election administration, the literature on elite–mass opinion suggests that public views on fraud, voter confidence, and reform proposals may diverge from those held by LEOs, especially when partisan politicians and media outlets disseminate highly charged claims about elections. At the same time, partisan identities should continue to exert influence over both groups, albeit in distinct ways. Thus, Manion et al. (2024) find that, on average, LEOs report more positive assessments of election integrity and voter confidence than the mass public. Prior research suggests that partisan and ideological differences in LEO opinions about election integrity tend to be minimal or limited to a few of the most contentious policy proposals (Burden et al., 2011; Kimball & Baybeck, 2013; Moynihan & Silva, 2008). Instead, LEOs worry about administrative burdens and resource constraints that limit their ability to fulfill their job responsibilities. These administrative and resource concerns also motivate LEO opposition to election reform proposals (Adona et al., 2019; Anthony et al., 2021; Burden et al., 2012).

Elite–mass theories also emphasize that a divergence between elites and the public is more likely when issues are perceived as personally consequential or symbolically charged. When citizens view policies as directly affecting their rights, security, or livelihoods, they may form opinions independently of policy specialists (Cunningham & Moore, 1997). Election integrity and voting access plausibly fall into this category: Citizens experience elections as voters, are exposed to partisan messaging about democratic legitimacy, and may therefore respond more strongly to elite rhetoric than to bureaucratic reassurances. Although they are exposed to rhetoric from the media and politicians, election officials' views are also shaped by legal standards, court rulings, and audits.

At the same time, the literature cautions against assuming a one-way flow of influence from elites to masses. Studies of foreign policy attitudes show that elites and publics often respond in parallel to new information, and that opinion change can be reciprocal or driven by shared media environments (Cunningham & Moore, 1997; Oldendick & Bardes, 1982). This suggests that both LEOs and the public may be reacting to common external stimuli. These patterns guide our primary hypotheses in this study, examining not merely whether LEO and public opinions differ, but how partisan cues, expertise, and institutional roles jointly structure those differences.

Among the public, partisanship and ideology tend to be the strongest factors that structure beliefs about voter fraud and support for election reforms. Republicans tend to believe voter fraud is more frequent than

Democrats (Bowler et al., 2015; Udani & Kimball, 2017; Wilson & Brewer, 2013). Similarly, Republicans are more supportive of restrictive policies (like photo ID requirements) and more opposed to access-oriented policies (like Election Day registration) than Democrats (Bowler & Donovan, 2016; Hale et al., 2015; Kropf, 2016). In addition, people with higher levels of education and political knowledge tend to have more positive assessments of election integrity (Bowler et al., 2015; Udani & Kimball, 2017; Wolak, 2014).

Both theory and extant research suggest that LEOs and the mass public use a different decision-making process to form opinions about election integrity and reform. For all the study of election reforms and public/elite opinion as separate issues in political science, there is a dearth of research directly comparing public and elite opinions toward voter confidence and specific policies. Given the importance of these issues in contemporary American politics, this article investigates where patterns in public and elite opinions converge and diverge around election integrity and reform proposals.

2.3. Hypotheses: Elite and Public Opinions About Election Reform

Understanding where these groups converge and diverge is especially important in the contemporary US context, where disputes over election integrity have become central to partisan conflict. Competing narratives advanced by prominent political figures and media organizations have framed election policies either as essential safeguards against fraud or mechanisms that suppress participation. Election officials are likely to evaluate claims about fraud and reform proposals through a more technocratic lens than ordinary voters. We therefore posit that LEOs' assessments of election integrity will be less responsive to incendiary narratives about fraud or suppression than those of the general public, even as partisan divisions persist across both groups.

High levels of public skepticism about the 2020 and 2024 elections indicate that narratives promoted by political elites and media outlets may have exerted greater influence over citizens than statements issued by election administrators, even when those administrators shared partisan affiliations. Given LEOs' role as elites with technical information about election procedures and fraud detection, we hypothesize that:

H1: LEOs will express more positive assessments of election integrity and voter confidence than members of the mass public.

As reviewed above, partisanship and ideology remain among the strongest predictors of beliefs about voter fraud and election reform in the electorate, with Republicans more likely than Democrats to perceive fraud as widespread and to support restrictive voting policies. Among election administrators, partisan and ideological divisions are more muted, and LEOs consistently emphasize administrative feasibility, legal compliance, staffing, and fiscal capacity when evaluating reforms (Adona et al., 2019; Anthony et al., 2021; Burden et al., 2012). From an elite–mass perspective, this reflects the incentive structures and professional norms faced by administrative elites, whose opinions are constrained by implementation realities over symbolic partisan appeals. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H2: Partisan differences in attitudes toward election integrity, voter confidence, election reforms, and fraud will be larger among the mass public than among LEOs.

Elite–mass frameworks also allow for meaningful heterogeneity within elite groups themselves. Election administrators operate in jurisdictions that vary widely in population size, demographic diversity, and electoral complexity. Officials in large jurisdictions confront higher volumes of provisional ballots, undeliverable mail, and absentee rejections, as well as greater challenges in recruiting poll workers (Kimball & Baybeck, 2013; Ramsberger & Van Trieste, 2013). These pressures incentivize experimentation with administrative innovations and convenience reforms, whereas officials in small jurisdictions who often face limited budgets, skeletal staffs, and competing responsibilities may be more skeptical of reforms (Creek & Karnes, 2010; Kimball et al., 2010; Manson et al., 2020). These internal elite divisions reflect how institutional context shapes policy preferences, even among actors with shared professional roles. We therefore hypothesize:

H3: LEOs in larger jurisdictions will express greater support for administrative innovations and convenience-oriented election reforms.

3. Data and Methods

We rely on four survey datasets to compare the opinions of the mass public and LEOs. For the public opinion data, we coordinated efforts to yield representative national estimates on a set of items about voter confidence at the state and national level, support or opposition for a variety of election changes and reforms, and opinions on a set of “voting values.” The public survey data come from modules of the Cooperative Election Study (CES) in 2020 and 2024. A number of these same items were fielded as part of surveys of LEOs conducted in 2020 and 2024 by the Elections & Voting Information Center (EVIC).

