Public Perceptions of Electoral Management in Canada

Holly Ann Garnett and Edward Leibel, *Royal Military College of Canada[1]*

ABSTRACT

Elections Canada is widely respected as one of the oldest, most established, and well-regarded institutions of electoral management around the world. But what do Canadians think of their electoral management body? Furthermore, what individual-level variables can predict variations in levels of confidence, satisfaction, and perceptions of fairness in Elections Canada? This paper harnesses questions about Elections Canada asked in the Canadian Election Study from 2008-2021. It finds that Canadians have high levels of confidence, satisfaction and perceptions of the fairness of their electoral management body. Additionally, we find that, in general, confidence tends to increase with age, income, education, and political interest, but that women are likely to have lower levels of trust.

It is sometimes said that elections are only as good as they are trusted. If voters have confidence in the electoral process they may be more willing to participate, abide by the decisions made by their governments, and remain satisfied with their democracy (Norris 2014b). But when this trust in elections erodes, citizens can choose not to participate in the democratic process, leading to the breakdown of democratic governance. For these reasons, the question of what engenders trust in elections is an important one for scholars and practitioners alike.

One key component of trust in elections is perceptions of the electoral officials and electoral management body (EMB) responsible for the technical administration of elections. A variety of government bodies, boards, ministries, and commissions are responsible for the nuts and bolts of running elections, from registering voters to counting the ballots (Catt et al. 2014). The models of electoral management that exist around the world vary greatly, from independent agencies to governmental models where elections are run through an existing ministry or department. There are additionally variations in their levels of de jure and de facto autonomy or independence (van Ham and Garnett 2019), levels of centralization (James 2016; James et al. 2019) and capacity to perform their functions (Garnett 2019a). But because they fulfill such important tasks, trust in these institutions of electoral management is an important determinant of trust in elections more generally (Garnett 2019b).

Among these bodies of electoral management, Canada's centralized, independent EMB, Elections Canada, is widely respected as one of the oldest, most established, and well-regarded institutions of electoral management (Ace Project 2012). Founded in 1920, under the leadership of the Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada oversees most of the major electoral management tasks

---

[1] Holly Ann Garnett is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston. She is cross-appointed faculty at Queen's University (Canada) and an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of East Anglia (UK). She also serves as the co-director of the Election Integrity Project. She directs the <u>Elections and Democracy Lab – Laboratoire sur les Élections et la Démocratie (LED)</u> at RMC/Queen's. She is also an affiliated researcher with the <u>Consortium on Electoral Democracy/Consortium de la démocratie électorale (C-Dem)</u> and the <u>SERENE-RISC Smart Cybersecurity Network</u>.
Edward Leibel a recent graduate of the Royal Military College of Canada.

for national level elections in Canada (Elections Canada 2022). The EMB receives a high reputation in international rankings. The latest release of the Variety of Democracy dataset, a globally-respected cross-national set of expert ratings related to democracy, for example, put Canada within the top 5 countries (ranked 4) on capacity scores and among the top 30 countries in EMB autonomy scores (ranked 26) (Varieties of Democracy Institute 2021).

But what do Canadians think of their electoral management body? Furthermore, what can predict variations in levels of confidence, satisfaction, and perceptions of fairness in Elections Canada? This paper harnesses one of the few datasets globally that specifically asks respondents about confidence in a specific electoral management body over multiple election years. It examines these data over a series of the five most recent Canadian elections from 2008 to 2021, using data from the Canadian Election Studies, which have asked these questions of a nationally representative sample of Canadians after each federal level election. It focuses on three measures of trust in Elections Canada – confidence, satisfaction, and perceptions of fairness.

This paper therefore uncovers Canadians' opinions on their EMB, but also can help to understand among which population groups trust is lacking. This knowledge, in what could be considered one of the 'best case' scenarios of electoral management, can help us understand the differential levels of trust among populations for election administrators, knowledge which will be useful to electoral officials around the globe as they attempt to engender trust in their activities and elections more generally.

Public Trust and Electoral Institutions

Public trust in elections is widely agreed to be crucial to democratic governance, and research has demonstrated that perceptions of electoral institutions, notably electoral officials and election management bodies, factor into this relationship (Garnett 2019b; Norris 2015). Thus, an examination of electoral management bodies is a necessary component of uncovering the determinants of confidence in elections.

In the classic literature on electoral management, it was commonly assumed that independent model EMBs (those that operate at arm's length from the legislative and executive branches of government), are more trustworthy than their governmental counterparts (which operate from within government ministries or departments) (Catt et al. 2014). Among the international literature, independent or agency models were cited as the 'gold standard' of EMBs. However, more recent work has suggested this is not always the case, arguing that structures matter less than broader autonomy and impartiality. For example, van Ham and Garnett (2019)demonstrate a relationship between impartiality and electoral integrity. Bringing in potential intervening variables, Kerr and Luhrmann demonstrate a positive relationship between EMB autonomy and individual perceptions of electoral integrity, with media freedom as a linking variable (Kerr and Lührmann 2017, 57).

Yet while many studies are concerned with the structure and independence of the EMB itself, several studies indicate that the organizational structure of EMBs is only one small (but not insignificant) factor of many. In one article, James et al. identify seven distinct dimensions of EMB organizational design which impact electoral integrity the most: centralization, independence, capacity, scope and division, relation to external actors, technology, and personnel (James et al. 2019). Norris likewise broadens this discussion of the characteristics of high-quality electoral managing, noting that electoral integrity was strongest in states characterized by "effective governments with the capacity to deliver high quality public services as well as in states where the ethos of public administration is regarded as impartial and professional" (Norris 2014a, 136). Thus, the role of the organizational structure (government, agency, or hybrid) is less of a strong indicator of electoral integrity than

previous research seems to suggest, and the presence of the governmental models do not immediately mean greater risks of political interference and partisan bias (Norris 2014b).

At the individual level, this relationship between electoral institutions and public trust is borne out in empirical research. Garnett, for example, uses data from the 6th wave of the World Values Survey to note a relationship between perceptions of electoral officials and confidence in both the fairness of the vote count and perceptions of overall quality of democracy (Garnett 2019b). In other words, if citizens trust their electoral officials, they are also more likely to trust other political actors, including the election process in general.

This trust in electoral management can also extend to behaviours like voting. In the American context, Bowler et al. find that while even accounting for institutional factors like state income, and individual factors like low confidence populations, voter turnout has a strong correlation with the administrative quality of the EMB's. This means that people were more confident that election officials were fair, and that electoral integrity was maintained, in states that had higher administrative quality scores (Bowler et al. 2015).

However, one of the major advances in the study of electoral integrity in recent years is an acknowledgement of the differential perceptions and experiences of population groups. Perceptions of electoral management bodies will not be the same for all population groups: some are more likely to trust government institutions, while some may have different experiences of, or familiarity with, elections and electoral administration. However, we have little research specifically considering differential perceptions of confidence in electoral institutions.

Case Selection: Canada

The case used to further explore public trust in electoral management is that of Canada, where an independent model EMB, Elections Canada, runs elections at the federal level. The Canadian context is particularly apt for this study for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is a relatively conservative case where electoral management has been demonstrated to be conducted at high quality. International indicators consistently place Canada among the countries with the highest levels of electoral integrity (Norris and Grömping 2019; Varieties of Democracy Institute 2021). Thus we will be able to capture whether individual perceptions still vary where there is relatively high quality electoral management.

