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blending theory and practice
to advance the field

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Reflections on Practice
Research & Policy Briefs
Book and Product Reflections

# Editorial Team



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**A Partnership of the Institute for Election Administration, Research & Practice at the National Association of Election Officials**

## Editorial Board

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# Editor's Introduction

Mitchell Brown[1a]

[1] *Auburn University and The Election Center*

Volume 4 of the *Journal of Election Administration, Research and Practice* comes with a series of exciting changes. First and foremost, we are so happy to have hired Brandon Fincher, PhD, as managing editor of the journal to ensure a more seamless experience for writers and readers of *JEARP*. Second, we are also delighted to welcome new members to our editorial team, including Chris Cooper, PhD; Ricky Keech; and Kal Munis, PhD; as well as welcome back David Stafford. Third, we are sad to have lost Kathleen Hale, JD, PhD, as co-editor of the journal but welcome her important leadership as executive director of the Election Center.

In this issue, we continue our commitment to publishing articles that lift up important issues in the field of election administration from the perspectives of practitioners and researchers involved in the policy world. We start with two framing pieces. The first, is a summary of a new online book developed in conjunction between the National Conference of State Legislatures and the U.S. Election Assistance Commission on the state of election administration today. The second piece considers whether and how survey research about election administration, in this case election threat surveys, confuses respondents.

We then hear from election officials about their experiences as practitioners with cross-cutting issues. In the first reflection piece, Corinne Duncan tells the story of how her jurisdiction in North Carolina responded to Hurricane Helene. This reflection piece is first in a planned series of reflections we will include in upcoming regular issues on how the field responds to emergencies, crises, and unanticipated events. This series reflects an intentional commitment on the part of the editorial team to lift up regularly the voices of election officials who have had to navigate major disasters and problems. We believe these reflections will help us all better understand and prepare ourselves for future emergencies. In the second reflection piece, Fred DeCaro considers his experience and that of another local election office across the country in accepting private funding to support the work that these election offices do. He raises important issues about public scrutiny, harassment of election officials, and ultimately what the funds are actually used to accomplish.

In our research section, we include four articles written about a number of important issues for election officials, voters, and the state of democratic functioning more generally. One considers the impact of partisan election

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administration on representatives of independents and minor parties. Another considers voters with disabilities and trust in the electoral process. We also include a piece examining Facebook usage and its impact on school bond elections, as well as another examining correlates of polling place disruptions. Following each of these pieces, we print practitioner responses to them. We continue this practice because our initial and ongoing goals for the journal are to enhance dialogue and understanding between the research and practitioner communities with the stated purpose of improving both. Finally, we conclude with a review of Michael McDonald's important book examining the 2020 election.

Our approach to providing this journal as a dialogue among practitioners, policy makers, advocates, and researchers comes at a cost. It is a time-consuming and slow process to attract and develop this content. We encourage readers who are interested in writing for future issues to reach out and volunteer your viewpoints and experiences, and we want to express our deep appreciation for those who have done so thus far.

# New Book Describes How U.S. Elections Work

Wendy Underhill[1a]

[1] *National Conference of State Legislatures*

How do elections work in the United States? Until recently, the answer was mostly, "according to state law—and state laws vary."

While true, that wasn't much help to journalists, policymakers or the voting public—and that answer focused on differences, not commonalities. Now, *Helping America Vote: Election Administration in the U.S.*, a new publication from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), gives a more complete answer, acknowledging differences while following the throughline connecting all states.

The title plays off the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA), the most recent major federal legislation to address elections. HAVA created the EAC, established voluntary guidelines for voting equipment, provided grants to states to replace older voting equipment, and set a requirement for statewide voter registration databases.

Even though federal laws such as HAVA—and a handful of earlier laws—matter, "Elections are a state responsibility; the constitution is clear on that," said Tim Storey, NCSL's chief executive officer. "No wonder then that election procedures vary across the states and territories. It is impossible to give a single answer to how elections work without diving deep into details."

The 190-page *Helping America Vote* does not attempt to provide a deep dive on everything. Instead, it is a primer, offering a general overview of what election administrators do from start to finish. "*Helping America Vote* is a great resource for the most fundamental and best practices across the country," said Commissioner Don Palmer, one of the four EAC commissioners. "If you are interested in audits, go to the audit chapter. You'll find plenty of ideas. The same with any other question. There's a chapter on it."

The first chapter addresses governance structures for elections, which fit two big categories at the state level. Either a single elected official—usually a secretary of state—is in charge or a board or commission. It is similar at the local level. In most states a local elected official oversees elections, and in other states, a local board—often with an appointed director—is in charge. *Helping America Vote* provides links throughout the book to websites at NCSL, the EAC, and elsewhere that give the "deep dive" details of each state's governance. Why does the book not

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a Wendy Underhill served as the director of elections and redistricting for the National Conference of State Legislatures.

include the details? Because they can and do change. One example is in 2025 North Carolina changed who appoints the executive director of its State Board of Elections from the governor to the state auditor.

After chapter 1, the book addresses virtually every step of running elections, starting with how electoral districts and precincts are created and maintained in chapter 2.[1] Reprecincting is required everywhere, but who does it and how often it is done varies.

Next comes candidate filing in chapter 3. This task is often ignored in policy debates and workshops for local election officials. And yet, precision here is just as important as precision in the counting of votes. Candidates and the media will notice any errors, so finetuning both the timelines and processes is critical. Another reason this oft-ignored step matters is ballots cannot be designed until it is known who is running for office. In fact, ballot design comes next in chapter 4. Again, this step is often ignored so long as all is running smoothly. While the word "design" sounds artsy, in most places ballot design is all about precision programming, as in are the right candidates listed in the right order for the right offices?

Voter registration is NOT ignored by policymakers and the media. *Helping America Vote* devotes two chapters to registration, chapter 5 on how registrations are done and chapter 6 on voter registration list maintenance. Just as with the earlier chapters, the book offers broad strokes, and changeable details are available through resources offered in each chapter. Here, and throughout the book, the concept is to offer a new secretary of state, executive director of a local election board, state legislator, congressional member or staffer, or a reporter a solid overview, so they can see their own state's practices in context. One key point on this topic is registration is ongoing all year long—unlike defining precincts, candidate filing, or voting.

Voter outreach also can take place throughout the year as demonstrated in chapter 7. Providing accurate voter information about where, when, and how to vote is a key function for election officials, and state law often sets minimum requirements. As for outreach, some election officials see it as their responsibility. Others are just as clear that their job is to run an accurate election and that when "outreach" veers toward getting out the vote, it is outside their wheelhouse.

Three chapters are devoted to the act of voting itself. The first, chapter 8, focuses on in-person voting. Those who have been in the elections profession understand that in-person voting can take place on election day but also is common during an early voting period, depending on state law. People who are new to the field will be glad to know that these two options have a lot in common but also some distinctions. For instance, voting during the early voting period is much more likely to be available in

1 One could argue that elections begin with redistricting, but the political tussle over the once-in-a-decade line-drawing of congressional and legislative districts is beyond the purview of this book, and election officials are glad to have little to do with that process. See NCSL's "Redistricting Law: 2020" https://www.ncsl.org/redistricting-and-census/redistricting-law-2020 for legal details, and "Into the Thicket: A Redistricting Starter Kit for Legislative Staff" https://www.ncsl.org/redistricting-and-census/redistricting-starter-kit for a procedural overview.

fewer locations but with all voters from the jurisdiction voting at any of them, whereas election day voting is mostly—but not exclusively—conducted at precinct-specific polling places.

Chapter 9 is centered on absentee and mail voting. The terms "absentee voting" and "mail voting" are often used interchangeably, and every state has some version of this available. The question is can all voters request to vote an absentee— or mail— ballot, or can only those who have circumstances that make in-person voting difficult vote by mail? As with so much else, this chapter identifies the policy considerations that govern this practice, leaving the specific, "How many states do this?" and, "How many states do that?" to the linked resources.

Chapter 10 concentrates on mostly mail voting. More than a handful of states have adopted a voting model where every active voter receives a ballot in the mail. Some might call it "absentee voting for all," others "vote by mail," and still others "mail-in voting." Newcomers will learn how this is distinct from the ubiquitous absentee voting discussed previously and that in-person voting remains an option in these states, too.

Voter ID itself is the basis of chapter 11 because both the policy choices and implementation are complex. Voter registration, which takes place before voting, is the first step in identifying a voter. In this process, eligibility, age, and residency are confirmed, and citizenship is attested to—and often confirmed through state efforts to crosscheck data. Yet, the phrase "voter ID" refers to what a voter is asked to show at a polling place to receive a ballot. The takeaway is all states use some kind of identity check, but the methods vary from asking voters to state their name and address—which are then confirmed in the poll book, electronic or otherwise—or show an ID with a photo on it.

Voters are not the only people in the polling place. Election officials and poll workers are there, too. Chapter 12 addresses qualifications, selection processes, training, and compensation for the people who are on the front lines of democracy. It should come as no surprise that norms and processes vary state to state, and even jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but the broad brush shows that all states work to ensure impartial management of accurate elections.

In times of old, "voting technology" consisted of a lever machine or a punch card. Now, technology includes not only the voting equipment utilized to tally the votes but also many forms of ancillary equipment, as discussed in chapter 13. The EAC provides voluntary voting system guidelines that election technology providers use when designing their products. States often use these guidelines but may have their own processes as well. Like reprecincting and candidate filing, the role technology plays in elections is usually overlooked until something goes wrong and headlines are written.

Candidates and the media always pay attention to election results, and how they are reported is critical as described in chapter 14. Timeliness does matter but not as much as accuracy. Results are collated from various streams of ballots at the local

level and transmitted to the state level, although details of these processes, of course, vary. Most states now have user-friendly online interfaces. The key takeaway is that what is reported on election night is unofficial and only becomes official after procedures are reviewed and, in some cases, results are audited.

Chapter 15 on post-election audit processes; chapter 16 on canvassing, certification, and election contests; and chapter 17 on recounts all address post-voting procedures. *Helping America Vote* describes policy choices and implementation considerations for each topic but primarily makes it clear that dotting I's and crossing T's is essential to both identifying areas for improvement and ensuring the public that the election was conducted according to law and produced trustworthy results.

How and when elections take place, covered in chapter 18, has changed over time. A century ago, elections for various entities happened many times throughout the year. The trend has been toward fewer election days, often combining dates for some or all local elections, school board elections, special district elections, primary elections, and state elections. However, federal law dictates federal elections are held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years. Having multiple small elections run concurrently has some benefits, especially for the voter, while creating longer ballots and more administrative complexity.

Finally, chapter 19 addresses a particular category of voters: those who are in the military or live overseas. Clearly, in-person voting is not an option for these American citizens. Federal law provides clarity on when ballots must be provided to these voters—starting 45 days before election day to give time for twice sending the ballots across the globe—but leaves the details up to the states.

To balance the reference book style, each of the 19 chapters has an interview with an election official who brings that topic to life. Reading just the interviews is worthwhile, possibly even fun. Common threads from these interviews? Election officials will make anything happen that lawmakers want to have happen. They just need time and resources. And they will do their work outside the reach of politics. They focus on "what can work not for your party and not for my party but for the American people," EAC Commissioner Tom Hicks reports.

The audience? NCSL and the EAC believe those who are new to election administration at the local or state levels will benefit from the broad overview. The same is true for state lawmakers and even members of Congress or their staff. The media can benefit as well as anyone else who needs to know about the processes used to run accurate, secure, and accessible elections in the U.S. With that in mind, *Helping America Vote* is 100 percent descriptive and 0 percent prescriptive. For state-by-state data, NCSL and the EAC both provide up-to-the-minute resources that can and are changed as states adjust their processes.

# Election Threat Surveys Pose Confusing Syntax

Frank Dunphy[1a]

[1] *Chatham County, North Carolina*

## Introduction

Media reports discussing the safety of local election officials (LEOs) and the frequency with which they face threats from the public have become commonplace in recent years. Surveys of election officials are often cited in their reporting as evidence of these threats. Since 2021, at least seven surveys have included questions attempting to measure threats directed toward election workers – four by the Brennan Center for Justice and three by Reed College's Elections and Voting Information Center. (Brennan Center for Justice 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024; EVIC/ Reed College 2022; Gronke and Manson 2023, 2025). The surveys' conclusions have become part of the extended public discourse as benchmarks translatable to the nationwide pool of election workers.

It can be problematic if survey conclusions cannot be validated, are ambiguous, or are possibly inflated. This may create false media leads and not accurately translate to the universe of LEOs. Disturbingly, uncritical consumers may accept conclusions, quote them, and act on them. Unscrutinized conclusions may be disseminated, circulated, and recirculated as fact in the mass media. A recent example is a story that inserted a conclusion from the 2024 Brennan survey, that "38 percent of LEOs reported experiencing threats, harassment, or abuse." The same content by the same author was recirculated by at least two different outlets on two subsequent days. The effect was a three-day publishing cycle of the same story for public consumption by three different outlets. (Graham 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). This article reviews the body of posted survey data addressing threats directed against LEOs. Lack of question consistency and syntax ambiguity will be identified. This paper proposes survey questionnaires should provide more clarity and consider standardizing syntax.

## Public Survey Data

Applying a Google.com internet search, seven publicly available surveys were identified that reported threats directed toward LEOs. Detailed search methods are provided in the appendix. The four Brennan questionnaires—from 2021 through 2024—were online email invitations. The reported number of respondents were 233, 596, 852, and 928, respectively. The 2023 and 2024 surveys averaged about one response for every ten surveys sent. Compiled results were posted online. Questions about election threats were wide-ranging and included topics such as emotional

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feelings, opinions, secondhand knowledge about co-workers and acquaintances, and firsthand experiences. Questions probed the method of perceived threats including in-person, telephone, email, social media, U.S. mail, swatting, and bad-faith Freedom of Information Act requests. Furthermore, questions probed respondents' opinions about whether perceived threats impaired recruitment or contributed to LEO resignations. The 2022, 2023, 2024 questionnaires noted approximately half of threats—46 percent, 55 percent, and 54 percent, respectively—were reported to law enforcement (Brennan Center for Justice 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024).

The three Reed College questionnaires—from 2022 through 2024—were online email invitations with follow-up, paper-mailed inquiries to non-responders. The reported number of respondents were 912, 886, and 659, respectively. These surveys averaged about one response for every four surveys sent. Analytical methods, sample size, questionnaires, and compiled results were posted online. Questions about election threats included the same general topics as the Brennan questionnaires. (EVIC/Reed College 2022; Gronke and Manson 2023, 2025)

Table 1 depicts a compilation of selected questions from all seven surveys. The table segregates syntax that comingled terms—such as abuse, harassment, unsafe, intimidation, concern—that describe hostility or emotional distress from syntax dedicated to the term "threatened" as a single descriptor. Additionally, it segregates syntax asking about secondhand knowledge from firsthand experience. Overall, the result of comingled nouns or emotional opinion resulted in a higher percentage—mean 38 percent—and wider variability—range 19-77 percent—of respondents reporting either threatening comingled terms, distressed emotions, distressed opinion, or secondhand knowledge of another LEO who quit due to fear. However, the analysis is much different if the questions restrict syntax dedicated to the term "threatened" or restrict fear to firsthand experience contributing to consideration of quitting. When the aforementioned restrictions are employed, considerably fewer respondents reported threats or firsthand experience contributing to considering quitting—mean of 14 percent—and there was much tighter variability—range 11-17 percent.

## Discussion of the Survey Findings

The findings reported in these seven surveys are subject to limitations. First, the entire dataset of the surveys should be available to enable the reader to critically validate conclusions. The four Brennan reports failed to display its datasets in the level of detail that the Reed College reports displayed. The Reed College reports included links to review its data including the questionnaire instrument, cross tabulations and a codebook.

Second, survey compliance was incomplete. There was only an 8 percent response rate for two of the reported Brennan surveys, which lowers confidence that these results are representative of the general LEO population. In contrast, the Reed College surveys observed an approximately twofold to threefold better average compliance rate of approximately 25 percent with a range of 21-29 percent. The low response rate of the Brennan surveys raises the question of if there is a high enough

**Table 1. Syntax Reported by Seven Surveys**

| Survey | Year | n / N | Method | Comingled Nouns or Emotional Opinion | Result (%) | Nouns not Comingled, Firsthand Reported | Result (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brennan | 2021 | 233 / NA | Online | Concerned about Unsafe/ Harassment | 30 | Been Threatened ^ | *17* |
| Brennan | 2022 | 596 / NA | Online | Feel Threats Have Increased | 77 | Been Threatened ^ | 17 |
| Brennan | 2023 | 852 / 10,974 | Online | Been Harassed/ Abused but not Threatened | 19 | Been Threatened ^ | 11 * |
| Brennan | 2024 | 928 / 11,678 | Online | Been Abused/ Harassed/ Threatened | 38 ^* | Been Threatened ^ | 16 ^* |
| Reed | 2022 | 912 / 3118 | Online/ Paper Survey | Experienced Abuse/ Harassment/ Threats ^^ | 25 | NA | NA |
| Reed | 2023 | 886 / 3106 | Online | Secondhand Knowledge LEO who Quit *` | 31 | Considered Quitting *^ | 11 |
| Reed | 2024 | 659 / 3105 | Online/ Paper Survey | Secondhand Knowledge LEO who Quit *` | 48 | Considered Quitting *^ | 14 |
| **Mean [Range]** | | | | | 38 [19-77] | | 14 [11-17] |

Abbreviations/Symbols: n, Number of survey Responders; N, Total number of surveys sent; NA, Not Available; ^, firsthand experience "as result of your job;" *, 11 percent could represent a purer result because syntax of harassment/abuse were filtered into a different question; ^*, conflicting data on web page [36 percent harassed/abused + 16 percent threatened = 52 percent, third vertical column on webpage depicted an unverifiable 38 percent as Abused/Harassed/Threatened]; ^^, in past 2 years; LEO, Local Election Official; *`, due to fear about feeling unsafe/Threats/Intimidation; *^, quitting is an actionable and measurable endpoint due to firsthand reporting of intrinsic fear of feeling Unsafe/Threats/Intimidation.

response rate to represent the thoughts and experiences of the entire LEO population with a high level of confidence. Survey results may not translate to the national general pool of LEOs if the non-responders represent a fundamentally different majority of LEOs (Gronke and Manson 2023, page 7; U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2021). One possibility is that responders may represent an enriched self-selected subset motivated by threatening experiences and may, therefore, be more likely to exert the labor to report it.

Confusing question syntax also makes comprehension problematic. Comingling the noun "threats" with five other "fear-related" terms—abuse, harassment, unsafe, intimidation, concern—and asking for secondhand information may have inflated the responses that were classified as "threats." The five aforementioned terms are subjective, difficult to measure, and, if used casually, become cliché and irrelevant. The fifth and sixth columns of Table 1 depict questions using comingled nouns, emotional opinion, and secondhand knowledge resulting in an overall high incidence of threats with an implausible variation between the lowest and highest range, i.e., a mean of 38 percent with a range of 19-77 percent. In contrast, as depicted in the seventh and eighth columns of Table 1, when questions are asked using terms that are not comingled or are asking respondents for firsthand information, responses that were classified as "threats" were much lower with a more plausible range, i.e., a mean of 14 percent with a range of 11-17 percent. The tighter range indicates smaller variability, fewer extreme outliers, and implies a purer interpretation of threats with consequently greater reproducibility.

