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EDITORIAL

Open Access Journal

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.

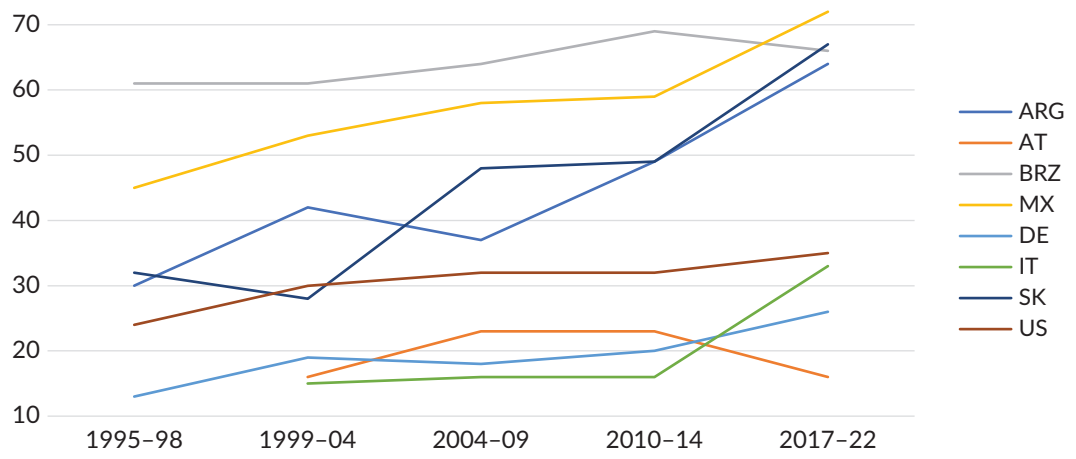

Figure 1. The percentage of people saying strong leaders do not need elections is *very good* or *fairly good*. Source: Authors' own production based on WVS for each year.

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%).

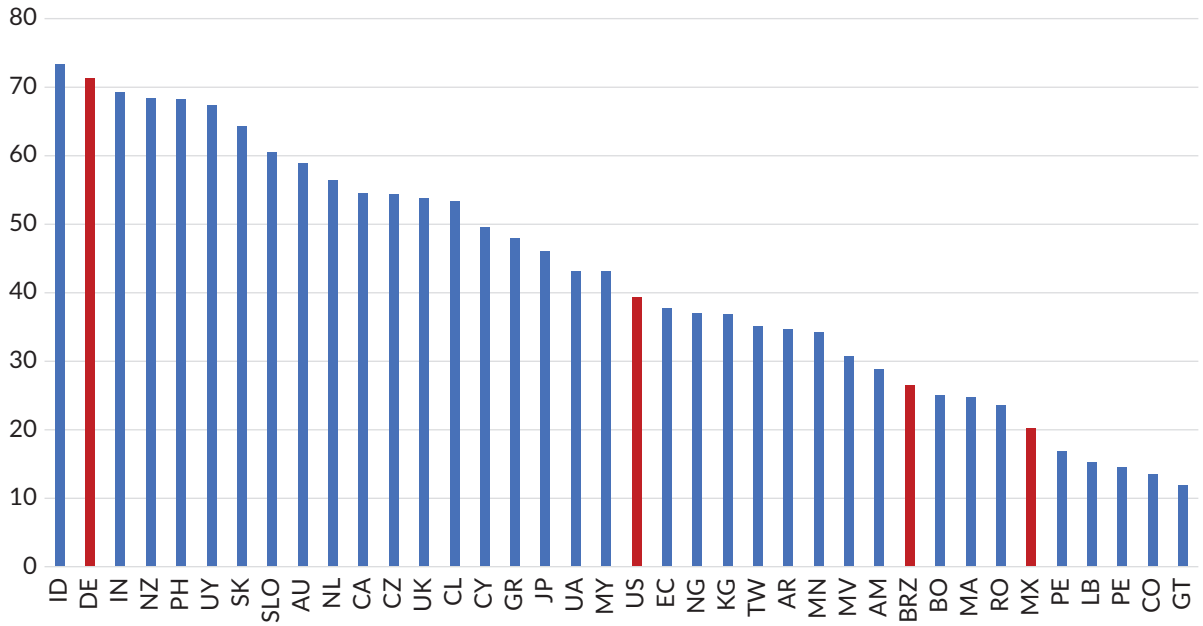

Figure 2. Confidence in elections: Percentage having *a great deal* or *quite a lot* of confidence in elections, WVS Wave 7 (2017–2022).

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 Kritzinger (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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ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Following the Leader Against Democracy? Evidence From the 2022 Brazilian Presidential Election

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Abstract

This article examines the 2022 Brazilian presidential campaign to explore the dynamic relationship between political alignment and electoral trust. We argue that trust in elections is not solely a function of partisanship but is also influenced by exposure to elite narratives and citizens' expectations about who will win. Using a five-wave panel survey conducted during the 2022 election in Brazil, we analyze both between-individual differences and within-individual changes in vote intention and trust in Brazil's electronic voting system. Employing within–between models, we separate stable partisan differences from changes associated with individual-level shifts in political alignment. We show that then-President Jair Bolsonaro's voters consistently expressed lower trust in the electronic voting system compared to other voters. Yet, among Bolsonaro voters, trust in the electronic voting system was significantly higher for those who expected him to win and lower for those who expected him to lose. Critically, exploiting within-person variation, we show that switching vote preference toward Bolsonaro is associated with declines in trust. These findings suggest that elite cues and outcome expectations interact to shape electoral trust.

Keywords

backsliding; Brazil; election; electoral trust; electronic ballot; elite cues; Jair Bolsonaro; Lula da Silva

1. Introduction

Free and fair elections are a defining feature of democracy. Yet public trust in electoral processes has declined over the past decade (Kerr et al., 2024). Political trust is central for societal cooperation (Devine, 2024), but growing skepticism about the integrity of elections raises concerns about democratic legitimacy,

political stability, and public compliance with electoral outcomes (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Norris, 2014). While some degree of dissatisfaction with elections is common, persistent and politically asymmetric distrust—especially when concentrated among supporters of losing candidates—can undermine the acceptance of democratic procedures (Anderson et al., 2005; Przeworski, 1991). When individuals lose trust in elections, they are more likely to believe that the outcome was manipulated or stolen, which can severely erode faith in democratic institutions (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). This perception undermines the legitimacy of elected officials and the broader democratic system, regardless of whether there is any evidence of fraud or irregularities. In short, when democracy is disputed, it may be perceived as not the "only game in town" and this will threaten its consolidation (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Understanding how electoral distrust emerges or can be shaped is therefore central to diagnosing democratic resilience.

In this article, we argue that trust in elections is deeply embedded in the environments shaped by political elites and information flows. While much of the literature emphasizes long-standing factors, such as partisan identity, we argue that short-term dynamics are equally consequential. In particular, voters' trust in elections is not merely a reflection of stable partisan attachments but is also shaped by the elite narratives that they are exposed to and expectations about political outcomes. Specifically, when populist leaders cast doubt on the integrity of elections, their supporters' confidence in the electoral process may erode. In short, voters may follow their leaders (Lenz, 2013), but against democracy. Consistent with Zaller's (1992) receive–accept–sample (RAS) model, repeated elite cues questioning electoral integrity are more likely to be received and accepted by predisposed supporters, thereby shaping their attitudes. In this sense, elite cues provide a powerful heuristic through which voters update their beliefs about democratic institutions.

In addition, this erosion may be contingent on their belief in the leader's electoral prospects. Citizens who expect their preferred candidate to win are more likely to dismiss fraud allegations as irrelevant, whereas those who anticipate defeat may internalize elite claims of electoral manipulation.

To test this argument, we analyze survey data from the 2022 presidential election in Brazil. We draw on a five-wave panel survey in the months leading up to the election. The longitudinal design allows us to trace the evolution of electoral trust over time, measure individual expectations about electoral outcomes and their change, and assess the conditional association of these expectations on trust in the voting system. The analysis leverages vote intention and (positive and negative) partisan identification to disentangle the associations of elite cues from broader partisan orientations.

Brazil has a longstanding tradition of electronic voting and high institutional capacity for election administration (Kapiszewski et al., 2019), yet recent years have witnessed a sustained campaign by political elites to delegitimize these institutions (Rennó, 2020). Former President Jair Bolsonaro emerged as a key figure in this dynamic, repeatedly questioning the integrity of Brazil's electronic voting system and claiming, without evidence, that it was vulnerable to fraud. Bolsonaro continuously used populist rhetoric against the "system" (Hunter & Power, 2019; Samuels & Belarmino, 2024; Samuels et al., 2023). These developments provide an ideal setting for assessing how elite rhetoric and electoral expectations jointly shape public trust in elections.

In 2022, Bolsonaro ran his reelection campaign against another former president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the main figure of the leftist Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT). Our findings reveal a pattern of asymmetric and

conditional electoral distrust. While trust in the electronic voting system was high among supporters of Lula during the whole electoral period, fewer than 20% of Bolsonaro supporters expressed complete trust at any point in the panel. Critically, among Bolsonaro supporters, those who believed he would not be re-elected exhibited 23 percentage points lower trust in the electoral system than those who expected him to win or held no clear expectation. This relationship persists after adjusting for demographics such as religion, age, region, gender, education, and income, besides individual perceptions of the economy.

This article contributes to three central debates in political science. First, it advances research on electoral legitimacy by emphasizing the dynamic ways in which trust in elections is shaped by the interplay between elite cues and citizens' expectations about electoral outcomes. This helps explain why trust in elections can fluctuate within partisan groups in different contexts.

Second, the study contributes to the growing body of research on populism and democratic backsliding by documenting how populist leaders strategically deploy fraud narratives to undermine electoral legitimacy. By situating this dynamic within the case of Brazil, we show how accusations of fraud can be instrumentalized to mobilize supporters, delegitimize opponents, and create conditions conducive to democratic erosion.

Third, this article expands the empirical scope of research on electoral trust, which has been concentrated in advanced democracies. Less attention has been given to how these dynamics unfold in the Global South. By examining Brazil's recent democratic experience, this study helps bridge this gap and demonstrates the importance of studying electoral trust in diverse political settings.

This article proceeds as follows: In the next section, we introduce and motivate the research question against the existing literature. Section 3 presents the 2022 Brazilian election as our case study. Section 4 presents the hypotheses, while Section 5 presents the data and methods used. We introduce supporting results for our hypotheses in Section 6 and discuss them and their implications in Section 7.

2. Follow the Leader Against Democracy?

The study of trust in elections has a long tradition, reflecting the central role that electoral legitimacy plays in sustaining democratic systems. Early research highlighted the importance of citizen confidence in elections as a foundation for regime stability (Easton, 1965; Lipset, 1960). Over subsequent decades, scholars have examined the determinants of electoral trust, ranging from institutional performance and electoral administration (Birch, 2011; Norris, 2014) to broader patterns of democratic satisfaction and legitimacy (Dalton, 2004).

A recent strand of research concerns the polarization of political trust itself. Trust is increasingly less a general orientation rooted in long-term socialization or broad assessments of government performance. Instead, it is strongly conditioned by partisanship (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2017). Partisans place greater weight on the evaluative criteria that favor their preferred political party. This is a dynamic process through which elites and voters mutually reinforce distrust when political power is perceived to be in the "wrong" hands. Zaller (1992) conceptualizes this elite-driven process as a RAS sequence, in which citizens' political attitudes are shaped by the cues they receive from elites and the considerations made salient in their informational environment. Building on this logic, Lenz (2013) argues that citizens frequently "follow" political leaders by updating their

beliefs in line with elite positions, suggesting that elite cues can reshape not only policy preferences but also evaluations of democratic institutions.

Our argument extends these insights to the electoral arena. When leaders condition the legitimacy of elections on partisan or personal victory, trust in electoral institutions becomes polarized in advance of the vote and responsive to expectations about winning or losing. In this sense, declining trust in elections reflects not only partisan conflict but also a broader pattern of polarized political trust in which democratic institutions are evaluated through the lens of elite cues.

As controversies surrounding electoral integrity have become more visible across both established and emerging democracies, understanding how and why citizens distrust elections continues to be a core concern for the study of democratic resilience. When individuals lose trust in elections and governing institutions, the consequences may extend far beyond electoral behavior. Research shows that political distrust undermines economic performance, weakens government accountability, reduces the likelihood of successful collective action, and can fuel extra-legal forms of justice, such as vigilantism or mob rule (Keefer & Scartascini, 2022). Crucially, such environments of mistrust tend to benefit populist and outsider candidates who position themselves as the only authentic representatives of the people against a corrupt system (Masala, 2020).

In studying trust, existing research identifies multiple structural factors that influence it in elections, particularly those tied to economic performance and partisan alignments. Perceptions of worsening economic conditions or rising inequality are closely linked to declining democratic satisfaction, as individuals in such contexts are more likely to lose confidence in governance and become susceptible to anti-system appeals (Brownlee & Miao, 2022; Lee, 2024). Long-term structural factors shape how citizens evaluate the integrity and legitimacy of electoral processes. Sustained economic growth tends to bolster support for institutions, while persistent inequality or regional disparities can undermine perceptions of fairness and fuel distrust in representative processes.

Partisan alignments represent another key dimension. Stable party systems with clear programmatic competition often reinforce trust by providing voters with predictable choices and facilitating accountability. By contrast, contexts marked by party system instability, weak institutionalization, or frequent partisan realignments are more likely to erode trust, as voters perceive elections as less effective channels for representation (Dalton, 2004; Mainwaring & Scully, 1995).

Taken together, these structural and long-term factors set the context within which citizens interpret electoral processes and evaluate whether elections provide a meaningful and legitimate mechanism of democratic governance. Yet, trust in elections is not shaped solely by these structural conditions. It is also contingent on more short-term factors, such as the interaction between political leaders and mass publics, particularly through the transmission of cues and narratives. When elites consistently question the legitimacy of electoral outcomes or undermine confidence in institutions, citizens' long-term trust in elections may be weakened (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Norris, 2014). This may be especially relevant in Latin America, where partisanship may operate in distinctive ways. Party systems in the region are often more fluid, less institutionalized, and marked by higher levels of electoral volatility (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995; Roberts & Wibbels, 1999). As a result, citizens may rely less on long-standing partisan attachments to guide

their interpretations of electoral integrity and more on short-term elite signals or charismatic leadership. In such contexts, narratives questioning electoral legitimacy can resonate more strongly and spread more rapidly, amplifying citizens' doubts about the fairness and effectiveness of democratic institutions.

However, the elite–citizen nexus has traditionally been overlooked in the literature on democratic attitudes (Clayton et al., 2021). A growing body of research underscores how populist leaders strategically challenge democracies (Galston, 2018), undermining confidence in democratic elections to consolidate political power and shield themselves from unfavorable outcomes. While allegations of fraud or manipulation have long been present in competitive politics, their deployment by incumbents, particularly those with authoritarian or populist leanings, poses unique risks to democratic stability. As Norris and Grömping (2017) emphasize, populism heightens the risk of electoral malpractice through different channels, such as eroding public trust in democracy or weakening international standards of electoral integrity.

Empirical studies provide evidence that such dynamics are not merely theoretical. In the US, for instance, studies document how exposure to unsubstantiated fraud claims significantly reduces public confidence in elections, particularly when these claims originate from political elites aligned with the individual's partisan identity. Experimental evidence shows that false claims of voter fraud, especially when politically congenial, can delegitimize election results and undermine democratic norms (Berlinski et al., 2023). Similarly, survey work shows how Donald Trump's persistent, baseless allegations of electoral fraud during and after the 2020 US presidential election led to a measurable decline in trust in voting by mail and the electoral process among his supporters (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

These processes are not confined to advanced democracies alone. Populist rhetoric, often amplified through social media, exacerbates risks to electoral integrity worldwide (Tucker et al., 2018). Populist incumbents frequently frame elections as existential battles between the "virtuous people" and a "corrupt elite," delegitimizing any outcome that does not favor their political project (Mudde, 2017). Through this strategy, elections become not mechanisms for resolving political competition but tools for reinforcing partisan divisions and sowing doubt about the democratic process itself (Bermeo, 2016).

We argue that this elite effect may be *independent of* partisanship. The literature on democratic backsliding highlights the mechanisms through which political leaders undermine trust in elections. Increasingly, the tools of democratic erosion operate through more subtle channels: targeted attacks on electoral management bodies, disinformation campaigns, and sustained efforts to discredit electoral officials and institutions (Bicu, 2024). Importantly, these elite cues do not always operate by appealing to partisan predispositions. Rather, they function by activating more general heuristics about institutional reliability, integrity, and fairness. Citizens often lack direct information about how elections are administered and thus rely heavily on informational shortcuts provided by elites they are close to, regardless of whether those elites are copartisans or not (Graham & Svolik, 2020). Moreover, research on elite–mass linkages shows that repeated negative elite framing of electoral procedures can erode diffuse support for electoral institutions even among individuals who are not strongly attached to parties (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This suggests that the persuasive effect of elite rhetoric about electoral integrity travels through institutional trust channels rather than being reducible to partisan identity alone. In other words, elite-driven narratives of fraud or mismanagement can diminish confidence in elections more broadly, shaping attitudes toward the democratic process itself. Also, research shows that citizens' evaluations of an electoral process can be

biased by the election outcome itself, depending on whether the result aligns with their own preferences (Anderson et al., 2005). In this regard, losers are more likely to perceive that the election was not completely clean (Cantú & García-Ponce, 2015), and elites may amplify or shape this by questioning the fairness of the process. (Hernández-Huerta & Cantú, 2022). Another factor we explore is the role of expectations. Disinformation campaigns often thrive in polarized informational environments, where citizens' pre-existing political beliefs strongly condition how they interpret new information.

If effects might occur *after* elections, we situate the following argument *in the lead-up to* elections. Some individuals exhibit a strong preference for information that confirms their prior beliefs, even when such information is false (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). This motivated reasoning, coupled with elite-driven fraud narratives, creates a potent mechanism through which trust in elections can be systematically eroded. Once aligned with leaders, voters increasingly rely on their cues to interpret political information, deepening polarization and weakening the informational foundations of democratic accountability. In polarized contexts, corrections and fact-checks often fail to mitigate the effects of disinformation, as individuals simply discount contradictory information or attribute it to partisan manipulation (Batista Pereira et al., 2022).

Thus, expectations about electoral outcomes play a crucial role in shaping citizens' trust in voting mechanisms. Trust is often depicted as an ex-post rationalization of whether the outcome has been favorable to a voter or not. We argue that this rationalization also happens *before* the election. Individuals who anticipate that their preferred candidate or party will win are more likely to express confidence in the integrity of the electoral process, while those who expect to lose are predisposed to question the fairness of elections (Anderson et al., 2007). This asymmetry reflects the psychological dynamics of motivated reasoning, whereby electoral losers become more susceptible to fraud narratives and less willing to accept unfavorable results as legitimate (Norris, 2014; Svolik, 2020). Conversely, electoral winners often interpret the same procedures as fair and reliable, reinforcing trust in voting institutions. Thus, expectations do not simply reflect partisan preferences but also interact with elite cues and political rhetoric, shaping whether citizens evaluate elections as trustworthy (Clayton et al., 2021). In this sense, trust in voting mechanisms is not fixed but contingent upon both anticipated outcomes and the broader informational environment in which elections take place.

In this context, fraud allegations serve both as a political weapon and a mechanism for shaping public perceptions of electoral legitimacy. Leaders who suggest that only their victory is legitimate effectively condition trust in elections on partisan expectations about the outcome. When supporters believe their candidate will win, they are more likely to view the electoral process as legitimate; conversely, when they anticipate defeat, trust collapses. This dynamic is particularly pronounced when populist leaders prime their supporters to believe that any unfavorable result is the product of manipulation.

This dynamic suggests that elite rhetoric operates not only as a direct cue but as a conditional mechanism that interacts with voters' expectations, amplifying distrust among pessimistic supporters. This conditionality of trust has important implications for democratic resilience. If public confidence in elections depends not on institutional performance or independent assessments of integrity, but rather on partisan cues and perceived outcomes, democratic legitimacy becomes increasingly fragile. In sum, existing research demonstrates that populist leaders strategically deploy fraud allegations to undermine trust in elections, that these narratives interact with partisan identities and cognitive biases to shape public perceptions of electoral integrity, and that the resulting decline in trust carries profound consequences for democratic stability.

3. The Brazilian Case: Bolsonaro and Electoral Trust

Brazil's *urna eletrônica* (electronic ballot) system combines a controlled "chain of custody" with layered technical safeguards that make large-scale manipulation difficult and detectable (Agência Brasil, 2022). The voting machines are prepared through a formal sealing process, and they run only election software that is cryptographically authenticated. The election authority (the Superior Electoral Court; TSE) runs public security challenges and allows extensive inspection procedures. Importantly, independent forensic analyses of electoral results' data find no statistical evidence consistent with vote-count manipulation. Figueiredo Filho et al. (2022) apply five widely used fraud-detection diagnostics and conclude that the joint evidence "rules out" fraud with high confidence.

Still, Jair Bolsonaro, who served as president from 2019 to 2022, persistently attacked the legitimacy of Brazil's electronic voting system (Bastos & Recuero, 2023), before and after the election. Researchers argue that Bolsonaro and his allies were among the most prolific disseminators of electoral falsehoods (Alves et al., 2023). Table 1 lists a selection of Bolsonaro's public statements casting doubt on Brazil's electronic voting system and the integrity of its elections.

Table 1. Bolsonaro's statements questioning Brazil's ballots and elections.

Statements	Outlets
Here in Brazil, if we have electronic voting in 2022, it will be the same thing. Fraud exists.	Jornal Nacional, G1, 01/07/2021
If we don't have printed voting in 2022, a way to audit the vote, we're going to have a problem worse than the United States.	Jornal Nacional, G1, 01/07/2021
It's impossible to audit elections here in Brazil.	Gazeta do Povo, 07/18/2022
I'll hand over the presidential sash to anyone who beats me cleanly at the ballot box. Not by fraud. Let's go for an auditable vote. Not this 'fake' vote. It won't work. We're going to have an upheaval in Brazil.	Veja, 07/01/2021
If we don't have a printed ballot, we won't have an election.	CNN Brasil, 05/06/2021
I also recall that in 2014, when Aécio Neves lost to Mrs. Dilma Rousseff, the PSDB hired an external audit, and the conclusion of that external audit was that the electronic voting machines are unauditable.	UOL, 10/06/2025
A hacker said that there had been fraud during the elections, that he had hacked into the TSE. It is the TSE itself that is undermining the elections and democracy by trying to hide the investigation.	Poder 360, 07/18/2022
My election was rigged, I have evidence of fraud in my election. I should have won in the first round.	Poder 360, 01/06/2021
We're going to invite the press, we're still going to decide on the time, to demonstrate what happened in the second round of 2014, and also part of what happened in 2018. That gives you more than the feeling, the conviction that there was, yes, interference in 2014, and there was, yes, interference in 2018.	Congresso em Foco, 07/29/2021
With the printed ballot, there will be no doubt in the minds of any Brazilian citizen whether the process was conducted fairly or not.	Poder 360, 05/12/2021

Judicial investigations point to strategic objectives behind the narrative. According to testimonies, the former president hoped to use alleged fraud to persuade the Armed Forces' top commanders to back an attempt to reverse the election outcome (Maia, 2025; Richter, 2025). Additional evidence cited by the Prosecutor General's Office highlights the coordinated nature of the effort. The prosecutor referenced multiple times a ministerial meeting held at the Presidential Palace less than three months before the election, where ministers allegedly sought to mobilize other cabinet members in support of the false narratives of electoral fraud. The prosecutor argued that Bolsonaro "systematically mobilized state agents, resources and competencies to propagate false narratives" (Prosecutor General of the Republic, 2025, p. 66) and that "incisive attacks on the electronic voting system and democratic institutions…have intensified with the approach of the electoral period" (Prosecutor General of the Republic, 2025, p. 88).

While establishing a direct causal chain is difficult, it has been suggested that narratives about fraud helped incite the January 8, 2023, attacks on Brazil's democratic institutions, when thousands of Bolsonaro supporters stormed the headquarters of Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Presidential Palace (Fuks & Casalecchi, 2025). The extent to which Brazilian democracy was at risk remains debated. Some argue that, despite the severity of his rhetoric, Bolsonaro was "ultimately unable to mount an antisystem challenge," even if he "tested the fabric of Brazilian democracy" (Hunter & Power, 2023), while others see the answer to his actions as evidence of the institutional strain of the country (Melo & Pereira, 2024). Brazilian authorities have investigated and prosecuted Bolsonaro and allies for alleged coup-plotting. Regardless of whether democracy itself was fully imperiled, the question of how Bolsonaro's narrative influenced a share of the electorate is empirical.

In contrast to Bolsonaro, Lula's 2022 campaign explicitly positioned itself as a defense of Brazilian democracy and adherence to democratic principles became, for the first time, a significant predictor of voting behavior (Fuks & Casalecchi, 2025). Throughout the campaign, Lula expressed confidence in the electoral system and praised the role of the TSE in ensuring clean elections. His decision to form a unity ticket with former rival Geraldo Alckmin underscored this message. As Alckmin put it: "Today, we find ourselves in the exceptional position of fighting for democracy" (Porcella & Rosa, 2022).

4. Hypotheses

4.1. General Effects

We derive a set of hypotheses that specify how trust in elections varies within the Brazilian electorate. Our main expectation is that trust in elections is not simply a reflection of broader political orientations but is actively shaped by elite rhetoric and, crucially, by supporters' expectations about the electoral result. Classic theories of public opinion formation emphasize that citizens' attitudes toward political institutions depend heavily on the signals they receive from political elites, particularly when those elites are perceived as credible partisan leaders (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2017; Lenz, 2013; Zaller, 1992).

In the Brazilian case, Bolsonaro's sustained attacks on the electronic voting system provide an ideal setting to evaluate this argument. Bolsonaro has been labeled the "primary purveyor of electoral disinformation" in the country (Rossini et al., 2023). If elite cues shape institutional trust, and given the campaign characteristics described in Section 3, we should observe systematic differences in trust across political camps, which raises the first hypothesis:

H1: Bolsonaro voters are less trusting of the electronic voting system compared to supporters of all other candidates.

4.2. Temporal Effects

Understanding temporal dynamics is critical for assessing whether changes in political alignment are associated with changes in trust in elections. The panel structure of the data allows us to observe respondents' vote intentions and trust repeatedly over the campaign period, making it possible to examine within-individual change rather than relying solely on cross-sectional comparisons. If elite cues actively shape trust, changes in vote intention should be accompanied by corresponding changes in trust within individuals. Specifically, adopting support for Bolsonaro should be associated with declining trust, hence:

H2: Individuals who switch their support to Bolsonaro between survey waves exhibit a decrease in trust in the electronic voting system.

4.3. Conditional Effects of Expectations

We also expect that the relationship between elite rhetoric and trust in elections is not static. Supporters' beliefs about the outcome of an election condition how strongly they internalize elite narratives of fraud. When individuals believe their preferred candidate will win, the perceived threat to democracy diminishes. By contrast, when defeat seems imminent, elite claims about electoral manipulation become more psychologically appealing, helping supporters reconcile unfavorable expectations with partisan loyalty. We therefore expect heterogeneity within Bolsonaro's electorate:

H3: Bolsonaro voters who believe he will win the election exhibit higher trust in the electronic voting system than Bolsonaro voters who believe he will lose.

To isolate the influence of Bolsonaro's elite cues from more stable partisan predispositions, we leverage measures of partisan identity that distinguish between positive and negative identification with the PT. The divide between *petistas* and *antipetistas* (supporters and opponents of the PT) is the single most important cleavage structuring political attitudes and behavior in Brazil (Samuels et al., 2023; Samuels & Zucco, 2018). Most Brazilian voters do not simply respond to short-term performance evaluations by rewarding incumbents or punishing challengers (cf. Amaral, 2020; Peixoto & Rennó, 2011; Rennó, 2020). Instead, perceptions of performance, public policy, and candidate favorability are deeply shaped by pro- and anti-PT partisan identities.

The negative PT identity is stronger than any other positive attachment to a right-wing party. Our survey data echoes this broader literature and recent national surveys. Approximately 20% of respondents are classified as *petistas*, 32% as *antipetistas*, and the remaining 48% as non-partisans. Importantly, only a small number of voters identify positively with Bolsonaro's own party (less than 5%), the vast majority of them being also *antipetistas*. This distinction allows us to test whether conditional declines in trust reflect Bolsonaro's candidate-specific rhetoric or a more generalized anti-PT orientation.

If trust in elections were driven purely by partisan hostility toward the PT, we would expect similar expectation-based patterns among antipetistas and Bolsonaro voters. If, instead, Bolsonaro's elite cues play a distinct role, the association should be weaker among *antipetistas* who do not support him. Therefore:

H4: Expectation associations are weaker among *antipetistas* than among Bolsonaro voters.

5. Data and Methods

We use data from a five-wave panel survey conducted by the Instituto Brasileiro de Pesquisa e Análise de Dados (IBPAD) between May and September 2022, covering the months leading up to Brazil's presidential election. The survey is designed to be representative of the Brazilian electorate. In addition, the attrition rate is not correlated with the key explanatory variables. The panel retention declined from 3,383 respondents in Round 1 to 2,426 in Round 5. To assess whether attrition is systematically related to key political variables, we estimate a linear probability model predicting whether a respondent dropped out before the final wave as a function of baseline trust in electronic voting, vote intention, partisan identity (PT and anti-PT), and demographics measured in Round 1. Attrition is not significantly associated with baseline trust, vote choice, or partisan identification. While older and more educated respondents are modestly more likely to remain in the panel—a common pattern in longitudinal surveys—these characteristics are time-invariant and are controlled for in all analyses (see the Supplementary File for complete information).

The panel structure enables us to track whether distrust in elections reflects selection into political camps or changes associated with elite discourse during the campaign. Our main outcome is a binary indicator of high trust in Brazil's electronic voting system. This measure captures confidence in the institution at the center of Bolsonaro's public attacks on electoral integrity and is therefore a substantively relevant indicator of democratic trust during the campaign.

Our key independent variable is the declared intention to vote for Bolsonaro, Lula da Silva, or another candidate in each survey wave. Outcome expectations are measured by respondents' beliefs about which candidate will win the presidential election. To capture partisan identities, we also classify respondents using positive and negative partisan identification items following Samuels and Zucco (2018). Respondents who name the PT as their preferred party are coded as *petistas*, those who name PT as the party they most reject are coded as *antipetistas*, and the remaining respondents are coded as non-partisans.

Our primary empirical strategy is a random effect within–between model, as outlined by Bell et al. (2019). The motivation for this approach is that our hypotheses involve both between-person differences (e.g., whether Bolsonaro supporters exhibit lower trust in elections than other voters) and within-person change over time (e.g., whether trust changes as individuals' vote intentions shift during the campaign). Estimating these dimensions separately risks conflating selection effects (where individuals with systematically lower trust sort into particular political camps) with within-person change consistent with persuasion or alignment with elite cues. The hybrid model allows both processes to be estimated and compared within a single specification.

The dependent variable, Trust_{it}, is a binary indicator equal to one if respondent i reports high trust in Brazil's electronic voting system in wave t, and zero otherwise. The model is estimated using a logistic link function

with survey weights. For each time-varying political alignment variable X_{it} (e.g., vote intention), we decompose it as:

$$X_{it} = \overline{X}_i + \left(X_{it} - \overline{X}_i\right),$$

$\overline{X}_i$ is the individual-specific mean across waves (the *between-person component*) and $X_{it} - \overline{X}_i$ is the deviation from that mean (the *within-person component*). The between-person component captures stable differences across individuals, while the within-person component isolates changes over time within the same individual.

Combining this decomposition with a random-effects logistic framework, the estimating equation is:

$$\begin{aligned} \Pr(\text{Trust\_}it) = {} & \beta_0 + \beta_B^W \ \text{VoteBolsonaro}_{it}^W + \beta_L^W \ \text{VoteLula}_{it}^W \\ & + \beta_B^B \ \text{VoteBolsonaro}_i^B + \beta_L^B \ \text{VoteLula}_i^B \\ & + \boldsymbol{\gamma}^T \mathbf{C}_{it} + \beta_t \ \text{Time}_t + u_{0i} + u_{1i} \ \text{Time}_t, \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

Where $\text{VoteBolsonaro}_{it}^W$ and VoteLula_{it}^W denote the within-person components of vote intention, and VoteBolsonaro_i^B and VoteLula_i^B denote the corresponding between-person components. The vector $\mathbf{C}_{it}$ includes indicators for partisan identity (anti-PT and PT identification), a standard set of demographic controls (sex, age group, social class, religion, and education), and time-varying perceptions of household economic conditions. We model time using a linear trend common to all respondents, while allowing individual-level random intercepts (u_{0i}) and random slopes for time (u_{1i}). The individual-level random effects are assumed to follow a joint normal distribution (Bell et al., 2019).

The decomposition between within-person and between-person coefficients is theoretically informative. A substantially larger between-person effect is consistent with selection, whereby individuals with lower trust disproportionately support Bolsonaro (even though the change could have happened before the survey started, because of the years of messaging). In contrast, a sizable within-person effect indicates that trust changes meaningfully as individuals' political alignment shifts during the campaign, consistent with dynamic elite cueing effects.

The between-person difference in trust across vote-intention groups functions as the covariate-adjusted regression test of whether typical Bolsonaro supporters exhibit lower trust than other voters, net of demographics, economic perceptions, and waves (H1). For the within-person change (H2), the coefficients on deviations from individual means, $\left(X_{it} - \overline{X}_i\right)$ and $\left(Z_{it} - \overline{Z}_i\right)$, capture whether trust changes as the same individual's alignment and expectations change across waves.

To assess whether expectations and information environments condition how political alignment relates to trust in the electoral system, we estimate interaction models that combine within-person and between-person effects. We interact the within-person component with both vote choice and reliance on social and message apps. The same controls are used for consistency. Substantively, the interaction term captures whether the same individual becomes more or less trusting of the electronic voting system as their expectations about the election outcome change.

Extending this logic, we use questions about media consumption and interest in politics to create variables about people who consume political information, legacy media, and use social media. Both variables were measured only in the first round of the panel. The interaction between within-person vote switching and

social media exposure tests whether changes in trust associated with political realignment are amplified in information environments where elite claims are more likely to circulate unchecked. The same is true for interest in politics.

6. Results

We begin by examining baseline differences in trust by vote intention (H1; Figure 1). We then test within-individual "switching" effects using the hybrid model (H2; Figures 1 and 2). Next, we document the overlap between vote choice and PT-based identities (Figure 3) and assess whether electoral expectations moderate the relationship between political alignment and trust in elections (H3; Figure 4). We further examine whether these expectation-based effects extend beyond Bolsonaro voters to the broader antipetista category (H4; Figure 4). Finally, we evaluate whether these within-person effects are amplified among individuals who consume political information on social media (H5; Figure 5). Throughout the presentation of the results, we report point estimates with 95% confidence intervals and clustered standard errors at the individual level.

Figure 1 shows the estimates from a mixed model that decomposes the relationship between vote intention and trust into (a) between-person differences (baseline differences across individuals) and (b) within-person changes (how the same individual's trust changes when their vote intention changes). Consistent with H1, the between-person component of the hybrid model reveals significant differences in trust in electronic voting across vote groups. Respondents who are Bolsonaro voters, consistently across waves, exhibit substantially lower baseline trust in the electronic voting system (point estimate = −0.22, $p < 0.01$), whereas respondents who are, on average, Lula voters display markedly higher trust (+0.46, $p < 0.01$). These differences indicate strong sorting in attitudes toward electoral institutions. Individuals who support Lula tend to trust the voting

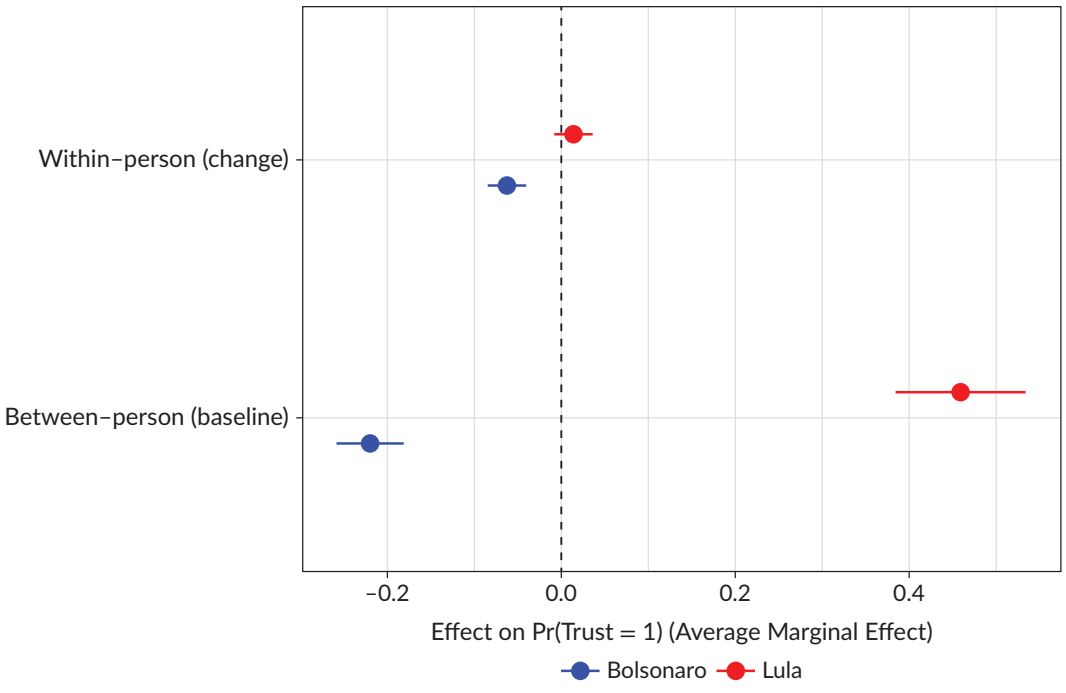

Figure 1. Within–between estimates of trust in electronic voting.

system even prior to any changes in vote choice, while Bolsonaro supporters are disproportionately drawn from a pool of citizens who are already skeptical of the system.

However, the results are not driven only by between-group differences, indicating that there is more than an effect based only on selection. We also see that there is an effect of persuasion by elite cues. In the case of Bolsonaro, the within-person change offers evidence for the follow-the-leader hypothesis. Figure 1 also plots the within-person coefficients from the hybrid model, which provide the main evidence for H2. Switching into Bolsonaro support is associated with a sizable and statistically significant decline in trust in electronic voting (within-person effect = −0.07, $p < 0.01$). In contrast, switching into Lula support is not associated with a change in trust (within-person effect = +0.01, $p = 0.21$). The evidence is consistent with the idea that, among Lula's supporters, trust in the electoral system is already high, leaving little room for further updating. By contrast, the negative within-person shift among Bolsonaro voters provides clear evidence of a "following the leader" dynamic: as individuals move into Bolsonaro's camp, their confidence in the electoral system declines in tandem with the candidate's rhetoric.

Next, we examine whether electoral expectations condition trust among Bolsonaro switchers. Figure 2 presents within-person interaction estimates from the hybrid model, focusing on how expectations are associated with changes in trust. Consistent with H3, when Bolsonaro voters expect a Bolsonaro victory, their trust in the electronic voting system increases (within-person estimate = +0.15, $p = 0.044$). In contrast, when Bolsonaro voters expect a Lula victory, their trust declines sharply (within-person estimate = −0.26, $p = 0.002$). Anticipated defeat is associated with a reduction in confidence in the voting system, consistent with the argument that elite cues can shape institutional trust.

Importantly, these patterns indicate that expectations moderate the effect of Bolsonaro's cue. While the cue questioning the integrity of the electoral system is constant, its impact on individual trust varies depending on whether voters foresee electoral victory or defeat. When victory is expected, voters appear more willing to discount or reinterpret the elite's negative rhetoric. By contrast, when defeat is anticipated, the same elite

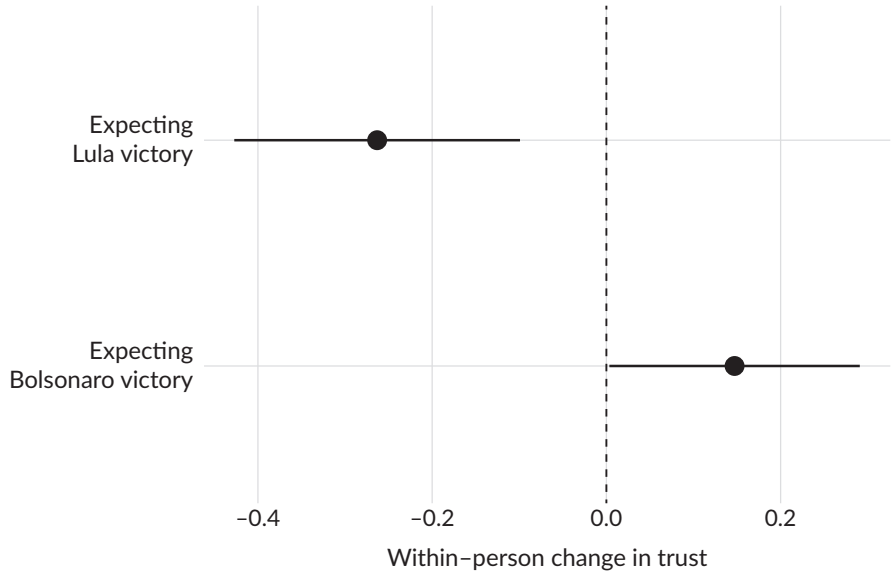

Figure 2. Within estimates of trust in electronic voting, moderated by expectations.

cue becomes more persuasive, amplifying distrust and leading to sharper declines in institutional confidence. This suggests that expectations function as a psychological filter through which elite messages are processed, intensifying their effects under conditions of anticipated loss. These results show that electoral expectations condition the extent to which elite cues undermine confidence in democratic institutions.

Once we have shown the importance of elite cues and expectations, we move on to the test of H4. As this requires distinguishing between *anti-petism* and voting for Bolsonaro, we first examine descriptively how vote intention maps onto PT-based partisan identities. Figure 3 presents cross-tabulations of vote choice by mutually exclusive identity categories (*petistas*, *antipetistas*, and neither). The results show substantial but incomplete alignment. Bolsonaro voters are predominantly *antipetistas*, but roughly one-fifth lack an explicit partisan identity, while virtually none identify as *petistas*. Lula voters, by contrast, are far less tightly anchored in positive partisanship: fewer than half identify as *petistas*, with a majority falling into the nonpartisan category. This distinction is central for interpretation. If distrust in elections were driven primarily by negative partisanship toward the PT, expectation effects should appear broadly among *antipetistas* regardless of vote choice. If, instead, distrust reflects elite cueing by Bolsonaro, expectation-based responses should be concentrated among those who not only oppose the PT but also align electorally with Bolsonaro.

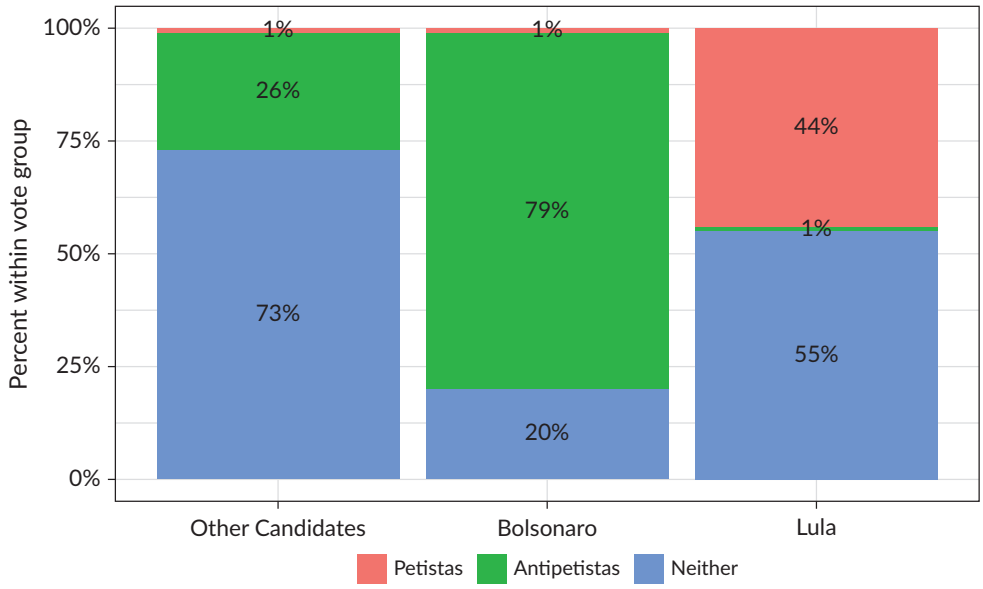

Figure 3. Composition of vote groups by PT-based identity (*petistas*, *antipetistas*, neither).

This incomplete alignment between vote choice and partisanship motivates the key comparison in the next step of the analysis. Figure 4 estimates models interacting antipetista identity with expectations about the winner. In line with H4, expectation interactions among antipetistas are small and statistically indistinguishable from zero. This stands in sharp contrast to the large expectation effects among Bolsonaro voters in Figure 2. Substantively, these results indicate that expectation-driven distrust is not simply a feature of anti-PT sentiment; rather, it is concentrated among voters who align electorally with Bolsonaro and who are responsive to his cues, consistently with the RAS model. All in all, *antipetismo* may predispose citizens toward political opposition, but the switching results provide evidence that trust tracks Bolsonaro's alignment within individuals, consistent with the central "following the leader" mechanism.

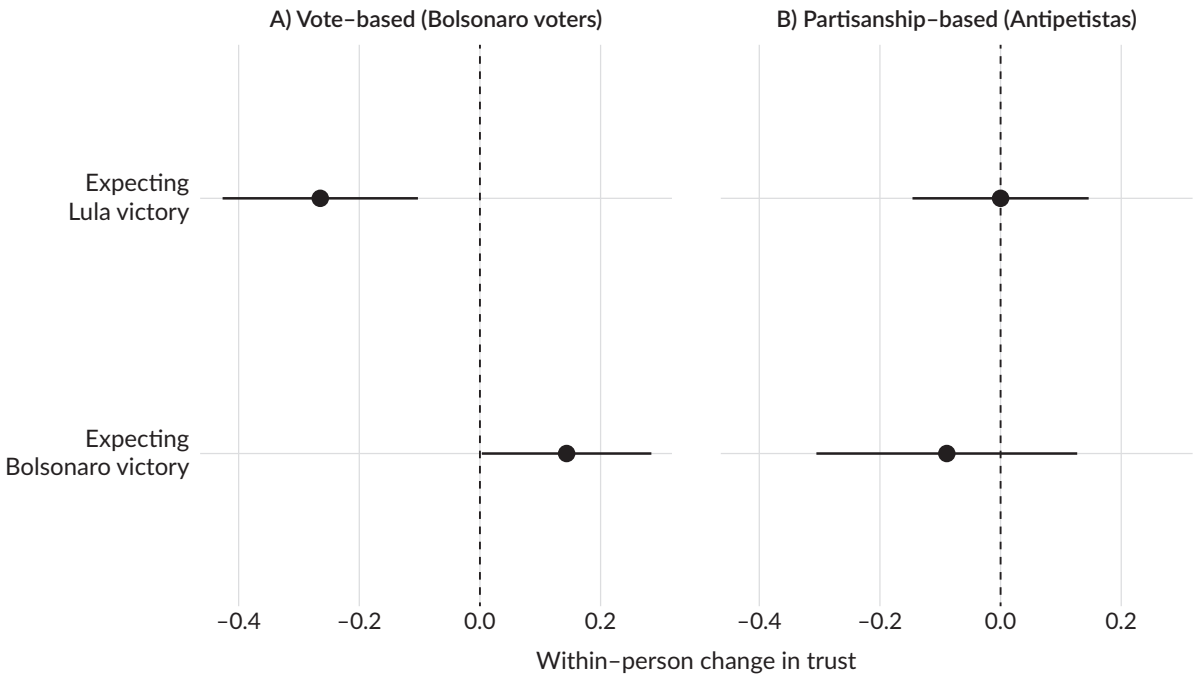

Figure 4. Expectation moderation on trust among *antipetistas* and Bolsonaro voters.

In the Supplementary File, we explore the mechanisms that may explain the results. We find two things. First, political messaging depends critically on individuals' information environments, particularly the media through which political claims are encountered and reinforced. In Brazil, social media platforms and message apps (e.g., WhatsApp and Telegram) play a central role in disseminating claims about electoral fraud (Fernández-Caba et al., 2025). As a result, the association between switching into Bolsonaro support and declining trust in the electronic voting system is strongly conditioned by information environments. Individuals who rely more heavily on social media and messaging apps experience substantially larger within-person declines in trust when they shift toward Bolsonaro, whereas reliance on legacy media is associated with higher baseline trust and does not amplify the effects of vote switching (see Figure 1 in the Supplementary File). This pattern suggests that social media–centric environments play a key role in translating elite rhetoric into institutional distrust. Second, political interest further moderates this relationship: the negative within-person association between switching into Bolsonaro support and trust is significantly stronger among individuals with higher levels of political interest (see Figure 2 in the Supplementary File). As Bolsonaro supporters tend to be more politically engaged, these politically interested voters account for a disproportionate share of the observed decline in trust, helping to explain the overall results.

7. Discussion

Using panel data from Brazil's 2022 presidential election, this article demonstrates that distrust in the electronic voting system is not only unevenly distributed across political camps but also changes within individuals as their political alignment shifts. The hybrid within–between models reveal strong baseline differences consistent with partisan sorting. At the same time, the within-person evidence points to a distinct "following the leader" dynamic among Bolsonaro voters. When individuals move into Bolsonaro's electoral camp, their confidence in the voting system declines, net of controls and time trends.

Crucially, among Bolsonaro supporters, anticipated defeat is associated with sharp within-person declines in trust, while anticipated victory is associated with increased confidence in the system. This pattern does not generalize to *antipetistas*. This contrast allows us to rule out a purely partisan-hostility account and strengthens the interpretation that Bolsonaro's candidate-specific rhetoric is the primary driver of distrust. Our evidence that social media consumption amplifies within-person declines in trust among Bolsonaro switchers highlights how elite rhetoric can be magnified through communication channels.

These findings have important implications for democratic resilience. When trust in elections becomes contingent on whether one's preferred leader is expected to win, democratic legitimacy shifts from being procedural to being conditional. In such contexts, distrust becomes a mobilized political stance tied to leader loyalty and reinforced through permissive information environments. More broadly, the results contribute to scholarship on electoral legitimacy, populism, and democratic backsliding by showing that confidence in democratic procedures can erode endogenously during campaigns, when elites strategically question the rules of the game. In polarized contexts, this dynamic poses a serious challenge to democratic stability.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

LLMs were used only to check and proofread specific phrases. No other uses were made.

Data Availability

Replication files and data can be found at: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/09BA7A

Supplementary Material

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

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ARTICLE

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Comparative Perspectives on Electoral Integrity Beliefs: A Case Study of Austria and Germany

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Abstract

This article examines the perception of electoral integrity in Austria and Germany, two established democracies with robust electoral systems. Despite their high standards, both countries have faced significant challenges regarding electoral integrity. In Austria, the 2016 presidential election was annulled by the Constitutional Court due to procedural irregularities affecting postal ballots. In Germany, widespread organizational failures during the 2021 federal election—including missing ballot papers—prompted the Federal Constitutional Court to order a partial rerun. Although no evidence of intentional fraud was found, these breaches were deemed sufficient to undermine public confidence in the electoral process and raise the question to what extent is electoral fraud perceived in Austria and Germany and whether electoral integrity is therefore rated low in both countries. The analysis proposes a multidimensional conceptualization of electoral integrity, incorporating fraud risk perception (voting by mail vs. in the polling station), populist voting, and feelings of economic insecurity. Methodologically, the study applies a harmonized set of survey indicators to enable explorative cross-national comparison and uses multivariate regression models to identify individual-level predictors of electoral confidence. Drawing on two surveys—conducted in Austria in 2020 and Germany in 2025—the analysis reveals that the perceived risk of voting in person or by post is linked to a negative assessment of institutional integrity, but not to external influences such as foreign interference or manipulation through biased information on social media platforms. This is particularly interesting because, in the two well-functioning democracies studied, the former risks are objectively considered to be significantly lower than, for example, the influence of misinformation on social media.