3.1. Public Opinion Surveys

The CES seeks to understand how Americans view Congress, how they voted and their electoral experiences, and how their behavior and experiences vary with political geography and social context (Ansolabehere et al., 2017). The CES is an online survey administered by YouGov, and has a pre- and a post-election panel structure. Most of the CES respondents are YouGov panelists. CES recruits additional respondents from online advertisements and other survey providers. Researchers can purchase a module that is administered to a nationally representative sample of 1,000 respondents. The 2020 CES survey was in the field from September 29 to November 2. The 2024 CES survey was administered from October 1 to November 1.

3.2. LEO Survey

The EVIC LEO survey project tracks changes, monitors attitudes, and amplifies opinions among LEOs throughout the US. Surveys were conducted in 2018, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2023, and 2024. The LEO survey produces results generalizable to the population of LEOs nationwide. Local jurisdictions and their LEOs vary in number and population size within and across states, usually at the county level.

This variation in jurisdictions can create challenges for summarizing survey findings. First, because three-quarters of LEOs serve just over 8% of the general population, the distribution of opinions among LEOs is likely to differ from the general population (Lee & Gronke, 2024). Second, and closely related, eight

states administer their elections at the township and municipality level, rather than the county level. Of the universe of roughly 7,800 LEOs, 3,400 work in just two states—Michigan and Wisconsin—and another 1,500 administer elections in the towns and villages of New England. In short, the “LEO population” is made up of experts in election administration in their states and localities, and is also a population of which 43% are either Wisconsinites or Michiganders. To address these proportions, the LEO survey uses a probability sampling approach that includes all large jurisdictions in the US, and samples smaller ones with a decreasing probability as jurisdiction size shrinks. Because the smallest jurisdictions make up the bulk of the offices in the US, we sample a smaller proportion of them compared to the largest jurisdictions.

The 2020 EVIC LEO survey was conducted online. The 2024 LEO survey allowed respondents to complete an online or printed survey. The total number of responses in 2020 was 857, completed between July 22 and October 5, for a response rate of 29%. In 2024, 658 LEOs completed the survey between August 6 and October 28, for a response rate of 21%. Our representation in jurisdiction size categories closely matches Kimball and Baybeck (2013) and the Government Accountability Office (Gambler, 2016). Similarly, both LEO survey samples are very similar to previous studies of LEOs in the US in terms of demographic characteristics (Gronke et al., 2025).

3.3. *Opinion Measures*

This article relies on data from the same questions administered in surveys of LEOs and the mass public at roughly the same time in 2020 and 2024. We provide the full question wording in the Supplementary File. Both surveys asked respondents about their:

1. “Voter confidence” in the integrity of the ballot count and “list confidence” in the accuracy of registered voter lists in their own state and nationwide.
2. Level of support for several election reforms: running all elections by mail; allowing people to register to vote on Election Day; requiring photo identification; moving Election Day to a weekend; making Election Day a national holiday; consolidating local, state, and federal elections; and increasing the use of internet voting.
3. Attitudes on several paired statements about “voting values”: voting on Election Day versus having multiple options; ease of access versus security in elections; individual versus government responsibility for voter registration; and whether voting is a duty or a choice. These are forced-choice questions that ask respondents to weigh competing goals or values.

Both surveys also ask respondents about characteristics, including age, race, gender, level of education, and partisanship. We use these questions to create categories for the analyses below. We use the jurisdiction size categories developed for the LEO survey sampling methodology to identify large (more than 250,000 registered voters), medium (25,000 to 250,000 registered voters), and small jurisdictions (less than 25,000 registered voters). We use county and zip code to match each respondent in the CES surveys to their local jurisdiction (county or municipality, depending on the state) and the same jurisdiction size categories. Finally, we apply sampling weights for all of the survey data analyses presented below.

3.4. Demographic Comparisons of the LEO and Mass Samples

It is important to recognize that the demographic profile of LEOs nationwide does not match the mass public. Independently of the different information and experience bases that will lead these two groups to vary in their attitudes, demographic differences may also be a source of variability. Table 1 compares the 2020 CES sample and the 2020 LEO sample on demographic variables. We have produced mass public sample measures that match the categories used in the LEO survey to make as close to an apples-to-apples comparison as possible. We also report breakdowns of the LEO sample by jurisdiction size, an important source of variation.

Overall, LEOs are older, whiter, and more female than the public; these differences are especially pronounced among officials from small and medium-sized jurisdictions. LEOs are also slightly wealthier and more educated than the public; these differences are driven by officials in large and medium-sized jurisdictions. Reflecting the politics of populous urban areas, LEOs in large jurisdictions are less likely to be Republican than officials in smaller jurisdictions and the general public. We find similar demographic comparisons when we examine the 2024 LEO and CES samples (Table A1 in the Supplementary File).

Table 1. Demographic comparisons of LEOs and the mass public (2020).

Demographic	Public	LEOs	LEO Size (Registered Voters)		
			< 25,000	25,000–250,000	> 250,000
Female	51%	81%	85%	68%	47%
White	69%	94%	94%	93%	85%
College	41%	50%	47%	62%	82%
\$50,000 or more	51%	45%	37%	84%	95%
50 or older	49%	74%	75%	66%	61%
Republican	40%	44%	46%	40%	17%
Elected	—	57%	61%	35%	18%

We are interested in whether both groups evaluate election issues in the same way. Do the same predictors explain variation in opinion in both samples? To answer this question, we estimate the same regression models using a set of variables common to both samples. One set of dependent variables asks about confidence in the vote count (2020 and 2024) and confidence in voter lists (2024 only) in one's own state and in the nation. These items ask respondents to answer on a five-point scale, with higher values indicating greater confidence. The 2024 survey questions are identical; however, the 2020 LEO survey measured voter confidence on a 5-point scale from *very confident* to *not at all confident*, while the 2020 CES survey measured voter confidence on a 5-point *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* scale. The LEO surveys included a "don't know" response option for these questions, while the CES surveys only included a "don't know" option in 2024. We recoded "don't know" responses (between 1% and 8% of respondents in each of the samples) to the midpoint of the scale.

