



Understanding the Voter Experience

The Public's View of Election
Administration and Reform

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Preface

The public's trust and confidence in elections provide the basis for a healthy election system and a healthy democracy. Yet few have taken the time to study the public's perceptions of American elections. It is in the spirit of learning and dialogue that we present to you *"Understanding Elections and Voting: The Public's View of Election Administration and Reform in the United States."*

The primary goal of sharing these survey findings is to help improve the conduct and integrity of election administration in the United States. Democracy Fund believes that a "voter-centric" approach is a key element of improving our election system. At the same time, public opinion can be volatile, emotionally driven, and misinformed. Taking a close look at public opinion about election administration and reform can raise concerns, but also provides avenues to engage with voters. This report evaluates public opinion about the American election system, considering everything from the experience of voter registration, perceptions about the legitimacy of election outcomes, and much more. We hope that this report will help election officials, policymakers, advocates, and others understand the opportunities as well as the constraints that public opinion may place on their work.

At Democracy Fund, our investments and approach seek to foster an election system that is modern, trusted, and voter-centric. Our Election Administration and Voting strategy leverages efforts to create and expand (I) Modern Voter Registration, (II) Voter-Centric Election Administration, and (III) Trust in Elections.

Through our **Modern Voter Registration** strategy, we invest in organizations and projects that support state efforts to modernize voter registration systems. Our work includes supporting election officials on implementing modernization policies in ways that are accessible and secure, providing education and advocacy, and ensuring "motor voter" compliance.

Our **Voter-Centric Election Administration** strategy focuses on providing election officials with the tools and resources that they need to ensure the integrity of our elections. Our work includes the creation of a robust election official network and the dissemination of tools to better manage elections.

In our **Trust in Elections** strategy, we invest in organizations that work with and alongside election officials to mitigate and eliminate threats to the election system. Our work also includes monitoring and evaluating the public's trust and confidence in election outcomes, responding to misinformation about the elections process, and combating the effects of political gamesmanship and polarization.

We are committed to supporting innovations in elections and voting through grantmaking, partnerships, and collaboration. We believe that civic participation, especially voting, is absolutely vital to the health of American democracy. This report reflects our commitment to the integrity and accessibility of elections and voting for all citizens. We hope that this report serves as a baseline for initiating constructive dialogue about the public's view of election administration and reform in the United States.

Adam Ambrogi
Director, Elections Program at Democracy Fund

Executive Summary

This report provides insights into the state of public opinion about election administration and reform. The findings are primarily drawn from the 2008-2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a survey conducted each federal election year since 2006.ⁱ We hope that the findings contained in this report, and suggestions for future research, will help election officials, lawmakers, advocates, and others understand attitudes of the American people toward one of their most-cherished rights.

The takeaways in this report include:

DECIDING TO VOTE

- A significant number of nonvoters choose not to participate because they do not like the candidates, and some may be generally unenthusiastic about participating.
- Lack of information may keep people from voting in certain contests, especially down-ballot races.

NAVIGATING VOTER REGISTRATION

- Many people know that they are responsible for registering and updating registration. Most know where to register and that a move requires them to update their information. Most people are likely to rely on internet searches for registration information.
- Many people could benefit from ongoing education about how the voter registration process works in their states, especially states that have recently implemented modernization reforms.
- The majority of people support online voter registration but might not know whether it is available in their state. Some continue to prefer to use the paper registration form. The public does not currently express strong support or opposition to automatic voter registration.

THE VOTER EXPERIENCE

- There is not one most-preferred method of voting. Many like the convenience of early in-person and absentee or vote-by-mail voting. Absentee or vote-by-mail voters are more likely than early in-person voters to say that they distrust certain aspects of the voting process. Not surprisingly, voters provide compelling reasons to continue to vote in the way they have done before.
- People express a higher tolerance for waiting in line when they are told that the wait is 15 minutes. Tolerance decreases as the anticipated wait time increases.

ⁱ More about the CCES is offered in the Survey Methodology section of this report and on the project's website at: <https://cces.gov.harvard.edu>.

- Significant numbers of people are confused or unfamiliar with their state voter identification requirements. Many appear to learn about these requirements during election cycles, suggesting the need for ongoing education.
- Overwhelming majorities of people provide good or excellent job performance ratings for their poll workers. Most people like that poll workers are polite and knowledgeable and demonstrate other signs of excellent customer service.

TRUST AND CONFIDENCE MEASURES

- Election administrators enjoy higher levels of public trust when compared to officials in other public institutions. State and local election officials should continue to enjoy high public approval if they are viewed as nonpartisan experts.
- Levels of voter confidence are influenced by the voter's polling place experience, partisanship, and support for the winner (sometimes referred to as the "winner's effect"). Most are confident that their own votes and votes across the country are counted as intended, though there is a noticeable gap between individual and national-level confidence. There was a dramatic up-tick in voter confidence levels among Republicans and Trump supporters in 2016.
- Perceptions of voter fraud, electoral integrity, and electoral fairness are deeply intertwined and powerful indicators of a healthy democracy. Most people believe that our elections are run with integrity and that outcomes are fair, but perceptions about the prevalence of voter fraud raise concerns.

We hope that readers find this informative report as interesting as we do.

Thank you for reading!

Natalie Adona and Paul Gronke

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For more information, please visit www.democracyfund.org.

Public Opinion, Elections, and Democratic Legitimacy

"The exploration of public attitudes is a pursuit of endless fascination – and frustration."
– V.O. Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, 1961

Over the years, the American election system has proved amazingly resilient. Much of that credit goes to the country's election officials – public servants dedicated to conducting fair, inclusive, and secure elections. This does not mean, however, that our elections are immune to the effects of widespread erosion of public confidence in government and disillusionment over partisanship. The media has the power to amplify public fears – whether real or perceived – about election fraud and misconduct. Public statements about election integrity from elected officials, candidates, and other validators have the ability to shape the public's opinion about the legitimacy of election outcomes and, possibly, of government and democracy.

During the 2016 presidential election, Republican candidate Donald Trump persistently leveled charges of widespread election "rigging." Political leaders and commentators from across the spectrum assured citizens that this was not true. State election officials and intelligence agencies insisted that the vote tabulations themselves were not compromised. But the political rhetoric about our election system raised the very real possibility that millions of Americans may not have trusted the results of the 2016 presidential election. In other countries,¹ such charges have had long-lasting, negative effects on the public's faith and trust in democratic procedures and could have the same effect in this country.²

It is the responsibility of those who understand elections and voting to learn more about the public's opinions – and not just because of concerns raised in 2016. Positive public evaluations of elections provide a base to support democracy, especially in times of stress. Positive evaluations have the potential to encourage more frequent voter participation, may improve trust in government, and can play an important role in the debate over reforms to improve our election system. A strong foundation of public support may even undercut legislative efforts to change election laws and procedures that benefit only one political party or candidate.

Public opinion studies emerged in the 1930s through a desire to forecast and understand elections.³ Surveys ask innumerable questions about candidates, parties, and policies, but only after the 2000 presidential election did anyone ask about election administration

Defining Election Administration and Reform

- **Election administration** describes the process of determining who's qualified to vote and the manner of distributing, receiving, and counting ballots.
- **Election reforms** are proposals to revise state policy or change administrative procedures.

and reform.ⁱⁱ Until the emergence of the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAЕ),ⁱⁱⁱ there was no regularly repeated survey of public attitudes about the voter experience. Data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), on which our report is largely based, provide an opportunity to explore opinions and perceptions that may or may not be informed by individuals' personal experiences with the election system.

As we discuss election administration and reform throughout this report, we offer some definitions that may be useful. "Election administration" is a term that we and others use to describe generally the process of determining who is qualified to vote and the manner of distributing, receiving, and counting ballots. Election administration involves many bureaucratic decisions and determinations and covers everything from the design of a voter registration form to the process of completing a post-election audit. Lawmakers, advocates, administrators, and other stakeholders endorse various "election reforms," i.e., proposals to revise state policy or implement state or local administrative changes. Examples of election reforms include, but are not limited to, the adoption of online voter registration, rules and procedures for determining poll worker qualifications, and the implementation of vote centers.

Public opinion is a powerful tool to encourage positive reforms in election administration, as long as decision makers understand what survey data can and cannot show. It is in this spirit of improving democracy that we offer a glimpse into our data.

Illuminating the ways in which the public thinks about the election process, the report attempts to take the reader through the voter's thought process from the start of the voting process to its finish. Our findings include important survey data about the decision to vote, the voter experience, and the public's trust and confidence in the way elections are run. At the end of the report, we identify what we do not yet know and offer some suggestions for future research.

ii Public opinion surveys in countries with emerging democratic systems have asked broader questions about democratic performance for a longer period of time. Examples of these surveys include the European Values Survey (now World Values Survey), begun in 1981, and the Latinobarometer, begun in 1995.

iii The SPAЕ is a national survey of voter experiences that was administered in 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2016. The survey design allows researchers to create state-level estimates of public opinion about election administration. Unlike the SPAЕ, which focuses on election experiences, our CCES modules include attitude and opinion items about election administration that are not included in any other surveys. This provides a unique and valuable complement to the SPAЕ. If the SPAЕ helps us understand how voters experience elections, then this research helps us understand what respondents (voters and nonvoters) know, believe, and feel about elections and democracy.