Secondly, Canada's centralized electoral management system, in which Elections Canada implements the same rules across the country, offers a particularly useful case study. In contrast with more decentralized systems, variations in public opinion are not likely the result of regional variations in electoral management. Furthermore, having a known central EMB, that communicates regularly with the public, means there is less likely to be confusion about survey questions regarding Elections Canada; while we know that electoral management is not always on the top of citizens' minds, there is more likelihood they will be able to respond to questions about it in the Canadian context. Finally, the Canadian case has available data over multiple election cycles, and multiple years, and a wealth of individual correlates, thanks to the consistent questions asked in the Canadian Election Study.

To understand Elections Canada currently, we must delve briefly into its history. There are two key dates important to elections in Canada: 1) In 1874, secret balloting and simultaneous voting was implemented; 2) In 1920, the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer was created (Courtney 2004, 106). Prior to this period, partisanship, gerrymandering, non-simultaneous elections, and open voting systems vulnerable to intimidation or corruption were commonplace. The Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, now commonly known as Elections Canada, is an independent, non-partisan agency created with the mandate to "[ensure] that Canadians can exercise their democratic rights to vote and be a candidate" (Elections Canada 2022). The head of Elections Canada, the Chief Electoral Officer,

is appointed by the House of Commons for a period of 10 years, reporting directly to Parliament and removable only by the Governor General (and therefore not by the government of the day). While the staff under the CEO consist of 500 permanent employees, this number can balloon to 235,000 during periods around elections or referendums. Under the Canada Elections Act, Elections Canada mandates assume a wide variety of responsibilities, to include:

- "administering elections
- registering political parties and third parties
- maintaining the National Register of Electors
- appointing and overseeing its officers for its 338 electoral districts
- disclosing contributions to candidates, parties and third parties, examining their financial returns, and reimbursing expenses when criteria has been met
- ensuring access to voting for all citizens
- providing support to independent commissions charged with the readjustment of federal electoral boundaries" (Elections Canada 2022).

Thus, when an election is called, Elections Canada is involved in all aspects of electoral management. Through Elections Canada, voter cards are issued to all citizens listed in the National Register of Electors, and supplies are prepared to be shipped to pre-selected polling stations in every district. Each district officer then sets up an office as an HQ for their district, from which to hire and train the incoming staff. At the same time, candidate and party campaign expense limits are calculated, including maximum advertisement airtime, as all official candidate nominations are collected and transferred to the ballot. Elections Canada also deals with distributing and collecting mail-in ballots, conducting advance voting at polling stations that run on 4 distinct days before election day, and collecting ballots from eligible voters in hospitals or in penitentiaries. On election day, polls are mandated to be open for 12 consecutive hours in each district, during which EC collects and counts all regular votes. Finally, after the vote, its officers validate the results for each district, carry out recounts if necessary, and declare the winning candidate to the Chief Electoral Officer, after which political parties and candidates may be reimbursed some expenses for adhering to elections rules. Elections Canada is crucial at every step of the electoral process, and thus understanding perceptions of Elections Canada is crucial to understanding perceptions of elections themselves.

Objectives

This paper has two objectives. First, it seeks to uncover the levels of trust in electoral management, across five elections, within the Canadian context. Second, it seeks to discover whether levels of trust in electoral management vary by certain individual-level variables. Understanding the variations in opinion by individual characteristics will shed light on the differential experiences and opinions of citizens with their system of electoral management, thus providing scholars and practitioners with important insights into which population groups may have the lowest levels of trust in the electoral system.

We therefore consider a number of these individual predictors, beginning with socio-demographic variables,[2] There is some evidence that women may trust elections less than men, possibly related to feelings of efficacy with the system (Bowler et al. 2015; Flesken and Hartl 2018).

---

[2] Race is not explicitly asked in the Candian Election Study (CES) and thus cannot be included in this study, though we do note that minority status can be an important predictor of trust in elections and government institutions in general.

We also note that previous studies have demonstrated that older citizens are more likely to trust elections, perhaps due to greater levels of experience with, or engagement in, the system (Birch 2010; Flesken and Hartl 2018). Education has been noted to be a predictor of confidence in elections in previous research (Birch 2010); individuals with higher levels of education may understand the political system and electoral institutions better, and thus be more likely to trust it. Likewise, wealth tends to be positively related to trust in elections (Flesken and Hartl 2018), perhaps because they have the resources available to engage fully in the voting process without the high costs that affect those with more unstable employment and residential mobility. Additionally, income (like education) may impact access to the political networks that encourage engagement in the system.

Considering political variables, we expect that political interest will engender knowledge and attention to the system, and thus engender trust. Relatedly, if a citizen has first-hand experiences with the electoral management body, their trust should increase. Previous research has suggested this to be the case (Mochtak, Lesschaeve, and Glaurdić 2021) via a socialization effect. There are many studies, particularly in the American context, that consider ideology and party support as it relates to confidence in elections (Norris, Garnett, and Grömping 2019). Fewer studies on this phenomenon exist in the Canadian context, though we may expect to see some variation based on party support.[3]

Together, these variables will provide a comprehensive picture of the potential correlates of satisfaction, confidence, and perceptions of fairness in Elections Canada, taking into account both socio-demographic and attitudinal variables.

Methodology

This article uses data from the Canadian Election Study (CES) for the five most recent federal elections: 2008 (Gidengil et al. 2009), 2011 (Fournier et al. 2011), 2015 (Fournier et al. 2016), 2019 (Stephenson et al. 2020b, a) and 2021.[4] These surveys were collected via online, mail, and telephone samples both during the campaign and in the post-election period. These data provide one of the most comprehensive public opinion survey results specifically concerning electoral management in a country. Three major dependent variables will be considered that gauge trust in electoral management in Canada:

---

[3] We have chosen not to study the 'winner' effect (Singh, Karakoç, and Blais 2012; Anderson and Tverdova 2001) because of the Canadian parliamentary system, where votes are cast for local candidates, not national-level leaders. However, while we know that national-level dynamics are key in Canadian politics, it is difficult to clearly state for each voter whether they believe they voted for the 'winner' or not.

[4] Citations for Canadian Election Study Datasets:

Gidengil, E, Everitt, J, Fournier, P and Nevitte, N. 2009. The 2008 Canadian Election Study [dataset]. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Institute for Social Research [producer and distributor].

Fournier, P, Cutler, F, Soroka, S and Stolle, D. 2011. The 2011 Canadian Election Study [dataset]. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Institute for Social Research [producer and distributor].

Fournier, P, Cutler, F,Soroka, S and Stolle, D. 2016. Canadian Election Study, June 2015 [Canada]. [Study Microdata]. Toronto, Ontario. Institute of Social Research [distributor]

Stephenson, Laura B., Allison Harell, Daniel Rubenson and Peter John Loewen. The 2019 Canadian Election Study – Online Collection. [dataset]

Stephenson, Laura B., Allison Harell, Daniel Rubenson and Peter John Loewen. The 2019 Canadian Election Study – Phone Collection. [dataset]

(Garnett 2019b)

Stephenson, Laura B., Allison Harell, Daniel Rubenson and Peter John Loewen. 2022. The 2021 Canadian Election Study. [dataset]

1. ***Confidence*** – "Please indicate how much confidence you have in the following: Elections Canada (A great deal, quite a lot, not very much, none at all)"
2. ***Satisfaction*** – "How satisfied are you with the way Elections Canada runs federal elections? (Very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, not satisfied at all)"
3. ***Fairness*** – "Thinking about this election, would you say that Elections Canada ran the election… (very fairly, somewhat fairly, not very fairly)"

There are, of course, some limitations to these data. The questions here are drawn from the post-election survey (second wave), thus individuals agreed to not only participate in the initial pre-election survey but participate again in the post election survey, and therefore may be more likely to take an active participation in political activities. Secondly, respondents were only contacted via the electronic survey, and therefore may be more technologically literate than the telephone-only survey participants.

