Trust in Elections

Charles Stewart III

The sometimes violent movement to reject the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election draws our attention to the topic of trust in the institution of American election administration. An examination of this topic must make an important distinction between trust in elections (a psychological construct) and the trustworthiness of election results (a legal construct). The history of election administration in the United States is full of examples of efforts to increase the trustworthiness of elections to ensure that results are based on fair and competent administration. The resilience of these efforts was on display following the 2020 election, as formal institutions rejected claims that the election was fraudulent. Still, the past two decades have seen a decline in trust in American elections that has primarily been driven by a slow but steady decline in trust among Republicans. Surprisingly, the increased polarization in trust most recently has been due more to Democrats suddenly becoming more trusting. Election officials must continue to try to overcome attacks on trust in the system, but it is unclear how long they can sustain the legal system guaranteeing free and fair elections without broad-based public trust in how we administer elections.

Trust is declining in American institutions of all sorts. Elections are thought to be no exception. It is difficult to pin a precise date on when trust in elections became a concern, but academic and commercial polling on the subject did not begin until the recount-controversy in Florida during the 2000 presidential election, when the results of the election were determined by poor ballot design, poorly maintained election technologies, and shifting recount standards.[1] Two decades later, the persistent claims by supporters of Donald Trump that the outcome of the 2020 election was fraudulent; the invasion of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, in support of those claims; and activity in state legislatures to impose greater controls on the administration of elections in the name of "voter confidence" all suggest that trust in American electoral institutions has reached a new low.

But the reality is more complicated than this. By the most common measures of voter confidence, Americans were *more* confident in the electoral machinery following the 2020 election than they were in 2016. The difference is they were more polarized over the question in 2020. This polarization was not fueled by ev-

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idence of the shortcomings of election administration, but by basic psychological factors, such as emotions and motivated reasoning.

Concern over the trustworthiness of American elections stretches back centuries. Controls against ineligible voters casting ballots and the stuffing of ballot boxes have been in place since the beginning of the Republic. Greater attention to controlling access to the ballot box and preventing procedural irregularities was a major feature of Progressive Era reforms pursued around the turn of the twentieth century. With the rights revolution of the mid-twentieth century, greater attention was paid to expanding access to voting, leading to major enactments such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and passage of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which granted eighteen-year-olds the right to vote. States made it easier to vote by eliminating excuse-requirements to cast absentee ballots, establishing in-person early voting, and generally innovating in "convenience voting" measures. The passage in 1993 of the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) mandated the elimination of barriers to register, limited the removal of voters from voting rolls, and was nicknamed "Motor Voter" because it required departments of motor vehicles to offer voter-registration forms to anyone applying for a state identification card.[2] Still, the NVRA contained requirements that states regularly perform "list maintenance" to keep the voter rolls accurate. The Help America Vote Act of 2002 ushered in a two-decade-long trend toward increasing voter ID requirements.[3]

Discussing trust in elections requires an examination of two major ways of understanding the topic: through law and public opinion. In this essay, I first set the terms of debate, distinguishing confidence in the conduct of elections from related ideas of trust in the electoral process overall and government legitimacy. I then examine the layering of legal controls over election administration in the United States, and evidence about how well they have performed. Next, I turn my attention to the public-opinion data. In concluding, I discuss the difficulty of restoring trust in American elections and the value of maintaining trustworthiness even if many Americans remain distrustful.

What do I mean when I speak of confidence in American elections? How can confidence in American elections be differentiated from related ideas of trust in the American electoral process, trust in government, and political legitimacy?

When I write of confidence in American elections, I refer specifically to the work of election managers who are charged with ensuring that elections are fair. For ease of discussion, I will call the institution in which election managers toil *election administration*. Election administration is an institution to the degree that it is distinct from other governing processes and guided by formal rules and regularized practices. However, election administration is not a single organization, so we cannot think of it being institutionalized or trusted in the sense that the U.S.

president or Congress might be.[4] Still, it is no more of a stretch to call election administration an institution than it is to call journalism, organized religion, or law enforcement institutions.

Election administration interacts with a larger set of institutions, actors, and processes to help form the American electoral system. The performance of all these agents together lends credibility to the outcome of an election: whether it is considered by citizens and the international community to be fair and legitimate.

Academic studies evaluating the performance of the American electoral system often conflate the institution of election administration with the larger American electoral system itself. This conflation is most easily seen in surveys when Americans are asked if they believe an election was "free and fair," or when academics score the United States and other countries according to the integrity of their elections. One highly visible project that rates national elections around the world, the Electoral Integrity Project, assesses aspects of elections that easily fall within election administration (the accuracy of voter registration rolls), exist on the boundaries (bribery of voters), and are clearly outside it (media coverage of candidates).[5]

Focusing the question even more narrowly, scholars have sought to understand how confidence or trust in *election administration* relates to the broader question of confidence in the *electoral process*, and the still broader question of trust in *government*. Political scientist Paul Gronke has noted that, since 2000, the topic of election trust in the United States has tended to be framed in terms of the competency of the process – whether votes were counted accurately, for example – rather than in terms of overall system-fairness, which is the tendency in studies of other countries.[6] In the United States, research has tended to show that public trust in the administration of elections is judged on performance, and is quite distinct from attitudes about regime legitimacy or trust in the performance of government overall.

Public trust in U.S. election institutions comes down to whether voting machines accurately record votes, voter registration systems accurately record those eligible to vote, geographic information systems accurately assign voters to voting districts, election-night reporting systems accurately aggregate and communicate election results to officials and the public, and postelection audit and canvassing procedures proceed impartially and in accordance with the law. The canonical question to gauge voter confidence focuses specifically on the tabulation of ballots – how confident are you that votes counted in the recent election were counted as intended? – but studies have found that answers to this specific question are highly correlated with the varied ways the auditors pose the question.