Secondhand information is hearsay, invalid, and should not be reported. An uninterpretable example asked in both Brennan and Reed Surveys reads, "Do you personally know of any LEOs or election workers who have left their jobs at least in part because of fear for their safety, increased threats, or intimidation?" (Brennan Center for Justice 2023; Gronke and Manson 2025). It likely is impossible to comprehend this question. The unsystematic phrase, "Do you personally know of," requires a secondhand value judgement about another person's fear. The phrase "in part" requires a secondhand value judgement about a fraction of another person's fear. A third secondhand judgement is required to mentally combine how each contributed to a LEO's decision to quit work. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, this is like asking the responder to solve "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." It is best to report only firsthand experience, but even firsthand experience can be unreliable and unquantifiable because intrinsic bias influences interpretation. One offensive behavior may be hyperbolically reported as a "firsthand threat" while a second respondent may dismiss the same offense as "he was just having a bad day." In the former instance, the offense will be reported, and in the latter, it would never be reported.

Survey conclusions have significantly impacted the public discourse. The four Brennan surveys at least partially initiated a flurry of derivative web posts and meetings (Autrey 2021; Bipartisan Policy Center, Brennan Center, and Ash Center 2021; Brennan Center for Justice and Bipartisan Policy Center 2021; Elden and Norden 2024; Miller and Weiser 2023; Parks 2022). The unverified conclusion of "30 percent concerned about threats" leveraged an emphatic debate that initiated action plans. Furthermore, Reed College conclusions have been reported to the public via print and broadcast media (Bipartisan Policy Center, Brennan Center, and Ash Center 2021; Brennan Center for Justice and Bipartisan Policy Center 2021; Draeger 2023; Parks 2024; Shumway 2022).

This review analyzed seven surveys focusing on reported election worker threats and demonstrated that there is a lack of consistency and confusing syntax in questionnaires resulting in a likely inflated average of 38 percent reported incidence of threats occurring. The truth is that firsthand threat incidence is more likely halved at an average of 14 percent. Furthermore, since survey conclusions are cited in public discourse and disseminated, circulated, and recirculated in mass media, it is important to attempt to define what is being described as a threat. To create clarity, terms that describe hostility should not be comingled into the same question. Questionnaires could include a definition for the terms used as the descriptor in the proposed question. Furthermore, some form of minimum standards for questionnaires may help distinguish between a bona fide threat and a frivolous gesture.

Minimum standards may improve analysis and reporting. This author suggests that objectivity from a common set of facts may be a better standard. Asking LEOs about actions taken in response to firsthand threats could meet a minimum standard. Actionable conduct concerning responding to firsthand threats could include installing security equipment in the office or voting space; notifying police and generating police reports; and quitting work subsequent to receiving a threat. Applying actionable conduct may create a measurable point of reference and objective benchmark. Actionable conduct may serve as a surrogate for bona fide firsthand threats and filter out secondhand hearsay. Furthermore, actionable conduct may be more reproducible across jurisdictions and, thus, be more applicable to the nationwide general pool of LEOs.

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## Appendix: Search Methods; Seven Surveys Identified

A: A general search for publications was conducted at Chatham Community Library in Pittsboro, North Carolina. The library's online database, NC Live.org, was used to search for publications using a database titled ProQuest. A search was conducted for scholarly reports of hostility directed toward elections officials. Search terms included "Election Workers threats United States" and "Election Workers intimidation United States." Search filters were set for "scholarly journals," "2020-2029," "elections," "United States – US," and "English." The search was limited to "full text," "peer reviewed," and "English language." No results were discovered.

B: A specific search via Google.com for "Brennan Center for Justice, Benenson Strategy Group's survey" was conducted. It resulted in four Brennan Center for Justice website posts, the 2021 Brennan survey PowerPoint posting of 8 pages downloadable in .pdf format; a 2022 Brennan Survey PowerPoint posting of 24 pages downloadable in .pdf format; a 2023 Brennan Survey PowerPoint posting of 29 pages downloadable in .pdf format; and a 2024 Brennan Survey PowerPoint posting of 33 pages downloadable in .pdf format. Request via telephone and publicized web page contact resulted in the 2021 questionnaire forwarded for review. There was no response to multiple telephone and email requests for the 2022, 2023, and 2024 questionnaires; methods; sampling; or raw data. (Brennan Center for Justice 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024)

C: A specific search via Google.com for "Reed College surveys" was conducted that revealed a website posting displaying six Reed College surveys from 2018-2024. The 2022, 2023, and 2024 surveys were included in this analysis because their respective questionnaires contained self-reporting of perceived threats. Each of the three included links to downloadable reports titled "Summary;" "Who are the Stewards;" "Workload and Staffing;" "New Environment of Threats, Harassment, and Abuse;" "Methodology;" "Sampling;" "Methods;" "Codebook;" "Crosstabs;" and "Questionnaire" (EVIC/Reed College 2022; Gronke and Manson 2023, 2025).

# Come Helene and High Water: Reflections on a Post-Disaster Election

Corinne Duncan[1a]

[1] *Buncombe County, North Carolina*

Catastrophic flooding. This phrase was repeated over and over at the county's emergency briefing. It was a Thursday evening, and all day long Tropical Storm Helene had brought heavy rain. More was on the way. The county would close its offices on Friday. As I sat at a red light on my way home, the word "catastrophic" echoed in my head, and as the water rose around me, so did my fear of drowning. I recalled learning about the region's 1916 flood while volunteering for the local nonprofit RiverLink years ago. There was a high-water mark painted on their building in the River Arts District, and I had often wondered what it was like to see the riverbanks bursting like that. I would soon find out.

Buncombe County is the largest jurisdiction in western North Carolina (WNC). We are 660 beautiful square miles of waterways, forest, steep slopes, and tight communities. Our office is in the heart of downtown Asheville, and I live just two miles away in the River Arts District. I was home when the flood peaked, taking with it houses, entire business districts, and—sadly—lives. It happened differently for everyone. For me the power went out first, then cell service, and then water. The quiet amidst the massive damage was surreal. For days we only knew what we could see, but as we made contact with others, it became apparent that the scale of our situation was larger than imagined. The highways were closed, gas stations empty, trees were down everywhere, and power lines lay in the water. I started to hear about landslides from here to Tennessee.

Some chose to evacuate, while others had no choice but to go. It was a time of uncertainty. It was also late September, just three weeks before early voting was to begin for the 2024 presidential election. From the perspective of an election official, the top priorities were personal safety, community stabilization, and ensuring access to voting. There was an election to run, and we knew our responsibility.

The day after the storm I made my way to the office, and one other staff member was there. What a relief to see someone! The next day, a Sunday, I was greeted by a few more staff members, and by Tuesday we were able to account for nearly everyone. I will never forget my team piled up in my office working together to find, make provisions for, and comfort each other. The heart and dedication shown by

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a Corinne Duncan serves as the director of elections for Buncombe County Election Services.

these election officials still brings tears to my eyes. It is also what allowed us to get to work so quickly. From the beginning we could confidently reassure our community that voting would take place.

Though we were not prepared for a crisis of this scale, we were at the table with a mindset for connection and creative thinking. In 2022, Election Services and Emergency Services staff began working together on an incident action plan. Relationship building and psychological resiliency were the focal points of this planning, and both proved critical in compassionately overcoming the multitude of challenges we had to face.

Through years of meetings and tabletop exercises, we knew whom to call for what and had an idea of what pressures our partners in local government were facing. They all truly rose to the occasion. Even when we were unable to contact each other, we knew the election was on their radar. Poll workers stepped up. Staff from other county departments joined elections operations to support the increased demand for absentee-by-mail voting and assessing voting locations. The North Carolina State Board of Elections organized with State Emergency Management even before most WNC counties could be contacted. They brought temporary voting structures, portable restrooms, water, and access to the internet. Radio became the most practical means of communicating, and stations combined efforts to broadcast briefings at a reliable cadence. People listened from their cars everywhere. Local and state geospatial teams shared data and created real-time maps. Fire departments assisted in identifying usable facilities, and shuttles from shelters to voting locations were established. These are just a few examples of the solutions made possible by preparing and connecting.

One challenge was knowing when to begin communicating to voters about the election. Health and safety still took precedence, and information about shelter, food, and water was the priority. Ultimately, it was voters themselves that asked us to start talking. Being able to vote was so important that they were knocking on the office door just days after the flood asking whether the election would go on. At a community briefing on October 7, we acknowledged the serious situation and assured the community they had a team that would bring them an election. Come Helene and high water, the voice of WNC would be heard.

The result of these efforts was that in a remarkably short time new voting locations were found, voting plans were revamped, and information was effectively distributed to voters. This would not have been possible without previous relationship development and strategies learned for remaining levelheaded under pressure. In the end the community was reassured that voting would go on, and it did in numbers in which WNC should take pride. In fact, the region edged out the rest of the state in voter turnout.

This event tested us, but it did not break us. We are grateful we were able to prioritize contingency planning and that we had the support of others. Our advice is to take emergency preparedness seriously. Use it to build relationships and devise

ways to communicate without technology. If crisis strikes, prioritize the wellbeing of your team, and give them the safety and agency to inventively solve problems. This community demonstrated that we could count on each other to join forces in difficult times. We overcame and so would you. This is the spirit of America.

# Reflections on Private Funding of Elections

Fred DeCaro[1a]

[1] *Greenwich, Connecticut*

The April 2024 acceptance by California's Shasta County Board of Supervisors of a $1.5 million Alliance for Election Excellence grant from the Center for Technology and Civic Life marked a complete reversal of fortune in what had been a multiyear journey filled with misinformation, false accusations, and general chaos surrounding the issuance and acceptance of grants for election administration.

The Shasta County example is of great interest because the same board of supervisors voted to eliminate the use of electronic tabulators more than two years ago, insisting future elections be hand-counted. Less than 60 days before Shasta County would have had to execute on this scheme, California's state legislature stepped in and passed Assembly Bill 969 to prevent hand counting on such a large scale and limiting hand counts to elections with fewer than 5,000 voters and only in certain circumstances. A good portion of the $1.5 million grant went toward the expenses associated with the cancellation of the original tabulator contract and the costs of a new contract. This is an unfortunate waste of money when you consider how much value could have been derived from that grant to provide a balanced blend of additional security and accessibility measures.

At almost the same latitude 2,900 miles to the east, in my own jurisdiction of Greenwich, Connecticut, a similar story played out. Connecticut does not have county government, and elections are administered at the municipal level. Two co-equal registrars of voters representing the two major parties work together to register voters, hire poll workers, administer elections, and certify the results. The successful collaboration of admittedly partisan individuals working together on a bipartisan basis is among the reasons we were selected as an example of excellence in the field. As one of the first 10 members of the Centers for Election Excellence, as chosen by the U.S. Alliance for Election Excellence, we were pleased and surprised when we found out this designation would also come with a $500,000 grant.

It is important to note the initial applications for membership in the Alliance for Election Excellence made no mention of grants. Our desire to join was because we enjoy sharing best practices and learning from others across the country. Anticipating the addition of early voting to our duties in 2024 and adjustments to absentee ballot eligibility in 2025, we were excited to learn from others who had already administered elections with these opportunities.

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a Fred DeCaro has served as the Greenwich Republican Registrar of Voters since 2009. He holds the CERA designation and has a certificate in election administration from the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs. He also serves on the board of directors of the Registrars of Voters Association of Connecticut.

As is part of the normal process for the acceptance of any unanticipated gifts or grants, we put the matter on the agenda for the 230-member nonpartisan Greenwich Representative Town Meeting (RTM). The RTM is a unique successor to the traditional New England town meeting. As Greenwich grew to a large town of 60,000 people, having everyone come together annually for debates on ordinances and the town budget became unworkable. The RTM was instituted to keep the tradition alive through robust debate with a low barrier to entry. These 230 representatives provide a diversity of expertise and opinions.

As soon as the grant was published on the RTM's agenda, I received a stunning series of phone calls. I was asked if I had run the acceptance of this grant before my local party representatives. The then-chairwoman of the party called me and demanded the withdrawal of the item. I explained that in my 14 years administering elections I had never asked permission or previewed any decision with my party, and my oath of office requires impartiality.

In the few weeks leading up to the vote on the acceptance of the grant, I found myself cut off from communication with people whom I had supported for years. I was removed from private chat groups. Potential candidates were identified and approached to challenge me for my party's nomination. Local "patriot" groups used their blogs to accuse us of accepting a bribe. Freedom of information requests were received from across the country. One of the national parties sent potential talking points to the people challenging the acceptance of the grant proposal. We received an unusual request to participate in an out-of-cycle cybersecurity review, and the cybersecurity firm asked us to discuss the grantor. We were asked if by using grant money for security upgrades we would be required to give the grantor a key.

The RTM passed the measure in a close 104-101 vote. Immediately following the vote, those opposing the grant questioned the accuracy of the tabulation equipment used to conduct the vote. They insisted on a re-vote, which left the acceptance of the grant in limbo for two months until the next meeting. During this time the accuracy of the voting system was criticized, and my fellow registrar and I continued to be pilloried. The grants were referred to as "blood money." Photos of us were doctored and distributed by email. My weight and appearance became fodder for a local blogger. Advocates in other states were using Greenwich as an example of how to make it as uncomfortable as possible to accept this funding. Yet, in a historic vote, the RTM defeated the attempt to rescind the grant's acceptance. The attempt to rescind a vote had only occurred twice before in its 90-year history. Support actually swelled, and the margin of victory went from three votes on the original acceptance to 20 votes on the rejection of the attempt to rescind.

Fast forward to today. After reviewing the actual spending plans for the grant money—which included security cameras, additional secure storage areas, a new handicapped-accessible counter, and the replacement of aging equipment—the Greenwich Board of Finance approved the spending unanimously, and the RTM approved the spending with 180 in favor and five against. A second and third tranche of spending has also been approved.

What has changed? I would attribute the change in attitude in Greenwich and Shasta County to two factors. First, the scrutiny associated with the grants provided an opportunity to provide more education to the public about our process. Shasta County continued to have a robust observation process, and in Greenwich, where observers are limited due to state laws, we created an Election Academy to allow interested individuals to participate in the same training delivered to our poll workers as well as observe logic and accuracy testing and participate in numerous question-and-answer sessions directly with election administrators.

Second, the grants have truly been demonstrated to have no strings attached outside of the requirement that they be spent for the purpose of running elections. The grantor has made no requests for specific actions, suggested no usages for the funding, and offered no hint of influence on how money is spent. Ironically, the same Shasta County supervisor who last year spearheaded the effort to eliminate voting machines in his county recently stated, "[I]t is free money with no strings attached."

Many will say, especially those in places that have banned private donations, that the juice is not worth the squeeze. I can understand that. It is part of the reason why so many colleagues have exited the field of elections. However, as a fiduciary of taxpayer dollars, it is important to remember that we have an obligation to conduct due diligence to ensure purchases best address the needs of the public. Outside pressure should not make independent election officials shut down a process which rightfully belongs in the hands of the policy makers.

# Partisan Election Administration in America: How Major Parties Shut Out Independents and Minor Parties

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Keywords: U.S. elections, election administration, nonpartisan elections, independent voters, electoral codes

ABSTRACT

Little inquiry has focused on how the two major parties have colluded to shut out independents and minor parties throughout the entirety of election administration at the state level. This article examines the electoral codes of all fifty states for policies that restrict independents and minor parties from participating in the U.S. system of election administration. Six categories of restrictions were identified including restrictions around canvassers, poll workers, poll judges, access to voter data, campaign finance laws, and voter registration. To test how these restrictions on participation are related to partisan status, several measures were compiled such as party leaning, measured by presidential votes, congressional votes, and partisan makeup of state legislatures; election supervision; state population; and geographic distribution. This analysis found minor parties and independents face numerous restrictions. Further, the findings indicate that neither Democratic- nor Republican-leaning states, the type of election supervision, state population, or geographic distribution are associated with restrictions that disadvantage independents and minor parties in election administration.

## Introduction

The United States is one of the few democracies in the world in which partisans run the election administration system (Ferrer, Geyn, and Thompson 2024; Gaughan 2017) and is "the only country in the world that elects its elections officials" (Johnson 2022, 3). In other democracies elections are administered by independent commissions or governmental agencies shielded from political influence (Tokaji 2022).

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Historically, the U.S. partisan system has largely worked because, in essence, each party checked the other party's ability to influence election outcomes. As long as states were politically diverse and members of the two major parties acted in good faith, this model functioned – albeit imperfectly (Ferrer, Geyn, and Thompson 2024; Hasen 2005). Two long-term trends in American politics, the increasing numbers of independent and unaffiliated voters and the increasing stratification of states into unified majority control by one of the two major parties, are challenging the partisan parity principle and the two-major-party control of election administration in the states.

The administration of elections in the U.S. is a decentralized and complex system which gives considerable authority to state and local officials (Shanton 2019). As of the 2020 presidential election, the U.S. had 6,460 local election administration jurisdictions (Election Assistance Commission 2021). It is the officials in these local jurisdictions who handle the day-to-day operations of elections where votes are initially counted and canvassed. At the state level, election administration covers a range of logistics including maintaining the statewide voter registration file and ensuring state and federal election laws are followed (Shanton 2019). The result is that no state administers elections in exactly the same way, and there is variation even within states.

Control of election administration by the Democratic and Republican parties is a defining feature of U.S. elections which gives political advantages to each of the two major parties, advantages neither party is keen to relinquish (Gaughan 2017). Partisanship is integrated into every aspect of American election administration. In most states individuals are required to be registered as either a Republican or Democrat to serve on election boards, serve as poll workers, or serve as election judges (NCSL, n.d.-b). According to Howard (2020), "[M]ultiple states incorporate balanced partisan representation into various layers of the election administration process," which, in theory, serves to check the other party's ability to tinker with the balance of election outcomes (para. 8). However, the core purpose of political parties is to win elections. At every juncture, when permitted to do so, the parties design rules to ensure the other party is not advantaged and to shut out minor parties and independents from participating in the election administration system.

At the top of the U.S. election system is the Federal Election Commission (FEC), an independent regulatory agency created to encourage nonpartisan decisions in its efforts to administer campaign finance law (Federal Election Commission, n.d., para. 3). The six members of the Commission are appointed by the president, after approval by each party's leaders, and are confirmed by the Senate. Every other federal regulatory commission, except for the International Trade Commission, has an odd number of commissioners, so the body can function and pass rulings efficiently and decisively. The FEC specifies that no more than three commissioners may belong to one party and is designed to ensure that neither party has an advantage. It also ensures that enforcement is virtually impossible because crucial votes end in a 3-3 tie (Lau 2019).

This study presents the results of a review of the electoral codes of all fifty states for policies that excluded or disadvantaged minor parties and independent voters. The following two questions are addressed:

1. In what ways are minor parties and independent voters restricted from participating in the U.S. system of election administration?
2. Are these restrictions more prevalent in some states than others, and are they related to variables such as party leaning, type of election supervision, state population, or geographic distribution?