Ordered logistic regression models are used to test the predictors of these dependent variables, using self-reported socio-demographic and attitudinal responses to the survey. The election years are reported separately, since the election studies had small differences in collection and means of surveying between election years. We note that there are few instances of regional variation in electoral management across Canada due to the highly centralized nature of Elections Canada. However, province is included as a control variable to account for any variations that may be uncovered. National survey weights are used. See Appendix A for all variable coding.

Results

First, we consider the descriptive statistics regarding what Canadians think about electoral management in their country over the past five election years. Figure 1 shows that satisfaction with Elections Canada is quite high, with at least 80 percent of Canadians fairly or very satisfied with the way they run federal elections in any election year.

**Figure 1: Satisfaction with Elections Canada**
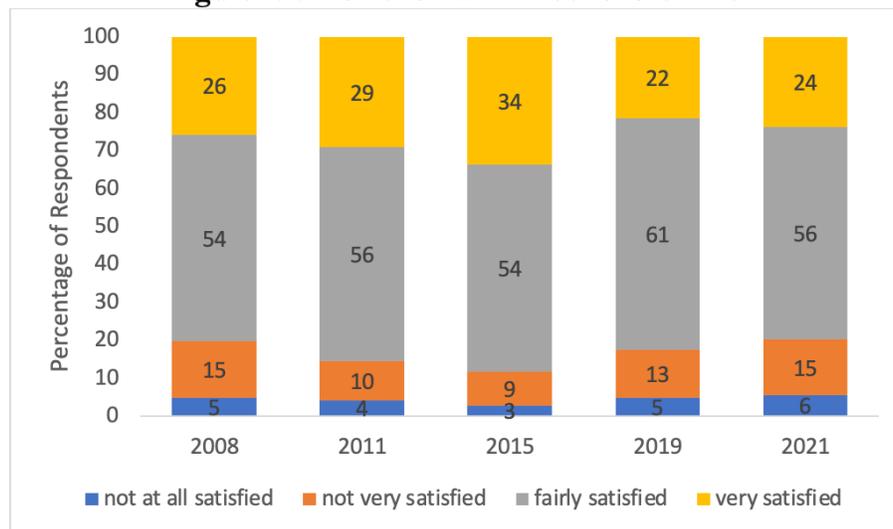
Question Wording: How satisfied are you with the way Elections Canada runs federal elections? (Very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, not satisfied at all)

Confidence is likewise high, with between about 65 and 80 percent of Canadians responding they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in Elections Canada (Figure 2). There is a notable

dip in 2021, but it is impossible to pin-point the main reasons behind this, be it an increase in alternative voting mechanisms due to the COVID-19 pandemic or a spillover of electoral fraud rhetoric from the United States after the contentious 2020 Presidential election.

Figure 2: Confidence
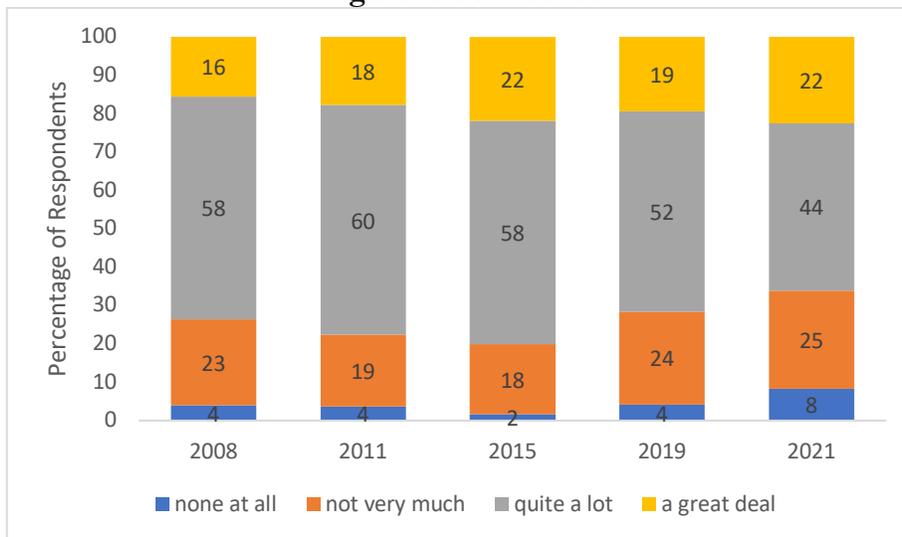
Question Wording: Please indicate how much confidence you have in the following: Elections Canada
(A great deal, quite a lot, not very much, none at all)

Perceptions of fairness are especially high with between about 85 and 95 percent of respondents saying that Elections Canada runs very or somewhat fairly. Here we also note a slight dip in perceptions of fairness in 2021. But in general, we see that trust in Canada's EMB is consistently quite high in recent years, with very few respondents having serious concerns about the fairness of their EMB.

Figure 3: Fairness
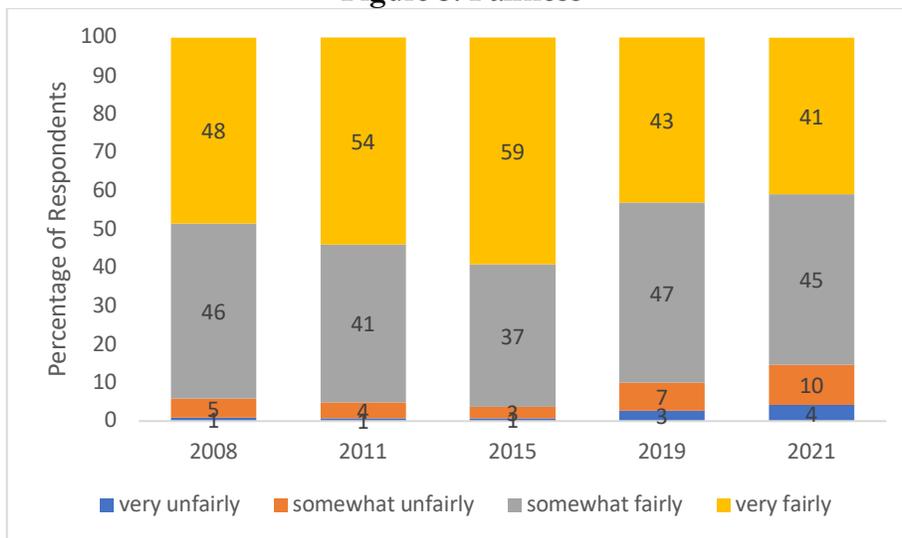
Question wording: Thinking about this election, would you say that Elections Canada ran the election…
(very fairly, somewhat fairly, somewhat unfairly, not very fairly)

However, previous research has demonstrated that there are often important differences in levels of trust in elections and electoral management based on other individual-level variables. In other

words, these feelings of confidence or trust are not consistent across all population groups. Tables 1-3 present the results of an ordered logistic regression that considers some of these potential predictor variables for the entire sample. Each year is reported separately. In this section, we note the major trends across all elections, by independent variable.