A second set of dependent variables comprises four questions from the 2020 surveys that present two opposing voting values and ask respondents to choose the one they prefer. These include: (a) whether they prefer more voting options versus only voting on Election Day; (b) whether voting should be made easier or more secure; (c) whether voting is a duty or a choice; and (d) whether individuals or the government should bear more responsibility for voter registration. For each pair, we coded the more permissive response as 1 and the alternative as 0. For the third and final set of dependent variables, both surveys in 2020 asked

respondents their level of support for several election policies on a five-point scale, with higher values indicating greater support.

As predictors of election attitudes, we examine several independent variables. Given longstanding and often heated partisan disagreements over voting rules, party identification is one important independent variable. Both surveys measure partisanship on a seven-point scale. Those who answered “not sure” (roughly 5% in the public samples) or “prefer not to answer” (approximately 30% of the LEO samples) are recoded as pure Independents. We then created separate dummy variables for Republicans and Democrats, including leaners. The remainder were coded as Independent.

The second predictor is jurisdiction size, since previous studies show size is an important source of variation in local conditions and LEO attitudes. We measured jurisdiction size by the number of registered voters in the general election in that year. For North Dakota, which has no voter registration, we used the number of eligible voters. We then collapsed the data into three categories: small (no more than 25,000 registered voters), medium (25,001 to 250,000), and large (more than 250,000).

Finally, we include several binary demographic variables. One measure of education indicates whether respondents have a college degree. Consistent with prior research, we expect more educated respondents to hold more positive views of election integrity and support more voter access reforms than less educated respondents. Our analyses also control for age (65 and older), sex (female), and a binary variable that distinguishes non-Hispanic white respondents from racial minority respondents. The survey samples are not large enough to make more detailed racial comparisons. Based on previous studies, we expect men, older voters, and non-Hispanic white respondents to report more positive assessments of election integrity than women, young people, and racial minorities.

4. Results

To test H1, we report the mean responses to the ballot count and voter list confidence questions in both sets of surveys in Table 2. Confidence in the ballot count and registration lists tends to be strong, as the mean rating for each measure is above the midpoint of the five-point scale in each sample. We also observe a small increase in voter confidence in 2024 versus 2020 in both samples. We find strong support for H1. In each comparison, confidence among LEOs is significantly higher than among the mass public. For state confidence measures, the LEO mean is roughly one point higher than the mean score for the public. For the national confidence

Table 2. Mean confidence ratings for LEOs and the mass public.

Measure	Public	LEOs
Vote Count—National (2024)	3.4*	4.0
Vote Count—State (2024)	3.8*	4.7
Registration List—National (2024)	3.1*	3.7
Registration List—State (2024)	3.5*	4.5
Vote Count—National (2020)	3.3*	3.6
Vote Count—State (2020)	3.6*	4.6

Note: * Difference between LEO and public mean is significant, $p < .05$ (two-tailed). Sources: CES 2024, 2020 (UM-St. Louis module); LEO 2020 & 2024 Survey (Reed College).

measures, the differences between LEO and public ratings are narrower but statistically significant. Election officials consistently hold more sanguine views about the integrity of election processes than the public. This pattern holds within each partisan subgroup as well.

To test the other two hypotheses, we estimate an OLS regression function to examine the relationship between each dependent variable and the independent variables described above. Each independent variable is binary, so the coefficient estimates can be compared to see which factors best explain variation in opinion.

We start with measures of voter confidence and registration list confidence. LEOs report greater voter confidence and list confidence than the public, particularly at the state level. Among the public we observe substantial partisan differences, with Republicans and Independents expressing less confidence than Democrats. In the public sample there is also evidence of a positive correlation between college-educated and white respondents, and voter and list confidence. Other demographic variables are unrelated to voter confidence measures for the public. We also observe smaller partisan differences in state and national voter and list confidence among LEOs, with Republicans and Independents reporting less confidence than Democrats. The other predictors do not explain much of the variance in LEO confidence. We see significant differences associated with jurisdiction size in 2020; LEOs from medium and large jurisdictions report greater confidence in the national vote count than LEOs in small jurisdictions. However, jurisdiction size is not a consistent predictor of LEO confidence in the 2024 survey. In the 2020 sample, female LEOs report slightly lower levels of voter confidence than males, but this relationship washes out in the 2024 LEO sample.

Partisanship is the most powerful predictor of voter and list confidence in both samples. For a more thorough illustration of partisan differences, we use the model estimates to plot expected levels of voter confidence on the five-point scale for Democrats and Republicans (see Figures 1 and 2). The expected values are computed from the model estimates by averaging across all observations in each sample. The top panel reports confidence at the national level; the bottom panel reports state confidence. The expected voter confidence values for the 2024 samples (Figure A1 in the Supplementary File) are similar to the 2020 expected values in Figure 1. Partisan differences are more pronounced in the public than among LEOs, although Democratic LEOs report higher levels of confidence than Republican LEOs, particularly in 2024. When we pool the LEO and public samples, the partisan gap in confidence ratings is significantly larger for the general public than for LEOs for each measure ($p < .01$), strongly supporting H2. See Tables A2 to A4 in the Supplementary File for regression results on predictors of voter and list confidence.

The partisan differences in voter confidence are larger in 2024 than in 2020 for LEOs and the mass public. Furthermore, in both measures of election confidence, public Republicans are distinct from the other subgroups in holding unusually lower levels of voter confidence heading into the 2020 and 2024 elections. On each comparison, Republicans in the public are the only subgroup with average confidence ratings below the midpoint. Other partisan subgroups are well above the midpoint on the election confidence measures. Republican LEOs report less confidence than Democratic LEOs, but Republican LEOs report average levels of confidence that are closer to Democrats than Republicans in the public.