## Background

### *Parties Dominate American Politics, Despite Intentions of the Founding Fathers*

The shape of the U.S. partied political system largely rests upon events during the first quarter of the 19th century. This is ironic, as disdain for political parties was nearly universal among the founding fathers. Colonial leaders had concluded that "parties were evil: they were associations of factious men bent on self-aggrandizement" (Wallace 1968, 453). Several factors cemented the leadership of the Republican and Democratic parties later in the 19th century. King and Lee (2022) suggest that throughout their histories, "major parties preemptively alter their behavior to minimize non-major party success" (p. 3). Since the mid-1800s, the two dominant parties (first Democrat-Whig, then Democrat-Republican) "worked both internally and externally with each other to control the agenda in order to focus attention on a single major dimension of party conflict" (Aldrich and Lee 2016, 289). When the policy agenda is thus limited, no third party could effectively insert itself and win the presidency because of the way in which the Electoral College system functions. In a recent legal analysis, Woodward-Burns (2021) theorized that two Congressional acts in 1889 and 1890, both of which determined the addition of states to the Union, set the stage for the non-majority party in Congress to allow the majority party to pass some preferred legislation, but with concessions included to set up the minority party for future power grabs, almost ensuring both party parity and deadlock. This Constitutional workaround, still used today, created an assured path toward control of the national political stage by Republicans and Democrats alone.

### *Trends in the Present American Electorate*

Trends in the American electorate reflect the changing political landscape of the country. One notable trend in the electoral process is the increasing number of independent and unaffiliated voters. Ongoing surveys by the Gallup organization (2023) show that self-identified independents have averaged 42 percent of the U.S. public over the past year. As Democratic and Republican affiliation has declined, the nation has witnessed a steady increase of independent voters (Jones 2022). The growth of Americans identifying as independent is not merely an aspirational construct (Reilly, Salit, and Ali 2023). Independent voters are now the largest or

second largest group of registered voters in half the states that require registration by party. This growth is across all regions of the United States and taking place in states dominated by one major political party and in states where the parties are at parity (Gruber and Opdycke 2020). Reilly and Hunting (2023) found that after analyzing American National Election Studies data on political identification and voting choices from 1972 to 2020 independent voters were not reliably tied in their votes to one party or the other. The authors also found evidence that a sizable number of independents move in and out of independent status from one election to another.

A second trend is the increasing stratification of states into single-party control by one of the two major parties in what is often called a "trifecta," wherein a state's governor and both chambers of its legislature are all held by a majority of one party. This presents a challenge to the partisan parity principle, wherein one party checks the activity of the opposing party in ways which keep the parties in parity. The number of these one-party trifecta states has steadily been on the rise in recent years (Kashinsky 2022). In 1992, only 19 states were governed by trifectas, and divided state governments were the norm. In 2023, 39 states have partisan trifectas of the governor's office and both chambers of the state legislature while 24 of those states have a supermajority with one party holding veto-proof majorities in both chambers and the governor's office (Ballotpedia, n.d.).

Together, these trends suggest that while the American people desire political voices independent of Republicans and Democrats in order to "agitate, educate, generate new ideas, and supply the dynamic element in our political life," (Hofstadter 1955, 97) the major parties often ignore those priorities and continue to entrench control.

### *Partisan Control of Election Administration*

Another obstacle to free and fair elections is found in the two major parties' control of election administration which determines who can vote, where people can vote, and how people can vote. As *The Economist* recently declared, "Partisan election administration is a greater worry today than voter suppression" ("The Real Risk to America's Democracy" 2021). Despite the expressed preference for a nonpartisan system of election administration by most Americans, the two major political parties control every aspect of electoral rule making and administration (Alvarez and Hall 2005). Because of this control-in-parity dynamic, there will likely continue to be primarily Republicans and Democrats elected to office, due to the "host of institutional structures that ensure the survival of a two-party cartel" (Bitzer et al. 2022, 1588). This control is seen in partisan local election administration offices all the way up to the FEC, which features partisanship that is perpetuated. At the state and county level, most boards of elections follow the FEC model. Each major party is granted up to 50 percent control of the regulatory body, thus ensuring that no party can "game" the rules or the outcome of an election.

## Methodology

### *Indicators of Election Restrictions and Privileges*

The electoral codes for all 50 states were reviewed in their entirety, statute by statute, to identify rules that disadvantaged minor parties and independent voters. Statutes were reviewed that differentiated independent from party-aligned voters and had the effect of empowering party aligned voters at the expense of independent voters. Several common categories of voter interaction with the administration of elections emerged from this process that were similar across states, and the statutes were classified based on such. Six categories of restrictions were identified:

- Restricts/Privileges Boards of Elections, Canvassers or Related Boards to Major Party Members
- Restricts/Privileges Poll Workers/Watchers/Inspectors/Registrars to Major Party Membership
- Restricts/Privileges Poll Judges to Major Party Membership
- Privileges Access to Voter Data to Major Party Members
- Campaign Finance Law Privileges Major Party Members, and
- Privileges Major Parties in Voter Registration.

In addition to a dichotomous, yes/no, indication for each of the six restrictions, the total number of restrictions was counted for each state. All states showed some restrictions on party participation, with Oregon and Washington having just one, and four states—Alabama, Arizona, Illinois, and Indiana—having all six restrictions. The distribution of restrictions is shown in Figure 1, and these findings are shown in Table 1.

**Figure 1. Distribution of Election Restrictions**

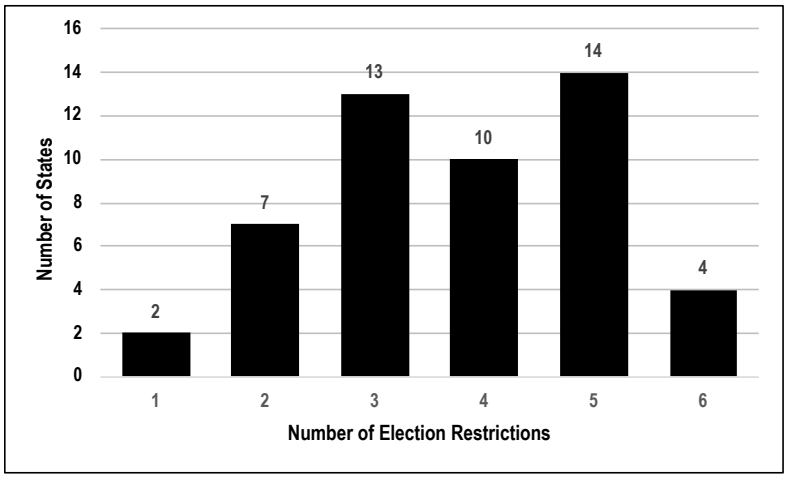

**Table 1. Restrictions Favoring Major Parties**

| ST | Boards of Elections, Canvassers or Related Boards are Major Party Members | Poll Workers/ Watchers/ Inspectors/ Registrars are Major Party Members | Poll Judges are Major Party Members | Access to Voter Data for Major Party Members | Campaign Finance Law Privileges Major Party Members | Privileges Major Parties in Voter Registration | Total Restrictions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AK | X | X | | X | X | X | 5 |
| AL | X | X | X | X | X | X | 6 |
| AZ | X | X | X | X | X | X | 6 |
| AR | X | X | X | | X | | 4 |
| CA | X | | | X | | X | 3 |
| CO | X | X | X | X | | | 4 |
| CT | | X | | | | X | 2 |
| DE | X | X | | X | X | X | 5 |
| FL | | X | | X | X | X | 4 |
| GA | X | X | | X | X | | 4 |
| HI | X | X | | | X | X | 4 |
| IL | X | X | X | X | X | X | 6 |
| IN | X | X | X | X | X | X | 6 |
| ID | X | X | | | | | 2 |
| IA | X | X | | | | X | 3 |
| KS | X | X | X | X | | X | 5 |
| KY | X | X | X | X | | X | 5 |
| LA | X | | | | X | | 2 |
| ME | X | X | | | | | 2 |
| MD | X | X | X | | X | X | 5 |
| MA | X | X | | X | X | X | 5 |
| MI | X | X | X | | | | 3 |
| MN | | X | X | | | | 2 |
| MS | X | X | | | | | 2 |
| MO | X | X | X | X | X | | 5 |
| MT | | X | X | | X | | 3 |
| NE | X | X | X | X | X | | 5 |
| NV | X | | | X | | | 2 |
| NH | X | X | | | X | X | 4 |
| NJ | X | X | X | X | | X | 5 |
| NM | X | X | | X | X | X | 5 |
| NY | X | X | | X | X | X | 5 |
| NC | X | X | X | X | | | 4 |
| ND | X | | X | X | | | 3 |
| OH | X | X | | | X | X | 4 |
| OK | X | X | X | | | X | 4 |
| OR | | X | | | | | 1 |
| PA | X | X | | | | X | 3 |
| RI | X | X | | X | | | 3 |

| ST | Boards of Elections, Canvassers or Related Boards are Major Party Members | Poll Workers/ Watchers/ Inspectors/ Registrars are Major Party Members | Poll Judges are Major Party Members | Access to Voter Data for Major Party Members | Campaign Finance Law Privileges Major Party Members | Privileges Major Parties in Voter Registration | Total Restrictions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SC | X | X | | X | | | 3 |
| SD | X | X | | | X | | 3 |
| TN | X | X | X | | | | 3 |
| TX | X | X | X | X | | X | 5 |
| UT | X | X | | | | X | 3 |
| VT | X | X | X | X | X | | 5 |
| VA | X | X | | X | X | X | 5 |
| WA | X | | | | | | 1 |
| WV | X | X | X | | | X | 4 |
| WI | X | X | | | X | | 3 |
| WY | X | X | X | | | | 3 |

### *Indicators of Statewide Partisanship*

To test how these restrictions on participation are related to partisan status, several measures were compiled. Each of these measures are presented on a scale from zero to one with one indicating 100 percent Republican-leaning and zero being 100 percent Democratic-leaning.

Several factors should be considered when looking at statewide measures of partisanship in relation to the above restrictions:

1. Is the partisanship of the electorate or the partisanship of the legislature that created the restrictions being measured?
2. Are these measures comparable from state to state?
3. What time period is appropriate to take these measurements?

Because the available data do not list when the restrictions were enacted, it is possible a state which shows a high degree of partisanship favoring one party today is actually operating under election rules that were enacted by the opposing party. Six of the identified indicators are based on election results. Two show the Republican results of presidential elections; three are derived from votes for Republicans in congressional elections; one consists of the percentage of Republican seats in each state legislature.

### *Presidential Votes*

Republican voting percentages from each state were downloaded from the Cook Political Report (2020). Additionally, Cook provides a margin shift, which quantifies how the presidential vote changed from 2016 to 2020. This gives an indication on how the partisanship of each state changed over time.

### *Congressional Votes*

Similar to presidential voting, a state's votes for members of the U.S. House of Representatives can provide an indication of partisanship. House elections are held every two years in each of the 435 seats. The MIT Election Data and Science Lab provides results for each congressional district for elections from 1976 through 2020 (MIT Election Data and Science Lab, n.d.). By summing each state's congressional votes, these data provide insight into recent partisanship from the 2020 presidential election results, recent change in partisanship by comparing 2016 and 2020 results, and partisanship over an extended period by aggregating the results from 2000-2020.

### *Partisan Makeup of State Legislature*

Although the electoral results described above detail the partisan stances of each state's voters, laws governing favoring or restricting major parties will inevitably be enacted by state legislatures. The partisan makeup of state legislatures was determined from data available at Stateside.com (Stateside, n.d.). The number of Republican-held seats in each current legislature was divided by the total legislative seats to indicate the partisan makeup of each state.

### *Election Supervision*

In 33 states, elections are overseen by an elected official, usually the secretary of state. In the remaining 17 states, boards or commissions supervise elections (NCSL, n.d.-a). Elected officials are inherently partisan while boards and commissions may be less likely to be influenced by purely political concerns. Table 2 lists states with elected supervision as "partisan." The states with elections overseen by a board or commission are listed as "nonpartisan."

### *State Population*

As state population could be another possible factor influencing partisan restrictions on the election process, state population figures were also correlated with the list of restrictions. The U.S. Census Bureau 2021 one-year estimates from the American Community Survey program were used.

### *Geographic Distribution*

Finally, a possible geographic distribution of the six restrictions was explored with states divided into the four geographic regions identified by the U.S. Census Bureau—west, south, midwest, and northeast. These regions are detailed in Table 3.

**Table 2. Election Supervision**

| State | Election Supervision | State | Election Supervision |
|---|---|---|---|
| Alabama | Partisan | Montana | Partisan |
| Alaska | Partisan | Nebraska | Partisan |
| Arizona | Partisan | Nevada | Partisan |
| Arkansas | Nonpartisan | New Hampshire | Partisan |
| California | Partisan | New Jersey | Partisan |
| Colorado | Partisan | New Mexico | Partisan |
| Connecticut | Partisan | New York | Nonpartisan |
| Delaware | Nonpartisan | North Carolina | Nonpartisan |
| Florida | Partisan | North Dakota | Partisan |
| Georgia | Nonpartisan | Ohio | Partisan |
| Hawaii | Nonpartisan | Oklahoma | Nonpartisan |
| Idaho | Partisan | Oregon | Partisan |
| Illinois | Nonpartisan | Pennsylvania | Partisan |
| Indiana | Nonpartisan | Rhode Island | Nonpartisan |
| Iowa | Partisan | South Carolina | Nonpartisan |
| Kansas | Partisan | South Dakota | Partisan |
| Kentucky | Nonpartisan | Tennessee | Nonpartisan |
| Louisiana | Partisan | Texas | Partisan |
| Maine | Partisan | Utah | Partisan |
| Maryland | Nonpartisan | Vermont | Partisan |
| Massachusetts | Partisan | Virginia | Nonpartisan |
| Michigan | Partisan | Washington | Partisan |
| Minnesota | Partisan | West Virginia | Nonpartisan |
| Mississippi | Partisan | Wisconsin | Nonpartisan |
| Missouri | Partisan | Wyoming | Partisan |

### *Correlations*

The six indicators of specific partisan restrictions were treated as dichotomous nominal variables while the sum of these indicators for each state was treated as a scale-level measurement to create a total of seven variables. Each of these indicators was correlated with the seven measures of partisanship, four geographic regions, and state population—creating 12 total measures— for a total of 84 correlations.

If maneuvering by one of the two major parties was responsible for the six types of restrictions identified, significant correlations were expected to emerge. Positive correlations would indicate Republican-leaning states are associated with these restrictions while negative correlations would show restrictions are found in Democratic-leaning states.

Data were first summarized in Microsoft Excel and then imported into SPSS v. 28.0 where Pearson correlations were used for the election-related indicators. The dichotomous pairings between voting restrictions and the geographic regions, in

**Table 3. U.S. Census Bureau Regions**

| West | Midwest | Northeast | South |
|---|---|---|---|
| Alaska | Illinois | Connecticut | Alabama |
| Arizona | Indiana | Maine | Arkansas |
| California | Iowa | Massachusetts | Delaware |
| Colorado | Kansas | New Hampshire | Florida |
| Hawaii | Michigan | New Jersey | Georgia |
| Idaho | Minnesota | New York | Kentucky |
| Montana | Missouri | Pennsylvania | Louisiana |
| Nevada | Nebraska | Rhode Island | Maryland |
| New Mexico | North Dakota | Vermont | Mississippi |
| Oregon | Ohio | | North Carolina |
| Utah | South Dakota | | Oklahoma |
| Washington | Wisconsin | | South Carolina |
| Wyoming | | | Tennessee |
| | | | Texas |
| | | | Virginia |
| | | | West Virginia |

addition to the indicator for elected supervisor of elections were analyzed with Cramer's V, while the Pearson correlation was most appropriate for the Total Restrictions measure. Table 4 shows p-values and coefficients for these correlations.

### *Regressions*

An OLS regression model was tested with the total number of restrictions as the dependent variable. Election supervision, either partisan or nonpartisan; elected/appointed status of secretaries of state; percentage of Republican seats in the state legislature; percent of statewide votes for Republicans in U.S. House elections from 2000-2020; and percent Republican votes in the 2020 presidential election were the independent variables. This gave an equation with an insignificant F-value and an adjusted R-square of 0.007 indicating that neither party appears to be pushing these restrictions at the state level.

Next, logistic regressions were performed using each of the five restrictions as the dependent variable with the independent variables listed above. These equations did not highlight any relationships that would indicate state partisanship for either major party is associated with particular restrictions.

## Results

As seen in Table 1, the following states have restrictions favoring major parties:

- 45 states restrict or privilege boards of elections, canvassers, or related boards to major party members;

- 45 states restrict or privilege poll workers/watchers/inspectors/ registrars to major party membership;
- 27 states restrict or privilege election judges to major party membership;
- 26 states privilege access to voter data to major party members;
- 24 states have campaign finance laws that privilege major party members; and
- 26 states privilege major parties in voter registration.

Table 2 outlines the 33 states with partisan election supervision and the 17 states with nonpartisan systems.

**Table 4. Correlations and P-Values**

| | Dichotomous (Y/N) Variables | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Boards of Elections, Canvassers or Related Boards are Major Party Members | | Poll Workers/ Watchers/ Inspectors/ Registrars are Major Party Members | | Poll Judges are Major Party Members | | Access to Voter Data for Major Party Members | | Campaign Finance Law Privileges Major Party Members | | Privileges Major Parties in Voter Registration | | Total Restrictions (0-6 Scale) | |
| | Pearson | p | Pearson | P | Pearson | p | Pearson | p | Pearson | P | Pearson | p | Pearson | p |
| Republican%, 2020 Presidential Election | 0.114 | 0.431 | 0.04 | 0.783 | .315* | 0.026 | -0.207 | 0.15 | -0.171 | 0.236 | -0.188 | 0.19 | -0.06 | 0.677 |
| Change in Republican Presidential Margin, 2016-2020 | 0.08 | 0.582 | -0.241 | 0.091 | -0.207 | 0.149 | -0.151 | 0.294 | -0.028 | 0.847 | 0.141 | 0.328 | -0.13 | 0.369 |
| Republican%, 2020 Congressional Elections | 0.094 | 0.517 | 0.007 | 0.963 | 0.275 | 0.053 | -0.23 | 0.108 | -0.083 | 0.568 | -0.189 | 0.188 | -0.063 | 0.662 |
| Change in Republican House margin, 2016-20 | -0.045 | 0.754 | 0.118 | 0.413 | -0.039 | 0.79 | -0.134 | 0.355 | 0.275 | 0.053 | -0.046 | 0.753 | 0.038 | 0.791 |
| Republican%, All Cong. Elections, 2000-2020 | 0.073 | 0.615 | 0.009 | 0.949 | 0.229 | 0.11 | -0.082 | 0.573 | -0.078 | 0.592 | -0.105 | 0.469 | 0.005 | 0.972 |
| Percent of state legislature seats held by Republicans | 0.05 | 0.731 | 0.078 | 0.588 | .298* | 0.035 | -0.246 | 0.085 | -0.113 | 0.433 | -0.166 | 0.25 | -0.057 | 0.693 |
| Population, 2021 | -0.03 | 0.835 | -0.203 | 0.157 | -0.049 | 0.734 | .285* | 0.045 | -0.056 | 0.702 | .304* | 0.032 | 0.13 | 0.367 |
| | Cramer's V | p | Cramer's V | P | Cramer's V | p | Cramer's V | p | Cramer's V | P | Cramer's V | p | Pearson | p |
| Election Supervision | 0.239 | 0.152 | 0.239 | 0.152 | 0.1 | 0.557 | 0.098 | 0.559 | 0.155 | 0.373 | 0.098 | 0.559 | -.280* | 0.049 |
| Western States | 0.106 | 0.595 | 0.258 | 0.103 | 0.181 | 0.332 | 0.069 | 0.751 | 0.113 | 0.526 | 0.069 | 0.751 | -0.247 | 0.083 |
| Midwest States | 0.031 | 1 | 0.031 | 1 | 0.233 | 0.183 | 0.022 | 1 | 0.116 | 0.514 | 0.116 | 0.514 | 0.094 | 0.516 |
| Northeast States | 0.017 | 1 | 0.156 | 0.57 | 0.224 | 0.152 | 0.033 | 1 | 0.033 | 1 | 0.138 | 0.467 | -0.001 | 0.996 |
| Southern States | 0.086 | 0.661 | 0.086 | 0.661 | 0.141 | 0.373 | 0.058 | 0.767 | 0.027 | 1 | 0.058 | 0.767 | 0.147 | 0.307 |

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

As shown in Table 4, correlations that indicate partisanship in election codes were practically nonexistent. The requirement that poll judges are members of one of the major political parties was associated with Republican vote percentage in 2020, Republican success in 2020 congressional elections, and the percentage of Republican seats in the state legislature ($p < 0.05$). There was also an association

between campaign finance law advantages for major parties and the change in Republican congressional vote percentage from 2016 to 2020 ($p < 0.05$). All other correlation showed high, and often very high, p-values.