What, then, of trust in the institution of election administration? Here I make an important distinction between *trustworthiness* and *trust*. I use *trustworthy* in the simple sense of its definition from Merriam-Webster,

"worthy of confidence: dependable."[7] It is a quality that can be attached to the conduct of a particular election. It measures the degree to which a reasonable, impartial observer would agree that the declared winner of an election actually won, and that the election was conducted as prescribed. Trustworthiness is built by the rules of the game. It forms the basis on which formal authorities, ranging from local elections boards to state and federal courts, adjudicate the results.

I use *trust* to distinguish the psychological construct that describes the conclusion reached by the public about the functioning of the process. Trust is influenced by a combination of factors, most notably: direct observation of the process, hearsay from friends and neighbors, and interpretations of the trustworthiness of the election as communicated by the media and political elites.

To understand the trustworthiness of American elections, we must consider the formal procedures by which elections are conducted, both in theory and practice. Here, I focus narrowly on the process that regulates the interaction of voters with the process: how voters are registered, which candidates they can vote for, how votes are collected and tabulated, and how results are certified. If the process is conducted fairly and competently, and the results are determined by the actions of voters – rather than actors such as military juntas, corrupt party machines, or private oligarchs – we can call this a trustworthy election.

The trustworthiness of elections is guarded worldwide by electoral management bodies (EMBs). In the United States, they go by many names: Secretary of State, elections department, board of elections, supervisor of elections, and so on.[8] EMBs are – or should be – separate from the other actors and processes that constitute the electoral system. To borrow a sports metaphor, they are responsible for ensuring that the playing field is level and that the outcome is determined solely by the competitors' activity on the field. The metaphor is imperfect, of course. It breaks down to the degree that American EMBs are not charged with adjudicating and punishing those who "play dirty," leaving much of the refereeing to other actors, such as the courts, the media, and voters themselves.

One major strand in the history of election administration in the United States has been the accretion of laws, rules, and practices aimed at guarding the fairness and accuracy of elections, and making them more trustworthy in the process.[9] Because American election administration is a subject for the states, the regulation of elections has largely been left to state constitutions and legislatures.[10] States typically delegate the conduct of elections to local governmental units – counties in most of the country, but municipalities in New England, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

The greatest explosion of efforts to safeguard the lawfulness of elections and limit the influence of violence and particularism occurred during the Progressive Era, stretching from roughly 1890 to 1920. This period gave the United States a host of integrity-enhancing features most now take for granted, including the secret

ballot, government printing of the ballot, regulation of ballot access, widespread voter registration, prohibitions against electioneering near the polls, mechanical vote-tabulation, and publication of precinct-level registration and election-return statistics.[11] These developments remain the touchstone for thinking about the challenges that beset the integrity of elections and the best approaches to securing elections regardless. The cultural influence of late-nineteenth-century frauds and their "cures" have so dominated thinking in the election administration field that more modern threats to election integrity, such as hacking, disinformation campaigns, doxing, and cyberattacks, have been difficult to acknowledge and address using modern tools.

Nonetheless, the evolution of voting practices in the United States has led to advances in security procedures. These advances have given rise to the adoption of business-control practices in election administration, most importantly, post-election auditing, but also practices such as logic-and-accuracy testing of election equipment and chain-of-custody requirements for election materials.[12]

This account of efforts to shore up the fairness and accuracy of elections has hewed close to the standard good-government narrative that usually accompanies discussions of the history of election administration reform. Undoubtedly, polling places are less violent than they were a century and a half ago, and election results are much less likely to be undermined by corrupt dealing. These advances have been possible in large part because of the developments just reviewed. Still, most of these reforms have come with costs.

Take voter registration. Having accurate election registries is an internationally recognized sign of clean election administration. At the same time, the motivations behind requiring registration in the United States have often been suppressive. The first widespread adoption of voter-registration requirements coincided with the surge of late-nineteenth-century immigration, especially into the cities of the North and the Midwest. State legislatures, dominated by rural members, sought to limit the political influence of cities and their large ethnic populations. Thus, the earliest voter registration laws only applied to cities. As late as the 1960s and 1970s, eight states imposed voter-registration requirements, but generally only on their largest municipalities.[13]

Another cost of voting reform came through voter-identification laws. In recent years, conflict over these laws has emerged through the competing interests of security and access, with supporters advocating for what seems like an obvious barrier against fraud, and opponents decrying their suppressive effects. Despite charges that identification laws are discriminatory because fewer people in racial minority groups have state-issued photographic identification, the Supreme Court has generally upheld the laws. In writing the majority opinion in the Supreme Court's *Marion County* decision, Justice John Paul Stevens argued that Indiana had a right to protect public confidence "in the integrity and legitimacy of

representative government," further quoting the 2005 report from the Commission on the Federal Election Reform: "the electoral system cannot inspire public confidence if no safeguards exist to deter or detect fraud or to confirm the identity of voters."[14] Although legal justifications for strict photo ID laws have rested on the states' interest in safeguarding public confidence in elections, academic research following on the *Marion County* decision has consistently shown that the presence of photo ID laws has not increased voter confidence.[15]

The controversy over auditing the results of the 2020 elections is the most recent example of intuition colliding with evidence over how to maintain the trustworthiness and trust in elections. Starting with California in the 1960s, states began passing laws mandating statistical sampling of ballots after elections so they could be recounted and the results audited. Such postelection audit laws are now common. More recently, advances in the statistical literature have led to more sophisticated techniques that go under the heading of risk-limiting audits, which are slowly being rolled out.[16] Georgia, one of the states with such a law, used it to demonstrate the correctness of its presidential election tally in 2020. However, 2020 election deniers still insisted on conducting entirely irregular "forensic audits" in states such as Arizona (by a company called Cyber Ninjas) and Wisconsin (by Michael Gableman, former state supreme court justice), which were without standards or precedent in election administration.[17] These audits have confused efforts to provide rigor to postelection review. They have likely reinforced distrust among skeptics while doing nothing to bolster trustworthiness itself.