Keywords

Austria; economic insecurity; electoral integrity; Germany; populism

1. Introduction

Public confidence in the integrity of democratic elections is fundamental to the legitimacy and stability of democratic systems. When citizens doubt whether elections are conducted fairly and competently, trust in political institutions erodes and the willingness to accept electoral outcomes declines, posing a serious challenge to democratic governance (Birch, 2011; Garnett & James, 2023; Norris, 2013). Importantly, such doubts need not be grounded in proven electoral fraud. Even in contexts where robust institutional safeguards render deliberate manipulation highly unlikely, perceptions of threats to electoral integrity can nonetheless gain traction, shaped by political narratives, administrative irregularities, and heightened media scrutiny (Garnett & James, 2021). These perceptions alone—irrespective of their factual accuracy—can undermine democratic legitimacy, depress political participation, and foster political cynicism (Banducci & Karp, 1999; Birch, 2010; Bowler et al., 2015; Schnaudt, 2024a; Vliegenthart et al., 2024).

Crucially, citizens rarely evaluate elections in legalistic terms or make precise accusations of fraud. Instead, they assess whether elections are conducted with integrity, attributing potential problems to different sources. On the one hand, concerns may focus on the performance and fairness of domestic electoral institutions, such as election administration or vote counting. On the other hand, elections may be perceived as vulnerable to external or systemic influences, including foreign interference, coordinated manipulation, or distortions arising from digital information environments. These attribution patterns point to analytically distinct types of perceived threats to electoral integrity, which are likely to be shaped by different political experiences and individual-level factors.

Despite the centrality of these issues, much of the existing research treats public evaluations of electoral integrity as a unidimensional phenomenon, typically capturing a general sense of whether elections are trustworthy or compromised (Norris, 2018; Norris et al., 2020; Schnaudt, 2023a; Schnaudt & Wolf, 2023). Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the need for a more differentiated conceptualization. Studies highlight that citizens distinguish between trust in the competence and impartiality of domestic electoral institutions and concerns about external threats, such as foreign interference, coordinated disinformation, or algorithmic amplification on social media platforms (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Partheymüller et al., 2022; Tucker et al., 2018; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Building on these insights, this article conceptualizes public evaluations of electoral integrity as a two-dimensional construct. The first dimension, institutional electoral integrity, captures perceptions of procedural fairness, administrative competence, and balanced media coverage. The second dimension, external threats to electoral integrity, refers to perceived risks arising from actors or processes external to electoral institutions, including foreign organizations and distortions within the digital information environment. These dimensions reflect fundamentally different attribution logics and are therefore expected to respond to different individual-level determinants.

Austria and Germany offer compelling cases for examining these dynamics. Both are consolidated democracies with long-standing electoral institutions and high international standards of electoral administration. Yet, in recent years, both countries have experienced high-profile disruptions that triggered public debates about electoral reliability. In Austria, the Constitutional Court annulled the result of the 2016 presidential election due to procedural violations in the handling of postal ballots. Although no evidence of deliberate fraud was found, the ruling directly implicated the institutional integrity of electoral administration. In Germany, widespread organizational failures during the 2021 federal election—most

notably missing ballot papers and logistical breakdowns at polling stations—led the Federal Constitutional Court to order a partial rerun. Here, too, investigations revealed no intentional manipulation, but the events raised concerns about administrative capacity and procedural competence. In both cases, media coverage and political debate amplified public attention to electoral vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities, however, remain analytically distinct from concerns about manipulation by external actors.

The present study addresses the following research question: How do individual-level factors—such as perceived voting risks, economic dissatisfaction, populist orientations, and political alignment—shape evaluations of institutional electoral integrity and perceptions of external threats to electoral integrity? By answering this question, the article contributes to the literature on democratic confidence and electoral legitimacy in three ways. First, it advances a theoretically grounded, multidimensional conceptualization of electoral integrity perceptions. Second, it leverages harmonized survey data to provide a rare comparative assessment of these dimensions in Austria and Germany. Third, it offers new insights into the distinct mechanisms through which citizens evaluate institutional performance and external vulnerability in contemporary democracies.

The results show that the perceived risk of voting in person or by post is linked to a negative assessment of institutional integrity, but not to external influences such as foreign interference or manipulation through biased information on social media platforms. This is particularly interesting because, in the two well-functioning democracies studied, the former risks are objectively considered to be significantly lower than, for example, the influence of misinformation on social media. In addition, the analysis reveals that institutional competence and external vulnerability are shaped by separate mechanisms. Assessments of institutional integrity hinge mainly on procedural issues and winner–loser dynamics, whereas partisan alignment—especially populist support—plays a central role in shaping perceived external threats. Economic dissatisfaction further conditions these relationships, strengthening negative evaluations in Austria but contributing little to explanations in Germany.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Conceptualizing Electoral Integrity Beliefs in Austria and Germany

Perceptions of electoral integrity differ fundamentally from empirically verified instances of fraud. While the latter are rare in established democracies and typically subject to judicial review and institutional redress, the former are shaped by subjective interpretations, political narratives, and contextual cues (Garnett & James, 2021; Norris, 2018; Sheagley & Udani, 2021). Following Birch (2011) and Norris (2013), this study adopts the concept of electoral integrity beliefs—the belief that elections are conducted fairly, transparently, and competently—as the central lens for understanding public evaluations of electoral integrity. Prior research has often conceptualized electoral integrity beliefs in overly simplistic terms—as a binary judgment of whether elections are generally fair or manipulated (Norris, 2018; Norris et al., 2020; Schnaudt, 2023b; Schnaudt & Wolf, 2023).

Many large-scale surveys, such as the European Social Survey, rely on single-item indicators to measure electoral trust, typically asking respondents to rate the overall fairness or freedom of elections. While useful for general cross-national comparisons, such measures lack the granularity required to capture the nuanced

ways in which citizens may differentiate between various types of concerns, such as administrative failures, media distortion, or foreign interference (Schnaudt, 2024a). This one-dimensional approach risks flattening a complex attitude structure into a single evaluative dimension, thereby obscuring the underlying sources of electoral skepticism. Recent theoretical and empirical contributions argue for a more refined conceptualization. For example, the Election Perception Index explicitly adopts a multidimensional framework to account for different stages and aspects of the electoral process (Garnett et al., 2024). However, this multidimensionality has not yet been implemented in cross-country surveys. Similarly, Norris (2013) emphasizes that irregularities—and by extension, perceptions thereof—can emerge at any point across the electoral cycle, from registration and campaigning to vote counting and post-election adjudication. Building on these insights, it follows logically that citizens' perceptions of electoral integrity are also likely to be structured along multiple, distinguishable dimensions, rather than reducible to a single judgment about overall electoral fairness. Building on this literature, we propose a two-dimensional framework of perceived electoral integrity (Garnett et al., 2024; Norris, 2013).

Norris (2013) differentiates between first-order and second-order electoral malpractices based on their impact on democratic processes. First-order irregularities—such as the suppression of opposition candidates or the denial of free voter choice—are typically associated with authoritarian regimes and directly undermine the core principles of electoral democracy (Norris, 2013, p. 564). In contrast, second-order malpractices are more subtle and commonly observed within established democracies. These include technical shortcomings, administrative errors, or procedural irregularities that, although not necessarily intentional, can still undermine public confidence in the integrity of elections (Norris, 2013, p. 566). This study focuses on perceptions of such second-order issues, emphasizing how they are interpreted by citizens in the absence of verified fraud. This is because these second-order malpractices are also those that already occurred in both countries under investigation in 2016 and 2021.

Within second-order malpractices, we propose distinguishing between two dimensions: the assessment of institutional integrity and the assessment of external threat. The first dimension reflects institutional skepticism, encompassing concerns about vote counting and misconduct by electoral authorities. The second dimension captures external and media-related threats, including fears of foreign interference or manipulation through biased information on social media platforms. These threats, while often less directly tied to electoral administration, can similarly distort perceptions of democratic fairness. By distinguishing between internal institutional concerns and systemic or exogenous influences, this framework enables a more differentiated understanding of how electoral distrust is structured in democratic societies.

2.2. Explaining Electoral Integrity Beliefs: Three Core Mechanisms

Although electoral fraud is extremely rare in established democracies such as Austria and Germany, a substantial share of citizens perceives elections as manipulated or untrustworthy (Partheymüller et al., 2022; Schnaudt, 2023a, 2024b). This raises the question of why individuals develop such perceptions in the absence of concrete evidence. Building on existing research, we identify three mechanisms that shape these beliefs: First, perceived procedural vulnerabilities may lead citizens to question the competence and fairness of electoral institutions; second, ideological mobilization by populist actors can frame elections as manipulated by corrupt elites; and third, broader societal dissatisfaction, particularly linked to economic insecurity, may foster generalized skepticism toward the electoral system (Auerbach & Pierson, 2021;

Beaulieu, 2014; Birch & ElSafoury, 2017; Foster & Frieden, 2017; Norris et al., 2020; Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021).

These mechanisms map naturally onto two distinct dimensions of electoral integrity. Concerns about institutional electoral integrity reflect perceptions of domestic procedural competence, such as the fairness of vote counting or the reliability of election administration, whereas perceptions of external threats to electoral integrity capture beliefs about manipulation by outside actors, including foreign interference or social media distortion. This two-dimensional framework allows us to test targeted hypotheses linking procedural risk, partisan cues, winner–loser dynamics, and economic dissatisfaction to each dimension, providing a more nuanced understanding of how citizens form beliefs about electoral trustworthiness.

2.2.1. Perceived Procedural Risk

The first mechanism focuses on how individuals evaluate the technical and procedural integrity of elections. Even in the absence of documented fraud, perceived risks associated with the administration of elections may undermine confidence in the integrity of electoral institutions. In particular, perceived risks related to election day procedures, such as overcrowded polling stations, organizational failures, or inadequate oversight, directly implicate the capacity of electoral authorities to conduct elections in a competent and impartial manner. Such concerns are therefore closely linked to evaluations of institutional electoral integrity, as they reflect doubts about the effectiveness and reliability of the organizations responsible for administering elections:

> H1a: Higher perceived risk of voting at the polling station is associated with a negative assessment of institutional electoral integrity.

In contrast, perceptions of risk associated with postal voting tend to activate a distinct interpretive framework. Postal voting is often perceived as especially vulnerable to fraud due to its reliance on mail systems, the absence of public oversight during ballot casting, and its perceived exposure to third-party interference. Unlike in-person voting, postal ballots are completed in private settings and handled outside the immediate control of election officials, which can foster beliefs that they are susceptible to manipulation by external actors rather than institutional mismanagement (Herron & Smith, 2021; Nemčok & Peltoniemi, 2023; Wagner & Lichteblau, 2020). As a result, perceived fraud risks in postal voting are more likely to translate into concerns about external threats to electoral integrity, rather than into generalized doubts about institutional competence:

> H1b: Higher perceived risk of fraud in postal voting is associated with a negative assessment of external threats to electoral integrity.

Country-specific experiences further shape the salience of these perceptions. In Austria, the annulment of the 2016 presidential runoff due to procedural irregularities in the handling of postal ballots—despite the absence of deliberate fraud—has heightened public sensitivity toward mail voting and reinforced its association with electoral manipulation (Liechtenstein, 2024; Snyder, 2025). In Germany, by contrast, controversies surrounding election administration, such as the partial rerun of the 2021 Berlin elections, primarily concerned election day logistics rather than postal voting, while allegations of mail-in ballot fraud have largely been propagated through partisan narratives lacking empirical support ("Mostly false," 2022;

Witting & Bateson, 2021). These differing experiences suggest that perceptions of postal voting fraud may be particularly potent in shaping beliefs about external threats to electoral integrity, especially in the Austrian context.

2.2.2. Populist Mobilization and the Winner--Loser Effect of Electoral Integrity

A second explanatory mechanism emphasizes the role of political communication and ideological framing in shaping public perceptions of electoral integrity (Birch & ElSafoury, 2017; Brown & Cormack, 2021; Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021). Right-wing populist parties, in particular, frequently portray elections as instruments of elite manipulation and employ fraud narratives to challenge the legitimacy of democratic institutions. As conceptualized by Akkerman et al. (2014) and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018), populism is grounded in a moral dichotomy between a virtuous and homogeneous people and a corrupt elite. This worldview inherently encourages skepticism toward established political procedures, including electoral administration.

Rather than emerging from detailed evaluations of electoral procedures, beliefs about electoral fraud—especially those concerning external threats to electoral integrity, such as manipulation or interference—are often shaped by partisan cues and repeated elite messaging. Longitudinal research demonstrates that persistent electoral defeat reinforces distrust in elections, while repeated electoral victories only partially restore confidence (Daniller & Mutz, 2019; Schnaudt, 2023b). Beyond this winner–loser dynamic, populist supporters are particularly susceptible to fraud narratives, as populist elite rhetoric frames political outcomes as the product of elite manipulation rather than fair democratic competition.

In both Austria and Germany, populist parties actively disseminate such narratives, though their resonance may vary across contexts. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) has repeatedly questioned the integrity of elections by highlighting alleged vulnerabilities of postal voting, despite a lack of empirical evidence supporting these claims ("Mostly false," 2022; Witting & Bateson, 2021). In Austria, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) operates in a context where judicially documented—but largely technical—irregularities can be rhetorically leveraged to suggest broader institutional failure (Liechtenstein, 2024). Exposure to and acceptance of these narratives increases the likelihood that supporters of populist parties perceive elections as threatened by external forces (because these narratives transform perceptions of administrative shortcomings into claims about external manipulation), even in the absence of direct personal evaluation of electoral procedures (Partheymüller et al., 2022; Schnaudt, 2023a):

> H2a: The vote intention for a populist party should be accompanied by a negative assessment of external threats to the integrity of the elections.

Beyond ideological framing, evaluations of electoral integrity are strongly shaped by winner–loser effects. Extensive research shows that individuals whose preferred party wins an election exhibit higher levels of political trust and more favorable evaluations of democratic institutions, whereas electoral losers are significantly more likely to express dissatisfaction with political processes and outcomes (Daniller & Mutz, 2019). These effects extend beyond short-term emotional reactions and systematically influence perceptions of institutional fairness and legitimacy.

From this perspective, support for a governing—or electorally successful—party should be associated with a more positive assessment of institutional electoral integrity, reflecting greater acceptance of electoral outcomes and confidence in the procedures that produced them. Conversely, electoral losers are more inclined to question the integrity of electoral institutions, independent of objective indicators of electoral quality:

> H2b: The vote intention for a winning party should be accompanied by a higher rating in the assessment of institutional electoral integrity.

2.2.3. Economic Dissatisfaction: Electoral Distrust as a Symptom of Broader Discontent

Economic dissatisfaction is likely to be a decisive factor in the negative assessment of electoral integrity. This is based on the well-known negative correlation between economic performance and political support. Kölln and Aarts (2021) show that a positive economic assessment is one of the main factors for satisfaction with democracy. Electoral integrity beliefs should be understood less as a precise assessment of electoral procedures and more as an expression of diffuse socio-political dissatisfaction. Individuals who perceive themselves as economically insecure or socially marginalized are more likely to experience political alienation, manifested in a weakened sense of political efficacy and reduced attachment to democratic institutions. This alienation, in turn, fosters institutional distrust, heightens cynicism toward political elites, and promotes skepticism about the fairness and legitimacy of democratic processes more broadly (Foster & Frieden, 2017; Ivanov, 2023; Kölln & Aarts, 2021).

Prior research consistently demonstrates that subjective economic dissatisfaction—that is, individuals' perceptions of their personal economic situation—is closely linked to lower levels of political trust and institutional confidence (Foster & Frieden, 2017; Goubin, 2020; Sahin et al., 2024). Citizens who feel economically disadvantaged may therefore be more inclined to question the integrity of elections, both by expressing negative assessments of institutional electoral integrity and by endorsing beliefs that elections are threatened by external manipulation or interference. In this perspective, electoral integrity beliefs function as cognitive shortcuts that help individuals make sense of perceived systemic failure and unmet economic expectations:

> H3: Reported economic dissatisfaction is associated with higher levels of both (a) a negative assessment of institutional electoral integrity and (b) a negative assessment of external threats to the integrity of elections.

We expect this relationship to be stronger in Germany than in Austria. The German populist discourse—especially that of the AfD—more frequently ties economic grievances to systemic political failure, reinforcing a narrative that elections are controlled by elites who ignore the needs of ordinary citizens (Jung & Jung, 2022; Lengfeld & Dilger, 2018). In Austria, while the mechanism is still relevant, slightly higher levels of economic satisfaction and different populist framing may attenuate its explanatory power.

In sum, this study advances the understanding of electoral integrity beliefs by integrating three complementary mechanisms within a two-dimensional framework. First, perceived procedural vulnerabilities (H1a, H1b) shape evaluations of institutional competence and external threats by highlighting how specific

features of election administration—such as polling station organization or postal voting—can be interpreted as risky or manipulable. Second, ideological mobilization by populist actors and winner–loser effects (H2a, H2b) influence perceptions of electoral integrity beyond procedural realities, as partisan narratives and repeated electoral losses or victories condition citizens' trust in institutions and susceptibility to claims of external interference. Third, diffuse societal dissatisfaction, particularly economic insecurity (H3), fosters generalized skepticism toward both institutional integrity and external threats, reflecting broader discontent with the political system. By combining these mechanisms within a two-dimensional conceptualization, this study provides a theoretically grounded and nuanced explanation for why citizens in consolidated democracies may perceive elections as untrustworthy, even in contexts with minimal documented fraud.

3. Methodology, Datasets, and Measurements

To investigate the determinants of electoral integrity beliefs in Austria and Germany, we draw on two independently collected but methodologically harmonized survey datasets. Both surveys include rich information on political attitudes, populist orientations, economic evaluations, and sociodemographic characteristics, along with a shared item battery measuring perceived electoral fraud.

3.1. Case Selection

This study compares Austria and Germany to examine public opinion on electoral fraud and its negative consequences for the assessment of electoral integrity. The case selection follows a most similar systems design, as both countries share key structural and institutional characteristics that are central to the research question. Austria and Germany are consolidated parliamentary democracies with proportional electoral systems, high administrative capacity, comparable media landscapes, and historically high electoral integrity, according to the Electoral Integrity Project (Garnett et al., 2024). The Electoral Integrity Project uses expert opinions to assess the integrity of elections worldwide and awards Austria a score of 85.7 out of 100 for the last election prior to the survey data used here (2019) and Germany a score of 84.4 out of 100 for the last election prior to the survey data used here (2021; Garnett et al., 2024). These similarities allow for a controlled comparison in which observed differences in citizens' beliefs about electoral fraud are less likely to be driven by institutional variation and more plausibly linked to attitudinal factors.

The analysis draws on survey data from Austria collected in 2020 and from Germany collected in 2025. A key contribution and novelty of this study lies in the unique level of cross-national comparability enabled by the use of identically worded survey items to measure the dependent variable in both countries. The employment of word-for-word equivalent items substantially reduces concerns regarding measurement error, semantic ambiguity, and cultural interpretation, which frequently limit comparative research on perceptions of electoral integrity. This high degree of measurement equivalence strengthens the validity of the cross-national comparison and allows differences in reported beliefs in electoral fraud to be interpreted with greater confidence as substantive rather than artefactual.

Despite the advantage of using identical wording for the central items in both analyses, there are also differences between the two countries and surveys, which make the study an exploratory one. First of all, it is comparable that both countries had to deal with allegations of electoral fraud and election reruns for formal reasons in the run-up to the respective surveys. However, in the case of Austria in 2016, this involved

a complete repeat of the federal presidential runoff election (Kazim, 2016), while in the case of Germany, it involved a partial repeat of the 2021 federal election in some districts of Berlin ("Wahlwiederholung in Berlin," 2024). The time lag between the original election and the subsequent legal correction or rerun also varies. While in Austria the FPÖ quickly lodged an appeal and the Constitutional Court ruled on it in 2016 (Kazim, 2016), the procedure in Germany took two years and also had implications for the Bundestag ("Wahlwiederholung in Berlin," 2024). This means that the two events may have had a different impact on the presence of the topic among respondents at the time of the 2020 and 2025 surveys.

Secondly, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the popularity of postal voting and the possible consequences for the risk assessment of postal voting security in both countries are only comparable in some respects. There is a debate in right-wing and right-wing populist forums about the integrity of postal voting in Austria (Kern, 2024), while Germany attempted to counter false information on social media about the 2021 election and postal voting with a dedicated website set up by the Bundeswahlleiterin (2021). By acknowledging these temporal differences explicitly, the study refrains from making causal claims about temporal dynamics and instead adopts an exploratory perspective.

3.2. Austria: The Austrian Corona Panel Project

For Austria, we use data from wave 16 (October 2020) of the Austrian Corona Panel Project, a longitudinal online survey initiated in March 2020 to monitor public responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. While the panel was originally designed to track health-related, psychological, and socio-economic developments, later waves included political variables such as vote intention, trust in institutions, and attitudes toward democracy. From March to July 2020, surveys were conducted weekly, and thereafter monthly (Kittel et al., 2021).

Wave 16 is particularly relevant for this study, as it introduced a newly developed item battery measuring perceptions of electoral integrity. Unlike expert-based assessments (Garnett & James, 2021; Norris, 2013) or vague single-item measures, this approach operationalizes fraud perception as the subjective probability that various types of electoral malpractice may occur (Sheagley & Udani, 2021). Respondents were presented with six randomized statements addressing different facets of potential fraud, such as incorrect vote counting, misconduct by electoral officials, and external influences via social media or foreign organizations. From these items, we construct a multidimensional index of perceived electoral integrity.

3.3. Germany: Post-Election Survey Following the 2025 Bundestag Election

For Germany, we use data from a post-election survey conducted in the immediate aftermath of the early federal election held on 23 February 2025. The survey was fielded by Bilendi GmbH and funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. It targeted a sample of residents in Germany aged 18 to 74, using a quota sampling strategy stratified by gender, age group (five categories), and federal state. Fieldwork took place within one week after the election and was optimized for mobile devices to ensure accessibility and high response quality. The realized gross response rate was 40.59%, with an average interview length of 29 minutes and up to 289 questions, depending on filter routing (Marschall & Bernhard-Rump, 2025).

The questionnaire included an extensive set of variables on media consumption, ideological orientation, trust in political institutions, populist attitudes, and perceptions of electoral fraud, using the same six-item battery

as in the Austrian dataset. This deliberate harmonization allows for direct cross-national comparison, while the German case offers a relevant context following notable organizational failures during the 2021 election and renewed public attention to electoral integrity in 2025 (Marschall & Bernhard-Rump, 2025).

3.4. Dependent Variable: Two Dimensions of Electoral Integrity Beliefs

To measure electoral integrity beliefs, we rely on items used in the Austrian Corona Panel Project (Kittel et al., 2021) and a previous study by Partheymüller et al. (2022), which employed a multidimensional electoral integrity item battery. This battery captures different aspects of perceived electoral malpractice, ranging from procedural concerns (e.g., incorrect vote counting, misconduct by electoral boards) to external threats (e.g., foreign interference, social media manipulation). Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with six randomized statements on an 11-point scale. Because a variable for assessing the risk of postal voting is to be analysed to test H1b, one of the six items is removed from the dependent variable. This item originally asked whether respondents believed that postal votes were counted correctly. The same item wording and response scales were used in both surveys. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for all six items. Higher values indicate stronger beliefs in electoral fraud. However, compared to the original study, the item "Postal votes are manipulated" was removed, as a variable for the perception of the risk of postal votes is to be used in the regression analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the dependent variable.

Variable			Austria		Germany	
	Min	Max	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*
Institutional electoral integrity concerns						
Votes are not counted correctly. (recoded)	0	10	2.53	2.75	2.52	2.61
The media do not report in a balanced way. (recoded)	0	10	4.55	2.85	4.67	3.11
The electoral board does not behave correctly. (recoded)	0	10	2.72	2.68	2.61	2.62
External threats to electoral integrity						
Foreign organizations intervene in the election.	0	10	4.37	3.04	5.44	3.00
Social media, like Twitter and Facebook, bias the election.	0	10	5.61	2.78	5.65	2.98
N (listwise)			1,171		1,645	

Notes: Higher values indicate more negative electoral integrity evaluation; data not weighted. Sources: Austria: Kritzinger et al. (2020), Germany: Marschall and Bernhard-Rump (2025).

In both datasets, we construct composite indices of electoral integrity beliefs using exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation and Kaiser normalisation to check how many factors could be formed from the five items and whether the same three dimensions found by Partheymüller et al. (2022) could be identified (Table 2). Two consistent components with an eigenvalue greater than 1 emerge: (a) institutional electoral integrity concerns (e.g., vote counting, board misconduct) and (b) external/media-related electoral integrity concerns (e.g., social media bias, foreign interference). These serve as dependent variables in our regression models. It is not surprising that the two items addressing the role of traditional and social media fall into two different factors in the empirical analysis. The item addressing the general balance of reporting belongs to factor 1 because both Germany and Austria have a publicly funded media system that is supposed to ensure balanced reporting (Grassmuck & Thomass, 2023). The second item, which addresses

the external influence of social media on elections, empirically fits well to the second factor because it concerns an external threat to the integrity of elections.

Table 2. Results of the exploratory factor analysis.

	Austria		Germany	
	Factor 1 Institutional concerns	Factor 2 External threats	Factor 1 Institutional concerns	Factor 2 External threats
Institutional electoral integrity concerns				
Votes are not counted correctly. (recoded)	0.89		0.89	
The media do not report in a balanced way. (recoded)	0.65		0.73	
The electoral board does not behave correctly. (recoded)	0.89		0.89	
External threats to electoral integrity				
Foreign organizations intervene in the election.		0.76		0.89
Social media, like Twitter and Facebook, bias the election.		0.86		0.87
Eigenvalue	2.1	1.3	2.3	1.4

Notes: Exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation; data not weighted. Sources: Austria: Kittel et al. (2020), Germany: Marschall and Bernhard-Rump (2025).

3.5. Independent Variables and Controls

For the regression analysis, only comparable variables were selected from both data sets, or harmonized where necessary, as in the case of vote choice and education. The perceived risk of fraud at polling stations and in postal voting was measured on a 5-point scale (0 = *very low risk*, 4 = *very high risk*) to test H1a and H1b. Respondents' voting intention was included as a dichotomous variable indicating support for populist parties in both countries (H2a), and a dummy variable for governing parties was used to control for the winner–loser effect (H2b). In Austria, vote choice was measured prospectively. Support for governing parties—the Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP, Austrian People's Party) and Die Grünen (The Greens)—captured the winner–loser effect, while support for the FPÖ assessed populist vote choice. In Germany, vote choice was measured retrospectively based on the 2025 Bundestag election. Support for governing parties—the Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU, Christian Democratic Union), the Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern (CSU, Christian Social Union), and the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD, Social Democratic Party)—captured the winner–loser effect, while support for the AfD indicated populist vote choice. In addition, we tested an alternative operationalization of winner–loser status based on support for the single strongest party rather than for the governing coalition. Across both countries, this specification does not yield a statistically significant winner effect. We interpret this as further evidence that winner–loser dynamics in coalition systems are sensitive to how electoral alignment is operationalized. To avoid overinterpreting unstable effects, we retain the coalition-based measure in the main analysis.

Personal economic circumstances were assessed on a 5-point scale ranging from *very poor* (0) to *very good* (4). Gender (female = 1), age in years, and two education dummies (lower and medium education, with

high education as the reference category) were included as control variables. The independent variables show comparable demographic distributions between Austria and Germany (Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the independent and control variables.

	Austria				Germany			
	Min	Max	Mean	*SD*	Min	Max	Mean	*SD*
Independent variables								
(H1) Fraud risk: Polling station (0–4)	0	4	0.83	1.08	0	4	1.03	1.20
(H1) Fraud risk: Postal voting (0–4)	0	4	1.59	1.30	0	4	1.54	1.35
(H2) FPÖ (Austria) / AfD (Germany) (Ref: all others)	0	1			0	1		
Winner-Coalition (Ref: all others)	0	1			0	1		
(H3) Personal economic situation (0–4)	0	4	2.51	1.04	0	4	2.11	1.02
Control variables								
Dummy: Gender (Female = 1)	0	1			0	1		
Age (in years)	16	87	42.18	17.45	18	74	47.03	15.19
Dummy: Education low (High = 1)	0	1			0	1		
Dummy: Education medium (High = 1)	0	1			0	1		
N (listwise)	1,040				1,726			

Sources: Austria: Kittel et al. (2020), data not weighted, Germany: Marschall and Bernhard-Rump (2025), data not weighted.

4. Results

This study aimed to identify the individual-level determinants of electoral integrity beliefs in Austria and Germany—two consolidated democracies with recent procedural disruptions to their electoral processes. Drawing on a multidimensional framework of electoral integrity, we formulated three hypotheses relating to procedural risk perceptions, economic dissatisfaction, and populist orientation, controlling for the well-established winner–loser effect. Table 4 presents the regression results for Austria and Germany, distinguishing between two analytically distinct dependent variables. Model 1 captures skepticism toward the integrity of core electoral institutions, combining perceptions of vote counting accuracy, media impartiality, and the behavior of electoral authorities. Model 2 focuses on perceptions of external and informational interference, including foreign intervention and the role of social media in biasing elections.

The results provide nuanced support for the proposed hypotheses, revealing distinct mechanisms underlying citizens' perceptions of electoral integrity. Regarding H1a, perceived risks associated with voting at polling stations are positively and significantly related to negative evaluations of institutional electoral integrity in both Austria and Germany, indicating that procedural and administrative vulnerabilities strongly shape perceptions of institutional performance. In contrast, H1b—linking perceived risks in postal voting to external threats—is not supported in either country; in Austria, the relationship is even slightly negative, suggesting that concerns about postal ballots are interpreted primarily in terms of institutional procedures rather than as indicators of external interference.

Table 4. Regression results.

	Austria		Germany	
	Model 1 Institutional concerns	Model 2 External threats	Model 1 Institutional concerns	Model 2 External threats
(H1) Fraud risk: Polling station (0–4)	0.97***	0.45	0.45***	0.23**
(H1) Fraud risk: Postal voting (0–4)	−0.40***	0.03	0.49***	−0.01
(H2) FPÖ (Austria) / AfD (Germany) (Ref: all others)	−0.23***	−0.03	−0.37***	0.19***
Winner-Coalition (Ref: all others)	0.67***	0.10	1.30***	−1.63
(H3) Personal economic situation (0–4)	0.48***	0.40***	−0.28**	−0.18
Dummy: Gender (Female = 1)	−0.03	−0.23	−0.05	−0.39**
Age (in years)	0.00	0.01*	−0.01*	0.01*
Dummy: Education low (High = 1)	0.04	−0.02	−0.01	−0.40
Dummy: Education medium (High = 1)	0.00	0.20	0.13	−0.28
N	873	873	1,526	1,526
Adjusted R^2	0.41	0.07	0.46	0.07

Notes: Standardised beta values; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .005$; data not weighted. Sources: Austria: Kittel et al. (2020), Germany: Marschall and Bernhard-Rump (2025).

With respect to populist support, H2a is confirmed in Germany: Voters of the AfD report higher perceptions of external threats to electoral integrity, reflecting the party's framing of elections as vulnerable to manipulation by outside actors. In Austria, however, FPÖ support does not significantly predict external threat perceptions, likely because the party emphasizes institutional irregularities over narratives of external manipulation. Consistent with H2b, alignment with the governing coalition is associated with more positive evaluations of institutional electoral integrity in both countries, demonstrating a clear winner–loser effect: Governing party supporters perceive elections as more competent and fair, while opposition supporters report greater institutional skepticism.

Finally, regarding H3, the relationship between economic dissatisfaction and perceptions of electoral integrity appears context-dependent. In Austria, reported economic dissatisfaction is associated with greater concern about both institutional integrity and external threats, supporting the hypothesis that broader socio-economic disaffection amplifies skepticism toward electoral processes. In Germany, by contrast, economic dissatisfaction shows a weak or inconsistent relationship with these perceptions. This finding contrasts with the expectations outlined in Section 2.2.3, where prior research suggested a stronger relationship in Germany, indicating that other factors—such as partisan cues or populist messaging—may play a more prominent role in shaping citizens' evaluations of electoral integrity there.

In addition to the main explanatory variables, we included several socio-demographic controls—gender, age, and education level—to account for potential confounding factors. Gender and age exhibit occasional significant effects, while educational attainment is largely unrelated to electoral skepticism. Model fit is substantially higher for institutional integrity skepticism (Model 1) than for skepticism toward external interference (Model 2) in both countries, indicating stronger explanatory power for evaluations of domestic electoral institutions.

Overall, these findings underscore that perceptions of institutional competence and external vulnerabilities are influenced by different mechanisms. Procedural concerns and winner–loser status primarily shape assessments of institutional integrity, while partisan alignment—particularly support for populist parties—has a more pronounced effect on perceptions of external threats.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This study provides a nuanced understanding of citizens' perceptions of electoral integrity by distinguishing between institutional electoral integrity and external threats. The findings indicate that procedural risks, such as concerns about voting at polling stations, primarily shape evaluations of institutional performance, while support for populist parties is more strongly associated with perceptions of external manipulation. Alignment with the governing coalition further reinforces confidence in institutional integrity, reflecting the well-established winner–loser effect. Economic dissatisfaction amplifies these perceptions in Austria, highlighting the interplay between socio-economic disaffection and skepticism toward electoral processes. In Germany, however, economic dissatisfaction has a weaker and less consistent effect than expected based on prior research. This suggests that citizens' evaluations of electoral integrity there are shaped more strongly by partisan cues and populist narratives than by socio-economic considerations.

While this study advances the understanding of electoral integrity beliefs in consolidated democracies, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis focuses on Austria and Germany—two high-functioning democratic systems that have experienced procedural controversies but virtually no documented large-scale electoral fraud. This selective case design necessarily limits the generalizability of the findings beyond comparable Western European contexts. At the same time, existing cross-national research suggests that similar mechanisms linking procedural concerns, political alignment, and institutional trust can be observed across a broader set of European democracies, indicating that the patterns identified here are unlikely to be entirely case-specific (Birch, 2008; Daniller & Mutz, 2019; Garnett & James, 2023; Schnaudt, 2024a).

Second, the surveys were conducted at different points in time—Austria in 2020 and Germany in 2025—each following salient electoral controversies that heightened public attention to procedural issues. In Austria, the annulment of the 2016 presidential election shaped subsequent debates, while in Germany the partial rerun of the 2021 Bundestag election renewed concerns about electoral integrity. Although these temporal differences introduce potential contextual variation, the shared post-crisis nature of both cases provides a meaningful basis for comparison.

Third, the use of cross-sectional survey data and regression analysis allows for identifying systematic associations but does not permit causal inference. Reverse causality and unobserved confounding factors therefore remain possible. Prior research using longitudinal and panel designs suggests that economic evaluations and repeated electoral losses can exert lasting effects on political trust and democratic satisfaction (Daniller & Mutz, 2019; Kölln & Aarts, 2021). Future studies employing longitudinal or experimental designs would thus be well-suited to further disentangle causal pathways and to trace the evolution of electoral integrity beliefs over time.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings offer several robust insights. Perceptions of electoral integrity are shaped by distinct mechanisms across the two examined dimensions. Perceived risks associated with voting at polling stations are primarily linked to negative evaluations of institutional electoral integrity in both Austria and Germany, while concerns about postal voting do not consistently predict assessments of external threats. This pattern suggests that procedural and administrative vulnerabilities are more strongly associated with institutional evaluations than with perceptions of external interference.

In addition, support for populist parties is associated with heightened perceptions of external threats to electoral integrity, particularly in Germany where AfD voters exhibit significantly greater concern for such threats. By contrast, in Austria, support for the FPÖ does not significantly increase perceptions of external threats, possibly reflecting the party's stronger emphasis on institutional irregularities rather than external manipulation in its public messaging. Furthermore, alignment with the winning coalition parties is consistently linked to more positive evaluations of institutional electoral integrity, demonstrating a clear winner–loser effect in both countries.

Taken together, the results demonstrate the importance of analytically differentiating between institutional and external dimensions of electoral integrity beliefs in order to more accurately assess the sources and implications of negative electoral integrity evaluations in contemporary democracies.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data for Austria are available at https://doi.org/10.11587/28KQNS. The data for Germany are available subject to data protection rules at https://researchdata.hhu.de/handle/entry/208.

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Partisanship and the Gender Gap in Perceptions of Election Integrity: Gender Accentuates the Winner–Loser Gap

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Abstract

Confidence in the accuracy of elections and ballot counting is a foundation of representative government. In the US and cross-nationally, a substantial body of research demonstrates that partisanship and electoral outcomes are the strongest and most consistent predictors of trust in elections. Against this backdrop, the role of demographic factors, and gender in particular, is less well understood. Building on previous research, we expect women to have lower confidence in US elections than men. Since women tend to be stronger partisans than men, we also expect that gender accentuates the winner–loser gap. Using the 2024 Cooperative Election Study, the results show women are less likely to believe national, state, and local elections were conducted fairly. As electoral losers, women Democrats and independents have lower election confidence than men in their parties. As electoral winners, men and women Republicans have similar electoral confidence. We also analyze the 2022 and 2020 elections and find that our results are robust among the electoral losing party; women again have lower election confidence than men. This gender gap in election integrity attitudes has important implications for women's political participation and polarization in the US.

Keywords

election administration; election confidence; election integrity; partisan winners; partisanship; women in politics

1. Partisanship, Gender, and Election Integrity Beliefs

A critical foundation of representative government is that citizens have confidence in the administration and accuracy of elections. In the US and cross-nationally, a substantial body of research demonstrates that partisanship and electoral outcomes are the strongest and most consistent predictors of trust in elections

(Anderson et al., 2005). That is, public perceptions of whether elections are conducted fairly are shaped primarily by whether an individual supported the winning or losing political party, the election outcome, and citizens' direct experiences at the polls. Individuals whose preferred candidate or party wins express significantly higher confidence that ballots were counted accurately than those whose side loses, a pattern observed repeatedly across recent national elections (Sances & Stewart, 2015; see also Atkeson et al., 2025; Bowler & Donovan, 2024; Clayton et al., 2021). This winner–loser gap has become a central lens through which scholars explain variation in perceptions of electoral integrity.

Other influential factors include individual voting experiences and the administration of elections. Studies show that smooth interactions with poll workers, clear ballot design, and efficient polling place operations contribute positively to perceptions of fairness, while negative experiences depress confidence (Atkeson & Saunders, 2007; Bowler et al., 2015). People living in counties that do a better job administering elections have consistently higher perceptions of polling place quality in both the 2016 and 2020 US elections (Abus et al., 2025); this is especially true for people living in places with more local news. Voters who report having experienced problems when voting (e.g., long lines, difficulty casting ballot) and those who believe fraud has occurred report lower confidence, especially in local ballot tabulation and local election administration (Alvarez et al., 2021).

However, these effects are generally smaller than those associated with partisanship and winning. In addition, elite rhetoric and narratives of fraud can shape mass attitudes, often reinforcing partisan divisions (Clayton et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2025). Research on elite cues finds that when political leaders cast doubt on the electoral process, confidence declines among their partisan supporters, regardless of objective conditions of how well the election was conducted (i.e., election administration; Mongrain, 2023).

Against this backdrop, the role of demographic factors, and gender in particular, is less well understood. A long tradition in political behavior research highlights how men and women differ in political attitudes and participation, raising the question of whether such differences extend to trust in elections. To our knowledge, there are no previous studies exploring if there are gender differences in attitudes about election integrity. Yet studies examining perceptions of fraud and candidate gender cues suggest that men and women may sometimes respond differently to contextual factors, such as when female candidates are perceived as less corrupt (Barnes & Beaulieu, 2014).

While many cross-national studies have shown that individuals who voted for the winning party in an election tend to be more satisfied with democracy than those who did not, Williams et al. (2021) find that gender moderates the effect of winning on election satisfaction. They argue the effect should be smaller for women due to gender differences in (a) political socialization and (b) connection with candidates and parties. They find the gender gap is smaller where women are well represented. While related, this study is about election administration, while Williams et al. (2021) focus on satisfaction with democracy, and those authors do not analyze the US case. The US's single-member districts and winner-take-all rules may cause a different gender gap than proportional or mixed systems, which often increase satisfaction (Karp et al., 2003).

Taken together, the limited published literature suggests that gender is not a robust independent determinant of election confidence, but it may condition other factors such as partisan environments. By situating gender alongside well-established predictors—partisanship, winner/loser status—this study

seeks to clarify whether gender represents an overlooked source of variation in democratic attitudes. We investigate these expectations using survey questions asked for the first time on the 2024 Cooperative Election Study (CES; 50,000 respondents) immediately post the 2024 presidential election. Paralleling well-known gaps in political knowledge, the results find that women have lower confidence in the conduct of national and state/local elections. Additionally, there is a partisan dimension. Reflecting a stronger attachment to political parties (Norrander, 1999), women Democrats have lower confidence in both national and state/local elections than men of the same party if their party loses. In the same election, men and women who are Republicans have the same level of election confidence in state and local elections. There is thus an asymmetric gender gap in election confidence, depending on whether one wins or loses.

To investigate the robustness of these findings, we measure the partisan gender gaps in electoral confidence in prior elections under reverse party control of government using the 2022 Collaborative Midterm Survey. The Republican Party lost the 2020 presidency, and the expected "red wave" did not materialize in 2022. To investigate election confidence in the 2022 election, we utilize a question that asks respondents whether ballot counting in the US is trustworthy. In 2022, women still have lower confidence in election administration than men. Consistent with results from 2024, women who are electoral losers report lower confidence in ballot counting than men. An extension to the 2020 presidential election finds the same pattern using the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAE), with women Republicans having the lowest election confidence after their party's candidate lost the presidency compared to men.

This gender gap in election integrity attitudes has important implications for the representation of women, the gender gap in voting behavior, and the gendered nature of political polarization in the US. Lower electoral trust matters and has been linked to more non-voting political participation (Fitz & Saunders, 2024).

2. Gender and Confidence in US Elections

While trust in the national government has been low for more than half a century, confidence in US elections was fairly high until the last decade. "Voter confidence" is a distinct construct from broader measures of trust in government or political efficacy (Atkeson et al., 2015). Today, some people lack confidence in the process of democratic elections. Nearly one-third of Americans believed that fraud occurred in the 2022 US midterm elections (Holliday et al., 2025), a percentage comparable to that in 2020. But confidence in elections rebounded in 2024 under Trump's second-term presidential victory.

Information environments and cues—elite rhetoric, news, and misinformation—are powerful forces in shaping public opinion and confidence, more so than technical security measures, such as election audits (Clayton et al., 2021). The 2020 presidential election produced stark partisan divides and widespread doubts among Republicans that the election was fair, particularly regarding the counting of mail-in ballots that soared during the Covid-19 pandemic (McDonald, 2022). President Trump repeatedly claimed the 2020 election was stolen (over 800 times according to the Washington Post database between Nov 4, 2020, and the end of his presidency; Kessler, 2021). President Trump's 2024 election win offers an opportunity to reevaluate the factors that shape public trust in US elections.

While belief in election-related conspiracy theories partially arises from information environments and elite cues, other factors also play a role. One such factor is that individuals who feel they are powerless tend

to believe election conspiracy theories (Prooijen & Willem, 2018). Research on racial backlash and election conspiracies finds that white Americans who believe that they are losing their rights and power in government are far more likely to believe that the election was stolen than those who do not share this "white grievance" (Filindra et al., 2024). Put together, these findings suggest that individuals who feel like they do not have influence in government should be more likely to be skeptical of election administration.

How does gender influence confidence in elections? Women have historically been excluded from holding public office and have lower self-reported political knowledge (Dolan, 2011), interest, and efficacy than men (Hinojosa & Kittilson, 2020; Verba et al., 1997), although women's representation improves their engagement in politics (Wolak, 2024). Women may be more skeptical of how the government is run and how elections are administered.

In addition to these broad expectations, we suspect that the effect of losing an election on trust in elections is stronger for women than men. Women tend to be stronger partisans (Norrander, 1999) and have a large social group component to their party identification (Greene & Elder, 2001). In contrast, men are more likely to be political independents and thus have weaker social-group attachment to their partisanship (Norrander, 1999). For women, this combination creates a stronger social attachment to their partisan group and should exacerbate the effect of a partisan electoral loss, while the effect should be smaller for men. In the context of the 2024 election, when Republicans won control of the presidency and Congress, we expect women Democrats will be less likely to agree that elections at the state/local and national levels are fair in the US relative to men who are Democrats.

Beyond a stronger attachment to the parties for women than men, political socialization can also play a role, as women can feel excluded from the political process (Bos et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2021). As children grow, they learn more about the political world; namely that politics is associated with conflict and competition, and of the contributions of men to American politics (Bos et al., 2022; Cassese & Holman, 2018; Lay et al., 2023). Additionally, media coverage of political campaigns and elected officials shows that, while there are women in office, most elected positions in the American government are held by men; women are significantly underrepresented in local, state, and national government (Center for American Women in Politics, 2024). This process can lead to fewer women being involved and interested in government and expressing lower self-reported political knowledge, while men are, on average, more engaged and have higher levels of self-reported political knowledge.

We believe a gender gap in election confidence may parallel existing gender gaps in knowledge, as confidence in election administration and ballot counting may be a form of political knowledge. Using 2024 CES data, we find that the correlation between the belief that US elections are fair and political knowledge is 0.22 ($p < 0.05$), and the correlation between the belief that state/local governments conduct fair elections and political knowledge is 0.26 ($p < 0.05$). Existing research on political knowledge found that women, on average, know less about politics than men (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). They explain this from a socialization perspective, arguing that women have less time to focus on politics because they do a larger share of the child-rearing and household work relative to men. More recent research attributes the gap in political knowledge to women answering knowledge questions with "don't know" more often than men (Mondak & Anderson, 2004) and women knowing different types of political information than men (Barabas et al., 2014; Dolan, 2011; Kraft, 2024; Kraft & Dolan, 2023). In fact, the gap between women and men

closes when asking about state and local politics, and it reverses when individuals are asked about women's issues, with women knowing more. Both men and women perceive women to be less knowledgeable about politics (Morehouse Mendez & Osborn, 2010).

Given the gender gap in political knowledge, and that election confidence may require some knowledge of election administration more generally, we hypothesize that women are less trusting of how elections are administered at both the state/local and national level than men, all else equal (H1).

3. Winner–Loser Gap in Election Integrity: Gender as a Moderator

In addition to the above factors that influence trust in election administration, partisanship has become a major factor in election confidence in the US. Research finds that objective, empirical measures of the quality of election administration in a respondent's state have a positive effect on attitudes that US elections are "fair," all else equal (Bowler et al., 2015; see also Abus et al., 2025). But in 2020, powerful partisan cues about a flawed election process drowned out other positive cues; one study found little relationship between "election performance" (as measured by the Election Performance Index [EPI]) and perceptions that vote counts are accurate, and instead, partisanship and the winner–loser gap dominated (Bowler & Donovan, 2024).

The published research finds that partisanship and the winner–loser gap dominate perceptions of election integrity, with confidence tracking whether "your side" won (Sances & Stewart, 2015). Republican trust remained persistently low compared to Democrats after the controversial 2020 election because of elite cues about the election being stolen (Clayton et al., 2021). Analyzing post-2020 opinion, Bowler and Donovan (2024) find that partisanship is the most important factor in believing that the election was stolen and is the strongest predictor of low election confidence and beliefs that officials manipulate results—patterns not present in the 2016 election. The authors argue this may reflect a structural shift in Republican mass attitudes rather than routine winner–loser cycling. This is one reason why studying the 2024 election, under a Republican presidency victory, as is done here, is important.

Despite this general shift, it is important to note that there is a significant difference in the extent to which partisans trust elections when they win compared to when they lose. Bowler and Donovan (2024) find that in 2016, Democrats are, on average, less confident in the results of the national election than they are in 2020. This provides evidence that, while Democrats continue to have a net higher average confidence in elections, people in both parties react to losing the election through lowered trust in election administration.

Importantly, these effects are exacerbated for those who are stronger partisans relative to those who are weaker partisans. When individuals have strong social group attachments, and attachment to a political party, they engage in behaviors and believe narratives that are consistent with improving their self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, it logically follows that those who have strong attachments to political parties will be more likely to believe that their party loses elections because the elections were administered unfairly rather than due to flaws with how the political party campaigned in the election. In this study, we seek to separate the effects of strong partisans from those of any partisan, with separate covariates for party strength vs. party identification (Weisberg, 1980).

Notable for this study is the consistent finding that women are stronger partisans than men are (Norrander, 1999; Ondercin & Lizotte, 2021). This gender gap in partisan strength stems from two gender differences in partisanship. First, men are more likely than women to not identify with a political party (Norrander, 1997). This indicates that men, in general, are less likely to identify as part of a partisan group. Second, even among partisans, women are more likely to identify as strong partisans than men are. This second element likely stems from women having a stronger social identity component of partisanship than men do (Greene & Elder, 2001). This means that women relate to their party more as a social group than men do.

From their stronger partisanship and greater social identity component of their partisanship, we argue that the winner–loser effect will be exacerbated among women. Specifically, in the context of the 2024 election, we expect that democratic women will be less trusting of how elections were administered at both the state/local and national level than democratic men are (H2).

In sum, we expect there will be gender gaps in confidence in US elections. We model political knowledge alongside election confidence to provide context to the size of these gaps. Election confidence is also colored by the winner–loser gap, with women being less likely to believe the ballot counting was trustworthy when their political party loses, under both Democratic and Republican presidencies. We seek to extend the gender gap literature to perceptions of election confidence and evaluate party winner–loser status, with asymmetries based on gender.

4. Data and Methods: 2024

To test our expectations, we rely on large sample survey data from the 2024 CES of 50,000 respondents, conducted immediately after the 2024 presidential elections (Schaffner et al., 2025). The CES is a panel survey and includes questions before and after the election. The CES is a random national survey of American adults first conducted in 2006 by a consortium of 39 colleges and universities to study public opinion and political behavior. When using weights, these data are representative at the national, state, and congressional district levels (Schaffner et al., 2025).

In 2024, for the first time, the CES asked respondents two new questions on this topic. Respondents were asked if they agree with the statements "Elections in the U.S. are fair" and "Your state and local government conducted a fair and accurate election in 2024." These questions were asked immediately following the 2024 election, from November 6 to December 10, 2024. These data represent current metrics of confidence in US elections based on the 2024 election results. The Likert scale was collapsed with *strongly agree* and *agree* coded 1 and *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, and *neutral* coded 0. Since most individuals think of national elections when asked about elections in general, we will refer to the question asked about elections generally as a question about national elections. Overall, 64% of Americans agree that national elections are fair, while 75% agree that their state and local government conducted fair and accurate elections in 2024. Consistent with prior research on political trust, Americans have higher trust in their state and local governments to conduct elections fairly than national elections.

Our primary predictor variables are gender and party identification. For gender, we use a binary indicator, where women are assigned a value of 1 and men are assigned a value of 0. We opted for an indicator because only 321 observations in our sample were not missing on our dependent variables and identified in

some way other than man or woman (see Bittner & Goodyear-Grant, 2017, for a discussion of ways to measure gender other than binary indicators). We use two measures of partisanship: One is an indicator for being a self-reported Republican (winner at the national level), with Democrats and independents set to zero; the other is a standard three-point party identification measure. As mentioned above, a separate variable measures the strength of partisanship (the variable is a four-point scale; *pure independents* are coded to 1, *leaners* are coded to 2, *regular partisans* are coded to 3, and *strong partisans* are coded to 4). We use these two variables (i.e., partisanship and party strength) instead of the seven-point scale because we are interested in isolating the effects of party identification and winner/loser status on election confidence, after controlling for party strength.