This lack of association indicates that neither Democratic- nor Republican-leaning states were more inclined to favor these restrictions on elections. These findings indicate that neither Democratic- nor Republican-leaning states, the type of election supervision, state population, nor geographic distribution were associated with these restrictions favoring major parties in election administration.

## Discussion

America's system of election administration has come under increasing scrutiny over the past two decades. Since the 2020 presidential election, there has been a furious tug of war between Republican Party activists and related groups moving legislation in dozens of states determined to ensure election "integrity" (Heritage Foundation, n.d.) and Democratic Party activists and related groups determined to prevent election "sabotage" and to reform voting laws (Brennan Center 2021).

This study attempts to answer a different question: why is our system of election administration vulnerable to political manipulation in the first place? This research shows that part of the answer can be found directly in the electoral codes of all 50 states. Little inquiry has focused on how major parties collude to shut out minor parties and independents throughout the history of election administration at the state level. This analysis of six indicators of specific partisan restrictions found that the two major parties have imposed significant restrictions for minor parties and independents in the U.S. system of election administration. In 45 states only members of the two major parties can serve on boards of elections, serve as canvassers, or participate as poll workers. In 27 states minor parties and independents are barred from serving as election judges. Further, in 26 states the two major parties are privileged in getting voter registration information and access to the basic tools of electioneering, such as voter data. Finally, 24 states have campaign finance laws that privilege major party members.

These findings indicate that neither Democratic- nor Republican-leaning states, the type of election supervision, state population, nor geographic distribution are associated with these restrictions imposed on minor parties and independents in election administration. This lack of association indicates that neither Democratic- nor Republican-leaning states are more inclined to favor these restrictions on elections. A possible explanation for this lack of association is that both major parties have an interest in maintaining the two-party system and have worked to enact these restrictions that disadvantage minor parties. The parties may work independently of one another to achieve these policy goals, or they may have operated in tacit cooperation to ensure minor parties and independent voices have limited input into the electoral process.

In the U.S. system of election administration, both parties have designed rules based on ensuring the other party is not advantaged. Party parity is a defining feature of election systems in the United States (Ferrer, Geyn, and Thompson 2024). In essence, each party is tasked, by law, with checking the other party's ability to tinker with the balance of election outcomes. That partisan system largely worked until now because, in essence, each party checked the other party's ability to influence election outcomes. As long as states were politically diverse and members of the two major parties acted in good faith, this model functioned. But this model has always been vulnerable should the detente framework it is built upon breaks down. That may be happening now.

The confluence of two seismic events in American politics are challenging the partisan parity model. First, as previously outlined, a significant change is happening in the makeup of the American electorate, where independent and unaffiliated voters have grown steadily while party membership has declined. Recent Gallup polling (2023) found that a record 49 percent of Americans see themselves as independent or unaffiliated, equivalent to the two major parties combined. An election system that now excludes 40-to-50 percent of voters is placing the administration of elections into an increasingly small and partisan group of actors. The second seismic event is states are continuing to become either very red or very blue. That means the ability of one party to act as a check on the other is diminishing. So, when one party is motivated to interfere with the election system in a particular state, there is little to stand in the way.

There is broad consensus among advanced democracies in the world regarding the need for neutral or nonpartisan administration of elections due to the long history of political parties interfering in election outcomes in democracies. Can partisan actors be removed from overseeing the administration of elections in the U.S.? Some scholars argue that removing partisan actors from the U.S. election system bears some risk and that these actors actually serve a critical role as adversaries, bolstering accountability and ensuring the other side follows the law (Gerken 2007; Green 2023). Green (2023) argues that, at least in the short term, "Partisanship in election administration should not be unquestioningly degraded or villainized, it should be acknowledged and harnessed. Marshalling fruitful antagonisms may, at least for now, be our best way forward" (151). However, given the two trends mentioned above—the rising number of unaffiliated voters and the unified majority by one party in most states—is a U.S. election administration system run by partisans at its breaking point?

## Conclusion

This study contributes to previous literature on election administration in the U.S. and sheds context on some of the foundational issues motivating the concerns of many policymakers and citizens on the trustworthiness of the U.S. democratic system of elections. A partisan election system that requires party parity to ensure fairness has always been vulnerable to manipulation and collusion. As parity breaks down, such vulnerabilities are becoming increasingly exposed and exploited. As

demonstrated in this research, this partisan election system has not been limited to a particular geographic region, party leaning, supervisory administrative structure or population of a state.

Despite these contributions, this study has limitations. The temporal link between party control and the time when the restrictions were enacted is a limitation in the methodology. The available data do not list when the restrictions were enacted. It is possible a state that shows a high degree of partisanship favoring one party today is actually operating under election rules that were enacted by the opposing party. So, for example, it is possible that a Democratic-leaning state is operating under election rules that were instituted years ago when the state was Republican-controlled. Despite this limitation, our study offers important insight into the vulnerabilities of the partisan system of election administration operating in the U.S.

No amount of reform will fully address the vulnerability of the U.S. election system to partisan manipulation unless the partisan nature of election administration itself is addressed and new models are explored. Nonpartisan election administration is the norm in other Western democracies where the administrators running the system have no stake in the outcome and electoral agencies are legally and administratively shielded from partisan actors. Given the current level of hyperpolarization and low levels of trust in the U.S. election system, the time may be right to explore how these systems may be adapted to the administration of elections in the U.S. (Brennan Center 2021). Indeed, when polled, most Americans prefer a nonpartisan system of election administration (Alvarez and Hall 2005).

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# Response to "Partisan Election Administration in America"

Tonya Rice[1a]

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As a *JEARP* editorial board member and practitioner in the field for 15 years, I believe this article makes significant contributions to the literature on election administration in the United States. The authors' empirical analysis of electoral codes dives deep and categorizes important growth areas for community service and access. For additional context, this article is also instructive when it comes to analyzing how nonpartisan election administration currently operates within bipartisan frameworks and institutional structures to increase public trust.

Across the U.S., election administration is grounded in federal and state laws, local procedures, and professional standards that are designed to be nonpartisan. In the 6,460 election jurisdictions across the country, officials at the local, state, and federal levels work relentlessly to support complex election systems and technologies. While some election officials may have been elected or appointed through partisan processes, they share a professional commitment to maintaining high standards of public service, trust, and transparency. In practice, most individuals working in election administration are very patriotic and committed to fair elections, regardless of whether they privately vote for candidates affiliated with the Democratic or Republican parties or for independent candidates. The two major parties recruit many election workers, but their function is to uphold checks and balances that support nonpartisan election administration and prevent exclusive control by a single party. For example, state laws and procedures that require bipartisan teams to be present at polling places, post-election audits, or recounts create a system of mutual oversight and trust for public observers, who can witness the nonpartisan operations of their local election administrators. While the authors cite the increase in independent or unaffiliated voters, it is also significant to note public opinion research on the high credibility of local election officials compared to national partisan actors. This includes a 2022 Pew Research Center study, which found that the overwhelming majority of registered voters, 90 percent, expressed confidence that elections in their local communities are run and administered well.

In addition, academic partnerships, nonpartisan civic tech organizations, and independent observation programs strengthen access, confidence and norms. For example, professional certification programs—such as the Election Center's program—establish national standards, collaboration across jurisdictions, and

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training by academic experts and practitioners. Nonpartisan civic tech organizations also partner with local governments, universities, associations, corporations, and nonprofits to educate and empower independent voters and the public at large to meaningfully engage through innovative platforms. Technological tools for voter registration, campaign finance, and other election systems are not inherently designed to disadvantage voters. The implementation of these systems, along with robust partnerships for audits and observation programs, are administered by professional election officials. Under close scrutiny, practitioners across the U.S. consistently rise to the challenge to maintain both operational security and public confidence in their local communities. In sum, this article builds on a strong foundation, provides new mechanisms for analyzing election reforms, and challenges the field to continue strengthening our democracy.

# Response to "Partisan Election Administration in America"

Benton Grubbs[1a]

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In this article, the authors draw on research from the Gallup organization, concluding that 42 percent of the U.S. public identify as independents. During my time in election administration, I have heard countless voters say, "I do not agree with either party," or, "I just wish there was a party that would represent my beliefs." This sentiment is shared nationally due to the hyperpolarization of American politics. I typically think to myself, "Well, there are a multitude of other parties and candidates you can vote for." However, upon further research, this article proves just how difficult it is for independent and minor parties to win elections.

The authors focus on six categories of restrictions to base their research: restrictions around canvassers, poll workers, poll judges, access to voter data, campaign finance laws, and voter registration. These data are gathered by researching the specific electoral codes of all 50 states. These restrictions are then compared against six other factors that are unique across each state: presidential votes; congressional votes; partisan makeup of state legislatures; election supervision, meaning whether the state chief election official is appointed or elected; state population; and geographic distribution. The authors conclude that neither Republican-controlled nor Democrat-controlled states specifically enact election administration laws that restrict the opposing party's ability to gain power. However, the authors agree that the "both major parties have an interest in maintaining the two-party system and have worked to enact these restrictions that disadvantage minor parties."

As most election administrators would agree, the goal of administering fair, open, and honest elections should not be political. However, in recent decades, election administration has become a focal point in both major parties' platforms. Additionally, potential violence is a fear those in elections know all too well. This has caused a massive decline in those willing to serve as canvassers as well as poll workers/judges. I have seen this firsthand from county officials at the state level who are struggling with recruitment despite their use of a variety of recruitment strategies. Because of this, there is a large lapse of institutional knowledge that can be recognized nationally.

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Personally, I believe that both major parties want elections to be run as efficiently and simply as possible because, after all, that is how they are put into office. Legislators very well know that there is a large issue regarding recruitment among their constituency. The article concludes that there are 45 states where only members of the two major parties can serve on boards of elections, serve as canvassers, or participate as poll workers. It would be advantageous for state legislatures to potentially rewrite certain election codes to allow for a broader range of voters to be selected for positions such as poll workers, election judges, and canvassers. As an election administrator, I would appreciate this because it would put less of an administrative burden on county election staff.

While this research is valuable, there is one main limitation of the study that the authors mention, and I would agree with, as well. "The available data do not list when these restrictions were enacted. It is possible a state that shows a high degree of partisanship favoring one party today is actually operating under election rules that were enacted by the opposing party." Additionally, the authors speak to how, "In 2023, 39 states have partisan trifectas of the governor's office and both chambers of the state legislature while 24 of those states have a supermajority with one party holding veto-proof majorities in both chambers and the governor's office." I believe it would be valuable to gather further details on this because it would provide more insight to test their original hypothesis of if there is a partisan effect on election law that favors one party over another.

As the authors would agree, "Given the current level of hyperpolarization and low levels of trust in the U.S. election system, the time may be right to explore how these systems may be adapted to the administration of elections in the U.S." I would encourage legislators to listen to their election officials' suggestions on how to further improve laws to encourage members from minor and independent parties to be a larger part of the election administration process. This, in turn, could lead to an increase in trust in the U.S. election systems, which I am sure all election administrators would appreciate.

# How Much Did Voters with Disabilities Trust in the 2022 Midterm Elections?

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Keywords: disability, trust, elections

ABSTRACT

In an age of heightened mis- and disinformation, both voters and election officials are pressed with disentangling fact from fiction. Disinformation surrounding elections impacts public perceptions of electoral integrity, particularly among minoritized populations. This paper focuses on disabled voters and their experiences in the 2022 midterm elections. The authors conducted a nationally representative survey of 3,038 eligible voters with 999 self-identifying as disabled. The findings reveal voters with disabilities expressed lower confidence in the accuracy of their votes being counted. Voting by mail instilled greater confidence in voters with disabilities with nearly 12 percent more of them opting for this method. Trust levels varied within disability categories with Democratic respondents with disabilities displaying higher trust in election accuracy. These findings shed light on the relationship among disability, trust, and election methods, emphasizing the need for a nuanced look into inclusive electoral practices.

## Introduction

Voters and elections officials alike must confront unique challenges when conducting democratic elections in an age of (dis)information where fact and fiction alike run rampant. The disinformation surrounding elections is of particular concern. It affects the electorate's perceptions of fraud, integrity, and accuracy in elections, particularly among minoritized members of the population. This report focuses specifically on voters with disabilities. This nationally representative survey was fielded from November 17-27, 2022, meaning that this survey was reflective of the nation's eligible voter population across a range of demographic categories. A total of 3,038 respondents were sampled of which 999 identified as having a disability. Respondents were identified as having a disability if they self-reported having disabilities with regard to hearing, reading, remembering, seeing, talking, thinking, walking, or using their hands. Respondents were asked about their confidence in elections, different vote methods, and potential election policies.

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The principal findings are as follows. First, no significant differences between voters with and without disabilities were identified when it comes to how much they trust: 1) the American election system, 2) results accurately reflecting the vote count, and 3) elections in their own state versus elections in other states. However, respondents with disabilities do have lower levels of trust when asked if they believe their vote will be counted accurately in the election when compared to other voters. Additionally, when asked which methods give a respondent the most confidence in the integrity and accuracy of the election, voters with disabilities tend to feel *more confident* voting by mail than voters without disabilities. A higher share of respondents with disabilities cast their ballot by mail in the 2022 election than respondents without disabilities----a difference of nearly 12 percentage points.

The authors further looked within the disabled community in terms of type of disability, ethnorace, partisanship, gender, income, and region. When it comes to voters with disabilities related to walking and reading, these respondents have the highest reported levels of trust in the November 2022 midterm election while respondents with disabilities when it comes to using their hands have the lowest reported levels of trust. Respondents with disabilities related to thinking reported the highest levels of perceived fraud in the election. Democratic respondents with disabilities are more than twice as likely to trust that the 2022 midterm results accurately reflected the vote than Republican respondents with disabilities. White respondents with disabilities had the highest levels of perception of fraud with more than one in four thinking there was significant fraud in the 2022 midterm elections. There is a sharp drop-off for the other ethnoracial groups, with Black respondents with disabilities having the next highest levels of distrust. The implications of these findings underscore a need for a nuanced approach to building trust among various population groups, including voters with disabilities and other intersecting identities of ethnorace and partisanship.

## Voter Experience among Voters with Disabilities

Voters with disabilities face unique obstacles in casting their ballots. It should come as no surprise, then, that both voter registration and turnout rates among voters with disabilities are consistently several percentage points lower than voters without a disability (Schur and Kruse 2000, 2008, 2016b, 2018). Indeed, if the turnout gap between disabled and other voters was nonexistent, between 1 and 2 million more voters would cast a ballot every general election cycle (Schur and Kruse 2016a, 2020c).

What are some persistent barriers to voting that cause this voting gap? Schur and Kruse (2010) note that roughly 40 percent of voters with a disability note their disability as a significant barrier to voting: 6.1 percent have transportation problems, 4.3 percent encountered issues with registration such as not receiving their mail ballot or not being registered at their polling place, less than 1 percent note inconvenience, and nearly 10 percent list some other undisclosed reason. When voting in person, either early or on election day, voters may experience impediments with parking, the path to the building, the building entrance, the path to the voting

area, or the voting booth setup itself (United States Government Accountability Office 2017; Vasilogambros 2018). When voting by mail, there are added barriers that may occur with receiving the ballot, sending out the ballot, or rejection issues with respect to signature mismatches or undelivered curing affidavits (Baringer, Herron, and Smith 2020).

## How has the U.S. Election System Supported Voters with Disabilities?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), in conjunction with the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA), enumerate various legal protections and voting rights afforded to disabled voters to address the barriers that voters with disabilities have historically faced when exercising their right to vote. These laws require all aspects of voting—such as voter registration, polling place selection, and voting methods—must be accessible to people with disabilities. The ADA also mandates that election officials provide reasonable accommodations and auxiliary aids and services to voters with disabilities upon request—such as sign language interpreters, large print ballots, or assistance from poll workers.

Some of the ways shown to increase voter participation and accessibility include preemptively mailing ballots or applications out to all registered voters, expanding ballot delivery options such as drop boxes, and extending voting and registration periods (Schur, Adya, and Ameri 2015; Schur and Kruse 2020a; Schur, Kruse, and Ameri 2022; Syed et al. 2022). These reforms have been shown to narrow the turnout gap between voters with and without disabilities. The gap decreased from 6.3 percentage points to 5.7 points from 2016 to 2020 (Schur and Kruse 2020b). The increase in turnout happened across all demographic categories of gender, ethnorace, age, and region (Schur and Kruse 2020b).[1]

Voting by mail increased during the COVID-19 pandemic for people both with and without disabilities, and voters with disabilities continued to be more likely to use this option (Schur and Kruse 2020b, 2021). However, voting by mail also poses some challenges for voters with disabilities—such as signature mismatch, lack of privacy and assistance, and accessibility barriers. Some states offer options of signing an affidavit or curing a ballot if there is a signature mismatch, but these processes may have low responsiveness and issues among voters with disabilities (Baringer, Herron, and Smith 2020). Therefore, it is important to ensure that voting by mail is accessible, secure, and perceived as trustworthy for all voters, especially those with disabilities who may face additional obstacles.