Considerable effort has been spent over the past century and a half to reinforce the integrity of American elections. What does the public think about this? Unfortunately, the answer is far from straightforward. Research by political scientists Shaun Bowler and Todd Donovan suggests that institutional reform has little influence on whether citizens believe elections to be clean, either in the United States or the rest of the world.[18]

Analysis of the question often starts with comparing the United States with other countries. Since 1981, the World Values Survey has regularly surveyed residents of scores of nations about social and political issues.[19] Between 2016 and 2020, respondents from fifty-two countries were asked how often they believed votes were counted fairly and that election officials were fair in their country. Respondents from the United States were in the middle of the pack of democracies in terms of trust, but lagged the most developed democracies that many would consider America's peers: New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and Japan.

Studies like this are vague with respect to which levels of election administration respondents have in mind and, in the American case, are limited in the degree to which they help reveal the dynamics of trust.[20] With those objections in mind, I turn to the questions that have been used most often to gauge voter confidence

in the two decades since *Bush v. Gore*. The core question, first asked in the context of the breakdowns of voting machines and election procedures in Florida in 2000, is: How confident are you that your vote was counted as you intended in the most recent election? Variants can gauge attitudes about anticipated elections (How confident are you that your vote *will be counted* as you intend?), and about the accuracy of election administration at different levels of government (How confident are you that *votes in your state* were counted as intended?).

In prior research coauthored with political scientist Michael Sances, we assembled all public opinion studies about trust in U.S. elections, starting with data collected surrounding the 2000 election and continuing to 2012.[21] Working with political scientist Jesse Clark, I have here updated the data collection to include studies through the 2020 election.[22]

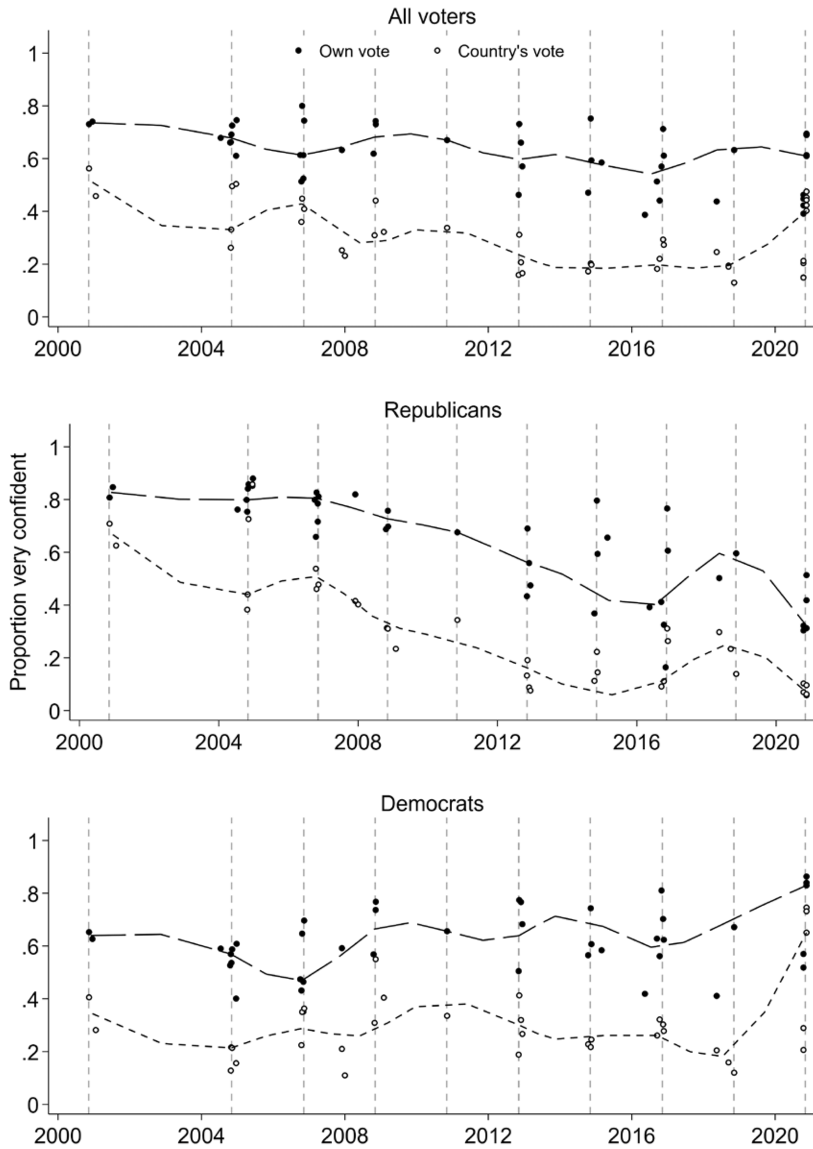
Figure 1 summarizes responses to all polls from academic and commercial sources over the past two decades that have asked about voter confidence. Although the various polling organizations ask questions that are worded slightly differently, they are nonetheless very similar and track similarly across time. Polling organizations have regularly asked about confidence that the respondent's "own" vote and votes nationwide were counted properly. Polling organizations generally give respondents the option of using a four- or five-point scale. Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents who gave the "most confident" response to the question posed.

Regardless of whether results are broken down by party identification, confidence that one's own vote has been counted typically outpaced confidence in the counting of the nation's votes by approximately 40 percentage points over the past two decades. Among all voters, confidence in the counting of both one's own vote and in the nation's votes gradually declined slowly in parallel during the years 2000 – 2016.