Table 1 shows descriptive data for a gender gap in confidence in elections across partisan groups (i.e., crosstabs). Overall, 69% of men but only 59% of women agree that "elections in the U.S. are fair," a 10-percentage point gap. Seventy-nine percent of men believe their state and local governments conducted fair and accurate elections, compared to 72% of women, a 7-percentage point difference. Overall, by party, Democrats have the highest levels of agreement: 72% agree that elections are fair, and 82% agree that their state and local governments conduct fair elections. Independents have the lowest levels of trust: 56% and 67% agreement, respectively, for national vs state. Republicans fall in the middle: 64% of Republicans agree that elections are fair, while 77% of Republicans agree that their state and local governments conduct elections fairly. Notably, men's perception of election fairness changes from a low of 62% among independents to 67% among Republicans (electoral winners) to 81% among Democrats (electoral losers); male Democrats have the highest confidence in the 2024 election being fair, even though their party lost.

Table 1. Crosstabs of agreement elections are fair (2024) by gender and party.

Statement	Republicans			Independents			Democrats		
	Men	Women	Diff.	Men	Women	Diff.	Men	Women	Diff.
Elections in the U.S. are fair	67%	61%	6% pts	62%	49%	13% pts	81%	65%	16% pts
Your state and local government conducted a fair and accurate election in 2024	79%	76%	3% pts	73%	61%	12% pts	88%	73%	15% pts

Note: Survey weights used; for each partisanship subgroup, election confidence and gender are statistically correlated; for national election fairness, Republicans have a Chi^2 statistic of 49.3, Democrats have a Chi^2 of 518.4, and for independents it is 344.6 ($p < 0.001$); on the state and local variables, Republicans, Democrats, and independents have Chi^2 statistics of 19.7, 423.0, and 351.6, respectively ($p < 0.001$).

More importantly, Table 1 also explores these relationships by examining gender–partisan combinations across subgroups of the American population based on party ID. Notably, the largest gender gaps exist among Democrats; there is a 16-percentage point difference between men and women in agreement about U.S election fairness among Democrats, and a 15-point gap in agreement for state and local governments. Men are much more likely to believe the election was fair, especially among the losing partisan groups. Regardless of party identification, a greater proportion of men believe that elections in the US are fair relative to women. This provides preliminary evidence for H1, that men are more likely than women to believe elections are fair.

To control for overlapping factors that may predict confidence in elections at the individual level, we control for race (binary indicator variables for racial group, with white non-Hispanic as the reference category), age (measured in years), education level (1 = *No HS*, 5 = *post-grad*), political interest (1 = *hardly interested*, 4 = *very interested*), political ideology (5-point ordinal scale, higher more conservative), marital status, and family income (1 = *less than $10,000 per year*, 16 = *$500,000 or more*, missing values were imputed based on race, education, gender, employment status, region, and marital status). Research also finds that exposure to observable facts about election administration can shape election trust. People living in counties that do a better job administering elections have consistently higher perceptions of polling place quality in both the 2016 and 2020 US elections (Abus et al., 2025).

To control for the state electoral environment of the respondent, we include the EPI from the MIT Election Lab, which measures election administration quality in a state on a 19-component metric capturing convenience, integrity, and accuracy, developed with expert input, scoring from 0 to 1, where higher scores mean better administration. Mississippi has the lowest and New Mexico the highest score. We also include a covariate for the Cost of Voting Index (COVI; Schraufnagel et al., 2020). The COVI combines over 30 electoral reforms across seven major electoral reform issue areas to form a single index where higher scores indicate more restrictions on voter registration and voting (Pomante, 2025; Pomante et al., 2023). Research has found that individuals living in states with more restrictive registration and voting laws are less likely to vote (Coll & Juelich, 2022; Ritter et al., 2024). Higher values mean more voting restrictions. The index ranges from Washington state lowest to Mississippi highest. EPI and COVI are weakly correlated, with a coefficient of 0.053 ($p < .0001$; Ritter et al., 2024).

To contextualize our findings on election integrity, we compare these results to the well-documented gender gap in political knowledge. To measure political knowledge, we measured the proportion of 15 non-gender-relevant (see Dolan, 2011) knowledge questions a respondent answered correctly. On average, respondents answered 67% of questions correctly. The text of the questions and the percentage of respondents who answered each question correctly are listed in Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File. On average, women answered 62% of questions correctly while men answered about 74% of questions correctly, a 12-percentage point gender gap in political knowledge. The overall gap in election confidence in 2024 is 10-percentage points, a comparable size to the knowledge gap.

To test our hypotheses, we use OLS for our continuous dependent variable, measuring political knowledge, and logistic regression for our binary election integrity outcome variables. The models are estimated using survey weights, robust standard errors, and fixed effects for the respondent's state to capture any unmeasured state-level factors that could affect trust in elections.

5. Results: 2024

After controlling for both demographic, partisan, and contextual factors that may shape confidence in elections, the multivariate results presented in Table 2 show a significant and persistent gender gap, with women having lower confidence in the conduct of US elections. As a baseline comparison, the coefficient for women (compared to men) is statistically significant and negative in model 1. This indicates that, on average, women answer 7% fewer political knowledge questions correctly than men do. This is consistent with previous findings on political knowledge (Barabas et al., 2014; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). In models 2

and 3, the coefficients are again statistically significant and negative. This indicates that women are less likely to agree that the US elections are fair and less likely to agree that their state and local governments conduct fair and accurate elections.

Table 2. Gender gaps in 2024 election confidence.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Political Knowledge (OLS)	Trust in National Elections (Logit)	Trust in State/Local Elections (Logit)
Woman	−.07***	−.44***	−.39***
	(.003)	(.034)	(.040)
Black	−.09***	−.38***	−.65***
	(.006)	(.060)	(.068)
Asian	−.03***	.20**	.19*
	(.009)	(.100)	(.116)
Latino	−.04***	−.19***	−.10
	(.007)	(.071)	(.079)
Other Race	−.02**	−.43***	−.40***
	(.008)	(.073)	(.083)
Age	.003***	.01***	.01***
	(.000)	(.001)	(.001)
Education	.04***	.13***	.17***
	(.002)	(.018)	(.020)
Political Interest	.11***	.21***	.33***
	(.002)	(.020)	(.022)
Democrat	−.12***	.30***	.21**
	(.010)	(.088)	(.101)
Independent	*Reference Category*		
Republican	−.10***	.09	.04
	(.009)	(.087)	(.099)
Party Strength	.08***	.14***	.23***
	(.004)	(.037)	(.041)
Conservative Ideology	.005**	−.14***	−.17***
	(.002)	(.019)	(.024)
Married or Civil Partnership	.003	−.04	−.03
	(.004)	(.038)	(.044)
Family Income	.01***	.03***	.04***
	(.001)	(.006)	(.007)
COVI		.02	.16
		(.012)	(2.482)
EPI 2022		.59*	1.31
		(.322)	(21.335)
Constant	−.17***	−1.34***	−1.59
	(.026)	(.285)	(23.527)
State Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Observations	58,895	48,964	48,965
Log Likelihood	6,647.65	−31,701.57	−25,852.00
R-squared/Pseudo *R*-Squared	.50	.06	.10
BIC	−12,592.36	63,586.73	52,395.13

Notes: Models 2 and 3 are unstandardized logistic regression coefficients; robust standard errors in parentheses; * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

Since the coefficients in columns 2 and 3 are not directly interpretable, we calculate predicted probabilities for men and women for these models, holding all other covariates at their mean values. These predicted probabilities and predicted values for men and women are reported in Table 3. Women do 7-percentage points worse on political knowledge questions than men, and they are 7-percentage points less likely to believe their state/local government conducted a fair election in 2024, all else equal. They are 10-percentage points less likely to believe national elections are fair. These differences provide support for our first research hypothesis, that women, on average, have lower confidence in elections than men. The gaps in confidence in elections align with well-known knowledge gaps in politics.

Although the 2024 election outcome returned a Republican president to the White House and Republican Party control of both houses of Congress, Table 3 results indicate that Democratic partisans still had higher confidence in the conduct of elections both nationally and at the state/local level, compared to independents (reference category), while Republicans were not statistically different than independents. These patterns show the lasting effects of election-related conspiracy theories in 2020 (Bowler & Donovan, 2024; Clayton et al., 2021). People who are stronger partisans, regardless of whether they are Democrats or Republicans, have higher political knowledge and are more likely to believe the election was fair. The negative sign for Democratic and Republican partisans in predicting political knowledge is a function of the modeling and the inclusion of the party strength variable. True independents do report lower levels of political knowledge than Democrats and Republicans, while leaners report similar levels of political knowledge to partisans and strong partisans of both parties when using the seven-point scale for partisanship and omitting the use of the two covariates.

Table 3. Predicted gender gaps in 2024 election confidence.

	Knowledge (Percent Correct)	National Elections (Probability of Agreement)	State/Local Elections (Probability of Agreement)
Men	67%	69%	79%
Women	60%	59%	72%
Difference	7% pts	10% pts	7% pts

Notes: Values are predictive margins from Table 2; differences are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Appendix 2 in the Supplementary File replicates the two election confidence models (2 and 3) but includes political knowledge as a predictor. The findings align with our theory that there is a parallel between political knowledge gender gaps and election confidence gaps, but election confidence gaps also include a sore-loser component. Higher political knowledge is a statistically significant predictor of more election confidence. When political knowledge is excluded, men have a 69% probability of election confidence and women a 59% probability, resulting in a 10-point gender gap. When political knowledge is included as a predictor, the gap reduces by 2 points to an 8-point gender gap. The gender gap in confidence in state elections drops from a 7-point gap without political knowledge to a 5-point gap with political knowledge. Thus, accounting for knowledge helps close the gap, but the gender gap by political party remains strong and significant.

Do these patterns change for people in states that make it easier or harder to vote, given research findings that voter access laws are important for confidence in elections (Atkeson et al., 2025), or in states that do a better job administering elections? In terms of state context, only the EPI is positively related to more confidence in elections (column 2 of Table 2) with a 90% confidence interval, consistent with prior research (Abus et al., 2025; Bowler et al., 2015) that quality election administration can lead to greater public confidence. Also, as

the cost of voting increases, people know less about politics overall, which makes sense. But people living in states with higher or lower voter access are not more or less likely to believe the 2024 election was fair.

We find gender gaps in election confidence are relatively consistent regardless of whether the state makes it easier or harder to cast a ballot (see Table 4). The gender gap varies by only 1 or 2 percentage points across state election contexts. This indicates that the gender gap in election confidence is robust to the restrictiveness of voting laws in a state (see Appendix 3 in the Supplementary File). We find a similar-sized gender gap in election confidence when we subsample by people living in states with high and low election performance quality, as measured by above and below the mean on the EPI (see Appendix 4 in the Supplementary File).

Table 4. Predicted 2024 gender gaps in election confidence subsampled by state COVI.

	Knowledge (Percent Correct)		National Elections (Probability of Agreement)		State/Local Elections (Probability of Agreement)	
	Low COVI	High COVI	Low COVI	High COVI	Low COVI	High COVI
Men	66%	68%	70%	68%	77%	80%
Women	60%	60%	60%	59%	72%	73%
Difference	6% pts	8% pts	10% pts	9% pts	5% pts	7% pts

Notes: Values are predictive margins from Table 1 in Appendix 3 of the Supplementary File; gender differences are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.

6. Interacting Gender and Partisanship

Most importantly, does gender condition the effects of partisanship on perceptions of election integrity? Models 1–4 in Appendix 5 of the Supplementary File test our second research hypothesis, which posits that the impact of being a partisan whose party lost the last election (i.e., partisan loser), is more substantial for women than for men. Models 1 (national) and 2 (state) investigate this relationship using a binary Republican variable, who in the wake of the 2024 election were political winners compared to all other respondents. Models 3 (national) and 4 (state) show the results interacting gender and three-point party identification. Both strategies are useful because models 1 and 2 allow us to investigate the differences between political winners and political losers, while models 3 and 4 allow further granularity to compare Republicans (political winners) to Democrats (political losers) and independents who may feel like either winners or losers, or neither, based on the election outcome. Results are in Table 5.

Figure 1 shows the results of the interaction between gender and indicator variable Republican partisans, holding constant party strength (columns 1 and 2 of Appendix 5 in the Supplementary File). In the left there is a statistically significant gender gap in overall election confidence, regardless of political party. However, as shown in Table 5, this gender gap is over twice as large for Democrats (electoral losers in 2024) and independents as it is for Republicans, 12-percentage point compared to a 5-percentage point gap. Similarly, on the right side of Figure 1, there is a large gender gap for Democrats and independents in believing state/local elections were conducted fairly, but the difference between men and women Republicans is not significant (i.e., no gap). These data suggest that women Democrats and independents lost more confidence in the fairness of elections than their male counterparts, consistent with our expectations.

Table 5. Predicted 2024 gender gaps in election confidence by Republican ID.

	National Elections (Probability of Agreement)		State/Local Elections (Probability of Agreement)	
	Non-Republicans	Republicans	Non-Republicans	Republicans
Men	72%	65%	83%	77%
Women	60%	60%	74%	76%
Difference	12% pts	5% pts	9% pts	1% pts

Notes: Values are predictive margins; gender differences are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level except for among Republicans on state/local elections.

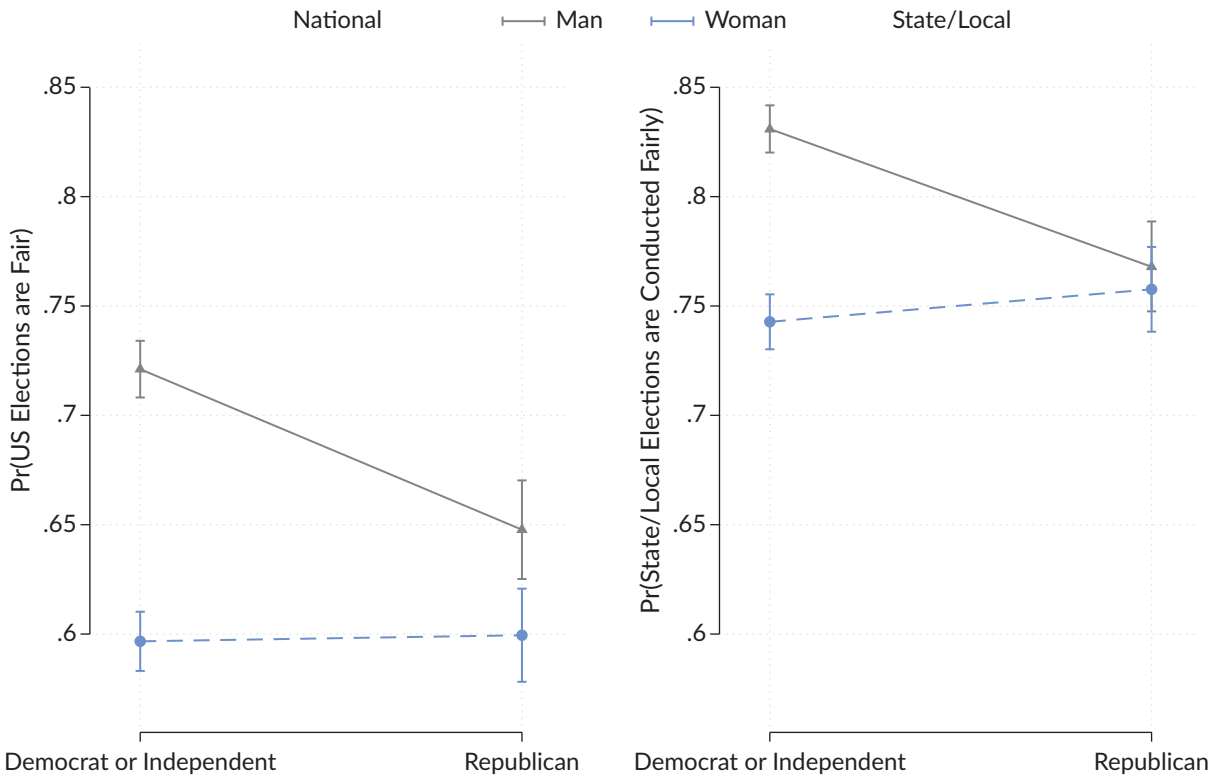

Figure 1. Predicted 2024 election confidence by gender and party.

Figure 2 and Table 6 present similar results for the interaction between gender and three-point party identification (columns 3 and 4 of Appendix 5 in the Supplementary File). In the left pane of Figure 2, there is a large gender gap of 16 percentage points in the probability of agreement among Democrats. This gap is slightly smaller, 10-percentage points, for independents, and disappears to no longer be statistically significant among Republicans, electoral winners. This trend is echoed in the three-point party identification interaction results for state and local election confidence, shown in the right pane of Figure 2. Again, there is a large gender gap, 11-percentage points, between Democratic men and women, a smaller gap, 7-percentage points, for independent men and women, and no statistically significant gender gap between Republican men and women. Put together, the results of the gender and party identification interaction models provide support for our third research hypothesis: that women who are electoral losers have lower confidence in elections than men who are electoral losers.

Table 6. Predicted 2024 gender gaps in election confidence subsampled by three-point party ID.

	National Elections (Probability of Agreement)			State/Local Elections (Probability of Agreement)		
	Democrats	Independents	Republicans	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Men	77%	67%	66%	86%	80%	78%
Women	61%	57%	61%	75%	73%	77%
Difference	16% pts	10% pts	5% pts	11% pts	7% pts	1% pts

Notes: Values are predictive margins; gender differences are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level except for among Republicans on state/local elections.

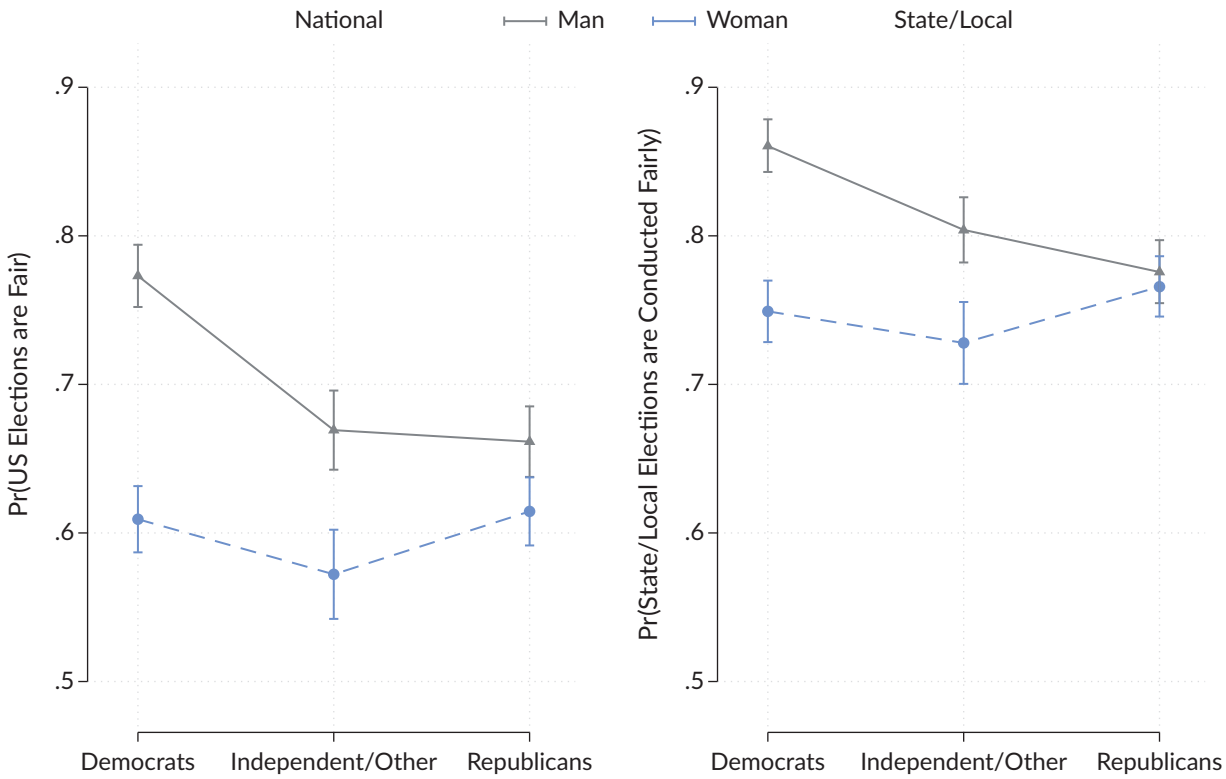

Figure 2. Predicted confidence in elections in 2024 by gender and party identification (3-part).

7. Robustness Tests: Democratic Winners and Republican Losers

In 2022 Democrats retained control of the Senate with Democratic President Biden in the White House. To investigate the robustness of our results, we investigate these relationships further using the National Science Foundation-funded 2022 Collaborative Midterm Survey from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University (Barry et al., 2023). Three teams of scientists collected the nationally representative data of 6,400 respondents each, with a combined total of over 19,000 respondents. We rely on a post-election question asked by the Gradient Metrics team that asks the extent to which the respondents agree with the statement "The process of counting ballots for American elections is trustworthy." While the magnitude of estimates using this variable is not directly comparable to those in our 2024 analysis, given changes to question wording, we expect related trends between 2022 and 2024, but different electoral winners and losers.

Appendix 6 in the Supplementary File shows logistic regression models and use the same set of controls coded identically as for the 2024 analysis to optimize the comparability of our results. For reference, these controls include race, education, political interest, party strength, ideology, marital status, and family income. We continue to control for the COVI and the EPI and estimate the models with state-level fixed effects, survey weights, and robust standard errors.

Consistent with the results from 2024, the models in Appendix 6 of the Supplementary File include an interaction between gender and partisanship shows a negative and statistically significant effect of being a woman on the likelihood of agreeing that the process for counting ballots in the US is fair. Men have a 59.4% chance of agreeing with this statement while women have a 55.7%, a statistically significant difference of 3.7 percentage points ($p < 0.07$). This provides evidence that our support for H1 is consistent across the 2022 and 2024 elections; overall, women have lower confidence in elections.

Model 2 in Appendix 6 of the Supplementary File shows the results of the interaction between gender and party ID. The interaction of women and Democratic partisanship and women and Republican partisanship is statistically significant. Table 7 shows the predicted probability values for men and women in each party, all else equal. As expected, there is a statistically significant gap in election integrity beliefs between men and women who are electoral losers, which in this context are Republicans, with women having less confidence in the election. Notably, there is no gender gap in election confidence among Democrats and independents. This provides further evidence to the robustness of our finding that gender exacerbates the winner/loser gap, in support of H2.

Table 7. Predicted gender gaps subsampled by three-point party ID.

	Process of Counting Ballots is Trustworthy (Probability of Agreement)		
	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Men	87%	46%	48%
Women	82%	48%	37%
Difference	5% pts	−2% pts	11% pts

Notes: Values are predictive margins; only the gender difference among Republicans is significant ($p < .06$).

8. 2020 Replication

The 2020 US presidential election was held during the height of the Covid pandemic, and Democratic President Joe Biden won by a slim margin. We used similar coding as described above to analyze the 2020 SPAE from the MIT Election Lab (Stewart, 2021). The 2020 SPAE reports 58% were confident that "your vote in the General Election was counted as you intended?" Similar response options were used for confidence in state elections: "Now, think about vote counting throughout [respondent's state]. How confident are you that votes in [respondent's state] were counted as voters intended?" We use simple crosstabs of these two variables by gender and subsampled for the respondents' party using the three-category party ID variable (survey weights were used). These crosstabs are shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Crosstabs of election confidence from the 2020 SPAE.

	National		State	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republican
Men	91%	21%	93%	62%
Women	91%	25%	93%	58%
Difference	0% pts	4% pts	0% pts	4% pts

Notes: Values are predictive margins; only the gender differences among Republicans are significant ($p < .05$).

Results find the gender gap in confidence in national elections, broken down by party, was insignificant among Democrats, the winning party; 91% men and women were confident in how their vote was counted generally, and 93% thought their state counted their vote properly. But among Republicans, the losing party, the gender gap was much larger. Women were 4-percentage points less likely to believe their ballot was counted accurately in the general election and 4 points less likely to believe their state and local election ballot was counted accurately, statistically significant differences. This is evidence that Republican women, the electoral losers, were less likely to have confidence in ballot counting, but among women Democrats (the winners), there was almost no gap. This pattern follows the 2022 and 2024 data, even though the party controlling the government changed. The consistent pattern over three elections, varying party control of government, survey sample, and question wording, provides confidence in the results.

9. Conclusion

The analyses presented here provide clear evidence that gender accentuates the partisan winner–loser gap in perceptions of electoral integrity in the US, a finding that most scholars and policymakers have not discussed. Across three recent US elections and multiple specifications, women report significantly lower confidence in national, state, and local elections than men, and the effect is robust to controls for demographic covariates and state-level electoral environments.

The results further demonstrate that gender interacts with partisanship in systematic ways: Democratic women exhibit the sharpest declines in confidence when their party loses, while gender gaps largely disappear among Republican respondents following their party's 2024 electoral victory. When Republicans are the electoral losers, Republican women report less trust in the process by which ballots are counted than Republican men, and there is no gender difference among Democrats. Findings from 2020 and 2022 are consistent with those from the 2024 election, providing further evidence for the moderating effects of gender in the partisan winner–loser gap.

Differences in political socialization and women's greater partisan attachment shape evaluations of democratic processes in ways that extend beyond traditional accounts centered on partisanship and elite cues alone. By identifying a durable and substantively meaningful gender gap in election confidence, this study contributes to both the literature on electoral trust and gendered political behavior. The evidence suggests that gender is not simply an ancillary demographic variable but an important moderator of the winner–loser dynamic.

These findings also speak to the broad implications of women being stronger partisans than men. Previous work on this topic finds that women are more affectively polarized than men (Ondercin & Lizotte, 2021).

Future work should continue to investigate the consequences of this difference in partisan strength, including gender differences in how individuals form social group attachments.

A systematic difference between men and women in the extent to which they trust elections to be fair is problematic, since it can be linked to lower political participation (Fitz & Saunders, 2024). When individuals do not trust the electoral process, they are less willing to accept the results of elections and less willing to participate in future elections. These consequences have important implications for the descriptive and substantive representation of women. Further, these results underscore the importance of studying the intersection of gender and partisanship to truly understand how these identities interact and shape our political system.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

All data used in this article are publicly available. Visit the CES (https://tischcollege.tufts.edu/research-faculty/research-centers/cooperative-election-study), 2022 Collaborative Midterm Survey (https://socialsciences.cornell.edu/funding-programs/2022-collaborative-midterm-survey?tabSettingAtom=%7B%22tabIndex%22%3A1%7D&question=%5B%22Q15%22%2C%22Q15B%22%2C%22Q15C%22%2C%22Q16%22%2C%22Q17%22%2C%22Q18%22%2C%22Q19%22%2C%22Q19A%22%2C%22Q20%22%2C%22Q20A%22%2C%22Q22%22%5D), and SPAE website (https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/FSGX7Z) for access.

Supplementary Material

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

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When Populists Win but Are Excluded From Power: Explaining Post-Electoral Dynamics of Democratic Satisfaction

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Abstract

This article investigates the dynamics of satisfaction with democracy when a populist party wins an election but is subsequently excluded from governing. While classic research highlights winner–loser gaps as a key determinant of democratic satisfaction, we argue that under proportional representation, especially in times of rising populism, post-electoral dynamics unfold in two distinct stages shaped not only by *electoral results* but also by *coalition bargaining*. We examine this argument with a case study of the 2024 Austrian parliamentary election, in which the populist radical right Freedom Party (FPÖ) won a plurality of votes, yet was excluded from government following the longest coalition negotiations in Austrian history. Using data from the AUTNES Online Panel Study, which features two post-electoral panel waves, we disentangle the effects of winner–loser perceptions, populist attitudes, democratic norms, and evaluations of procedural fairness. Our findings show that electoral victory did not increase satisfaction with democracy among FPÖ voters, largely due to their low confidence in electoral integrity and strong populist attitudes, which reinforced dissatisfaction. After coalition formation, weak democratic norms regarding the acceptance of unfavorable democratic decisions, together with the perception that excluding the plurality winner was procedurally unfair, contributed to a further decline, reaching a new low point. By demonstrating how orientations towards electoral and post-electoral outcomes and processes shape democratic attitudes, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of satisfaction with democracy in proportional systems amid rising challenges to democratic legitimacy.

Keywords

coalition bargaining; democratic norms; electoral integrity; panel data; procedural fairness; satisfaction with democracy; winner–loser perceptions

1. Introduction

What happens to voters' satisfaction with democracy when a populist party wins an election but is subsequently excluded from governing? Classic research on winner–loser gaps has consistently shown that electoral winners tend to express higher democratic satisfaction than losers, making election outcomes a central determinant of system support (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Anderson et al., 2005). Yet two developments complicate this relationship. First, the rise of populism has introduced a group of voters whose political psychology and democratic orientations diverge from those of mainstream electorates. Second, in proportional representation systems, post-electoral outcomes unfold in two distinct stages—the election and the coalition formation process—each with the potential to generate its own winner–loser dynamics.

Some earlier research has portrayed populist parties as essentially normal competitors that could even act as a democratic corrective by representing an otherwise fairly distrustful group of voters. Their electoral or governmental success was found to increase satisfaction among disaffected citizens and narrow the gap in satisfaction with democracy (Harteveld et al., 2021; Haugsgjerd, 2019; Mauk, 2020; Quaranta & Martini, 2025). However, subsequent work suggests that such effects are often short-lived (Rooduijn & van Slageren, 2022) and that populist voters tend to be more sensitive to unfavorable political outcomes (Schäfer & Wenker, 2025). Voters of populist parties appear to hold a more instrumental view of elections as a means to secure power rather than as a procedural mechanism whose outcomes must be accepted, reflecting a weaker commitment to the democratic norm of accepting unfavorable decisions. In addition, their Manichean worldview, anti-elite predispositions, and disproportionately low confidence in elections (Partheymüller et al., 2022) make them prone to interpreting losses as illegitimate, potentially triggering a spiral of distrust (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018). Thus, while populist voters may react positively to victories, defeats may provoke particularly sharp declines in satisfaction with democracy.

In proportional systems, these dynamics become even more complex, as coalition bargaining introduces a second stage in which electoral winners may become governmental losers (Otjes & Willumsen, 2023). Winning and losing are often more ambiguous and open to interpretations in these systems (Plescia, 2019), with the media often framing the plurality winner as "the winner" of the election (Gattermann et al., 2022), raising potentially false expectations among voters about who has a mandate to govern. When a populist party then wins the largest number of votes but is excluded from government thereafter, supporters may perceive this as unfair, with the coalition formation process potentially contributing independently to growing dissatisfaction. Such situations raise new theoretical questions about how voters respond to each of the two stages, which may be incongruent, featuring electoral success at first but subsequent governmental exclusion, and thus loss.

Against this background, we propose a framework that expands the classic winner–loser model by incorporating three additional factors that are particularly relevant in times of populism: (a) populist attitudes as a negative filter that reinforces distrust; (b) the democratic norm of losers' consent, which can no longer be assumed to be consensual in all segments of the electorate; and (c) perceptions of procedural fairness related to both electoral integrity and the coalition formation process. This two-stage perspective allows us to capture the distinct pathways through which electoral and post-electoral processes shape satisfaction with democracy among voters for populist parties. We evaluate this framework and aim to disentangle those various factors through a case study of the 2024 Austrian parliamentary election, in which the populist radical right Freedom Party (FPÖ) won a plurality, yet was excluded from government following the longest

coalition negotiations in Austrian history. Using panel data from the AUTNES Online Panel Study (Partheymüller et al., 2024), featuring two post-electoral survey waves, we analyze how FPÖ voters updated their satisfaction with democracy (a) following the election and (b) after the coalition negotiations were completed. Although this study focuses on a single case, we believe it has relevance beyond Austria. As populist parties continue to make electoral gains across Europe and beyond, mainstream parties increasingly face a difficult strategic dilemma: include populists and risk democratic backsliding or exclude them and risk deepening dissatisfaction among their already distrustful supporters. Understanding how voters interpret both electoral and post-electoral outcomes is therefore essential for assessing the contemporary challenges to democratic legitimacy.

2. Previous Research and Hypotheses

2.1. Literature Review

The foundational research on winner–loser gaps has established the winner–loser dynamic as a key determinant of system support, demonstrating that electoral losers generally tend to express lower levels of satisfaction with democracy than electoral winners (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Anderson et al., 2005). The cognitive mechanism underlying this often-found pattern can be illustrated as follows: While supporters of the winning side experience positive emotions, those on the losing side tend to react with disappointment, uncertainty, or concern about the implications of a government that does not align with their preferences. In addition, the winner–loser gap may also reflect policy expectations, as winners expect policies closer to their preferences, whereas losers do not, as well as post-hoc rationalizations that preserve consistency between political preferences and evaluations of the political system (Anderson & Mendes, 2006; Craig et al., 2006). These responses are assumed to extend beyond the election itself and to inform more general evaluations of how the political system functions. In light of this research, majoritarian systems operating under a winner-takes-all logic appeared less advisable as institutional design than more consensus-oriented proportional representation systems, especially for new democracies with culturally diverse populations (Lijphart, 1999). Likewise, prolonged periods of exclusion from power have been seen as problematic, as they may lead to a continued decline in satisfaction and growing frustration among those excluded (Anderson et al., 2005, Chapter 4). Such dynamics are concerning because diffuse support among the population is critical for the stability of any political regime (Easton, 1967), and, especially, an overly intense winner–loser competition has been linked to democratic breakdown and transitions to authoritarianism (Linz, 1990).

However, most of this research predated the more recent rise of populism (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), which subsequently raised questions about the extent to which voters of populist parties would equally follow the usual winner–loser dynamics. With the emergence of these new actors, it initially remained unclear whether populist voters, often characterized by weaker commitments to democratic norms and lower willingness to concede defeat, would react in the same way as voters of mainstream parties. Some of the early research on this question focused primarily on cases where populist parties gained parliamentary representation or entered government as coalition partners, and found that under such conditions, their supporters, much like those of other parties, often became more satisfied with democracy, as these parties were perceived as a corrective force addressing citizens' concerns. This notion has been supported by both large-scale comparative studies and longitudinal case analyses. For example, using European Social Survey data, Mauk (2020), Harteveld et al. (2021), as well as Quaranta and Martini (2025) have examined the relationship

between satisfaction with democracy and the electoral successes of populist parties—such as gaining seats or entering government—and found that such events increased satisfaction with democracy among their supporters, narrowing the winner–loser gap. Similar patterns have been found in panel-based case studies, including research on Norway (Haugsgjerd, 2019) and the Netherlands (Harteveld et al., 2021; Quaranta & Martini, 2025). Some of this research, however, indicates that the satisfaction gap does not necessarily shrink but may, in some cases, reverse, as mainstream supporters tend to become more dissatisfied with democracy in the face of populist electoral wins (Fahey et al., 2022).

Yet other studies indicate that populist parties' inclusion may not constitute a lasting corrective and could, in the worst case, even pose a threat to the stability of democracy. While winning appears to be largely unproblematic for voters of populist parties and may even boost their satisfaction, the more pressing question is how they react when they lose or are excluded from government—situations that might trigger markedly different and potentially more destabilizing responses. Some findings suggest that increases in satisfaction among voters of populist parties tend to be short-lived and dissipate once these parties leave office (Rooduijn & van Slageren, 2022), indicating that their success and inclusion in government do not foster long-term democratic commitment. Instead, voters with stronger populist attitudes have been shown to be especially sensitive to unfavorable outcomes. Using cross-sectional data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and panel data from Germany and the Netherlands, Schäfer and Wenker (2025) have demonstrated that the effect of losing on satisfaction with democracy is substantially stronger among voters with populist attitudes, who react far more sharply to defeat than other citizens. Due to their Manichean worldview and anti-elite sentiment, defeat may appear to them not merely disappointing but entirely unacceptable. As "sore losers," they tend to interpret electoral defeat as evidence that the democratic system is biased or malfunctioning—reinforcing suspicions that elections are rigged and echoing the Trumpian logic of accepting outcomes only when one's own side wins.

Consistent with this notion, supporters of populist parties have been found particularly likely to express doubts about electoral integrity more often than mainstream party supporters (Partheymüller et al., 2022) and to engage in conspiratorial motivated reasoning about electoral fraud (Edelson et al., 2017). Although objectively high levels of electoral integrity can mitigate some of the negative consequences of losing in elections (Mauk, 2022), low confidence in elections, rather than being rooted in reality, is often fueled by the spread of false narratives and disinformation aimed at discrediting electoral processes (Mauk & Grömping, 2024). This bears the risk of setting in motion a reinforcing spiral of distrust (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018), in which voting for populist parties further undermines system legitimacy by amplifying their anti-system and election fraud rhetoric, thereby deepening distrust in elections and the democratic system as a whole.

Moreover, while the foundational literature emphasized the importance of losers' consent for democratic stability, more recent developments have made clear that winning may also carry risks for democracy. Although electoral success may generate positive emotions among supporters of populist parties, the inclusion of populist actors in government has been associated with risks to democratic quality and is now widely seen as a key driver of democratic backsliding, i.e., the weakening or dismantling of democratic institutions by elected leaders (Benasaglio Berlucchi & Kellam, 2023; Bermeo, 2016; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). While some research shows that participation in government as a junior partner may reduce support for populist parties through the "cost of ruling" (Riera & Pastor, 2022), such effects tend to be short-lived

and do not translate into sustained improvements in system support. At the same time, even junior participation in government, and even more so, stronger executive power, have been linked to democratic erosion. Taken together, these findings suggest that populist parties more often threaten democracy than correct it (Vittori, 2022).

While increasingly being perceived as a threat, populist parties have nevertheless continued to grow in electoral support and secure victories in national contests, raising the question of how mainstream parties should respond to this development. While accommodative strategies (Meguid, 2005) have been tried many times, in particular with center-right parties trying to adopt similar rhetoric and positions (Bayerlein, 2021; Schumacher & van Kersbergen, 2016), this has generally not helped to halt the continued upward trend in voting for populist parties (Krause et al., 2023) and may instead contribute to an erosion of democratic norms (Valentim et al., 2025). As a result, the question of which other democratic strategies may be pursued to safeguard democracy arises, particularly under proportional representation, where populist parties increasingly hold a significant share of seats in parliaments or may even emerge as the largest party in the election.

When populist parties win large vote shares, government formation becomes more complicated: coalitions that exclude a large or even the largest party often require substantial compromise across several, potentially ideologically diverse actors, so who ultimately enters government may only be determined much later in the process (Ecker & Meyer, 2020). This creates an awkward situation in which "winning" the election does not necessarily translate into winning access to the executive office, generating countervailing feelings of being a winner at the electoral stage but a loser at the bargaining stage. This discrepancy may be amplified by the ambiguous nature of electoral outcomes in proportional systems, where who "won" is often open to interpretation. Although being the "largest minority" typically carries no formal constitutional status, media outlets often frame plurality winners as the real "winners" of the election (Gattermann et al., 2022), shaping citizens' winner–loser perceptions (Plescia, 2019) and their sense of who has a mandate to form a government (Plescia & Eberl, 2021). A coalition formed explicitly against the largest party may therefore be seen as illegitimate or as violating democratic norms, heightening dissatisfaction with democracy among voters who already tend to exhibit low trust in democratic institutions and potentially contributing to further radicalization. This creates a "tough trade-off" (Harteveld et al., 2021) for pro-democratic parties, which must choose between further alienating an already distrustful voter group by excluding its preferred party or granting executive power to actors who may weaken democratic institutions. Understanding voter responses in such situations is therefore crucial, as these reactions may shape both the stability of future governments and the long-term prospects for democratic resilience.

2.2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Against this background, this article aims to theorize and examine the dynamics of democratic satisfaction among supporters of populist actors in situations where a populist party wins a plurality of votes but is subsequently excluded from power during coalition bargaining. Following Otjes and Willumsen (2023), we conceptualize winner–loser dynamics in proportional systems as a two-stage process, in which both the electoral outcome and the outcome of the coalition negotiations may exert distinct and independent effects on voters' democratic satisfaction. We argue, however, that in the case of populist voters, the classic winner–loser mechanism alone is insufficient to explain their responses to these events. To fully understand

the distinct dynamics among this group, additional factors closely tied to their populist ideology must be considered.

In particular, we suggest that the following factors—while they may to some extent be shaped by the election result as well—warrant attention in their own right, alongside the familiar winner–loser dynamics. First, underlying populist attitudes may activate a broader spiral of distrust, encouraging voters to interpret political events through a more Manichean lens and reinforcing anti-elite sentiment. Second, democratic norms related to losers' consent can no longer be assumed to be equally shared across the electorate and may influence how willing voters are to accept unfavorable outcomes as legitimate. Third, perceptions of electoral integrity may shape satisfaction independently of winner–loser feelings, especially as populist actors often circulate narratives of electoral fraud that may lower confidence in elections. Fourth, perceptions of fairness in the coalition formation process, including beliefs that plurality winners ought to be included in government, may affect legitimacy judgments and heighten dissatisfaction when such expectations are not met. These mechanisms operate in parallel but not necessarily in the same direction, which means they need to be carefully disentangled in empirical analysis to better understand post-electoral dynamics in satisfaction with democracy. Figure 1 illustrates this expanded framework.

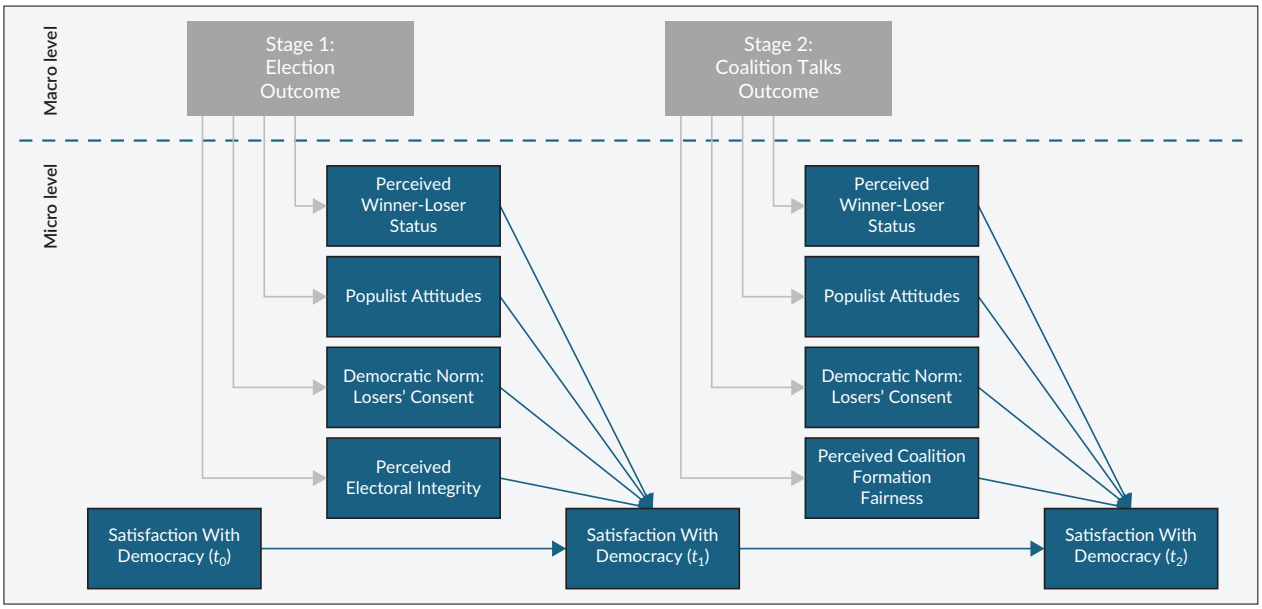

Figure 1. Dynamics of satisfaction with democracy as a two-stage process.

Based on this framework, we derive the following hypotheses for the analysis. Winner–loser perceptions and populist attitudes are expected to matter across both stages. Democratic norms and procedural fairness are also expected to matter at both stages, though regarding the election result and electoral integrity in the first stage, and regarding coalition outcomes and the fairness of coalition negotiations in the second stage.

- H1. Winner–loser perceptions: Perceiving one's preferred party as a winner increases satisfaction with democracy, whereas perceiving it as a loser decreases satisfaction with democracy.
- H2. Populist attitudes: Stronger populist attitudes are associated with decreases in satisfaction with democracy, reinforcing downward shifts over time.

- H3. Commitment to democratic norms: A low willingness to accept unfavorable outcomes of democratic procedures is associated with decreases in satisfaction with democracy.
- H4. Perceived electoral integrity: Lower perceived electoral integrity is associated with decreases in satisfaction with democracy.
- H5. Perceived fairness of coalition formation: Lower perceived fairness of the coalition negotiations is associated with decreases in satisfaction with democracy.

While we believe that the framework could in principle be applicable to all voters, the dynamics it captures are likely to be most pronounced where consensus on relevant factors, such as electoral integrity and democratic norms, may be lacking. We therefore limit our expectations to the group of voters of populist parties, which are the focus of this article.

3. Case Study: The 2024 Austrian Parliamentary Elections

Austria offers a particularly useful context for analyzing the proposed two-stage framework of democratic satisfaction because it combines a long-standing and electorally strong populist radical right party, the FPÖ, with a proportional representation system that routinely produces multi-party governments. The FPÖ has been a central actor in Austrian politics for decades and has participated in several governing coalitions, meaning that its presence in executive office is neither exceptional nor unprecedented. At the same time, shifting patterns of coalition formation create considerable uncertainty about which coalition will emerge after an election, making it difficult for voters to anticipate the eventual government outcome. This constellation, therefore, provides precisely the kind of circumstances in which the two-stage framework seems applicable and allows us to gain further insights into the post-electoral dynamics of satisfaction with democracy.

The 2024 parliamentary election provides a particularly revealing case for our framework. The inter-election period had been marked by multiple crises (Scharrer et al., 2026), and trust in political institutions among FPÖ voters had declined sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching its lowest level since the early 2000s (Juen, 2024; Kritzinger et al., 2021). FPÖ supporters thus entered the campaign with already low institutional trust. In September 2024, the FPÖ became the strongest party for the first time, winning 28.8 percent of the vote, and ran with Herbert Kickl as its explicit chancellor candidate, signaling a clear ambition to lead the next government and being widely perceived as the election's main victor. Yet despite this plurality win, all other parties initially ruled out cooperating with Kickl. At the same time, uncertainty remained over whether a coalition could realistically be formed without the FPÖ and whether the center-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) might eventually soften its stance or change leadership to facilitate negotiations. The bargaining process unfolded in several phases. A first attempt to form a three-party coalition between the ÖVP, the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), and the liberal NEOS collapsed after lengthy negotiations in early January 2025. The mandate to form a government then passed to the FPÖ, which sought to negotiate a coalition with the ÖVP, but these talks also failed. Only afterwards did the ÖVP, SPÖ, and NEOS return to the table and, on their second attempt, reach an agreement in March 2025, almost half a year after the election. Overall, this prolonged and uncertain process provides a particularly suitable setting to examine how voters responded to the electoral victory and the subsequent coalition formation process.

4. Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we draw on data from the AUTNES Online Panel Study 2017–2024 (Partheymüller et al., 2024), a multi-wave survey designed to capture dynamics in political attitudes within the Austrian electorate. A key advantage of AUTNES is that it includes not only a post-election survey, as most studies do, but also a second survey following the completion of coalition negotiations. We use three waves to examine transitions in democratic satisfaction: Wave 22, fielded in September 2024 during the campaign; Wave 23, collected from late September to October 2024 after the election; and Wave 24, conducted in March 2025 after coalition formation came to an end. All interviews were carried out via CAWI, with respondents recruited from a large commercial online access panel using demographic quotas. A comprehensive data paper provides further detail on sample quality (Partheymüller et al., 2025).

To measure our central dependent variable, satisfaction with democracy, we rely on the following survey item, with similar items having been used in various studies of winner-loser gaps before: "On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Austria? Are you…very satisfied, rather satisfied, rather dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?" We recode this variable into a binary indicator, assigning a value of 1 to respondents who report being very or rather satisfied and 0 to those who report being rather or very dissatisfied. This binary coding follows common practice in the winner–loser literature and has been used to demonstrate meaningful post-electoral dynamics in studies of winner–loser gaps (e.g., Anderson et al., 2005). It also allows us to capture transitions across the substantively meaningful boundary between being satisfied and dissatisfied with democracy.

Our independent variables include winner–loser perceptions, populist attitudes, democratic norms of losers' consent, perceived electoral integrity, and perceived fairness of the coalition formation process. While some of these measures follow existing studies, the batteries capturing democratic norms and perceived coalition fairness were newly developed for this project. Full question wording is included in Appendix A in the Supplementary File, with descriptive statistics in Appendix B in the Supplementary File.

Winner–loser status is measured via respondents' subjective perceptions of whether the party they voted for is a winner, loser, or partly both. This subjective measure, which correlates with vote shares (Plescia, 2019), accounts for the ambiguity of electoral outcomes under proportional representation. The item was included in both post-election waves, referring separately to the election result and the coalition negotiations.

Populist attitudes are measured using a six-item battery based on CSES Module 5 (Hobolt et al., 2016) and Akkerman et al. (2014). Responses are recorded on a five-point Likert scale and recoded so that higher values indicate stronger populist attitudes. We construct an additive index by averaging across items (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$ post-election, 0.81 post-coalition), with the index showing sufficient variation among FPÖ voters (see Figure B2.2 in the Supplementary File) to be used as a predictor. Commitment to democratic norms of losers' consent is captured using two four-item batteries measuring willingness to accept unfavorable outcomes of elections and coalition bargaining. Items tap into whether respondents see acceptance as important, support a peaceful transfer of power, or instead question legitimacy. Responses use five-point agreement scales, recoded so that higher values reflect greater willingness to accept democratic outcomes. The resulting indices show acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.74$ election battery; $\alpha = 0.76$ coalition battery).

Perceived electoral integrity is measured only in the post-election wave using a seven-item battery assessing how frequently respondents believe key aspects of the electoral process function correctly or are compromised. Items cover vote counting, bribery, media balance, election administration, postal vote manipulation, and foreign or digital interference. Higher values indicate higher perceived integrity ($\alpha = 0.73$). Finally, the perceived fairness of coalition formation is measured via a newly developed four-item battery capturing whether respondents view the exclusion of the strongest party as fair or legitimate. The resulting index shows excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Instead of modelling overall levels of satisfaction, we make use of the panel structure and focus on switches between discrete states, moving from satisfaction to dissatisfaction or vice versa. Specifically, we estimate two separate logistic models conditional on the initial state: among initially dissatisfied respondents, the outcome is switching into satisfaction versus remaining dissatisfied; among initially satisfied respondents, the outcome is switching into dissatisfaction versus remaining satisfied. This follows the logic of a first-order Markovian transition model for a binary longitudinal outcome (Diggle et al., 2013). While effects on these transitions could also be estimated in a pooled regression, i.e., as a lagged dependent variable model, the chosen setup allows predictor effects to vary with the direction of the transition and thereby enables us to explore potentially asymmetric dynamics, in line with the intuition that trust is often more easily lost than rebuilt. Using this approach, we analyze each of the two stages of the post-electoral process separately: first, transitions from the pre-election to the post-election wave, and second, transitions from the post-election to the post-coalition-formation wave. By concentrating on changes over time rather than static levels, this approach allows us to better isolate the impact of major events such as the election itself and the conclusion of coalition negotiations from more stable predispositions or background characteristics that shape respondents' initial levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive Analysis

Before turning to the multivariate analysis and the test of our hypotheses, we first provide descriptive evidence to situate the overall patterns in democratic satisfaction across parties and over time. Figure 2 displays the aggregate levels of democratic satisfaction for different groups of voters across the three survey waves. Supporters of all mainstream parties were mostly satisfied throughout the period, whereas a majority of supporters of the populist radical right already reported very low levels of satisfaction during the election campaign. After the election, and despite the FPÖ emerging as the strongest party and being widely perceived as the winner, satisfaction with democracy among its voters declined further, with an even sharper drop following the formation of a three-party coalition consisting of ÖVP, SPÖ, and NEOS without the FPÖ in March 2025.