## Data

This survey was conducted on a nationally diverse sample reflective of voting-age American citizens after the midterm elections held on November 8, 2022. The survey was in the field from November 17-27. These dates were chosen to reflect the

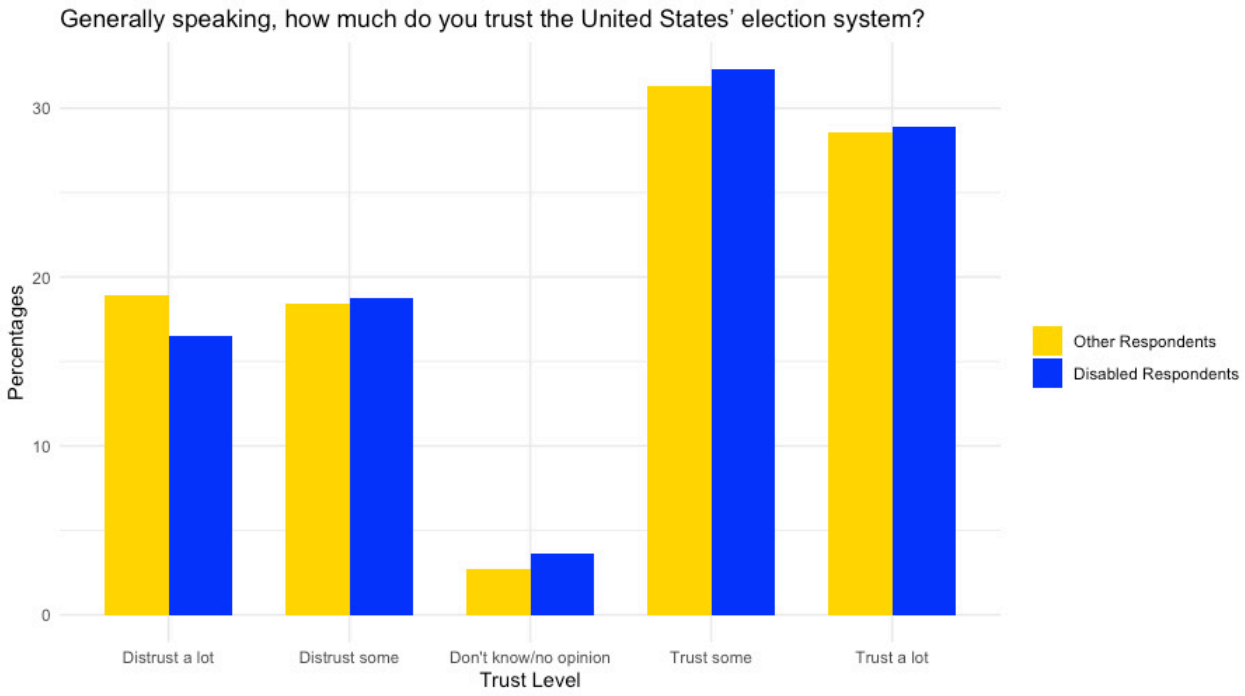
1 For reference, the racial turnout gap (white/non-white) is 18 percentage points (Herzig, Grange, and Morris 2024).

period after the Associated Press published projected party control results of the U.S. House and Senate. The research team designed this survey after discussions with election officials from Los Angeles County, Colorado, Georgia, and Texas.

The survey sampled 3,038 voting-eligible respondents whose distributions along race, ethnicity, age, gender, and education reflected those of the United States at large as published on the 2021 American Community Survey. The survey was distributed through Cint (formerly known as Luc.Id). To ensure respondent quality, two attention-check questions were incorporated, removing those who failed these checks from the sample of analysis. Respondents had the ability to answer the survey in English or Spanish. The margin of error on this survey is ±1.8 percentage points for respondents overall. For smaller subsets of voters, such as members of a particular party or demographic group, the margin of error is larger. The margin of error among respondents with disabilities is ±3.1 points.[2]

This study focused on voters in our sample who noted they have some form of disability. The sample identified 999 voters with a disability with respect to hearing, reading, remembering, seeing, talking, thinking, walking, or using their hands. While this is not an exhaustive list of disabilities that may impair the ability to cast a ballot, these disabilities were chosen because they reflect congruence with the categories the Community Population Survey utilizes.

**Figure 1. Trust in the United States' Election System**




2 While these findings are important and have substantive implications, readers should take caution that these estimates may not fully capture the feelings and beliefs of voters with disabilities nationwide. The authors assert the importance of ensuring adequate representation of this group in future studies to improve the precision of estimates.

## Trust in the U.S. Election System among Voters with Disabilities

The survey centered the experiences of voters with disabilities in assessing their levels of trust in the American election system. A series of unpaired (two-samples) t-tests were conducted in order to test whether there are statistically different means across the samples of voters with and without disabilities. Strikingly, the findings show there is no significant difference between voters with and without disabilities when it comes to how much they trust the elections in the United States. Similarly, there is no noticeable difference between voters with and without disabilities when it comes to their trust in results accurately reflecting the vote counts. The same lack of a difference exists across the two groups when asked about trusting elections in their own state as well as in other states. There is, however, a statistical difference across groups when asking whether they believe their vote will be counted accurately in the election. Among respondents with disabilities, 50.96 percent said they were very confident that their vote would be counted accurately compared to 57.32 percent of respondents without disabilities. This pattern is mirrored among those who were very skeptical that their vote would be counted accurately in the election: 6.04 percent of respondents with disabilities, compared to 3.11 percent of other respondents, were very skeptical.

## Voting by Mail

The findings do show a statistical difference in the level of trust that respondents with and without disabilities have when it comes to voting by mail. When asked which methods give a respondent the most confidence in the integrity and accuracy of the election, there is a noticeable difference across the two groups. Voters with disabilities tend to feel *more confident* with voting by mail than voters without disabilities. This may be because voters with disabilities have historically utilized this method of voting more, as it provides a more accessible format of voting in some cases.

Voting by mail may also increase a sense of agency among some voters. For example, voters with disabilities that make mobility difficult may feel a heightened sense of independence by casting their ballot at home rather than having to navigate potential issues with transportation to a polling location or asking someone to deliver their ballots for them, as is allowed in some states. Voters with cognitive disabilities may be able to take more time to review their ballot at home, giving them a feeling of greater agency. Increased agency is linked with higher satisfaction feelings of empowerment in other groups of the electorate (Campbell 2003). The Elections Assistance Commission published a report reminding elections practitioners that ensuring accessibility of voting by mail should also come with the provision of "multiple options to request, complete, and deliver ballots" (Jackson 2022). However, since respondents were not asked why they feel more confident in voting by mail, these are speculative arguments.

**Table 1. Vote Method and Perceived Confidence, Integrity, and Accuracy**

***Which method gives you the most confidence in the integrity and accuracy of the election?***

| | Respondents without Disabilities (percent) | Respondents with Disabilities (percent) |
|---|---|---|
| Voting by mail | **11.83** | **16.77** |
| Voting by drop box | 4.45 | 5.59 |
| Voting in person | 83.72 | 77.64 |

*Note: Percentages in boldface indicate a statistically significant difference between the responses of respondents with and without disabilities.*

More respondents with disabilities in our sample cast their ballots by mail in the 2022 election than respondents without disabilities----a difference of nearly 12 percentage points. Respondents were asked which aspect of the process of casting their ballots did not satisfy them, and a statistically distinguishable difference emerged when prompted about the ease or difficulty of voting by mail. While only 7.46 percent of respondents without disabilities checked this category, 9.93 percent of respondents with disabilities did. When asked if they would support national legislation directing all states to send a vote-by-mail ballot to any voter who requests one, there is another noticeable gap between respondents with and without disabilities. Specifically, 59.13 percent of respondents with disabilities said yes, compared to only 51.54 percent of other respondents.

**Table 2. Vote Method in 2022 Midterm Election**

***In this year's November election, in what way did you cast your ballot?***

| | Respondents without Disabilities (percent) | Respondents with Disabilities (percent) |
|---|---|---|
| **By voting at your assigned polling place or vote center on election day** | **52.65** | **39.97** |
| **By filling out your vote-by-mail ballot and mailing it** | **17.74** | **29.72** |
| **By dropping your vote-by-mail ballot at a polling place or vote center on election day** | **5.81** | **8.78** |
| **By voting at a staffed county elections location before election day** | 16.71 | 15.96 |
| **By dropping your vote-by-mail ballot in an unstaffed secure county ballot drop box** | 7.10 | 5.56 |

*Note: Percentages in boldface indicate a statistically significant difference between the responses of respondents with and without disabilities.*

Last, no statistical difference emerged when asking disabled and other respondents about the length of time it took them to cast their ballot in person. Disabled respondents reported a median of 8 minutes while nondisabled respondents

reported a median of 10 minutes. Similarly, when asked about time to travel to drop off their ballots or vote in person, both groups had a median of 10 minutes. Also, 12.82 percent of other respondents said they were not satisfied with the long line at their voting location compared to only 8.21 percent of disabled respondents, and this relationship is statistically significant.

**Table 3. National Legislation Support for Automatic Mail Ballot**

***For future elections, would you support national legislation directing all states to send a vote by mail ballot to any voter who requests one?***

| | Respondents without Disabilities (percent) | Respondents with Disabilities (percent) |
|---|---|---|
| **Yes** | **51.54** | **59.13** |
| **No** | **29.74** | **25.35** |
| **Not sure** | 18.72 | 15.52 |

*Note: Percentages in boldface indicate a statistically significant difference between the responses of respondents with and without disabilities.*

## Variation in Trust by Disability Type

Voters with disabilities may encounter issues at any step of the voting process, from registration through the casting of their ballots. For example, people who use a wheelchair might find the gravel leading up to their polling place to be a barrier to their voting process. People with shaky hands may find it difficult to sign their ballots the exact same way each time, increasing the likelihood of ballot rejection by mail (American Civil Liberties Union 2020). Each disability presents its own unique challenge, as does each step of the voting process.

The table below reports that, of these categories, respondents with disabilities related to walking—64.14 percent—and reading—64.04 percent—have the highest reported levels of trust in the November midterm election. On the other end, respondents with disabilities when it comes to using their hands have the lowest reported levels of trust at 50.53 percent. Respondents with disabilities related to thinking reported the highest levels of perceived fraud in the election—30.39 percent. On the other end, respondents with disabilities related to talking reported the lowest levels of perceived fraud in the election—14.08 percent.

**Table 4. Trust by Disability Type**

***Do you trust that the results from this year's November election accurately reflect the vote, or do you think there is significant vote fraud in this election?***

| Reported Disability | I trust that the November election results accurately reflect the vote (percent) | I think there is significant vote fraud in this election (percent) |
|---|---|---|
| **Hearing** | 61.14 | 26.57 |
| **Seeing** | 57.64 | 26.39 |

| Reported Disability | I trust that the November election results accurately reflect the vote (percent) | I think there is significant vote fraud in this election (percent) |
|---|---|---|
| **Walking** | 64.18 | 22.12 |
| **Hands** | 50.53 | 26.32 |
| **Reading** | 64.04 | 17.98 |
| **Talking** | 57.75 | 14.08 |
| **Thinking** | 56.86 | 30.39 |
| **Remembering** | 56.00 | 26.67 |

The survey also asked whether respondents were able to access and understand information about how to vote and about how ballots are counted fairly and accurately. With regard to information about how to vote, 78 percent or more of respondents of all disability categories felt they were able to access and understand such information with respondents with hearing disabilities at the highest percentage with 92.86 percent. When asked about the ability to access and understand information about how ballots are counted fairly and accurately, each group drops anywhere from seven to fourteen percentage points. For example, 89.93 percent of respondents with sight disabilities said they were able to access and understand information about how to vote, but only 75.69 percent of respondents with sight disabilities said they were able to access and understand information about how ballots are counted fairly and accurately. This difference is 7 percent among respondents with reading and with talking disabilities.

**Table 5. Access and Comprehension by Disability Type**

| | ***Were you able to access and understand information about how to vote in this election provided to you by official state and county election authorities, such as your Secretary of State, registrar, or elections director?*** **(percent)** | | ***Were you able to access and understand information about how ballots are counted fairly and accurately in this election provided to you by official state and county election authorities, such as your Secretary of State, registrar, or elections director?*** **(percent)** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| **Hearing** | 92.86 | 7.14 | 80.57 | 19.43 |
| **Seeing** | 89.93 | 10.07 | 75.69 | 24.31 |
| **Walking** | 91.59 | 8.41 | 81.49 | 18.51 |
| **Hands** | 87.37 | 12.63 | 78.95 | 21.05 |
| **Reading** | 89.89 | 10.11 | 82.02 | 17.98 |
| **Talking** | 78.87 | 21.13 | 71.83 | 28.17 |
| **Thinking** | 81.37 | 18.63 | 70.59 | 29.41 |
| **Remembering** | 83.33 | 16.67 | 75.33 | 24.67 |

## Demographic Variation in Trust within the Disabled Community

Consider next patterns within the community of respondents with disabilities and how they compare across partisanship, ethnorace, education, gender, age, income, and region.[3] One-way ANOVA (analysis of variance) tests were employed to assess the statistical significance of variations among the categories within the group. If it is found that at least two groups are significantly different from each other, Tukey's HSD post-hoc tests are utilized. These tests allow direct comparisons between each group within each category, providing a more detailed examination of the differences.

### *Partisanship*

There are particularly noticeable differences in trust----margins as wide as 47 percentage points between Democrats, at 85.23 percent, and Republicans, at 37.46 percent. That is, Democratic respondents with disabilities are more than twice as likely as Republicans with disabilities to trust that the 2022 midterm results accurately reflected the vote. Independent respondents with disabilities find themselves in the middle with 46.82 percent trusting the results. With fraud, the relationship is shifted: Republican respondents with disabilities, 43.65 percent, are more likely to distrust results than Democratic respondents with disabilities, 7.99 percent, believing instead in significant fraud during the 2022 midterms. Again, independents are found in between, with 28.09 percent believing there is significant fraud. An initial ANOVA test reveals significant differences among the groups ($F(2) = [98.23]$, $p < [.0001]$). A post-hoc Tukey test reveals that all groups----Democrats, Republicans, and independents----are statistically different from each other ($p < 0.001$). These results can conclude that, even within the disabled community, partisanship has a great impact on trust in election results.

### *Race and Ethnicity*

Again, within the community of respondents with disabilities, patterns can be noticed along ethnoracial lines when it comes to trust in the 2022 midterm election results. White respondents with disabilities had the highest levels of perception of fraud with nearly 27 percent of respondents----more than one in four----thinking there was significant fraud in the 2022 midterm elections. There is a sharp drop-off for the other ethnoracial groups. Black respondents with disabilities had the next highest levels of distrust at only 16.49 percent. Hispanic and Asian-American respondents with disabilities had the lowest levels of perceptions of fraud at 12.50 percent and 7.14 percent, respectively. On the other hand, Black respondents with disabilities had the highest levels of trust with over 70 percent of respondents trusting that the 2022 midterm results accurately reflected the vote. Asian-American respondents with disabilities registered 64.29 percent, followed by white respondents with disabilities at 59.97 percent. Last, Hispanic respondents with disabilities had the lowest levels of trust with only 43.75 percent of respondents

3 For a comparison to respondents without disabilities, please see this report: https://yankelovichcenter.ucsd.edu/_files/reports/After-The-2022-Midterms-Do-Americans-Trust-Elections.pdf.

saying they trusted that the 2022 midterm election results accurately reflected the vote. An ANOVA test reveals significant differences among the groups ($F(4) = [2.743]$, $p = 0.0276$). A post-hoc Tukey test reveals that significance can be found when comparing levels of trust among Black disabled respondents and others, which include "some other race," "American Indian or Alaska Native," or "prefer not to say" ($p = 0.02$).

### *Educational Attainment and Gender*

Respondents with disabilities reflect similar patterns to the overall sample when it comes to educational attainment. That is, the higher level of education a respondent receives, the higher is the likelihood that respondents will answer that they trust the results of the 2022 midterm election. There is also a clear gender difference among respondents with disabilities: 62.67 percent of female respondents trusted in the accuracy of the results, whereas only 57.02 percent of male respondents believed in the accuracy of the results. Comparably, 26.81 percent of male respondents perceived there to be significant fraud in the 2022 midterm elections while only 22.44 percent of female respondents responded in the same manner.

Again, ANOVAs were conducted on both of these categories. While no significance was found among gender ($p > 0.05$), significance is found on educational attainment ($F(5) = [3.648]$, $p = 0.00285$). A post-hoc Tukey test shows that the groups that are statistically different from one another are those who have advanced degrees compared to those whose highest level of education is a high school diploma. In other words, these two categories have significant differences in their trust in elections outcomes.

### *Age Group, Income, and Region*

With age, results show that older respondents with disabilities have higher levels of trust that the 2022 midterm elections are accurate. In contrast, there is a relatively similar rate of belief that there was fraud in the 2022 midterm election across age cohorts, hovering between 23 percent and 27 percent. Income has a two-step jump when it comes to trust in the election results. That is, for respondents with household incomes below $75,000, trust in the result of the election hovers between 55 percent and 60 percent. The first jump occurs at income levels between $75,000 and $150,000, where about 70 percent of respondents with disabilities trust that the 2022 midterm election results are accurate. The second jump occurs for household incomes at and above $150,000. In this income cohort, just over 81 percent of respondents trust in the accuracy of these election results. This income cohort also has the lowest reported level of distrust in the election results with only 6.25 percent of these respondents perceiving there to be fraud in the 2022 midterm results.

Last, region does not appear to bring much variation. Among respondents with disabilities across all regions, about 25 percent perceive there to be fraud in the 2022 midterm results. In the Midwest, 65.42 percent of respondents with disabilities trust

the results of the elections while those in the West show the lowest levels of trust at 57.14 percent. ANOVAs run on all of these groups find no statistical significance for any ($p > 0.05$).

**Table 6. Trust within Disability Demographic Groups**

| | Trusts that 2022 midterm results accurately reflected the vote (percent) | Thinks there is significant fraud in the 2022 midterms (percent) |
|---|---|---|
| **All Respondents with Disabilities** | 59.98 | 24.52 |
| **Partisan Affiliation *** | | |
| Democrat | 85.23 | 7.99 |
| Republican | 37.46 | 43.65 |
| Independent | 46.82 | 28.09 |
| **Ethnorace *** | | |
| White | 59.97 | 26.69 |
| Black | 72.94 | 16.47 |
| Hispanic | 43.75 | 12.50 |
| Asian | 64.29 | 7.14 |
| **Educational Attainment *** | | |
| No high school degree | 43.48 | 26.09 |
| High school degree | 54.04 | 28.13 |
| Some college | 62.01 | 24.03 |
| College graduate | 64.41 | 22.03 |
| Higher education degree | 77.42 | 13.98 |
| **Gender** | | |
| Male | 57.02 | 26.81 |
| Female | 62.67 | 22.44 |
| **Age** | | |
| 18-24 | 52.86 | 27.86 |
| 25-44 | 55.79 | 23.61 |
| 45-64 | 61.11 | 23.06 |
| 65+ | 66.14 | 25.59 |
| **Household Income** | | |
| Under $25,000 | 58.72 | 23.59 |
| $25,000 to $49,999 | 55.71 | 31.43 |

| | Trusts that 2022 midterm results accurately reflected the vote (percent) | Thinks there is significant fraud in the 2022 midterms (percent) |
|---|---|---|
| $50,000 to $74,999 | 59.22 | 22.33 |
| $75,000 to $99,999 | 69.77 | 16.28 |
| $100,000 to $149,999 | 71.88 | 18.75 |
| $150,000 and above | 81.25 | 6.25 |
| **Region** | | |
| Northeast | 58.02 | 24.69 |
| Midwest | 65.42 | 25.00 |
| South | 58.81 | 24.07 |
| West | 57.14 | 24.73 |

*Note: Asterisks indicate a statistically significant difference between respondents across at least two levels of the variable.*

## Modeling the Independent Effect of Having a Disability on Trust in Elections

Finally, a multivariate regression model is included to assess the effect of having a disability on one's trust in the 2022 election. Respondents are coded as having a disability if they indicate they have any of the aforementioned disabilities in the same way as they were coded above for the descriptive analyses. Model 1 is a simple, bivariate regression of general trust in elections regressed on disability status. There is no evidence of a relationship in this model.