When we examine responses by identifiers of the two main parties separately, we see that downward pressure on confidence – of both measures – has been exerted primarily by Republicans. In the Republican "own vote" series, we see a result that suggests that confidence among Republicans declined by an average of 10.8 percentage points every presidential election across those five presidential elections.[23] The average decline in the "country's vote" series was even greater at a decline of 14.9 points per presidential election cycle. Democrats, on the other hand, exhibited no secular trend throughout this period, going up a little when Democrats were doing well nationally and down a little when they did poorly.[24]

These series took a turn in 2018 that accelerated in 2020. Nationwide, the average level of confidence in one's own vote being counted as intended rose slightly among all voters from 54 percent in 2016 to 56 percent in 2018. For the country's votes, it rose from 24 percent to 32 percent.[25] After rising from 44 percent in 2016 to 57 percent in 2018, Republican confidence in the counting of their own vote fell back

Figure 1
Voter Confidence in the Accuracy of the Vote Count, 2000 – 2020



Each point represents an individual poll. Trend lines are calculated using median-spline regressions. Original data reported in Michael W. Sances and Charles Stewart III, "Partisanship and Confidence in the Vote Count: Evidence from U.S. National Elections since 2000," *Electoral Studies* 40 (1) (2015): 176–188. Data updated by Jesse T. Clark and Charles Stewart III, "The Confidence Earthquake: Seismic Shifts in Trust and Reform Sentiments in the 2020 Election," presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, virtual conference, April 15–18, 2021.

down to 37 percent in 2020. Republican confidence in the counting of the country's votes was around 20 percent in both 2016 and 2018 before falling to 8 percent in 2020. In contrast, Democratic confidence grew to historic highs (at least for this twenty-year period). Confidence in counting one's own vote grew from 62 percent in 2016 to 72 percent in 2020. Confidence in counting the nation's votes rose a staggering amount among Democrats, from 29 percent in 2016 to 52 percent in 2020.

These long-term trends frame the rest of the empirical analysis in this essay. The sudden turn in 2020 among all respondents is striking, but it is important to distinguish the paths taken by respondents who identify with the two parties. For Republicans, the decline in 2020 was a continuation of a two-decade-long decline in confidence in the vote count, after an uncharacteristic uptick in 2018. For Democrats, the upward swing in confidence in 2020 was uncharacteristic of the steady pattern of the preceding two decades.

Perhaps the 2020 Democratic upswing was due to the euphoria over the victory of Joseph Biden over Donald Trump, but one must wonder whether Democrats' responses to the confidence questions in 2020 were influenced by a strong negative repudiation of Trump's calling the results of the election into question. At the very least, it bears underscoring that if the two parties diverged dramatically in how confident they are in the voting process, that divergence seems to be more affected by changes in Democratic responses than to changes among Republicans.

This discussion of voter confidence over the past two decades suggests there are two major dimensions of voter confidence to explore. The first is the sharp divide in confidence across levels of voter experience, national and personal. The other is partisan. These two dimensions suggest different dynamics that drive attitudes about election administration, one based on direct experience, and the other mediated by political elites.

When it comes to experience, there is little doubt why voters express such high confidence that their votes are counted as intended: their experiences voting are remarkably positive. This has been documented quadrennially since 2008, through the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAE), which asks questions of voters about their experience while casting a ballot. In 2020, it queried 18,200 respondents who were registered to vote.[26]

Among validated in-person voters who responded to the 2020 SPAE, almost everyone reported a positive experience when they went to cast a ballot. For instance, 98 percent of in-person voters reported no problems with their registration when they went to vote, 97 percent reported no problems with the voting equipment, 98 percent reported that the polling place they used was run very well or okay, and 96 percent reported that the performance of the poll workers they encountered was excellent or good. Eighty-seven percent of respondents agreed that their voting experience had been mostly positive.

Although the reported experience of voters was overwhelmingly positive, the answers from those who had negative experiences help to further illustrate the connection between voters' experience and voter confidence. Among the 94 percent of in-person voters who agreed their experience was mostly positive, 94 percent were confident their vote was counted as intended; for the 6 percent who had a negative experience, only 68 percent trusted that their vote was counted as intended.[27]

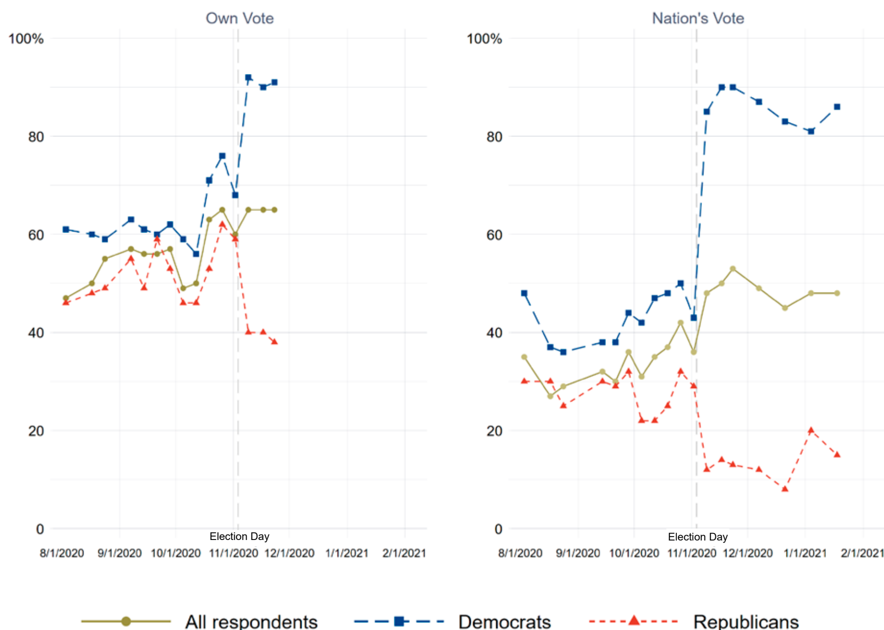
Some might object that framing the question in terms of the accuracy of the vote count only partially reflects the confidence a voter might have that their ballot and the ballots of their neighbors were treated fairly. To address this objection, the SPAE asked a series of questions in 2020 about perceptions of fairness by officials at various levels of election administration.[28] Among those who reported a mostly positive experience, 89 percent said they thought local election officials were committed to "making sure elections in the United States are fair and accurate," compared with 62 percent among those who did not report a mostly positive experience.[29]