The Public's View of the Election Process

A successful election requires a high degree of integrity, transparency, and accountability from independent, fair, and competent administrators.⁴ Election administration ideally follows a voter-centric model, where the voter's needs are paramount in adopting rules and implementing administrative procedures. Voters who have a positive experience are more likely to participate in the future. If it is difficult to register; if voting information is not readily available; if polling places are inconveniently located, with insufficient parking or mass transit options; or when ballots and voting technology are poorly designed, some voters may become disheartened after voting or may choose not to participate at all.

In this section, we offer our findings on the decision to vote and important factors that influence that decision, such as the availability of election information and feelings about politics. We then describe how people understand voter registration requirements and how much support there is for current modernization reforms. We also set forth important aspects of the voter experience in the order that many voters experience it, from their decision on where to cast a ballot, their tolerance for waiting in line, their knowledge of voter identification requirements, and their interactions with poll workers.

DECIDING TO VOTE

Findings in This Section

- A significant number of nonvoters choose not to participate because they do not like the candidates, and some may be generally unenthusiastic about participating.
- Lack of information may keep people from voting in certain contests, especially down-ballot races.

Most survey respondents say that they are registered and voted, and respondents to the CCES are no exception. Some people do not participate but are reluctant to admit it, which brings us to one well-known limitation of election and voting survey data. Questions about registration and voting are susceptible to social desirability bias – i.e., people tend to over report their civic participation. And sometimes people forget whether they registered or voted, leading to truthful but mistaken survey answers. For the purposes of this report, we assume that respondents answered questions in earnest and that their answers are a good indicator of what people think about participation.

The first step for any voter is deciding whether to participate at all. In this section, we describe some people's stated reasons why they do not vote, as well as levels of enthusiasm for voting. We also describe the reasons why people sometimes skip voting for down-ballot races.

REASONS FOR NOT VOTING

The question of “who votes” has been investigated for decades,⁵ but we know surprisingly little about why citizens do not vote.

Some respondents in the 2008 and 2016 surveys admitted that they did not vote and provided us with a window into their reasons why. In the 2016 election, distrust in the candidates was the top reason why people did not vote (37 percent) followed by general disgust with politics (21 percent). Nonvoters’ dislike for candidates has noticeably increased since 2008, when 28 percent of respondents answered that they did not vote for that reason. Our 2016 data also show that Republicans were more likely to answer that they didn’t trust the candidates (57 percent) compared to Democrats (40 percent). In 2008, only 33 percent of Republicans and 22 percent of Democrats disliked the candidates. Our findings are consistent with studies that have taken a closer look at the nonvoting population. Recent reports from the Pew Research Center, for example, also showed that among the top reasons for not voting were dislike of the candidates or issues in the campaign.⁶

Related research from the Pew Charitable Trusts showed that many people do not register due to lack of interest in voting.⁷ We also asked all our respondents about their enthusiasm for voting in the 2016 election, which might play a role in the decision to vote. Prior to the election, 40 percent reported they were more enthusiastic than usual, 31 percent were less enthusiastic than usual, and 28 percent felt the same as usual. After the election, people reported more enthusiasm than usual at a rate of 48 percent, with most of the increase drawn from people being less enthusiastic (26 percent).

When examining the data by category, we noticed that 41 percent of women answered that they were less enthusiastic than usual, which was 9 percentage points higher than men answering the same way. Similarly, more men than women answered that they were more enthusiastic than usual (40 percent versus 33 percent, respectively). Enthusiasm by party seems to be tied to expectations in pre-election polling and the final results. Democrats reporting more enthusiasm than usual declined from 44 percent to 37 percent after the election, while Republicans expressing more enthusiasm than usual shot up from 35 percent to 62 percent. Among Independents, enthusiasm increased from 40 percent before to 50 percent after the election.

Enthusiasm about voting is far more in the control of candidates and campaigns than election officials, whose responsibility is a maximally and equitably accessible voter-centric elections system, within appropriate constraints placed by security. The current political climate may create limits to convincing nonvoters to become voters, which is an unfortunate reality of politics today.

“The current political climate may create limits to convincing nonvoters to become voters, which is an unfortunate reality of politics today.”

VOTING DOWN BALLOT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF CANDIDATE INFORMATION

Unsurprisingly, information is vital for a citizen to make the decision to vote and to make choices on the ballot.

Lack of information about the candidates is the top reason why people skip down-ballot contests. We asked respondents in 2008 and 2016 about which contests they skipped, if any, and the reasons why they skipped certain contests. The results were consistent across the years. In 2016, 36 percent of respondents said that they did not have enough information to vote for attorney general; 39 percent did not have enough information to vote for secretary of state; nearly 40 percent did not have enough information to vote for their state senator; and 43 percent did not have enough information to vote for their representative in the state house or assembly. Similarly in 2008, 56 percent of respondents said that they did not vote for certain down-ballot offices because they did not know enough about the candidates to make an informed choice.

Lack of name recognition has a similar effect on voting decisions. A significant number of 2016 respondents did not vote in certain contests because they did not recognize the candidates. Nearly 20 percent of respondents skipped the attorney general's race for this reason; contests for secretary of state (17 percent), state senate (16 percent), and state house or assembly (20 percent) were also skipped for the same reason.

Where do our respondents say they seek out information about candidates on the ballot? Even in the age of the internet, a surprising number rely on traditional resources, in addition to the web, to learn about who's on the ballot. In our 2016 survey, we asked respondents to rank their top three sources of candidate information and provided a list of several options to choose from. Over 41 percent said that political parties were their number-one source of candidate information, followed closely by the county election website (41 percent), voter guides (40 percent), and a search engine like Google or Yahoo (40 percent). There was comparatively less reliance on social media (20 percent), friends and family (25 percent), traditional news media (26 percent), and television (30 percent).^{iv}

It will be important to monitor continually the sources of election information, especially as the traditional media landscape changes and the internet-savvy proportion of the population grows. We suspect that an increasing percentage of voters will turn to online sources to learn about registration requirements, ballot formats, and candidate information, in addition to other aspects of elections and voting.

iv These questions only asked about how citizens found out what candidates were on the ballot, not about sources of political and campaign information more broadly.

NAVIGATING VOTER REGISTRATION

Findings in This Section

- Many people know that they are responsible for registering and updating registration. Most know where to register and that a move requires them to update their information. Most people are likely to rely on internet searches for registration information.
- Many people could benefit from ongoing education about how the voter registration process works in their states, especially states that have recently implemented modernization reforms.
- The majority of people support online voter registration but might not know whether it is available in their state. Some continue to prefer to use the paper registration form. The public does not currently express strong support or opposition to automatic voter registration.

Once people decide that they are interested in voting, the first step is to either register or update their registration. To gauge our respondents' knowledge of voter registration, we presented them with questions about key aspects of the registration process. To gauge the extent to which people understand and support recent changes to voter registration in some states, we presented them questions about online voter registration and automatic voter registration.

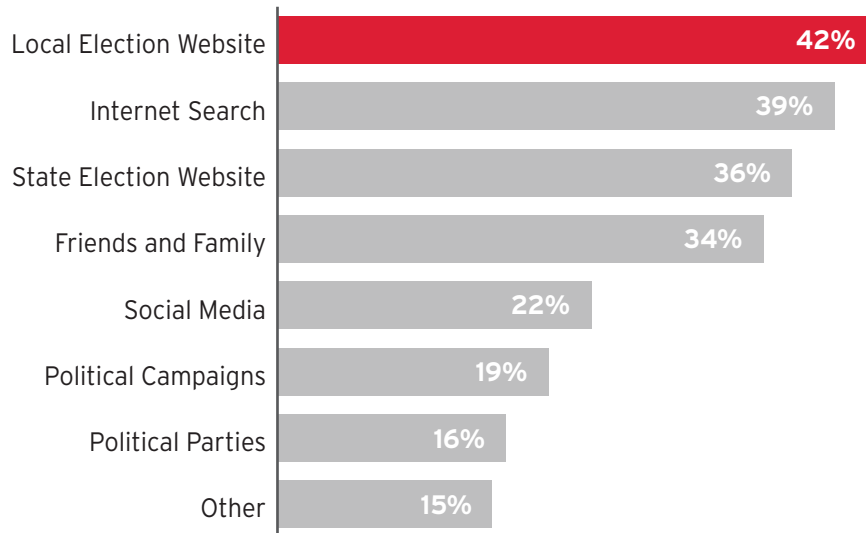
VOTER REGISTRATION BASICS

Across several surveys, most of our respondents knew that they are responsible for registering to vote. They knew that updating voter registration after a move is their responsibility and were also reasonably familiar with places that can help them with registration.

When we asked our 2008 respondents where voter registration could be updated, 67 percent said that they would go to their county elections office, 61 percent said that they would mail in the voter registration form, and 50 percent said that they could update at the department of motor vehicles. Relatively few said that they could update their registration through the secretary of state website (33 percent), a political party (20 percent), at the library (18 percent), or via a political organization or campaign (13 percent).

If voters want to register or update their information, they must do so before the deadline. Most of our survey respondents would turn to the internet to look up the registration deadline. We asked people to rank their top three sources of voter registration deadline information and provided a list of several items to choose from. Forty-two percent of respondents said that their first choice for registration information was the local election official website, followed closely by an internet search (39 percent), and the state website (36 percent). A significant number of people also said that they rely on their friends and family for registration deadline information (34 percent). Fewer said that the political parties or campaigns were their number-one source (16 percent and 19 percent, respectively).