Table 1: Satisfaction with Elections Canada

	(1) 2008	(2) 2011	(3) 2015	(4) 2019	(5) 2021
Age	-0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01***	0.01***
	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Between $30&$60k	-0.12	0.12	0.35*	0.18	-0.01
	0.15	0.16	0.19	0.14	0.10
Between $60 -&$90k	0.01	0.35**	0.40**	0.16	0.03
	0.16	0.17	0.19	0.14	0.09
More than $90k	0.27*	0.39**	0.60***	0.34***	0.11
	0.16	0.17	0.18	0.13	0.09
Completed High School	0.08	0.21	0.27	0.33*	0.49***
	0.19	0.18	0.24	0.20	0.19
Some or Completed College	0.18	0.11	0.19	0.33*	0.55***
	0.18	0.19	0.23	0.18	0.18
Some or Completed University	0.33*	0.40**	0.35	0.71***	0.92***
	0.18	0.18	0.22	0.18	0.18
Female	-0.17*	-0.22**	-0.14	-0.16**	-0.20***
	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.08	0.06
Political Interest	0.04*	0.10***	-0.01	0.08***	0.07***
	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.01
Voted	0.28*	0.58***		0.73***	0.71***
	0.16	0.15		0.14	0.10
cut1					
_cons	-2.54***	-1.99***	-3.18***	-0.64*	-1.23***
	0.39	0.39	0.43	0.34	0.40
cut2					
_cons	-0.98***	-0.65*	-1.58***	0.83**	0.27
	0.38	0.37	0.40	0.34	0.39
cut3					
_cons	1.57***	2.16***	1.24***	3.82***	3.00***
	0.38	0.38	0.40	0.35	0.40
N	2049	2167	2185	4325	7068

Standard errors in second row, * p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01
Models: Ordered Logistic Regression
Reference categories: Income – Under $30k, Education – Less than High School
Voted variable not included in 2015 because all respondents of the Satisfaction question had voted.
Dummy variables for Province included in models, but not reported due to space limitations (Respondents from the Territories are dropped from these analyses due to low response rates)

Dummy variables for Province included in models, but not reported due to space limitations (Respondents from the Territories are dropped from these analyses due to low response rates)

Table 2: Confidence in Elections Canada

	(1) 2008	(2) 2011	(3) 2015	(4) 2019	(5) 2021
Age	-0.01*	0.00	-0.00	0.01***	0.01***
	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00
Between $30&$60k	-0.06	-0.01	-0.33	-0.18	0.12*
	0.22	0.26	0.25	0.23	0.06
Between $60 -&$90k	0.34	-0.17	0.19	-0.13	0.20***
	0.23	0.27	0.26	0.23	0.06
More than $90k	0.42*	0.20	0.33	0.10	0.29***
	0.23	0.28	0.26	0.22	0.06
Completed High School	0.10	0.91***	-0.31	-0.47	0.21*
	0.28	0.30	0.33	0.30	0.12
Some or Completed College	0.34	1.04***	-0.28	-0.09	0.32***
	0.29	0.29	0.32	0.28	0.12
Some or Completed University	0.60**	1.63***	-0.04	0.54*	0.83***
	0.28	0.29	0.32	0.28	0.12
Female	-0.08	-0.24	-0.11	-0.07	-0.22***
	0.14	0.15	0.13	0.13	0.04
Political Interest	0.19***	0.17***	0.11***	0.15***	0.14***
	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.01
Voted	0.79**	-0.15	0.56	1.13***	0.77***
	0.31	0.31	0.34	0.26	0.06
cut1					
_cons	-2.02***	-1.37**	-2.70***	-0.71	0.07
	0.66	0.67	0.67	0.60	0.24
cut2					
_cons	0.28	0.89	-0.01	1.61***	1.97***
	0.66	0.66	0.63	0.60	0.24
cut3					
_cons	3.34***	3.94***	2.80***	4.20***	4.13***
	0.67	0.68	0.63	0.61	0.24
N	1072	962	1154	1459	14522

Standard errors in second row, * p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Models: Ordered Logistic Regression

Reference categories: Income – Under $30k, Education – Less than High School

Dummy variables for Province included in models, but not reported due to space limitations (Respondents from the Territories are dropped from these analyses due to low response rates)

Table 3: Fairness of Elections Canada

	(1) 2008	(2) 2011	(3) 2015	(4) 2019	(5) 2021
Age	0.01*	0.01	0.01**	0.02***	0.02***
	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00
Between $30&$60k	0.03	0.24	-0.30	0.01	0.00
	0.26	0.24	0.30	0.14	0.10
Between $60 -&$90k	0.32	0.45*	-0.02	-0.04	0.07
	0.28	0.26	0.31	0.14	0.10
More than $90k	0.43	0.36	-0.02	0.08	0.21**
	0.27	0.26	0.30	0.13	0.10
Completed High School	-0.47*	0.69**	0.15	0.26	0.21
	0.27	0.32	0.33	0.18	0.18
Some or Completed College	-0.17	0.25	0.20	0.40**	0.34*
	0.27	0.32	0.33	0.17	0.18
Some or Completed University	0.10	0.99***	0.59*	0.85***	0.67***
	0.25	0.31	0.31	0.16	0.18
Female	-0.30**	-0.41***	-0.16	-0.17**	-0.16***
	0.15	0.15	0.15	0.07	0.06
Political Interest	0.06*	0.14***	0.07*	0.06***	0.05***
	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.01
Voted	0.57*	0.11	-0.54	0.81***	0.64***
	0.29	0.31	0.59	0.14	0.10
cut1					
_cons	-3.87***	-3.36***	-4.02***	-1.15***	-1.17***
	0.70	0.83	0.93	0.34	0.32
cut2					
_cons	-2.03***	-1.35**	-2.29***	0.24	0.23
	0.65	0.67	0.88	0.32	0.32
cut3					
_cons	1.17*	1.78***	0.77	2.85***	2.54***
	0.64	0.66	0.86	0.33	0.32
N	1002	899	1065	4233	6842

Standard errors in second row, * $p<0.10$, ** $p<0.05$, *** $p<0.01$
Models: Ordered Logistic Regression
Reference categories: Income – Under $30k, Education – Less than High School
Dummy variables for Province included in models, but not reported due to space limitations
(Respondents from the Territories are dropped from these analyses due to low response rates)

Firstly, we note that perceptions of fairness in Elections Canada does consistently increase with age (albeit this relationship is not statistically significant in 2011). We suspect this is because older respondents have more experience with Elections Canada, likely through years of voting. For the other

two dependent variables – satisfaction and confidence – this positive relationship between the dependent variable and age is only consistently positive and statistically significant in the final two election years.

We see a general trend of increases in confidence, satisfaction, and perceptions of fairness as income and education levels increase. This is especially visible for the top education category (containing those who have completed at least some university-level education), which tends to be consistently positively related to all three measures of confidence, satisfaction, and perceptions of fairness (the one exception being a negative relationship with confidence in 2015). We see a similar relationship where satisfaction increases with income levels, though this does not consistently repeat for the two other dependent variables. Like with age, we expect the relationships between income or education and more positive perceptions of Elections Canada may be related to positive experiences with Elections Canada. Those with higher income and education levels likely have greater resources (cognitive and material) and residential stability, thus their voting process is easy, and interactions with Elections Canada more straightforward. These positive experiences lead to greater perceptions of fairness, confidence, and satisfaction. There is also likely some influence of the (well-researched) greater trust in democratic and government systems found generally among older, wealthier, and more educated individuals, spilling over to confidence and satisfaction with electoral management.