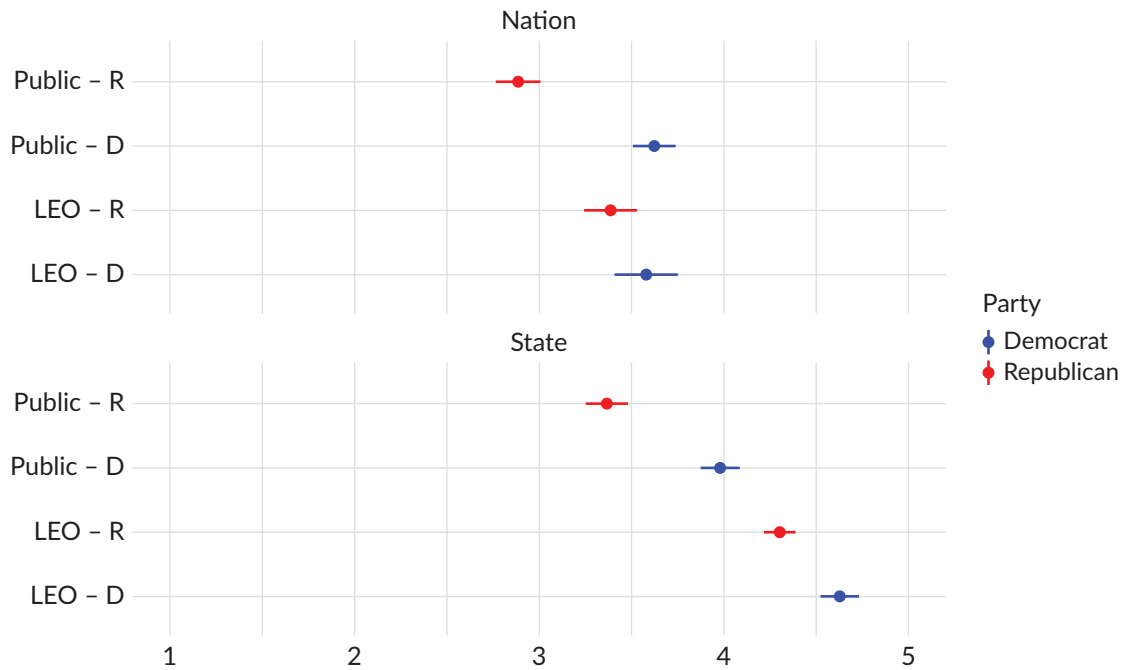


Figure 1. Expected voter confidence (2020).

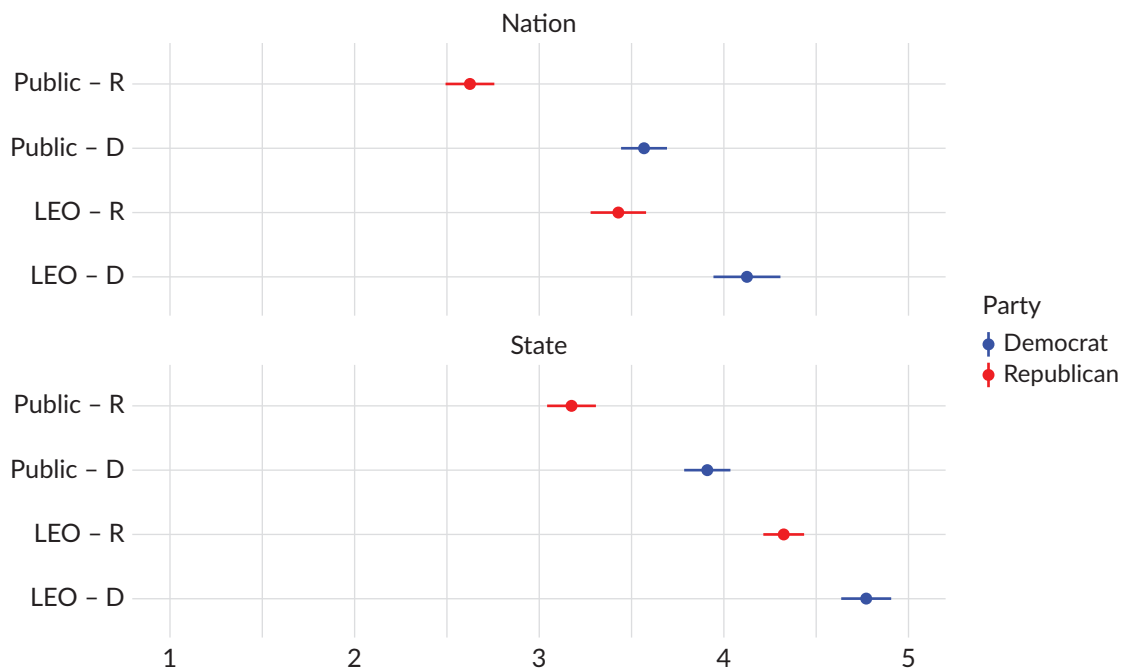


Figure 2. Expected registration list confidence (2024).

We next turn to voting values. These questions ask respondents to choose between two competing values in election administration. We conceptualize these as normative tradeoffs inherent in election administration between access and security, and individual and governmental responsibility. These value choices reflect longstanding tensions in democratic theory and election policy debates. From an elite–mass perspective, LEOs’ experience with implementation and resource constraints should orient them toward

feasibility and system integrity, while public preferences are more likely to reflect partisan narratives about rights and fraud.

Since the dependent variable is binary, the coefficient estimates indicate the expected change in probability of choosing the more progressive value in the pair. Once again, we see significant partisan differences among the public, with Democrats expressing a stronger preference for liberal voting values than Republicans in each question. On two of the four value pairs, we observe a positive correlation between education and a preference for the more liberal value. Non-white respondents express a stronger preference for more government responsibility in voter registration than white respondents, while older citizens prefer more individual responsibility. Aside from that, the demographic variables account for little variation in public preferences on voting values.

In the LEO sample, we also find partisan differences in voting values, with Democrats expressing a stronger preference for progressive values than Republicans or Independents on three of the four pairs. Jurisdiction size appears to have little impact on LEO voting values, except that LEOs in medium and large jurisdictions report a stronger preference for more government responsibility in voter registration than LEOs in small jurisdictions. This may reflect the increased difficulty of maintaining voter lists in larger jurisdictions. Female LEOs report a stronger preference for conservative values than male LEOs on two of the items (making voting more secure and individual responsibility for voter registration). Older LEOs are more likely to report that voting is a duty than younger LEOs and also report a stronger preference for limiting voting options to Election Day. Beyond that, there are minimal demographic differences in voting values among LEOs.