Most respondents get voter registration information from their official local election website.



Our survey respondents also understood that a move triggers a need to update registration. In 2008, we found that 82 percent of respondents knew that it is their responsibility to update their voter registration when they move. These results are consistent with what we found in 2016, when 77 percent of respondents understood that they must re-register or update registration after moving.

However, a small yet significant percentage of our respondents were confused about the need to update registration after a move. In 2008, 14 percent reported that they did not know whose responsibility it was to update their registration, and 3 percent erroneously believed that the U.S. Postal Service updates voter registration with a change of address request.⁸ In the 2016 survey, we further tested respondents' knowledge by asking them whether updating registration was necessary if 1) moving across town, 2) moving to a different county, and 3) moving to a different state. Twenty-three percent incorrectly thought that they did not need to re-register after an out-of-state move. Forty-six percent of respondents either did not know, said "no," or claimed it happened automatically when asked if an across-town move triggers the need to update registration. Thirty-one percent answered incorrectly when asked about an out-of-county move.

These results indicate to us that most Americans know that they need to register to vote and, at least when presented with a set of options, can correctly identify how and where registration changes can be made. We are nonetheless concerned that potentially tens of millions of eligible citizens remain uninformed or make inaccurate assumptions about the most basic requirements of voter registration.

KNOWLEDGE AND USE OF ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION

Offering citizens online voter registration (OVR) is a major innovation in election administration that creates administrative efficiencies, helps states and localities save money, and offers a convenience for voters. Starting with Arizona in 2002, OVR has expanded to 37 states and the District of Columbia.⁹ We wanted to see whether the public recognized the breadth of this change.

When asked about whether their states offer OVR, nearly 50 percent of respondents did not know. Over 17 percent answered incorrectly; of those respondents, 55 percent believed that their state did not offer OVR (when it did), and 45 percent believed that the state did offer it (when it did not). Of the third of respondents who provided the correct answer, over 60 percent of them told us that they had not registered or updated their registration using their state's online system.¹⁰

Only a third of respondents knew whether their state had online voter registration.

However, less than 40% of those who answered correctly had used their state's online system.



At first glance, these data may feel discouraging. But remember: 1) most of the CCES respondents claim to be registered already, so might not have had a need to use the online system; and 2) many respondents might have registered through the department of motor vehicles (DMV), which may or may not incorporate OVR into the DMV transaction. Some respondents may even have used an “online” kiosk at the DMV and not associated it with online voter registration. Though the CCES does not ask about the manner in which respondents registered (e.g., whether at the DMV, online, or some other way), data from the United States Election Assistance Commission¹¹ show that, between 2014 and 2016, election officials received 33 percent of registrations from DMVs, which is the largest single source of registration applications compared to in person (12 percent), by mail (17 percent), online (17 percent), and other sources (15 percent).

OVR is a significant reform in voter registration, but our data indicate that the public is largely unaware that the reform has occurred. Even though most people have OVR available, a significant portion of our respondents might not have actually used it or might not have realized that they used it at the DMV. This finding demonstrates one of the challenges of marshaling public opinion to promote reforms in election administration. Some of the most effective reforms that make voting easier and more efficient do not typically attract news coverage and therefore do not necessarily get the public’s attention.

SUPPORT FOR MODERN VOTER REGISTRATION REFORMS

Our evidence, however, suggests a pathway to promote reform. Our surveys show that the public supports reforms that make registration easier. Approximately 52 percent of our respondents in 2012 somewhat or strongly support pre-registration and 58 percent in both 2012 and 2014 support same-day voter registration. Other, more recent registration reforms have also sought to make the process easier, and many modernization reforms attempt to do so by leveraging the use of technology. We asked people about their views of OVR as well as automatic voter registration (AVR), which makes registration the default when the voter has a driver license or state-issued identification.

Online Voter Registration. Many people appear to support OVR when it is described, even if they are unaware of its availability. Over 50 percent of our respondents said that they would prefer to register online, while 35 percent said that they preferred to use a paper form. These data make it clear that states should not completely phase out paper – at least, not while a significant number of people prefer paper or lack access to the internet – and that educational outreach efforts may encourage more citizens to use, and support, OVR.¹²

Automatic Voter Registration. Overall, the public does not currently express strong support or opposition to AVR, which was first adopted by the state of Oregon in 2015 and has been authorized in 13 states plus the District of Columbia.¹³ In our 2016 survey, 30 percent said that they strongly support AVR while 17 percent were strongly opposed. We also note differences in support or opposition along party lines. Among Democrats, 44 percent indicated strong support for automatic voter registration, while 21 percent of Republicans indicated strong support. As more states decide to adopt and implement AVR, and the public becomes more familiar with it, we look forward to monitoring opinions around this new election reform.

THE VOTER EXPERIENCE

Findings in This Section

- There is not one most-preferred method of voting. Many like the convenience of early in-person and absentee or vote-by-mail voting. Absentee or vote-by-mail voters are more likely than early in-person voters to say that they distrust certain aspects of the voting process. Not surprisingly, voters provide compelling reasons to continue to vote in the way they have done before.
- People express a higher tolerance for waiting in line when they are told that the wait is 15 minutes. Tolerance decreases as the anticipated wait time increases.
- Significant numbers of people are confused or unfamiliar with their state voter identification requirements. Many appear to learn about these requirements during election cycles, suggesting the need for ongoing education.
- Overwhelming majorities of people provide good or excellent job-performance ratings for their poll workers. Most people like that poll workers are polite and knowledgeable and demonstrate other signs of excellent customer service.

Once they are registered and have the information needed to participate, voters must figure out how and where to cast a ballot. Most of our survey respondents provided positive feedback about their voting experience – no doubt a reflection of the hard work of America’s election officials. Even in the face of budgetary and other resource challenges, election officials provide a menu of registration and voting options, are responsible for deploying well-trained poll workers, and must ensure that elections are administered securely and with integrity.

This is not to say that there is no need for ongoing, systemic administrative improvements or that any election is absolutely void of errors. There are some people who might encounter unnecessary or annoying barriers to the voting process, have to wait in line longer than expected, or have a bad interaction with a poll worker.

In this section, we detail our survey respondents' feedback about their preferences and perceptions of their voting experience. We describe the public's mode of voting preferences (i.e., in person, early voting, or absentee/vote by mail), their tolerance for waiting in a line at the polling place, and their knowledge of voter identification. We also offer the public's evaluation of poll worker performance at our nation's polling places.

MODE OF VOTING PREFERENCES

As election administrators and policymakers offer more options for casting a ballot, it is important to understand what voters like and dislike about the various modes of voting. In our survey, we asked whether people liked or disliked anything about voting early in person, absentee or vote by mail, or on Election Day. We then offered respondents the opportunity to tell us why, using their own words.

If there is one overwhelming takeaway from these results, it is that voters come up with convincing reasons to prefer their current method of voting. Election Day voters, not surprisingly, told us that they liked to vote on Election Day, that it gave them a feeling of empowerment and a sense of community. We did find, however, that early voters in both 2014 and 2016 provided us with more reasons why they liked the options to vote early in person and absentee or vote by mail, when compared to conventional Election Day voters. Early in-person and vote-by-mail voters overwhelmingly mentioned "convenience" generally or a more specific aspect of convenience when asked what they liked about these modes of voting.^v Many said they liked early in-person voting because there are no lines relative to Election Day, it was easy, and it helped them make better use of their time.^{vi} The reasons voters like voting absentee or by mail were similar: Voters had more control over the time, place, and manner by which they were able to fill out the ballot.

We caution readers not to read too much into the comparatively lower rate of likes for Election Day voting: First, many of the reasons for Election Day likes and dislikes were reactions that our respondents had to voting in general (e.g., "makes me feel patriotic," "it's part of citizenship," or "it's my duty"). We noticed that not a single respondent who preferred early in-person and absentee or vote-by-mail voting made similar references to civic values. We don't think this is because early voters are less patriotic. Rather, we think

v We coded the responses by first reading all the open-text answers and then determining that they fell generally into a small number of categories, along with idiosyncratic or infrequent responses that we lumped into "other." We coded only the first mention given by the respondent, even though some provided us fairly detailed answers. This means that we lost some of the nuances in the interests of comparability. For instance, if a respondent wrote that they liked early in-person voting because "it was more convenient, the lines were shorter," we coded this as a "convenience" measure and did not also code it as a mention of "lines." We only report summary results when we obtained 10 or more mentions and, as noted in the text, chose not to report the likes and dislikes for Election Day voting. We hope to take a deeper dive into these responses in future reports.

vi Voters made two distinct uses of "time," at points saying "it saved me time," but at other points saying "I travel a lot" or "I commute" and early in-person voting let them choose the best time.

that convenience is probably what distinguishes the other modes of voting from Election Day voting. Second, the only responses we collected were among those who decided to vote. These likes and dislikes can help election officials understand why voters choose to vote early in-person or absentee/vote by mail but provide less insight into nonvoting. The latter remains an important question for future research.

We also note that absentee/vote-by-mail voters were more likely to identify something that they disliked about early voting (although the total number of mentions was relatively low). In 2014 and 2016, over half of those who disliked absentee or vote-by-mail voting said that they did not trust the process itself.