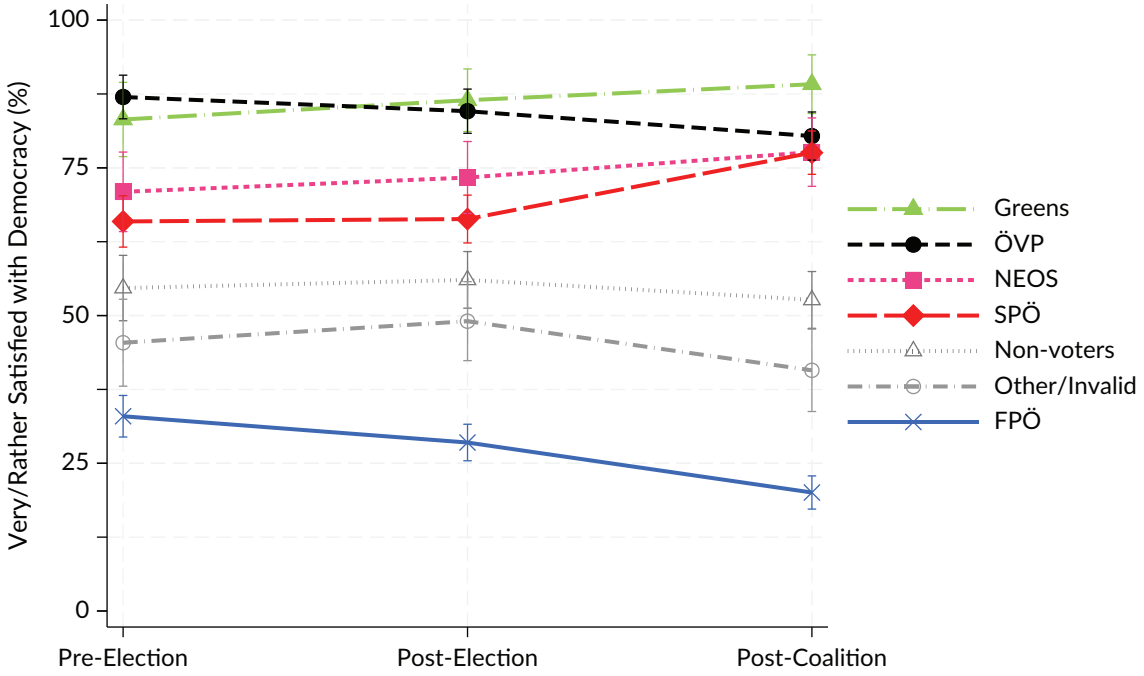

Figure 2. Changes in satisfaction with democracy by vote choice.

As our focus here is on the individual-level transitions among FPÖ voters, the Sankey diagram in Figure 3 displays their transitions across the same time period. While there is, of course, some persistence in attitudes, there is also a clear net movement in the negative direction: the share switching from satisfaction to dissatisfaction is consistently larger than the share moving in the opposite direction, and this pattern is particularly pronounced after the coalition formation. Although satisfaction was already low at the outset, it significantly declined further from 33 percent in the pre-election wave to 29 percent after the election and to only 21 percent after the coalition negotiations, reaching the lowest level ever recorded for this group since the beginning of measurement in this panel in 2017. Overall, dissatisfaction among FPÖ voters was already widespread before the election but continued to deepen even while being an election winner, reaching a new low point as the post-electoral process unfolded.

What may seem surprising is that no positive effect of winning is observed after the election, even though around 85 percent of FPÖ voters considered their party to be the winner (Figure 4). Only about 14 percent viewed the outcome as only partly a win, and barely 1 percent regarded it as a defeat. This raises the question of why, despite such widespread perceptions of electoral victory, FPÖ voters did not show an increase in democratic satisfaction but instead displayed a further decline. Whatever positive feelings were associated with winning appear to have eroded quickly once the coalition outcome became clear. At this stage, only about 21 percent of FPÖ voters still regarded their party as a winner, while around 45 percent viewed it as the loser of the coalition negotiations process, a dramatic change that could have contributed to the observed decline. In the next step, we therefore examine how these subjective winner–loser perceptions, alongside other individual-level factors, help explain the observed shifts in democratic satisfaction.

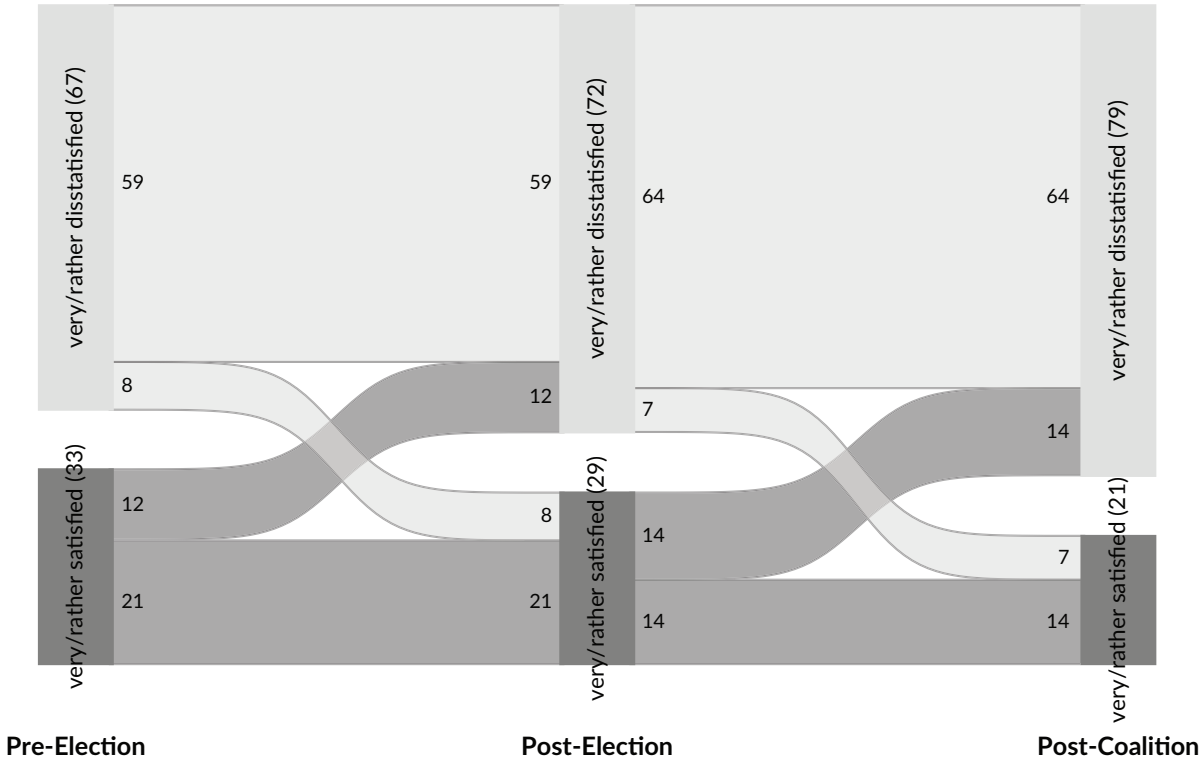

Figure 3. Individual-level transitions among FPÖ voters.

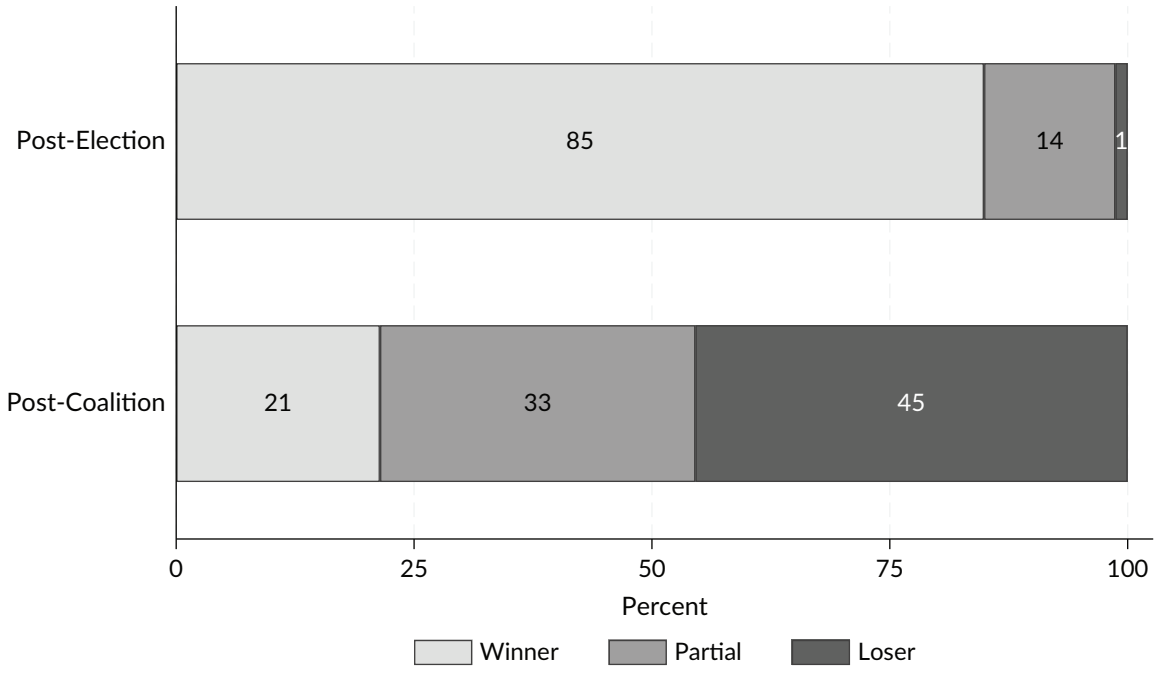

Figure 4. Perceived winner–loser status of FPÖ voters.

5.2. Empirical Test of the Hypotheses

To evaluate our hypotheses, we first examine the initial stage of the two-stage process, namely the transitions from the pre-election to the post-election period. Table 1 presents the results. Overall, the findings indicate that changes in satisfaction with democracy at this stage are driven more strongly by perceptions of electoral integrity and populist attitudes than by whether individuals perceived themselves as electoral winners or losers. Contrary to H1, winner–loser status did not exert a significant effect on transitions in either direction immediately after the election. Among FPÖ voters, only a very small share perceived their party as having lost the election, which made the insignificant effect unsurprising. A non-negligible group expressed mixed or ambivalent perceptions, yet even compared with this group, perceiving one's party as a winner did not increase the likelihood of becoming more satisfied with democracy. This suggests that, although there was some post-electoral euphoria, it did not translate into higher system support.

Table 1. Transitions in satisfaction with democracy from pre-election to post-election.

	Δ Satisfaction with democracy: Pre-election to post-election			
	Dissatisfied → Satisfied		Satisfied → Dissatisfied	
Winner-loser perception (ref. partial):				
—Winner	−0.006	(0.047)	−0.085	(0.099)
—Loser	0.295	(0.331)	0.195	(0.291)
Populist attitudes (index)	−0.046^{+}	(0.025)	0.094^{+}	(0.047)
Norm to accept democratic decisions:				
Election result (index)	0.019	(0.021)	−0.002	(0.044)
Perceived electoral integrity (index)	0.048^{+}	(0.028)	−0.122*	(0.060)
McFadden's R^2	0.039		0.049	
Obs.	414		206	

Notes: Entries are average marginal effects based on logistic regression; standard errors in parentheses. The reference categories for the dependent variables are *staying dissatisfied* and *staying satisfied*; $^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Perceptions of electoral integrity instead emerged as the most relevant factor at this stage. Individuals who viewed the election as having high integrity, based on our composite index, were more likely to move into satisfaction and less likely to become dissatisfied, whereas those with low integrity perceptions tended to remain dissatisfied. This supports H4, which predicted that lower perceived electoral integrity would increase dissatisfaction with democracy. In addition, although only marginally significant, it seems that populist attitudes functioned as a reinforcing mechanism that contributed to a broader spiral of distrust—even in the context of an electoral victory. This pattern is consistent with H2, which predicted that stronger populist attitudes reinforce dissatisfaction and reduce transitions into satisfaction.

Respondents scoring higher on populist attitudes were less likely to move into satisfaction and more likely to shift into dissatisfaction. This pattern suggests that anti-elite sentiment prevented voters from updating their democratic evaluations positively, even when the election produced a favorable outcome, and instead encouraged negative filtering, setting voters on a trajectory to foster or increase dissatisfaction by looking at politics through a Manichean lens.

Next, we focus on the transitions from the post-election period to the stage after the new coalition had formed. Table 2 shows the results. Here, we find a clearer winner–loser pattern, which is in line with H1 as well as previous research suggesting that being part of the government is more relevant for winner–loser dynamics than parliamentary strength alone (Otjes & Willumsen, 2023). Although only a small share of FPÖ voters considered their party a winner of the coalition formation process, those who nevertheless did were more likely to increase in democratic satisfaction. One possible explanation is that some may have believed that the three-party coalition would struggle to govern effectively, thereby strengthening the FPÖ's position in the future. In contrast, the considerably larger group who perceived their party as a loser was significantly more likely to shift into dissatisfaction.

Table 2. Transitions in satisfaction with democracy from post-election to post-coalition.

	Δ Satisfaction with democracy: Post-election to post-coalition			
	Dissatisfied → Satisfied		Satisfied → Dissatisfied	
Winner-loser perception (ref. partial):				
—Winner	0.082*	(0.044)	0.102	(0.102)
—Loser	0.043	(0.030)	0.148^{+}	(0.083)
Populist attitudes (index)	−0.072**	(0.023)	−0.060	(0.057)
Norm to accept democratic decisions:				
Coalition talks outcome (index)	0.022	(0.016)	−0.127**	(0.041)
Perceived coalition formation fairness (index)	0.048**	(0.018)	−0.110*	(0.048)
McFadden's R^2	0.119		0.074	
Obs.	420		168	

Notes: Entries are average marginal effects based on logistic regression; standard errors in parentheses. The reference categories for the dependent variables are *staying dissatisfied* and *staying satisfied*; $^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Winner–loser perceptions, however, were not the only factor shaping changes in satisfaction with democracy at this stage. Populist attitudes, in this case, even more clearly, contributed to reinforcing dissatisfaction. In addition, a stronger commitment to the norm that the outcomes of democratic processes, including coalition agreements, should be accepted, helped prevent some FPÖ voters who were still satisfied from becoming dissatisfied. This is in line with H3, which expected that a weaker commitment to democratic norms would increase the likelihood of transitioning into dissatisfaction. Perceived procedural fairness also emerged as an important predictor. This was measured through an index capturing the expectation that the plurality winner should be included in government and that excluding it is undemocratic. Consistent with H5, the results indicate that low perceived fairness was associated with an increased likelihood of remaining dissatisfied or of moving into dissatisfaction. It should be noted in this context that it is somewhat remarkable that FPÖ voters viewed this coalition pattern as unfair, given that a similar configuration had previously enabled the FPÖ's own entry into government. In the 1999 Austrian parliamentary election, the SPÖ won the most votes but was excluded from office, while the third-placed ÖVP appointed the chancellor and formed a coalition with the second-placed FPÖ—marking the FPÖ's first participation in federal government (Müller, 2000). Yet 25 years later, this earlier episode appears to have been largely forgotten, and perceptions of unfairness in 2024–2025 contributed to declining satisfaction with democracy among FPÖ voters.

To evaluate the robustness of our findings, we conducted several additional analyses. A reduced model excluding the additional predictors showed that the effect of winner–loser perceptions was not simply absorbed by other variables (Appendix C1 in the Supplementary File). Adding sociodemographic controls such as age, gender, and education likewise did not substantively alter the findings (Appendix C2 in the Supplementary File). We also accounted for the possibility that some voters might have already anticipated the three-party coalition excluding the FPÖ by including coalition expectations in the first-stage models; while expectations of an FPÖ–ÖVP coalition were not uncommon and increased the likelihood of moving from dissatisfaction to satisfaction after the election, the remaining results again stayed substantially unchanged (Appendix C3 in the Supplementary File). Excluding respondents who failed an attention check in the post-election survey also did not substantively affect the results, although the already small post-election FPÖ loser category became even smaller, leading us to collapse the partial and loser categories in that analysis (Appendix C4 in the Supplementary File). We further found that populist attitudes and orientations toward the coalition formation process also helped explain transitions in democratic satisfaction among voters of other parties, including the major mainstream parties ÖVP and SPÖ (Appendices C5 and C6 in the Supplementary File), pointing to promising avenues for future research on broader electorates and in comparative settings. In addition, lagged dependent variable models using logit, linear, and ordered specifications left the substantive conclusions essentially unchanged, although the somewhat asymmetric winner–loser effect in the post-coalition stage became less visible, whereas populist attitudes emerged as more strongly significant (Appendices C7 and C8 in the Supplementary File). Finally, interaction models provided little evidence for systematic conditional effects and did not alter the substantive conclusions (Appendices C9 and C10 in the Supplementary File).

Overall, our results and robustness checks support the conclusion that it is analytically fruitful to study post-electoral dynamics in satisfaction with democracy under proportional representation by distinguishing between two stages. Where previous research has not distinguished between the electoral and coalition-formation stages, which often coincide, it may have overstated the importance of election outcomes relative to the more decisive dynamics of government formation. More comprehensive theoretical models are therefore needed, especially as democratic stability may increasingly depend on developments during the post-electoral period.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we explored the dynamics of satisfaction with democracy when populist parties win an election but are subsequently excluded from power during post-electoral coalition bargaining and coalition formation. To situate our study in the broader literature, we reviewed research on winner–loser gaps, which has consistently shown that electoral outcomes shape democratic satisfaction (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Anderson et al., 2005). We then highlighted how the rise of populism has complicated these dynamics. While some studies find that populist parties' electoral or governmental success can boost satisfaction among their supporters by providing a perceived corrective (Haugsgjerd, 2019; Mauk, 2020), other work suggests that such effects are short-lived and fade quickly once populists leave office (Rooduijn & van Slageren, 2022). Moreover, populist voters appear particularly vulnerable to winner–loser dynamics: strong populist attitudes combined with low confidence in elections heighten the risk of interpreting unfavorable outcomes as illegitimate, fueling a broader spiral of distrust (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; Schäfer & Wenker, 2025). In proportional representation systems, coalition formation adds a further layer of

complexity (Otjes & Willumsen, 2023). As populist parties gain electoral ground while also being viewed as potential threats to democratic institutions (Bermeo, 2016; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Vittori, 2022), mainstream parties increasingly face a difficult dilemma: include populists in government, with all the attendant risks, or exclude them and potentially deepen dissatisfaction among their supporters.

Against this background, we proposed a theoretical framework that conceptualizes post-electoral dynamics in satisfaction with democracy as a two-stage process in which, in addition to classic winner–loser dynamics, several further factors may shape changes in democratic satisfaction. Specifically, we added that populist attitudes may contribute to a spiral of distrust by reinforcing prior dissatisfaction; that democratic norms related to accepting the outcomes of democratic procedures can no longer be taken for granted; and that procedural fairness, both regarding electoral integrity and coalition formation, deserves heightened attention.

We then applied this theoretical framework to the case of the 2024 Austrian parliamentary election, an election in which the populist radical right won 28.8 percent of the vote and secured a plurality of seats. Although the FPÖ was widely recognized as the electoral winner, it was ultimately excluded from government after protracted coalition negotiations that lasted almost half a year and resulted in a three-party coalition between the ÖVP, SPÖ, and NEOS. This sequence of a clear electoral victory followed by exclusion from executive office created an unusually sharp decoupling between electoral and governmental outcomes, offering ideal conditions to assess the two-stage dynamics.

Using panel data from the AUTNES Online Panel Study, our empirical analysis showed that at the first stage, immediately after the election, democratic satisfaction among FPÖ voters was shaped more by perceptions of electoral integrity and by populist attitudes than by a straightforward winner–loser logic. Subjective winner–loser perceptions had no discernible effect on changes in satisfaction at this point. Instead, FPÖ voters with low confidence in the integrity of the election were more likely to become dissatisfied, and those with stronger populist attitudes tended to reinforce or deepen pre-existing distrust, even in the face of an objectively favorable outcome for their preferred party. Taken together, these factors help explain why, despite the FPÖ's historic electoral victory, no increase in democratic satisfaction was observed. Once the coalition negotiations concluded, a clearer winner–loser pattern emerged. FPÖ voters who perceived their party as a loser of the coalition talks were substantially more likely to become dissatisfied, whereas the rather few who viewed the outcome as a win showed the opposite tendency. At this stage, procedural orientations again played a central role. Perceiving the coalition process as unfair and believing that the plurality winner ought to have been included in government significantly increased dissatisfaction. In addition, a weak commitment to democratic norms of accepting unfavorable democratic outcomes heightened the probability of shifting into dissatisfaction. Overall, these patterns suggest that, in addition to the immediate emotional response associated with winning or losing, perceptions of procedural fairness, democratic norms, and populist attitudes act as additional drivers of democratic (dis-)satisfaction in proportional systems, where government formation typically involves multi-party coalitions and has become increasingly complex with the rise of populist parties.

Our study is not without limitations. First, as a single case study, its generalizability is naturally limited. Nonetheless, since populist parties continue to rise across many democracies, similar situations are likely to occur elsewhere, and our findings may provide useful insights for such contexts. However, there may also be contexts in which coalition outcomes are already clear on election night because of strong pre-electoral

coordination, or in which executive power is determined more directly by the election result itself, as in many presidential systems. In such settings, the proposed two-stage framework may be less appropriate. Instead, our approach seems most applicable to parliamentary systems with protracted and uncertain coalition bargaining, which has become more common in recent elections across Europe. Second, another limitation concerns causal interpretation. Although our study leverages panel data and focuses on transitions over time, it remains observational in nature. The reported relationships should therefore be interpreted rather as conditional associations than as definitive causal effects.

In terms of theoretical implications, we believe that the classical winner–loser model of post-electoral dynamics in satisfaction with democracy needs to be expanded when trying to account for the growing complexity of proportional systems and the rise of populist parties. On the one hand, models of democratic satisfaction should incorporate the role of populist attitudes, which can operate as a negative filter, feeding into a reinforcing spiral of distrust and weakening individuals' commitment to democratic norms, including the willingness to accept unfavorable outcomes produced by legitimate democratic procedures. On the other hand, our results highlight the importance of considering perceptions of procedural fairness, particularly with respect to electoral integrity and coalition bargaining, since these factors may now matter as much or even more than the outcomes themselves.

Finally, our analysis also has practical implications. Mainstream parties increasingly face a difficult trade-off: whether to include populist parties in government, which carries risks for democratic quality, or to exclude them, which may heighten dissatisfaction among their supporters and potentially contribute to democratic destabilization in other ways. Understanding how voters perceive and interpret both election outcomes and coalition negotiations can help political actors anticipate the consequences of different strategies and navigate an increasingly challenging political environment. While losing some of the time is an unavoidable part of democratic competition, it is important to prevent spirals of distrust and feelings of political marginalization that could ultimately result in political unrest or even democratic breakdown. This requires efforts to reduce the latent anti-elite sentiment and to break up Manichean us-versus-them worldviews, as well as to strengthen democratic norms and to enhance procedural fairness. Regarding procedural fairness, it will be essential to protect electoral integrity as well as to avoid creating unrealistic expectations about democratic processes, such as through media portrayals of plurality winners as the unequivocal "winners" of an election, whether based on polls or actual results. Although no single measure can resolve these challenges on its own, addressing these issues in combination may help mitigate some of the risks facing contemporary democracies.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The dataset of AUTNES Online Panel Study 2017–2024 (SUF Edition) is available for scientific use via AUSSDA: https://doi.org/10.11587/HNUFCC

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An LLM (ChatGPT) was used for grammar and style editing during manuscript preparation. All content was reviewed and verified by the authors, who remain fully responsible for the accuracy and integrity of the manuscript.

Supplementary Material

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

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ARTICLE

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

2. The Elite Origins of Mass Perceptions of Election Integrity

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

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

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

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

3. The Racialization of Election Integrity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Data and Methods

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

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

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

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

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

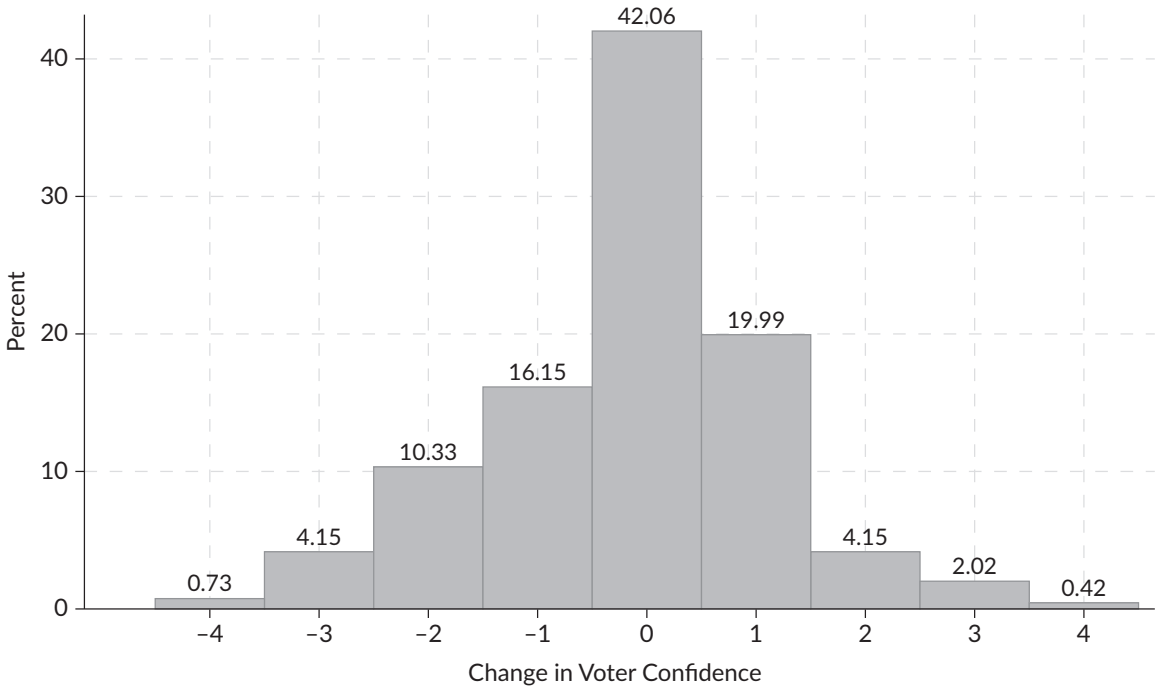

Figure 1. Change in voter confidence (histogram), 2016 to 2020. Notes: Calculations by authors; negative values represent decreased confidence, positive values represent increased confidence, and zero represents no change in confidence. Source: American National Election Studies (2021).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1. Summary statistics.

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

Source: American National Election Studies (2021).

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

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

6. Analyses

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

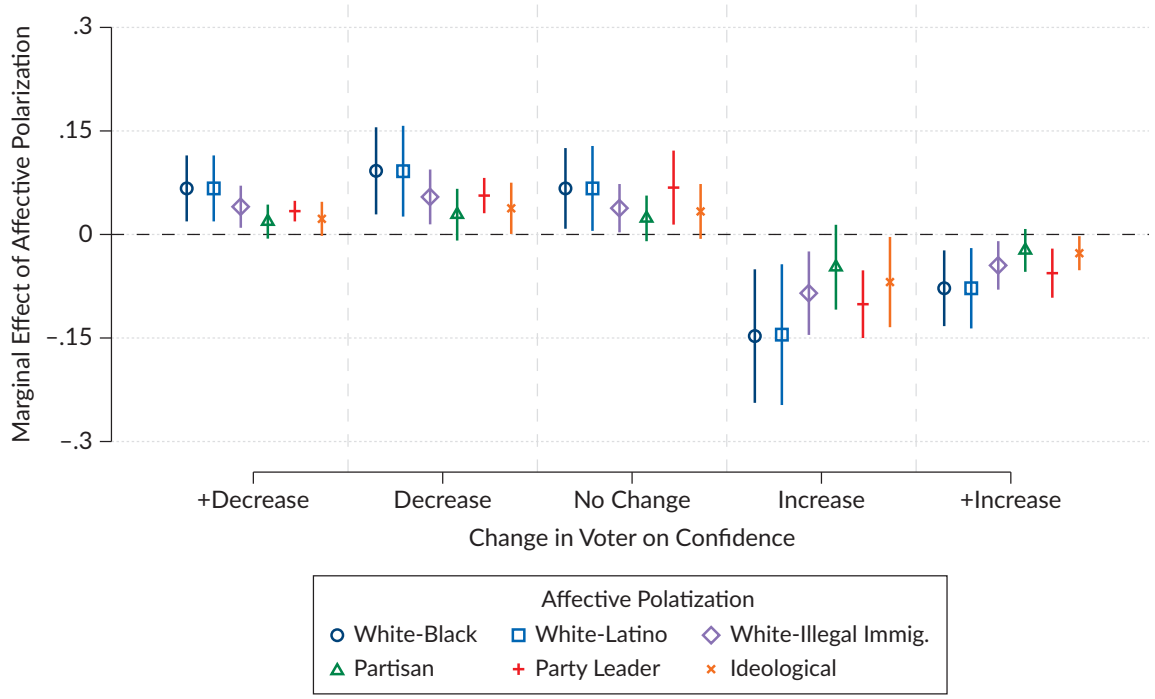

Figure 2. Change in voter confidence, 2016 to 2020. Notes: Estimates derived from Table A1 in SM A in the Supplementary File.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

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

Supplementary Material

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

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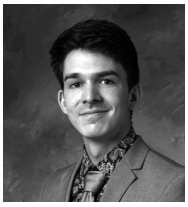

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ARTICLE

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What Electoral Outcomes Foster Electoral Consent and Dissent?

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Abstract

Losers' consent is a key indicator of democratic vitality. In a functioning democracy, citizens should accept electoral outcomes regardless of which party wins. Contrasting with previous studies on the topic, we, in this article, directly measure the types of electoral outcomes to which over 5,000 German adults, representative of the national population, are willing to consent/dissent. We find that respondents are more likely to accept, and less likely to protest, outcomes in which their preferred party performs well, and their most disliked party performs poorly. Meanwhile, structural features of the outcomes, such as the number of parties in government or whether the Chancellor comes from the party with the most seats, have little to no effect. These results support the idea that partisanship is the main driver of electoral consent/dissent, and that negative preferences have a unique explanatory power in this respect.

Keywords

elections; Germany; losers' consent; protest; satisfaction with democracy

1. Introduction

Electoral consent is fundamental to the proper functioning of democracy. For democratic regimes to endure, all actors, from political elites to ordinary citizens, must remain committed to core democratic principles (Claassen, 2020; Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011; Svolik, 2015). Central among these principles is acceptance of electoral outcomes: those who lose elections must consent to their defeat and recognize the legitimacy of the elected parliament and government (C. J. Anderson et al., 2005; Dahl, 1989; Nadeau & Blais, 1993). In principle, this legitimacy should not be contingent on partisanship but should instead depend on whether elections are conducted freely and fairly, irrespective of who wins or loses (Birch, 2011; Esaiasson et al.,

2019). Diffuse support for democracy thus acts as a reservoir that must be sufficiently robust to absorb destabilizing shocks, such as deep socio-economic crises (Easton, 1975). When this reservoir erodes, the risk of democratic backsliding increases. The attack on the Capitol perpetrated by Trump's supporters in the United States in January 2022 and the one perpetrated by Bolsonaro's supporters in Brazil in 2023 illustrate this danger: supporters of some losing incumbents seem to be able to mobilize their partisans to challenge the electoral outcome, which strongly threatened democratic stability (Cohen et al., 2023).

Scholars interested in citizens' consent and dissent have traditionally looked at answers to survey questions about satisfaction with democracy and the "gap" in democratic satisfaction between electoral winners and losers (C. J. Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Kern & Kölln, 2022). Although these studies have greatly advanced our understanding of the topic, they nevertheless rely on an indirect measurement of consent. Citizens may be dissatisfied with the way democracy works in their country without necessarily being willing to contest electoral outcomes. Besides, the term "satisfaction with democracy" is multifaceted, meaning the answers to this question tap into various sets of beliefs that do not necessarily factor into a single latent trait (Canache et al., 2001).

In view of these challenges, we rely in this article on a direct measurement consisting of presenting a set of plausible electoral outcomes to citizens before asking whether they would accept these outcomes and whether they would participate in a protest contesting them. Based on a large original survey from Germany, we find that acceptance levels are relatively low and that a substantial number of outcomes (23%) would trigger a protest. We then examine the types of electoral outcomes that foster consent or dissent. Respondents are more likely to consent when their preferred party performs well, particularly if this party plays a central role in the governing coalition. These findings corroborate previous work showing that supporters of losing parties are more likely to question the integrity of the electoral process and to believe that there may have been fraud (Beaulieu, 2014; Edelson et al., 2017; Mochtak et al., 2021). However, negative partisanship emerges as an important other driver: the performance of the most disliked party is an even more powerful predictor of acceptance and protest likelihood. By contrast, the structural features of electoral outcomes, such as the number of parties in government and parliament or whether the chancellor comes from the party with the most seats, have little to no impact. Taken together, these findings indicate that partisanship is the main driver of electoral consent and dissent, with negative partisanship playing a strong role in this respect.

In the remainder of the article, we begin by presenting, given its originality, our new direct measure of electoral consent/dissent. We then review the literature on the topic and the hypotheses built around it, presenting the variables used to operationalize the concepts underlying these hypotheses. Finally, we present the results before concluding.

2. A Direct Measure of Electoral Consent

We study citizen electoral consent and dissent in the context of a multi-party system where no party has a majority of seats in parliament, leading to the formation of a majority coalition government. This situation is typical in established democracies. We examine the case of Germany, which has always had majority coalition governments since the Second World War. Although Germany uses a mixed-member electoral system, the compensatory nature of the list tier makes it a proportional system, like most established democracies (Bormann & Golder, 2022). Except for the parties that do not reach the 5% vote threshold, all

parties receive a seat share proportional to their vote share. It thus constitutes a case study that offers reasonable boundaries for generalization across a broader set of countries.

We conducted our survey in March 2024 with 5,370 respondents recruited by the company Dynata. This sample is made representative of the German adult population using socio-demographic quotas: age, gender, region (hard quotas), and education (soft quota). Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File presents descriptive statistics for our sample and compares them with the most recent census data for the target population. The survey took on average seven and a half minutes to complete. At the core was our survey instrument to capture electoral consent and dissent. We showed a fictitious yet plausible outcome of a Bundestag election to respondents before asking how they would react to it. We repeated this operation five times, which is well below the threshold where the answers start becoming meaningless due to fatigue and satisficing (Bansak et al., 2018). Given that the core question was repeated five times, the number of observations in our study is 26,850. However, due to a bug in the survey platform, 0.41% of these observations are unusable. We thus have a $N = 26{,}740$.

Each outcome consisted of a distribution of parliamentary seats among the seven main national parties in Germany that stood a chance of passing the 5% vote threshold and hence gaining parliamentary seats at the time of the survey. These parties were: the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), with its sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the Alliance 90/The Greens, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), The Left, and the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW). The outcomes also included these parties' cabinet seats, and an indication of which of them holds the Chancellorship. We decided to include information about both parliament and government in an effort to present a realistic electoral outcome with which respondents are familiar (for example, one that looks like an outcome they could have seen in a newspaper). However, we did not show the vote shares of other parties, as we did not want to overburden respondents with too much information. In the context of Germany, seat shares and vote shares are very similar for all parties that pass the electoral threshold. However, we acknowledge that the results might have been different if we had included vote shares in the vignettes. Indeed, vote results are mechanical translations of the popular will and may therefore carry more legitimacy in the eyes of voters than other indicators, particularly the composition of governing coalitions, which more directly reflect party politics.

Figure 1 presents an example of such an electoral outcome, as it appears on the respondents' screens. We opted for a textual description of the electoral outcome rather than a visual one. While visual representations are generally easier to process, they would create practical difficulties given the very large number of possible outcome combinations. They would also make it challenging to convey three distinct pieces of information—parliamentary seats, cabinet seats, and the Chancellorship—within a single figure.

The three pieces of information (parliamentary seat share, cabinet seats, and Chancellorship) are randomly generated by the computer for each respondent. We put several constraints on this random generation so that the electoral outcomes look plausible. First, the parties receive a random number of parliamentary seats based on their aggregated vote intentions from the last five national polls, adjusted by ± 10 percentage points, ensuring no negative percentages and a total of 100%. Due to Germany's 5% vote threshold, no party can receive a seat share between 1% and 4%. This means that the number of parties with parliamentary seats varies from outcome to outcome. The government is formed by randomly selecting parties that together

Imagine an election produces the following German Bundestag:

- CDU/CSU: 39% of seats
- AfD: 20% of seats
- SPD: 7% of seats
- Greens: 18% of seats
- FDP: 6% of seats
- BSW: 5% of seats
- The Left: 5% of seats

After the election, there is a governing coalition between the CDU and the Greens:

- CDU/CSU: 68% of cabinet seats
- Greens: 32% of cabinet seats

The CDU/CSU has the Chancellorship.

Figure 1. Example of the survey vignette with the electoral outcome.

hold at least 51% of parliamentary seats, with any unnecessary parties being excluded to avoid an oversized government, which is the least frequent type of government in democracies (Clark et al., 2009). Cabinet seats are allocated proportionally to the number of parliamentary seats each party holds, following Gamson's law, and must total 100%. The Chancellorship is given to the party with the most parliamentary seats within the government, or randomly in case of a tie.

The advantage of random generation in this context is that it allows us to cover a wide range of potential electoral outcomes. On the respondents' screens appeared 72 different combinations of coalitions, 49% of which had the CDU/CSU as senior partner and Chancellor. Importantly, although the seat distribution is made realistic, any combination of parties, including those far apart ideologically, can form a coalition together as soon as they jointly have at least 51%. A variable capturing the ideological polarization of the government accounts for this in our analysis.

After each electoral outcome, we asked respondents how (un)acceptable they would personally find it on a scale from 0 (*not acceptable at all*) to 10 (*completely acceptable*). The question wording used to measure our dependent variables can be found in Appendix 2 of the Supplementary File (in English and German). The term "accept" is a synonym of "consent" according to the Cambridge dictionary, and arguably one that is more widely used and understood in the population. For example, in the first electoral debate between the two 2024 US presidential candidates, the journalist Bash asks Trump whether he will *accept* the result of the election if he loses. The literature on the topic also makes the link between consent and acceptance. C. J. Anderson et al. (2005, p. 5) argue that "if democratic procedures are to continue in the long run, then the losers must [...] *accept* the decision of the election." The link is even more clearly established in Nadeau and Blais (1993) with the title "[A]ccepting the Election Outcome: The Effect of Participation on Losers' Consent."

Because the term "accept" does not capture a behavior and might be interpreted in slightly different ways by different respondents, we also asked them how likely they would be to participate in a protest contesting the electoral outcome on a scale from 0 (*very unlikely*) to 10 (*very likely*). Importantly, we did not ask respondents

about their willingness to participate in a protest contesting the electoral outcome if they already said they accepted the outcome (five or above on the 0–10 scale). This second question would have been redundant. Instead, we assigned a value of 0 to the *protest* variable for all respondents who gave an answer of five or above to the *accept* question. Additionally, we used an 11-point scale for both indicators of consent/dissent to obtain a fine-grained measure, as we anticipated that very few respondents would be willing to make a forced choice between accepting/not accepting an electoral outcome and protesting/not protesting it. Moreover, the existence of a midpoint is central for us, as it allows us to distinguish those who are more consenting than dissenting. Note that these questions did not elicit the motivations of those dissenting from the electoral outcome. We acknowledge that, for some respondents, these motivations may be aligned with democratic values, such as protesting a government perceived as dangerous to democracy. Yet the consequences of not accepting such an outcome and contesting it may undermine democratic functioning. For example, a protest, even if it begins as a genuinely peaceful demonstration, may escalate into a riot due to the presence of a handful of ill-intentioned individuals.

Figure 2 reports the distribution of the two electoral consent/dissent variables. In each instance, this distribution is bimodal with the two extreme values, 0 and 10, being largely over-represented, indicating that respondents have strong opinions on the question. For acceptability, a plurality of respondents chose 0 (around 29%), whereas only 9% chose 10. In fact, a majority of electoral outcomes are not accepted, with 55% being evaluated below the midpoint. The distribution of the likelihood to protest variable shows that many of them are not willing to put this lack of acceptance into action, as 56% are at 0 on this variable. Yet there are still 23% of electoral outcomes against which Germans are willing to protest, i.e., they choose a response above the midpoint of the scale. For 13% of them, they even chose the maximum category 10. This is thus a substantial threat to electoral consent in the country. The correlation between the acceptability and

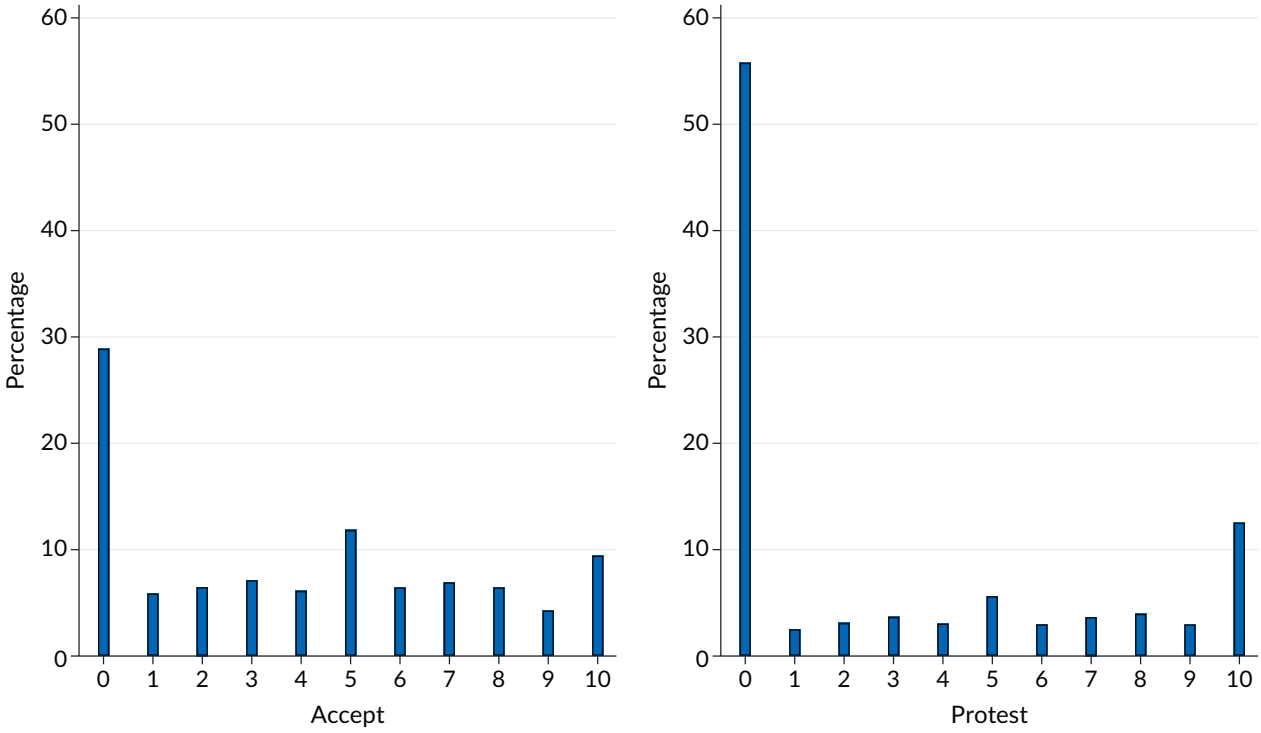

Figure 2. Distribution of electoral consent/dissent among respondents. Note: Means are 3.96 (accept) and 2.88 (protest). Standard deviations are 3.46 (accept) and 3.80 (protest).

likelihood to protest variables is −0.67, indicating that those who accept an outcome are also those who are least likely to participate in a protest contesting it. Note that this correlation is inflated by the fact that we assigned a value of 0 to the likelihood to protest variable for respondents who answered five or more to the acceptability question. Yet the correlation is still −0.26 when we only consider respondents who gave an answer to the acceptability question below five and who were thus asked both questions.

As a further exploration of the data, we examine differences between partisan groups (see Section 3 on how we identified the most liked and disliked party of each respondent). Those who are most accepting of the electoral outcome and least likely to protest against it are supporters of the AfD (average acceptance = 4.68, average likelihood of protest = 2.40), followed by CDU/CSU supporters (average acceptance = 4.17, average likelihood of protest = 2.71). At the other extreme, supporters of The Left are the least accepting (average = 3.25), while Greens supporters are the most likely to protest (average = 3.62). These differences between supporters are expected, given that not all of them are equally likely to be part of the governing coalition as constructed in the vignettes. However, the differences remain relatively small, less than 1.50 points on both indicators of consent and dissent. These descriptive statistics also show that acceptance and protest are not driven solely by supporters of a single party.

We also examine differences between groups depending on which party they dislike the most. The two parties most commonly disliked in our data are the AfD (53% of respondents)—especially among Greens supporters (84%)—and the Greens (27%)—especially among AfD supporters (69%). These two parties thus represent major opposing camps. The other parties are much less polarizing, with the proportion of haters not exceeding 6%. For this reason, Figure 3 shows the average level of consent and dissent among supporters of the AfD and the Greens when their main opponent is presented as being in government in the vignettes or not. The figure shows that Greens supporters react strongly to the presence of the AfD in government: their acceptance level decreases from 5.52 to 2.46, and their likelihood of protest increases by

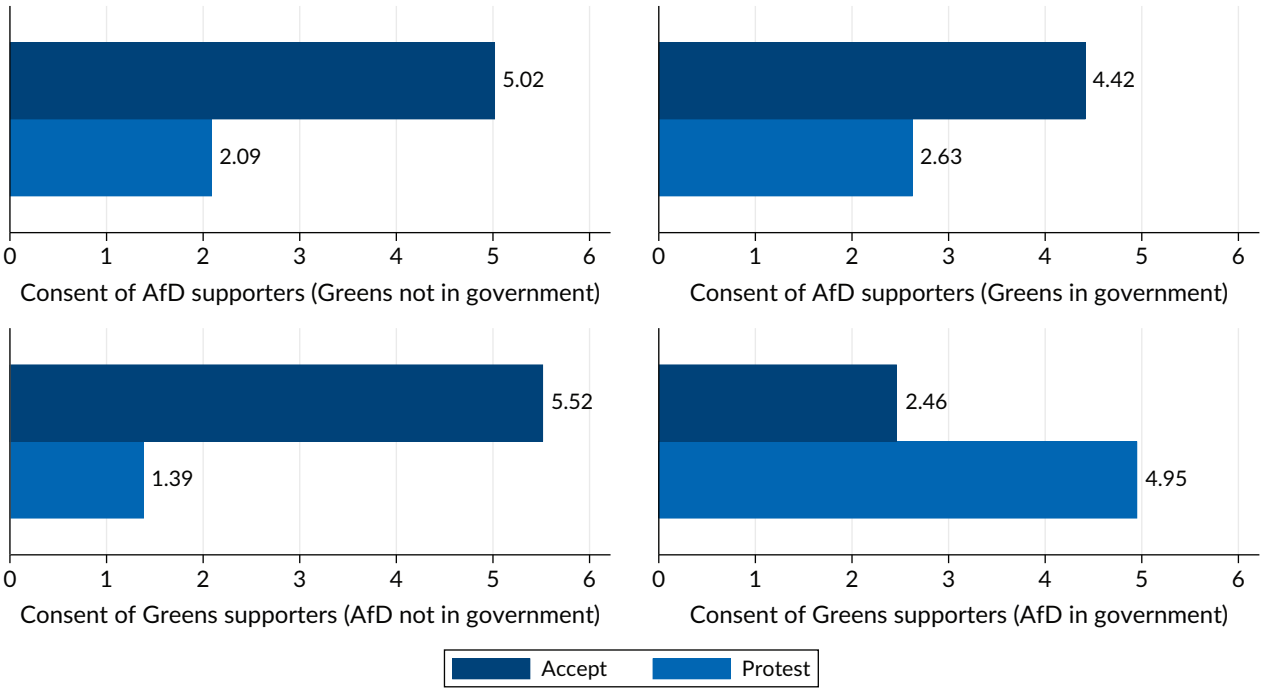

Figure 3. Electoral consent/dissent among AfD and Greens supporters.

1.39 to 4.95. Interestingly, AfD supporters show a similar pattern, but to a much lesser extent: their acceptance level decreases from 5.02 to 4.42 when the Greens are in government, and their likelihood of protest increases from 2.09 to 2.63. These results suggest that negative preferences against certain parties drive electoral consent and dissent. In the following sections, we present hypotheses and analyses that formalize these intuitions more systematically.

3. Hypotheses and Variables

In this article, we test two sets of pre-registered hypotheses (see https://osf.io/j26wp, sub-projects 1 and 2). The first examines the extent to which electoral consent and dissent are shaped by partisan preferences and the performance of the various parties in the vignette. The second assesses whether these attitudes vary with the structural characteristics of the electoral outcome, such as the number of parties in government or whether the chancellor comes from the party that won the largest share of parliamentary seats.

Following the literature on the winner–loser gap in satisfaction with democracy (C. J. Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Kern & Kölln, 2022; Nadeau et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2012), we expect electoral consent and dissent to be influenced by partisan preferences. This literature shows that citizens' democratic evaluations are shaped by the performance of their preferred party. The more seats this party secures in parliament and in government, the more satisfied its supporters are, and the more acceptable they find the election outcome. This greater acceptance stems from political representation: the victory of one's preferred party increases the likelihood that one's policy preferences will be realized (Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011). Additionally, winning boosts satisfaction with democracy because it validates supporters' political identity and reinforces their confidence in the democratic process (Beaudonnet et al., 2014; Singh, 2014). Consequently, the better one's preferred party performs in an election, at both parliamentary and governmental levels, the more willing citizens should be to accept the electoral outcome and the less likely they should be to engage in protest contesting it (C. J. Anderson & Mendes, 2006).

In an era of growing polarization, negative partisanship has become increasingly prevalent (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Caruana et al., 2015), especially given the human tendency to be more sensitive to negative information (Fournier et al., 2020). Citizens' electoral consent is therefore also likely to be affected by the performance of their most disliked party. An outcome in which this party gains substantial representation in parliament or government is likely to be perceived as a threat to their political values and preferences, or maybe even the regime as a whole, thereby reducing their acceptance of the outcome and increasing their likelihood of protesting against it. However, we expect the performance of the most liked party to remain a stronger determinant than that of the most disliked party, as positive partisanship still tends to be a better predictor of a range of political attitudes, including vote choice, than negative partisanship (C. D. Anderson et al., 2022; Ridge, 2022).

A further question concerns how to measure party performance. Evidence suggests that, in evaluating electoral outcomes, citizens tend to prioritize information about the government (Blais et al., 2023), as they consider the parties forming the governing coalitions to be the true "winners" of the election (Plescia, 2019; Stiers et al., 2018). We keep an agnostic approach by testing multiple indicators of performance. We, therefore, formulate the first set of four "partisan" hypotheses as follows:

H1A: The more seats their most liked (most disliked) party has in parliament, the more (less) acceptable the electoral outcome is, and the less (more) likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.

H1B: The more seats their most liked (most disliked) party has in government, the more (less) acceptable the electoral outcome is, and the less (more) likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.