Model 2 includes party identification of the respondent. Here, the reference category is Independent. This model indicates Democrats are generally more trusting and Republicans less trusting of elections when compared to independents, all else equal. Additionally, the coefficient for respondents with disabilities reaches statistical significance at the $p < 0.05$ level. This means that, all else equal, respondents with disabilities are *less trusting* in elections than their non-disabled counterparts.

Finally, in Model 3, a set of control variables are included that are known to influence a wide range of political outcomes----age, gender, education, and household income. Including these controls affects neither the direction nor the significance of the finding in Model 2. That is, even controlling for this set of demographic characteristics, there is evidence that, all else equal, respondents with disabilities are less trusting than respondents without disabilities in the sample.

**Table 7. Trust in 2022 Midterm Elections**

| | General Trust in Elections (1-4) | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Model 1** | **Model 2** | **Model 3** |
| (Intercept) | 2.766*** | 2.568*** | 2.573*** |
| | (0.024) | (0.036) | (0.131) |
| Disabled | -0.056 | -0.083* | -0.076* |
| | (0.042) | (0.038) | (0.039) |
| Democrat | | 0.721*** | 0.708*** |
| | | (0.045) | (0.044) |
| Republican | | -0.258*** | -0.287*** |
| | | (0.047) | (0.046) |
| Controls | | | √ |
| $R^2$ | 0.001 | 0.165 | 0.209 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | 0.000 | 0.164 | 0.201 |
| Num. obs. | 2932 | 2932 | 2932 |

*$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$*

## Discussion

This study highlights the intersection of disability and trust in elections, revealing that voters with disabilities express lower confidence in the accuracy of their votes being counted compared to their non-disabled counterparts. The preference for voting by mail among disabled voters, which instilled greater confidence, underscores the importance of accessible and flexible voting methods. However, the variation in trust levels across disability categories and partisan affiliations suggests electoral confidence is shaped by both identity and political context. This underscores the need for more inclusive electoral practices that address the unique challenges faced by voters with disabilities, particularly in an era of widespread mis- and disinformation. Future research should further explore the experiences of voters with disabilities, including how different types of disabilities and intersecting identities influence trust and participation in elections. Additionally, policymakers must consider these insights to design electoral systems that not only ensure accessibility but also bolster confidence in the democratic process for all voters.

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# Response to "How Much Did Voters with Disabilities Trust in the 2022 Midterm Elections?"

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The insights from this article reflect many of the realities I have seen in my work advising staff on accessibility and facilitating accessible services for members of the public. The study brings attention to the nuanced experiences of voters with disabilities and underscores the importance of building not just accessible election systems but also trust in those systems. While it is encouraging to see that many voters with disabilities express confidence in the overall system, the lower confidence in whether their own votes are counted accurately points to opportunities for deeper engagement, outreach, and support.

From my experience, one of the most persistent barriers is lack of awareness. Many people with disabilities do not realize they have multiple voting options—such as absentee voting, voting with assistance, or using accessible equipment at polling places. Even when accommodations exist, they are not always well publicized. We must work to ensure accessibility does not stop at infrastructure or compliance. It also depends on communication and education that reach the community clearly and consistently.

Ahead of the 2024 presidential election, a local resident requested a simple flyer outlining voting options for people with disabilities. That request sparked a partnership between my Office of Elections and Voter Registration and me. Together, we created an accessible voting flyer in English and Spanish. It includes details on accessible polling places, curbside voting, ballot-marking tools for voters with print disabilities, and how to request accommodations.

The request underscored how essential proactive communication is. To ensure voting is truly accessible, elections professionals should consider how and when they are reaching out to the community with information about accessible voting. When people know their rights, they vote with confidence. And confidence builds trust.

The report also underscores the importance of well-trained election staff. Poll workers can shape the voting experience. They need more than a checklist. They need meaningful training on Americans with Disabilities Act requirements, disability etiquette, and how to assist people without making assumptions. A prepared, respectful team can turn a stressful situation into a welcoming one.

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Trust in elections is not built by policy alone. It is also built through experience. The report's findings on how trust varies by disability type, race, and political affiliation underscore the complexity of the issue. But one truth remains clear: inclusion must be intentional. Accessibility is more than ramps and adaptive machines. It is about relationships, respect, and systems designed to meet the diverse needs of every voter.

# Response to "How Much Did Voters with Disabilities Trust in the 2022 Midterm Elections?"

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The article raises an important point about the role of vote by mail in increasing electoral trust among voters with disabilities. It correctly highlights that a significant number of voters with disabilities rely on mail-in voting as a more accessible and trustworthy alternative to in-person voting. However, it is surprising that the article does not mention accessible remote ballot solutions, particularly those that include electronic ballot return—a key advancement in expanding voting access for individuals with disabilities.

Accessible remote ballot systems with electronic return capabilities enable voters with disabilities to receive, mark, and submit their ballots entirely electronically. This method removes numerous barriers that traditional voting methods still present. For example, in-person voting often involves inaccessible transportation, limited parking, poorly designed paths of travel, and voting booths that do not accommodate mobility or visual impairments. Even vote by mail can pose challenges, such as difficulty handling physical ballots or navigating the U.S. Postal Service to send and receive election materials.

Electronic ballot return significantly enhances the voting process by allowing eligible voters to cast their ballots independently and privately—an essential aspect of full electoral participation. It also ensures that voters who face time-sensitive or last-minute accessibility obstacles can still vote effectively. Despite its potential, this technology remains underutilized and under-researched.

It would be valuable for future research to explore how accessible remote ballot options—including electronic ballot return—impact voter turnout and perceptions of election integrity among people with disabilities. Such studies could inform policy decisions, improve voting system design, and ultimately support a more inclusive democracy. Expanding our understanding of how these tools affect trust and participation is essential to ensuring that all voters, regardless of ability, have equal access to the ballot.

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# Facebook and Texas School Bond Elections: Localizing Facebook's Influence on Bond Passage

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ABSTRACT

Bond elections are the seeds for new growth because they facilitate capital improvement needs such as new facilities, campus renovations, and technological infrastructure. A school bond election impacts whole communities. How stakeholders engage with bond messaging is theorized to influence bond passage. To sufficiently inform community stakeholders on an upcoming bond election, school districts may perceive that leveraging social media platforms, like Facebook, will lead to bond passage. This paper seeks to further evaluate how social media engagement on Facebook impacted bond elections for 79 public school districts in Texas. Contrary to the theoretical explorations defined early in the study, this study finds social media engagement and the frequency of posts on Facebook positively influences bond passage.

## Introduction

School bond elections are vital both for capital improvements within independent school districts and for community stakeholders who financially support such enterprises. Historically, bond election engagement strategies for community stakeholders ranged from town hall meetings to tri-fold pamphlets to fact sheets. With the evolution of social media, specifically Facebook, districts currently utilize various social media platforms to engage with stakeholders on school bond elections, whereas such engagement can become polemical. This paper seeks to specify how social media engagement influences school bond elections and to what extent Facebook engagement impacts election outcomes. By analyzing Facebook engagement trends in school bond elections, this study aims to determine whether digital outreach fosters support or inadvertently fuels opposition, ultimately shaping best practices for administrators navigating social media in election campaigns.

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There is an existing tendency to shift towards Facebook to increase stakeholder engagement during a competitive election. According to Auter and Fine (2018, 186), "While nearly all candidates engage in some level of campaigning on social media, candidates in competitive races, challengers, and underdog candidates more fervently adopt these types of strategies on Facebook." Concerning school bond elections, it is theorized in this analysis that the bonds which pass have less Facebook engagement and are subsequently less competitive. When bond elections become highly contested, school districts may turn to Facebook as a tool for persuasion and outreach. Such findings could infer that school district administrators utilize Facebook to emphasize the necessity of passing a bond election. Alternatively, Facebook engagement with community stakeholders may evoke avoidable confusion and decrease the likelihood of bond passage. Increased visibility and discussion can also intensify opposition, making passage more difficult. This study hypothesizes that increased engagement correlates with a more competitive, and potentially less successful, bond passage rate as heightened public discourse may introduce more resistance than support. Thus, this paper, in theory, explores the following correlations between social media engagement and organizational purpose pertaining to bond passage:

1. the degree to which Facebook serves as an effective catalyst in emphasizing organizational needs to stakeholders,
2. the role of social media in local elections through a focus on Facebook's two-way engagement and the risk of generating complex interactions, and
3. an examination of how to disseminate knowledge with stakeholders in a format that meets the organizational purpose and desired outcomes.

Understanding this relationship is vital for school administrators and policymakers as it could influence future communication strategies and resource allocation in bond campaigns.

Engagement across social media platforms is profoundly public and affords immediate two-way communication. When a school administrator develops bond election messaging for a Facebook post, community stakeholders engage with such postings producing an overall advantageous or detrimental impact on bond passage. Hence, a practical solution is finding a balanced approach when employing a social media agent, specifically regarding elections, that allows the modern-day administrator efficient distribution of knowledge that satisfies organizational intentions and meets stakeholder expectations. If a significant inverse correlation is found between engagement on Facebook and the passage of a school bond, proclaiming Facebook as advantageous to disseminating information in future elections may need to be reevaluated for efficacy.

## Literature Review

A notable quantity of enduring research interprets social media's influence on local, state, and federal elections. While national- and state-level elections provide a framework for understanding social media's influence on voter behavior, local-level school bond elections differ in scale, stakeholder dynamics, and engagement strategies. Such differences require a more in-depth analysis of Facebook's role in shaping public perception and electoral outcomes within communities. Additionally, a considerable amount of research examines the underlying causes of whether a school bond passes or fails. Yet, limited studies specifically address Facebook engagement and its direct influence on school bond election results in Texas communities. While prior studies (e.g., Cox and Mcleod 2014; Lavergne 2017) explore social media's impact on political transparency and stakeholder involvement, research specifically linking Facebook engagement to school bond election outcomes is scarce. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how online interactions influence voter decision making in local bond elections.

### *Facebook's Political Atmosphere*

Emerging research has aimed to improve or establish school administrators' social media policies, demonstrating an amplified interest in public school leadership and the social media experience (Smith et al. 2012; Lopez and Combs 2017). Media reports across the nation, likewise, have yielded insight into engagement on Facebook that appears connected with a bond passage. This existing pool of relevant research will contribute practical knowledge for the motive of this study.

Fostering social media engagement among teachers, school administrators, parents, and community stakeholders is encouraged in public school districts. However, an appropriate guide for such participation is not readily available for many school districts, creating severe challenges for all parties involved. Headlines throughout the country feature episodes of inappropriate social media missteps leading to the termination of essential school personnel and embarrassment within the school community. Mergel and Bretschneider (2013) support institutionalizing social media and call for the adoption of sound guidelines developed into an official document to direct practitioners in the public sector. It is inferred that social media policies can prevent stakeholder confusion and perhaps curb the complexity and political misperceptions often observed across election campaigning methods on Facebook (Garrett 2019). Without established guidelines school administrators may unknowingly craft messaging that creates confusion or fuels unnecessary debate, potentially undermining support for bond initiatives. Cox and Mcleod (2014) find that social media platforms allowed for more transparency regarding finance and decision-making processes and stronger connections to local stakeholders. Also, Lopez and Combs (2017) note that social media helps stakeholders feel informed, which may increase enthusiasm to address district needs. Similarly, Lavergne (2017) argues that social media allows all stakeholders to feel informed which may increase enthusiasm to address district needs. While Mergel and Bretschneider (2013) highlight the importance of institutionalizing social media policies, it remains

unclear whether such policies influence bond passage outcomes. This study will extend existing findings by examining how Facebook engagement may shape voter perceptions in local school district elections.

More than a decade ago, a significant user engagement trend emerged linking Facebook and the election process. Candidates took to Facebook in 2006, increasing citizen interaction yet further complicating the dynamics of political communication (MacWilliams 2015; Williams and Gulati 2013). As campaigns grew highly unrestricted inside the social media environment, a politically charged discussion was shared through a network of opinion leaders where the back-and-forth dissemination of information remained alive and well (Feezell 2018). Mergel (2017, 489) finds that existing social media studies furthermore neglect potential measures of this back-and-forth dissemination of information, remarking, "These measures are the dyadic relationships between actors which can be analyzed to conclude the segmentation of stakeholders or the quality of content shared on social media." Additionally, Siebers, Gradus, and Grotens (2018) discover that, surprisingly, local engagement cripples citizens' trust. Hájek (2018, 13) finds a likewise deduction claiming, "that the use of Facebook in the campaign is considered as a standard (and demanded) part of the campaign, a sign of its professional administration, even where the citizens admit that there might be no added value to such involvement." Hájek (2018) moreover argues that evaluating Facebook as an impactful campaigning tool considers a wealth of complexities ranging from the existing experience with local politics to the socioeconomic conditions of the people.

Alternatively, several scholars have reasoned there is still an existing correlation between the decision to vote and engagement on Facebook. "For many users, political discussion on Facebook is likely an early event in the chain of decisions to ultimately participate in politics" (Settle et al. 2016, 373). Carlisle and Patton (2013) observe that although there is a substantial correlation between engagement and political participation, Facebook users with a higher number of friends as well as users who were members of more social media groups were less politically mobilized. Additionally, digital social signals that prompt peer influence—such as the "I voted" button, tagging, and "poking" friends to vote on Facebook—factor into mobilization strategies (Aral 2012; Haenschen 2016; Gottfried et al. 2017). Teresi and Michelson (2015, 195) further argue that "increased use of online social networking sites should not be interpreted as a danger to social capital but rather as an alternative means of generating it." Carlisle and Patton (2013) also find that traditional socioeconomic factors of parental income, gender, and ethnicity are irrelevant regarding Facebook. However, an exception proved that minorities tend to benefit the most. "[W]e find this to indicate that perhaps Facebook is leveling the playing field and allowing those who might lack the resources to participate in a conventional sense, the ability to participate in a digital sense" (Carlisle and Patton 2013, 892).

In 2017, Xenos, Macafee, and Pole reviewed archived 2010 U.S. election data on Facebook concerning how users interact—counting for likes and comments—with each candidate's posts—testing for variables of a call to action, photos, and thanks—throughout the campaigning period. Distinct from preceding research on social media and elections, the authors of this study explore how singular posts on Facebook influence supply and demand between social media interactions and campaigning. The authors find, "the closer the contest, the greater effort all interested parties invest in attempts to secure victory by mobilizing or swaying decisive votes ... such activities regularly play out in social media" (Xenos, Macafee, and Pole 2017, 831). Despite several limitations, including human coding errors and a lack of advanced Facebook data collection tools, the study identified a significant correlation and "notable patterns" between Facebook posts and user engagement (Xenos, Macafee, and Pole 2017, 839). An unexpected insight within the study further reveals that an increase in campaign postings resulted in lower user engagement:

> ... our findings run contrary to our initial expectations, which were that more frequent posting should elicit greater user response, by creating more occasions for such response and priming user interaction. Rather than increasing user response, we found that the freshness of posts (as measured by smaller increments of time between that post and the one immediately preceding it) was significantly associated with less user response (Xenos, Macafee, and Pole 2017, 839).

The outcomes indicate that an increase in social media postings does not increase stakeholder engagement towards a mean (Xenos, Macafee, and Pole 2017, 840). This finding has critical implications for school bond elections, where frequent posting by administrators might not always lead to increased support but could instead reduce stakeholder engagement. In comparative research for measuring campaign effectiveness, Khairuddin and Rao (2017) find the number of likes generated on a Facebook page does not depend on the frequency of posts shared. As such, the study manifests questions on whether counting likes in terms of posting frequency is the best variable to use in measuring performance, suggesting that the number of comments could best lead to a more significant correlation of engagement in future research. Although likes and comments serve as indicators of online engagement, they do not necessarily translate into voter turnout or support for a bond measure. In some cases increased digital interaction may signal heightened opposition rather than widespread approval, making it critical to assess not just volume but sentiment in stakeholder engagement.

## *A Review of School Bond Passage Literature*

Several studies have attempted to estimate the grounds of school bond election passage or failure. These studies have examined various factors that might change the election's outcome, including school choice, the number of attempts to pass the bond, the type of bond, community characteristics, voter turnout, and property tax

implications. In a comprehensive study, Bowers and Lee (2013, 746) found Texas had a high passage rate at 77 percent from 1997 to 2009. Bowers and Lee (2013, 747) discovered through their study that the "first float," the first attempt by a district to pass a bond, was the most likely attempt to pass, at 78.24 percent. Second and third attempts, or "refloats," passed 72.5 percent and 44 percent of the time, respectively.

Bonds that mentioned buildings, renovations, debt refinance, or technology passed 77.66 percent to 82.86 percent of the time while bonds for athletics—stadiums and fields—and art—performance halls and auditoriums—passed only 62.33 percent and 61.11 percent of the time, respectively (Bowers and Lee 2013, 747). Interestingly, regardless of the district type—city, suburb, town, or rural—all passed bonds at roughly the same rate. Furthermore, populations with higher percentages of citizens aged 65 or older had a negative impact, whereas populations with a higher percentage of Hispanic or Asian citizens positively impacted passage (Bowers and Lee 2013, 751).

Within a similar vein, Cattaneo and Wolter (2009, 231) find that, among Swiss voters, senior citizens are far less willing to spend money on education and would rather spend money on health and social security. With each additional year of age, the probability of supporting an increase in education spending decreased by 0.16 percentage points. Fletcher and Kenny (2008) find that a higher percentage of U.S. citizens aged 65 or older caused a drop in school spending. Lastly, Gong and Rogers (2014) find that higher-than-expected turnout is associated with lower probabilities of bond passage.

### *Bond Passage and Social Media*

In the Broadalbin-Perth Central School District, the superintendent, Stephen Tomlinson, was reported in *The Daily Gazette* as an adamant proponent for effective communication practices. "Tomlinson ... emphasized the importance of building a positive brand among the districts' families and its communities' residents and voters" (Matson 2018). Tomlinson's sentiment is strengthened by Ahlquist (2014, 60), who claims, "In order for leaders to address and embrace change, emerging technologies are critical to building competence." Although, not all school districts have shared such opportunistic encounters with social media.

Robinson Independent School District—located south of Waco, Texas—experienced an overwhelming rejection of a $31.5-million bond issue in May 2019. Whereas 1,219 citizens voted against the bond, only 535 voted for its passage. The wide margin surprised many residents, including Robinson ISD's school board president, who reportedly blamed the spread of misinformation across Facebook as detrimental to the bond, saying, "I'm disappointed that many people voted against it as a result of misinformation and misinterpreting information. Facebook was not our friend" (Crum 2019). Midland Independent School District, in Midland, Texas, also came under fire in September 2019 when a bond announcement at a football game rang to the tune of political advocacy, according to community members (Addison 2019). Residents expressed their concerns to a local newspaper, the

*Midland Reporter-Telegram*, wherein the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the Texas Association of School Boards, and the Texas Election Commission soon became involved. According to Corrigall-Brown and Wilkes (2014), exposure in newspapers was the most critical medium for predicting voting for or protesting against an election. It was later determined Midland ISD's actions were within legal and ethical boundaries and social media postings were also in compliance, meaning campaign messaging was free of "social media manipulation on voter turnout and vote choice" (Aral and Eckles 2019).