Their reasons included fears of fraud, lack of security, and uncertainty whether the ballot was counted. A small percentage of people also expressed generalized distrust in the U.S. Postal Service (3 percent in 2014). Other reasons people disliked voting absentee or by mail included paying for postage to return the ballot (20 percent in 2014 and 7 percent in 2016) and wanting options other than mail (11 percent in 2014). The number of voters who said there was something they disliked about early in-person voting was very small (six people in 2014 and 14 people in 2016). Ironically, the same reasons that were given to dislike early in-person voting (inconvenience and long lines) were also given as a reason to vote early versus on Election Day.

Many of our respondents specifically mentioned that avoiding lines was a reason to choose a method of early voting. How can our results be reconciled with other surveys that show, on average, that early in-person voters experience longer waits?¹⁴ Our survey results demonstrate that voter-centric election administration may include a system that provides a range of options for voters. The ability to choose when to wait in line can be more influential in creating a positive voting experience than the reality of the line itself.

TOLERANCE FOR WAITING IN LINE

In 2016, we asked a series of questions to find out how long people were willing to wait in line to vote. This question was included because we believe that long lines may lower voter evaluations of election conduct. We also wanted to test our assumption that long lines discourage people from voting. Though there have been many reports of people waiting hours in line to vote, many may become discouraged and leave the line. When we offered estimated wait times up front, a significant number of our survey respondents said that they would not wait very long to vote.

We presented “what-if” scenarios about line wait times of 15, 30, or 60 minutes, and then asked if such waits would make them more or less likely to vote or if they made no difference. Less than 4 percent said that waiting in line for 15 minutes would make them less likely to vote. But their tolerance decreased as wait times increased. Almost 19 percent said that they would be less likely to vote if they knew they had to wait for 30 minutes, and almost 21 percent said that they would be less likely to vote if they knew that they had to wait for 60 minutes.

Two things should be noted here. First, most voters do not encounter long lines or long wait times when voting, and they might not ever know how they would actually react if this scenario should play out in real time. According to the SPAE, in 2016, 68 percent of early

“We think that convenience is probably what distinguishes the other modes of voting from Election Day voting.”

voters and 74 percent of Election Day voters waited less than 10 minutes to vote. Lines were less frequent in 2014, a midterm contest with lower turnout: 89 percent of Election Day voters in 2014 waited less than 10 minutes to vote, compared to 84 percent of early voters.¹⁵ While convenient, early in-person voters are more likely to experience longer wait periods due to a limited number of early voting locations.

Second, there has been remarkable improvement in the jurisdictions that experienced issues with long lines on Election Day. Improvements were due primarily to responsive election officials, especially those who have been able to harness available data and management tools to meet voter needs. Many have even created partnerships to reduce long lines. The Bipartisan Policy Center recently partnered with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to support election officials in 11 states with line-management tools and methods developed by the Voting Technology Project.¹⁶ Nonetheless, there is an ongoing need to stop long lines before they start, and our data demonstrate the need to be constantly aware of factors that could keep voters in line for longer than they expect.

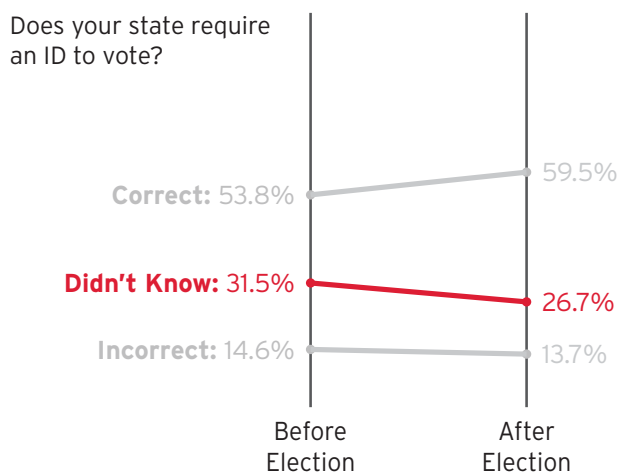
KNOWLEDGE OF VOTER IDENTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

Once a voter reaches the election table, she or he might be asked to present a form of identification (ID). The federal law applies minimum identification requirements,¹⁷ and many states create further voter ID rules that the voter must meet to cast a valid ballot. Most readers know that some voter identification laws are very controversial (especially photo identification) and make headlines when legislatures propose changes or when laws are challenged in court close to Election Day. Changes and challenges to voter ID requirements can lead to voter confusion and worry about what they should bring to the polls, and being unprepared can be detrimental to a voter's participation in an election. Given its importance to the voting process, we asked respondents about voter identification to measure the extent of their knowledge.

Our data show that there is experiential learning going on, as well as confusion about state requirements. Prior to the 2014 elections, 58 percent of those who lived in a state with some sort of identification requirement correctly said their state required an ID, while 11 percent said (incorrectly) that their state did not. The parallel numbers for respondents in states without voter ID requirements were: 46 percent said correctly that their state did not require an ID, while 20 percent thought that their state did. Combining the responses from states with voter ID and states without voter ID, 53.8 percent accurately understood their state's identification requirements before the election, and that percentage increased nearly 6 percentage points in the post-election survey.

There remained a substantial amount of confusion, but overall, a slight increase in knowledge about voter identification after the election. In 2014, 34 percent of respondents in the pre-election survey living in states without voter ID requirements reported not knowing if their state had a photo voter identification law, while 30 percent of those in

Voters learn about ID requirements at the polling place, but a substantial number remain uncertain.



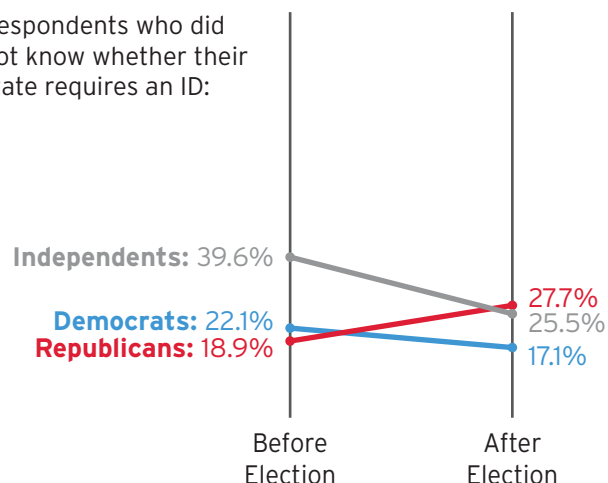
a voter ID state said that they did not know. Many respondents changed their answers between the pre- and post-election surveys. Of those who answered that their state did have a photo identification requirement in the pre-election survey, 16 percent changed their answer to “no” in the post-election survey; 21 percent changed to “don’t know.” Of those who responded that their state did not have a photo identification requirement in the pre-election survey, 6 percent changed their answer to “yes” post-election; 17 percent changed to “don’t know.” Most of those who were unsure in the pre-election survey remained unsure post-election, but at the same time, accuracy of knowledge about voter ID laws did increase if the state had an ID requirement: The percentage giving a correct answer increased by 7 percentage points, and the number saying “don’t know” decreased by 8 percentage points. Accuracy of knowledge in states without voter ID requirements remained largely unchanged, an expected finding since the voting experience did not provide an opportunity to learn about a nonexistent requirement.

We found only small partisan differences in knowledge of photo voter identification laws. Interestingly, more Democrats than Republicans and Independents living in states erroneously thought that their state did require an ID, and the election experience did little to reduce that gap. But the most notable partisan gap appeared in voter ID states in the pre-election survey between Independents, a whopping 45 percent of whom said they did not know if their state required an ID, and partisans (Democrats and Republicans), just 19 percent of whom did not know. Overall, in voter ID and non-voter ID states, nearly 40 percent of Independents said they didn’t know if their state had an ID requirement, approximately double the rate of partisans who said they didn’t know. It is encouraging that a substantial number of Independents appeared to learn about their state’s requirements as a product of the election. The number who answered accurately that their state either did or did not have an ID requirement increased by 11 percent, while the number saying they “don’t know” dropped by 14 percent. Accuracy rates among partisans increased slightly (3 percentage points higher for Democrats) or were nearly unchanged (1 percentage point higher for Republicans).

Yet, as shown in the figure, the percentage of Republicans who said they “did not know” increased by nine percentage points. How can we square this latter result with our claim that the election experience teaches voters about administrative requirements? Almost all of the increase among Republicans is among those who lived in non-voter ID states and who responded “I don’t know”. In this specific case, we suspect that Republican respondents in non-voter ID states may either be reflecting their actual experience at the polls (we know from extensive past research that many voters show, and sometimes are asked for, ID even when it is not required), or may be responding to elite messaging about the value of a voter ID requirement even though their state does not have one in place. Regardless, we remain encouraged that accuracy rates increased in every other category of partisanship and voter ID regime.

There is little partisan difference in knowledge about ID requirements – but independents were more likely not to know what their state requires.