H1C: Electoral outcomes in which their most liked (most disliked) party has the Chancellorship are more (less) acceptable and the less (more) likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.

H1D: Respondent's acceptance of an electoral outcome and the likelihood to participate in a protest contesting it depend more on the performance of their most liked party than on that of their most disliked party.

To identify the most liked and most disliked parties, we use 0–10 party-liking scales for each of the seven parties included in the electoral outcomes. These questions are asked prior to the vignettes and the consent/dissent questions, along with a follow-up question to break any ties. Approximately 3% of the sample is excluded from this analysis due to *don't know* responses to all seven party-liking questions.

We formulate five additional hypotheses regarding the structural characteristics of the electoral outcomes presented in the vignettes. The rationale behind these hypotheses is that citizens are more likely to be satisfied with some political systems because of specific features they find more desirable than others, for example, because they believe that a government with only a few parties is more efficient, or that a parliament in which more parties are represented is fairer. Therefore, we expect citizens to be more likely to consent to electoral outcomes generated by rules that reflect their structural preferences regarding what political systems ought to be (C. J. Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Blais et al., 2023). Firstly, we expect citizens to be less willing to consent to an outcome with a larger number of parties in government, as they may perceive such governments as less stable, less efficient, and more prone to difficulties in reaching compromises (Powell & Whitten, 1993; Vowles, 2010). By contrast, we anticipate these citizens to view a higher number of parties in parliament more positively, assuming that greater party diversity leads to broader representation of social groups and political preferences in the decision-making process (Lijphart, 1999). Our indicator is the effective number of parties, which we apply separately to the government and to the parliamentary seat share to define our first two "structural" hypotheses.

Secondly, we expect consent to be higher when the party with the largest parliamentary seat share is in government than when this party is in the opposition. The intuition is that respondents find the electoral outcome more legitimate when the party that has "won" the election in terms of parliamentary seats is part of the coalition that is governing the country, and has thus, by virtue of Gamson's law, the Chancellorship. There is indeed a common belief in the public that the party with the most seats is the legitimate winner of the election (Gattermann et al., 2022; Plescia, 2019), which is also echoed by the media coverage of elections (Glasgow et al., 2011). To capture this, we create a dummy variable that takes the value 1 when the party with the most seats in parliament is in the governing coalition, and 0 otherwise.

Thirdly, we also expect citizens not to consent to electoral outcomes in which the coalition government is ideologically incohesive, as they assume it will be unstable and inefficient. This is the same reason why we predict that people are more reluctant to accept larger coalitions. The more partners there are and the more diversified these partners are, the more difficult it is to reach an agreement on the policies to adopt. To measure the ideological range of the governing coalition, we rely on the left–right positioning of the various German parties according to the latest wave of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al., 2022). We then construct an indicator of polarization between governing parties, using the formula proposed by Dalton (2008), which consists of taking the average distance of all parties to the center of gravity of the group, weighted by the number of cabinet seats of each party.

Fourthly, we believe that citizens are risk-averse and react negatively to an uncertain political world where they perceive that an unfamiliar governing coalition could lead to turbulent times or even system collapse. Furthermore, there might be a psychological mechanism of voters preferring the status quo just for the cognitive comfort that it provides (Blais et al., 2021). We thus expect that respondents will be more inclined to consent to electoral outcomes with which they are familiar. To calculate familiarity, we rely on ParlGov data that list the parties that have been included in all German governments for more than a century (Döring et al., 2022). For each combination of parties appearing in the scenarios, we calculate the number of years it has been in government since 1990 (i.e., date of German reunification) divided by the total number of years over the period (= 34 years). Following this, we formulate five additional hypotheses:

> H2A: The larger the effective number of parties in government, the less acceptable the electoral outcome is, and the more likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.
>
> H2B: The larger the effective number of parties in parliament, the more acceptable the electoral outcome is, and the less likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.
>
> H2C: Respondents are more accepting of an electoral outcome and less likely to participate in a protest contesting it when the party with the largest parliamentary seat share is in government than when this party is in the opposition.
>
> H2D: The larger the ideological range of parties in government, the less acceptable the electoral outcome is, and the more likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.
>
> H2E: The more familiar the governing coalition, the more acceptable the electoral outcome is, and the less likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.

4. Results

As specified in the pre-analysis plan, we create a dataset in which each line is a dyad of respondent and electoral outcome (N = 26,740). We perform a series of OLS regressions where the dependent variables are our two indicators of consent/dissent, and the independent variables are those that correspond to our hypotheses. The descriptive statistics of the independent variables before standardization can be found in Appendix 3 in the Supplementary File. We also cluster the standard error by respondent. We add the total legislative seat share of the parties in the governing coalition since this variable was deemed influential in the

evaluation of electoral outcomes in the study of Blais et al. (2023). As there are no minority and oversized government in our scenarios, we do not have much variation on this variable, and the results regarding this variable should be interpreted with caution. To facilitate the interpretation of the effect sizes in the regressions, we standardize these independent variables so that the mean is 0 and the standard deviation is 1. This is the "baseline" regression model that is the same for both sets of hypotheses.

We begin by testing the first set of four partisan hypotheses. Figure 4 presents the results, showing the estimates from the baseline regression model alongside those from a series of pre-registered robustness tests. First, we use alternative measures of partisan preferences based on responses to questions about positive vote intention ("If there were an election tomorrow, for which party would you vote?") and negative vote intention ("For which party would you never vote?") instead of the party-liking scales. About 15% of our sample responded *don't know* or *would not vote* to the positive vote intention question, and less than 1% did so for the negative vote intention questions. These are considered missing values in the related analysis. Second, we restrict the sample to the first iteration of the electoral outcome questions, as respondents may experience fatigue after multiple iterations, which may, in turn, negatively affect the quality of their answers. Third, we exclude all outcomes in which the newly created BSW party (formed only a few months before the survey) is in government, as some respondents may not be familiar with it. Fourth, we remove from the sample respondents who have mild preferences in terms of the most liked party, as their weak partisanship levels might lead to a downward bias in the estimates. Specifically, we only keep those for which the most

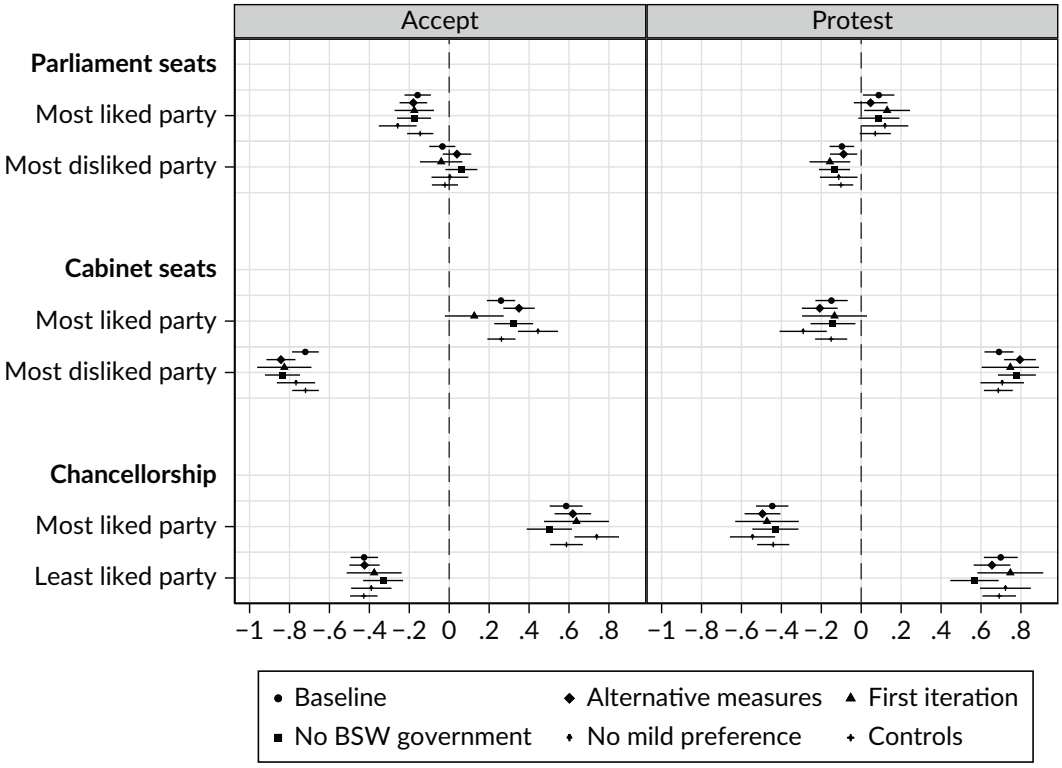

Figure 4. Regression results for partisan hypotheses. Notes: Entries are coefficient estimates from OLS regressions predicting the acceptability of the outcome (left panel) and the likelihood to protest this outcome (right panel), both on 0–10 scales. All independent variables are standardized. Full regression results are in Appendix 4 in the Supplementary File. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered by respondent.

liked party is two points above the second most liked party on the 0–10 party-liking scale. About half of the respondents in our sample exhibit mild political preferences according to this definition. We decided not to apply the same approach to negative partisan preferences, although this was pre-registered in our pre-analysis plan, because 96% of respondents fall into the "mild" category under this definition. Fifth, we re-estimate the regressions including additional individual-level socio-demographic control variables, age, gender, education, and region, to account for potential cofounding effects at this level.

Figure 4 shows that both positive and negative partisan preferences are powerful predictors of electoral consent and dissent, particularly when party performance is measured at the government level. The first estimates show that when performance is measured by parliamentary seat shares, the coefficients are small in absolute terms and rarely statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, and when they are, their sign is often in the opposite direction from what was expected. This finding is likely due to the vignette design and the fact that cabinet seat shares are mechanically strongly correlated with parliamentary seat shares. When we estimate a regression with the parliamentary seat shares of the most liked and disliked party alone, without the variables capturing cabinet seat shares of those parties and whether they have Chancellorship, the coefficients take the expected direction, in the sense that the greater the seat share of one's most (dis)liked party, the higher (smaller) the acceptance and lower (higher) likelihood of protesting (statistically significant at $p < .05$). However, these effects become mostly null in the full regression model, which suggests that respondents were more affected by what happens at the government level. Hence, we find only mixed evidence for H1A.

Figure 4 also shows that when cabinet seats of one's most liked party increase by one standard deviation, acceptance increases by 0.4 points, and the likelihood of protesting decreases by 0.3 points. This represents about 10% of the standard deviation of the dependent variables and is statistically significant at $p < .05$ across all specifications but one (the one with the alternative measure of partisan preferences, likely due to the high number of missing values for this variable, see above). To provide a different interpretation, we reproduce the baseline analysis in Appendix 6 in the Supplementary File using raw (unstandardized) independent variables. The results show that when the cabinet seat share of a respondent's most liked party increases from 0% to 50%, acceptance rises by 0.69 points on the 0–10 scale, while the likelihood of protesting decreases by 0.39 points.

Negative preferences are even more powerful predictors: the same increase in the independent variable leads to a decrease of 0.7–0.8 points in acceptance (about 20% of the standard deviation) and an increase in the likelihood of protesting by the same margin. These effects are statistically significant at $p < .05$ across all specifications. In terms of raw values (see Appendix 6 in the Supplementary File), when the cabinet seat share of one's most disliked party increases from 0% to 50%, acceptance decreases by 2.2 points, while the likelihood of protesting increases by 2.1 points. In other words, negative preferences are about twice as powerful as positive preferences in shaping electoral consent and dissent when performance is measured by cabinet seat shares. Equivalence tests show that differences between the two are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

The situation is more mixed for the Chancellorship. Figure 4 shows that an increase of one standard deviation in the variable leads to an increase of about 0.6 points in acceptance for positive partisan preferences, and a decrease of about 0.5 points in the likelihood of protesting (both $p < .05$ across all specifications). These effects are about 0.4 and 0.7 points, respectively, for negative partisan preferences (again $p < .05$ across all

specifications). Appendix 6 of the Supplementary File offers another way to interpret these estimates: when one's favorite party holds the Chancellorship, acceptance increases by about 1.4 points on the 0–10 scale (and the likelihood of protesting decreases by about 1.1 points). Conversely, when one's most disliked party holds the Chancellorship, acceptance decreases by about one full point (and the likelihood of protesting increases by about 1.6 points). Here again, equivalence tests show that differences in performance between the most liked and most disliked parties are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

We thus find strong evidence for both H1B and H1C: partisanship drives electoral consent and dissent when party performance is measured at the government level. We do not, however, find much evidence for H1D, as positive preferences are not stronger predictors than negative ones. In fact, negative preferences tend to matter more than positive ones.

We then continue with results related to the structural hypotheses, starting with the baseline regression model. As announced in the pre-analysis plan, we also perform a series of robustness tests for these hypotheses. First, we re-estimate the same regressions with alternative measures of some of the variables, i.e., the raw number of parties in government and parliament instead of the effective number, the ideological polarization of parties in government using the left–right positioning variable of the latest wave of the Comparative Manifesto Project (Lehmann et al., 2023) instead of the one of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, and finally using the whole post-World War II period to calculate familiarity with coalition instead of the post-1990 period. Note that this last alternative measure of the variable "familiarity with coalition" was not specified in the pre-analysis plan, but, ex post, it seems like a sensible additional test to us. Second, similarly to the robustness tests for the partisan hypotheses above, we reduce the sample to the first iteration of the vignette questions and then to the electoral outcomes in which the BSW is not in government. Finally, we add the same individual-level socio-demographic control variables.

Figure 5 shows that all estimates of the effects of structural variables are small in absolute terms and never statistically significant at $p < .05$ across all specifications. The variable that comes closest to this threshold is the polarization of governing parties, which decreases acceptance of the electoral outcome and increases the likelihood of protesting against it ($p < .05$ in all but one specification). This finding suggests that respondents prefer cohesive coalitions composed of ideologically aligned parties. The effect, however, is small in absolute terms, at most 0.2 in standardized units, which is lower than all partisan effects (see Figure 4).

Among the other structural variables, Figure 5 shows that only the number of governing parties affects acceptance levels, but not the likelihood of protesting. Respondents seem less favorable toward coalitions composed of many parties. Yet here again, the standardized effect is small, around 0.2 in absolute terms, and only statistically significant at $p < .05$ in four out of five specifications.

We thus find little evidence supporting any of the structural hypotheses. Respondents are not more likely to consent to electoral outcomes where the number of parliamentary parties is large (H2A), where the largest party in seat share has Chancellorship (H2C), or where they have some familiarity with the governing coalition (H2E). We find only mild evidence that they are somewhat affected by the polarization of governing parties (H2D) and their number (H2B), but these effects are clearly weaker than the partisan ones.

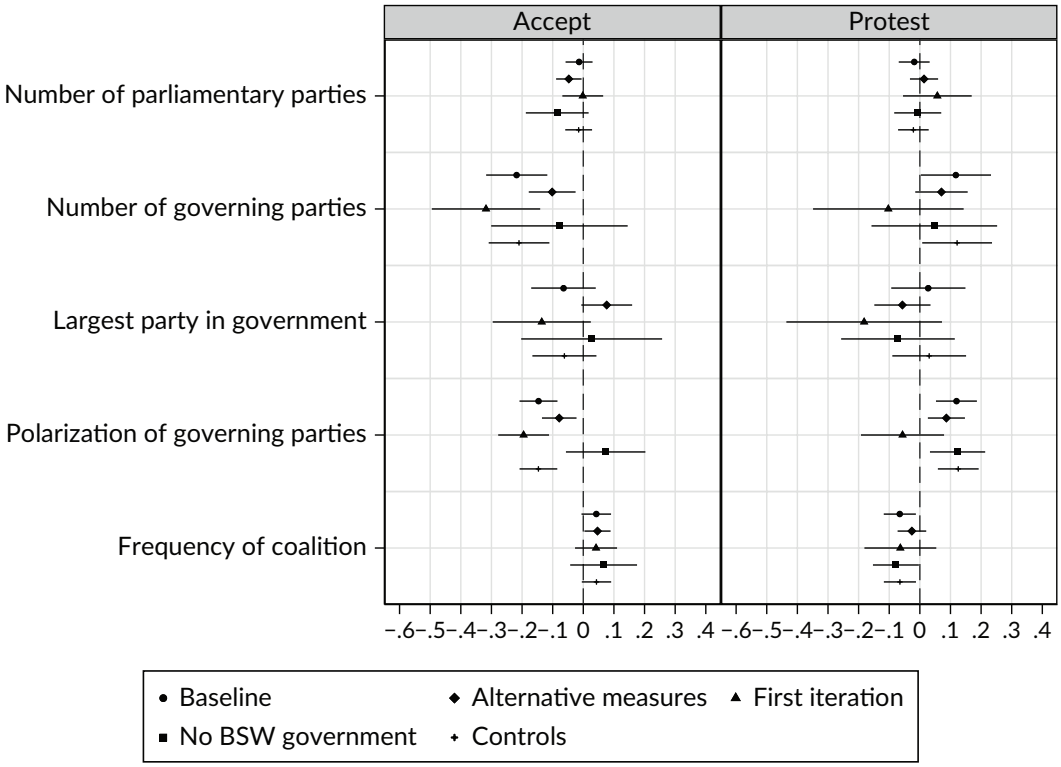

Figure 5. Regression results for structural hypotheses. Notes: Entries are coefficient estimates from OLS regressions predicting the acceptability of the outcome (left panel) and the likelihood to protest this outcome (right panel), both on 0–10 scales. All independent variables are standardized. Full regression results are in Appendix 5 in the Supplementary File. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered by respondent.

5. Conclusion

Although electoral consent is vital for democracy (C. J. Anderson et al., 2005), the empirical literature has so far approached it indirectly, most often by examining the gap in satisfaction with democracy between electoral winners and losers (C. J. Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Kern & Kölln, 2022; Singh et al., 2012). We propose a direct measurement instrument that can be applied in various countries: generating plausible electoral outcomes and asking respondents whether they consent to them. Using a representative sample of over 5,000 German citizens, we find that a substantial portion of electoral outcomes are deemed unacceptable and that a significant minority (23%) would incite protest actions. This important finding highlights the need for future research to study electoral consent directly.

We have examined which kinds of electoral outcomes foster citizen consent. We tested partisan hypotheses, according to which the performance of the most liked and disliked party affects citizens' electoral consent and dissent, and structural hypotheses, according to which the nature of the electoral outcome, such as the number of parties in government or whether the largest party holds the Chancellorship, affects such consent/dissent. The results are clear: partisan considerations outweigh structural features of electoral outcomes. What matters most for citizens' willingness to accept an electoral outcome and not to protest against it is whether the parties they like (dislike) perform well (poorly), especially when this performance is measured at the government level.

Importantly, we find that negative partisanship emerges as at least as powerful as positive partisanship, and often more so, in shaping electoral consent and dissent. In an era of affective polarization, the fortunes of the party one dislikes seem to matter even more than those of the party one favors. This has important implications for interpreting recent political events such as those in the United States and Brazil. Despite the differences between the political systems of these countries and that of Germany, particularly the presidential nature of the government and the resulting high degree of personification of politics where some candidates sometimes fuel affective polarization by using an aggressive and hostile rhetoric (Clayton et al., 2021), our results suggest that the supporters of Trump and Bolsonaro who gathered in front of their respective parliament after their favorite candidate lost the election may have been mobilized not only by loyalty to their preferred leader but equally or even more so by hostility toward the other side. These dynamics may thus reflect a broader, and potentially destabilizing, pattern in contemporary democracies.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

The replication material, including data, is available on https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/XOCRVU

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used LLMs to format the list of references in accordance with the journal's citation style.

Supplementary Material

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

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ARTICLE

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Abstention and Populist Voting: Evidence From the Italian 2018 Election

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Abstract

The 2018 election in Italy produced a highly fragmented outcome with a "tripolar" structure: mainstream forces were sharply weakened, while the Five Star Movement (left-wing) and The League (right-wing), two populist parties with different political agendas but similar anti-establishment postures, captured unprecedented levels of support. This configuration highlights a theoretical tension regarding disaffection towards the voting mechanism: similar underlying grievances can lead to either abstention or support for right- and left-wing populist parties. In 2018, in Italy, these three responses were available simultaneously, a unique case. This article examines the determinants of abstention and populist voting in Italy's 2018 general election. Using provincial (NUTS 3) data from 2008, 2013, and 2018, we employ a combination of factor and regression analysis to describe the underlying causes of populist voting and abstention. Our results show that abstention was higher in provinces characterized by crime, insecurity, and weak governance, while populist parties thrived in economically fragile areas. This contrasts with the stronger performance of mainstream parties in more prosperous regions. Overall, our findings suggest that both abstention and populist voting reflect enduring socio-territorial inequalities and institutional fragility. This implies that reducing regional disparities and strengthening state capacity are key conditions for addressing persistent patterns of electoral disengagement.

Keywords

abstention; Italy; political disaffection; populism; populist voting; territorial inequalities; voter turnout

1. Introduction

Across advanced democracies, the rise of populist parties has reshaped political competition. Dissatisfaction with mainstream politics, institutional strains, and widening social divides have weakened established party systems and opened space for movements claiming to represent "the people" against "corrupt elites." Italy offers a particularly relevant case of this transformation, as the Italian party system has undergone major changes over the past three decades, culminating in the results of the 2018 general election. Traditional center-left and center-right parties declined sharply, while two populist forces gained unprecedented support: the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), a left-wing anti-establishment movement, and the Lega (The League), a right-wing nationalist and anti-immigration party rooted in northern Italy. Both are widely recognized as populist (Corbetta et al., 2018) and strongly critical of European integration (Dijkstra et al., 2020).

The 2018 election produced an unprecedented tripolar configuration. According to post-election analyses (Itanes, 2018), 26.7% of voters changed their preferences compared with 2013. The Democratic Party (PD) and Forza Italia (FI) lost 2.76 and 2.81 million votes, respectively, while The League and M5S gained 4.19 and 1.55 million votes. Unlike many European contexts, Italian populist parties obtained a parliamentary majority and formed a coalition government that lasted until September 2019. Scholars have linked the rise of populism to economic and cultural transformations associated with globalization (Colantone & Stanig, 2018a, 2018c, 2019; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Morgan, 2018a, 2018b; Mutz, 2018a, 2018b). In Italy, these dynamics were reinforced by a prolonged economic downturn following the 2007 financial crisis. By 2018, real GDP per capita remained below its 1998 level, and declared incomes had not fully recovered (Maraffi, 2018).

Building on this literature, this article argues that abstention and populist voting represent distinct electoral responses associated with structural conditions consistent with lower confidence in representative institutions. When citizens perceive democratic institutions as unresponsive, they may either withdraw from participation (abstention) or support parties that challenge the status quo (populist voting). Empirically, we analyze provincial-level data for the 2008–2018 elections, combining descriptive analysis, factor analysis, panel regressions, and dynamic panel models. This framework allows us to examine how persistent territorial inequalities relate to abstention and populist voting across Italian provinces.

This article contributes to the literature by providing a unified interpretation of abstention and populist voting as interconnected electoral outcomes linked to structural conditions affecting democratic representation, and developing an empirical framework combining factor analysis with panel and dynamic regressions to examine how territorial inequalities shape electoral behavior. This study is structured as follows: The next section (Section 2) reviews the literature on populism and confidence in voting mechanisms. Section 3 describes the evolution of the Italian party system and the 2018 election. Section 4 presents the data and variables. Section 5 outlines the analytical framework and empirical results, and Section 6 concludes.

2. Electoral Confidence and Political Disaffection: A Structural Perspective

2.1. Confidence in Voting Mechanisms

Although scholars (e.g., Cook & Gronke, 2005) caution against treating trust and confidence as interchangeable concepts, the literature on populism often discusses institutional legitimacy and political dissatisfaction in

broadly overlapping terms (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). These debates have frequently been used to interpret patterns of abstention and anti-establishment voting in contemporary democracies.

Theoretical contributions emphasize how weaknesses in representative institutions can reduce the perceived instrumental and normative incentives for electoral participation (Birch, 2010). Empirical research also documents a significant association between support for populist parties—as defined by Inglehart and Norris (2016)—and broader forms of political dissatisfaction and disengagement from representative institutions (Algan et al., 2017). These patterns are embedded in a longer-term decline in electoral participation driven by cumulative institutional and contextual factors (Blais, 2000; Franklin, 2004).

Comparative studies further show that institutional arrangements and electoral system characteristics influence participation and disengagement by shaping perceptions of responsiveness and inclusiveness in democratic representation (Blais & Aarts, 2006; Jackman, 1987; Powell, 1986). In addition, contextual and election-specific factors—such as issue salience, electoral competition, and the broader political environment—can reinforce these dynamics by interacting with structural institutional conditions (Blais & Rubenson, 2013; Franklin & Hobolt, 2011). In this perspective, citizens who perceive political representation as ineffective may either withdraw from electoral participation or support populist parties. Applied to Italy in 2018, this suggests that abstainers and populist voters share similar structural conditions while diverging in their electoral responses.

These considerations motivate a joint analysis of abstention and populist voting. In this article, we do not attempt to measure voters' confidence directly; rather, we examine whether persistent socio-territorial characteristics—such as economic fragility, demographic decline, and institutional weakness—are systematically associated with both forms of political disengagement. In this sense, abstention and populist voting are treated as parallel aggregate responses consistent with weaker institutional performance and legitimacy, while remaining analytically distinct behavioral outcomes shaped by territorial context.

2.2. Populism

Populism is among the most debated and multifaceted concepts in political science, and no single universally accepted definition exists, with competing approaches—ideational, discursive, and strategic—capturing different aspects of the phenomenon. The ideational approach, now dominant, defines populism as a thin-centered ideology that divides society into two antagonistic camps: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite." Populist actors claim to represent the general will of the people against distant or unaccountable elites (Mudde, 2004). Because it lacks a comprehensive ideological system, populism can combine with different host ideologies, including both left- and right-wing variants (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The discursive approach focuses on language and political rhetoric. In this view, populism is expressed through a discourse that constructs "the people" as a moral subject opposed to corrupt elites (Laclau, 2005; Stavrakakis et al., 2018). The strategic approach instead emphasizes modes of political mobilization, defining populism as a strategy through which leaders appeal directly to the masses while bypassing traditional intermediary institutions (Barr, 2009). Despite their differences, these perspectives converge on the idea that populism tends to emerge in contexts characterized by perceived exclusion and institutional irresponsiveness. Depending on the ideological context in which it develops, populism may assume different forms. Left-wing populism is commonly associated with economic grievances and opposition to neoliberal policies, whereas

right-wing populism is often linked to cultural conflicts related to immigration, national sovereignty, and supranational integration (Pappas, 2019). At the same time, recent research highlights the growing prevalence of hybrid forms that combine economic and cultural appeals and adapt political narratives to evolving socio-economic conditions (Kriesi & Pappas, 2016).

Populism frequently overlaps with nationalism, nativism, and authoritarian tendencies, which complicates empirical identification. In this study, we adopt the ideational approach as a baseline framework, interpreting populism as a worldview that portrays politics as a conflict between virtuous citizens and corrupt elites. Within this perspective, both M5S and The League can be classified as populist despite their ideological differences. M5S emerged as an anti-establishment movement emphasizing transparency and political renewal, whereas The League evolved under Matteo Salvini into a nationalist, anti-immigration, and Eurosceptic force.

Our analysis focuses on how economic stagnation, demographic decline, and perceived insecurity shape the geography of populist support and abstention. This perspective aligns with recent research emphasizing the spatial dimensions of populism (Colantone & Stanig, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Di Matteo et al., 2022; Dustmann et al., 2017; Guiso et al., 2017, 2025; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Italy's 2018 election provides a revealing case in which both left- and right-wing populist parties achieved strong electoral success in contexts marked by socio-economic fragility and institutional weakness.

3. Institutional Situation in Italy and Electoral Results

3.1. The Italian Second Republic

Between 1992 and 1994, Italian politics underwent a profound transformation often described as the transition from the First to the Second Republic. The Tangentopoli corruption scandals dismantled the governing parties that had dominated the postwar era and precipitated the collapse of the proportional electoral system. The 1993 reform introduced a mixed electoral system (Mattarella Law), encouraging pre-electoral alliances and consolidating bipolar competition between center-left and center-right coalitions.

From 1994 to 2013, these two blocs alternated in power, largely structured around Silvio Berlusconi's center-right leadership and the center-left coalition anchored in PD. Geographic cleavages reinforced this pattern: FI and Lega Nord—later The League—were particularly strong in Northern regions, while center-left parties maintained stronger support in the center and parts of the South. During the same period, Italy also experienced frequent electoral reforms.

Four main systems were adopted after World War II: proportional representation (1948–1992), the mixed-member system introduced by the Mattarella Law (Law 276/1993), a proportional system with majority bonus under the Calderoli Law (Law 270/2005), and the mixed system introduced by the Rosato Law (Law 165/2017). The current Rosato system allocates roughly 61% of seats proportionally and 37% through plurality single-member districts, maintaining a hybrid structure that has contributed to fragmentation and electoral volatility.

3.2. Overview of the 2008, 2013, and 2018 Electoral Results

3.2.1. 2008 General Election

The general election of 13–14 April 2008 was held under the electoral rules introduced in 2005 by the center-right coalition (the Calderoli Law). The vote followed the collapse of the center-left government elected in 2006, representing a further step in the transformation of the Italian party system from the bipolar competition of the Second Republic toward a more fragmented configuration (Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2017).

The center-right coalition won a clear parliamentary majority. For the first time, only five parties entered parliament—two within each major coalition and the centrist Unione di Centro. Voter turnout declined to 80.5%, the lowest level recorded in Italy's postwar parliamentary elections and 3.1 percentage points below the 2006 election. The League achieved its best result up to that point, with support strongly concentrated in Northern regions, reflecting its longstanding territorial and regionalist political positioning. Figure 1 illustrates the spatial distribution of abstention and populist voting across Italian provinces in the 2008 election.

3.2.2. 2013 General Election

The 2013 general election took place in the aftermath of the eurozone crisis and the technocratic government led by Mario Monti, whose austerity policies generated widespread dissatisfaction. Voter disaffection was reflected in declining turnout and increasing volatility affecting mainstream parties.

The PD obtained a relative majority and formed a center-left government, but the most significant outcome was the emergence of the M5S as the most voted-for single party. Founded in 2009, M5S capitalized on anti-elite and anti-corruption sentiments and presented itself as an alternative to the political establishment (Angelucci et al., 2020).

Turnout declined to 75.2%, continuing the downward trend observed in previous elections. The results consolidated a tripolar party system composed of the center-left coalition, a fragmented center-right, and M5S. By contrast, The League—still largely perceived as a regional party—obtained only 4% of the vote, a weak performance that preceded the leadership transition from Umberto Bossi to Matteo Salvini. Figure 2 illustrates the spatial distribution of abstention and populist voting across Italian provinces in the 2013 election.

3.2.3. 2018 General Election

The 2018 general election marked a major turning point in the Italian party system. Traditional parties such as the PD and FI experienced sharp electoral losses, while M5S and The League recorded significant gains. M5S obtained 32.4% of the vote and became the dominant political force in Southern Italy, where its message of economic justice and political renewal resonated strongly in areas characterized by long-term socio-economic fragility. At the same time, Matteo Salvini repositioned The League as a nationalist and anti-immigration party with a broader national appeal, allowing it to expand beyond its traditional Northern base and overtake FI within the center-right coalition (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Orsina, 2019).

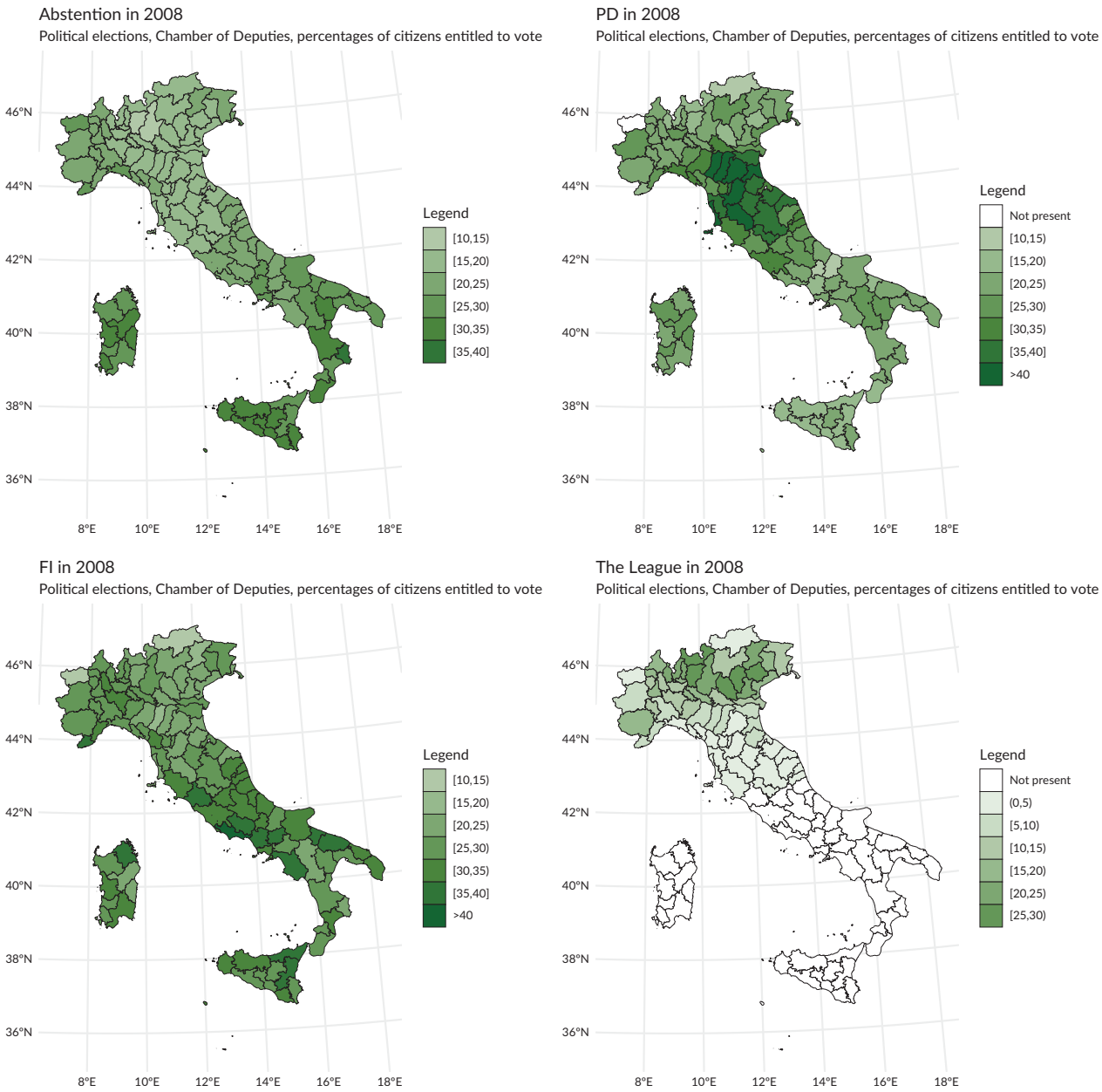

Figure 1. Italian political elections 2008: Results for abstention, PD, FI, and The League. Notes: The total number of voters who abstained or did not cast a valid vote (abstention) and the total number of valid votes obtained by each party or political area are expressed in percentage points as a share of citizens entitled to vote.

The election also confirmed the continuing decline in electoral participation. Turnout fell to 72.9%, and abstention rates were highest in economically and institutionally marginalized provinces. Although the coalition between M5S and The League proved short-lived, the election reflected a profound transformation of Italian politics around new issue dimensions related to sovereignty and social protection. Figure 3 illustrates the spatial distribution of abstention and populist voting across Italian provinces in the 2018 election.

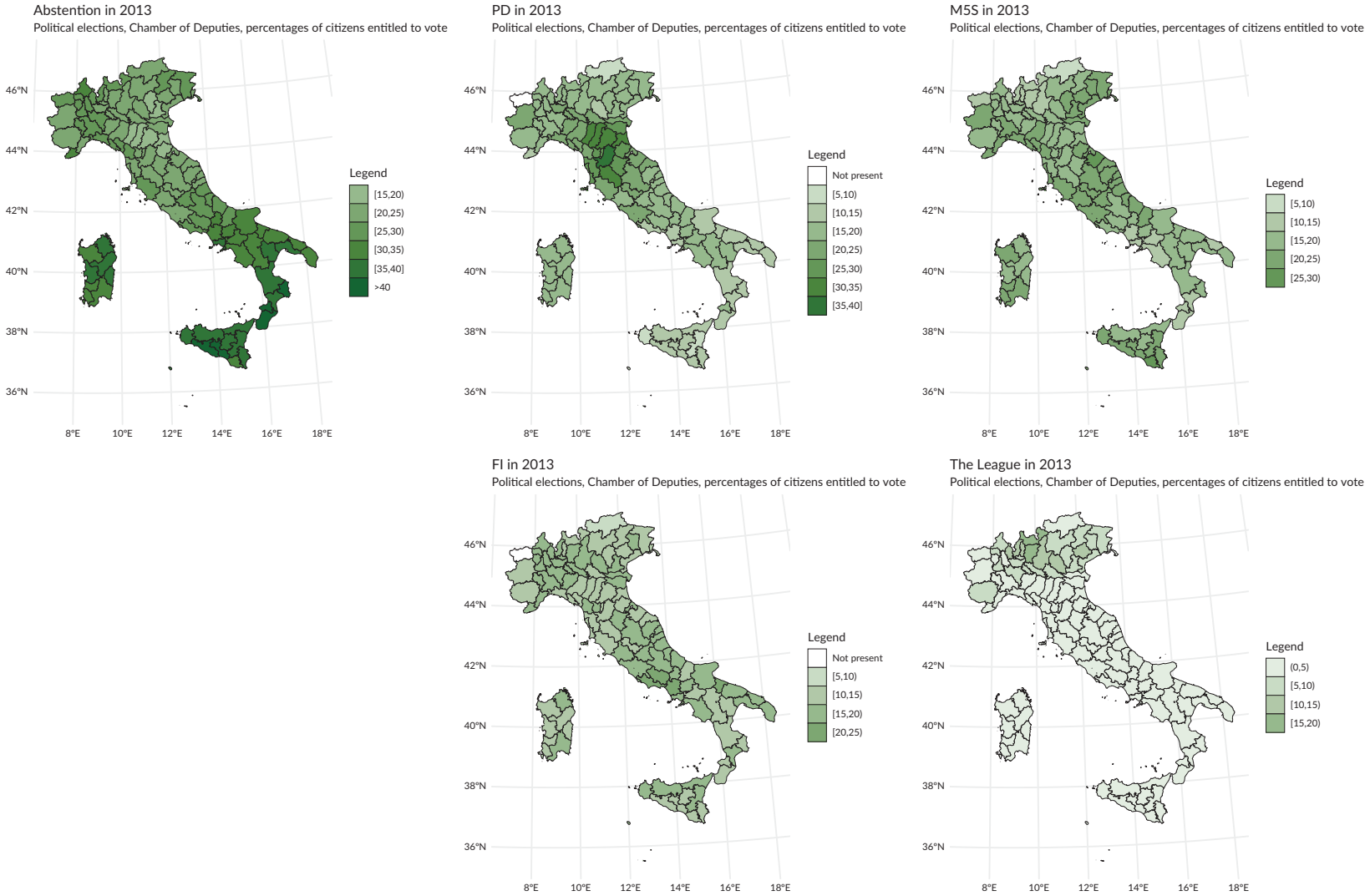

Figure 2. Italian political elections 2013: Results for abstention, PD, M5S, FI, and The League. Notes: The total number of voters who abstained or did not cast a valid vote (abstention) and the total number of valid votes obtained by each party or political area are expressed in percentage points as a share of citizens entitled to vote.

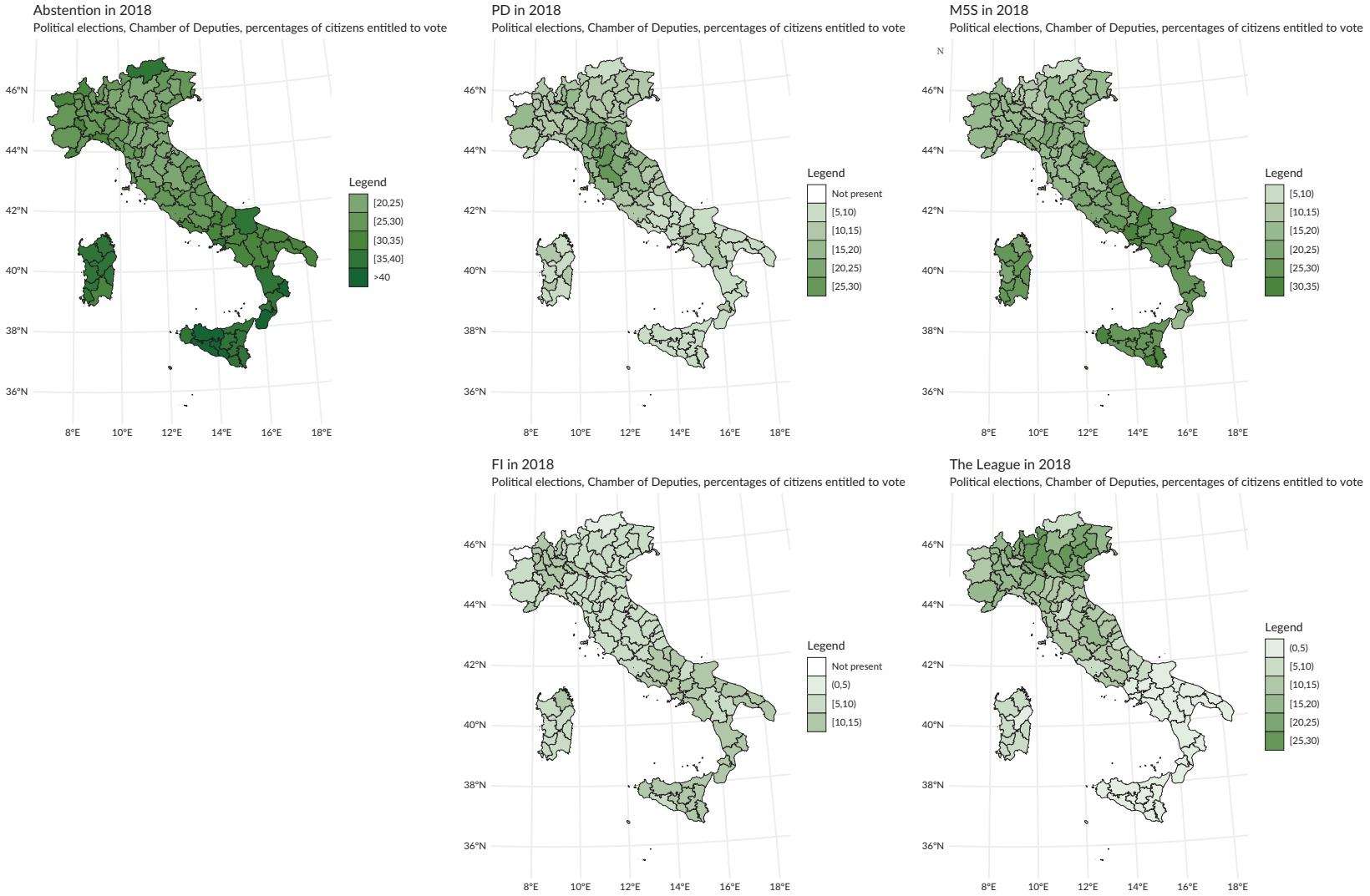

Figure 3. Italian political elections 2018: Results for abstention, PD, M5S, FI, and The League. Notes: The total number of voters who abstained or did not cast a valid vote (abstention) and the total number of valid votes obtained by each party or political area are expressed in percentage points as a share of citizens entitled to vote.

4. Data

To analyze the drivers of abstention and voting for populist parties, we have built a dataset that contains both electoral data from the general elections in 2008, 2013, and 2018, and a wide set of geographical, demographic, and socio-economic indicators.

4.1. Elections

The unit of observation is the province (NUTS-3 level). The dataset includes the 110 Italian provinces existing between 2012 and 2018, allowing us to capture territorial disparities that recent studies identify as central to the geography of political discontent (Di Matteo et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Electoral results and turnout rates were retrieved from the Italian Ministry of the Interior (Archivio Storico delle Elezioni). Socio-economic, demographic, and security indicators were obtained from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT—Territorial Database) and the Bank of Italy. These variables are consistent with those used in recent studies on the territorial determinants of populism and political disaffection (Colantone & Stanig, 2018a, 2018b; Di Matteo et al., 2022; Guiso et al., 2017; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Table 1 reports the electoral outcomes for the Chamber of Deputies elections in 2008, 2013, and 2018.

4.2. Demographic and Socio-Economic Variables

The study distinguishes two main electoral outcomes—abstention and populist voting—both interpreted as aggregate electoral responses associated with structural conditions affecting the functioning of representative institutions. Populist voting refers to ballots cast for the M5S and The League, which, despite ideological differences, share an anti-elite narrative and a strong appeal to "ordinary citizens." All other parties are classified as mainstream.

To explore territorial variation, we group the structural determinants into three broad domains—economic performance, demographic dynamics, and crime and security conditions—each measured through a set of standardized indicators:

- *Economic performance*: GDP per capita, unemployment, income inequality (Gini index), participation in the labor market, sectoral composition of value added, and non-performing loans.
- *Demography*: fertility and population growth rates, age structure, density, internal and international migration, and educational attainment.
- *Crime and security*: rates of theft, robbery, extortion, arson, and homicide, complemented by indicators of micro-criminality and organized crime presence.

These dimensions capture both the material and institutional context shaping patterns of political participation and disengagement. Following Rodríguez-Pose (2018), Colantone and Stanig (2018a, 2018b), and Di Matteo et al. (2022), we interpret persistent socio-economic disadvantage and insecurity as a fertile ground for populist mobilization and voter withdrawal alike. Variable description, data sources, summary statistics, and correlation matrices are reported in Appendix 2 in the Supplemental File.

Table 1. General elections results for 2008, 2013, and 2018 (Chamber of Deputies).

Political election	2008			2013			2018		
	Number	% of citizens	% of valid votes	Number	% of citizens	% of valid votes	Number	% of citizens	% of valid votes
Abstention and turnout									
Citizens entitled to vote	47,142,436	100%		47,005,432	100%		46,604,896	100%	
Abstention	10,617,017	22.5%		12,932,157	27.5%		14,955,989	32.1%	
Turnout	36,525,420	77.5%	100%	34,073,272	72.5%	100%	31,648,908	67.9%	100%
Parties									
M5S				8,702,987	18.5%	25.5%	10,252,280	22.0%	32.4%
The League	3,026,844	6.4%	8.3%	1,392,537	3.0%	4.1%	5,587,146	12.0%	17.7%
PD	12,092,998	25.7%	33.1%	8,644,542	18.4%	25.4%	5,887,357	12.6%	18.6%
FI	13,642,745	28.9%	37.4%	7,332,829	15.6%	21.5%	4,471,741	9.6%	14.1%
Fratelli d'Italia				668,886	1.4%	2.0%	1,398,109	3.0%	4.4%
Political areas and alignments									
Extreme left	378,116	0.8%	1.0%	95,150	0.2%	0.3%	480,285	1.0%	1.5%
Center-left	15,343,652	32.5%	42.0%	10,852,847	23.1%	31.9%	7,085,809	15.2%	22.4%
Center-liberals	103,760	0.2%	0.3%	3,364,715	7.2%	9.9%	971,815	2.1%	3.1%
Center-right	19,130,396	40.6%	52.4%	10,180,386	21.7%	29.9%	11,905,528	25.5%	37.6%
Extreme right	1,026,485	2.2%	2.8%	421,367	0.9%	1.2%	502,238	1.1%	1.6%
M5S				8,702,987	18.5%	25.5%	10,252,280	22.0%	32.4%

Notes: In 2008, FI and Alleanza Nazionale (which later became Fratelli d'Italia) stood in the elections together with a list called Il Popolo delle Libertà (The People of Freedom). Source: Italian Ministry of the Interior (2019).

5. Analytical Framework

5.1. Methodology

The empirical strategy combines exploratory, dimensional reduction, and inferential techniques to examine the territorial determinants of abstention and populist voting in Italy's 2018 general election. The objective is to identify the structural foundations of these outcomes and assess whether they reflect persistent territorial disparities affecting democratic representation.

To reduce multicollinearity and dimensionality, we apply factor analysis. This procedure summarizes a large set of correlated provincial indicators into a smaller number of structural dimensions capturing territorial inequalities, including economic conditions, demographic dynamics, and different forms of insecurity and crime. Using factor scores as regressors avoids estimating models with many highly correlated variables while preserving interpretability in the subsequent regressions. We then estimate regressions linking electoral outcomes in 2018 to lagged factor scores. Lagging the explanatory variables reduces simultaneity concerns and supports a more credible interpretation of the associations (Angrist & Pischke, 2009). It also helps avoid "bad controls," since contemporaneous variables may themselves reflect outcomes of the political process. The baseline specification includes election-wave effects and fixed effects to control for nationwide shocks and time-invariant territorial characteristics. Electoral persistence is captured by including lagged electoral outcomes. To further assess robustness, we estimate a dynamic panel specification based on the Arellano–Bond framework (Arellano & Bond, 1991). This estimator accounts for unobserved heterogeneity through first differencing and uses internally generated instruments based on lagged values of the dependent variable, helping to mitigate endogeneity related to persistence and simultaneity.

The empirical framework therefore proceeds in two stages: first, the extraction of latent territorial dimensions through factor analysis; and second, the estimation of static and dynamic regressions to evaluate the structural determinants and persistence of abstention and populist voting. The analytical framework is summarized in Figure 4.

5.2. Factor Analysis

To synthesize the large number of correlated indicators identified in the descriptive analyses, we perform a factor analysis on the full set of socio-economic, demographic, and security-related variables. This dimensionality reduction technique extracts a limited number of latent structural components that summarize broader territorial patterns, thereby reducing multicollinearity and facilitating a more interpretable regression analysis.

