

# Causes and Consequences of Confidence in Democratic Elections

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## Abstract

In this editorial, we examine trends over time and cross-national variation in attitudes toward democracy and elections, and explore the correlates of low confidence in elections, particularly focusing on the countries covered in the studies presented in this thematic issue. Using the World Values Survey measure of confidence in elections, we assess cross-country variation and show how this measure correlates with specific attitudes toward elections, as well as with low confidence in institutions and organizations broadly. We present potential causes of low confidence in elections identified by the studies in this issue: Elite attacks on electoral integrity, right-wing populism, partisan winner/loser effects, and the quality of election administration. We conclude by considering the consequences of low confidence in elections identified by the studies here.

## Keywords

confidence; democracy; elections; electoral integrity; populism; trust

## 1. Introduction

This thematic issue provides 11 articles exploring some of the causes and consequences of low confidence in democratic elections. One assumption about countries viewed as consolidated democracies is that there is confidence that electoral processes accurately count votes as cast and thus establish legitimate winners and losers. A related assumption is that electoral losers consent and accept that winners are legitimate (e.g., Anderson et al., 2005). Established norms have electoral losers accepting losses (Esaiasson et al., 2023). Losers are expected to concede, accept the process, and return to the electoral arena in the next round (Birch, 2011).

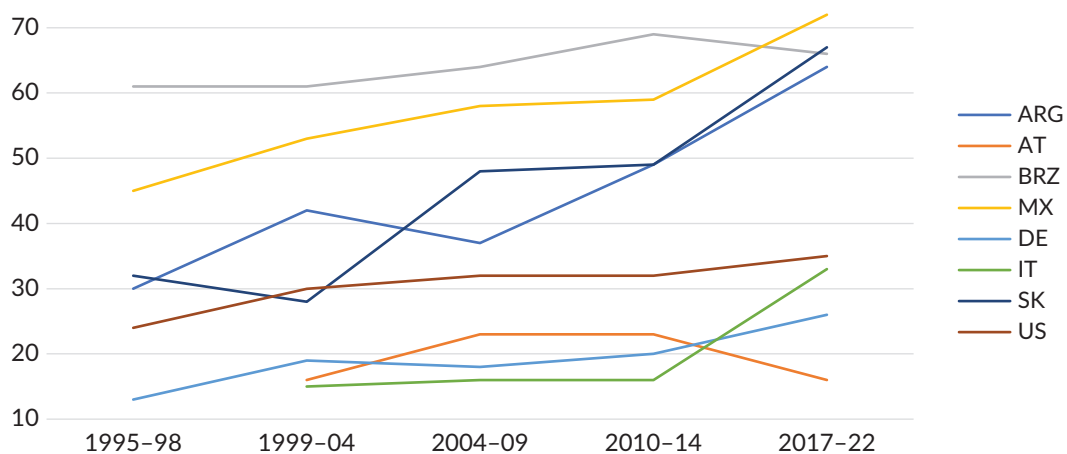
Recent events suggest some assumptions about elections as a trusted process, and losers' consent, may be unrealistic, or signs that some democracies are backsliding (Foa & Mounk, 2017). In Brazil (2023) and the United States (2021), supporters of right-wing presidents who lost refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of elections and engaged in post-election violence. South Korea's right-wing President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law in 2024 when frustrated with an opposition party that was elected with a legislative majority. In the US, Donald Trump insists that elections are only legitimate if he wins (Sanders, 2016). Supporters of Trump and many right-wing populist parties have an affinity for strong leaders and think they should not have to bother with elections (Donovan, 2021).

This demonstrates the need to study what might boost or erode confidence in elections and the consequences of low confidence in elections—points that the contributions in this thematic issue timely address.

## 2. Is Confidence in Democracy and Democratic Elections in Decline?

Some observers see trends in public attitudes suggesting a democratic decline, or backsliding (Foa & Mounk, 2016). The World Values Survey (WVS) and European Values Survey (EVS) conducted from the 1990s to 2020s found increasingly negative views of democratic governance. Satisfaction with democracy across 12 high-income democratic countries fell from 49% to 36% between 2017–2024 and dissatisfaction rose from 49% to 64% (Wike & Fetterolf, 2024).