Direct voter experience is not the only driver of voter confidence: party also determines attitudes about electoral trust. Experts have long recognized that party influence complicates voter confidence according to which party is in power and which is in opposition. Research into this question has focused on the winner-loser gap in trust. The pattern by which supporters of the winning party tend to express greater trust in the election has been well-established. In addition, the role of losing candidates in consenting to their losses has been shown to be a powerful factor in maintaining regime legitimacy, beyond the assessment of how well the election was run.[30]

The winner-loser gap was clear in the 2020 election. One of the most visible examples was the Economist/YouGov tracking poll that regularly posed two voter confidence questions several times before and after the 2020 election: "How much confidence do you have that your vote in the 2020 presidential election [will be/was] counted accurately?" and "How much confidence do you have that the 2020 presidential election [will be held/was held] fairly?" The percentage of respondents answering "a great deal" or "quite a bit" is displayed in Figure 2.[31]

The Republican-Democratic divide was present both before and after Election Day, but the change that occurred immediately after Election Day was stark. Before Election Day, an average 63 percent of Democrats expressed a great deal or quite a bit of confidence that their vote would be counted accurately in the election, compared with 52 percent of Republicans, for an 11-point gap. Within a day of the election, that gap grew to 45 points (93 percent for Democrats versus 48 percent for Republicans). The same was true when respondents were asked about the 2020 election being fair. What had been an average 8-point gap before Election Day (54 percent Democrats to 46 percent Republicans) grew to 59 points (84 percent Democrats to 25 percent Republicans) as soon as the results were known.

Figure 2
Trust in an Accurate and Fair Presidential Election, 2020



Graphs show the percentage of respondents who answered "a great deal" or "quite a bit" to the following questions: "How much confidence do you have that your vote in the 2020 presidential election [will be/was] counted accurately?" And "How much confidence do you have that the 2020 presidential election [will be held/was held] fairly?" Answers from independents are not displayed, but are included in the "all respondents" plots. Source: Author's compilation of data from Economist/YouGov polls.

The dynamics of electoral trust in 2020 was a product of the campaign and elite rhetoric. Because of the exigencies of voting amid the COVID-19 public health emergency, many states made accommodations to their absentee-ballot laws to discourage large numbers of voters congregating in person on Election Day.[32] Although these accommodations were mostly bipartisan during the primary season in the spring and summer, as the general election loomed, they became much more politicized. President Trump frequently made statements casting doubt on the legitimacy of mail balloting, which were amplified by his surrogates, notably, Attorney General William Barr.[33]

We can see evidence that the Trump team's relentless rhetoric against mail balloting influenced trust in the election in answers respondents made to the 2020 SPAE question, "How confident are you that votes *in your state* were counted

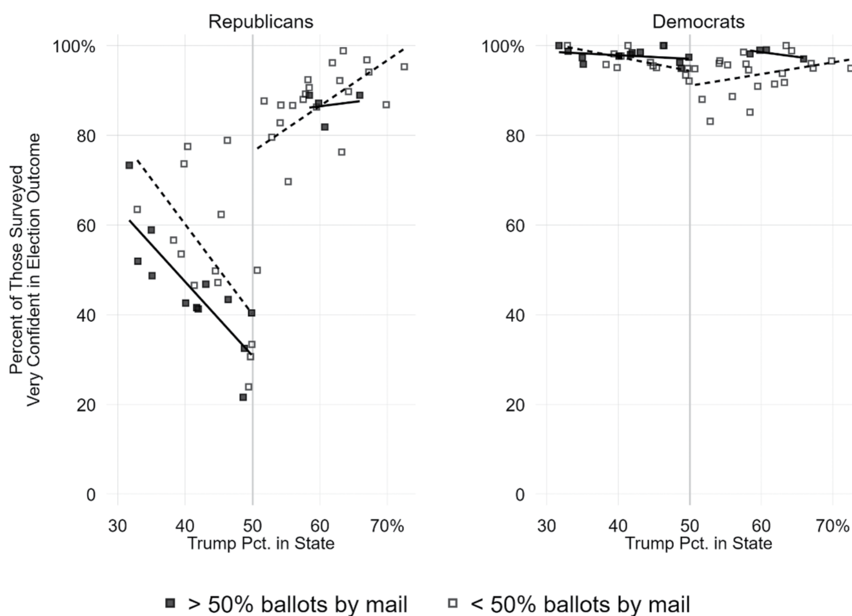
as intended?" Figure 3 displays the average responses of Democratic and Republican partisans in each state, plotting the percentage responding "very confident" against the percentage of the two-party vote received by Trump. The lines superimposed on the data tokens were estimated by linear regression and summarize the various factors that influenced citizen trust in their states' election administration in 2020. The figure, first, displays the responses from Republican and Democratic identifiers separately. Then, in each panel, I show the average answers from respondents who lived in states where more than half the ballots were cast by mail (solid squares) and fewer than half the ballots were cast by mail (hollow squares). The regression lines fit to the data in Figure 3 are based on one final subset of the data: whether Donald Trump won the state (that is, the two-party vote share was greater than 50 percent) or lost.

Four patterns stand out in Figure 3, all of which are related to the winner-loser effect interacting with elite rhetoric. First, Democrats were much more confident in their state's vote count than Republicans. Second, Republicans were much less confident in their state's vote count when Trump lost the state than when he won. (The analogous pattern among Democrats was much less prominent.) Third, whether or not Trump won the state, Republicans were much less trusting when the results were close. Finally, in states Trump lost, confidence was lower still when most ballots had been cast by mail – by an average of 15 percentage points. Figure 3 quantifies how elite framing of election-administration issues influenced citizen trust after the election. These are patterns not regularly seen in recent elections.[34]

Voter confidence can be influenced not only by national politicians, but by state politicians as well. Following the 2020 election, Republican-controlled state legislatures produced a flurry of activity, writing a record number of legislative proposals to restrict voter access and, in at least two cases, sponsoring highly visible forensic audits that relitigated the outcome of the election, and keeping partisan questions about the reliability of local election administration in the public eye for a long time.