The factor solution reported in Table 2 yields nine latent factors that capture distinct structural dimensions of the Italian provincial landscape, differentiating provinces by economic conditions, demographic vitality, and several forms of insecurity and social vulnerability. More specifically, Factor 1 captures overall economic performance and material well-being, loading strongly on value added per capita, wages, exports, wealth, and labor market participation, and negatively on unemployment. Therefore, higher values of this factor identify economically dynamic and prosperous provinces. Factor 2 reflects demographic structure and vitality, distinguishing younger, growing territories from aging, demographically stagnant ones through

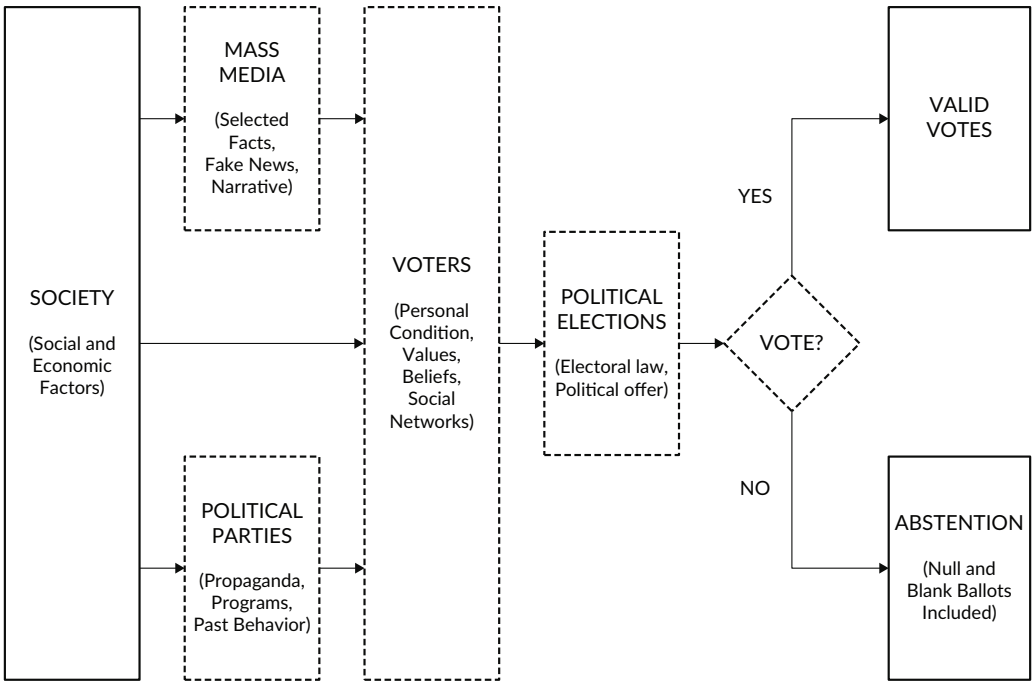

Figure 4. Analytical framework.

loadings on fertility, population growth, and age composition. Factor 3 captures labor market structure and sectoral specialization, particularly the relative weight of manufacturing and public sector value added, differentiating more industrialized provinces from those more dependent on public employment. Factors 4 and 5 group crime-related indicators. Factor 4 loads primarily on indicators of conventional crime—such as robberies, burglaries, and other forms of reported criminal activity—while Factor 5 is more closely associated with severe or organized crime, including homicides and mafia-related offenses. Together, they distinguish provinces according to different dimensions of insecurity and exposure to criminal networks. Factor 6 reflects educational attainment and human capital, loading on the share of the population with at least secondary education and related skill indicators. Factor 7 is associated with migration-related variables, including foreign residents and migrant reception structures. It captures the territorial intensity of migration-related presence and pressures, without implying any normative assessment regarding the governance or control of migration flows. Factor 8 reflects internal and external mobility dynamics, particularly emigration across regions and abroad, identifying provinces characterized by stronger outward migration patterns. Finally, Factor 9 captures aspects of the informational environment, proxied by newspaper circulation and related indicators of media exposure. Factor labels in Table 2 are intended as heuristic summaries of the dominant loadings and should not be interpreted as direct measures of specific phenomena.

Their spatial distribution (see Appendix 3 in the Supplemental File) aligns with well-documented territorial divides in Italy: long-term economic disparities between North and South, contrasting demographic dynamics between metropolitan and inland areas, and persistent differences in exposure to criminal networks and local security challenges. These patterns are consistent with evidence that contemporary political behavior is shaped by historically rooted territorial inequalities and uneven development trajectories (Colantone & Stanig, 2018b, 2019; Morgan, 2018b; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Table 2. Varimax rotated factor loadings and characterization of factors.

Variable	Factor 1 Economic well-being	Factor 2 Crime in densely populated areas	Factor 3 Demographic growth	Factor 4 Crime in less industrialize areas	Factor 5 Organized crime violence	Factor 6 Arsons and extortions in areas with high emmigration	Factor 7 Government management of uncontrolled immigration	Factor 8 Crimes against women	Factor 9 House robberies	Communality	Uniqueness
1. Arsons	–0.384					0.682				0.709	0.291
2. Attempted homicides	–0.380			0.328	0.593					0.680	0.320
3. Bag theft		0.917								0.868	0.132
4. Home burglaries	0.517	0.339	–0.314						0.428	0.767	0.233
5. Drug-related crimes		0.344		0.682						0.644	0.356
6. Extortions		0.311			0.319	0.379			0.329	0.564	0.436
7. House robberies		0.482							0.671	0.750	0.250
8. Intentional homicides					0.804					0.778	0.222
9. Mafia homicides		0.345			0.606					0.734	0.266
10. Micro criminality	0.403	0.796								0.904	0.096
11. Prostitution-related crimes								0.757		0.697	0.303
12. Sexual violence	0.369			0.474			0.340	0.471		0.773	0.227
13. Robbery		0.901								0.890	0.110
14. Robbery homicides				0.384	0.474	–0.323		0.398		0.692	0.308
15. Fertility rate	0.481		0.418				0.529			0.809	0.191
16. Total growth rate of population	0.781		0.456							0.893	0.107

Table 2. (Cont.) Varimax rotated factor loadings and characterization of factors.

Variable	Factor 1 Economic well-being	Factor 2 Crime in densely populated areas	Factor 3 Demographic growth	Factor 4 Crime in less industrialize areas	Factor 5 Organized crime violence	Factor 6 Arsons and extortions in areas with high emmigration	Factor 7 Government management of uncontrolled immigration	Factor 8 Crimes against women	Factor 9 House robberies	Communality	Uniqueness
17. Population between 15 and 64 years	−0.505		0.790							0.908	0.092
18. Population over 64 years	0.319		−0.875							0.933	0.067
19. Population density		0.655							−0.335	0.738	0.262
20. Total immigration	0.869									0.887	0.113
21. Isolation (highways, airports, and ports)		−0.491		0.421				−0.329		0.645	0.355
22. Participation in the labor market	0.882									0.911	0.089
23. Participation in the labor market: difference between men and women	−0.804		0.325							0.812	0.188
24. Exports per capita	0.668			−0.482						0.751	0.249
25. Income inequality	−0.656		0.391							0.697	0.303
26. Non-performing entry rate of loans to households	−0.648									0.646	0.354
27. Unemployment: job seekers aged 15 and over	−0.805									0.717	0.283
28. Value added: Manufacturing	0.601			−0.668						0.881	0.119
29. Value added: public sector	−0.761			0.426						0.878	0.122
30. Value added: per capita	0.907									0.895	0.105

Table 2. (Cont.) Varimax rotated factor loadings and characterization of factors.

Variable	Factor 1 Economic well-being	Factor 2 Crime in densely populated areas	Factor 3 Demographic growth	Factor 4 Crime in less industrialize areas	Factor 5 Organized crime violence	Factor 6 Arsons and extortions in areas with high emmigration	Factor 7 Government management of uncontrolled immigration	Factor 8 Crimes against women	Factor 9 House robberies	Communality	Uniqueness
31. Median gross hourly wage of employees born abroad	0.639					–0.364	0.352			0.747	0.253
32. Median gross hourly wage of employees born in Italy	0.869									0.893	0.107
33. Mean wage of employees	0.833									0.874	0.126
34. Mean wealth per capita	0.870									0.868	0.132
35. Population having at least a secondary degree	0.699				–0.323					0.762	0.238
36. Immigration of graduates between 25 and 39 years	0.848									0.844	0.156
37. Foreign residents	0.763									0.768	0.232
38. Emigration to other Italian regions	–0.335					0.765				0.745	0.255
39. Emigration abroad	0.413						0.579			0.656	0.344
40. Beds in emergency residences for migrants							0.671			0.557	0.443
41. Newspaper circulation	0.708									0.747	0.253

Note: Factor loadings below 0.3 are omitted.

5.3. Regression Analysis on Factor Scores

Rather than examining a large number of individual indicators separately, the factor structure allows us to model structural conditions more parsimoniously and evaluate how these broader dimensions relate to abstention and party support. The factors derived from this analysis serve as the main explanatory variables in the regressions estimated in the next sections. Full extended descriptions of factor composition, loadings, spatial distributions, and macro-territorial averages are reported in Appendix 3 in the Supplementary File.

To assess how the underlying territorial structures identified through factor analysis relate to electoral outcomes, we estimate a set of linear regression models where the dependent variables are the provincial shares of abstention and the vote shares of M5S, The League, PD, and FI in the 2018 election. The explanatory variables are the factor scores, which summarize broader socio-economic, demographic, and security-related conditions across provinces. This specification allows us to evaluate the relationship between territorial inequalities and electoral behavior while reducing multicollinearity and improving interpretability. The baseline linear panel model is specified as follows:

$$y_{i,2018} = \alpha_1 + \beta_1' F_{i,2017} + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Where $y_{i,2018}$ is the share, expressed in percentage points, of citizens entitled to vote who abstained or voted for a given party (i.e., M5S, The League, PD, FI) in province i in 2018, and $F_{i,2017}$ are the factor scores for province i in 2017. Factor scores are lagged at time $t - 1$, i.e., 2017, to limit problems of reverse causality. The outcomes of the baseline regression analysis linking electoral behavior to the latent structural factors are presented in Table 3. The results show that territorial disparities remain powerful predictors of both abstention and populist support.

The estimated coefficients should be interpreted as associations between territorial characteristics and electoral outcomes. The analysis does not identify causal effects but documents systematic patterns linking socio-territorial conditions to abstention and populist voting.

Starting with abstention (Column 1), the estimates suggest that it rose in provinces marked by structural disadvantages, particularly those characterized by crime in less industrialized areas (F4) and organized crime violence (F5), and declined in those with higher levels of economic well-being (F1). These findings reinforce the interpretation of abstention as a reaction to socio-economic marginalization and institutional neglect, in line with evidence that long-term territorial inequalities and weak governance contribute to democratic disengagement (Di Matteo et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). The government management of the uncontrolled immigration factor (F7) is also positively and significantly associated with abstention. In this sense, abstention functions as a form of protest or "exit" behavior—a withdrawal from political participation associated with the weakening of representative institutions and their capacity to channel political demands.

Moving to party-specific patterns, economic well-being (F1) emerges as the most consistent differentiating factor across political forces. M5S (Column 2) achieves higher support in economically fragile and institutionally weak territories, consistent with its stronger presence in areas characterized by socio-economic vulnerability and political disaffection. By contrast, The League (Column 3) performs better in economically dynamic provinces, particularly in Northern Italy, where demographic stagnation and long-standing territorial characteristics contribute to shaping its electoral geography (Albertazzi et al., 2018).

Table 3. Baseline regression analysis on factor scores.

	(1) Abstention	(2) M5S	(3) The League	(4) PD	(5) Forza Italia
F1 Economic well-being	−3.973***	−4.531***	5.106***	2.962***	−1.311***
	(0.266)	(0.266)	(0.437)	(0.258)	(0.156)
F2 Crime in densely populated areas	−0.438*	0.697***	−0.862**	0.796***	0.252
	(0.237)	(0.199)	(0.341)	(0.236)	(0.193)
F3 Demographic growth	1.146***	0.901***	−1.170***	−1.286***	0.472***
	(0.239)	(0.222)	(0.427)	(0.280)	(0.163)
F4 Crime in less industrialized areas	2.028***	0.600**	−2.496***	−0.446*	−0.400**
	(0.233)	(0.262)	(0.450)	(0.227)	(0.162)
F5 Organized crime violence	1.667***	−0.175	−0.911***	−0.734***	0.217
	(0.282)	(0.385)	(0.185)	(0.226)	(0.172)
F6 Arsons and extortions in areas with high emigration	0.446*	0.313	−1.327***	−0.091	0.419**
	(0.238)	(0.253)	(0.270)	(0.204)	(0.175)
F7 Government management of uncontrolled immigration	1.185***	−1.116***	0.356	−0.837***	−0.174
	(0.253)	(0.222)	(0.584)	(0.285)	(0.164)
F8 Crimes against women	−0.001	0.435*	−0.311	−0.373*	0.061
	(0.255)	(0.227)	(0.282)	(0.214)	(0.115)
F9 House robberies	−0.268	0.351	−0.310	0.747***	0.093
	(0.252)	(0.255)	(0.330)	(0.254)	(0.153)
Constant	29.684***	21.819***	12.278***	12.531***	9.507***
	(0.247)	(0.284)	(0.364)	(0.272)	(0.152)
No. of observations	110	110	110	109	109
R-squared	.808	.746	.736	.645	.514
F test	51.6***	57.3***	59.9***	20.1***	11.3***

Notes: The economic variables are expressed in thousands of euros, robust standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

For mainstream parties, the estimated coefficients are generally weaker and less stable across specifications, suggesting looser and less systematic associations with the structural factors considered. In line with this pattern, FI (Column 5) displays weaker and more dispersed territorial associations, consistent with its declining organizational capacity and the erosion of a coherent social base.

Taken together, the results underscore that economic well-being (F1) and security-related dimensions (F4–F5) capture the core territorial cleavages shaping both abstention and populist support. They also indicate that abstention and populist voting represent complementary yet distinct aggregate electoral responses to persistent socio-territorial inequalities: the former taking the form of withdrawal from electoral participation, and the latter manifesting as support for alternative political options. These findings align with previous studies highlighting how spatially entrenched inequalities and institutional weaknesses contribute to divergent reactions to representative democracy across Italian provinces (Di Matteo et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Overall, the baseline model demonstrates a high degree of explanatory power across all specifications and dependent variables. The results support a multidimensional understanding of Italian electoral dynamics, in

which abstention and populist voting patterns are shaped by overlapping, but not identical, structural conditions. These findings further confirm that both the demand for populism and the retreat from electoral participation are territorially rooted responses to persistent socio-economic and institutional deficiencies.

5.4. Robustness Analysis

To assess the robustness of our findings and the methodological choices presented in the previous section, we conducted complementary robustness checks. These serve to validate both the factor-based specification adopted in our main regressions and our substantive focus on the 2018 general election as a pivotal moment in Italy's electoral realignment.

5.4.1. Baseline Regressions With Lagged Dependent Variables

To limit endogeneity, we estimated an autocorrelated model, as follows:

$$y_{i,2018} = \alpha_1 + \gamma_1 y_{i,2013} + \beta_1' F_{i,2017} + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

In which we added the lagged dependent variable(s) calculated in 2013 (i.e., the results of the previous general election) as a covariate. The results align with those obtained with the baseline model. Regression outcomes can be found in Appendix 4 in the Supplementary File.

5.4.2. Baseline Regressions on Individually Selected Variables

As a second robustness check, we estimate the baseline regressions using a reduced set of demographic and socio-economic variables instead of the latent factors. The variables are selected based on their relevance in previous empirical studies, particularly Dijkstra et al. (2020), following the conventional strategy of relating observable structural indicators directly to electoral outcomes.

Regression outcomes are reported in Appendix 4 in the Supplementary File, while Appendix 5 lists the selected variables. The results confirm the importance of distinguishing between the two main populist parties—M5S and The League—which draw support from different socio-territorial contexts.

Overall, the findings remain consistent with the baseline analysis and support the interpretation that distinct territorial conditions are associated with different patterns of populist support.

5.4.3. Panel Regressions

As a third robustness check, we estimate fixed-effects panel regressions using the same individual variables to exploit the data's temporal dimension. This approach controls for unobserved, time-invariant heterogeneity across provinces and captures within-province changes over time.

The estimated model is as follows:

$$y_{i,2018} = \alpha_1 + \beta_1' F_{i,2017} + \mu_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

Where μ_i captures unobserved provincial effects, and all other variables have the same meaning as previously illustrated. Regression outcomes can be found in Appendix 4 in the Supplementary File.

The results confirm that the relationship between structural disadvantage and electoral outcomes evolved across elections, culminating in 2018—a turning point marked by the nationalization of The League, the consolidation of M5S in the South, and the collapse of traditional parties (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

5.4.4. Dynamic Panel Analysis

We estimate a dynamic specification using a System GMM estimator (Arellano & Bond, 1991; Blundell & Bond, 1998), which accounts for persistence, endogeneity, and unobserved heterogeneity.

Formally, the System GMM framework can be represented by two equations. The first, expressed in first differences, removes time-invariant unobserved effects and addresses the endogeneity of lagged outcomes:

$$\Delta y_{it} = \gamma_{41} \Delta y_{i,t-1} + \beta_1' \, \Delta F_{it} + \Delta \varepsilon_{it}, \tag{4}$$

The second equation, in levels, incorporates the original series and uses lagged differences as instruments to increase efficiency when variables display persistence, as follows:

$$y_{it} = \gamma_2 y_{i,t-1} + \beta_2' \, F_{it} + \mu_i + \varepsilon_{it}, \tag{5}$$

Where all variables have the same meaning as previously illustrated. To avoid instrument proliferation and the resulting overfitting of the endogenous structure in a short panel, we adopt a parsimonious specification of the estimator (Blundell & Bond, 1998; Roodman, 2009). Specifically, the second lag of the dependent variable is used as an instrument for the difference equation, and its first difference as an instrument for the level equation.

All models are estimated using two-step robust standard errors with finite-sample correction and Windmeijer-corrected standard errors. We also restricted lag depth to avoid instrument proliferation (Roodman, 2009). This procedure mitigates simultaneity and persistence biases not fully addressed in the baseline regressions.

The lagged dependent variable is positive and statistically significant across all equations, indicating strong persistence in electoral outcomes. Provinces with higher past abstention or party support tend to display similar patterns over time.

For abstention, higher rates are associated with provinces characterized by crime, social disorder, and weaker institutional capacity, while economic well-being is linked to lower disengagement. Support for M5S remains concentrated in economically fragile but demographically dynamic areas, whereas The League displays stronger persistence in wealthier Northern provinces. Mainstream parties show weaker and less stable coefficients, with FI in particular exhibiting declining persistence over time.

Overall, the dynamic estimates confirm that abstention and populist voting are cumulative processes shaped by persistent territorial inequalities and institutional fragility.

Table 4. Dynamic panel analysis on factor scores.

	(1) Abstention	(2) M5S	(3) The League	(4) PD	(5) FI
L.Abstension	1.097***				
	(0.006)				
F1 Economic well-being	0.814***	−0.575	−5.713***	1.107***	−0.291***
	(0.162)	(0.627)	(0.893)	(0.097)	(0.087)
F2 Crime in densely populated areas	0.145	−0.204	1.487**	0.131*	−0.066
	(0.119)	(0.535)	(0.573)	(0.078)	(0.081)
F3 Demographic growth	0.580***	4.097***	−4.856***	0.045	0.001
	(0.162)	(0.515)	(0.983)	(0.085)	(0.081)
F4 Crime in less industrialized areas	−0.057	0.384	3.802***	−0.546***	−0.279***
	(0.162)	(0.496)	(0.989)	(0.089)	(0.100)
F5 Organized crime violence	0.359**	1.450***	−0.212	−0.272***	−0.133
	(0.139)	(0.409)	(0.371)	(0.090)	(0.095)
F6 Arsons and extortions in areas with high emigration	0.008	1.227***	1.493***	−0.139	−0.034
	(0.146)	(0.428)	(0.539)	(0.096)	(0.086)
F7 Government management of uncontrolled immigration	−0.011	−2.164***	−1.407	−0.014	0.458***
	(0.292)	(0.692)	(1.201)	(0.133)	(0.126)
F8 Crimes against women	0.242*	2.677***	−0.524	−0.061	−0.440***
	(0.131)	(0.756)	(0.672)	(0.096)	(0.096)
F9 House robberies	0.463***	3.312***	−0.930*	0.119*	−0.269***
	(0.115)	(0.462)	(0.524)	(0.065)	(0.086)
L.M5S		1.521***			
		(0.048)			
L.League			2.505***		
			(0.205)		
L.Partito Democratico				0.689***	
				(0.005)	
L.Forza Italia					0.591***
					(0.006)
No. of observations	218	218	218	218	218
F test	6,914***	136***	17.5***	3,069***	2,281***

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Given the short panel (three electoral waves), the instrument set is deliberately restricted to avoid instrument proliferation. Therefore, the resulting model is exactly identified, and the Hansen J test is not defined. Similarly, there are not enough lags to calculate AR(.).

5.4.5. External Validation Using Survey Evidence

While the core empirical analysis of this article relies on aggregate electoral and territorial data, our theoretical framework draws on a broad literature linking socio-territorial disadvantage to political disaffection and lower institutional confidence. To address concerns regarding the potentially attitudinal nature of this mechanism, and to assess the plausibility of our interpretation, we complement the main

analysis with an external validation exercise based on individual-level survey data from the European Social Survey.

Specifically, we use data from the European Social Survey (Round 8), which includes standardized measures of institutional trust and democratic satisfaction across European regions. We focus on three widely used indicators: trust in the country's parliament, trust in politicians, and satisfaction with the way democracy works. In addition, we construct a standardized index of institutional trust by averaging trust in parliament and trust in politicians.

To ensure comparability with our territorial analysis, we compute population-weighted regional averages of these survey measures at the NUTS-2 level. We then relate these outcomes to a territorial disadvantage index constructed using the same structural dimensions emphasized in the main analysis—namely, unemployment, income, education, and crime. This index captures persistent socio-economic and institutional conditions that characterize regional contexts.

The results reveal a consistent pattern. Regions characterized by higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage exhibit systematically lower levels of institutional trust and democratic satisfaction. Trust in parliament and trust in politicians are positively associated with income and educational attainment, and negatively associated with unemployment and crime. Moreover, the composite index of institutional trust displays a significant negative relationship with the territorial disadvantage index, as shown in Table 5. The bivariate association between institutional trust and territorial disadvantage is visually illustrated in Figure 5, which highlights the clear negative slope linking structural disadvantage to lower trust levels across regions.

Table 5. Institutional trust index vs. territorial disadvantage.

	Institutional trust
Territorial disadvantage index	−0.481*
	(0.254)
Constant	−0.000
	(0.223)
No. of observations	17
R-squared	0.193
$F(1, 15)$	3.59
Prob > F	0.0777

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.10$.

For completeness, the full correlation matrix between ESS trust measures and the underlying socio-economic indicators is reported in Appendix 6 in the Supplementary File. Although this exercise does not establish causality, it provides survey-based evidence that the structural conditions identified in our aggregate models are associated with lower institutional trust, supporting the interpretation of abstention and populist voting as territorial outcomes linked to political disaffection rather than direct measures of individual attitudes.

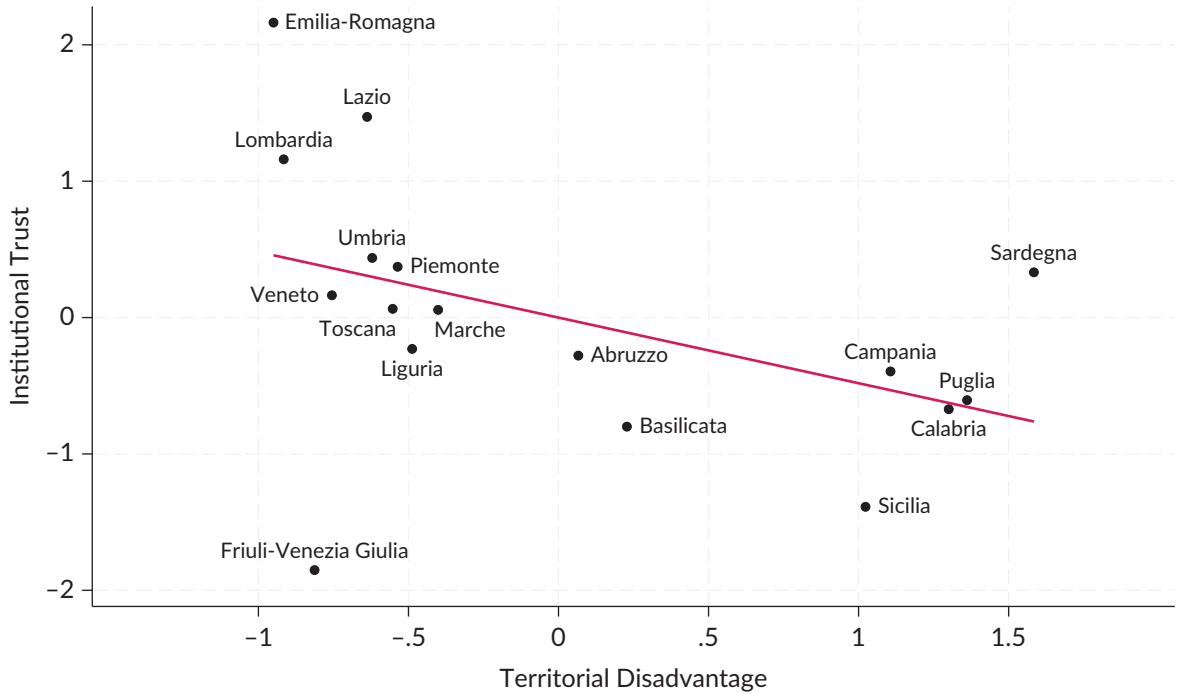

Figure 5. Trust vs. socioeconomic disadvantage.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This article examined how persistent territorial inequalities and lower confidence in electoral democracy shape both abstention and populist voting in Italy. Using provincial data for the 2008–2018 elections, we combined descriptive analysis, factor analysis, and panel regressions to identify the structural foundations of political disaffection. The results show that abstention and support for M5S and The League are stronger in provinces characterized by economic fragility, demographic decline, and insecurity—conditions that weaken social cohesion and the functioning of representative institutions. Dynamic panel estimates also reveal strong persistence in electoral behavior, indicating that patterns of abstention and partisan support tend to reinforce themselves over time.

While The League consolidated its support in Northern regions, M5S remained more strongly associated with economically and institutionally fragile Southern provinces. Mainstream parties display weaker and less systematic territorial linkages, with FI in particular experiencing a gradual erosion of its electoral base. Overall, these findings suggest that abstention and populist voting reflect long-term territorial disparities rather than short-term reactions to policy performance.

Addressing democratic disaffection, therefore, requires tackling its territorial roots by reducing regional inequalities, improving public services, and strengthening local governance. Future research could further explore the micro-level mechanisms linking territorial disadvantage, institutional trust, and electoral behavior, as well as extend the analysis to other European contexts experiencing similar political realignments.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data is available upon request.

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used a large language model (ChatGPT) solely for language editing and text compression during the revision process. The model was not used to generate scientific content, perform analyses, or interpret results. All arguments, analyses, and conclusions remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

Supplementary Material

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

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Democratic Confidence From Abroad: Evidence From the Mexican Diaspora in the United States

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between Mexican diasporic citizens' perceptions of electoral integrity and their participation in elections from abroad, as well as their levels of political efficacy, contributing to scholarship on transnational political behavior among diaspora communities. Utilizing data from two pre-election surveys of Mexican citizens residing in the United States, we find that respondents with high levels of confidence in the electoral process are more likely to vote from abroad and believe that their extraterritorial vote matters to national elections. This research provides new insight into the political attitudes and orientations of diasporic citizens' views toward democratic institutions and our understanding of transnational democratic participation.

Keywords

diaspora voting; electoral integrity; external vote; Mexico; voter efficacy

1. Introduction

Given the essential role of elections in democratic regimes, the proliferation of external voting rights is a significant development for the political rights of citizens across the world (Bauböck, 2007; Lafleur, 2013). External voting provides citizens with the opportunity to participate in democratic processes and remain politically engaged while residing outside of one's home country. Moreover, by increasing citizen participation, external voting can also serve to increase the accountability and legitimacy of democratic governments (Ellis et al., 2007). Worldwide, nearly 60 percent of all countries provide opportunities for

external voting in legislative elections, nearly 42 percent allow for external voting in presidential contests, and about 35 percent allow for external voting in referendums (International IDEA, 2025).

The provision of external voting rights is also important for regions with substantial diaspora communities such as Latin America. With the exceptions of Cuba, Haiti, and Uruguay, every country in Latin America provides some form of external voting (International IDEA, 2019), yet there is significant variation in the depth and scope of emigrant incorporation in the region (Erlingsson & Tuman, 2017; Escobar, 2007; Margheritis, 2017; Navarro Fierro, 2016). While some countries only allow external voting for presidential elections, nations like Colombia, Peru, and Mexico grant their expatriates the right to vote in presidential, federal legislative, and some subnational-level elections (International IDEA, 2025).

Building on this understanding of the proliferation of external voting mechanisms, we seek to understand which factors shape voting behavior among diaspora populations and whether these groups view their electoral participation as meaningful for their home country. While there are several factors that may influence these outcomes, the current study posits that perceptions of electoral integrity are key.

Recent scholarship suggests that perceptions of electoral integrity are important predictors of voter turnout (Martínez i Coma & Trinh, 2017) and efficacy in cases around the world (Norris, 2014). The scholarly evidence also suggests that inclusive and credible external voting arrangements can enhance external political efficacy by signaling state responsiveness to citizens abroad (Lafleur, 2013). External voting systems that are perceived as trustworthy and transparent, then, are more likely to be used extensively by diasporas, enhancing overall democratic participation and legitimacy. In this way, we argue that when citizens living abroad perceive their home elections as credible, they are more likely to engage in political participation, as they believe their vote truly matters (Umpierrez de Reguero & Dandoy, 2026).

To evaluate these claims, we explore the case of the Mexican diaspora living in the United States (US). This group has exhibited traits of political sophistication as well as a high degree of attentiveness to politics in their home country (McCann et al., 2019; Medina Vidal & Campos Carrasco, 2020). Moreover, national studies of Mexican voters indicate that perceptions of electoral integrity are related to key political attitudes like satisfaction with democracy (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2021) and electoral trust (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022). Yet, empirical research remains scarce on how citizens' perceptions of electoral integrity shape the transnational political behavior of the Mexican diaspora. For these reasons, we are eager to understand how views of the quality of electoral processes are related to political participation and efficacy among members of the Mexican diaspora in the US.

Employing original data from two pre-election surveys of the Mexican citizens residing in the US, we explore self-reported voting behavior and efficacy in the context of the 2018 and 2024 Mexican federal elections. The results of our analyses lend strong support to the notion that perceptions of electoral integrity are positively linked to voter turnout and efficacy. We find that respondents who express confidence in the fairness of the vote count and the cleanliness of elections, respectively, are more likely to report voting in home elections and more likely to express feelings of efficacy. While the analyses also indicate that prior voting behavior, support for Mexico's electoral authority, and awareness of voting logistics are linked to the outcomes of interest, our key findings suggest that confidence in the integrity of the external vote process may contribute to transnational democratic participation and confidence among citizens abroad.

The rest of the study is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the realities of external voting in Mexico. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework and key expectations related to our key outcomes of interest. Section 4 presents our research design and statistical findings. Section 5 discusses the implications of our findings and provides concluding remarks.

2. External Voting in Mexican Elections

External voting is a relatively recent development in Mexican politics. While discussions date to the 1920s, meaningful progress toward extending political rights to citizens abroad began with the 1996 constitutional reform permitting dual nationality, which granted civil and property rights but not suffrage (Fitzgerald, 2004, pp. 531–533; Lafleur, 2013). Full external voting rights were not extended until the 2005 electoral reform, which allowed expatriates to vote in presidential elections beginning in 2006 (Instituto Federal Electoral [IFE], 2006; Lafleur, 2013; Navarro & Carrillo, 2007).

Despite high expectations—given that approximately three million Mexicans abroad were eligible to vote in 2006 (Camp, 2014, p. 283; Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 535; Marcelli & Cornelius, 2005)—participation proved strikingly low. The IFE reported only 32,621 valid ballots in 2006, representing less than one-half of one percent of voting-age Mexicans in the US (Suro & Escobar, 2006). Critics characterized the reform as symbolically inclusive but substantively restrictive (Smith, 2008). As Lafleur (2013, p. 71) argues, the IFE's lack of institutional presence abroad and its inability to issue voter identification cards through consulates limited participation.

Incremental improvements were introduced in 2012. The IFE deployed staff and registration equipment in 30 US consulates, which modestly increased registration applications to 61,869 and valid votes to 40,737—an approximate 25 percent rise over 2006 (Gris Legorreta, 2014; IFE, 2012). Nevertheless, participation remained well below expectations, prompting descriptions of Mexico's model as a form of "truncated transnationalism," wherein formal rights existed but practical obstacles curtailed effective enfranchisement (Félix, 2012). Experiences in 2006 and 2012 also highlighted the limitations of an exclusively postal voting system (Navarro Fierro, 2016).

Comprehensive reforms enacted in 2014 transformed the institutional framework. The IFE was replaced by the Instituto Nacional Electoral (INE), and new legislation authorized voter registration and credential issuance abroad in coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Cámara de Diputados, 2014; INE, 2018). The franchise was expanded beyond presidential contests to include certain senatorial and gubernatorial elections, and voting modalities were diversified to include postal and in-person options, with provisions for electronic voting (Beltrán Miranda, 2014; INE, 2018; Navarro Fierro, 2016). The INE also implemented outreach campaigns in major diaspora hubs in the US to disseminate information and encourage participation (personal communication by David Maciel, September 2018).

In addition to voter mobilization, the INE has sought to ensure a free, fair, and secret electoral process. The INE's public slogan, "El voto es libre y secreto" (The vote is free and secret), reflects its commitment to promoting an electoral process that adheres to international standards of electoral integrity, both domestically and internationally. In the 2018 election, its first major national election as arbiter, the INE sought to bolster voter confidence by assuring that ballots cast within Mexico and abroad would be counted fairly, and that the overall electoral process would be administered impartially and professionally.

The reforms introduced by the INE and its commitment to uphold the integrity of the electoral process produced measurable gains in terms of increased voter registration and turnout from abroad (see Figure 1). In 2018, 98,470 valid votes were cast from 181,873 registered voters, a 54 percent increase in turnout and a 142 percent increase in valid votes compared to 2012 (INE, 2018). The upward trajectory continued in 2024, when 184,326 Mexicans abroad voted, representing an 87 percent increase over 2018 and an 82 percent participation rate (INE, 2024). Collectively, these developments indicate that sustained institutional reform, administrative adaptation, and targeted outreach have enhanced the effective political incorporation of Mexico's diaspora electorate.

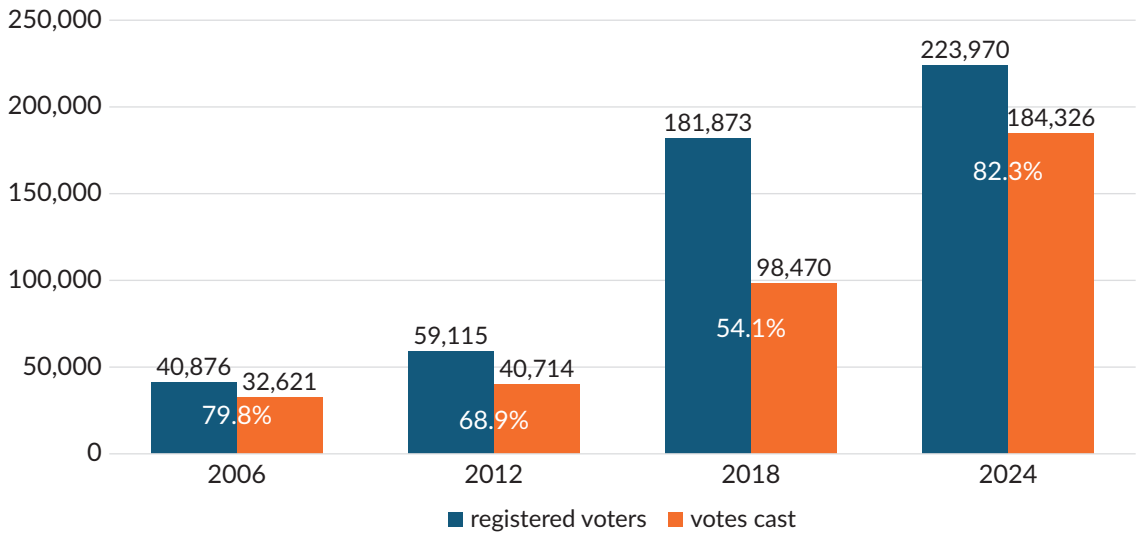

Figure 1. Registered voters and votes cast abroad in Mexican elections.

3. Theoretical Framework

While the previous section makes evident that great strides have been made to enhance the external voting landscape for the Mexican diaspora, the focus of this study is to understand the factors shaping the political behavior and attitudes of this population. The comparative scholarship has pointed to a number of factors that may shape the voting calculus among citizens living abroad, as well as whether they feel that their vote has a meaningful impact on their home country. These factors include the important role of previous political participation (Lafleur & Calderón Chelius, 2011), the role of electoral management bodies and election logistics (Aman & Bakken, 2021; Finn & Besserer Rayas, 2024), political identities linked with home-country political parties (Burgess & Tyburski, 2020; Goldberg & Lanz, 2021), exposure to mass media (Medina Vidal & Campos Carrasco, 2020), and the importance of transnational connections and engagement (McCann et al., 2019, 2021). We posit that an additional factor is a key predictor of external voting and efficacy: perceptions of electoral integrity.

Scholarship on electoral integrity consistently finds that citizens' perceptions of election fairness are central to political attitudes and democratic legitimacy. According to Norris (2014), electoral integrity is critical because it directly shapes democratic legitimacy and political behavior. When citizens perceive that elections meet the international standards of electoral integrity, they are more likely to trust political institutions, accept electoral outcomes, and participate in politics. Conversely, when elections are seen as flawed or manipulated,

public confidence declines, participation may fall or shift toward protest, which may in turn lead to political instability. This perspective builds on earlier work linking procedural fairness to democratic consolidation and system support (Birch, 2010; Lindberg, 2006).

One of the key findings in this literature is that positive evaluations of electoral integrity are associated with a host of factors considered key for democratic confidence. For one, scholars have identified an important link between electoral integrity and support for democracy. McAllister and White (2015) find that perceptions of unfair elections and widespread corruption in post-communist countries undermine citizens' confidence in democratic governance in these countries. Fortin-Rittberger et al. (2017) report similar findings. Using objective measures of electoral integrity, they find that higher levels of electoral fraud are associated with lower satisfaction with democracy (Fortin-Rittberger et al., 2017). Finally, Monsiváis-Carrillo (2021) finds that perceptions of electoral integrity are significantly related to democratic satisfaction with political interest as a key mediating factor in Mexico.

Another key finding is the relationship between electoral integrity and political participation. Exploring the link between electoral integrity and voter turnout, Martínez i Coma and Trinh (2017) contend that perceptions of electoral integrity are important predictors of political behavior. Through cross-national analyses, they find that when individuals believe elections are conducted fairly and transparently, they are more likely to engage in conventional political activities like voting because credible elections enhance political efficacy and system legitimacy. Regional analyses of Latin America point to similar trends. Carreras and İrepoğlu (2013) find that confidence in the integrity of elections is a primary driver of voter turnout, though citizens who perceive elections as unfair are significantly more likely to abstain from voting. Similarly, Haime's (2017) analysis of voter turnout in Latin America finds that individuals who perceive elections as fair, transparent, and trustworthy are significantly more likely to vote, even after accounting for institutional and socioeconomic factors. These findings show that confidence in electoral integrity complements structural explanations of turnout and plays an important role in democratic participation.

In Mexico, the case that serves as the home country for our diaspora population of interest, much attention has been paid to electoral distrust or skepticism given the country's long history of electoral manipulation (Estrada & Poiré, 2007; Schedler, 1999, 2002). Indeed, scholars have noted that electoral malpractice, whether actual or perceived, has historically undermined turnout in Mexican elections (McCann & Domínguez, 1998; Simpser, 2012). Although Mexico has implemented significant political and economic reforms to strengthen electoral integrity, many citizens continue to question the legitimacy of elections despite the lack of credible evidence of widespread electoral malpractice. These political attitudes may be related to the populist rhetoric of leaders that "trash talk" democracy (Cella et al., 2025). Monsiváis-Carrillo (2022) refers to this dynamic as the "Mexican paradox" and contends that we view the link between perceptions of electoral integrity and trust in electoral processes through the lens of a liberal conception of democracy. Understood in this way, he finds a strong link between perceptions of electoral integrity and trust in elections in Mexico.

Building on theories of electoral integrity and political behavior, we argue that confidence in the integrity of elections plays a central role in shaping political engagement among Mexicans residing abroad. We expect that Mexicans living abroad who report greater confidence in the integrity of elections will be more likely to report voting (turnout) and to express stronger beliefs in the impact of their vote (political efficacy). Confidence in electoral integrity signals that the rules of competition are fair, ballots are counted accurately,

and outcomes reflect voter preferences. When expatriate citizens perceive electoral institutions as impartial and professional, the perceived benefits of participation increase while the perceived risks of fraud or manipulation decrease. In this sense, institutional trust lowers the psychological and informational barriers that often discourage extraterritorial political participation.

We also expect that confidence in electoral integrity is closely linked to political efficacy, or the belief that one's participation can influence political outcomes. For citizens residing abroad, the costs of participation are often higher due to potentially onerous administrative procedures, registration requirements, and geographic distance. Under such conditions, beliefs about the credibility and fairness of the electoral process become especially salient. If migrants believe their ballots will be counted accurately and meaningfully incorporated into the final result, they are more likely to perceive their participation as consequential rather than symbolic.

Thus, electoral integrity functions not only as a procedural guarantee but also as a motivational resource. Among Mexicans abroad, higher confidence in the integrity of elections should be related to both a higher likelihood of reported turnout and political efficacy. Conversely, doubts about fairness or impartiality may suppress participation and weaken political efficacy, even among those who remain politically interested or engaged in other ways.

Accordingly, we derive the following hypotheses:

> H1: Mexicans living abroad who report higher levels of confidence in the integrity of elections will be more likely to report voting in national elections.
>
> H2: Mexicans living abroad who report higher levels of confidence in the integrity of elections will be more likely to report greater political efficacy.

Together, these hypotheses reflect the expectation that electoral integrity operates not only as a procedural safeguard but also as a psychological mechanism that strengthens both participatory behavior and beliefs in the effectiveness of democratic engagement among expatriate citizens.

4. Research Design and Findings

To investigate the drivers of turnout and efficacy among Mexicans living abroad, this study considers the public opinion of the Mexican diaspora living in the US within the context of the 2018 and 2024 Mexican presidential elections. These election periods coincide with significant electoral reforms pushed by emigrant activists and implemented by Mexico's electoral authority to enhance accessibility and participation among its nationals living abroad, as well as with growing scholarly interests in these contests among researchers of political behavior and electoral management. As demonstrated earlier, the data on the external vote suggest that Mexicans living abroad have an increasing interest in their home-country elections. These trends evince the need to understand the dynamics of political behavior among this population.

4.1. Data

Large majorities of Mexican diaspora voters reside in the US: 76.88 percent of diaspora voters in 2018 and 82.84 percent of diaspora voters in 2024, respectively (INE, 2024; see Figure 1). Yet, there are very few political science survey-based studies of the political behavior of the Mexican diaspora in the US, and even fewer are designed with the explicit purpose of understanding this group's transnational political behavior. The current study is unique in that it employs two original survey data sets that include a number of different measures of transnational civic engagement and political behavior uniquely suited to test the expectations described in the previous section. The 2018 Mexican Vote From Abroad Survey (MVFAS) is a web-based survey of 526 Mexican citizens of voting age residing in the US with a margin of error of +/− 5.4 percent. The survey recruited respondents from the 1.2 million-member YouGov panel and employs the sampling methodologies of the YouGov research firm. The sampling methods allow for the selection of representative samples from nonrandomly selected pools of respondents (Mexican citizens in the US). The MVFAS was fielded between June 15 and June 27, 2018, on the eve of Mexico's July 1 presidential election. To our knowledge, this is the first such scientific research study conducted in the US, and its design uniquely identifies the effects of Mexico's efforts to continue to expand the electoral franchise to its emigrants on citizens' attitudes and orientations. Surveys were completed in 14 minutes, on average, and 51 percent of them were administered in Spanish.

The second survey, the 2024 Mexicans Abroad International Survey of Elections (MAISE), is a national poll of Mexican citizen residents of the US. The MAISE is a web-based survey of 600 Mexican voting-age citizens residing in the US with a margin of error of +/− 4 percent. The MAISE employs the sampling methodologies of the BSP Research firm, which specializes in culturally competent modelling and analyses, especially for under-represented demographic groups. The MAISE was fielded between April 5 and April 20, 2024, just over a month prior to Mexico's June 2 presidential election. Surveys were administered in both Spanish (43 percent) and English (57 percent). The data are weighted to reflect the Mexican national population in the US across state, by age, and gender. Like the 2018 MVFAS, the MAISE data are uniquely suited to evaluate the expectations put forth in the previous section, since they capture public perceptions of turnout and efficacy but also perceptions on accessibility and election integrity. To be sure, we are confident that the sampling methods used by both YouGov and BSP Research adhere to the strictest of social scientific standards. Yet, like every public opinion survey of voting behavior, these data are subject to confirmation bias.

4.2. Methods

To evaluate our hypotheses concerning turnout and efficacy within the context of the 2018 Mexican election, we employ data from the 2018 MVFAS. Our dependent variables include turnout and efficacy. Turnout is based on a survey item that asks, "Do you plan to vote or have already voted by mail from the United States?" Recoding a five-point scale into a dichotomous variable, responses are coded as *yes* (1) or *no* (0), with mean turnout = 0.342. Efficacy is based on a survey that asks, "How confident are you that your vote has a positive impact for Mexico?" Responses are coded as *yes* (1) or *no* (0), with mean efficacy = 0.754. Here we note that average self-reported voting is lower than the average level of efficacy.

We model turnout and efficacy, respectively, as a function of two measures of electoral integrity—fairness of the vote count and clean elections. The former is based on a survey item that asks, "How much confidence do you have that votes will be counted fairly in the upcoming election?" (1 for *none at all*, 2 for *a little*, 3 for *some*, and 4 for *a lot*). The latter is based on a survey item that asks, "How clean do you believe that the upcoming elections will be?" (1 for *not at all*, 2 for *not very*, 3 for *more or less*, and 4 for *totally clean*). Because these variables are highly correlated ($r = .756$, $p < .001$), we run separate logit models with each predictor.

Each of the models also incorporates variables found in the literature and relevant to our study such as whether respondents reported voting in the 2012 election (0 if *no*, 1 if *yes*), and opinion of the INE (a 0-to-10 scale, ranging from *very bad* to *very good opinion*). We also consider the fact that concerns over electoral logistics may be correlated with the dependent variables, so we include a variable measuring perceptions of the ease of voting from abroad (ranging from 1 if *very difficult* to 4 if *very easy*) and the perceptions of the ease of learning about the vote from abroad (ranging from 1 if *very difficult* to 4 if *very easy*). To control for the role of home-country partisanship, we include a categorical variable indicating respondents' identification with the main political parties, as well as those with no party affiliation, using PAN (the National Action Party) as the reference category. Consistent with standard models of political behavior, we also include self-reported political ideology (1 for *very liberal* to 5 for *very conservative*). Because the literature suggests that connections to the home country are important for diaspora attitudes and behavior, we control for whether the respondent is an immigrant (0 if *no*, 1 if *yes*), the frequency of contact with friends and family in Mexico (ranging from 1 for *never* to 4 for *once a week or more*), and whether the respondent reported sending remittances to Mexico (0 if *no*, 1 if *yes*). Finally, key socio-demographic variables such as female (1 for *female*, 0 for *male*), age (continuous variable ranging from *18* to *86* years), income (intervals ranging from 1 for *less than $10,000* to 15 for *$350,000–399,999*), and education (categorical variable ranging from 1 for *no formal education* to 8 for *post-graduate education)* are included.

To evaluate our hypotheses within the context of the 2024 Mexican election, we employ data from the 2024 MAISE. Our measure of turnout is based on the following survey item: "Thinking ahead to the 2024 Mexican Presidential election, what would you say the chances are that you will vote in the upcoming election?" This survey item is originally coded on a 5-point scale ranging from *certain that I won't vote* (0) to *100% certain that I will vote* (5). We recode this as *plan to vote* (1) or *not* (0). Our measure of efficacy is based on the following survey item: "When it comes to voting for President of Mexico, do you think your vote will have an impact or not?" We recode this as *yes*, if respondents believe that their vote will have an impact (1) or *no* (0). We note that average self-reported vote intention (mean = 0.718) is higher than the average level of efficacy (mean = 0.358). This pattern runs contrary to the relationship between these two measures in the 2018 MVFAS. It is plausible that these differences can be attributed to potential skepticism about the vote from abroad process and a stronger tone and rhetoric of a "transformation" movement with Andrés Manuel López Obrador as its leader in 2018 versus the effect of Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional (MORENA)'s party incumbency in 2024, lowered expectations about efficacy given that Claudia Sheinbaum's campaign was one of continuity, and skepticism about efficacy as a function of the new voting modalities in 2024.

As with our models for 2018, we model turnout and efficacy as a function of the perceptions of the fairness of the vote count and clean elections. Fairness of the vote count is based on the following survey item: "How much confidence do you have that your vote will be counted fairly in the upcoming elections?" (1 for *none*, 2 for *a little*, 3 for *some*, and 4 for *a lot*). Clean elections is based on a survey item asking respondents

the following: "How clean do you believe that the upcoming elections will be?" (1 for *not clean* to 3 for *clean overall*). Given the degree of correlation between each of these variables ($r = .503$, $p < .001$), we run separate logit models with each predictor.

Theoretically relevant control variables include voted in the previous election (0 if *no*, 1 if *yes*), opinion of the INE (a 0-to-10 scale, ranging from *very bad* to *very good opinion*), and knowledge of electoral logistics. The latter include respondents' knowledge that Mexicans can show up to vote at consulates on election day (1 if *yes*, 0 if *no*), knowledge that Mexicans can obtain or renew their voter ID in the US (1 if *yes*, 0 if *no*), and knowledge that the INE extended the deadline to register by 5 days (1 if *yes*, 0 if *no*). We also control for partisanship (with PAN identification as the reference category) and self-reported political ideology (1 for *very liberal* to 5 for *very conservative*). To control for home-country connections, we include a variable for immigrant (0 if *no*, 1 if *yes*), the frequency of contact with friends and family in Mexico on politics (0 if *they do not have contact*, 1 if *they do*), and remittances (0 if *they do not send remittances*, 1 if *they do*). Finally, key socio-demographic variables such as female (1 for *female*, 0 for *male*), age (a variable with five groups: *18–24*, *25–44*, *45–54*, *55–64*, and *65 years or older*), income (ranging from 1 for *less than $20,000* to 10 for *$150,000 or more*), and education (categorical variable ranging from 1 for *did not complete high school or GED* to 7 for *post-graduate education*) are included. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
2018 ($n = 526$)				
Vote intention	0.342	0.475	0	1
Voter efficacy	0.754	0.431	0	1
Learning	2.857	0.940	1	4
Ease of voting	2.667	0.957	1	4
Cleanliness	2.378	0.989	1	4
Fairness	2.371	0.999	1	4
Opinion of INE	5.426	2.411	0	10
PAN identification	0.105	0.306	0	1
PRI identification	0.067	0.249	0	1
PRD identification	0.068	0.253	0	1
MC identification	0.048	0.213	0	1
MORENA identification	0.141	0.348	0	1
Ideology	2.681	0.986	1	5
Immigrant	0.618	0.486	0	1
Contact	3.220	1.004	1	4
Remittances	0.772	0.420	0	1
Education	5.059	1.685	1	8
Income	13.316	25.822	1	97
Female	0.662	0.474	0	1
Age	34.75	11.003	18	86

Table 1. (Cont.) Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
2024 (n = 600)				
Vote intention	0.718	0.450	0	1
Voter efficacy	0.358	0.480	0	1
Aware of registration extension	0.400	0.490	0	1
Aware of voting in consulates	0.392	0.489	0	1
Aware of INE ID renewal from US	0.568	0.496	0	1
Cleanliness	2.228	0.882	1	3
Fairness	1.702	0.933	0	3
Opinion of INE	6.035	2.573	0	10
PAN identification	0.147	0.354	0	1
PRI identification	0.115	0.319	0	1
PRD identification	0.128	0.335	0	1
MORENA identification	0.335	0.472	0	1
Ideology	3.172	1.111	1	5
Immigrant	0.667	0.472	0	1
Contact	0.682	0.466	0	1
Remittances	0.412	0.493	0	1
Education	3.243	1.813	1	7
Income	5.545	2.979	1	11
Female	0.507	0.500	0	1
Age	3.367	1.067	18–24	65+

Notes: PRI = Partido Revolucionario Institucional; PRD = Partido de la Revolución Democrática; MC = Movimiento Ciudadano.

4.3. Findings

The results of the analyses for 2018 indicate that measures of electoral integrity are linked with self-reported turnout and feelings of political efficacy (see Table 2). The coefficient for the fairness of the vote count is positive and statistically significant ($p < .001$), suggesting a positive relationship between this variable and the propensity to vote from abroad. Going from a respondent who reports no confidence in the fairness of the vote count to one who reports a lot of confidence increases the probability of voting by about 35 percent, holding all other variables at their mean. The results indicate a similar relationship between clean elections and turnout; the coefficient is positive and significant ($p < .05$). In this case, moving from a respondent who reports that elections are not at all clean to one who reports that they are totally clean increases the probability of voting by 20 percent, holding other variables at their mean (see Figure 2).