Our results also reflect previous research that women have less trust in elections. For all five election years, and all three dependent variables, women have more negative perceptions of Elections Canada. As mentioned earlier, this could be related to more negative experiences among women with participation in the political system.

For political attitudes and behaviours, we note more confidence, satisfaction, and perceptions of fairness as political interest increases (except for satisfaction in 2015). We notice this trend particularly if we visualise the predicted margins of confidence in Elections Canada by political interest, as depicted for 2021 in Figure 4. We note that as interest increases, the predicted response of 'a great deal or quite a lot' of confidence increases, whereas predicted responses of 'not at all' and 'not very much' decreases. We expect that those with a great interest in politics, who pay the most attention to electoral management, and those with familiarity, gain additional confidence in Elections Canada.

Figure 4: Predicted Probability of Confidence in Elections Canada, 2021 by Political Interest
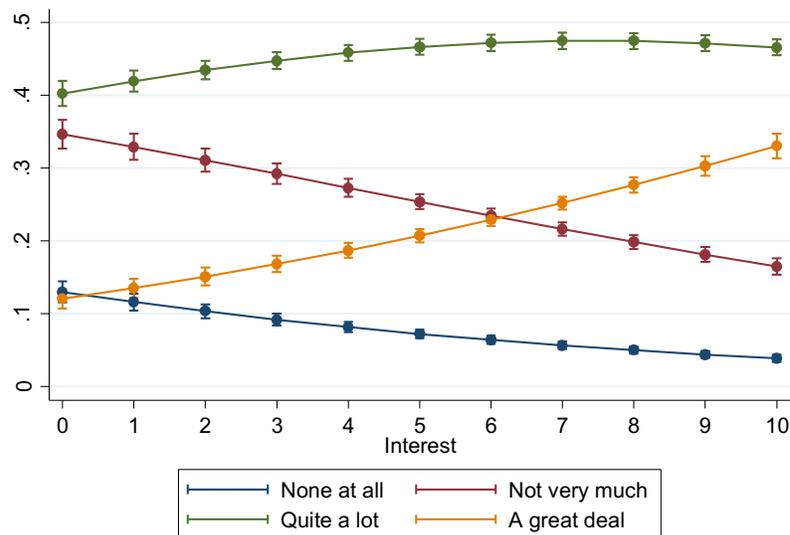
Surprisingly, the results are not as consistent when comparing voters and non-voters. In general, satisfaction with Elections Canada is much more positive for voters, but we note a dip in confidence and perceptions of fairness for 2011 and 2015 in particular. However, we do note (like with most election studies) that our sample has a particularly high rate of voters, with fewer respondents in the non-voters category.

Finally, we include a variable that captures which party the respondents said they supported in the last election in the models,[5] but we do not note any clear trends that are consistent across elections. This could be due to the shifting of political parties over election cycles, and also a relative lack of stable partisanship (when compared with other countries) that has been noted in Canada (LeDuc et al. 1984). We likewise do not note any patterns of perceptions of confidence, satisfaction, or fairness that correspond with the party winning government in the election studied.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article makes two main contributions to the study of electoral management. Firstly, it presents a unique dataset on confidence, satisfaction, and perceptions of fairness in an electoral management body. Access to multiple questions, over five election years, is rare in the study of electoral management bodies, and thus this article provides one of the few detailed analyses of trust in EMBs within a country. The results of this analysis show that Canadians do think highly of their EMB, with strong confidence, satisfaction, and perceptions of its fairness. It also shows relative consistency over the years. There are some slight dips in the most recent elections, but we are currently unable to determine whether this is related to factors relating specifically to the EMB, or to general trends in loss of satisfaction with democratic institutions.

The second major contribution of this article is the study of which population groups tend to have the most and least confidence, satisfaction, and perception of fairness of their EMB. We find that, in general, confidence increases with age, income, and education, but not consistently across all election years and questions. Additionally, we note a trend of women being less trusting in the EMB, while citizens with higher levels of political interest are more trusting. It is important to know which population groups do not trust electoral management, since this can have broader implications on feelings towards democratic governance. Additionally, it may elucidate for Elections Canada, and other EMBs around the globe, which groups require additional consideration, particularly in terms of their experiences with electoral officials and the electoral system more generally. These findings may be actionable with public outreach and further consideration about the barriers these groups may face when interacting with electoral management.

Scholars and practitioners of American electoral management will also find these results interesting, even though the system of electoral management is remarkably different in the American context, with electoral administration at the discretion of each state. Nonetheless, there have been recent discussions regarding efforts at greater centralization, through innovations like the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) at the federal level, and through joint initiatives by states like the Electric Registration Information Center (ERIC). The experience of Canada suggests that there are benefits to standard and centralized experiences of the registration and voting systems, as evidenced by the fact that high perceptions of trust in electoral administration did not vary significantly between Canadian provinces.

---

[5] See models in Appendix B due to space limitations. Party supported not included in the initial models since we only have these data for voters.

Another notable difference between the Canadian and American systems of electoral management is the levels of independence. Elections Canada works at arm's length from the government of the day, whereas many electoral officials in the United States are elected positions themselves. High levels of trust in Elections Canada may support calls to increase the autonomy of electoral administrators in the United States. However, it is important to note that the structures of independence are only helpful if they are accompanied by perceptions of fairness, as is found to be the case in the Canadian context.

Thus, election administrators and scholars from around the world have much to learn from Canada's well-trusted, and well-respected model of electoral management, as evidence by high levels of trust found in the survey data presented here.

References

Ace Project. 2012. "Canada: Stability, Indpendence, and Public Trust." https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/em/annex/electoral-management-case-studies/canada-stability-independence-and-public-trust.

Anderson, Christopher J., and Yuliya V. Tverdova. 2001. "Winners, Losers, and Attitudes about Government in Contemporary Democracies." *International Political Science Review* 22:321-338.

Birch, Sarah. 2010. "Perceptions of Electoral Fairness and Voter Turnout." *Comparative Political Studies* 43 (12):16011622.

Bowler, Shaun, Thomas Brunell, Todd Donovan, and Paul Gronke. 2015. "Election Administration and Perceptions of Fair Elections." *Electoral Studies* 38:1-9.

Catt, Helena, Andrew Ellis, Michael Maley, Alan Wall, and Peter Wolf. 2014. *Electoral Management Design*. Stolkholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

Courtney, John. 2004. "Electoral Machinery: fromo Partisanship to Professionalism." In *Elections*, 102-159. UBC Press.

Elections Canada. 2022. "The Role and Structure of Elections Canada." https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=abo&dir=role&document=index&lang=e.

Flesken, Anaïd, and Jakob Hartl. 2018. "Party Support, Values, and Perceptions of Electoral Integrity." *Political Psychology* 39 (3):707-724.

Fournier, Patrick, Fred Cutler, Stuart Soroka, and Deitland Stolle. 2011. The 2011 Canadian Election Study. edited by Institute for Social Research. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Institute for Social Research.

Fournier, Patrick, Fred Cutler, Stuart Soroka, and Deitland Stolle. 2016. Canadian Election Study, June 2015. edited by Institute for Social Research. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Institute for Social Research.

Garnett, Holly Ann. 2019a. "Evaluating electoral management body capacity." *International Political Science Review*. doi: 10.1177/0192512119832924.