It is notable that although the 2021 state legislative sessions produced a record number of bills to restrict voting access, these sessions did not produce a record number of passages.[35] Many states narrowly lost by Trump had both Republican state legislatures and Democratic governors who threatened to veto Republican election legislation. In addition, many of the proposals thrown into the legislative hopper were simply bad ideas that died once local election officials and political consultants – especially Republican consultants – caught the ear of legislative leaders with information about how some of these proposals could backfire on Republicans. The important thing for confidence, however, is that the sheer presence of so many bills provided state legislators the opportunity to take positions against election fraud, amplify often unfounded claims about fraud during the election,

Figure 3
Voter Confidence in the 2020 Presidential Election, Relative to Trust in Mail Ballots



Voter confidence among Republicans declines as the Trump margin of victory declines, and as more votes were cast in the 2020 presidential election, relative to trust in mail ballots. Confidence among Democrats was little impacted by outcome or use of mail ballots. Source: Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAE), https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/projects/survey-performance-american-elections.

and keep negative media messages about election administration in the public eye long after they would have faded from view in any other election year.

Although confidence in election administration has been trending slowly downward over the past two decades, the matter took a qualitatively different turn in 2020 that seems out of proportion with the overall public opinion trends displayed in Figure 1. The partisan split in attitudes because of the election results was large, as seen in Figure 2, but not all that much greater than in the past. Certainly, the changes in responses to the stock voter confidence questions in 2020 are not so large that one would have predicted the riot at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, nor would we have predicted the degree of personal violence that has been threatened against state and local election officials for simply doing their jobs and following the law.[36]

Not so long ago, the election results would have led to grumbling and "good, old-fashioned" proposed legislation aimed at simply hobbling, but not annihilating, the political opposition. What is the "extra sauce" that turned a lack of trust into a movement that has produced political violence?

Scholarship that addresses this question is only in its infancy, so any answer must remain speculative. It is obvious, though, that electoral distrust has broken through a barrier such that the negative emotions of anger and anxiety have been engaged to a degree never before seen. This prominence of emotions in contemporary political life has been noted throughout the world, and appears to be a special hallmark of right-wing populist political parties.[37] In the United States, the rise of affective or negative partisanship has been associated with intense dislike of out-partisans, weakened commitment to democratic values, and a willingness to endorse violence against political opponents.[38]

There is one small detail that suggests the quality of partisan polarization over electoral trust is not purely the work of strong negative emotions creeping into public opinion. Democrats have become much more trusting of election administration than they have ever been – by some measures, more trusting on the margin than Republicans have become distrustful. Could it be that Republican anger and anxiety are being met with Democratic happiness and gratitude? Perhaps. Or it could be that Democrats have been fed such a steady diet of laudatory comments about election administrators over the past two years that other processes are at work, such as motivated reasoning and confirmation bias.

One reason to believe that the origins of (dis)trust in American elections may differ between the parties is that the coalitions composing them have become quite different, potentially leading to differences between partisans in how they approach the issue of electoral trust. With the rise of the importance of White Christian nationalism within the Republican Party, it is likely that many – even if not most – Republicans are willing to ascribe electoral loss to the operation of malevolent supernatural forces in the world.[39] Thus, a process that seems arrayed against Donald Trump, who is seen by many Republicans as fighting to restore a White Christian nation, would engender anger and disgust. On the other hand, the Democratic Party is rapidly becoming a party of "nones," that is, people who eschew religion and highly value scientific evidence.[40] Thus, the heightened trust of Democrats in election administration, especially in light of the 2020 election, may not be due to the excitement of positive emotions because of winning, but assurances by secular authorities that the election was "the most secure in American history."[41]

The issue of whether Republicans and Democrats draw on different cognitive and precognitive sources may seem like splitting hairs, but it is of the utmost importance in considering how, or even whether, overall trust can be improved and the partisan divide can be narrowed. If distrust is being fueled by a negative emo-

tional reaction to the loss of a candidate who is considered the leader of an apocalyptic fight over the future of the nation, fact-based communication strategies by election officials to explain their procedures and the regular branding of Republican concerns about election fraud as "without evidence" may only entrench attitudes among the distrustful.

Unlike most of the other institutions that have lost public trust, the challenges for election administration are "coming from inside the house." If claims about whether elections can be trusted are so thoroughly entwined in partisan competition, what are those of us concerned about democratic backsliding to do? Recent events suggest that raising levels of trust will be hard to accomplish, especially among Republicans, even with future Republican victories at the polls.

The clash over the 2020 election provides one short-term answer: emphasize protecting the trustworthiness of American elections, even as trust is under assault. One thing that must be appreciated about the assault on the results of the 2020 election is that almost without fail, the procedures to ensure the trustworthiness of elections held. Official bodies at all levels of government reached decisions based on evidence that was considered dispositive because of the protections put in place to guard the trustworthiness of the results.

Despite the considerable evidence that election administration performed admirably, the violent rejection of the 2020 election results suggests that any conclusion reached about trust in electoral institutions must be mixed. As extreme skepticism continues to motivate the far right, pressure will continue to build to undermine the impartiality of election administration and trustworthiness of the process. Efforts to communicate to the public about the fairness of the process must continue, but we also must be realistic about the limitations of these efforts so long as trusted elites find political benefits to undermining trust. The notable trustworthiness of the system can be maintained for only so long without widespread trust among Americans across the political spectrum.