Respondents who did not know whether their state requires an ID:



POLL WORKER JOB PERFORMANCE

For those who vote in person, the voter experience is largely shaped by their interaction with poll workers. We included questions about poll worker's job performance because these "street-level bureaucrats" are often the only human interaction that voters will have with the elections office. Research shows that a well-informed and competent poll worker is an important factor for increasing voter confidence.¹⁸

We are pleased to report that across all survey years, the vast majority of CCES respondents gave poll workers positive performance evaluations. Positive evaluations have been high since we began asking the question in 2008, when 89 percent of respondents gave poll workers an "excellent" or near excellent evaluation. About 77 percent of respondents in 2010 said that poll workers were "excellent," gave them a "quite warm or favorable feeling," or performed "somewhat well."^{vii} Positive poll worker evaluations have increased since then, with 91 percent answering "excellent" or "good" in 2012 and 2014, and they reached their highest in 2016 (95 percent answering "excellent" or "good").

In 2016, we followed up with the reasons why poll workers were given positive evaluations. Answers indicate that people like poll workers who are customer service oriented. When asked to give their top three reasons, most respondents in 2016 said that they liked poll workers because they were polite (91 percent), helped get people through the lines (51 percent), and were informed about the proper procedures (49 percent). Of the few who gave poll workers negative evaluations, top complaints were that they took too long to get people through the lines (45 percent), made the voter say his or her name and address aloud (16 percent), and were rude (12 percent).

Related to poll worker performance were the findings that less than 1 percent of 2012 respondents, and less than 2 percent of 2016 respondents, felt intimidated at the polls. While this may sound encouraging – and we think that important progress has been made to make the voting process inviting to the historically disenfranchised – we also want to offer some critical insights. First, our respondent pool is statistically unlikely to ever experience voter intimidation.^{viii} Second, although our sample is small, other research indicates that nonwhite voters are more likely to report feelings of intimidation. This is an important area for follow-up research.

Our findings demonstrate why local election officials ought to continue to pay close attention to poll worker recruitment and training. We hope lawmakers and policy experts recognize that assuring a high-quality, diverse, and well-trained pool of poll workers in every jurisdiction is clearly a good investment.

vii We assume that the small drop in positive evaluations in 2010 was due to a change in question wording and not some widespread issue with poll worker performance in that year.

viii Most of the Reed survey respondents reported that they were white (72 percent), were over 30 years old (81 percent), and had at least some college (74 percent). We theorize that this group of voters is less likely to experience voter intimidation, compared to survey respondents who identify as nonwhite and who may have less experience with elections and voting.

Trust and Confidence Measures

Findings in This Section

- Election administrators enjoy higher levels of public trust when compared to officials in other public institutions. State and local election officials should continue to enjoy high public approval if they are viewed as nonpartisan experts.
- Levels of voter confidence are influenced by the voter's polling place experience, partisanship, and support for the winner (sometimes referred to as the "winner's effect"). Most are confident that their own votes and votes across the country are counted as intended, though there is a noticeable gap between individual and national-level confidence. There was a dramatic uptick in voter confidence levels among Republicans and Trump supporters in 2016.
- Perceptions of voter fraud, electoral integrity, and electoral fairness are deeply intertwined and powerful indicators of a healthy democracy. Most people believe that our elections are run with integrity and that outcomes are fair, but perceptions about the prevalence of voter fraud raise concerns.

Once voters cast their ballots, they must trust that the outcome of the election is legitimate, even if their preferred candidate or issue does not come out on top. Favorable public evaluations of elections and their outcomes indicate a healthy American election system. In such a system, the public trusts that election outcomes are determined fairly and equitably, and individuals report high levels of voter confidence, based in part on their positive experiences with the processes of registering to vote and casting a ballot.

Here we offer a snapshot of our trust and confidence in elections survey. We describe our findings on election officials' job performance, voter confidence and its key dynamics, the public's perceptions of election integrity, voter fraud, and electoral fairness, and support for integrity and security reforms.

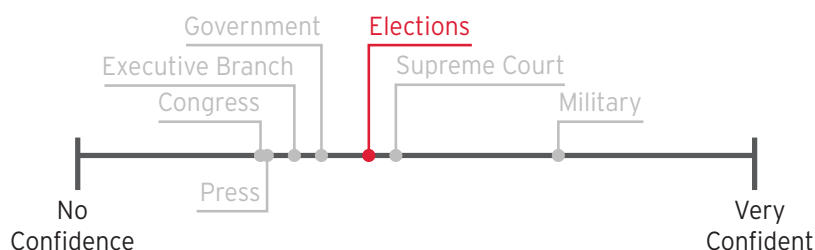
GENERALIZED TRUST IN ELECTION ADMINISTRATION AND GOVERNMENT

General public support for democratic institutions is a nearly unalloyed good. But throughout American history, many have remained skeptical and distrustful of government. Though most people trust their state and national government at least some of the time, our 2016 survey showed that over 20 percent of people "never" trust the federal government and almost 15 percent answered that they "never" trust their state government. When we broke down the data further, we noticed sharp differences between Trump and Clinton supporters. Trump supporters were six times more likely to say that they "never" trust the federal government compared to Clinton supporters, who were significantly more likely to trust the federal government "about half" or "most of the time."

Some public attitudes about elections may be subject to the overall negative trend in government trust that has permeated American public opinion over the past three decades.¹⁹ Others have shown that public opinion about elections is filtered through a partisan lens.²⁰ There remains some disagreement about the degree to which public opinion is linked to specific election experiences or is a function of generalized trust.

The good news is that our survey findings show that election administration ranks well when compared to other political, economic, and social institutions. When we asked in 2008, confidence in election administration was the second highest reported level of trust, with 73 percent reporting “some” or “a lot” of confidence, behind only the Supreme Court among governmental institutions. When ranked among all institutions (governmental and social), election administration ranks fifth highest among the 12 queried.

Election administration ranks well when compared to other institutions in trust.



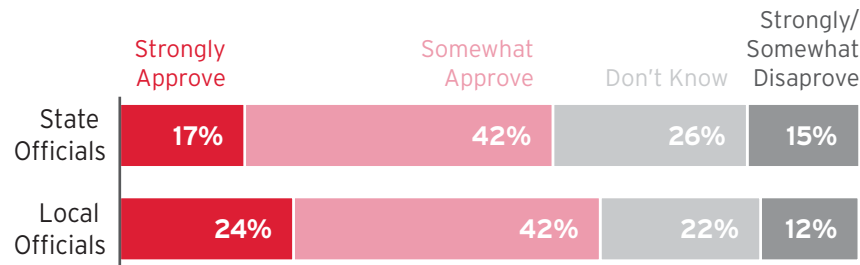
It is heartening to learn that the public expresses relatively high levels of confidence in election administration, especially as American politics becomes more polarized. This does not mean, of course, that election officials and other stakeholders should not improve key aspects of the system or ignore public opinion about the elections and voting process. We also note that our survey work here precedes recent conversations about cybersecurity of registration systems. Nonetheless, election officials should feel encouraged by this news, and we look forward to updating our survey with questions that take recent events into account.

ELECTION OFFICIALS' JOB PERFORMANCE

Apart from the data we have collected, there is little in the survey record of public confidence in election officials. In a number of our surveys, we have asked more detailed questions about election officials. Our survey offers a window into the public's view of state and local election officials' job performance.

Our survey results show that most people think that their state and local election officials are doing a good job. In 2016, nearly 59 percent of respondents either “strongly” or “somewhat” approved of their state election official's job performance, and 66 percent either “strongly” or “somewhat” approved of their local election official's job performance. These results are consistent with previous years. In 2014, 67 percent of respondents approved of their state election official and 57 percent approved of their local election official. Similarly in 2010, 58 percent of respondents approved of their state election official.

A majority of respondents approve of the job state and local election officials are doing.



While encouraging, our data also suggest a potential point of vulnerability: public perceptions that election administration and decision making are influenced by partisan considerations. Our survey data support research that shows that the public prefers nonpartisan election administration.²¹ In 2016, 33 percent of respondents believed that election officials ought to be elected in a nonpartisan contest. Twenty-one percent of respondents weren't sure, and 20 percent preferred choosing their election officials in partisan contests. These results mimic what we have observed in previous years.

Institutional trust may suffer as an institution becomes perceived as more “political.”²² Even if elected election officials are generally more responsive to voter needs than their appointed counterparts,²³ there is a danger that partisan divisions will overwhelm administrative competencies. Based on our survey findings and background research, we believe that election officials will continue to retain high levels of public approval if they are viewed as nonpartisan experts. This means that unfounded charges of partisan bias in conducting elections must be countered if election officials want to retain positive evaluations.