Garnett, Holly Ann. 2019b. "On the front lines of democracy: perceptions of electoral officials and democratic elections." *Democratization* 26 (8):1399-1418. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2019.1641797.

Gidengil, Elizabeth, Joanna Everitt, Patrick Fournier, and Neil Nevitte. 2009. The 2008 Canadian Election Study. edited by Institute for Social Research. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Institute of Social Research.

James, Toby S, Holly Ann Garnett, Leontine Loeber, and Carolien van Ham. 2019. "Electoral management and the organisational determinants of electoral integrity: Introduction." *International Political Science Review* 40 (3):295-312. doi: 10.1177/0192512119828206.

James, Toby S. 2016. "The Effects of Centralising Electoral Management Board Design." *Policy Studies.*

Kerr, Nicholas, and Anna Lührmann. 2017. "Public trust in manipulated elections: The role of election administration and media freedom." *Electoral Studies* 50 (50):50-67. doi: 10.1016/j.electstud.2017.08.003.

LeDuc, Lawrence, Harold D. Clarke, Jane Jenson, and Jon H. Pammett. 1984. "Partisan Instability in Canada: Evidence from a New Panel Study." *The American Political Science Review* 78 (2):470-484. doi: 10.2307/1963376.

Mochtak, Michal, Christophe Lesschaeve, and Josip Glaurdić. 2021. "Voting and winning: Perceptions of electoral integrity in consolidating democracies." *Democratization* 28 (8):1423-1441. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2021.1918111.

Norris, Pippa. 2014a. "Electoral Management." In *Why Elections Fail*, 133-159. Cambridge University Press.

Norris, Pippa. 2014b. *Why Electoral Integrity Matters*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Norris, Pippa. 2015. *Why Elections Fail.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Norris, Pippa, Holly Ann Garnett, and Max Grömping. 2019. "The paranoid style of American elections: explaining perceptions of electoral integrity in an age of populism." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*:1-21. doi: 10.1080/17457289.2019.1593181.

Norris, Pippa, and Max Grömping. 2019. Perceptions of Electoral Integrity, (PEI-7.0). Harvard Dataverse.

Singh, Shane, Ekrem Karakoç, and André Blais. 2012. "Differentiating Winners: How Elections Affect Satisfaction with Democracy." *Electoral Studies* 31 (1):201-211.

Stephenson, Laura, Allison Harell, Daniel Rubenson, and Peter John Loewen. 2020a. 2019 Canadian Election Study - Phone Survey. Harvard Dataverse.

Stephenson, Laura, Allison Harell, Daniel Rubenson, and Peter John Loewen. 2020b. 2019 Canadian Election Study – Online Survey. Harvard Dataverse.

van Ham, Carolien, and Holly Ann Garnett. 2019. "Building impartial electoral management? Institutional design, independence and electoral integrity." *International Political Science Review* 40 (3):313-334. doi: 10.1177/0192512119834573.

Varieties of Democracy Institute. 2021. "The V-Dem Dataset." https://www.v-dem.net/vdemds.html.

Appendix A: Variables

Variable	Coding
Confidence	"Please indicate how much confidence you have in the following: Elections Canada (A great deal, quite a lot, not very much, none at all)" *Other variations include:* "How much confidence do you have in: Elections Canada (A great deal, Quite a lot, very much, None at all)" (2008); "Please indicate how much confidence you have in the following institutions: Elections Canada (A great deal, quite a lot, not very much, none at all)" (2011; 2015)
Satisfaction	"How satisfied are you with the way Elections Canada runs federal elections? (Very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, not satisfied at all)"
Fairness	"Thinking about this election, would you say that Elections Canada ran the election… (very fairly, somewhat fairly, not very fairly)" *Other variations include:* "Thinking about this last federal election in Canada, would you say that Elections Canada ran the election… (very fairly, somewhat fairly, not very fairly)" (2011; 2015) AND "Would you say that Elections Canada ran the election… (very fairly, somewhat fairly, not very fairly)" (2008)
Age	Numerical variable, age at time of survey
Income	Categories: Under $30 000 (Reference) Between $30 and $60 000 Between $60 000 and $90 000 More than $90 000
Education	Categories: Did not complete High School (Reference) Completed High School Some or Completed College Some or Completed University
Gender	Female (1), Male (0), Other/Prefer not to say marked as missing

Interest	0-10 scale of interest in politics generally
Voted	Whether the respondent voted (1) or not (0), self-reported since verification is not possible in the Canadian context. Note a variety of question wordings were used through the five cycles of the Canadian Election Study
Party	Party options: Liberal Party of Canada Conservative Party of Canada New Democratic Party of Canada Bloc Quebecois Green Party of Canada Other: Note: People's Party of Canada (which emerged on the national scene in 2019, is included in 'other')
Province	Ten provinces included. Territories excluded due to low response rates

Appendix B: Models with Only Voters, Including 'Party Voted for' Variable

Table 2: Confidence (Only Voters, With Party Voted for)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Satisfaction	Confidence	Fairness	Satisfaction	Confidence
Age	-0.01**	0.00	-0.00	0.02***	0.02***
	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00
Between $30&$60k	-0.05	0.04	-0.31	-0.26	0.12
	0.24	0.27	0.28	0.27	0.07
Between $60 -&$90k	0.19	-0.19	0.19	-0.16	0.23***
	0.24	0.28	0.30	0.26	0.07
More than $90k	0.38	0.14	0.27	0.05	0.36***
	0.25	0.29	0.28	0.24	0.07
Completed High School	0.02	0.89***	-0.44	-0.73**	0.07
	0.32	0.33	0.33	0.32	0.15
Some or Completed College	0.17	1.09***	-0.36	-0.48	0.17
	0.34	0.32	0.33	0.29	0.14
Some or Completed University	0.55	1.63***	-0.15	0.16	0.59***
	0.34	0.32	0.32	0.29	0.14
Female	-0.13	-0.33**	-0.12	-0.20	-0.38***
	0.15	0.16	0.14	0.14	0.05
Political Interest	0.19***	0.15***	0.11***	0.17***	0.14***
	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.01
Voted Liberal	-0.89	-1.18	0.91	0.01	2.39***
	0.63	1.06	0.66	0.62	0.13
Voted Conservative	-1.04*	-1.27	0.33	-1.09*	0.99***
	0.63	1.06	0.67	0.62	0.13
Voted NDP	-1.24*	-1.18	0.57	-0.20	1.92***
	0.66	1.06	0.67	0.62	0.13
Voted Bloc Quebecois	-1.01	-1.00	0.69	-0.90	1.67***
	0.65	1.08	0.75	0.69	0.14
Voted Green	-1.07	-1.12	0.66	-0.20	1.48***
	0.69	1.13	0.69	0.67	0.17
PE	-0.56	-0.17	0.58	-0.06	1.16***
	0.51	0.50	0.41	0.66	0.38
NS	0.05	-0.46	-0.00	-1.21**	0.46*
	0.56	0.60	0.41	0.57	0.26
NB	0.05	0.01	0.25	-0.70	-0.10
	0.53	0.46	0.42	0.59	0.27
QC	0.44	0.16	0.71**	-0.68	0.50**
	0.44	0.43	0.33	0.54	0.23
ON	0.15	-0.18	0.42	-0.60	0.07
	0.42	0.43	0.33	0.52	0.22
MA	0.16	-0.13	0.19	-0.96	0.17
	0.53	0.53	0.43	0.59	0.25