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ENDNOTES

[1] On the history of polling on the topic, see Paul Gronke, "Voter Confidence as a Metric of Election Performance," in *The Measure of American Elections*, ed. Barry C. Burden and Charles Stewart III (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 248–270. On the recount, see Jeffrey Toobin, *Too Close to Call: The Thirty-Six-Day Battle to Decide the 2000 Election* (New York: Random House, 2001); Jonathan N. Wand, Ken Shotts, Jasjeet S. Sekhon, et al., "The Butterfly Did It: The Aberrant Vote for Buchanan in Palm Beach County, Florida," *American Political Science Review* 95 (4) (2001): 793–810, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3117714; and Walter R. Mebane, "The Wrong Man is President! Overvotes in the 2000 Presidential Election," *Perspectives on Politics* 2 (3) (2004): 525–535, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592704040320.

[2] The Help America Vote Act of 2002, H.R. 3295, 107th Cong. (2002).

[3] The National Voter Registration Act of 1993, H.R. 2, 103rd Cong. (1993).

[4] Nelson W. Polsby, "The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives," *American Political Science Review* 62 (1) (1968): 144–168, https://doi.org/10.2307/1953331; and Lyn Ragsdale and John J. Theis III, "The Institutionalization of the American Presidency, 1924–92," *American Journal of Political Science* 41 (4) (1997): 1280–1318, https://doi.org/10.2307/2960490.

[5] The Electoral Integrity Project, https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/ (accessed March 12, 2022).

[6] Gronke, "Voter Confidence." To be more precise, electoral trust in other countries has most often been examined in the context of translating votes for parties into shares of seats in the legislature. In the United States, however, it has most often been examined in the context of whether the administration of the election performed up to standards. This difference is no doubt due to the prevalence of multiparty competition in much of the world, in which the larger question of whether the balance between representation of all voices and governability is more salient.

[7] "Trustworthy," Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trustworthy (accessed March 12, 2022).

[8] On the role of electoral management bodies worldwide, see Andre Blais, Louis Massicotte, and Antoine Yoshinaka, *Establishing the Rules of the Game: Election Laws in Democracies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

[9] There are other strands in this history as well, some of which are entangled with trustworthiness. An important one is nondiscrimination of access to the polls, which has most importantly been seen in the decades-long effort to eliminate disfranchisement on the base of race, but the history of guarding access goes beyond racial violence and discrimination. For instance, Richard Bensel's scholarship about election challenges in the nineteenth century highlights how violence around polling places was often dismissed by legislative and judicial tribunals, under the theory that an implicit qualification for voting was the literal ability to fight for it, and that those unable to overcome the gauntlet of a violent mob had no fundamental rights violated. See Richard F. Bensel, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Richard F. Bensel, "The American Ballot Box: Law, Identity, and the Polling Place in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Studies in American Political Development* 17 (1) (2003): 1–27, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X03000014. For a comprehensive account of the history of election administration policy in the United States,

see Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

[10] Sections 1 and 2 of Article I of the U.S. Constitution sketch out the election of federal officeholders–members of the House, senators, and president–in very general terms. Amendments to these sections, along with amendments addressing other features of elections, such as the limitation on the president's term-of-office, have been similarly broad. Congress has been loath to prescribe the conduct of election administration, although it has, for instance, required House members be elected from single-member districts and set a uniform Election Day. In recent decades, Congress has been prescriptive in matters related to voting and voter registration for citizens living overseas, but states are still given considerable latitude in implementing these laws. As suggested by the politics surrounding the For the People Act and the much more narrowly constructed alternative, the Freedom to Vote Act, even when Congress has a majority on record as favoring the specification of scores of election-administration procedures, passage is unassured. See For the People Act of 2021, H.R. 1, 117th Cong. (2021); and Freedom to Vote Act of 2021, S.2747, 117th Cong. (2021).

[11] Peter H. Argersinger, *Structure, Process, and Party: Essays in American Political History* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1992); Roy G. Saltman, *The History and Politics of Voting Technology: In Quest of Integrity and Public Confidence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Joseph P. Harris, *Registration of Voters in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1929).

[12] Logic and accuracy (L&A) testing is defined as "Equipment and system readiness tests whose purpose is to detect malfunctioning devices and improper election-specific setup before the equipment or systems are used in an election. Election officials conduct L&A tests prior to the start of an election as part of the process of setting up the system and the devices for an election according to jurisdiction practices and conforming to any state laws." U.S. Department of Commerce, National Institute of Standards and Technology, "Election Terminology Glossary," https://pages.nist.gov/ElectionGlossary (accessed March 12, 2022).

[13] These states were Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Stephen Ansolabehere and David M. Konisky, "The Introduction of Voter Registration and Its Effect on Turnout," *Political Analysis* 14 (1) (2006): 83–100, https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpi034.

[14] *Crawford v. Marion County Election Bd.*, 553 U.S. 181 (2008); and Electionline and The Pew Charitable Trusts, *Building Confidence in U.S. Elections: Report of the Commission on the Federal Election Reform* (Washington, D.C.: The Commission on the Federal Election Reform, 2005), https://web.archive.org/web/20070609115256/http://www.american.edu/ia/cfer/report/full_report.pdf, 10.

[15] Stephen Ansolabehere and Nathaniel Persily, "Vote Fraud in the Eye of the Beholder: The Role of Public Opinion in the Challenge to Voter Identification Requirements," *Harvard Law Review* 121 (7) (2008): 1737–1775, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40042715; and Charles Stewart III, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Nathaniel Persily, "Revisiting Public Opinion on Voter Identification and Voter Fraud in an Era of Increasing Partisan Polarization," *Stanford Law Review* 68 (6) (2016): 1455–1490, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43921171.

[16] On the issue of statistically rigorous postelection auditing, see Mark Lindeman and Philip B. Stark, "A Gentle Introduction to Risk-Limiting Audits," *IEEE Security and Privacy* 10 (5)

(2012): 42–49, https://doi.org/10.1109/MSP.2012.56; Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project and MIT Election Data and Science Lab, *Election Auditing: Key Issues and Perspectives*, a special report prepared to summarize the presentations made at the Multidisciplinary Conference on Election Auditing, December 7–8, 2018, http://electionlab.mit.edu/sites/default/files/2019-06/Election-Auditing-Key-Issues-Perspectives.pdf; and National Conference of State Legislatures, "Post-Election Audits," October 15, 2019, last modified April 1, 2022, https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/post-election-audits635926066.aspx.