MEASURING TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN ELECTIONS

Voter confidence tracks whether respondents are confident that their ballots are counted as cast.^{ix} Voter confidence is related to legitimacy and trust in governmental institutions and may impact individual turnout decisions.²⁴ Recent work has extended the voter confidence measure beyond the individual ballot to include confidence measures in the accuracy of the count at the county, state, and national levels.²⁵

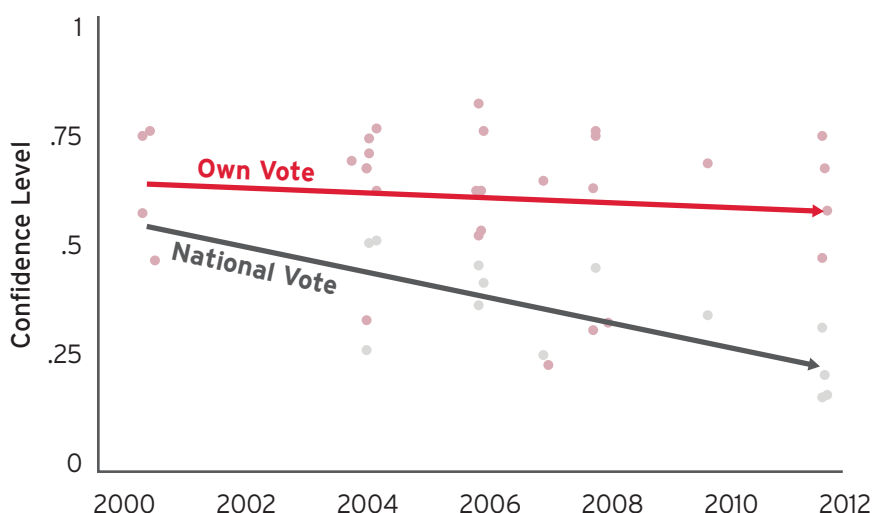
Across all years, the majority of people are confident that their own votes are counted as intended. Voter confidence decreases significantly the further the vote tabulation is removed from the individual's experience. In other words, confidence levels are relatively

ix The “voter confidence” survey measure first appeared after the 2000 election and has been repeated in various formats in numerous private and academic surveys. See Gronke, pp. 223-247. While we rely on this carefully defined term in this report, the term “voter confidence” has appeared in other contexts, for example, in the Supreme Court's majority decision in *Crawford v. Marion County Election Board*. It remains unclear what “voter confidence” means, or how it is measured, when used in this context.

lower when people are asked about national vote counts, compared to confidence in their own vote. We also find important differences in voter confidence when data are examined by party identification, candidate support, and other key factors.

Confidence in the national vote totals has declined over the past decade, even as confidence in one's own vote has remained mainly stable, as demonstrated in all the CCES surveys, and shown in Figure 1, reproduced from a study authored by Michael Sances and Charles Stewart that aggregated the results from dozens of surveys conducted since 2000.²⁶ The Sances and Stewart data show that confidence in one's own vote is approximately 30 percentage points higher than confidence in the nationwide vote count.^x

While voters remain confident that their own votes are being counted as intended, confidence in national results has declined.



Our data are consistent with the Sances and Stewart findings. In 2016, 87 percent of our survey respondents were confident that their own ballot was counted as cast, but only 71 percent were confident in the national vote count – a 16-point difference. Similar gaps occurred in 2012 (a 41-point difference) and in 2014 (a 28-point difference).

Research about the causes of different levels of voter confidence is at a very early stage. There are, however, several factors that influence levels of voter confidence, including the voter's polling place experience, partisanship, and the respondent's support for the winner.

CONFIDENCE AND THE VOTER EXPERIENCE

The act of voting itself may influence levels of voter confidence. We found differences in confidence based on the manner in which people voted, and high levels of confidence among those who reported a good interaction with their poll worker.

x Data generously provided by Profs. Michael Sances and Charles Stewart, updated from their 2015 article (see endnote 20).

From 2012 to 2016, our data show a small increase in voter confidence from pre- to post-election. In 2016, confidence in one's own vote rose from 75 percent pre-election to 87 percent post-election. Similarly, confidence in national vote counts rose from 62 percent pre-election to 71 percent post-election. Similar patterns emerged in 2012 and 2014. This suggests that the voter experience plays a positive role in boosting confidence in election outcomes.

Voter confidence in one's own ballot has been found to be responsive to the available modes and methods of voting. Claassen and colleagues wrote that "[v]oter confidence in the accurate counting of the ballot depends on institutional decisions (e.g. technology) and related factors at polling locations," while Alvarez et al. added that "the probability of a voter being confident is significantly affected by the voting technology..."²⁷ When we examined voter confidence against the mode of voting in 2016, we found that absentee/vote-by-mail and Election Day voters (87 percent) have approximately the same amount of confidence, marginally higher than early in-person voters (83 percent). In 2012, voter confidence across the three modes was nearly identical, at 80 percent.

Based on these data, the MIT Election Data and Science Lab reported that "there's little evidence that election administration has a direct effect on voter confidence."²⁸ While we do not disagree, we note that these data represent a change in trends from a decade ago when public opinion surveys consistently found lower confidence levels among vote-by-mail voters.²⁹ It could be that as convenience methods have become more popular with voters, and as election officials work to mitigate voters' concerns, we are finding few differences in how confident some voters are in the accuracy of the vote count.

"The act of voting itself may influence levels of voter confidence."

We also noticed that those who reported a good interaction with their poll worker also had high levels of confidence. About 63 percent of our respondents who felt "very confident" that their votes were counted also rated their poll worker as "excellent." And over 60 percent of respondents who were "very confident" that their votes were counted also answered that they liked that their poll worker "knew the proper procedures."³⁰ Because so many of our respondents gave their poll workers a high job performance rating, we cannot comfortably compare levels of confidence between this group and those who gave poll workers a low rating. Nonetheless, we believe that this finding is encouraging and demonstrates a continuing need to emphasize the importance of customer service and professionalism in poll worker training.

PARTISANSHIP AND THE "WINNER'S EFFECT"

Political partisans generally express significantly higher confidence than Independents. Research going back over 50 years tells us that partisans generally know more and care more about politics than the typical Independent.³¹ Therefore, it may not be surprising that they also express higher levels of confidence in election processes and procedures.

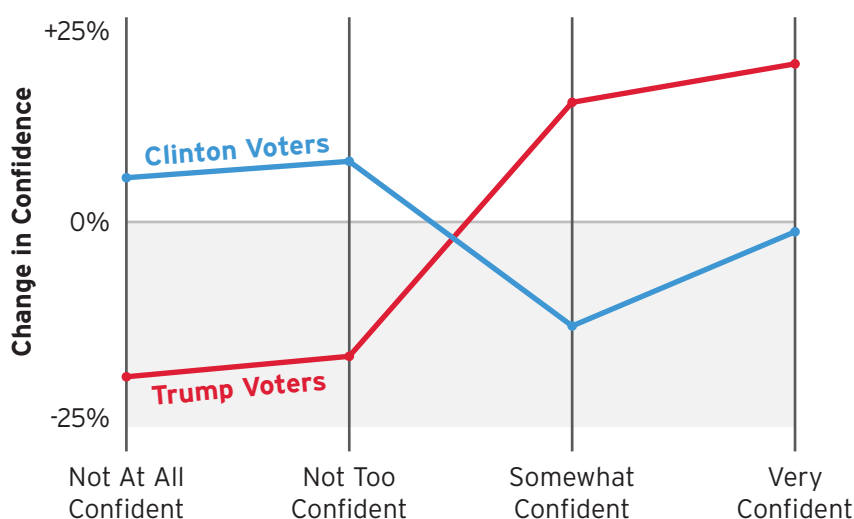
There are, however, differences in confidence levels among political partisans in every election. The “winner’s effect” describes a change in voter confidence from pre- to post-election:

“Voting for the winner...not only influences how a voter judges whether his own vote was counted accurately, but also strongly influences whether a voter judges that the votes of others were counted accurately.”³²

Typically, the winner’s effect is the most significant influencer of voter confidence but moves up or down by only small percentages. For example, when our data were broken down by party identification and candidate preferences, there was only a small increase in both 2008 and 2012 across all partisan groups. Pre- and post-election confidence levels for Democrats remained consistent across all presidential election cycles since 2008. In both 2008 and 2012, respondents who voted for winners experienced a half-point increase in confidence (on a 3-point scale) after the election.³³

The “Winner’s Effect” is the most significant influencer of voter confidence.

Change in confidence that votes nationwide were counted as intended from before to after the 2016 election:



Many of our readers will not be surprised that the 2016 election stands apart. Our findings demonstrate an unusually pronounced winner’s effect in the 2016 general election. In the Sances and Stewart study, they argued that the decline in national-level voter confidence is almost completely due to a decline in confidence among Republicans.^{xi} This observation is consistent with our current understanding of the winner’s effect and what we observed in 2016. In the period of time that Sances and Stewart studied, Democratic candidates for President won more elections than Republicans. But in 2016, Republicans unexpectedly won political control of the country. Our data show a subsequent and dramatic post-election boost in voter confidence levels, particularly among Republicans.³⁴

xi It is important to note that the decline in Republican confidence precedes candidate Donald Trump’s allegations of vote rigging, and his serious entry onto the political scene. In this case, low confidence among Republicans defies the easy explanation of being caused by elite cues.