To illustrate partisan comparisons in each sample, we again use the model estimates to plot expected voting values. We show the expected probability of preferring the more liberal value in each pair. In Figure 3, we start with two value items that pose the access versus integrity choice that is common in election reform debates.

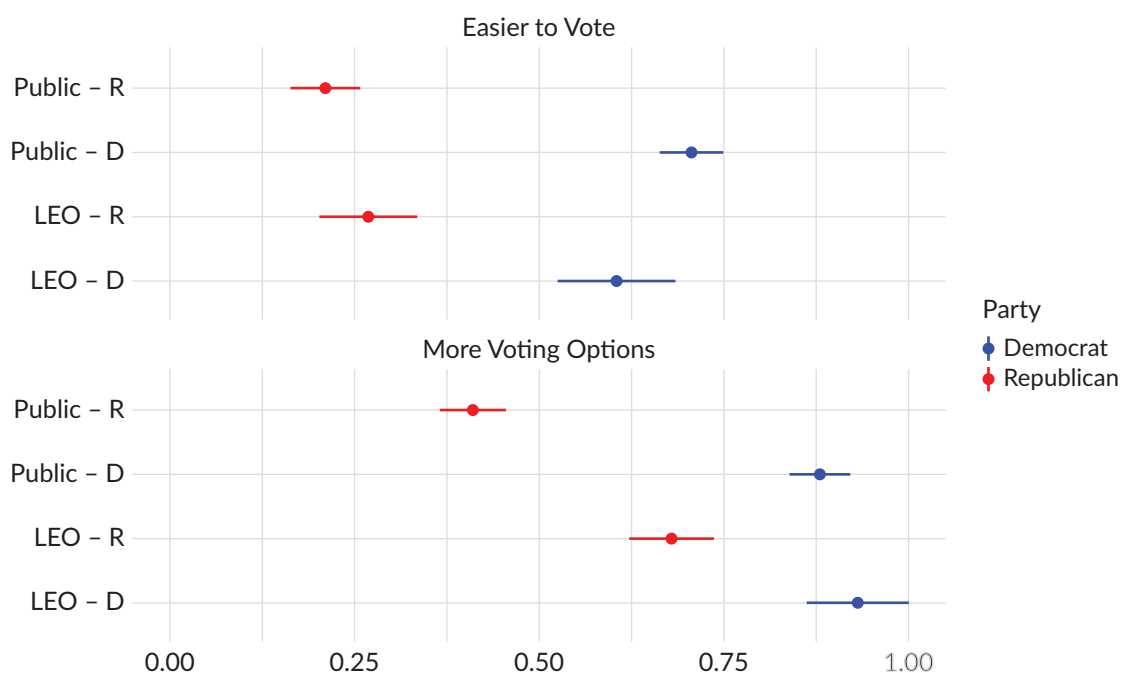


Figure 3. Expected voter values (access vs. integrity).

The top panel reports preferences for making it easier to vote (versus more security); the bottom panel reports preferences for more voting options (versus voting only on Election Day). See Table A5 in the Supplementary File for regression results for predictors of voting values.

Large and significant partisan differences are evident in values in both samples. In the pooled sample, partisan differences are significantly larger among the public than among LEOs for three of the four values ($p < .01$), which tends to support H2. On ease versus security, partisans in both samples hold similar views, with majorities among Democrats preferring to make voting easier and majorities of Republicans preferring more security. On the question of voting options, Republicans in the public stand out as the only subgroup where a majority prefer only Election Day voting. Republican LEOs and Democrats in both samples strongly prefer more voting options.

Figure 4 plots expected preferences by party and sample for the other two value items that deal with personal responsibility. The top panel reports preferences for more government responsibility for voter registration (versus more individual responsibility); the bottom panel reports preferences for viewing voting as a duty (versus a choice). Most respondents in all subgroups prefer more individual responsibility for voter registration, but in both samples Democrats are more likely than Republicans to prefer a stronger role for government in voter registration. Both samples are equally divided by party affiliation over whether the government should assume more responsibility for voter registration. Democrats in the public are more likely than Republicans to see voting as a duty, while there are no partisan differences among LEOs on that value question.

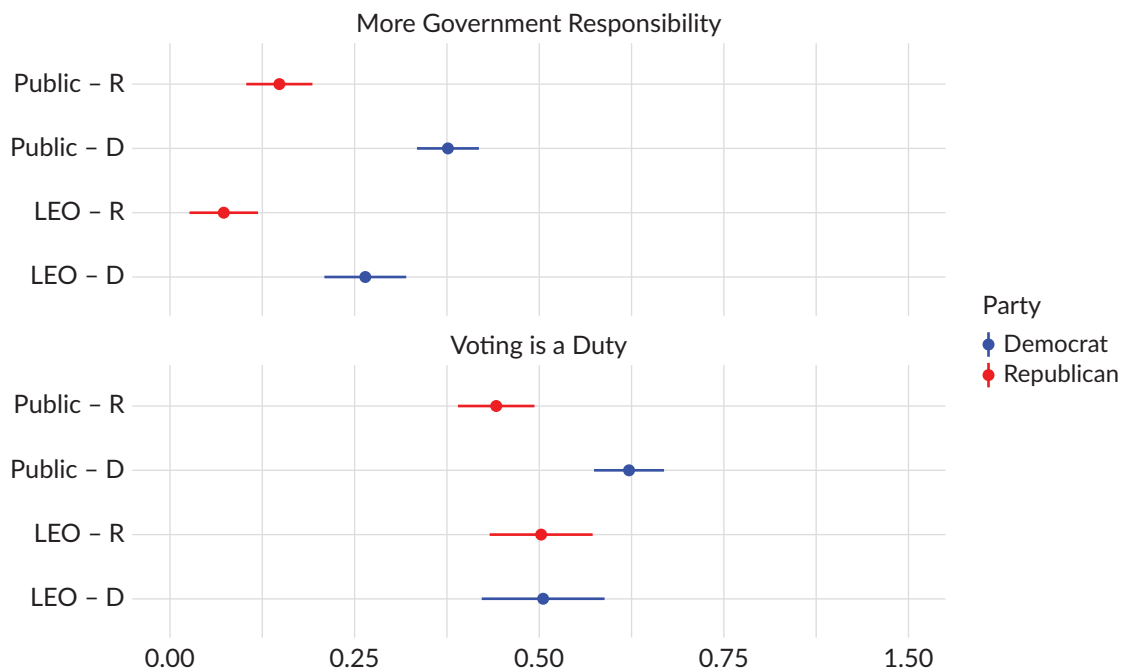


Figure 4. Expected voter values (individual responsibility).