[17] Cyber Ninjas, the company that conducted a partisan review of ballots cast in Arizona during the 2020 election, closed after election officials released a report denouncing its review, and a Maricopa judge issued a fine of $50,000 per day for not releasing public records related to the review. Yvonne Wingett Sanchez, "Advocates Want Cyber Ninjas, Which Led Ariz. Ballot Review, Barred from Federal Work," *The Washington Post*, July 18, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/07/18/cyber-ninjas-federal-work.

[18] Shaun Bowler and Todd Donovan, eds., *The Limits of Electoral Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[19] The World Values Survey Association, "World Values Survey," https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp (accessed March 19, 2022).

[20] Analysis in the following paragraphs is based on research reported in Jesse T. Clark and Charles Stewart III, "The Confidence Earthquake: Seismic Shifts in Trust and Reform Sentiments in the 2020 Election," presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, April 15–18, 2021, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3825118.

[21] Michael W. Sances and Charles Stewart III, "Partisanship and Confidence in the Vote Count: Evidence from U.S. National Elections Since 2000," *Electoral Studies* 40 (1) (2015): 176–188, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2015.08.004. For an alternative view on the subject, see Betsy Sinclair, Stephen S. Smith, and Patrick D. Tucker, "'It's Largely a Rigged System:' Voter Confidence and the Winner Effect in 2016," *Political Research Quarterly* 71 (4) (2018): 854–868, https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912918768006.

[22] Clark and Stewart, "The Confidence Earthquake"; and National Conference of State Legislatures, "The Canvass: January 2022," January 5, 2022, https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/the-canvass-january-2022.aspx.

[23] The regression uses OLS to fit the observations from 2000 to 2016 on a counter such that 2000 = 0, 2004 = 1, and so on. The slope coefficient is –0.108 (standard error = 0.017). For the "country's vote" series, the slope coefficient is –0.148 (standard error = 0.020).

[24] The regression coefficient of Democratic confidence on the counter from 2000 to 2016 is 0.0241 (standard error = 0.0153). For the "country's vote," the slope coefficient is 0.0028 (standard error = 0.0166).

[25] These percentages were calculated from all polls in a calendar year, both pre- and postelection.

[26] Data and documentation about the Survey of the Performance of American Elections may be found at Harvard Dataverse. Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, "Survey of the Performance of American Elections Dataverse," last modified March 28, 2021, https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/SPAE.

[27] It is possible to extend this analysis to specific problems voters report encountering. Those who reported voter registration problems, problems with voting machines, sub-

par poll workers, and poorly run polling places were similarly distrustful about the quality of the vote count.

[28] These officials and entities were state election officials, local election officials, your governor, your state legislature, the U.S. Congress, President Trump, the Republican Party, and the Democratic Party.

[29] "Survey of the Performance of American Elections Dataverse," Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project.

[30] Benjamin Ginsberg and Robert Weissberg, "Elections and the Mobilization of Popular Support," *American Journal of Political Science* 22 (1) (1978): 31–55, https://doi.org/10.2307/2110668; Harold D. Clarke and Alan C. Acock, "National Elections and Political Attitudes: The Case of Political Efficacy," *British Journal of Political Science* 19 (4) (1989): 551–562, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400005639; Christopher J. Anderson and Andrew J. LoTempio, "Winning, Losing, and Political Trust in America," *British Journal of Political Science* 32 (2) (2002): 335–351, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123402000133; and Christopher J. Anderson, Andre Blais, Shaun Bowler, et al., *Losers' Consent: Elections and Democratic Legitimacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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[32] National Conference of State Legislatures, "Absentee and Mail Voting Policies in Effect for the 2020 Election," November 3, 2020, https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/absentee-and-mail-voting-policies-in-effect-for-the-2020-election.aspx (accessed March 12, 2022); and Persily and Stewart, "The Miracle and Tragedy of the 2020 Election."

[33] MaryAlice Parks and Kendall Karson, "A Step-by-Step Look at Trump's Falsehoods on Mail-in Voting: Analysis," ABC News, October 1, 2020, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/step-step-trumps-falsehoods-mail-voting-analysis/story?id=73354979; and Caroline Kelly, "Barr Says, without Citing Evidence, that an Election Done Predominantly by Mail Would Not Be Secure," CNN, June 25, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/25/politics/barr-mail-in-voting-election-fraud-npr/index.html.

[34] Clark and Stewart, "The Confidence Earthquake."

[35] National Conference of State Legislatures, "The Canvass: January 2022," January 5, 2022, https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/the-canvass-january-2022.aspx.

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[38] Shanton Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarizations in the United States," *Annual Review of Political Sci-*

ence 22 (2019): 129–146, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034; Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven Webster, "The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of U.S. Elections in the 21st Century," *Electoral Studies* 41 (1) (2016): 12–22, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2015.11.001; Steven W. Webster, *American Rage: How Anger Shapes Our Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); and Lilliana Mason and Nathan P. Kalmoe, "What You Need to Know about How Many Americans Condone Political Violence–and Why," *The Washington Post*, January 11, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/11/what-you-need-know-about-how-many-americans-condone-political-violence-why. However, there is evidence that public opinion research may be significantly overestimating support for political violence against opponents. See Sean J. Westwood, Justin Grimmer, Matthew Tyler, and Clayton Nall, "Current Research Overstates American Support for Political Violence," *PNAS* 19 (12) (2022): https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2116870119.

[39] Andrew L. Whitehead, Samuel L. Perry, and Joseph O. Baker, "Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election," *Sociology of Religion* 79 (2) (2018): 147–171, https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srx070; and Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

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