The magnitude of increase among Republicans in 2016 dwarfed all the other changes among other partisan groups and in other elections. Those who backed the winner in 2016 increased their voter confidence by three-quarters of a point (on a 3-point scale) in confidence, an increase that was 50 percent or higher than we found in previous years. After the 2016 election, Republicans ended with an average confidence level similar to what they reported in 2008 but began with a pre-election level far lower than in previous years. Similarly, Trump supporters did not end with a confidence level that was higher compared to previous years but rather expressed levels of voter confidence after the election that were comparable to those who backed the winner in previous elections.³⁵

Voter confidence is one indicator of a healthy election system and should not be dismissed simply because of the winner's effect. As we noted earlier, voter confidence is responsive to voter-centric features of election administration, such as efficiently organized polling places and high-performing poll workers. But we want to make clear that the strong impact of the winner's effect makes it difficult to use voter confidence as a measure of the quality of election administration. Because who wins an election is out of the election official's control, voter confidence measures should not be used to evaluate local and state administrative performance. In fact, voter confidence levels are not included in the Election Performance Index (EPI) for this reason.³⁶

PUBLIC CONCERNS ABOUT ELECTION FRAUD

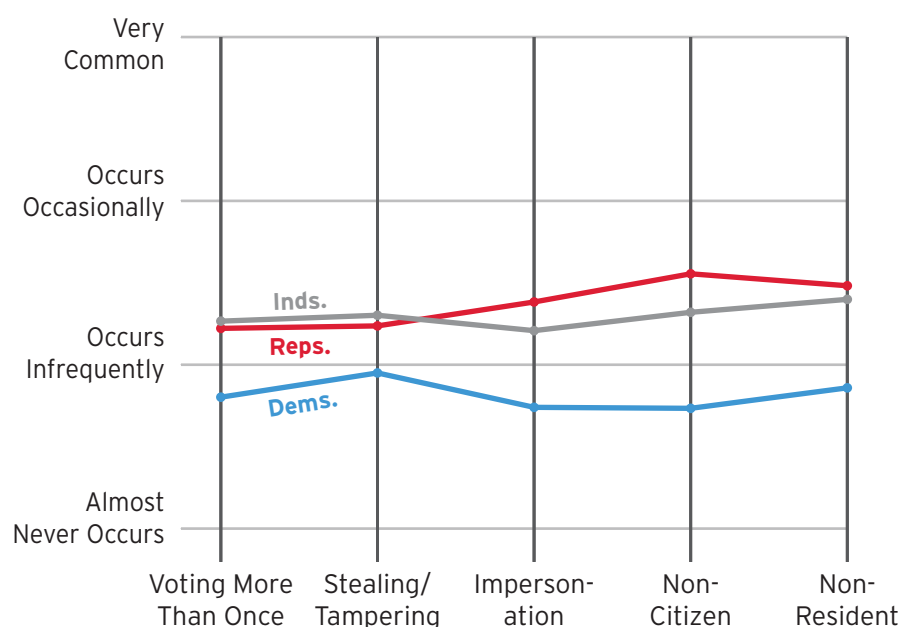
Even though there is little evidence to support claims of widespread voter fraud,³⁷ the public continues to perceive that it is an ongoing threat and occurs frequently. We asked people about whether they were worried about voter fraud. The following findings provide insights into how frequently citizens think voter fraud occurs and what types of fraud they believe are the most common.

On a 7-point scale, we asked our 2016 respondents how worried they were about voter fraud and found that people were mostly split on this issue. About 29 percent said that they were worried about voter fraud, while 21 percent said that they were not worried. There were noticeable differences when we examined the data by party identification and among Trump and Clinton supporters. Republicans and Independents were far more likely to be worried about fraud (48 percent and 37 percent, respectively) than Democrats (10 percent). Trump supporters were 48 points more likely than Clinton supporters to express worries about voter fraud. Though all of our survey respondents believed that voter fraud occurs to some extent at the state and local levels, Republicans and Independents were more likely to believe that election fraud occurs at both levels. Democrats were the least likely to believe that all types of fraud occur with any regularity.

In 2014, we also asked people how often they thought multiple voting, election tampering, voter impersonation, noncitizen voting, and nonresident voting occur at the state and local levels. All of our respondents believed that at least one of these types of fraud occurs at least infrequently. Most believed that nonresidents and noncitizens voted improperly, which is consistent with our 2008 results. In 2008, 21 percent believed "many" undocumented immigrants were voting illegally. Twenty-eight percent believed "some" undocumented

immigrants were voting illegally, while 19 percent said “a few,” and 12 percent thought “no” undocumented immigrants were voting. An additional 20 percent of respondents replied “don’t know.” The second highest result in 2014 was the perceived frequency of in-person voter impersonation. Intentionally voting more than once consistently ranked the lowest type of fraud expected.

Republicans and Independents are more likely to believe voter fraud happens more frequently



There was a minor decrease in perceptions of fraud in the post-election follow up, possibly mitigated by the voting experience or election outcomes. But generally, perceptions of fraud were slightly higher in 2014 than in 2012. The biggest increase was in the area of (intentionally) voting more than once, but it was also fairly small (.13 points on a 4-point scale).

We recognize that these findings may frustrate many election administrators and advocates of election reform. One thing to keep in mind is that most surveys – including ours – do not offer a definition of “voter fraud” to respondents. It is quite possible that the public defines it in different ways and that those definitions may be colored by personal experience, political beliefs, and education.

Is it possible to counter negative public sentiments based on widely held misconceptions? In our view, public concerns about voter fraud are a reality that everyone in the elections community must acknowledge. Any reform proposals must address these concerns and must be supported by facts. We believe that these survey findings can provide stakeholders with a good starting point to talk about strategies for engaging with the public.

PERCEPTIONS OF ELECTION INTEGRITY

A voter's beliefs and experiences with elections inform her or his perceptions of electoral integrity. Surveys fielded in other countries, and more recently in the United States, have asked people about system fairness and legitimacy, generally referred to as "electoral integrity."³⁸ Perceptions of electoral integrity touch on the broadest possible values and expectations of our democratic system – one that is fair, transparent, not tilted toward wealth, and covered accurately by the media.

As alluded to earlier, these perceptions are an important indicator of a healthy democracy. Beginning in 2014, we included within the CCES five key questions about electoral integrity in the United States:

In your view, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections?

- *Votes are counted fairly.*
- *Journalists provide fair coverage of elections.*
- *Election officials are fair.*
- *Rich people buy elections.*
- *Voters are offered a genuine choice at the ballot box.*^{xii}

Our data show mixed results on the electoral integrity measures. In 2016, about 57 percent said that voters are offered a genuine choice at the ballot box "very" or "somewhat often." Sixty-one percent said that election officials would be fair "very" or "somewhat often" if there were an election dispute, and 66 percent believed that votes are counted fairly "very" or "somewhat often." However, almost 60 percent of our respondents said that journalists provide fair coverage of elections "not often" or "not at all often," which is unsurprising given the downward trends in trust in media. And around 65 percent of all our respondents also believed that rich people buy elections "very" or "somewhat often."

The perception of electoral integrity is lower than previous years. In 2014, election officials were seen as fair "very often" or "fairly often" 63 percent of the time, and 70 percent thought votes were counted fairly "very often" or "somewhat often." Fifty-three percent of

xii These questions are also included in the World Values Survey and the American National Election Studies. As described on its website, "The World Values Survey is a global network of social scientists studying changing values and their impact on social and political life, led by an international team of scholars, with the WVS Association and WVS Secretariat headquartered in Vienna, Austria." It regularly collects data on several items of global importance, including election integrity. For more about its mission and purpose, visit www.worldvaluessurvey.org (accessed August 13, 2018). Similarly, "The mission of the American National Election Studies (ANES) is to inform explanations of election outcomes by providing data that support rich hypothesis testing, maximize methodological excellence, measure many variables, and promote comparisons across people, contexts, and time." ANES surveys several key aspects of elections and includes items on election integrity from the World Values Survey. For more about the ANES, visit www.electionstudies.org (accessed August 13, 2018).

respondents thought journalists provided fair coverage “not often” or “not at all often”, and only 61 percent of respondents thought rich people bought elections “very often” or “fairly often.”

There are substantial partisan differences in perceptions. In 2016, Republicans were most negative about the fairness of journalists (79 percent answered “not often” or “not at all often” – about 38 points higher compared to Democrats) and less likely to believe that rich people buy elections (57 percent answering “very” or “somewhat often,” compared to 68 percent of Democrats). Democrats, in contrast, were most positive about the fairness of journalists but also most likely to believe that rich people buy elections. There were no noticeable differences between Democrats and Republicans on other measures of electoral integrity.

“The perception of electoral integrity is lower than previous years...[and] there are substantial partisan differences in perceptions.”

We provide these results not because we think that administrators can move the needle on these issues, but rather because we believe that most election officials are committed to do their part to support a healthy and vibrant American democracy. We hope to identify ways that election administration can improve perceptions of electoral integrity.

PERCEIVED FAIRNESS OF ELECTORAL OUTCOMES

We suspect that perceptions of integrity – and possibly their beliefs about voter fraud – are influenced by whether voters believe that election outcomes were fair. Digging into our 2012 and 2016 surveys, which included fairness questions, we find that most of our respondents believed that the election resulted in a fair outcome. However, we also note that a significant number of people did not.

In 2012, respondents were presented three options about the outcome of the election.^{xiii} Our data revealed that 60 percent believed that “votes were counted accurately nationwide [and] the man who actually received the most votes was elected president in a fair election.” Twenty-three percent believed that “there was a lot of fraud in counting the votes after the

xiii The question wording appeared as follows:

“Taking everything into account concerning the 2012 presidential election, indicate which statement most closely describes how you believe the outcome was decided.

“1. Votes were counted accurately nationwide. The man who actually received the most votes was elected president in a fair election.

“2. There was a lot of fraud in counting the votes after the election. Nonetheless, the man who actually received the most votes nationwide was elected president.

“3. There was a lot of fraud in counting the votes after the election. Because of that, the man who actually received the most votes nationwide was denied the presidency.”

election [but] the man who actually received the most votes” won. A smaller but significant percentage of our respondents (16 percent) believed that “there was a lot of fraud in counting the votes after the election [and] the man who actually received the most votes nationwide was denied the presidency.”