In the case of Midland ISD, there was an observable line between political advertising and disseminating information to stakeholders. Local media outlets were informed, potentially impacting voter turnout, and state agencies were required to step in. School superintendents today may, therefore, require additional training to establish superior proficiency with social media messaging. "[T]he superintendent's traditional instructional leadership role takes new forms when confronted with digital learning tools, campus networks, social media, and other online systems" (Mcleod, Richardson, and Sauers 2015). If public entities exceedingly push a cause, agenda, or election on Facebook, it may be inferred that such a cause, agenda, or election is contentious versus assured. Therefore, if the motive is to increase stakeholder awareness of bond approval with an achievement metric of increasing engagement on Facebook, an increase in singular bond election posts will enact the opposite. Consequently, such perception warrants proper inquiry of the proposed correlation between passing a school bond in an election in Texas public schools and engagement methods on Facebook.

This paper theorizes that an increase in Facebook engagement could negate bond passage. Bonds that pass with a higher percentage have less Facebook engagement. Consequently, school administrators turn toward Facebook to emphasize the necessity of passing a bond election, whereby Facebook engagement may evoke detrimental election results. To analyze the impact of Facebook on bond elections, bond election data from 97 Texas independent school districts and 102 bond proposals from the November 2018 and May 2019 election cycles, in coincidence with each district's social media engagement strategies on Facebook, conferred the following hypotheses.

- **H1: Facebook engagement decreases the likelihood of school bond passage.**
- **H2: Facebook post frequency decreases the likelihood of school bond passage**.

## Data and Methodology

### *Sample*

To test the hypotheses about bond passage, data from the November 6, 2018, and May 4, 2019, bond elections were gathered from 97 Texas independent school districts that aimed to pass 102 bonds in which 22.7 percent of bonds were defeated.

The bond election data were collected through the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts website and the Texas Bond Review Board website. Content tends to overlap across social media platforms—such as Facebook, Instagram, and X/Twitter (Bossetta 2018; Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor 2018; Stier et al. 2018). Therefore, this study collected data from Facebook exclusively.

Although 97 districts were accounted for in the original sample of bond elections, it was discovered that 20 districts did not maintain an official ISD Facebook account or did not officially post on the bond election and were, therefore, ineligible for the study. As Facebook was the selected platform for this study, engagement needed to be measured solely on official ISD accounts so as not to convolute resulting statistics that would have accounted for content postings from sources such as bond committee advocacy pages.

It is important to note that out of the 97 school districts evaluated, 15 districts had bond committee advocacy pages and two had opposition pages. This study does not evaluate the impact of committee advocacy or opposition pages and the potential impact on bond election results, but future research should examine their influence potential. Therefore, the final sample accounted for 79 school districts in Texas that maintained an official ISD Facebook account.

## *Modeling*

This paper employs the following log regression model:

$$\textbf{Passage} = \beta(\textbf{engage}) + \alpha\,(\textbf{freq}) + \delta\,(\textbf{bond amount}) + \lambda(\textbf{TEA rating}) + \varphi(\textbf{political}) + \sigma(\textbf{demographic characteristics})$$

The independent variables (IVs) included in this paper were based on: 1) Facebook engagement analytics—i.e., likes and shares—and 2) frequency of posts. A linear probability model is utilized to ease interpretation. These models yield consistent results as logistic regressions. The IVs for this research inquiry incorporated the collection of Facebook post engagement rates of likes and shares, frequency of posts, TEA's report card rating, political orientation, and bond amount. The primary dependent variable (DV) was the bond's passage, i.e., whether citizens approved the bond or it was defeated. Using the Bond Review Board Database Search of Texas Local Government Bond Elections, voter counts—for and against—were sourced for the November 2018 and May 2019 election cycles. In addition, all bond data and the gap of years in bond elections starting from 2013 onwards were sourced from the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts.

## *Engagement*

The total engagement rate was measured throughout two active bond election periods: 1) January to May for the May 2019 election cycle and 2) July to November for the November 2018 election cycle. During the active bond election months, this study compiled data on the number of likes and shares each district's Facebook posts received on bond-related topics. The individual post counts were then combined to calculate a total engagement rate for each district during the bond election period.

The mean engagement rate across all districts was 35.88 with a minimum count of 1.25 and a maximum of 351. This suggests significant variation in engagement across communities during the election period with some districts generating relatively low levels of engagement while others registered much higher. It is important to note this data only capture engagement on Facebook and may not reflect engagement through other channels or in-person interactions. Additionally, the data were only collected during the active bond election periods and did not provide information about engagement before or after the election. Overall, these factors should be taken into account when interpreting the results of the study.

### *Frequency*

The frequency of bond-related Facebook postings from each district during the bond election period was measured by counting the total number of postings made by the district during that period. This provides a benchmark of how often the district shared information related to the bond election on Facebook, which could indicate the district's level of engagement and investment in the bond's passage. The frequency of Facebook posts is just one factor that can provide insight into a district's approach to communicating with constituents during an election period. Regardless, it should be considered with other factors, such as engagement rates, and control variables, such as the bond amount, to best understand Facebook's influence on bond passage.

### *Controls*

The 2018-19 Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) was used to gather information on each district included in the sample. These data were used to control for potential confounding variables in the analysis. Specifically, percent minority (African American, Hispanic, American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander, and two or more races), economically disadvantaged (free and reduced lunch), TEA A-F Accountability Ratings, and district-wide enrollment counts were all taken into account.

Additionally, 2010 Census data were used to control for the population of senior citizens aged 65 and above within the district's county and geographic classification. The Census Bureau defines rural as any population not in an urban cluster area, whereas an urban cluster must meet the minimum population threshold of 2,500. Therefore, districts were classified as metropolitan or micropolitan based on the Census classification. If a district's location was not listed as either of these classifications, the category of urban cluster or rural area was used based on the distinction provided by the Census. This classification process permitted the grouping of districts based on similar geographic characteristics. For districts with students from more than one county, the senior population quantiles from each corresponding county were combined to provide a more precise calculation.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics**

| Variable | Obs | Mean | Std. Dev. | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Passage | 79 | 0.76 | 0.43 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Social Engagement | 79 | 35.88 | 46.78 | 1.25 | 351.00 |
| Social Freq | 79 | 4.18 | 3.46 | 1.00 | 18.00 |
| Amount (thousands) | 79 | 16,300 | 30,000 | 1,350 | 176,000 |
| Enrollment (thousands) | 79 | 10,622 | 19,313 | 160 | 117,446 |
| Tea Report Card Rating | 79 | 86.44 | 5.81 | 72.00 | 96.00 |
| Pct Minority (school district) | 79 | 0.56 | 0.24 | 0.07 | 1.02 |
| Pct Poverty (school district) | 79 | 0.16 | 0.07 | 0.02 | 0.35 |
| Pct Senior Population (Census) | 79 | 15.12 | 6.92 | 7.20 | 43.40 |
| Pct Democrat (TX Sec. of State) | 79 | 32.44 | 14.38 | 10.29 | 68.50 |
| Pct Republican (TX Sec. of State) | 79 | 63.48 | 15.13 | 27.14 | 87.47 |

TEA accountability ratings, assigned to districts to measure state-wide performance, are commonly understood in public education in syllabary expressions of letters A through F. However, to streamline statistical values in this study, the numerical value from a TEA A-F rating was aggregated for each district.

Political orientation was used to account for potential political differences among district taxpayers that could impact their engagement with bond-related posts on Facebook. The political orientation variable was measured using data on the percentage of votes cast for Republican and Democratic candidates in the most recent presidential election at the county level. This control was used to estimate the political leanings of each district with districts in counties that voted more heavily for Republican candidates assumed to be more fiscally conservative and those in counties that voted more heavily for Democratic candidates thought to have more social capital (Jha, Boudreaux, and Banerjee 2018).

Including political orientation as a control helps to ensure that any effects observed among engagement, frequency, TEA report card ratings, demographic characteristics, and bond amounts are not merely the result of differences in political orientation among district communities. By controlling for this variable, the analysis can provide a more accurate assessment of the factors influencing bond passage in Texas.

## *Results*

This study collects Facebook groups and official ISD pages for all school districts with a bond election to determine the number of posts regarding the bond, the amount of engagement on each post, and the frequency of posts. To determine demographics such as race, income, education levels, and age breakdowns in each school district examined, this study leverages the American Housing Survey (AHS). Table 1 provides a descriptive summary of the relevant data. This study controls for percent minority, economically disadvantaged, TEA Accountability Ratings, and district-wide enrollment counts.

In theory, if an ISD is utilizing Facebook to share knowledge with local stakeholders in a bond election—i.e., reaching outside traditional public agency-citizen communication methods such as holding an informative town hall meeting—this trend of highly engaged mobility could lead to the ISD ultimately passing the bond. As engagement increases on an official ISD Facebook post through likes and shares, this is associated with an increased likelihood of an ISD passing the bond (β=0.001). See Table 2.

In competitive bond elections, Facebook engagement has a considerable ability to influence a bond election. Thus, it is not incidental to find that school districts frequently post about bond elections on their Facebook accounts. While prior research often examined the impact of Facebook engagement, the frequency of social media posts was often overlooked. The frequency of Facebook postings is positively associated with school bond passage (β=0.014). Again, in a competitive bond election, this could significantly impact the bond outcome.

Regarding the control variables, this study finds that enrollment, accountability ratings, political orientation, and bond amount are not associated with bond passage. While this is not the focus of the study, it is surprising to find that higher bond amounts are not associated with revoked bonds by voters. Additionally, voters are not influenced by lower accountability ratings when deciding to pass a bond. Demographic factors such as percent poverty and percent minority are not associated with bond passage. However, this study finds that higher percentages of senior citizens increased the odds of bond passage. This finding requires a more detailed investigation.

## Discussion

Related literature in social media and education has primarily focused on using social platforms in educational contexts, such as classroom instruction or investigating educator or administrative conduct. However, research on the impact of social media on bond election outcomes at the district level has been limited. The results prove that engagement and frequency matter, correlate positively toward bond passage, and paint a considerably different picture than what had initially been understood of social media behavior. Early literature on Facebook's 2010 election data suggests that excessive engagement on social media can lead to adverse outcomes, such as information overload and voter fatigue (Xenos, Macafee, and Pole 2017). While it is theorized that voters might sense a sales pitch as ISDs become increasingly engaged with their constituents during a bond election on Facebook, the frequency of posts, in contrast with preceding literature, is observed to significantly increase the likelihood of bond passage. Based on our results, it is logical to theorize that a greater frequency of Facebook posts increased engagement, ultimately driving bond passage. The reexamination of such accounts provides insight at the municipal level for how convoluted the system of communicating a school bond election can be.

**Table 2. Regression Analysis**

| | Bond Passage<br>b/se |
|---|---|
| Social Media Engagement | 0.001* |
| | (0.002) |
| Social Media Frequency | 0.014** |
| | (0.027) |
| Bond Amount $ (thousands) | 0.0000 |
| | (0.0000) |
| Enrollment (thousands) | -0.0000 |
| | (0.0000) |
| TEA Report Card Rating | 0.013** |
| | (0.001) |
| Pct Minority (school district) | 0.3147 |
| | (0.3360) |
| Pct Poverty (school district) | 1.007 |
| | (0.102) |
| Pct Senior Population (census) | 0.008* |
| | (0.016) |
| Pct Democrat (TX Sec. of State) | 0.048<br>(-0.089) |
| Pct Republican (TX Sec. of State) | 0.045<br>(-0.089) |
| Constant | 0.2854 |
| | (0.9984) |
| N | 79 |
| r2 | 0.1394 |

Thus, the findings presented in this paper have significant implications for educational research and policy. While the analysis focuses on the impact of social media engagement on bond passage in school districts, the results suggest that frequent Facebook posts by school districts increase engagement and positively correlate with bond passage, which is contrary to the initial assumption that voters might perceive a sales pitch when school districts engage with their constituents on social media. These findings may inform future research on the impact of social media on both political and educational outcomes. As social media becomes an increasingly important news source and a tool for political action, it is crucial to understand how it affects public opinion and decision making. In addition, the study provides a pathway for scholars and practitioners to explore further the relationship between social media engagement and educational outcomes such as bond passage.

Likewise, this paper highlights the complexities of communicating school bond elections with voters. School districts have faced challenges when communicating their messages through traditional media channels, yet social media platforms, like Facebook, allow school districts to reach their constituents directly. Moreover, as the data suggest, posting frequency is essential to achieving engagement and bond passage. Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the role of social media in education policy and raises important questions for further research and process considerations.

From a practical perspective for elections, it is essential to recognize that social media is ubiquitous in our society. According to a 2022 Gallup Poll, 72 percent of Americans have a Facebook account of which 86 percent report using this platform weekly. For many voters, especially parents with children, Facebook serves as a platform to post about accomplishments, learn about upcoming events, and discuss important issues related to the school district. Social media is fast becoming the source of news gathering for citizens and is found to be complementary to political action (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, and Zheng 2014). Nearly every school district in Texas has a Facebook account to better communicate with families in the district. These districts are presumably using social media to educate and provide factual information about bond elections to voters. While providing information via social media is important, school districts must proceed with caution.

Given the rise of social media in a contentious political environment, school districts must be careful to avoid illegal school electioneering. On February 21, 2024, Frisco Independent School District posted, "Public education is always on the ballot. Your vote decides who has a say in school funding. Make sure you get out and vote in the primary election!" Frisco ISD was accused by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton of illegal electioneering with public funds (Osibamowo 2024). These posts were made during a time of heated discussions over school vouchers. Based on this, it is easy to see how a social media post during an election season can invite problems for a district.

This study has three practical recommendations. First, school districts should be focused on factual data and should not advocate for or against any bond measures. By doing so, districts are less exposed to lawsuits. Secondly, it is recommended districts promote respectful and productive discussion on social media platforms. This either requires monitoring and moderating interactions or, more simply, removing the ability to comment on the post altogether to avoid controversy. Lastly, it is important for school district officials to work with their legal teams to maintain compliance with election laws. It is highly recommended that local election officials start receiving training on how election laws can apply to social media communication by local and state government agencies.

## Limitations

Although this study encountered limitations with constraints in sampling size and was conducted within a limited time frame, it is not a stretch to assume Facebook engagement with stakeholders impacted election results at a localized level. Another

possible limitation is the general right-leaning nature of the Texas political arena. Because Texas leans significantly toward the conservative side of politics, political leaning might not be a relevant variable. However, one might be able to see this variable gain significance in states that are traditionally swing states or states that have a larger variety of political leanings.

## Conclusions

The existing correlations in the modest sampling size indicate a promising future for emerging scholarship in this area. This paper can serve as a building block for future scholars and practitioners to grow and improve upon as the political ramifications of Facebook engagement continue to manifest. As for the voters, Oser, Hooghe, and Marien (2013, 98) ascertain that the voters are, "young people ... taking advantage of technological opportunities to engage with politics in a new way through online means." In contrast to this evidence, this study concludes that at a localized level the stakeholder audience for school bond campaigning on Facebook surprisingly comprises senior citizens. Senior citizens involved in Facebook engagement positively influence the odds of bond passage. In looking toward the future of research in this field, studies can benefit from a longitudinal study. Such findings may exhibit where citizen engagement in the election process peaks, with which demographics such engagement is peaking, and how public administrators shift communication tactics over time.

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, are overflowing with citizen-generated social and political opinions, creating a volatile landscape for election influence. While this study offers only a glimpse into how Facebook engagement affects bond election outcomes, further research is needed to support legally sound and effective implementation. Moreover, how this knowledge is applied will help determine the course of 21st-century elections and the influence of social media, potentially swinging the pendulum toward stronger democratic processes or toward the manipulation of citizen preferences.

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# Response to "Facebook and Texas School Bond Elections"

Matt Roberts[1a]

[1] *Pinal County, Arizona*

As an election administrator in Arizona at the state and local levels for more than a decade, I read this study with interest. While school bond elections certainly do not draw as much attention as those at the state and federal levels, these measures require the same, if not more, effort for election administrators in their implementation and execution. The analysis in this particular study can help inform a greater understanding of a unique and hyperlocal political landscape while providing election officials with data that can help with the planning for and implementation of a successful election.

Monitoring social media is crucial to understanding the relative interest in an election. While election officials must be wary of false claims and specious arguments, social media can and does provide a glimpse into the relative interest in an election. For communicators in the field, this study invites an inward-looking review of the positive and negative outcomes of social media interactions from credible inquiries as well as mis-, dis-, and mal- information being spread online.

Interestingly, this study prompts the question of whether election communicators prioritize quality over quantity. For some working in the field, it's tempting, if not required, to report up the chain of command analytics related to the number of posts, and the likes and clicks they generate, as a simple way to measure impact and gauge social media effectiveness. But calculating effectiveness can be challenging, and determining whether or not the juice was worth the squeeze is nearly impossible. Did social media communications result in a more informed electorate? Did social media communications generate a negative reaction? Should we care about effectiveness among those who view elections with a skeptical, if not outright hostile, attitude? Or should we simply move forward and communicate to those who consume the information without bias and ignore so-called "trolls" in their attempts to undermine confidence in the process? The conclusions of this study seem to suggest that the frequency of posting on Facebook successfully influences public opinion on school bonds. Can this approach at a local level be scaled in a way that can also be successful in other election contests?

Working at the intersection of election administration and communications, I feel this study also sheds light on the importance of social media monitoring and how it can provide vital data in the effort to develop our own turnout forecast models from which we as administrators can plan for and carry out elections. Everything from the

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number of ballots to order—some counties do not utilize ballot-on-demand technology—to the number of voting locations and size of polling place staff to gauging the resources needed can all be influenced by utilizing a thorough understanding of social media engagement as another tool in the election professional's toolbox.

It is far too easy for election administrators to go about implementing their standard policies and procedures without necessarily paying close attention to the level at which a community is engaging on a particular issue. That can be especially true in ballot measures related to school bonds that directly impact the lives of those in their communities—not only taxpayers, but the children in the school, the teachers who instruct, and the administrators who run the school district.

Failure lurks around every corner of election administration. While monitoring social media related to school board elections will not provide election administrators with a complete picture of the election, it can serve as another tool to effectively prepare for the contest. Understanding the political environment related to popular support or opposition is important to provide the best possible service to the voters of those jurisdictions.

I look forward to further research on Facebook's impact on hyperlocal elections and if there are effective strategies to target voters in those areas with election information that builds confidence and understanding of how our elections work.

# Response to "Facebook and Texas School Bond Elections"

Jessica Lord[1a]

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The topic regarding Facebook's influence on elections is relevant for election administrators across the United States. Social media has become more intertwined in all aspects of elections and politics. In our current era, digital communications play an increasingly dominant role. This study presents research that is not only useful but also valuable to election administrators. Districts' digital communication strategies can either benefit or hinder voters and community support for funding measures.