SK	0.01	0.38	0.40	-0.63	0.34
	0.51	0.51	0.44	0.57	0.27
AL	-0.74	0.09	0.46	-0.89	0.29
	0.53	0.51	0.42	0.54	0.23
BC	0.08	0.08	0.10	-0.58	0.30
	0.44	0.46	0.36	0.54	0.23
cut1					
_cons	-3.65***	-2.52**	-2.77***	-3.28***	0.98***
	0.89	1.24	0.87	0.93	0.30
cut2					
_cons	-1.25	-0.28	-0.00	-0.78	2.99***
	0.88	1.23	0.84	0.92	0.30
cut3					
_cons	1.85**	2.77**	2.80***	2.04**	5.35***
	0.88	1.24	0.84	0.93	0.31
N	910	852	1063	1183	12438

Reference categories: Income – Under $30k, Education – Less than High School, Province – NFLD (Respondents from the Territories are dropped from these analyses due to low response rates); Party – Other (including People's Party); Voting method – In person election day voting; Year - 2008. *Models 4-6 are missing 2011 and 2015 because the method of voting wasn't asked.*

Table 2: Fairness (Only Voters, With Party Voted for)

	(1) Satisfaction	(2) Confidence	(3) Fairness	(4) Satisfaction	(5) Confidence
Age	0.01	0.00	0.01**	0.02***	0.02***
	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00
Between $30&$60k	0.29	0.15	-0.26	0.13	0.19*
	0.29	0.27	0.31	0.17	0.12
Between $60 -&$90k	0.39	0.34	0.03	0.05	0.21**
	0.31	0.28	0.33	0.16	0.11
More than $90k	0.53*	0.22	-0.12	0.18	0.40***
	0.29	0.28	0.31	0.16	0.11
Completed High School	-0.43	0.63*	0.22	0.27	0.06
	0.30	0.35	0.35	0.20	0.23
Some or Completed College	0.05	0.20	0.34	0.37*	0.21
	0.30	0.35	0.34	0.19	0.23
Some or Completed University	0.35	0.98***	0.78**	0.77***	0.47**
	0.28	0.33	0.33	0.19	0.22
Female	-0.42***	-0.39**	-0.20	-0.29***	-0.26***
	0.16	0.16	0.15	0.09	0.07
Political Interest	0.05	0.15***	0.08*	0.07***	0.05***
	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.02
Voted Liberal	0.36	0.13	-1.14	0.59**	2.23***
	0.59	0.92	1.14	0.27	0.20

Voted Conservative	0.62	0.30	-1.25	-0.37	1.05***
	0.58	0.91	1.14	0.27	0.20
Voted NDP	0.23	-0.11	-1.51	0.33	1.78***
	0.61	0.90	1.15	0.27	0.20
Voted Bloc Quebecois	0.06	-0.49	-1.54	-0.52*	1.51***
	0.61	0.92	1.20	0.29	0.21
Voted Green	-0.07	-0.38	-1.83	0.29	1.70***
	0.63	0.99	1.17	0.30	0.26
PE	-0.27	-0.17	0.79	0.91	-0.74
	0.71	0.57	0.52	0.80	0.46
NS	0.39	-0.72	0.10	0.36	0.35
	0.75	0.65	0.49	0.33	0.39
NB	-0.17	-0.05	0.19	0.29	-0.35
	0.84	0.76	0.57	0.34	0.40
QC	-0.63	-0.97**	-0.28	0.12	-0.20
	0.65	0.46	0.42	0.25	0.31
ON	0.47	-0.06	0.57	0.05	-0.20
	0.63	0.45	0.42	0.24	0.31
MA	0.50	0.45	0.34	0.09	0.21
	0.70	0.55	0.49	0.31	0.35
SK	-0.23	-0.15	0.07	-0.17	-0.07
	0.76	0.55	0.51	0.32	0.38
AL	-0.00	0.51	0.09	0.03	0.12
	0.76	0.58	0.51	0.26	0.33
BC	0.31	0.08	0.36	0.17	0.15
	0.65	0.49	0.44	0.26	0.33
cut1					
_cons	-3.45***	-3.54***	-4.70***	-1.59***	-0.28
	1.00	1.29	1.36	0.46	0.44
cut2					
_cons	-1.82*	-1.60	-2.90**	-0.16	1.19***
	0.96	1.18	1.32	0.45	0.44
cut3					
_cons	1.43	1.50	0.22	2.48***	3.65***
	0.96	1.18	1.30	0.46	0.44
N	860	805	990	3454	5920

Reference categories: Income – Under $30k, Education – Less than High School, Province – NFLD (Respondents from the Territories are dropped from these analyses due to low response rates); Party – Other (including People's Party); Voting method – In person election day voting; Year - 2008. *Models 4-6 are missing 2011 and 2015 because the method of voting wasn't asked.*

Table 2: Satisfaction (Only Voters, With Party Voted for)

	(1) Satisfaction	(2) Confidence	(3) Fairness	(4) Satisfaction	(5) Confidence
Age	-0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02***	0.02***
	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Between $30&$60k	-0.14	0.04	0.34*	0.17	0.14
	0.18	0.18	0.18	0.17	0.11
Between $60 -&$90k	0.06	0.25	0.38**	0.23	0.15
	0.19	0.20	0.19	0.17	0.11
More than $90k	0.31*	0.35*	0.57***	0.44***	0.24**
	0.18	0.20	0.17	0.16	0.10
Completed High School	-0.03	0.20	0.24	0.27	0.25
	0.21	0.20	0.23	0.23	0.23
Some or Completed College	0.16	0.23	0.18	0.21	0.25
	0.20	0.21	0.22	0.21	0.22
Some or Completed University	0.24	0.51**	0.35	0.55***	0.58***
	0.20	0.20	0.22	0.21	0.22
Female	-0.20*	-0.21**	-0.16	-0.26***	-0.31***
	0.11	0.11	0.10	0.09	0.07
Political Interest	0.01	0.09***	-0.01	0.09***	0.06***
	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.01
Voted Liberal	-0.45	0.00	-0.02	0.99***	2.43***
	0.51	0.83	0.46	0.32	0.18
Voted Conservative	-0.32	0.46	-0.23	-0.05	0.99***
	0.50	0.82	0.46	0.32	0.18
Voted NDP	-0.56	-0.24	-0.47	0.69**	1.80***
	0.52	0.81	0.47	0.33	0.19
Voted Bloc Quebecois	-0.80	-0.65	-0.39	0.03	1.54***
	0.52	0.84	0.54	0.36	0.20
Voted Green	-0.96*	-0.14	-0.73	0.65*	1.70***
	0.55	0.84	0.51	0.35	0.26
PE	-0.14	-0.08	-0.13	0.81	-0.25
	0.39	0.34	0.31	0.92	0.62
NS	-0.13	-0.24	-0.09	0.36	-0.52
	0.35	0.36	0.29	0.30	0.45
NB	-0.07	0.02	0.02	0.23	-0.87*
	0.36	0.36	0.33	0.33	0.46
QC	0.14	0.06	-0.39	0.52**	-0.59
	0.28	0.26	0.25	0.26	0.41
ON	0.30	-0.09	-0.01	-0.14	-0.72*
	0.27	0.26	0.25	0.25	0.41
MA	0.35	0.06	-0.45	0.13	-0.41
	0.36	0.34	0.31	0.30	0.44
SK	0.26	-0.19	-0.16	-0.10	-0.36