There were notable partisan differences among our 2012 respondents. Perhaps not surprisingly, 32 percent of Republicans thought that the person with the most votes was denied the presidency, compared to 19 percent of Independents and 2 percent of Democrats. Seventy-nine percent of Democrats thought that votes were counted accurately, compared to 55 percent of Independents and 40 percent of Republicans. To some degree, this is ascribable to a “winner’s effect.”

In 2016, we asked our respondents whether the outcome of the presidential general election was determined fairly. We included the winning and losing candidates’ names in the question prompt³⁹ and examined the answers by party identification and candidate support. Overall, about 65 percent of our respondents said that the election outcome was determined “very” or “somewhat fairly.” In 2016, we also observed noticeable differences among Republicans and Democrats and Trump and Clinton supporters. Almost 96 percent of Republicans thought that the election outcome was “very” or “somewhat fairly” determined, compared to 44 percent of Democrats. Similarly, 98 percent of Trump supporters thought that the election outcome was “very” or “somewhat fairly” determined, compared to about 44 percent of Clinton supporters.

Though election officials do not control who wins an election, these data make the case for continuing voter engagement even after an election has concluded. It concerns us that 16 percent thought that the wrong person won the 2012 presidency because of voter fraud – particularly now that the public discussion around foreign interference in American elections becomes increasingly complex and partisan. Moreover, it is unclear what may turn the other 23 percent of people who thought there was some fraud but who believed in 2012 that the right person won. More research is clearly needed to understand public opinion about electoral fairness.

SUPPORT FOR ELECTION INTEGRITY AND SECURITY POLICIES

Election integrity questions are often presented on surveys as a trade-off between security and ease of access to the ballot. While it is not surprising that Republicans strongly favor election integrity measures by a massive gap of 71 percentage points, Democrats also place greater importance on security than access, albeit by a much narrower margin of 7 percentage points. When we looked at our data from 2012 and 2014, the two most popular reforms that people often associate with election security were: 1) requiring a voter-verified paper audit trail and 2) requiring voter identification.

Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trails. About 81 percent of respondents said that they “somewhat” or “strongly” supported the use of voter-verified paper audit trails (VVPATs). We suspect that support for VVPATs will be just as strong post-2016, now that stories about election cybersecurity have become increasingly salient.

Voter identification. Support is also high for voters showing government-issued identification at the polls. In 2012, 78 percent “somewhat” or “strongly” supported this requirement, which decreased slightly to 77 percent in 2014. These findings are consistent with the SPAE and other surveys. Though there is little evidence that voter identification laws ameliorate voters’ concerns about the frequency and danger of fraud, people continue to support the policy.⁴⁰ Our findings suggest that openness, transparency, and nonpartisan election laws and procedures are vital to maintaining the public’s trust and confidence in elections.

Strong support for election integrity and security is not a zero-sum game. In fact, election officials must – and many do – implement rules and procedures that are intended to strike a balance between the need for a secure and trusted election system and the rights of voters. We hope that the public views election administration in a similar light, and we look forward to the opportunity to dive deeper into this aspect of election administration and reform using our current dataset as a baseline of understanding.

“Election officials must — and many do — implement rules and procedures that are intended to strike a balance between the need for a secure and trusted election system and the rights of voters.”

Recommendations for Future Research

In this report, we have summarized eight years of survey research into elections, election administration, and faith and trust in American democracy. Based on our survey findings, we provide some recommendations for future research.

DECIDING TO VOTE

Scholars have a good understanding of the reasons why people choose to vote and how they navigate the ballot. We encourage ongoing research in this area, as well as complementary research about how voters get information about down-ballot races. We would also like to see research showing how changes in the media environment and the nationalization of politics may impact participation in down-ballot races.

There is also a large unexplored territory of nonvoting. We recognize the limitations of public opinion research into the reasons why some people do not vote. We also believe that there are further opportunities to understand the particular role of election administration in the decision to vote. For nonvoters who might be interested in voting, lack of information keeps some from participating fully. It is clear, however, that a small yet significant portion of the American public is completely disconnected from the election process. Research must be done to understand whether election administration can do anything to reduce the number of citizens who remain off the rolls or do not turn out to vote.

NAVIGATING VOTER REGISTRATION

Voter registration has been transformed and modernized in the past decade. Yet our results show that many of these reforms, which are widely lauded in the elections community, remain largely invisible to the public. We wonder if informing the public more fully about the ways that voter registration has improved would offset some cynicism and distrust in our system.

We found that many rely on internet searches for basic information, and many reported reliance on election officials' websites to keep them informed about registration deadlines and candidate information. We do not believe, however, that election administrators are the only government officials who can help educate the public. More research is needed to understand the role that DMVs play in shaping the public's understanding of the registration process.

The majority of people support OVR, but many do not know that online voter registration is available in their states, and over a third of people still prefer to use the paper form. We also do not yet know whether and to what extent AVR might impact voter's knowledge of voting and registration. We encourage more studies of OVR's recent impact, as well as more studies that explore the effect of registration modernization policies.

THE VOTER EXPERIENCE

Most people like to vote in the way that suits them the best. We wonder, however, about the limits of this tendency. How do citizens feel about voting when they change their mode of voting, especially when that change is mandated by state law? Do they “like” their new mode of voting?

Many clearly enjoy the convenience of early in-person and absentee/vote-by-mail voting. Based on the feedback we collected, we encourage studies about whether the cost of postage for vote-by-mail voting may change some people’s preferences. We also noted that voters appear to have growing confidence in voting by mail, prompting the need for further study of these voters.

Overwhelming majorities of people provide good or excellent job performance ratings for their poll workers, who may play a key role in voter confidence levels. But we note again that our survey sample is statistically less likely to experience a problem on Election Day. Other research conducted by Democracy Fund indicates that racial minorities are more likely to feel intimidated at the polls.⁴¹ More survey work is needed that informs understanding of the role of the poll worker in shaping confidence and that oversamples communities of color, persons with disabilities, and voters who require assistance in languages other than English.

Significant numbers of people are confused or unfamiliar with their state voter identification requirements. More research is needed to know whether and to what extent voter identification controversies and legal challenges shape the public’s knowledge of these laws and the extent to which this knowledge affects voting decisions. We also do not know the role that the poll worker might play in the public’s knowledge of voter identification.

Finally, we believe that more research should be conducted on the conditions promoting the belief that elections are the best method for civic participation and on the factors causing citizens to lose trust in elections and turn to other methods for making their voice heard. The democratic process was severely tested in 2016, and we want to understand how long the impact of that election will resonate.

TRUST AND CONFIDENCE MEASURES

Our 2008 survey showed that election administration enjoys higher levels of public trust when compared to other public institutions. As the issue of cybersecurity and the threat of foreign interference in American elections become more salient, we encourage efforts to continue monitoring the public’s trust in election administration.

Although the majority of people provide positive evaluations of election officials’ performance, more research should be conducted to contextualize these assessments and to see if evaluations are correlated with objective measures of performance (e.g., the Election Performance Index) or with other political attitudes (e.g., partisanship). We also do not know how or to what extent performance evaluations are impacted by election outcomes, partisan polarization, or other phenomena that are out of election officials’ control.

We encourage research that measures the degree to which focused messaging, media coverage, campaign rhetoric, and election performance can affect voter confidence or perceptions of voter fraud. As national conversations about election cybersecurity become

more salient, we encourage academic survey questionnaires like the CCES or the SPAE to ask the public questions about cybersecurity to see whether confidence is impacted. We further encourage studies of voter confidence in communities of color, as well as other communities likely to experience particular problems with the voting process (e.g., military and overseas voters, voters with disabilities, and voters requiring language assistance).

Most survey respondents are presented with a trade-off between election integrity and security and ease of access to voting. We recommend more research that examines these opinions, given the public's support for making voter registration processes easier. For example, researchers could consider asking whether voters would be more or less supportive of a convenience reform if security could be guaranteed.

Knowledge and opinions about voter identification may be connected to perceptions of voter fraud data. We urge research into how the public may be defining "voter fraud." Our survey questions that do not define voter fraud force respondents to make their own meaning of the term. Future research should seek to unpack respondents' thinking about the issue.

In sum, our survey data demonstrate the need to continue voter education and engagement on all aspects of election integrity, especially among Republicans, Independents, and candidates of all political parties. We recognize that election officials consistently take measures to make elections secure and to let the public know how those processes work. For reasons that are unclear, this message is not getting through to significant segments of the American electorate. We also appreciate the enormous challenges election officials face in the wake of the 2016 election now that many parts of the election process are digitized.

Survey Methodology

The Cooperative Congressional Election Study is a national internet survey administered by YouGov to 50,000+ respondents. The survey has been administered in pre-election and post-election waves in every even numbered year since 2006. It consists of “common content” asked of all survey participants and “team modules.” Each team module contains survey questions written by academic teams from 50 different institutions. Team modules are administered to a subset of 1,000 survey respondents.

For this report, we drew on CCES team modules from 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014. We did not use data from 2006 because of data-quality issues. Our analyses were guided by our work, plus the work reflected in other surveys, scholarly research, and reports.

We welcome readers to visit the CCES website, where a more detailed project description can be found at <https://cces.gov.harvard.edu/>.

Acknowledgments

For over 10 years, the Early Voting Information Center (EVIC) at Reed College has fielded election administration and reform questions through its participation in the CCES. In 2016, EVIC continued its work to better understand public opinion in election administration and reform, thanks to support from Democracy Fund.

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