The WVS asks how important it is for a country to have a “strong leader who doesn’t have to bother with parliament or elections” (Haepfner et al., 2024). In many democracies, including some studied in this issue, there has been an increase in people saying this is good, as illustrated in Figure 1. Brazilians are noteworthy for weak attachment to democratic elections as measured here, while Mexicans have more recently reached a similar point where *most* people are saying strong leaders not having to bother with parliaments and elections is a good thing. There were also upward trends in this sentiment in Italy and the US. In this set of cases, respondents in Germany and Austria expressed the lowest preference for strong leaders not having to bother with elections.



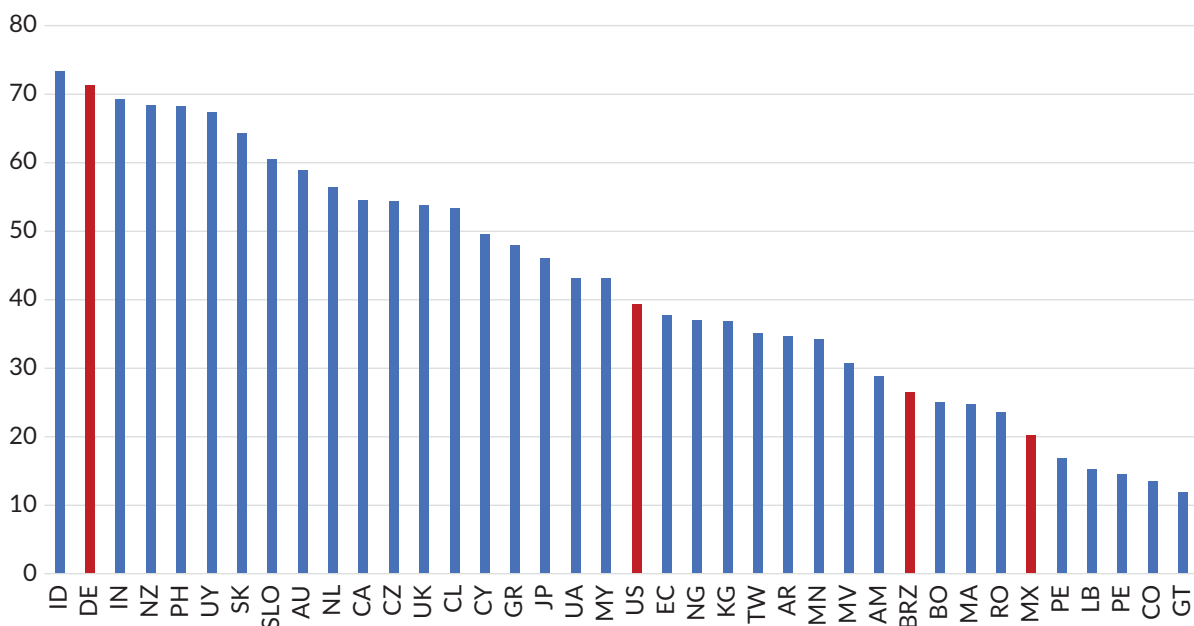
**Figure 1.** The percentage of people saying strong leaders do not need elections is *very good* or *fairly good*. Source: Authors' own production based on WVS for each year.

There are several exceptions to this upward trend. However, over the cases covered by the WVS, support for a leader not needing to be bothered with elections grew from 38% in Wave 5 (2004–2009) to 52% in Wave 7 (2017–2022), while the sentiment that democracy was important declined overall (Democracy Digest, 2022).

It is unclear if this reflects declining trust in elections; however, confidence in the US, measured as a vote being “accurately cast and counted,” has declined since 2004 (Saad, 2024). Expert opinion ratings of the quality of election administration find little evidence of decline from 2012 to 2024 (Garnett et al., 2025, p. 11). There are reasons to anticipate a decline in perceptions that elections are fair, however, given the ease of using social media to spread disinformation. Further, there is evidence suggesting that trust in social media corresponds with increased misperceptions of electoral integrity (Vliegenthart et al., 2024).

### 3. Correlates of Confidence in Elections

WVS wave 7 included a measure of “confidence in elections,” that has considerable variation across countries. Figure 2 plots this for 38 democratic countries (a V-Dem score of 4 or 5). This WVS question is part of a battery asking “how much confidence do you have in \_\_\_\_\_,” with elections included among a list of organizations. The highest reported confidence by this measure was found in Indonesia (73%), the lowest in Guatemala (12%).