The findings suggest that the relationship between our measures of electoral integrity and efficacy is more robust than that between electoral integrity and turnout (see Models 3 and 4). The coefficients for vote counted fairly and clean elections are both positive and significant ($p < .001$). Predictive margins indicate that the likelihood of reporting greater political efficacy increases to well over 90 percent for those with a lot of confidence in the fairness of the vote count and those reporting that elections are totally clean (holding all

other variables at their means). These findings suggest an important link between electoral integrity and political efficacy among the respondents in this survey.

Overall, the results indicate that our measures of electoral integrity are significantly linked to voting from abroad and efficacy based on our sample of Mexicans residing in the US during the Mexican 2018 election cycle. These findings provide strong support to our hypotheses.

Table 2. Predicting diaspora voting and political efficacy in the 2018 Mexican election.

	(1) Turnout	(2) Turnout	(3) Efficacy	(4) Efficacy
Vote counted fairly	0.601***		1.343***	
	(0.159)		(0.200)	
Clean elections		0.336*		1.452***
		(0.155)		(0.197)
Voted in 2012 election	1.312***	1.329***	1.295**	1.289**
	(0.264)	(0.261)	(0.402)	(0.413)
Opinion of INE	−0.056	−0.008	0.148*	0.136*
	(0.061)	(0.059)	(0.068)	(0.069)
Ease of voting from abroad	0.475**	0.494**	0.436*	0.508*
	(0.172)	(0.170)	(0.194)	(0.206)
Ease of learning about the vote from abroad	0.249	0.251	0.0795	−0.027
	(0.178)	(0.177)	(0.191)	(0.207)
Party identification (Base is PAN)				
PRI	0.030	0.099	−0.350	−0.179
	(0.543)	(0.539)	(0.738)	(0.747)
PRD	1.158*	1.082	−0.034	−0.329
	(0.584)	(0.568)	(0.815)	(0.855)
MC	0.602	0.645	0.759	0.619
	(0.600)	(0.595)	(0.976)	(1.005)
MORENA	0.432	0.552	1.263	1.369*
	(0.454)	(0.449)	(0.684)	(0.696)
Other party	0.827	0.848	−0.364	−0.365
	(0.483)	(0.480)	(0.666)	(0.713)
No party	−0.355	−0.432	0.176	−0.112
	(0.420)	(0.416)	(0.471)	(0.492)
Ideology	−0.261*	−0.290*	0.0757	0.0261
	(0.121)	(0.120)	(0.141)	(0.147)
Immigrant	−0.479	−0.519*	0.226	0.127
	(0.260)	(0.256)	(0.322)	(0.330)
Contact	−0.363	−0.479	1.875***	1.592**
	(0.583)	(0.578)	(0.509)	(0.520)
Remittances	0.409	0.449	0.275	0.210
	(0.358)	(0.358)	(0.351)	(0.361)
Education	0.105	0.113	−0.120	−0.121
	(0.079)	(0.078)	(0.096)	(0.098)
Income	0.001	0.001	0.001	−0.003
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)

Table 2. (Cont.) Predicting diaspora voting and political efficacy in the 2018 Mexican election.

	(1) Turnout	(2) Turnout	(3) Efficacy	(4) Efficacy
Female	−0.189	−0.173	0.358	0.367
	(0.256)	(0.254)	(0.314)	(0.322)
Age	−0.002	−0.002	−0.005	−0.020
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.013)
Constant	−4.078***	−3.589***	−5.780***	−4.620***
	(1.068)	(1.044)	(1.231)	(1.211)
Observations	526	526	526	526
Pseudo R^2	0.338	0.323	0.413	0.436
Log likelihood	−223.8	−228.9	−172.1	−165.1

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; PRI = Partido Revolucionario Institucional; PRD = Partido de la Revolución Democrática; MC = Movimiento Ciudadano.

The findings also indicate that some of the covariates are significantly related to our dependent variables. Prior voting experience and perceptions of the ease of voting from abroad are positively related to both turnout and efficacy, suggesting an important role for previous voting experience and awareness of electoral processes from abroad. While ideology self-placement is negatively associated with turnout, evaluations of the INE and contact with friends and family in Mexico are positively linked to efficacy. Finally, while there is some evidence of a significant relationship between some partisan identification and turnout (e.g., Partido de la Revolución Democrática) and efficacy (e.g., MORENA), these trends are not robust across multiple model specifications.

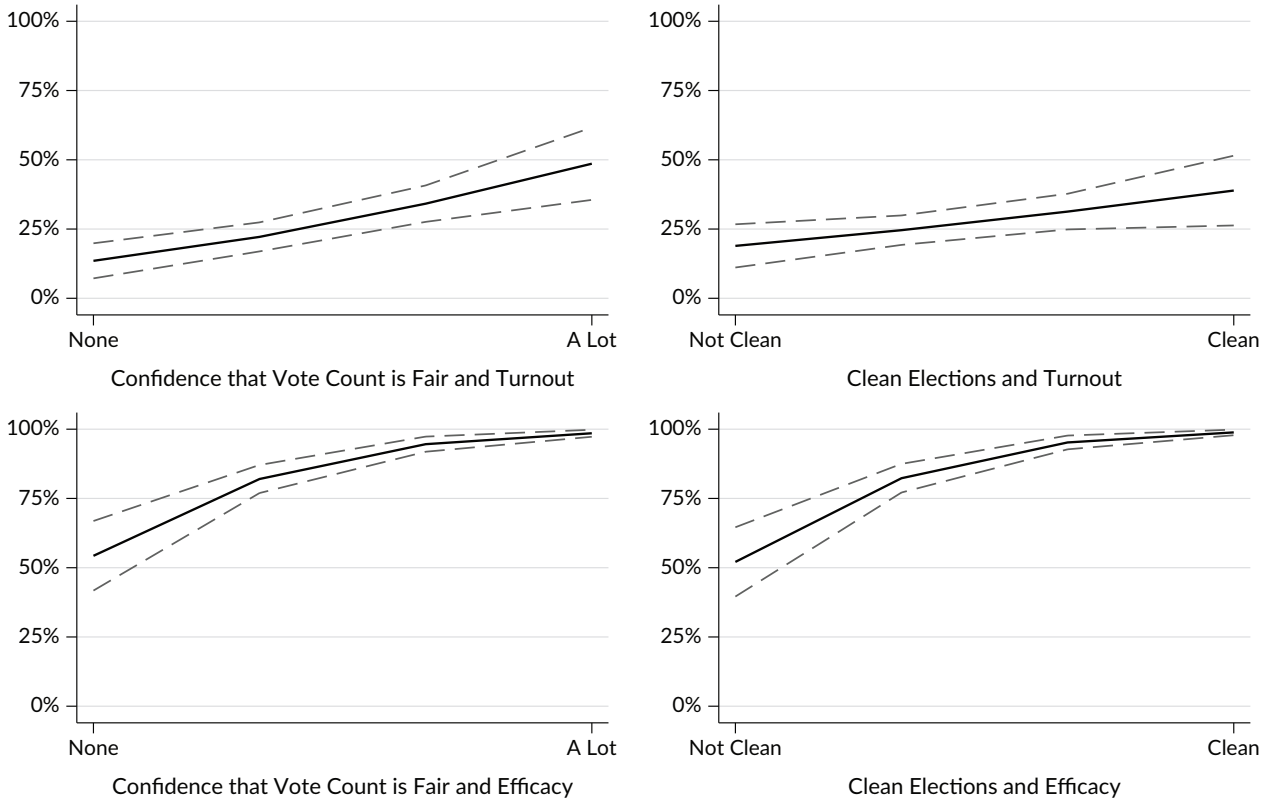

Figure 2. Predictive margins of electoral integrity, diaspora voting, and political efficacy in 2018.

The results of the analyses for 2024 also indicate a strong link between measures of electoral integrity, voting from abroad, and political efficacy (see Table 3). The positive and significant coefficient for the fairness of the vote count ($p < .001$) suggests a strong, positive association with voting from abroad (see Model 5). In fact, the probability of voting increases from about 26 percent for those with no confidence in the vote count to 65 percent for those reporting a lot of confidence in the fairness of the vote count, holding all other variables at their means (see Figure 3). While not as robust, the positive and significant coefficient ($p < .05$) for clean elections suggests that turnout from abroad is associated with this measure of electoral integrity (see Model 6). In this case, moving from a respondent who reports that elections are not at all clean to one who reports that they are totally clean increases the probability of voting by about 13 percent, holding other variables at their mean.

Electoral integrity is also statistically associated with political efficacy. The coefficient for fairness of the vote count is positive and significant ($p < .001$), as is the coefficient for clean elections ($p < .001$). Going from a respondent who reports no confidence in the fairness of the vote count to one who reports a lot of confidence increases the probability of reporting greater political efficacy by about 35 percent, holding all other variables at their mean. The probability of reporting greater political efficacy increases by about 18 percent as we shift from respondents who report that elections are not clean to clean, holding all other variables at their means.

Overall, the results indicate that our measures of electoral integrity are significantly associated with both voting from abroad and political efficacy in our sample of Mexicans residing in the US during the 2024 Mexican election cycle. These findings lend strong support to our hypotheses.

The analyses yield additional interesting findings. Opinion of the INE is linked to both turnout and efficacy in 2024, suggesting an important role for public evaluations of Mexico's electoral authority. Prior voting experience, knowledge of electoral logistics (e.g., awareness that Mexicans can show up to vote at consulates on Election Day and knowledge that the INE extended the deadline to register to vote), self-reported ideology, and contact with friends and family in Mexico to discuss politics are each positively linked to turnout. While identifying as an immigrant and a respondent's level of education are positively associated with reporting greater political efficacy, identifying with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, sending remittances, and income levels are negatively associated with efficacy.

Table 3. Predicting diaspora voting and political efficacy in the 2024 Mexican election.

	(5) Turnout	(6) Turnout	(7) Efficacy	(8) Efficacy
Vote counted fairly	0.562***		0.584***	
	(0.135)		(0.126)	
Clean elections		0.251*		0.419***
		(0.120)		(0.117)
Voted in 2018 election	0.441*	0.533*	−0.236	−0.131
	(0.220)	(0.217)	(0.208)	(0.206)
Opinion of INE	0.164***	0.197***	0.087	0.108*
	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.045)	(0.044)
Aware that Mexicans can show up to vote at consulates on Election Day?	0.730**	0.767**	−0.133	−0.074
	(0.244)	(0.242)	(0.235)	(0.234)

Table 3. (Cont.) Predicting diaspora voting and political efficacy in the 2024 Mexican election.

	(5) Turnout	(6) Turnout	(7) Efficacy	(8) Efficacy
Aware that Mexicans can obtain or renew their voter ID in the US?	−0.114 (0.234)	−0.0640 (0.231)	0.406 (0.223)	0.433 (0.221)
Aware that the INE extended the deadline to register by 5 days?	0.702** (0.245)	0.680** (0.241)	−0.010 (0.239)	−0.013 (0.237)
Party identification (Base is PAN)				
PRI	−0.0460 (0.453)	−0.110 (0.446)	−0.839* (0.421)	−0.914* (0.422)
PRD	0.0305 (0.469)	0.0565 (0.467)	−0.144 (0.415)	−0.097 (0.416)
MORENA	0.168 (0.391)	0.184 (0.385)	−0.267 (0.351)	−0.280 (0.351)
Other party	0.687 (1.118)	0.700 (1.043)	0.121 (1.004)	0.397 (0.976)
No party	0.183 (0.382)	0.0850 (0.376)	−0.142 (0.347)	−0.234 (0.344)
Ideology	0.255** (0.094)	0.231* (0.093)	0.056 (0.085)	0.041 (0.085)
Immigrant	0.340 (0.302)	0.299 (0.298)	0.571* (0.281)	0.530 (0.276)
Contact	0.878*** (0.246)	0.959*** (0.243)	0.243 (0.240)	0.312 (0.236)
Remittances	−0.0139 (0.218)	−0.0587 (0.214)	−0.398 (0.206)	−0.431* (0.204)
Education	0.0419 (0.060)	0.0546 (0.059)	0.135* (0.055)	0.152** (0.055)
Income	0.0151 (0.037)	0.0171 (0.037)	−0.070* (0.035)	−0.066 (0.034)
Female	−0.0387 (0.205)	0.00114 (0.204)	0.059 (0.190)	0.144 (0.190)
Age	−0.0224 (0.101)	−0.0357 (0.100)	0.147 (0.094)	0.125 (0.093)
Constant	−4.606*** (0.780)	−4.377*** (0.773)	−3.230*** (0.698)	−3.308*** (0.705)
Observations	600	600	600	600
Pseudo R^2	0.266	0.250	0.115	0.103
Log likelihood	−305.0	−311.9	−346.4	−351.1

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; PRI = Partido Revolucionario Institucional; PRD = Partido de la Revolución Democrática.

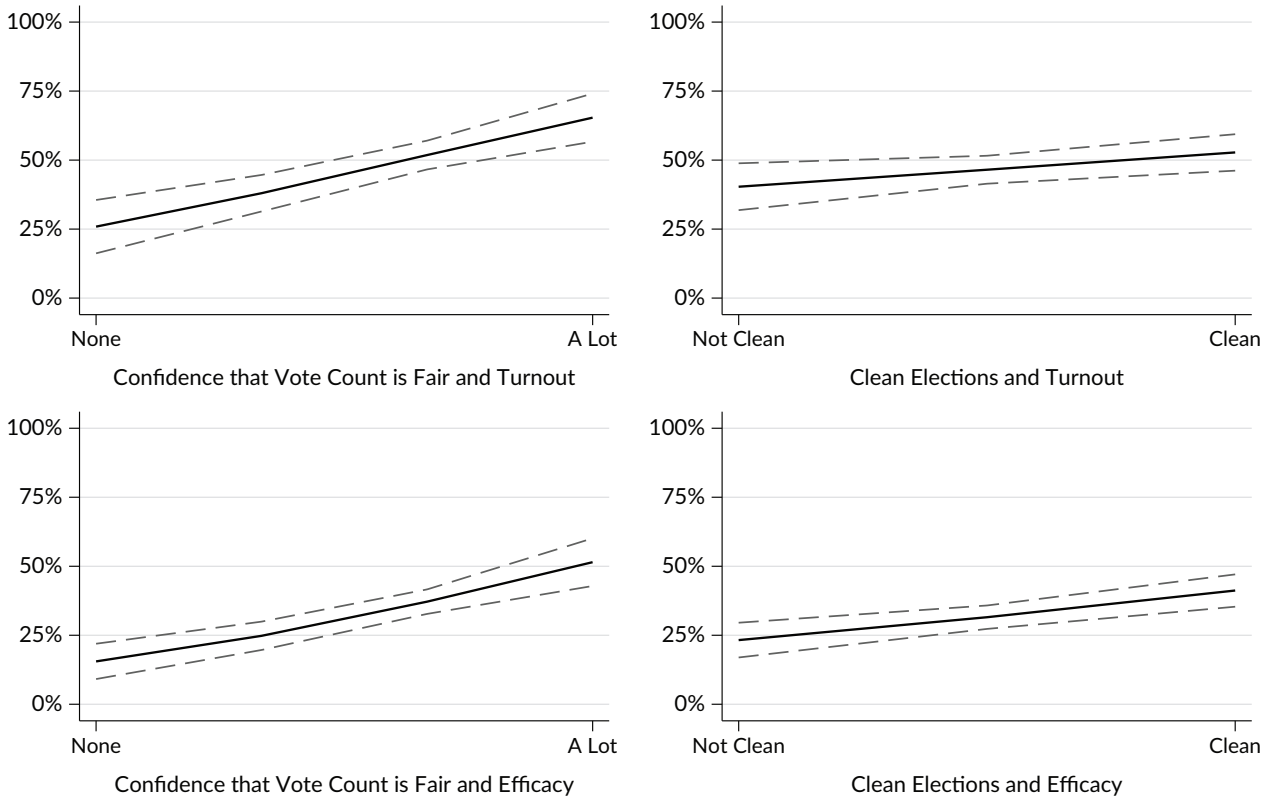

Figure 3. Predictive margins of electoral integrity, diaspora voting, and political efficacy in 2024.

5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The expansion of external voting rights has given citizens living abroad a meaningful opportunity to engage in the political life of their home countries. This development is particularly significant in the Western Hemisphere, which is characterized by large and politically active diaspora communities in countries like the US, especially those from Latin America. While the proliferation of external voting rights has coincided with increasing interest in the political behavior of these populations (see Lafleur, 2013; McCann et al., 2019, 2021; Medina Vidal & Campos Carrasco, 2020; Takahashi et al., 2026), we still know little of how these groups participate and relate to home-country politics.

The current study has sought to address this gap in the literature by exploring the Mexican diaspora population living in the US. This focus is critical given the relatively rapid evolution of Mexico's electoral management body toward becoming more accommodating to potential voters in the diaspora and the estimated 11.4 million Mexican citizens currently residing in the US (Kramer & Passel, 2025). Using original survey data of Mexicans living in the US during the 2018 and 2024 Mexican election cycles, we have explored the self-reported voting behavior of the Mexican diaspora population living in the US (turnout) and whether this group views their electoral participation as meaningful for their home country (efficacy). While there are several factors that may influence these outcomes, we have argued that perceptions of electoral integrity are key predictors of turnout and efficacy for the respondents in our surveys.

Our findings highlight a consistent relationship between diasporic citizens' perceptions of electoral integrity and their political engagement with their country of origin. Respondents who express greater confidence

in the fairness of the vote count and the cleanliness of elections are more likely to report participating in elections from abroad during the 2018 and 2014 election cycles. These patterns align with a large body of scholarship emphasizing the importance of institutional trust and perceptions of electoral integrity in shaping political behavior (Birch, 2010; Martínez i Coma & Trinh, 2017; Norris, 2014). The findings of the current study suggest that these relationships extend beyond territorial borders, linking perceptions of electoral integrity to the political attitudes and behaviors of citizens residing abroad.

Beyond turnout, the findings also indicate a positive association between perceptions of electoral integrity and feelings of political efficacy. Diasporic citizens who believe that elections in their countries of origin are conducted fairly and transparently appear more likely to feel that political participation is meaningful and that their involvement may have an impact. This relationship is notable in the context of diaspora politics, where geographic distance and limited direct contact with domestic political institutions could potentially weaken individuals' sense of influence over political outcomes (Bauböck, 2007; Lafleur, 2013). Among these survey respondents, the results suggest instead that confidence in democratic processes may help sustain feelings of political relevance among citizens residing abroad.

These findings contribute to the growing literature on transnational political behavior by highlighting the role of institutional perceptions in shaping diaspora engagement. Much of the existing scholarship on external voting focuses on institutional arrangements and the administrative barriers that emigrants face when attempting to participate in elections (Collyer, 2014). While these factors remain important, the results presented here suggest that attitudes toward the integrity of electoral processes may also be closely associated with participation and attitudes among diaspora populations. In this way, perceptions of democratic integrity may represent an additional dimension linking emigrants to the political life of their home countries.

The results also carry broader normative implications for debates about democratic legitimacy and diaspora enfranchisement. As countries increasingly extend voting rights to citizens residing abroad, questions arise regarding the conditions under which diaspora communities remain politically engaged with their countries of origin. This is particularly true of Mexico, where attempts by Mexico's electoral authority to accommodate potential voters in the diaspora have been linked to a substantial increase in diaspora ballots cast in Mexican presidential elections between 2006 and 2024. Still, considering the high number of voter IDs (1,685,402) distributed abroad in 2024 ("INE ha entregado," 2024) the actual level of participation is less impressive. Electoral observers have documented that this lag in voter participation is largely a function of poor communication from electoral authorities with the diaspora electorate, and a lack of information with which voters are expected to navigate the still complex system of voting from abroad (Tacher Contreras, 2024). The findings of this study suggest that confidence in electoral integrity may be an important factor in sustaining this engagement. When citizens believe that elections are administered fairly and transparently, they may be more inclined to participate and to view their involvement as meaningful. Conversely, declining confidence in electoral institutions could weaken these connections and reduce participation among external voters, potentially limiting the effectiveness of diaspora enfranchisement policies.

Finally, the findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution. The analyses presented here identify statistical associations rather than causal relationships, and the cross-sectional nature of the data limits the ability to determine the direction of these relationships. It is possible that individuals who are already more

politically engaged are more likely to hold positive views of electoral institutions. While our analyses incorporate theoretically motivated controls to partially remedy these concerns, future research could build on these findings by examining longitudinal data, employing experimental designs, or conducting comparative analyses across diaspora populations to better understand the dynamics linking electoral integrity with our outcomes of interest. Such research would further clarify how institutional trust shapes the political engagement of citizens living beyond their countries' borders.

In conclusion, this study's focus on the Mexican case of external voting provides practitioners and analysts with engaging lines of inquiry for future research. First, the link between perceptions of electoral integrity among diasporic citizens and engagement in home-country politics has important implications for future research on political behavior. At a very basic level, this suggests that electoral integrity may serve as a critical, motivating factor in the political engagement of diaspora communities. More broadly, however, these findings suggest that attempts to enhance electoral integrity may serve to bolster future diasporic engagement. Through its many rounds of reforms, the Mexican government has been marginally more responsive to expatriate citizen demands for political representation by enhancing accessibility and outreach, especially that focused on the integrity of the transnational electoral process. We hope that this study encourages analysts to take a deeper dive into how institutional reforms may serve to buttress diasporic political engagement, and how the dynamics of binational professional and personal networks influence diaspora voters' orientations. Advances in these lines of inquiry will enrich scholarship across multiple subfields. Finally, this study encourages critical thinking about Mexico's diaspora electorate, a group largely overlooked by US immigration and Latino politics scholars, who have focused mainly on its engagement with US institutions. We argue that when scholars ignore Mexican transnational political behavior and interpret migrant political behavior exclusively through a US lens, they neglect to understand many of the circumstances under which Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans maintain ties with their country of ancestry.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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ARTICLE

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County Election Administration Promotes Voter Confidence in US Elections for Election Losers

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Abstract

Does high-quality county election administration (CEA)—the center of US elections—add to public confidence in US elections, including among election losers? No study has examined how CEA quality throughout the US and over time affects this outcome. Specifically, this study evaluates the hypotheses that, from 2012 to 2022, higher quality CEA leads to higher public confidence in election results and enhances this confidence among election losers. These hypotheses are evaluated using the new CEA (Ritter & Tolbert, 2024) index. Using the Survey of the Performance of American Elections data (from 2012 to 2022), coupled with multi-level modeling, this study evaluates the impact of CEA on public confidence for election winners and losers. Ultimately, this study finds that higher quality CEA helps close the confidence gap between election losers and winners.

Keywords

American elections; county election administration; elections; USA; voter confidence

1. Introduction

Low confidence in elections is a concern for US democracy and is tied to attitudes the American public holds toward government. In 2022, *Gallup* reported that 47% of Americans trusted the judicial branch, 43% the executive, and 38% the Congress. Regarding the 2024 presidential election, only 43% were confident that accurate vote counting took place (Jones, 2022; Saad, 2024). One way the US government can enhance individual confidence in government is by fairly and effectively administering elections, because doing so is likely to create the belief among individuals that they can cast ballots and see the election of candidates that reflect their needs and interests. However, if individuals believe they are election losers, meaning they voted for the non-winning candidates, because of an unfairly or ineffectively administered election, they are less

likely to perceive the elected government as being worthy of this confidence. This concern applies to all democracies: Convincing losers that the election process was fair and professionally administered can boost their confidence, because they believe they have a meaningful chance of having their preferred candidates elected (Anderson et al., 2005). This study argues that a new measure of election administration quality—the county election administration (CEA) index—can be used to assess the degree to which election administration quality shapes the confidence election losers have in elections.

Researchers, such as Anderson et al. (2005), Atkeson et al. (2015), and Bowler et al. (2015), emphasize that election administration is a key mediating mechanism between voters and government, shaping individuals' confidence in elections. Building on previous voter confidence and election losers' research, this study posits that the CEA serves as such a mediating mechanism affecting individual confidence in US elections. Results show that high-quality CEA is a moderating mechanism that enhances the confidence that election losers have in election results and even narrows the gap between losers and winners.

This study contributes to research on election administration, voter confidence, and the losers' effect, being the first study to examine how county-by-county variations in election administration quality (across the 2012 to 2022 years) shape voter confidence. Another contribution is that this study uniquely employs the CEA to evaluate the relationship between county election administration and voter confidence in the US. Also, this article adds to the literature (Anderson et al., 2005; Enders & Thornton, 2021) on factors that moderate the losers' vs winners' effects pertaining to election confidence, presenting the CEA as such a factor. Furthermore, a significant empirical contribution shows that quality CEA leads losers to become more confident in the electoral process. On the other hand, winners, who are generally more confident in election results, do not see a similar increase in confidence.

In line with past research (Jardina & Mickey, 2022; Rush et al., 2025, p. 7) noting that individuals and groups—including electoral winners—can be motivated to support more restrictive voting or election administration laws to preserve their electoral dominance, this study theorizes that election winners do not become more confident because they do not like to see their dominant electoral positions assailed by election losers through higher quality election administration.

In the next sections, this article provides an overview of the research literature on voter confidence, the losers' effect, and election administration, along with theoretical expectations. It then introduces and describes the CEA. Ultimately, it is shown that CEA can boost confidence in elections for election losers, providing insights for policy authorities about how to promote election confidence.

2. Voter Confidence and Elections in the US

Confidence in democratic institutions is the level of trust that a polity's residents have that their government will represent their interests, provide them with reasonable means for having their political voices heard, translate that voice into representation, and use it to create policies that reflect their preferences (Lipset & Schneider, 1983; Wolak & Palus, 2010). According to Almond and Verba (1963; also see Dalton & Shin, 2015), a stable and healthy democracy requires a public with confidence in governing institutions. If individuals lack confidence in government, this may lead them to rely on themselves, other individuals or groups, or extralegal means to address their interests. Over time and cumulatively, a sustained breakdown in

confidence can lower the sense of legitimacy held by the people towards the institutions that represent them (Llewellyn et al., 2013).

There needs to be citizen confidence in government institutions and processes for government stability. Numerous historical examples exist of democracies declining because of low confidence, from Ancient Rome to the Weimar Republic, and more recent cases of democratic backsliding in the 2010s and 2020s, including in many American states (Grumbach, 2022). People's low confidence in the government likely stems from several factors, such as whether a government can reliably address their interests. Certainly, though, an important factor in promoting confidence is the ability of a democratic government to provide valid, reliable, and transparent ways for individuals to request, receive, and cast ballots, and have those ballots translated into elected representatives that reflect the pluralistic or majoritarian will of the people (Dahl, 2008; Ritter & Tolbert, 2024). And, even if a person's ballot does not result in their favored politician winning, they trust the election process enough that they continue to have faith in their representatives (Foley, 2016). For a stable democracy, election losers and winners need to be able to believe in the legitimacy of the electoral system, understood as a perception that the election administrative system exhibits no party favoritism and gives election losers and winners a non-trivial probability of being winners in the next election.

Research confirms this idea (see Bowler et al., 2015; Bowler & Donovan, 2024) that implementing election laws in a neutral and professional manner fosters more favorable individual attitudes towards the election process. Insightfully, several researchers (Bowler et al., 2015; Bowler & Donovan, 2024; Hall et al., 2009) find that a person's sense of trust in election processes and institutions can be captured by the level of confidence they have that their ballot was counted accurately. For example, Atkeson and Saunders (2007) find that one's confidence that their ballot was counted correctly shapes their general faith in the American democratic system; without this confidence, one becomes less likely to believe that democracy works. They find that one's confidence that their ballot was counted reflects the totality of their experiences with the US electoral system, encompassing factors including experiences with election personnel, election equipment, and polling locations. Relatedly, Bowler et al. (2015, p. 2) find that when individuals believe that election rules are implemented fairly, they are more likely to believe that the leaders elected are legitimate political authorities (also see Bowler & Donovan, 2024).

Broadly, government confidence research illustrates that higher confidence is a critical source of democratic stability and legitimacy in the US, and that individual experiences with election processes shape this confidence.

3. Losers' Effect Literature

As a further implication of voter confidence, if elections are perceived as having been conducted in a fair and competent manner, the government will likely command the support of election winners—those who share party allegiance with winning candidates—and election losers—those who share party allegiance with losing candidates. How do election losers' versus election winners' studies operationalize these concepts? Bowler and Donovan (2007), using individual-level survey data, operationalize election winners and losers based on respondents' self-reported partisanship and recent national election outcomes (see also Anderson et al., 2005). If one's party candidate loses in an election, they are an election loser; if one's party candidate

wins in an election, they are an election winner. This article operationalizes these terms similarly to Bowler and Donovan (2007).

Democracy needs the support of election losers to be sustainable. Regarding the history of US elections, Foley (2016) finds that a source of democratic stability has been faith among election losers that they can be competitive in subsequent elections. Without such faith, supported by effectively and fairly run elections, such as in the form of election administration, the sustainability of democracy is endangered. According to Anderson et al. (2005, pp. 9–10), political legitimacy—or a sense of confidence in the government—refers to "people's attitudes toward the functioning of government." In a more detailed conceptualization of confidence and legitimacy, Bowler et al. (2015, p. 2) find that individuals are likely to view "elections as more legitimate where objective measures show they are better administered." In their study, this objective measure is the Election Performance Index (EPI)—a measure that captures how well American states implement elections on average, such as by having quality voting machines, well-trained poll workers, and effectively implemented mail voting. Individuals are more likely to recognize a democratic government as legitimate if they have confidence that elections were well-conducted with high-quality election administration. Connecting this line of thinking to the election winners' versus election losers' research literature, a persistent worry in democracies is that repeat losers in the electorate will develop lower perceptions of the government's political legitimacy. This study argues that when election losers experience fair and competently administered elections, they will be more likely to maintain a sense of confidence or legitimacy toward the government and have faith that their favored candidates could win in future elections (Foley, 2016).

However, if election losers perceive that their repeated losses are attributable to less well-administered elections, they are likely to advocate for electoral system changes. Such losers expect that new electoral rules will increase the probability that their favored candidates will win. Election losers are supportive of many different policy changes, including adoption of non-partisan redistricting, term limits for members of Congress, adoption of a national primary, and adoption of convenience voting laws (e.g., in-person early voting, absentee or mail voting, and same/election-day registration; Anderson et al., 2005; Biggers, 2019; Bowler & Donovan, 2007, 2013; Fougere et al., 2010; Karp & Tolbert, 2010). Bowler et al. (2015) show that, on average, higher state election administration quality bolsters confidence among individuals in elections. This study builds on this expectation by positing that higher-quality CEA will make election losers more confident in election results.

Conversely, election winners, who saw their favored candidates win under the status quo, are more likely to support existing rules (Bowler et al., 2007; Bowler & Donovan, 2007, 2013). In another piece of research, Coll et al. (2022) find that election winners are less likely to favor electoral reforms, including those relating to early voting or mail voting. A component of this literature, relating to the history of non-Hispanic White electoral dominance in the US, notes that White Americans have typically been election winners in US history, due to historical Jim Crow laws or modern voter ID laws that are intended to, or may have the effect of, diminishing turnout among racial and ethnic minorities (Enders & Thornton, 2021; Jardina & Mickey, 2022; Miller & Davis, 2021; Morris & Shapiro, 2025; Rush et al., 2025; Stewart et al., 2016). This literature (see Enders & Thornton, 2021; Morris & Shapiro, 2025) finds that White individuals with high racial resentment tend to attribute voter fraud to racial and ethnic minorities and have less confidence in elections when they believe candidates do not have similarly racially resentful political preferences. Generally, racially resentful Whites are more likely to

perceive themselves as election winners—and racial and ethnic minorities as election losers—who are unfairly robbed of this status by what they believe to be overly accessible voting and election administration rules. The point is that election winners prefer the status quo and are likely to be unaffected or less confident in elections as election rules become more accessible or higher performing.

Based on the losers' vs winners' effects presented in the literature, this study considers the losers' effect to be a well-established phenomenon and demonstrates that election losers' confidence in election results can be increased with high-quality election administration.

4. Election Administration and Confidence

The quality of election administration in the US shapes individuals' confidence in the election process. Alvarez et al. (2013, p. 31) define election administration as a set of rules, procedures, technologies, and election personnel that shape election-related processes and outcomes in the US, where elections are shaped fundamentally by local government rules, processes, and personnel (Atkeson et al., 2015; Burden & Stewart, 2014; Ritter & Tolbert, 2024), as well as local government resources and tax dollars (Kropf, 2016).

Relatedly, Bowler et al. (2015) explore the question of how election administration performance shapes individuals' perceptions that elections are conducted fairly. If such perceptions are more prevalent at the individual or collective levels, the implication is that there will be greater confidence in the electoral system. Connecting with other research (Alvarez et al., 2013; Atkeson et al., 2015, 2024), Bowler et al.'s (2015) work provides evidence that effective administration boosts individuals' faith in elections. Additionally, it uses the EPI as a proxy for election administration performance. The EPI measures how well elections are administered in the US state-by-state, covering a variety of elements of election administration that capture the integrity, accuracy, and voter access dimensons of elections (Gerken, 2009; MIT Election Data and Science Lab, 2024). The EPI has 19 components, including the presence of effective ballot processing and counting practices, the quality of voter registration implementation, and the existence of auditing procedures. Results from this study show that states with higher EPI levels have individuals who are more likely to view elections as legitimate (Bowler et al., 2015).

Although researchers, like Atkeson et al. (2015), maintain that one's experiences with local election administration affects their perceptions of elections, no study has examined how local election administration quality throughout the US shapes voter confidence. According to Ewald (2009), most tasks of American election administration are handled at the county or county-equivalent levels (e.g., townships). Although the US federal and state governments may adopt election laws, these laws are interpreted and implemented by local election authorities. Additionally, local election bodies typically have responsibilities including creating and disseminating ballots, placing and supplying polling sites, fielding and answering prospective voter questions, facilitating and maintaining accurate voter registration records, and requisitioning and maintaining quality voting machines. Most individual experiences with elections are with local election administration.

With the previous literature presented as background, this study posits three hypotheses to contribute to the voter confidence and loser-election administration literature. These are the following:

H1: Election winners will be more likely to be confident than election losers in US elections.

H2: Higher levels of CEA are related to higher levels of confidence in US elections.

H3: CEA will have a negative moderating effect on election winners, such that higher levels of CEA will narrow the confidence gap between election losers and winners.

Election winners/losers are more/less likely to positively view election results because their favored candidates have won/lost the election. Higher CEA quality, which means more effective election administration, will also likely bolster confidence. However, there is likely a moderating effect of CEA on election winners versus losers. Losers are likely to become more confident in election results at higher levels of election administration quality, as such administration provides them with a greater sense that the election process is fair, accessible, and their favored candidates could win in the future. Conversely, election winners are likely to have more confidence at lower levels of election administration quality, when their dominance of election results may be more protected under the status quo of election administration. At higher levels of election administration quality, winners are likely to see a null effect or reduction in their voter confidence, since they may see a more effective election administration as providing too much access to past election losers that could upset the election winners' dominance.

5. The CEA Index

Recently, Ritter and Tolbert (2024) created the CEA index to measure the quality of election administration at the county level. The CEA is a global index that captures the average quality of election administration for the more than 3,000 county or county-equivalent level election jurisdictions in the US. Use of the index in this voter confidence study assumes that individuals have direct (personal) or indirect (through family, friends, media, and other outside sources of information) experiences with the various aspects of CEA, and these shape their confidence in elections. Consistent with previous research (Atkeson & Saunders, 2007), this study assumes that prospective voters directly or indirectly experience local election administration, and this affects their confidence in election results.

Like the EPI, the CEA is meant to capture, on average, how well election administration works for prospective voters, along the dimensions of access (promoting easier individual access to ballot casting), accuracy (ensuring that election counts are accurate), and integrity (providing guardrails against voter fraud). The index includes 19 components (listed in Table 1), which tap into one or more of these dimensions. For example, the mail ballots unreturned component indicates how well a county is doing in facilitating mail voting for prospective voters. The disability access component is also designed to tap into the access dimension, with this component representing how well counties do in making ballot casting accessible for those with self-reported disabilities, such as through more accessible voting sites (see Schur & Kruse, 2015). The residual voting (percentage of ballots cast but not counted) and election audit components are meant to tap into the accuracy and integrity dimensions. Ritter and Tolbert (2024) provide a more extensive discussion of how each of the 19 components taps into one or more of these dimensions.

The index has recently been expanded to encompass the years 2012 to 2022; the data is available as replication material and accessible through the link in the Data Availablility section. The design of the CEA is

based on the methodology of the EPI (MIT Election Data and Science Lab, 2024), except with a focus on the county. Table 1 lists the CEA components and notes in what direction each component contributes to higher CEA index values, which represent higher CEA performance.

Table 1. Components of CEA.

Component	Description	Do higher or lower values on the component contribute to higher CEA performance
Data Completion	Percent of eighteen election administration statistics from the Election Assistance Commission's Election Administration and Voting Survey reported by county	Higher
Mail Ballots Rejected	Percent of mail ballots rejected	Lower
Mail Ballots Unreturned	Percent of mail ballots unreturned	Lower
Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) ballots rejected	Percent UOCAVA ballots rejected	Lower
UOCAVA ballots unreturned	Percent of UOCAVA ballots unreturned	Lower
Provisional ballots cast	Percent of ballots that are provisional ballots	Lower
Provisional ballots rejected	Percent of provisional ballots rejected	Lower
New registration forms rejected	Percent of new registration forms rejected	Lower
Non-voting due to registration problem	Percent of non-voters for voter registration problem reason	Lower
Non-voting due to illness or disability	Percent of non-voters for illness or disability reasons	Lower
Voter registration	County voting age population registration percent	Higher
Residual voting	Percent of ballots cast that are not counted	Lower
Disability access	Difference of aggregate voter turnout between non-disabled and disabled individuals, with higher numbers indicating more access	Higher
Voter lookup tools	How many informational details are offered to voters by a county's state? (includes voter registration status, polling place site, a sample ballot, absentee ballot status, and provisional ballot status)	Higher
Online vote registration (OVR)	Does a county's state have OVR?	Higher
Voter wait time	Average wait time for a voter in a state.	Lower
Post-election audit	Does a county's state have a post-election audit law?	Higher
Risk-limiting audit	Does a county's state have a risk-limiting audit law?	Higher
Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) membership	Is a county's state a member of ERIC?	Higher

Source: Ritter and Tolbert (2024).

To create the index, every county is ranked relative to all others per year on every index component, and then these rankings are converted to 0 to 100. Township election administration states have township data aggregated to the county level before creating the county CEA component values. Then, the 19 components are added together per county, and then are mean averaged to produce a CEA score for each county. Five of the 19 CEA indicators come from state-level data (risk-limiting audit laws, OVR laws, voter information lookup tool availability, post-election audit laws, and ERIC membership). To calculate the final CEA index value for each county, the county and state-level components are weighted according to how much they contribute to each county's CEA score (see Ritter, 2024). Completing this sequence of actions produces a final CEA score for each county.

What are the descriptive features of the CEA? In terms of mean averages and standard deviations, CEA values were 58.35 (standard deviation = 13.16) in 2012, 59.2 (standard deviation = 15.01) in 2014, 59.36 (standard deviation = 16.53) in 2016, 58.51 (standard deviation = 17.17) in 2018, 54.89 (standard deviation = 18.24) in 2020, and 60.72 (standard deviation = 14.68) in 2022. Average CEA quality tends to be consistent across this period, except for 2020, because of election administration challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The sizable deviations indicate considerable variations in election administration quality across and within states—something obscured by studies that rely on the EPI, which attaches single administration quality scores to each state.

Figure 1 provides six maps of CEA variation across US counties or county-equivalent jurisdictions from 2012 to 2022. Darker colors indicate higher election administration performance. Generally, election administration performance is higher in states outside of the US's Deep South. However, there is notable within-state variation; in states such as Texas, which the EPI would indicate as having low election administration quality, the CEA instead shows several Texas counties ranking among the best counties nationwide. In contrast, states that usually chart higher on the EPI, like Wisconsin, have a number of counties that rank poorly on the CEA (for EPI statistics, see MIT Election Data and Science Lab, 2024).

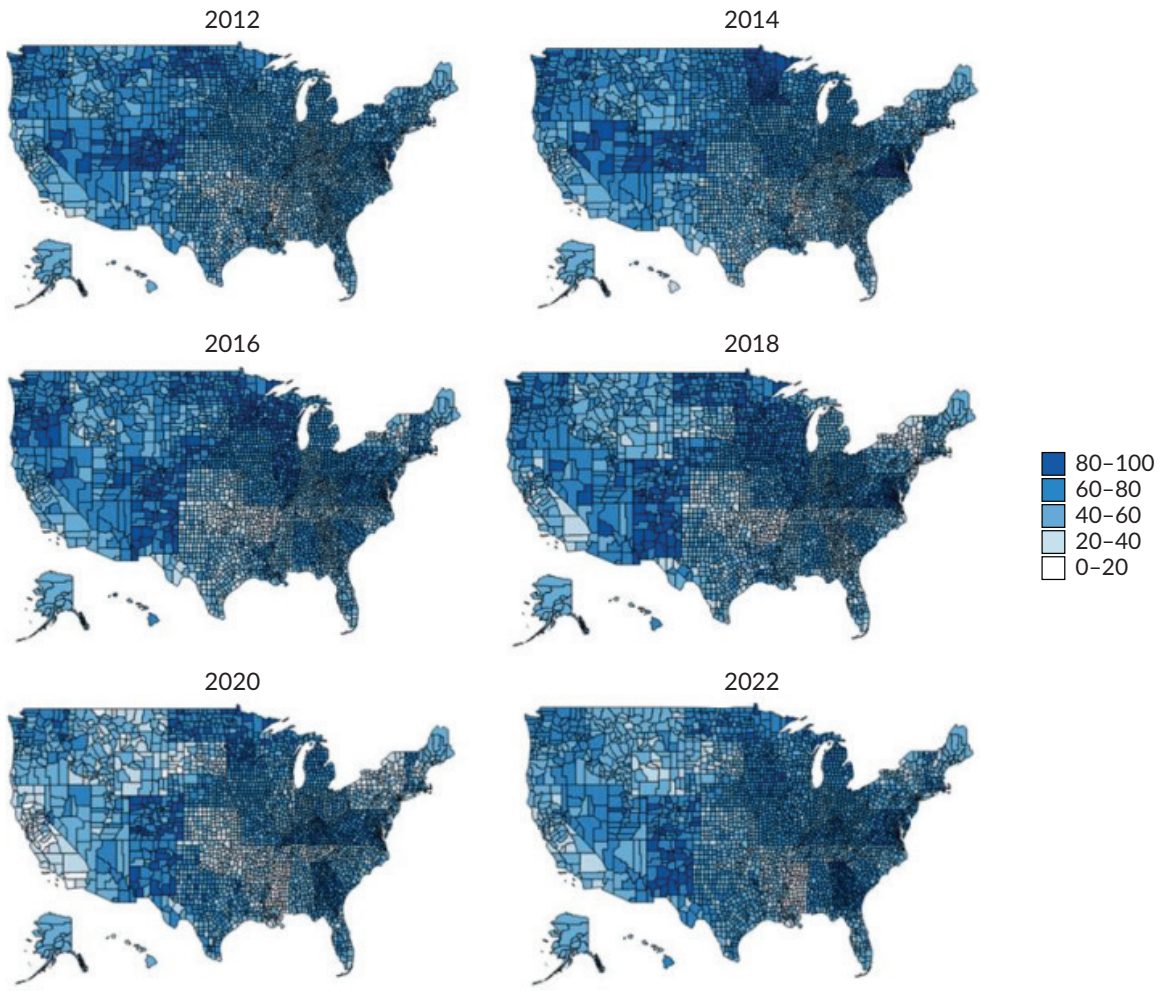

Figure 1. Map of CEA index by county from 2012 to 2022.

6. Data and Methods

To assess this study's inquiries into the impact of the CEA on voter confidence, the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAE) is employed. SPAE data with county geographic identifiers is available for 2012, 2014, 2016, 2020, and 2022. For each of these years, 200 registered voters were interviewed on their election experiences from each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The selections of these 200 interviewees per state and the District of Columbia were identified from state-level matched random samples in each of these geographic units. Ultimately, the resulting samples are representative of American adults on key demographic characteristics, including education, income, race, and partisanship.

The data sizes of the models in this study are determined by the number of respondents to the voter confidence questions on the SPAE. There are four voter confidence questions per survey. The first asks one's confidence that their vote was counted as they intended; the second, whether city or county vote totals were accurately counted; the third, whether state vote totals were accurately counted; and the fourth, whether national vote totals were accurately counted. Specifically, regarding the text of these questions, they ask individuals if they are *very confident*, *somewhat confident*, *not too confident*, or *not at all confident* that votes were accurately counted.

The key dependent variables in this study's statistical models (in Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5) are whether individuals are confident that ballots were counted accurately. These variables are coded at four levels, from 0 to 3, with higher numbers reflecting higher levels of confidence. There are dependent variables for confidence in personal vote count accuracy, county vote count accuracy, state vote count accuracy, and national state vote count accuracy.

The three key independent variables are the CEA index, the lagged presidential election winner, and the lagged Senate election winner. The lagged presidential election winner variable is binary, with 1 indicating an individual shares party identification with the winning presidential candidate in the most recent past presidential election, 0 if not. The most recent past presidential election would be the most recent one before a given SPAE survey year. If an individual on the SPAE survey is a Republican/Democrat, and their state's Electoral College votes went to the Republican/Democrat candidate, then they are categorized as a lagged presidential election winner; otherwise, a SPAE response is categorized as a lagged presidential election loser. Coding presidential election winners based on whether a person shares party identification with the national Electoral College winner results in incorrectly signed presidential winner coefficients, contrary to previous research.

The lagged Senate election winner variable is constructed similarly. The lagged election refers to the most recent Senate election in a state before a given survey year. This is a binary variable, with lagged Senate election winner categorized as 1 if an individual shares party identification with the winning Senate candidate from their state, 0 if not.

To avoid the possibility of spurious relationships or omitted variable bias, several other independent variables were included in the statistical models. These include the Cost of Voting Index (COVI), normalized from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating higher on average registration and voting law restrictions in a state (Pomante et al., 2023); this accounts for past research (Atkeson et al., 2024) showing that the restrictiveness of these laws—like the absence of accessible mail voting laws, or the presence of strict voter ID laws—can affect voter confidence. COVI, though moderately correlated with CEA, is theoretically distinct, as the former captures registration and voting laws more directly related to voter turnout, whereas the latter captures elements related to election processes that connect the individual to ballot casting (Ritter & Tolbert, 2021, 2024; Ritter et al., 2024). There is also a Republican trifecta state-level variable (1 = state legislature and governorship controlled by the Republican Party, 0 = divided state government; −1 = state legislature and governorship controlled by the Democratic Party) to account for the fact the Republican Party is more likely to issue rhetorical signals and endorse laws that are theoretically intended to increase voter integrity, which may also be related to voter confidence (Ballotpedia, 2022; Stewart et al., 2016).

A couple of county-level control variables are included to account for possible confounding factors from this level of analysis. One is median county income, to account for the fact that wealthier counties can afford—through higher tax bases and revenues—higher quality election administration, which may also shape confidence (Ritter & Tolbert, 2024; United States Census, 2022). In line with recent research (Enders & Thornton, 2021; Morris & Shapiro, 2025), this study also expects that counties with higher levels of racial diversity—with more potential for racial in-group versus out-group tension—will be more likely to lead to lower levels of confidence in US elections. Accordingly, this study employs a racial diversity index measure originally created by Hero and Tolbert (1996) and constructed from United States Census (2022). This

measure ranges from 0 to 1, and represents the average proportion of racial/ethnic characteristics shared by a randomly selected pair of individuals in a county (the four racial/ethnic groups are White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian); higher levels on this variable indicate more diversity, which is theorized to be negatively related to individual confidence in elections.

Controls are also included for midterm elections (1 = yes, 0 = no) and the average vote margin in a state. In presidential election years, the vote margin is calculated by subtracting the vote margin separating the two leading presidential election candidates by state from 100, and, in midterm election years, the measure is calculated by subtracting the vote margin separating the overall Republican and Democratic House of Representatives percentage vote in the electorate by state from 100 (Leip, 2024).

Other control variables are education (0 = no high school degree, 1 = high school degree, 2 = some college, 3 = 2-year college degree, 4 = 4-year college degree, 5 = post-undergraduate degree), family income (0 = less than $10,000, 1 = $10,000–$19,999, 2 = $20,000–$29,999, 3 = $30,000–$39,999, 4 = $40,000–$49,999, 5 = $50,000–$59,999, 6 = $60,000–$69,999, 7 = $70,000–$79,999, 8 = $80,000–$99,999, 9 = $100,000–$119,000, 10 = $120,000–$149,999, 11 = $150,000–$199,999, 12 = $200,000–$249,999, 13 = $250,000–$349,999, 14 = $350,000–$499,999, and 15 = $500,000 or more), Republican scale (0 = non-Republican, 1 = Weak Republican, 2 = Moderate Republican, 3 = Strong Republican), democratic scale (0 = non-Democrat, 1 = Weak Democrat, 2 = Moderate Democrat, 3 = Strong Democrat), Black (1 = yes, 0 = no), Hispanic (1 = yes, 0 = no), and female (1 = yes, 0 = no).

Since the dependent variables are ordinal variables, this study utilizes multilevel ordered logistic regression models. The multilevel models include three levels, with individuals nested within years, and years nested within counties. These higher levels feature random county and year intercepts to account for varying county and year effects.

7. Results

There are four model sets below, one for each of the dependent variables: personal vote count confidence, county vote count confidence, state vote count confidence, and national vote count confidence. There are two models in each of these sets: The first of these is a baseline model and the second is an interaction model, with interaction variables between the winner and CEA variables. In the analyses below, higher/lower CEA signifies higher/lower election administration quality. Because of space limitations, the predicted probability analyses below focus on the highest confidence ordinal category for each of the dependent variables (the other levels of the ordinal variables indicate that individuals are generally less unconfident in vote counts when they are winners, and when CEA is higher, except for national vote count confidence results, as explained below). Generally, the results indicate that being an election winner and higher CEA leads to more confidence in elections, and higher CEA narrows and often eliminates the loser–winner confidence gap in election vote counts.

The baseline model in Table 2 indicates that being a presidential winner, a Senate winner, or residing in a county with higher quality CEA makes a person more likely to be confident in their personal vote count. Converting the key logistic regression variable values to predicted probabilities, and setting all other variables at mean values, being a presidential winner changes a person's probability of being highly confident in their vote count

from 67.89% to 71.53%, a change of 3.64 percentage points. Regarding being a Senate winner, the impact is a positive 6.42 percentage points, from 67.58% to 74%. Comparing the impact of CEA at minimum and maximum values, an individual in a county with the highest CEA value has a 4.64 percentage points higher likelihood of being highly confident (at 71.67% versus 67.03%).

Table 2. Impact of election winners and CEA on personal vote confidence from 2012 to 2022.