Our final set of analyses examines election reform preferences for seven policies, measured on a five-point scale. Once again, partisanship is the main source of division in both samples. We observe significant partisan differences among the mass public on each policy question, with Democrats expressing a stronger preference for convenience reforms and Republicans registering stronger support for security measures.

These partisan differences are largest on some of the most contentious policies (photo ID, voting by mail, and Election Day registration). In the public sample, education is positively correlated with support for some convenience reforms and negatively correlated with support for a photo ID requirement. Furthermore, older voters are more opposed to some convenience reforms than younger voters. Non-white respondents are more opposed to making Election Day a holiday and consolidating elections than white respondents. Other demographic differences in the public sample are small or insignificant.

Partisanship is also the largest source of division in the LEO sample. We observe significant partisan differences among LEOs on six of the seven policy questions. We also find some support for H2 on election reform preferences. When we pool the samples, the partisan gap in support for Election Day registration, voting by mail, online voting, and consolidating elections is larger among the public than among LEOs ($p < .01$). The differences between Democrats and Republicans in preferences for photo ID requirements, weekend elections, and making Election Day a holiday are statistically equivalent among LEOs and the public.

Jurisdiction size is another important factor for LEOs. LEOs in larger jurisdictions tend to oppose photo ID requirements and Election Day registration more than LEOs in small jurisdictions. Meanwhile, officials in larger jurisdictions indicate greater support for moving Election Day to the weekend or a holiday than LEOs in small jurisdictions. Female and older LEOs tend to be more opposed to some convenience reforms than male and younger LEOs. Beyond that, we do not observe consistent or large demographic differences among LEOs on election reforms. See Table A6 in the Supplementary File for the regression results for voting by mail and Table A7 for Election Day registration.

Overall, the data provide limited support for H3. While LEO confidence in the ballot count and voter lists tends to be higher among officials in larger jurisdictions, the jurisdiction size differences only reach statistical significance for two of the six measures we examine. Similarly, while LEOs in large and medium-sized jurisdictions tend to support more liberal voting values than officials in small jurisdictions, we only observe statistically significant size differences for one of the four value measures (government responsibility for voter registration). We find the clearest support for H3 in election reform preferences, where jurisdiction size is associated with support for four of the seven policies. The regression coefficients associated with jurisdiction size are also consistently smaller in magnitude than the partisanship coefficients. Once we control for party affiliation, jurisdiction size seems to be a less reliable predictor of LEO opinions.

To further probe partisan comparisons, we plot support for each policy on the five-point scale. In Figure 5, we start with two high-profile convenience reforms. The top panel reports expected support for Election Day registration; the bottom panel reports expected support for running all elections by mail. Large and significant partisan differences are evident across all subgroups, though they are somewhat larger in the public sample. Reflecting the political debates on these issues, Democrats express more support for these policies than Republicans. In each sample, the average Democrat supports both policies while the average Republican opposes both policies. GOP opposition to voting by mail is especially strong in the public.

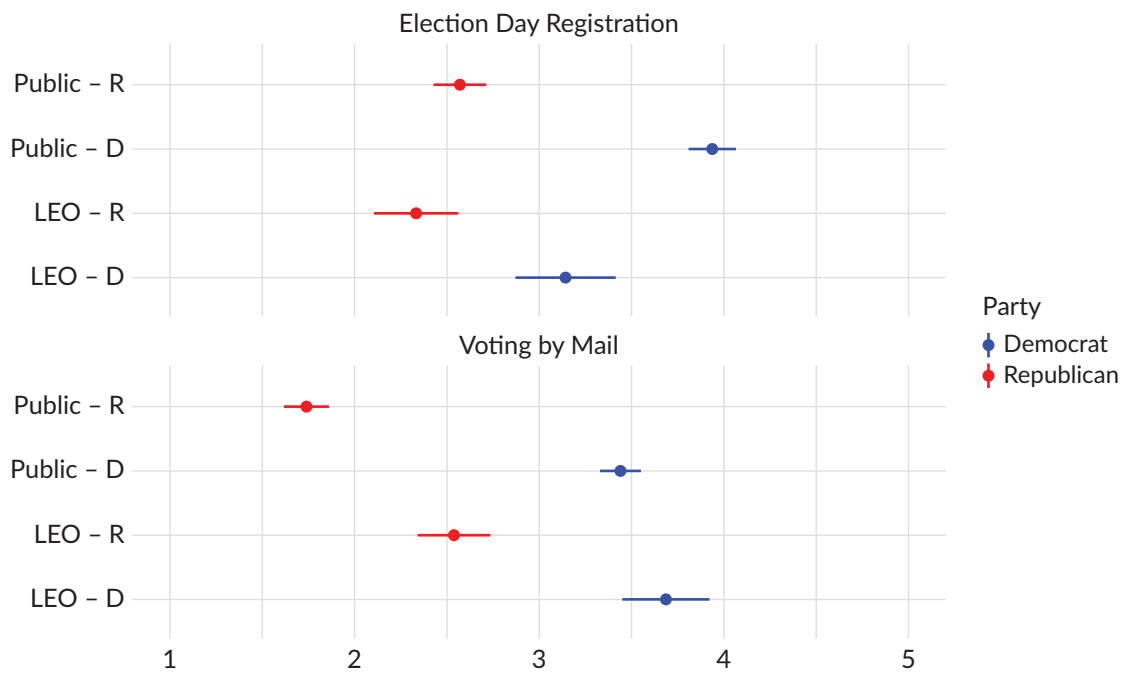


Figure 5. Expected support for convenience reforms.