**Figure 2.** Confidence in elections: Percentage having a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in elections, WVS Wave 7 (2017–2022).

Studies in this issue consider Austria, Brazil, Germany, Italy, Mexico (Mexican diaspora in the US), and the US. Red bars in Figure 2 represent cases considered in the issue where Wave 7 was conducted. It is not clear what is being measured with this question that asks about confidence along with a long list of entities, and there is no discernible pattern in Figure 2 in which people report greater confidence. It is assumed that better-administered elections and confidence in elections go hand in hand (e.g., Norris, 2014). But evidence is mixed on whether the quality of elections predicts confidence (Kerr et al., 2024; however, see Norris, 2024; Ritter, 2026).

We examine how responses to the WVS confidence in elections question correlate with measures of election quality, clean government, and political freedom across these 38 countries and find some evidence. Confidence in elections is correlated with the Freedom House measure of political freedom ( $r = .48$ ), with the Electoral Integrity Project’s measure of elite perceptions of electoral integrity ( $r = .47$ ), and with Transparency International measure of clean government ( $r = .56$ ). This suggests the WVS confidence in elections measure may reflect experiences with cleaner government and cleaner elections. However, much of the variation here is left unexplained, and these correlations dissipate when all the WVS cases are considered simultaneously (Kerr et al., 2024, p. 454).

A separate battery of WVS items gives us a clearer sense of what the “confidence in elections” question reflects. Wave 7 respondents were also asked if they thought votes were counted fairly, if election officials were fair, if voters were bribed, if rich people “buy” elections, if opposition candidates were prevented from running, and if voters were threatened with violence at the polls. Table 1 illustrates that countries with greater confidence in elections had more people seeing votes were counted fairly and that elections offered genuine choices. In places where people expressed more confidence, fewer said it was common to have election violence, bribery of voters, rich people buying elections, and opposition candidates being prevented from running.

**Table 1.** Correlates of confidence in elections.

	Conf. in elections	Counts fair	Voters bribed	Genuine choices	Voters threatened	The rich buy elections
Confidence in elections	1.0					
Count fair	.80	1.0				
Voters bribed	-.62	-.71	1.0			
Genuine choices	.57	.61	-.34	1.0		
Voters threatened	-.42	-.59	.82	-.38	1.0	
The rich buy elections	-.60	-.69	.92	-.34	.74	1.0
Opposition prevented	-.39	-.51	.83	-.37	.80	.82

Notes: Aggregate level of 38 countries; confidence is the percent saying “a great deal” or “quite a lot”; other items are the percent saying “very often” and “fairly often.” Source: Authors’ own production based on WVS Wave 7.

Bowler and Donovan (in press) likewise found that people who reported less confidence in elections also tended to be skeptical of many other aspects of politics and society broadly. They had less confidence in a range of entities WVS asked them about—banks, the press, television, labor unions, universities, major companies, the armed forces, and charitable organizations.

“Confidence in elections” then is multifaceted and reflects concerns about the power of money in elections, aspects of party systems, how well elections are administered, and a broad dissatisfaction with many aspects of society. What confidence in elections means also varies substantially by the context of the country being examined, but overall, it represents an opinion relating to trust in democratic processes, being also an indication of some wider sense of unhappiness with politics.

Table 2 displays variation across the countries studied in this issue. High confidence among Germans and Austrians corresponds with seeing vote counts as being fair, trusting officials, thinking elections offer

meaningful choices, and being less likely to see elections involving violence or votes being bought. Germany and Austria also have some of the highest scores among these cases on the Electoral Integrity Project's measure of electoral integrity. Low confidence in Brazil and Mexico corresponds with concerns about violence, voters being bribed, and a lack of trust in officials. In the US, most respondents said rich people buy elections, which Table 1 illustrates, is inversely correlated with confidence in elections. Most Italian, Brazilian, and Mexican respondents also said it was common for the rich to buy elections.