	0.34	0.30	0.32	0.33	0.45
AL	-0.20	0.21	-0.39	-0.08	-0.55
	0.33	0.36	0.30	0.27	0.42
BC	0.25	-0.15	-0.52*	0.22	-0.49
	0.29	0.29	0.27	0.26	0.42
cut1					
_cons	-3.36***	-2.24**	-3.40***	-0.69	-0.64
	0.66	0.90	0.63	0.50	0.52
cut2					
_cons	-1.80***	-0.86	-1.80***	0.77	0.94*
	0.65	0.90	0.60	0.49	0.52
cut3					
_cons	0.76	1.96**	1.05*	3.84***	3.88***
	0.66	0.90	0.60	0.50	0.53
N	1615	1784	2185	3526	6085

Reference categories: Income – Under $30k, Education – Less than High School, Province – NFLD (Respondents from the Territories are dropped from these analyses due to low response rates); Party – Other (including People's Party); Voting method – In person election day voting; Year - 2008. *Models 4-6 are missing 2011 and 2015 because the method of voting wasn't asked.*

Response to Public Perceptions of Electoral Management in Canada

Natalie Adona, *Assistant County Clerk-Recorder/Registrar of Voters, County of Nevada, California*[1]

In this piece, Holly Ann Garnett and Edward Leibel examine public opinion of Elections Canada, the electoral management body (EMB) responsible for administering federal elections. Using five elections' worth of public opinion surveys, Garnett and Leibel measure trust in Elections Canada in terms of public confidence, satisfaction, and perceptions of fairness. The authors successfully show that Canadians have high levels of trust in their EMB, with some differences based on age, gender, wealth, education, and political interest.

Unlike many American voter confidence surveys, which mostly center around confidence in national election outcomes, Garnett and Leibel's study focuses specifically on confidence, satisfaction, and perceptions of fairness of Elections Canada itself. While past surveys have offered a useful way to gauge the overall health of democracy and may offer some important insights into election administration, as a practitioner, I find that focusing on trust in a specific administrative body is potentially more helpful. Having public feedback on organizational performance may provide those who manage elections offices with a baseline on how their constituents experience services.

While Garnett and Leibel's paper makes an important contribution to voter confidence scholarship, I wanted more discussion around why Canadian respondents reported high levels of confidence, high satisfaction, and perceived Elections Canada as fair and how this EMB could help other election offices. What is it about the administrative process of elections that makes Elections Canada so highly trusted? What were the reasons that 15-30 percent of respondents report low levels of trust in the organization? Why are women more skeptical of Elections Canada? Are Canadians susceptible to the same kinds of misinformation and disinformation that Americans are? While the authors may have been limited by the survey data, as someone who oversees elections in my office, those details matter.

I was also left wanting more discussion around the notion that public perceptions of Elections Canada in 2021 may have been influenced by "electoral fraud rhetoric from the United States after the contentious 2020 Presidential election." A slight drop in trust was reported in 2021, but there was no discussion about how closely the Canadian electorate was following American elections coverage, or how misinformation in the 2020 US Presidential election affected Elections Canada in 2021. I encourage the authors to elaborate on that point, and to also consider the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and any resulting changes in election conduct, on voter trust. Most, if not all, jurisdictions that administered elections during the pandemic had to make dramatic but necessary changes to the ways in which people voted. Some voters were resistant to change, and some might have associated changes resulting from the pandemic with the election outcome. While it is possible that some of the "electoral fraud rhetoric" referred to could include misinformation about COVID-19, I encourage further studies into the impact that the pandemic had on election administration in Canada and the Canadian voter experience.

---

[1] In addition to her work in Nevada County, Natalie also serves as co-chair for the California Secretary of State's Ballot Design Advisory Committee, is an Advisory Board Member for the Election Official Legal Defense Network, and is a member of the Bipartisan Policy Center Elections Task Force.

Response to Public Perceptions of Electoral Management in Canada

Brianna Lennon, *Boone County Clerk, Missouri*[1]

Over the past two years it has become increasingly difficult for election administrators to accurately measure voters' perceptions of their offices and the overall public confidence in our elections. Threats, harassment, and political pressure in the elections space stemming from the 2020 Presidential election have captured national attention, but as election officials do the daily bureaucratic work of administering elections, it is hard to tell whether these narratives signal widespread public distrust of local offices. Historically, trust in local government[2] has outpaced trust in state and federal government, in part because of officials' proximity to constituents as members of the same community. Over time, local election officials have internalized the idea that voters are more likely to trust them than state or national election offices, but the reality of threats and harassment[3] against election administrators undermines that sense of confidence. We are at a crossroads as election officials plan for midterm elections this year—preparing to combat misinformation that we know is spreading through the country—but having little empirical data to determine exactly how pervasive civic distrust has become in our own communities.

With that challenge in mind, *Public Perceptions of Electoral Management in Canada* offers insight for practitioners into how voters may be feeling about local election offices. Importantly, the authors also note that "voter turnout has a strong correlation with the administrative quality"[4] of the election office. As we aim to build trust, confidence, and civic participation within our communities, voters must first believe that their election offices are run well and with integrity. *Public Perceptions* looks intentionally at that issue by digging into what impacts voters' confidence and satisfaction in the administration of the election.

The central tenet of *Public Perceptions* is that trust in election offices is necessary for a healthy democracy, which should not surprise any election administrator in the United States. However, there are limitations to the authors' work that will encourage American practitioners to look at specific results with a skeptical eye.

First, this research is exclusive to Elections Canada, which is highly centralized federal agency with a long and formalized bureaucratic history. Elections Canada performs many of the same electoral duties as local election authorities in the United States, but it does not have an equivalent counterpart in American federal government. The lack of decentralization means that voters are likely to have a consistent and similar voting experience across the country unlike in the United States. Second, the authors find that partisanship is not nearly as relevant in Canada than I suspect it is in the United States; in fact, the study reported a voter's supported party has no bearing on their confidence, perception of fairness, or satisfaction in Elections Canada. Finally, this study could not take voters' race into account, which is especially problematic.[5] Any study that would be appropriately extrapolated to the United States would need to take into account the history of racially-motivated voter

---

[1] In addition to her work in the Boone County Clerk's Office, Brianna is also the co-host and co-founder of High Turnout Wide Margins.

[2] https://news.gallup.com/poll/243563/americans-trusting-local-state-government.aspx

[3] https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/10/election-officials-exhausted-under-threat-00015850

[4] *Perceptions*, page 2.

[5] Public Perceptions, Footnote 2.

suppression and the intersection between race and voting in any discussion about trust in election offices.

Ultimately, this work tells us that voters are generally satisfied and confident in Elections Canada, but it stops short of making recommendations for how to increase trust so that even more voters have a better experience. American elections are uniquely decentralized, partisan, and burdened with a long history of exclusion based on race. Anecdotally, these three elements play a large role in voter trust in elections so it is imperative that they are included in future research that could help us gain a more accurate and nuanced view of how voters feel about our offices. Finally, as we move further from 2020, it would be helpful revisit this survey as the authors note that confidence, satisfaction, and the perception of fairness in Elections Canada remains high but dipped in 2021.

Despite these critiques, *Public Perceptions* serves as an important reminder to practitioners that voter opinion is not homogenous: variables like age, gender, income, education level, and political interest all play a role whether voters see election offices as fair and trustworthy. Voters will interpret the messages and actions of local election offices differently, so we need a multi-faceted approach for building trust in our communities. This lesson is important for practitioners to keep in mind as they plan voter education campaigns, assign polling places, or recruit staff.