Figure 6 illustrates expected support for a photo ID requirement among partisan subgroups. The figure shows large and significant partisan differences in all subgroups, with Republicans strongly supporting the policy and Democrats divided (the mean position for Democrats is near the midpoint of the scale). Across the two samples, fellow partisans hold very similar positions on the photo ID policy. See Table A6 in the Supplementary File for the regression results for support of a photo ID requirement. On the most heavily debated election reforms, partisan LEOs tend to hold preferences similar to their partisan allies in the public.

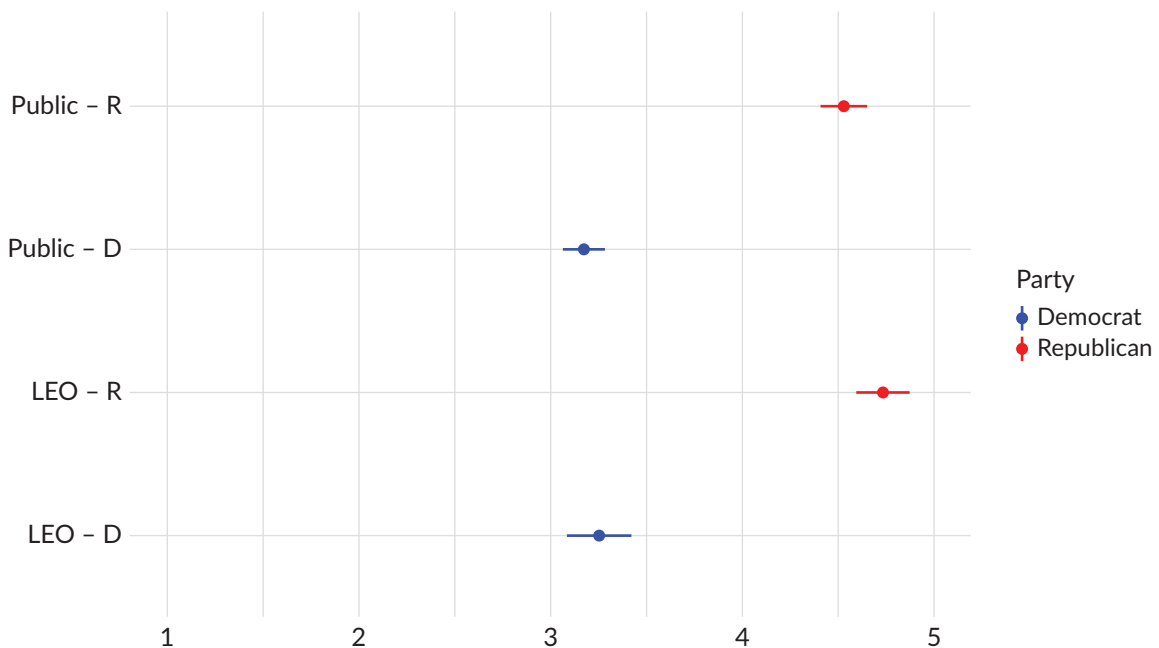


Figure 6. Expected support for a photo ID requirement.

Figure 7 plots expected support for two proposed changes to the scheduling of Election Day. The top panel indicates expected support for making Election Day a holiday; the bottom panel reports expected support for moving Election Day to the weekend. Partisan differences are evident and roughly equal in magnitude on these two policies, although they are not as large as in the more contentious policies reported above. In each sample, Democrats support these measures more than Republicans. Fellow partisans across the two samples express similar positions on making Election Day a holiday. LEOs are particularly opposed to moving Election Day to the weekend. See Table A7 in the Supplementary File for the regression results for making Election Day a holiday and moving Election Day to the weekend.

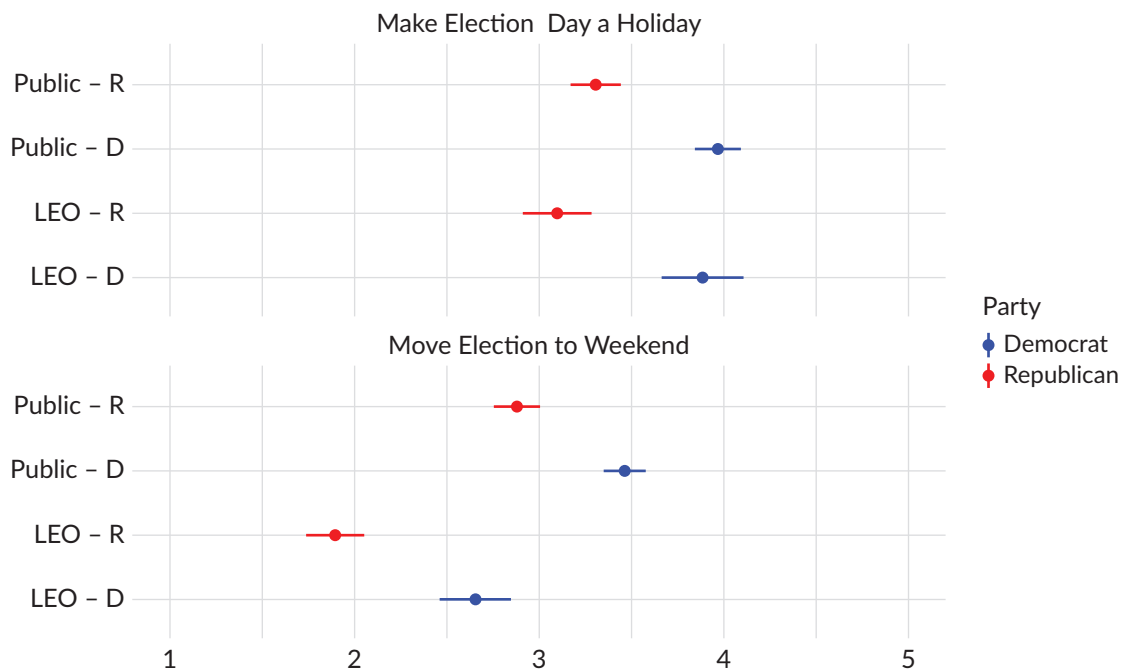


Figure 7. Expected support for election day changes.