**Table 2.** Attitudes about elections in countries covered in this issue.

	Confidence in elections	Count fair	Officials fair	Voters bribed	Genuine choices	Voters threatened	The rich buy elections	PEI score
Germany	76%	95%	95%	9%	91%	1%	15%	84
Austria	n.a.	90%	89%	17%	n/a	3%	19%	71
United States	41%	78%	69%	34%	67%	20%	65%	54
Italy	n.a.	71%	85%	64%	n/a	10%	57%	72
Brazil	27%	46%	49%	83%	76%	34%	82%	70
Mexico	20%	33%	31%	78%	55%	55%	70%	53

Notes: Column 1 is the percentage saying "a great deal" or "quite a lot"; Columns 2–7 are the percentage saying "very often" and "fairly often." Source: Authors' own production based on WVS Wave 7 and EVS/WVS (2022).

#### 4. Confidence in Elections as Studied in This Issue

Articles in this issue take various approaches to studying confidence in elections. Most studies examine how much people trust that their votes are cast and counted fairly. Mello and Jurado (2026) focus on attitudes about Brazil's electronic ballot system, which was central to Bolsonaro's attacks on the integrity of Brazil's 2022 election. Coll et al. (2026) study change in US public confidence in how "votes are counted fairly" in response to racially charged rhetoric about election fraud. Ritter (2026) and DeRagon and Tolbert (2026) use similar measures of confidence in vote count accuracy and fair and accurate elections in the US. Boudreau et al. (2026), likewise, asked Americans how confident they were that votes will be counted as voters intended. Bernhard-Rump (2026) examines Austrians' and Germans' electoral fraud beliefs with questions about votes being counted correctly and the electoral board behaving correctly, as well as concerns about external threats after high-profile problems with ballots in each country. Manion (2026) compares US local election officials' confidence in vote counts and voter rolls to confidence in the US public.

Partheymüller and Kritzing (2026) identify low confidence in procedural fairness as a factor that conditions how supporting a winning party affects satisfaction with democracy in Austria. Ugues and Medina Vidal (2026) examine how perceptions of clean elections predict efficacy and whether Mexicans living in the US reported voting in Mexican elections from abroad. Blais et al. (2026) examine factors that predict when people may be more likely to reject election outcomes and protest in Germany. And, finally, Dalla Pellegrina et al. (2026) see abstention from voting and voting for populist parties as symptoms of declining electoral confidence in Italy.

## 5. Causes of Low Confidence in Elections: Contributions of the Studies in This Issue

There are several potential causes of low confidence in elections identified in these studies, with some of them having the potential to be overlapping and intertwined.

### 5.1. *Elite Attacks on Electoral Integrity*

Elite cues and rhetoric about elections are expected to affect confidence in elections. Studies in this issue, specifically the ones focusing on Trump and Bolsonaro's challenges to the integrity of elections, note the role that elite attacks on electoral integrity play in diminishing confidence in elections. Mello and Jurado (2026) document Bolsonaro's claims about the election being "rigged" to cast doubt on electronic voting machines, and, allegedly, to persuade the military to reverse the election result. Coll et al. (2026) detail how Trump's rhetoric focused on majority-Black cities he lost and primed a link between Latino immigrants and voter fraud. Boudreau et al. (2026) examine the efficacy of messaging that election officials might use to counter unsupported claims of voter fraud.

### 5.2. *Right-Wing Populism*

Studies of attitudes about election integrity find that perceptions of fraud appear more commonly on the right (Birch, 2008). This has been observed in Australia (Karp et al., 2018), the UK (Fisher & Sällberg, 2020), and the US (Bowler & Donovan, 2024). Right-wing populist supporters' perceptions of fraud may be mobilized by claims from co-partisans that elections are manipulated by corrupt elites. Bernhard-Rump (2026) illustrates this may be the case with AfD and FPÖ voters. Mello and Jurado (2026) find this right-wing populist effect contingent on expectations of winning or losing in Brazil. Dalla Pellegrina et al. (2026) demonstrate that populist party support—an indicator of lower confidence in elections—is concentrated in areas with more crime, economic insecurity, and weak governance. Bernhard-Rump (2026) finds economic insecurity associated with lower confidence in elections in Austria. Coll et al. (2026) observe that Republican elites' false claims about ineligible Latino immigrants voting and fraud in Black communities decreased confidence in elections among "racially affective polarized" individuals.

### 5.3. *Partisanship and Winner/Loser Effects*

Satisfaction with democracy is known to depend on partisans being on the winning or losing end of elections, with losers less sanguine (Anderson et al., 2005). Likewise, confidence in elections has been found to be higher among people supporting a party that won a recent election (e.g., Mochtak et al., 2021) and lower among electoral losers.