	Baseline	CEA × winners/losers
Presidential winner	0.1880***	0.6376***
	(0.042)	(0.158)
Senate winner	0.3385***	0.6168***
	(0.055)	(0.183)
CEA	0.0024**	0.0075***
	(0.001)	(0.002)
CEA × presidential winner		−0.0080**
		(0.003)
CEA × Senate winner		−0.0050*
		(0.003)
COVI	−0.0001	−0.0001
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Vote margin	−0.0092***	−0.0094***
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Female	−0.0800**	−0.0793**
	(0.029)	(0.029)
Education	0.1111***	0.1116***
	(0.010)	(0.010)
Income quintile	0.0570***	0.0573***
	(0.011)	(0.011)
Black	−0.2834***	−0.2754***
	(0.064)	(0.064)
Hispanic	−0.2614***	−0.2586***
	(0.076)	(0.075)
Republican scale	−0.0583***	−0.0637***
	(0.016)	(0.016)
Democratic scale	0.3360***	0.3419***
	(0.016)	(0.016)
Midterm election	0.3217***	0.3223***
	(0.034)	(0.034)
Median income	−0.00000008	−0.0000001
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Racial diversity	−0.7296***	−0.7356***
	(0.097)	(0.097)
Republican trifecta	0.0920***	0.0936***
	(0.025)	(0.025)
Random county-level effects	0.0831***	0.0849***
	(0.021)	(0.022)

Table 2. (Cont.) Impact of election winners and CEA on personal vote confidence from 2012 to 2022.

	Baseline	CEA × winners/losers
Random year-level effects	0.3588*** (0.036)	0.3563*** (0.036)
Wald chi-square test	1,452.99 ($p = 0.00$)	1,487.08 ($p = 0.00$)
Observations	50,479	50,479

Notes: Logistic regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses,* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The CEA × winners/losers model of Table 2 shows significant interactive relationships between the presidential winner and CEA, as well as the Senate winner and CEA, variables. Converted to predicted probabilities, these results indicate the loser–winner confidence gap is narrowed with higher CEA quality.

This can be seen with Figure 2's left-hand graph. Figure 2 compares the probabilities of presidential winners and losers being confident, varying CEA from lowest to highest values, with all other variables set at means. At the lowest level of CEA quality, presidential winners are 12.22 percentage points (73.06%–60.84%) more likely than presidential losers to be highly confident in their personal vote counts; conversely, at the highest level of CEA quality, presidential losers are 2.98 percentage points (72.8%–69.82%) more likely than presidential winners to be highly confident in their personal vote counts. This latter difference cannot be discerned with 95% confidence intervals, indicating the winner–loser gap is closed at high CEA levels.

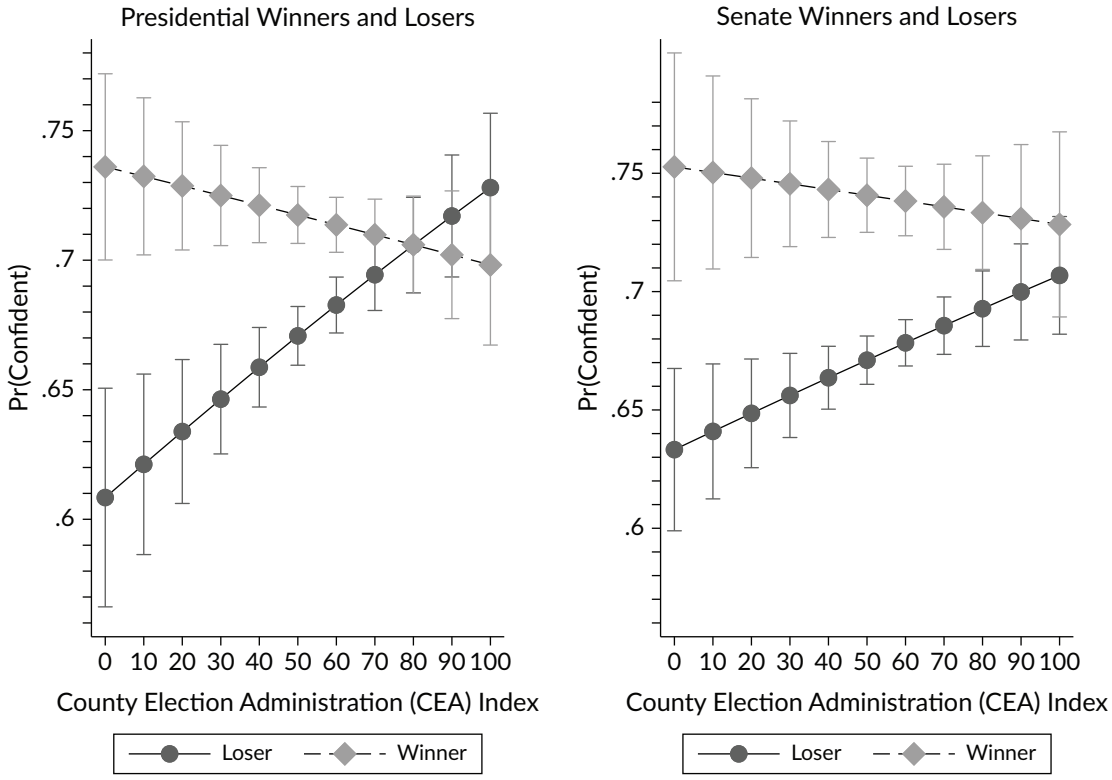

Figure 2. Impact of CEA on personal vote count confidence in presidential and Senate elections (with 95% confidence intervals).

Figure 2's right-hand graph shows a similar finding with Senate losers versus winners, varying CEA (with all other variables set at means). At the lowest level of CEA quality, the loser–winner gap is 11.95 percentage points (75.27%–63.32%) in favor of Senate winners, but the gap narrows to only 2.16 percentage points (72.84%–70.68%) in favor of Senate winners in high CEA quality contexts. Since the latter difference is not discernible with 95 percent confidence intervals, the winner–loser gap is closed at high CEA levels.

Regarding county vote confidence, the baseline model of Table 3 shows that presidential or Senate winners are significantly more confident in county vote counts. In predicted probabilities, a Presidential winner is 5.16 (61.36%–56.20%) percentage points more likely than a presidential loser to be highly confident in county election results. Senate winners are 7.69 (63.95%–56.26%) percentage points more likely than Senate losers to be confident.

Table 3. Impact of election winners and CEA on county vote confidence from 2012 to 2022.

	Baseline	CEA × winners/losers
Presidential winner	0.2310***	0.4301**
	(0.042)	(0.168)
Senate winner	0.3482***	0.7439***
	(0.067)	(0.192)
CEA	0.0012	0.0049**
	(0.001)	(0.001)
CEA × presidential winner		−0.0035
		(0.003)
CEA × Senate winner		−0.0071**
		(0.003)
COVI	−0.0011**	−0.0011**
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Vote margin	−0.0088***	−0.0089***
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Female	−0.1401***	−0.1397***
	(0.025)	(0.025)
Education	0.1178***	0.1180***
	(0.010)	(0.010)
Income quintile	0.0567***	0.0568***
	(0.010)	(0.010)
Black	−0.2560***	−0.2502***
	(0.057)	(0.057)
Hispanic	−0.2718***	−0.2705***
	(0.074)	(0.074)
Republican scale	−0.0803***	−0.0849***
	(0.017)	(0.017)
Democratic scale	0.3256***	0.3304***
	(0.017)	(0.017)
Midterm election	0.1131***	0.1159***
	(0.029)	(0.029)
Median income	0.000002**	0.000002**
	(0.000)	(0.000)

Table 3. (Cont.) Impact of election winners and CEA on county vote confidence from 2012 to 2022.

	Baseline	CEA × winners/losers
Racial diversity	−0.9538*** (0.088)	−0.9545*** (0.088)
Republican trifecta	0.1047*** (0.021)	0.1043*** (0.021)
Random county-level effects	0.0572** (0.018)	0.0580** (0.018)
Random year-level effects	0.3110*** (0.030)	0.3106*** (0.030)
Wald chi-square test	1,673.67 ($p = 0.00$)	1,674.05 ($p = 0.00$)
Observations	55,413	55,413

Notes: Logistic regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3's CEA x winners/losers model evaluates interactions between the presidential or Senate winner and CEA variables. Only the CEA x Senate winner variable is significant, in a negative direction. This relationship is graphed in Figure 3 as predicted probabilities, comparing the probabilities of Senate losers and winners being confident in county vote counts, varying CEA from minimum to maximum values. At the lowest CEA level, there is a substantively significant gap of 16.29 (68.42%–52.13%) percentage points in favor of Senate winners, but this gap closes at the highest level of CEA, when both losers and winners have about a 60% probability of being confident.

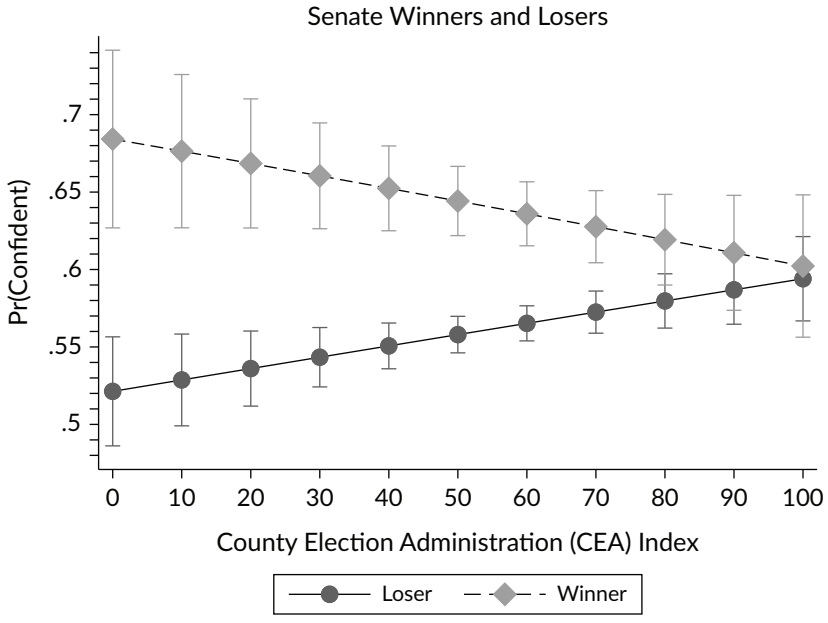

Figure 3. Impact of CEA on county vote count confidence in Senate elections (with 95% confidence intervals).

Regarding confidence in state vote counts, the baseline model for Table 4 shows that being a winner matters. As predicted probabilities, presidential winners are 6.26 percentage points more likely than losers (51.42% versus 45.16%), and Senate winners are 12.31 percentages points more likely than losers (56.65% versus 44.34%), to be confident in these vote counts.

Table 4. Impact of election winners and CEA on state vote confidence from 2012 to 2022.

	Baseline	CEA × winners/losers
Presidential winner	0.2764*** (0.045)	0.5855** (0.187)
Senate winner	0.5453*** (0.073)	0.9676*** (0.218)
CEA	−0.0009 (0.001)	0.0039** (0.002)
CEA × presidential winner		−0.0054* (0.003)
CEA × Senate winner		−0.0075** (0.003)
COVI	−0.0019*** (0.001)	−0.0019*** (0.001)
Vote margin	−0.0191*** (0.001)	−0.0193*** (0.001)
Female	−0.0674** (0.025)	−0.0666** (0.025)
Education	0.0779*** (0.010)	0.0783*** (0.010)
Income quintile	0.0409*** (0.010)	0.0409*** (0.010)
Black	−0.1654** (0.060)	−0.1579** (0.060)
Hispanic	−0.0845 (0.073)	−0.0819 (0.074)
Republican scale	−0.1602*** (0.016)	−0.1665*** (0.016)
Democratic scale	0.2942*** (0.016)	0.3004*** (0.016)
Midterm election	0.0390 (0.029)	0.0420 (0.029)
Median income	0.000005*** (0.000)	0.000005*** (0.000)
Racial diversity	−0.5561*** (0.090)	−0.5582*** (0.090)
Republican trifecta	0.1777*** (0.022)	0.1774*** (0.022)
Random county-level effects	0.0950*** (0.019)	0.0957*** (0.019)
Random year-level effects	0.3531*** (0.030)	0.3539*** (0.031)
Wald chi-square test	1,877.20 ($p = 0.00$)	1,951.67 ($p = 0.00$)
Observations	55,334	55,334

Notes: Logistic regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

However, Table 4's CEA x winners/losers model indicates this gap is closed at higher CEA levels. First, there is a significantly negative interactive relationship between the presidential winner and CEA variables. Figure 4's left-hand graph compares the probabilities of presidential winners and losers being confident, varying CEA from lowest to highest values, with other variables at means. Winners are 13.2 percentage points more likely to be highly confident at the lowest level of CEA (56.36% versus 43.16%), but this gap collapses at about 47% for both losers and winners at the highest level of CEA.

The Senate winner × CEA results are similar. At the lowest level of CEA quality, as depicted in Figure 4's right-hand graph, Senate losers have a 42.72% probability of being highly confident in state vote counts, compared to 64.24% for winners, a gap of 21.52 percentage points. However, at the highest level of CEA quality, this gap shrinks to a statistically insignificant 5 percentage points (50% for winners, 45% for losers, but the confidence intervals for these values overlap).

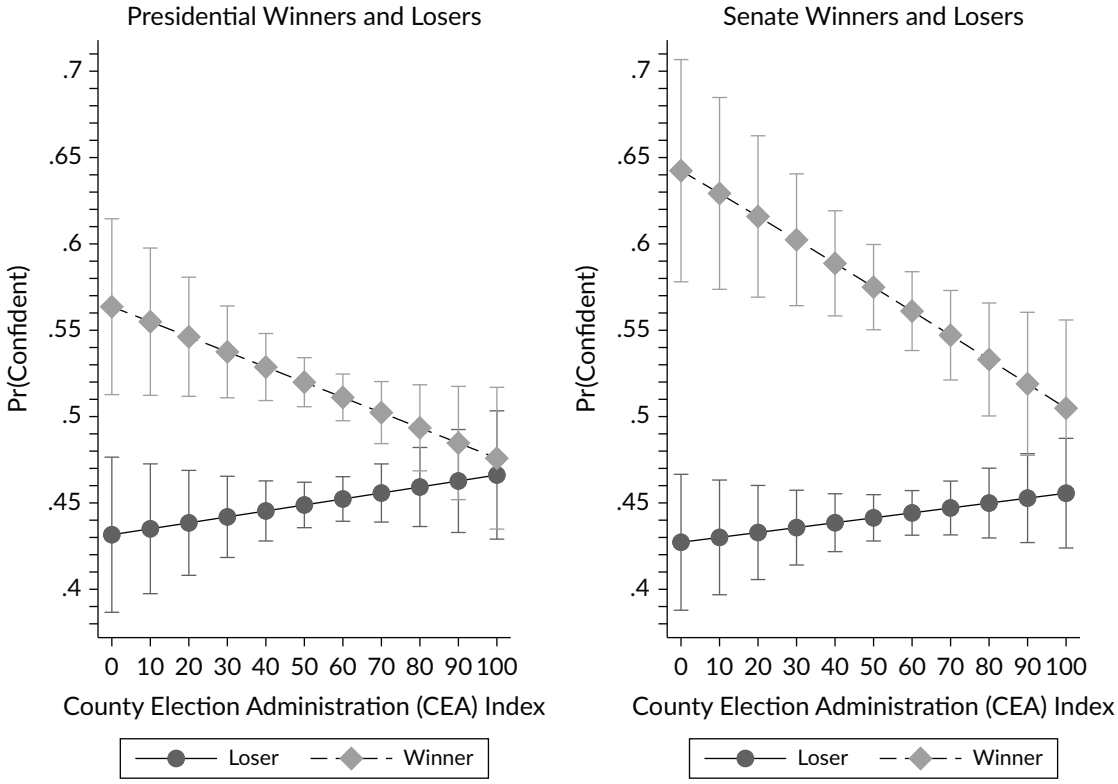

Figure 4. Impact of CEA on state vote count confidence in presidential and Senate elections (with 95% confidence intervals).

Regarding national vote count confidence, Table 5's baseline model results are mixed. Being a presidential winner is significantly negatively related to voter confidence. In terms of predicted probabilities, winners have a 24% probability of being highly confident in national vote results, compared to 31.64% for losers, a difference of −7.64 percentage points. While this may seem surprising, the paradox is likely due to cases when a presidential winner in a state (when the winner's preferred presidential candidate wins a state's popular vote) is not the national presidential winner.

Table 5. IImpact of election winners and CEA on national vote confidence from 2012 to 2022.

	Baseline	CEA × winners/losers
Presidential winner	−0.4111*** (0.036)	−0.3574** (0.165)
Senate winner	0.4195*** (0.061)	0.9167*** (0.182)
CEA	0.0009 (0.001)	0.0041** (0.002)
CEA × presidential winner		−0.0009 (0.003)
CEA × senate winner		−0.0088** (0.003)
COVI	−0.0003 (0.000)	−0.0003 (0.000)
Vote margin	0.0009 (0.001)	0.0009 (0.001)
Female	−0.0325 (0.023)	−0.0323 (0.023)
Education	0.0560*** (0.008)	0.0563*** (0.008)
Income quintile	0.0041 (0.009)	0.0039 (0.009)
Black	0.0302 (0.048)	0.0343 (0.048)
Hispanic	0.0501 (0.067)	0.0504 (0.068)
Republican scale	−0.2474*** (0.016)	−0.2516*** (0.016)
Democratic scale	0.4135*** (0.013)	0.4181*** (0.013)
Midterm election	0.2039*** (0.027)	0.2081*** (0.027)
Median income	0.000003** (0.000)	0.000002** (0.000)
Racial diversity	0.0427 (0.077)	0.0443 (0.077)
Republican trifecta	0.0057 (0.020)	0.0045 (0.020)
Random county-level effects	0.0211 (0.016)	0.0208 (0.016)
Random year-level effects	0.3616*** (0.031)	0.3616*** (0.031)
Wald chi-square test	2,533.03 ($p = 0.00$)	2,770.13 ($p = 0.00$)
Observations	55,251	55,251

Notes: Logistic regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses,* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Senate winners, in contrast, are more confident in national vote results than Senate losers. Winners have a 33.55%, and losers a 25.48%, probability of being highly confident in this outcome, a difference of 8.07 percentage points.

Table 5's CEA × winners/losers model evaluates interactions between the presidential or Senate winners and CEA variables. Only the interaction between Senate winners and CEA is statistically significant, in a negative direction. Figure 5 shows this relationship as predicted probabilities, comparing the probabilities of winners and losers being confident, varying CEA from lowest to highest values. High CEA performance closes the winner–loser confidence gap, which is 17.78 (39.72% versus 21.94%) percentage points in favor of winners at the lowest level of CEA, but essentially the same at a 28% to 29% probability for Winners and Losers at the highest CEA level.

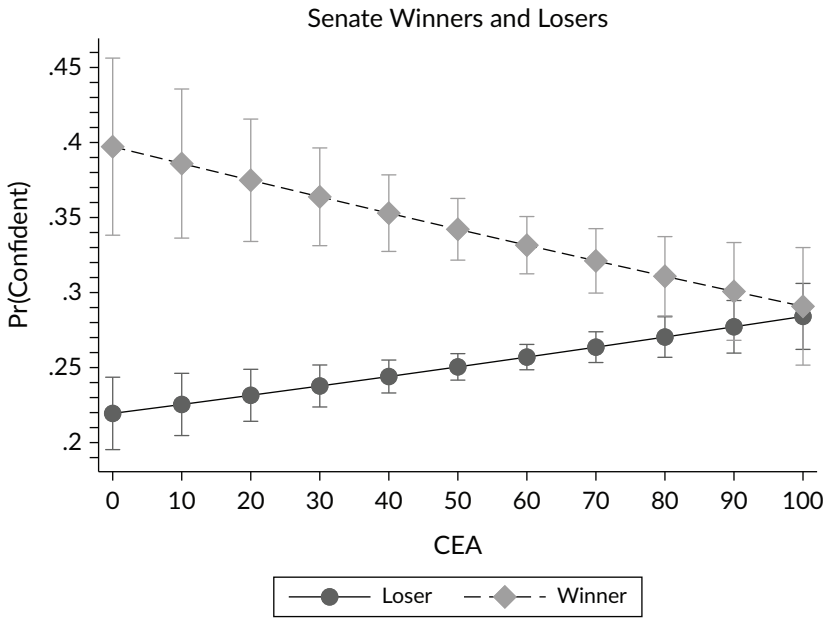

Figure 5. Impact of CEA on national vote count confidence in Senate elections (with 95% confidence intervals).

Regarding Tables 2 to 5 control variables, females (compared to males), Black or Hispanic individuals (relative to individuals of other races), and Republicans (with Independents as the reference group) are less confident. Conversely, higher income or education, as well as Democratic (with Independents as the reference group), individuals tend to be more confident. Higher county median incomes are positively related to confidence, but county-level racial diversity has a negative relationship with confidence, except for national vote counts. COVI is significantly negatively related to confidence at all levels except the national level. Close vote margins are negatively related to vote count confidence except at the national level. In the opposite direction, midterm elections (except for state vote count confidence) and Republican trifecta control of state governments are significantly positively related to confidence at all levels of vote counts.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown that election winners are generally more confident than losers in election results in the US. However, this relationship is moderated by higher levels of CEA. At the highest levels of CEA,

the confidence gap between losers and winners is closed for presidential and Senate elections in relation to vote counts. This is generally true for confidence in personal, county, state, and national vote counts, with the only exceptions being a lack of a moderating effect in relation to presidential elections for county and national vote counts. One may note that confidence levels generally tend to be higher for personal vote counts, rather than county, state, and national vote counts; the reason for this is that individuals tend to be more confident in vote counts that are more proximate to themselves, and are more skeptical of vote counts that are more distant from their own vote, as noted in previous research (Stewart et al., 2016). Higher levels of CEA were also shown to have a positive and significant direct effect on personal vote count confidence.

This research makes several important contributions to voter confidence and losers' effect election administration research: First, this study shows how CEA can be used to assess confidence in American elections from 2012 to 2022. Subsequent research and policy development work linked to voter confidence can make use of this index. Second, the various components of the CEA provide insights about what election reformers can do to enhance voter confidence. Possibilities include state adoption of ERIC or election audit procedures to promote election integrity; investment of more state or county financial and personnel resources into procuring or maintaining high-quality election or tabulation machines to increase vote counting accuracy; or increasing the number of polling sites and election workers to optimize voter access.

Regarding other important contributions, this study updates the literature on the losers' effect by showing that high CEA quality can narrow and even eliminate the loser–winner confidence gap. Past literature (Atkeson et al., 2015; Bowler et al., 2015) also demonstrates that election administration is an important moderating mechanism regarding the losers' effect. This study represents an advance from these earlier studies, since the CEA allows one to assess this relationship at the local level for the whole US.

The fact that election winners, compared to election losers, do not see an increase in election confidence at higher levels of CEA may be due to the preference winners have for the election rule status quo. Subsequent research should examine whether this is the case or if there are other explanations. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that CEA is a significant factor shaping election losers' and winners' confidence in elections.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Replication data is available at: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/Z68YDY

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ARTICLE

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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 (Suttmann-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).

			LEO Size (Registered Voters)		
Demographic	Public	LEOs	< 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.

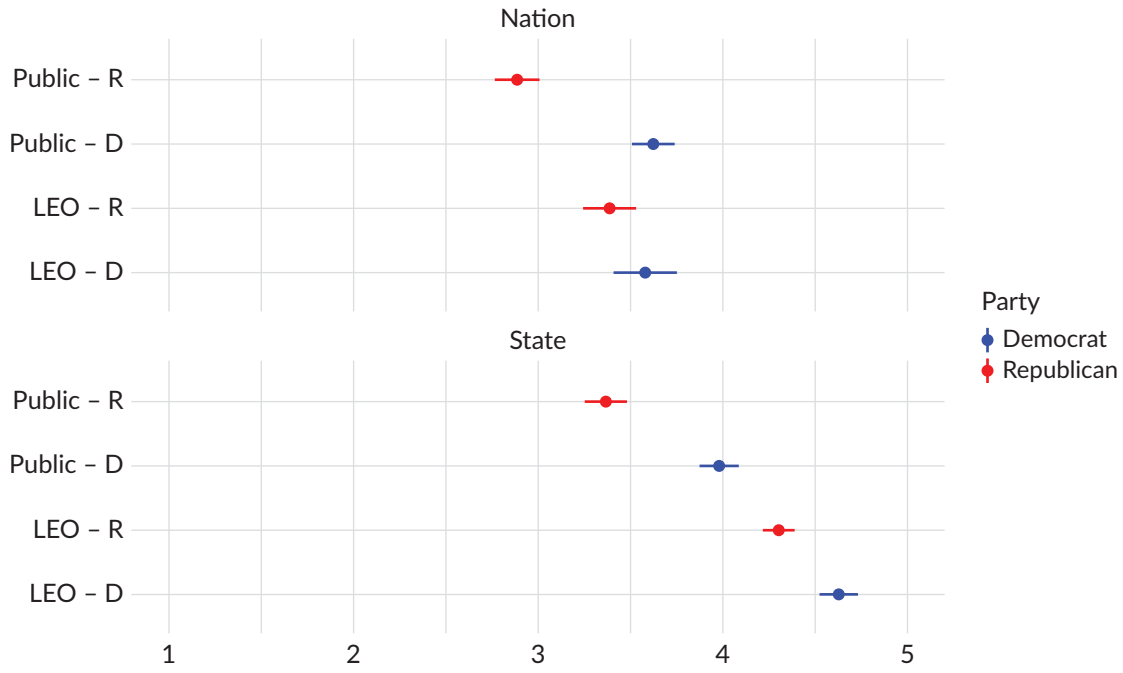

Figure 1. Expected voter confidence (2020).

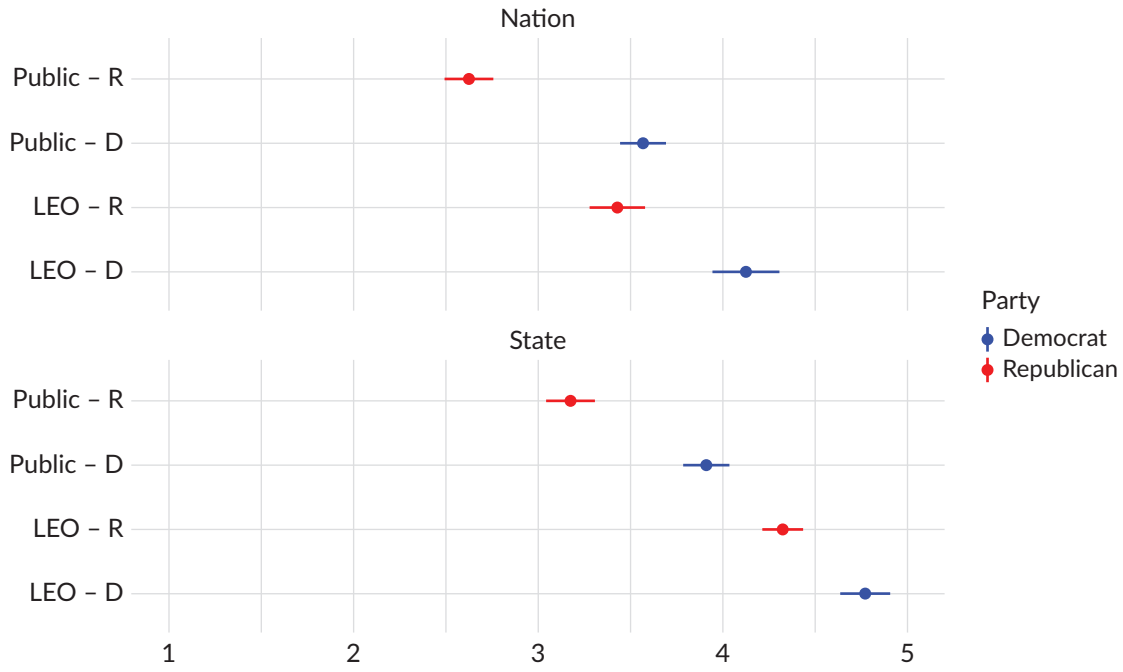

Figure 2. Expected registration list confidence (2024).

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.

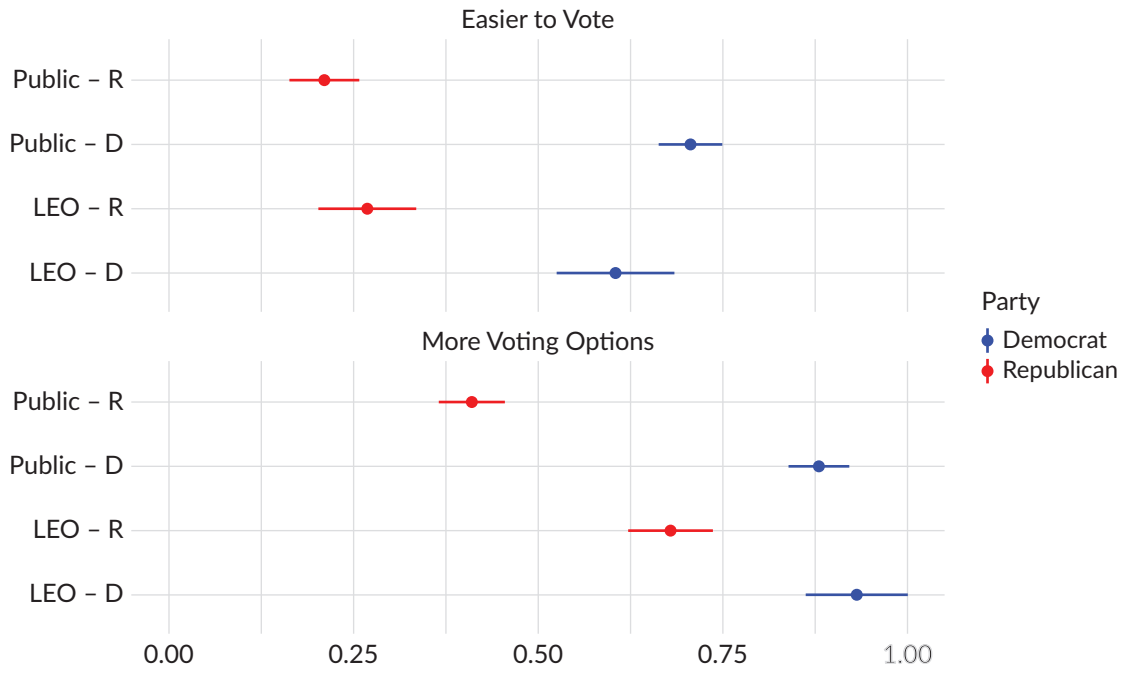

Figure 3. Expected voter values (access vs. integrity).

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.

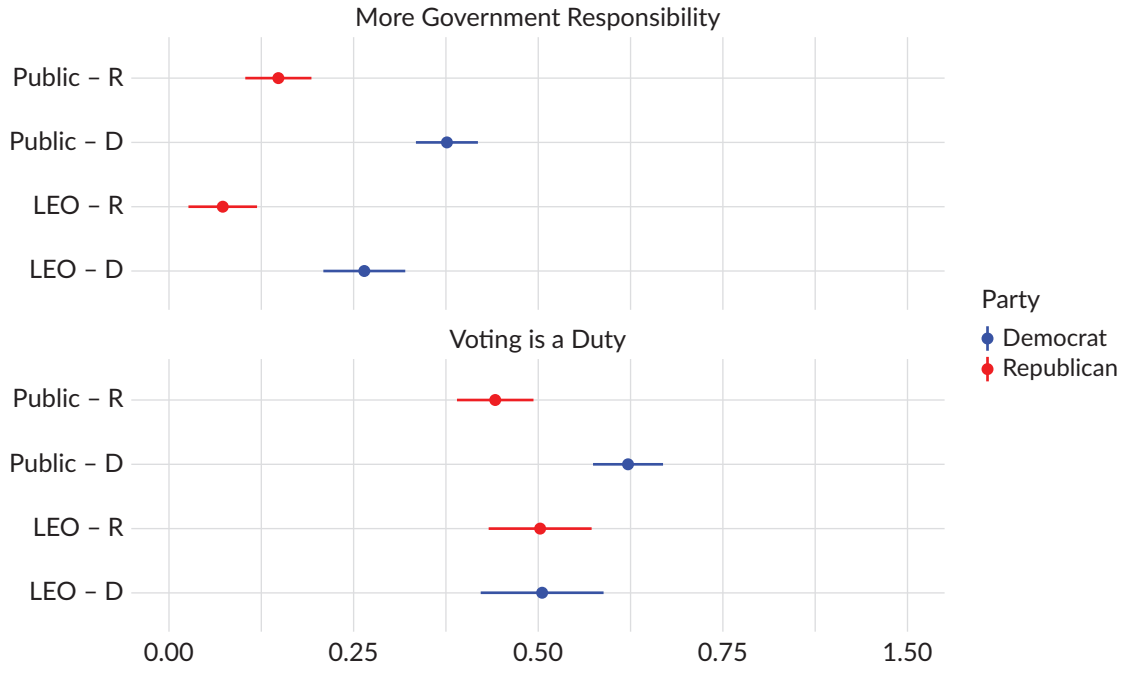

Figure 4. Expected voter values (individual responsibility).

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.

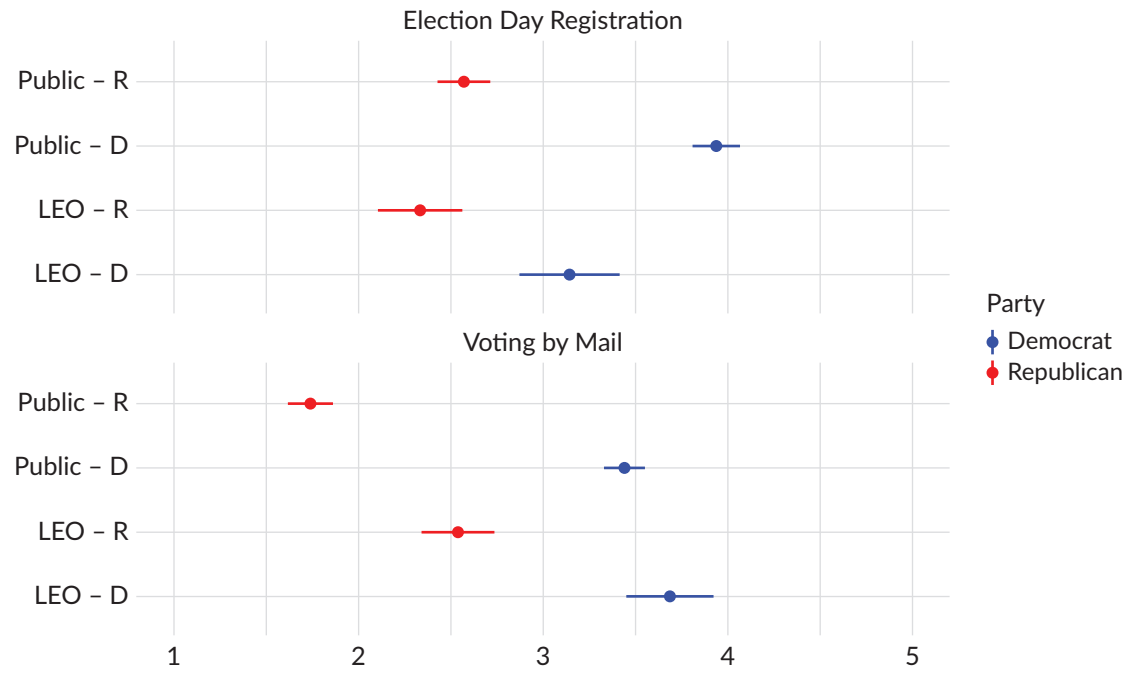

Figure 5. Expected support for convenience reforms.

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.

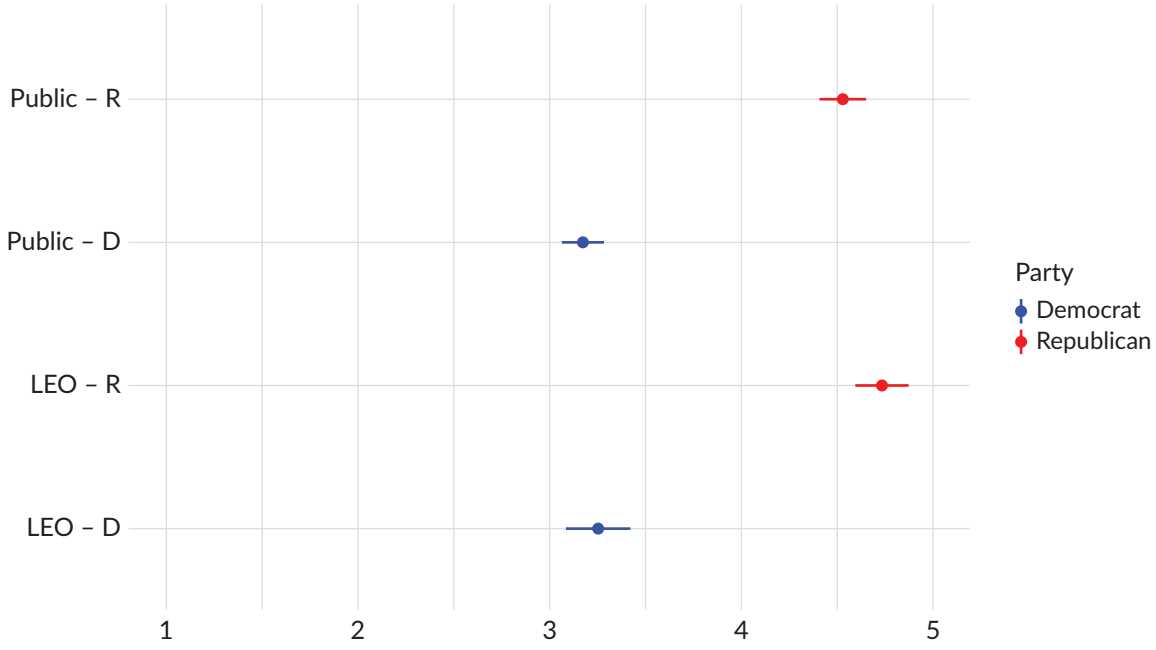

Figure 6. Expected support for a photo ID requirement.

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.

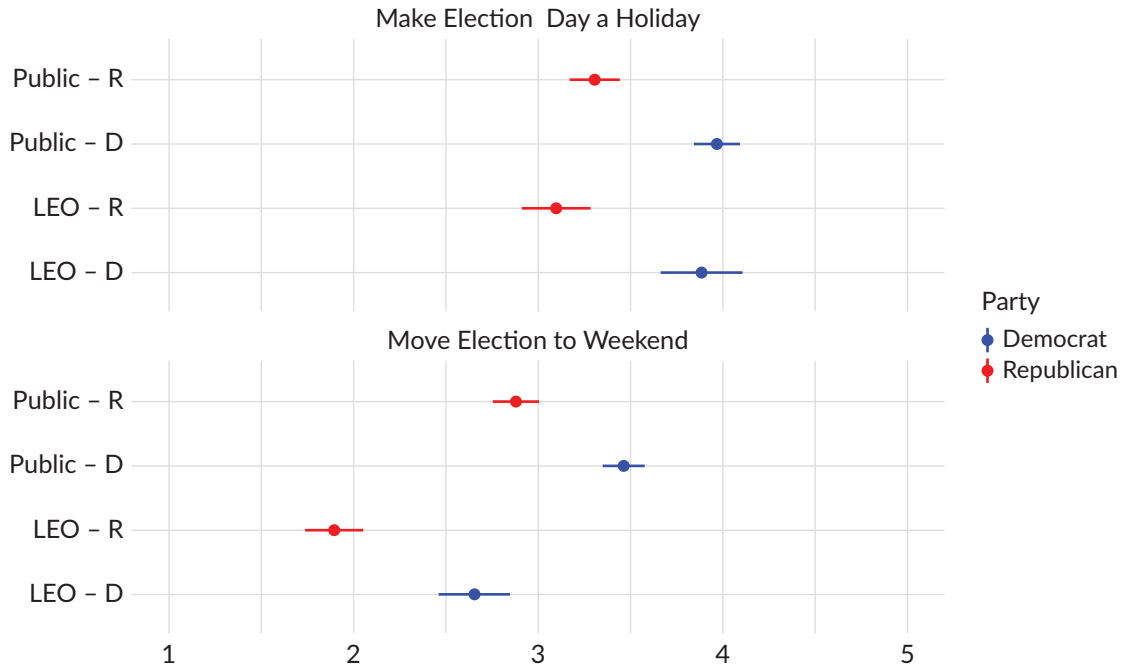

Figure 7. Expected support for election day changes.

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.

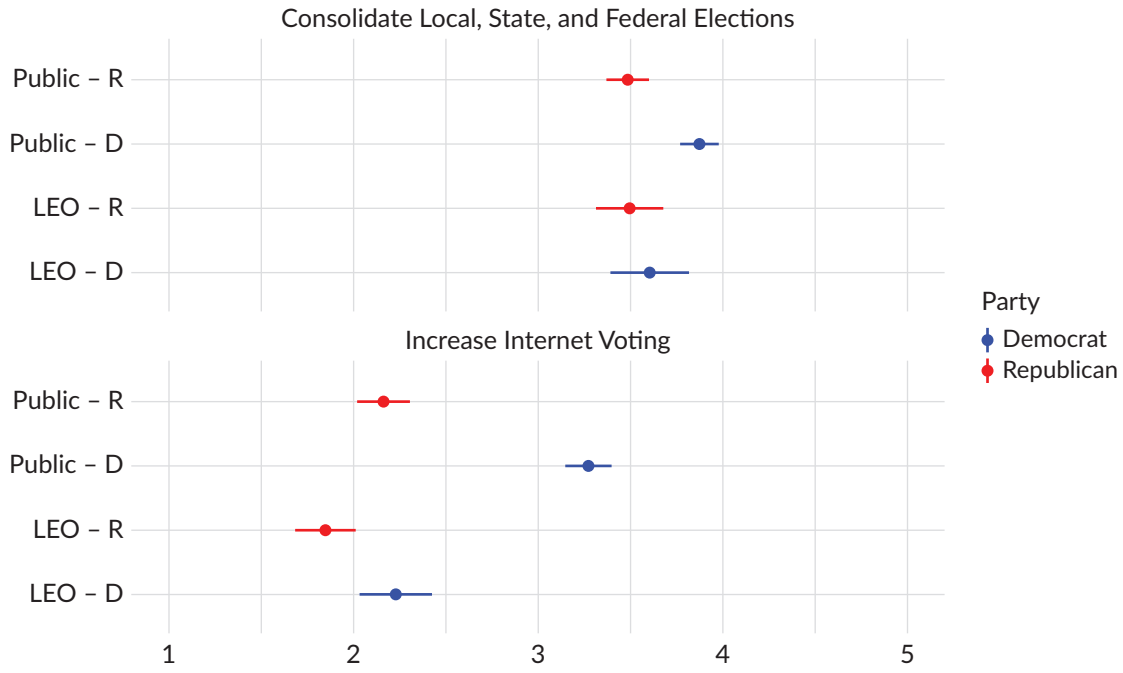

Figure 8. Expected support for other election reforms.

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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ARTICLE

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

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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.

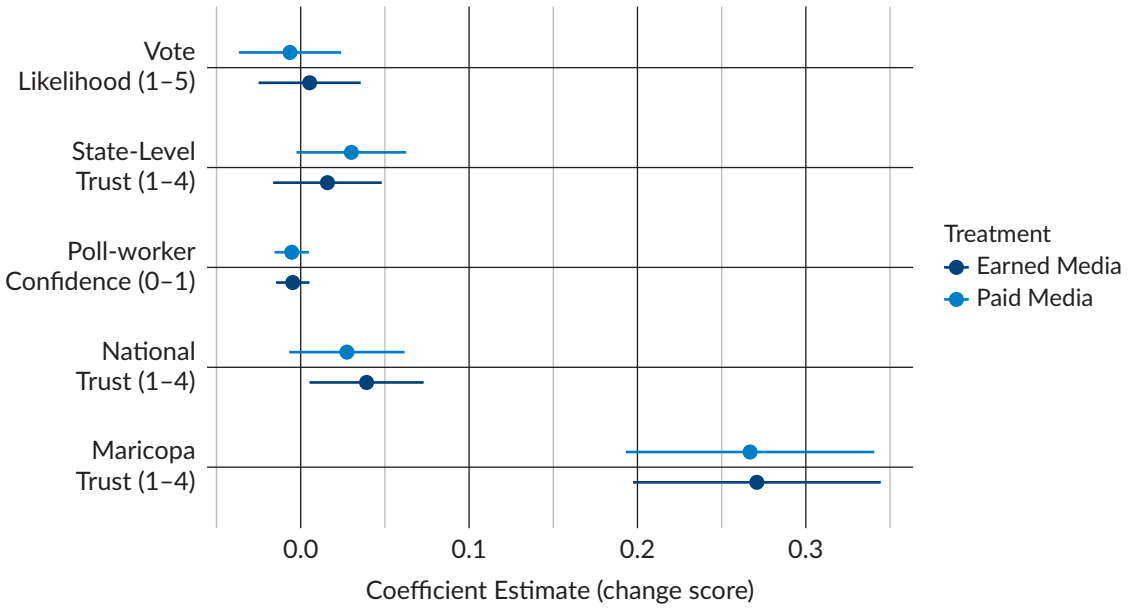

Figure 1. Effect of earned and paid messages on change in measures of trust and behavior outcomes. Notes: Positive values indicate an increase from baseline (post-pre) or, for Maricopa, a higher post-treatment score. Main outcome (Maricopa) not measured pre-treatment; all outcomes are measured post-treatment 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.

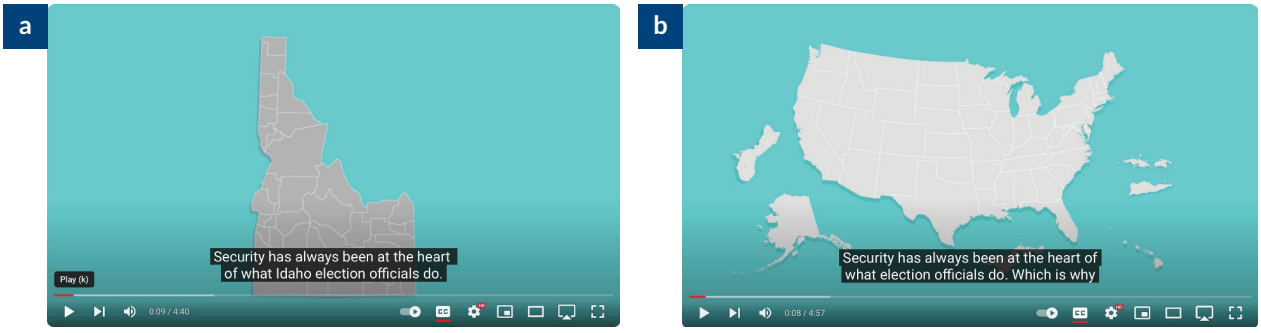

Figure 2. EAC-designed information videos, with (a) state version and (b) national version.

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.

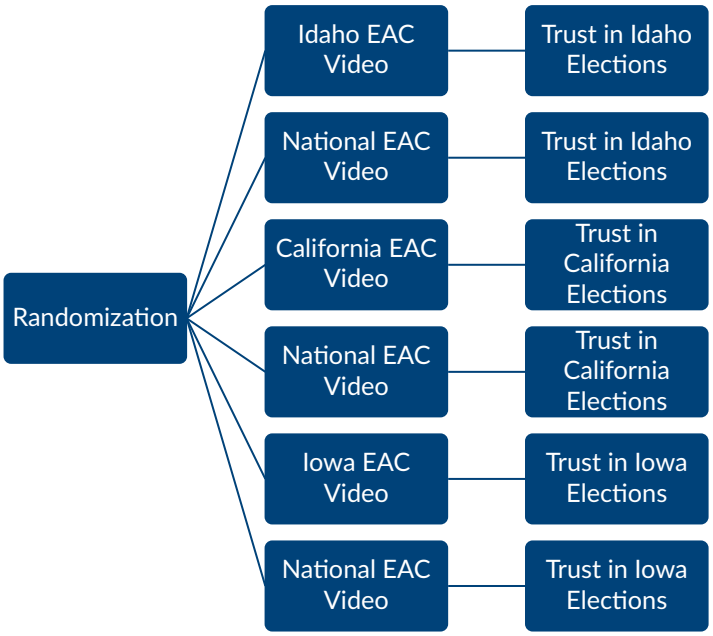

Figure 3. Experimental design for comparison of national vs. state sources.

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.

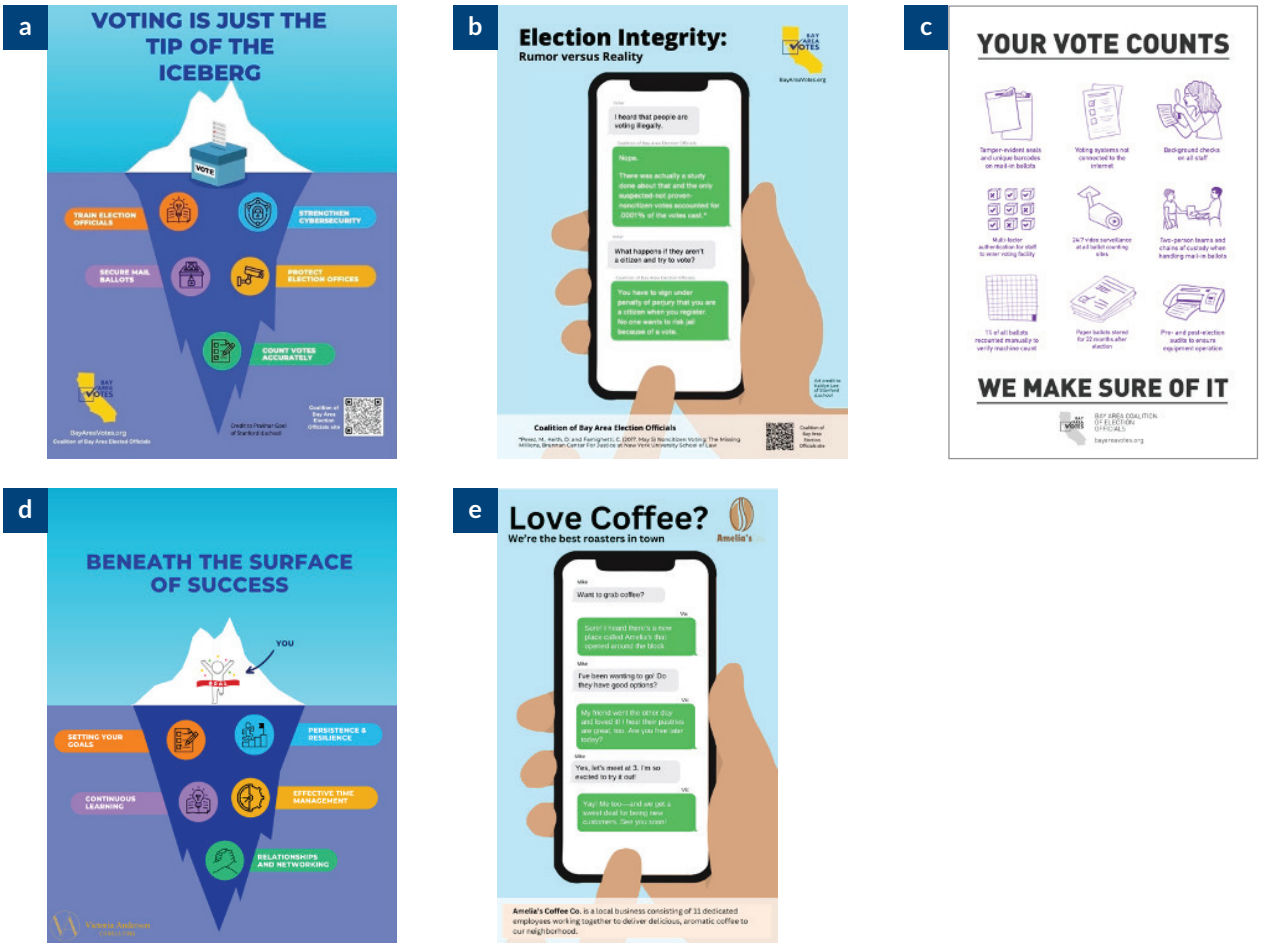

Figure 4. Treatment (a, b, c) and control (d, e) visual images.

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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