Finally, Figure 8 plots expected support for two other policies by party and sample. The top panel is expected support for consolidating local, state, and federal elections; the bottom panel plots expected support for increasing the use of internet voting. These proposals have not yet become hot-button issues. There appears to be a wide base of support for election consolidation, and there are only small partisan differences on that proposal. There is widespread opposition to more internet voting, with significant partisan differences in the mass public. Democrats in the public appear isolated from the other subgroups in supporting internet voting. See Table A6 in the Supplementary File for regression results for increasing internet voting and Table A7 for consolidating local, state, and federal elections.

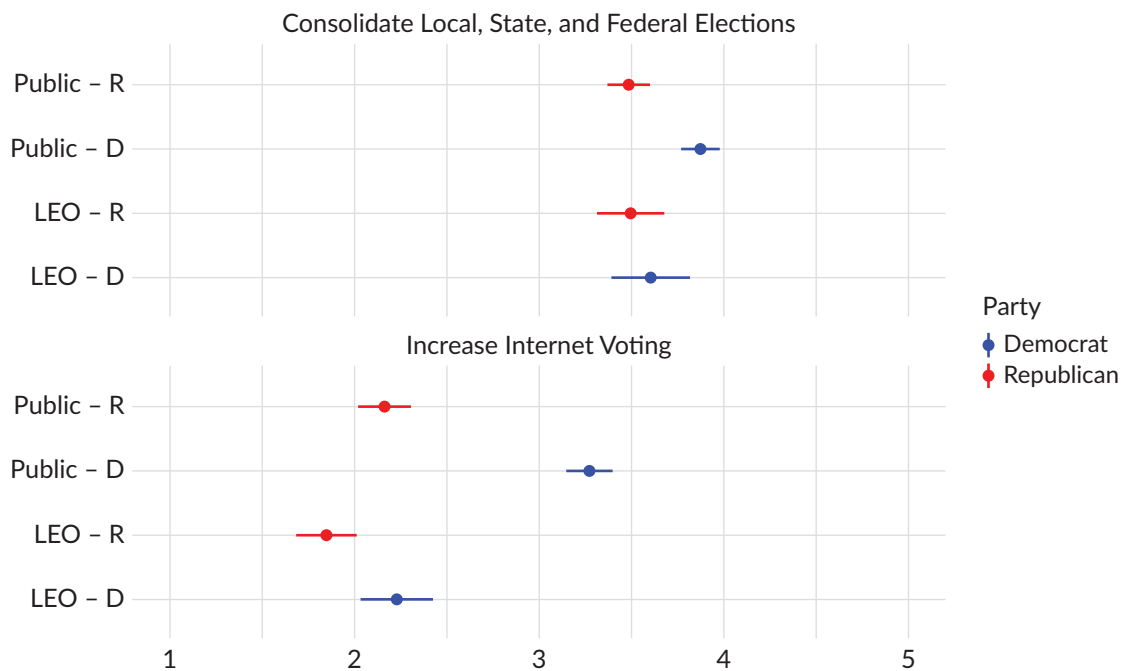


Figure 8. Expected support for other election reforms.

5. Conclusion

This study advances research on election administration by situating LEOs within broader debates about elite-mass opinion divergence. In an era when election integrity has become highly politicized, understanding how elites and citizens differ in their assessments of electoral processes is central to questions of democratic legitimacy. Election officials are often forced to respond to claims of voter fraud or proposed changes to election laws. This largely unexplored question provides new insights into the roles that election administration and public opinion play in fostering trust and legitimacy in the American election system.

Given the differences between LEOs and the public in their backgrounds and knowledge of election rules and procedures, we expected to find significant differences between the groups' opinions. We find differences in election integrity attitudes. LEOs report higher levels of voter confidence than the public and stand apart from the public in resisting claims of widespread voter fraud. Professional expertise appears to buffer LEOs from the most extreme claims about voter fraud. Nevertheless, we find partisan divisions among LEOs in voter confidence that are similar but smaller in magnitude than those in the public. In addition, we find clear partisan divisions in election confidence among LEOs and the mass public proceeding national elections with a Democratic winner (2020) and a Republican victor (2024). The charged environment around election integrity in the US seems to produce reliable partisan divisions of opinion among LEOs and the public, regardless of the winning candidate.

However, when we examine voting values and election policies, we tend to see somewhat more similarities between LEOs and the public. In particular, we find partisan differences on most policy and value questions, although partisan divisions tend to be stronger in the public sample. On the most heavily debated election reforms, such as requiring photo ID, partisan LEOs tend to hold preferences similar to their partisan allies in the public. LEOs are human beings who have opinions about elections that are partly shaped by partisanship that

reflects messaging coming from political leaders. When LEOs are asked for their opinion on election integrity and reform proposals, we should expect their responses to be shaped, in part, by partisanship. On the other hand, partisan differences between LEOs and the public are less pronounced for less contentious policies that have received little attention from elites and the media. Our findings illuminate how professional expertise can temper, but not transcend, political polarization. Professional competence alone does not guarantee public confidence when partisan narratives dominate. The perspective of LEOs as elites who have greater expertise, sophistication, and direct experience with elections seems to be less influenced by incendiary narratives about voter fraud and voter suppression than the public at large, though partisan differences occurred for both the public and elites. These findings may raise questions about whether Democratic and Republican officials administer elections in different ways (Burden et al., 2013; McBrayer et al., 2020; Porter & Rogowski, 2018; White et al., 2015). The most comprehensive study thus far finds little evidence of partisan differences in election administration (Ferrer et al., 2024).

These dynamics carry important implications for democratic governance. Public trust in elections cannot be restored through administrative competence alone when partisan narratives undermine institutional credibility. To build public trust in elections, it may help to have bipartisan groups of LEOs explain election procedures and results, given that public opinion responds to partisan cues. Election officials are generally seen as trusted sources of information about voting issues. It is important to better understand the decision-making processes used by LEOs and the public to reason about election integrity and reform. This may help inform efforts to counter misinformation about election issues.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Please contact the authors for the research data associated with this article.

Supplementary Material

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

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