Partheymüller and Kritzinger (2026) find that the winner effect on satisfaction with democracy may be inverted when a party with supporters having strong populist attitudes wins the most seats (Austria's FPÖ in 2024) but is excluded from power. Bernhard-Rump (2026) finds voters aligned with governing coalitions had more positive views of electoral integrity in Austria and Germany, with opposition supporters more skeptical. Blais et al. (2026) found a strong negative partisanship effect where electoral losers were less likely to accept election results and more likely to say they would protest results as a party they disliked won more cabinet seats. Mello and Jurado (2026) likewise found less confidence in the 2022 Brazilian election among

Bolsonaro supporters expecting to lose. DeRagon and Tolbert (2026) reveal a gendered aspect of the winner–loser gap that has not been previously recognized.

Ritter (2026) documents that winners were generally more confident in US elections, with this being conditioned on how well elections are administered. Manion (2026) also finds partisan differences in local election officials' views of election integrity in the US, although the partisan gap is generally narrower among officials than the public.

#### **5.4. Quality of Election Administration**

It may be expected that how well elections are conducted should affect perceptions of election integrity. Bernhard-Rump (2026) details that errors in administering elections happen even in places with high confidence in elections. This motivates studying confidence in elections in Austria and Germany, where people may have pre-existing reservoirs of trust in elections. Ritter (2026) employs a new measure of the quality of US county-level election administration and finds a positive relationship between that and confidence, with higher quality dampening the often-observed loser effect on confidence in elections. Manion (2026) found that election officials had more confidence in elections than the public and attributes this to officials having more professional knowledge of election rules and procedures. Ugues and Medina Vidal (2026) find that higher support for Mexico's National Electoral Institute and its efforts to boost confidence in election processes among the Mexican diaspora.

### **6. Consequences of Low Confidence in Elections: Contributions of the Studies in This Issue**

These studies record potential consequences of low confidence in elections that may be brought on by these and other factors. This includes less acceptance of unwanted election outcomes and greater willingness to protest election results (Blais et al., 2026), losing confidence in elections in response to racialized rhetoric (Coll et al., 2026), less trust in electronic voting machines (Mello & Jurado, 2026), perceptions that votes were counted wrong or manipulated (Bernhard-Rump, 2026), less propensity to vote or see elections as meaningful (Ugues & Medina Vidal, 2026), and less of a “winner effect” on satisfaction with democracy (Partheymüller & Kritzinger, 2026). Ritter's (2026) findings suggest that better quality elections may correspond with greater confidence in elections (as conditioned by winner/loser status).

### **7. Conclusion: What Can Be Done? Contributions of the Studies in This Issue**

Manion (2026) finds that election officials were more likely than the public to resist claims of widespread voter fraud, likely the result of their professional knowledge about how elections are conducted. This suggests people might have more confidence if they were better informed about how elections are conducted. Boudreau et al. (2026) examine the efficacy of different modes of messaging that governments can use to enhance confidence. However, it is not clear that these and other survey experiment findings translate into real-world effects. A large-scale field study tested whether pro-integrity messaging about election laws and security could enhance trust in elections among conservatives in Texas (Stein et al., 2025). They found no effects on confidence in vote counting or perceptions of voter fraud.

Ugues and Medina Vidal (2026) report a positive response to reforms to Mexican election codes. Ritter's study (2026) suggests that if governments adopted specific procedures correlated with greater public confidence—including election audits, additional polling sites, and higher-quality tabulation machines—confidence might increase. However, DeRagon and Tolbert (2026) find no link between measures of state-level election performance and confidence in a state's elections. In contrast to building confidence via tweaks that improve the administration of elections, Dalla Pellegrina et al. (2026) view electoral confidence as a structural and cumulative process, which requires addressing broader social forces.

Any answer to “what can be done?” likely depends on the context being addressed. Countries studied here differ in terms of their existing reservoirs of confidence in vote counting and confidence in election officials, in terms of what correlates with this, and in terms of who is in power and who is challenging the legitimacy of elections. Improved experiences at polling places, better administration, better tabulation equipment, and targeting voters with messages that elections are trustworthy may be less effective in places where some parties have supporters who are not particularly keen on their leaders having to bother with elections, and their leaders regularly telling them that elections can't be trusted.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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