One highlight from the study is the relationship between the frequency of posts and the rates of engagement regarding the specific issue of bond passage. This can allow for an enhanced approach to educating voters and collaborating with other institutions. There are times when excessive posting could irritate voters, seem too aggressive, or be seen as vigorous campaigning. Although, when the information is factual, transparent, and clear, it enhances trust and support. Educating voters is of the utmost importance. Social media is a crucial avenue that can be utilized. Voter education fosters voter participation.

Another takeaway is the insight mentioned earlier: Facebook's dual role as an asset and a liability. As an election administrator, one problem that can be amplified by social media is misinformation, disinformation, and emotional rhetoric. As the authors mentioned in the case of the Robinson ISD, the bond ultimately failed due to the misinterpretations on Facebook. From a government standpoint, we must be careful with message control. A recommendation to limit public comment sections or establish moderation is especially relevant.

Equally important is the warning about legal boundaries. One missing element in the research is possibly a deeper discussion of the legal framework surrounding election-related communication. There often is a fine line between education and electioneering, as seen in the example involving the Frisco ISD and the attorney general. As administrators, we must remain vigilant and ensure all communication adheres strictly to legal standards. While the research briefly studies the legal risk, it doesn't dive into the challenges that local entities face while protecting First Amendment rights with election communication. Any type of mistake or misstep in this area could be followed up with lawsuits and loss of public trust. Expanded guidance on best practices could enhance the article's connection to election administration's real-world experience.

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Another element that could be explored more deeply is the sentiment of social media engagement. An example of this could come from the comments and interactions. Are they supportive or oppositional? Are the interactions and shares followed by affirming or critical comments? This could help provide an analysis of how public opinion is shaped online.

In conclusion, overall, the article's research is reasonable and likely to be adopted. Districts that already have great communication teams and legal advisors will be more likely to adopt any of these strategies. Smaller or rural districts with fewer resources might struggle. This is a vital area to which election administrators can help contribute by creating best practices and organizing guidance materials or workshops on digital election communications that are compliant and effective.

This article emphasizes the need to adapt in an evolving world. Social media platforms are becoming crucial in elections. The study provides a great foundation for effective engagements. Our role as election officials is always to conduct fair, secure, transparent, and accessible elections. Social media is a powerful element we can add to this ever-changing process.

# Deterring Threats or Deterring Voters? Identifying Trends in Electoral Disruptions

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Keywords: elections, violence, disruptions, LEOs, polling places

ABSTRACT

Following the 2020 presidential election, violence and threats against local election officials emerged as a defining issue within the field of American elections. Born from an absence of trust from the American people, incidents and disturbances around the nation threatened to damage the integrity of the election system, thus making the protection of election workers and polling places of critical importance. In this article, the authors examine the correlation between county-level characteristics and election disruptions reported by voters at polling places in the 2022 midterm election. Through an analysis of context—an election jurisdiction's education level, unemployment rate, level of electoral competition, and racial diversity—the authors show that certain areas are more likely to experience such disruptions. Fortunately, only a small percentage of voters observed polling place disruptions, but these disruptions are significantly correlated with areas with higher education and higher unemployment. The effect of electoral competition is not statistically significant.

## Introduction

Following the 2020 general election, researchers and interest groups set out to understand what made the presidential election an election unlike any other. Although having the highest voter turnout in the history of the United States, many Americans felt disenfranchised (Cox 2021). This led to many Americans feeling the "American way of life was disappearing" (Kleinfeld 2021, 162). As a result of this discontent toward the election system and subsequent outcomes, some Americans have resorted to violence or threats of violence against local election officials. In that atmosphere, it is not hard to imagine other Americans may be willing to support, excuse, or carry out disruptions—or even political violence—at polling places.[1]

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1 Political violence may be defined as "physical harm or intimidation that affects who benefits from or can participate fully in political, economic, or sociocultural life" (Kleinfeld 2021, 161).

When such events take place at the polling place while people are voting, the purpose is often "to create fear and distrust around voting or to sabotage the functioning of democracy" (Leingang 2024).

As future elections approach, a concern for local election officials is whether harassment, threats, or violence may occur at polling places. In a 2024 report, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2023, 19) warned against domestic violent extremists, stating, "violence or threats could be directed at government officials, voters, and elections-related personnel and infrastructure, including polling places, ballot drop box locations, voter registration sites, campaign events, political party offices, and vote counting sites." The 2024 election did witness such problems as bomb threats, protestors brandishing machetes, burning drop boxes, and angry voters refusing to remove political apparel (Leingang 2024), but it was not as bad as some expected. It is still important to consider where issues might take place.

Because polling place disruptions have been relatively rare in the past, and often "benign" (Burden et al. 2017), the present paper examines literature concerning political violence. For example, Nemeth and Hansen (2022) find political context may motivate domestic terrorism events. Specifically, they find greater political competition and a higher white population together predict such events. Following the lead of Nemeth and Hansen (2022) and focusing on election incidents, the authors use observations of polling place disruptions from the 2022 Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAE) (Stewart 2023). The research question is *what types of counties were most likely to see reports of polling place incidents in 2022?* While a midterm election typically has lower voter turnout than a presidential election, the authors argue observations from the 2022 election provide a sound basis for understanding and predicting disruptions in the future.

## A New Reality

Today, voters face a new reality at polling places. This reality is observed through the news reports and stories sharing local election officials' (LEOs) and voters' experiences at the polls. In Iowa, for example, it was reported law enforcement found a live pipe bomb at a central voting location during a special election in March 2021 (AP News 2021). Although there were no injuries, Polk County election officials expressed their concern that there was no way of knowing how long the device was at the polling place (AP News 2021). Other examples come in the form of lethal threats, which many LEOs experience in-person and online during the election season (Gross, Baltz, and Stewart 2023). In the case of an election worker in Nevada, a former U.S. Marine and current employee of the Republican Secretary of State's Office received numerous telephone calls threatening her life (Bedekovics 2022). In Georgia, a man from Texas threatened election officials by posting a Craigslist message for "Georgia Patriots" to use lethal force against election employees (Bedekovics 2022). From these threats and acts of violence at the polls, it seems election officials and public safety officials must plan carefully.

However, for local agencies—i.e., police departments—to respond to acts of violence, there must be an understanding of when and where it is likely to occur. From previous research, scholars and interest groups found violence is likely to occur in areas with higher electoral competition[2] and even more likely when those competitive areas have a lower nonwhite population, meaning less than 27 percent. (Nemeth and Hansen 2022, 344). Nemeth and Hansen theorize areas with a greater white population are more likely to experience political violence because these areas experience fewer interactions with outside groups (Nemeth and Hansen 2022, 341). That opens the door for more anti-minority rhetoric from politicians, especially when elections in a locality are competitive. This "increases perceptions of political threat in right-wing adherents and normalizes violence as an acceptable political activity" (Nemeth and Hansen 2022, 339).

## Threats to Election Workers

The effects of threats on poll workers and local election officials are profound. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, hostile threats against election workers reached an alarming level in 2020 and continued into 2021 (Brennan Center for Justice and Bipartisan Policy Center 2021, 3). The Brennan Center survey also showed one in three poll workers feel unsafe with one in five poll workers expressing their concern about receiving threats related to their job (Brennan Center for Justice and Bipartisan Policy Center 2021, 3–4). Additionally, it was reported 79 percent of local election officials want more government security (Kleinfeld 2021, 160). In 2024, 70 percent of local election officials reported "threats against election officials" have increased (Brennan Center for Justice 2024). While this describes a perceived increase in threats, there is evidence to support this in reality. In 2024, 38 percent of local election officials had been harassed, abused, or threatened (Brennan Center for Justice 2024). This is an increase from the reported 30 percent in 2023 (Brennan Center for Justice 2024). Other reports show that roughly four in ten election workers experienced abuse or harassment with many suffering from post-traumatic stress as a result (Bernardo et al. 2024). Despite these numbers and despite the changes made at each level of government, LEOs' concerns are unrelieved, forcing many election officials to rethink their employment.

Reports of threats against local election officials (LEOs) have been legion, but, of course, LEOs also worry about potential disruptions and violence at polling places because it affects the process they oversee. Sometimes what starts as a simple disruption at a polling facility can lead to greater violence and decreased voter turnout. This may include photography outside the polling facilities, voter intimidation, and blatant voter disinformation. According to the Counter Threats Center (CTC), individuals in North Carolina, Arizona, and Nevada attempted to photograph sensitive equipment and intimidate voters (Bernardo et al. 2024).

2 By "electoral competition" the authors mean, the level of openness or number of available options between candidates or political parties in electoral politics. In Wagner and colleagues' words, electoral competition is a "[m]erasure of the intensity of political competition within a given party system" (Wagner and Krause 2023).

Similarly, officials in El Paso County, Colorado, were verbally harassed by bystanders shouting angrily at them (Bernardo et al. 2024). Scholars have not studied the question of where polling place disruptions occur nor are scholars sure when such disruptions that could turn into violence and when local law enforcement should respond. Therefore, the authors argue identifying the types of locations where there have been polling place incidents in the past can help local officials determine how to work more effectively with law enforcement.

## Methodology

To analyze the research question, the authors use the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (Stewart 2023). Using respondent data obtained by YouGov, the SPAE takes a national sample of citizens after the election to evaluate Americans' experiences with the election.[3] To make this sample representative, SPAE used post-stratification survey weights (Stewart 2023). The survey is conducted in presidential election years with 2014 and 2022 being exceptions. In 2022, the survey asked about "disruptions observed in [the] polling place" and "activities outside the polling place." These voter observations made during in-person voting both early and on election day form the basis of this analysis. These data allow the authors to ask what disruptions individuals observed and then connect individual observations to counties where those individuals live. To do this, the authors merge county-level data with each individual response. Furthermore, the focal hypotheses concentrate on county-level data where the individuals live.

## Hypotheses

The first hypothesis investigates the relationship between electoral competition and disruptions. It is hypothesized that *areas with greater electoral competition will experience more disruptions.* Nemeth and Hansen (2022, 338–339) argue electoral competition leads to exclusionary politics where politicians use threat-based rhetoric to mobilize their voters and increase tension between political groups.

The second hypothesis follows from the first in that it suggests threat-based rhetoric is common, especially when majority voters have little contact with minority voters. The hypothesis analyzes the relationship between racial homogeneity and disturbances. Consistent with Nemeth and Hansen (2022), the present paper hypothesizes that *areas with greater homogeneity will experience greater disruptions*.[4] This is counter to Blalock's *racial threat hypothesis*, which states that as the relative size of racial/ethnic minority groups increases, members of that majority group will feel an increasing threat (Wang and Todak 2016). Nemeth and Hansen (2022, 341) write, "whites in predominantly white regions may be isolated from contact with

3 See appendix for discussion of Yougov methods and weighting.

4 The authors note that the vast majority of the sample identifies as white, 76 percent, and about 10.7 percent identify as Black and are weighted in the analysis.

minorities, meaning that their only perception of the opposing group is based on elite cues. Whites in regions with larger non-white populations, in contrast, are more likely to have personal interactions with outgroups."

Racial homogeneity in a county is measured using the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI). It is used to measure economic market concentration—how many competitors are in a market—but social scientists also use it to measure how concentrated different races are in an area (see Kropf and Knack 2003). The index is calculated by considering the proportion of the county population that each race group comprises.[5] A higher value of the index means there is *less* racial diversity. Therefore, the hypothesis tests whether a higher score on the HHI is associated with more disruptions.[6]

Nemeth and Hansen (2022) do not consider unemployment, but it is included here to model the rise in crime and the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the lockdown mandates across the United States, civilian unemployment rose from 3.5 percent in February 2020 to 14.8 percent in April 2020 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024). The unemployment rate returned to its original pre-COVID percentage by spring 2021, but 79 percent of voters labeled the economy as one of the most important issues for the 2020 election, contributing to dissatisfaction (Pew Research Center 2020, 35). It is hypothesized that *areas with higher unemployment rates will experience greater disturbances.*

Additionally, the present authors explore the relationship a community's education level has with election incidents. Evidence shows that higher levels of education are associated with reduced political violence (Østby, Urdal, and Dupuy 2019, 80). This is true at every level of the education system: primary, secondary, and tertiary (Østby, Urdal, and Dupuy 2019, 80). Therefore, it is hypothesized that *areas with lower education rates will experience greater disturbances*.

## Dependent Variables

To test the hypotheses, it is necessary to know where these incidents take place. The SPAE asked voters, "When you went to vote, did you directly observe any of the following events taking place in the polling place?" and "When you went to vote, did you directly observe any of the following events taking place outside the polling place?" According to the data, 5,587 survey respondents voted in-person, either early or on election day.[7] The best news is that these data show that 5,113 of these voters did not observe a disruption while they voted inside and 4,219 did not observe a disruption outside polling places. Yet, understanding the events that did happen are key even if they are relatively rare.

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5 Please see the appendix for more information on calculating the HHI.

6 A separate test was conducted to determine whether counties with a larger white population will experience more disturbances at the polls, replacing the HHI. The proportion white is not statistically significant compared to disturbances in either model.

7 The reader should note the SPAE has a sample size of 10,200 individuals. Only voters who voted in person, either early or on election day, are included in this analysis.

The dependent variable is separated into inside and outside events. The idea behind this separation is akin to the difference between the inside and outside of a church. The voting booths represent the ideal of democracy in the United States, and as such, this paper predicts that disruptions theoretically should be more likely outside.

Table 1 shows the percentage of voters who observed inside and outside disruptions.[8] The reader will notice that not everything on each list is necessarily disruptive or anyone's idea of violence or a precursor to it. Taking a picture of a voter might simply be someone taking a celebratory picture of a new voter. Yet, in many states such as North Carolina, it is against the law to take a picture in the polling place (Willingham et al. 2020). Activities constituting outside disruptions include, "[p]eople peacefully holding signs or giving out literature in support of a candidate or ballot question" are common and—for the vast majority of polling places—legal activities outside a boundary distance most states set in law (National Conference of State Legislatures 2023). Since disruptions are rare, a dependent variable was created by summing the observations for each voter for inside disruptions and for outside disruptions.[9] Also, using only two independent variables makes for cleaner reporting of findings. The authors decided to include pictures for inside events given its illegality and discouragement in many states but decided **not** to include the "peacefully holding signs" variable in the outside count.

## Independent Variables

The main independent variables examined focus on the context of the county in which the survey respondent lived. The authors use county-level demographics and other characteristics associated with counties across the United States. Education data is obtained from U.S. Census Bureau's Decennial Censuses of Population, the American Community Survey, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2023). Unemployment data was taken from Bureau of Labor Statistics Local Area Unemployment Statistics program and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2023b). The variables used show the unemployment rates and proportion of individuals over the age of 25 with a bachelor's degree or higher in each county.

Additionally, electoral competitiveness is calculated. Using the County Presidential Election Returns 2000-2020 dataset from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Election Data and Science Lab (2018), totals were taken from the results of the 2020 presidential election to ensure comparability across counties. The closeness of the margin of the election is then calculated:

$$1-|R_{votes}-D_{votes}|/(R_{votes}+D_{votes})$$

The margin is subtracted from one so that a larger number indicates greater electoral competitiveness.

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8 Despite the lack of media coverage, disruptions like shouting, arguing, voter intimidation, and suspicious individuals taking pictures are far more common than actual violence (but see Leingang 2024). These disruptions are reported more frequently in research studies and surveys, such as the Survey on the Performance of American Elections. Therefore, *disruptions* are operationalized rather than *violence*.

9 Do these variables really belong in an index? See discussion in appendix.

**Table 1. Disruptions Observed Inside and Outside the Polling Place**

| **Observed Inside the Polling Place** | **Weighted frequencies** |
|---|---|
| People in the polling place talking loudly or acting in a way that disrupted the voting | 250 (4.47 percent) |
| A voter in a dispute with an official election worker | 191 (3.42 percent) |
| A voter in a dispute with another voter | 121 (2.16 percent) |
| An individual, other than a police officer, carrying a gun | 104 (1.88 percent) |
| Someone who was not an official election worker challenging whether someone could vote | 136 (2.44 percent) |
| Someone taking pictures of voters or election workers who did not seem to be a reporter | 87 (1.56 percent) |
| Anything else that seemed disruptive | 80 (1.42 percent) |
| | **969 events** |
| **Observed Outside the Polling Place** | |
| People peacefully holding signs or giving out literature in support of a candidate or ballot question | 1,301 (23.3 percent) |
| Individuals or groups of people casting doubt on whether the election was fraudulent | 183 (3.27 percent) |
| Individuals or groups of people seeming to challenge whether some people could enter the polling place to vote | 167 (2.98 percent) |
| Individuals or groups, other than police officers, carrying a gun | 105 (1.87 percent) |
| Someone taking pictures of voters or election workers who did not seem to be a reporter | 117 (2.09 percent) |
| Anything else that seemed disruptive | 26 (0.47 percent) |
| | **1,899 events** |

Given the Nemeth and Hansen results, racial demographics are also considered. Using data from the Census Bureau for 2022 (U.S. Census Bureau 2024 and "RACE, Decennial Census, Table P1," n.d.), the effect of racial homogeneity is examined with the aforementioned HHI.

## Control Variables

This analysis relies on survey respondents to report disruptive events. Because individual respondents are making the observations, the control variables take into consideration the individual characteristics of the survey respondents. The authors expect those with a higher level of education to be more observant. Given that media reports seem to indicate Republicans are most doubtful of the election process, it is also expected they would be more likely to observe disturbances because they might see them as justified. Age, gender, and race are included as well. Considering the history of racial discrimination, those who identify as Black might be more likely to

observe disturbances at the polling place. The authors utilized SPAE data on respondents' education (coded 1-6), partisan identification (on a 1-7 scale, where 1 is "strong Democrat" and 7 is "strong Republican"), gender (where women=1), and age. Lastly, the authors control whether the respondent voted early or on election day. The authors do not have an expectation about which days might be more or less likely to see more disturbances.

The authors include one county-level control variable—whether the county is rural or urban. This is measured using the Rural-Urban Continuum Code (2023). The Rural-Urban Continuum Code considers a county's level of urbanization and proximity to metro areas. The variable ranges between one, representing the most urban places, and nine, representing the most rural places.[10]

## Results

Examining inside disruptions, several significant results are observed, but some of the hypotheses are not borne out. See Table 2. The first hypothesis examines the relationship between disruptions and electoral competition. The analysis reveals that the relationship is not statistically significant. Thus, contrary to the hypothesis, electoral competition does not result in more disturbances inside the polling place.

The second hypothesis explores the relationship between disturbances and racial homogeneity. What is found is contrary to the hypothesis: an increase in homogeneity is correlated with a decrease in disturbances; stated another way, an increase in diversity correlates to an increase in inside disruptions. While the contours of the racial threat hypothesis are nuanced, it seems as if the findings here are consistent with that hypothesis.

The third hypothesis considered the relationship between disruptions and unemployment. The unemployment rate is positively and statistically significant when compared to the number of reported disturbances. This stands to reason, especially when considered with the results of the fourth hypothesis, which involves education level in a community. There is a statistically significant relationship, but it is in the opposite direction expected. Those communities with higher education levels actually experience more disruptions. While this particular analysis does not establish that unemployment and high education go hand in hand in the counties examined, positive levels for both can lead to dissatisfaction when more highly educated individuals are unemployed or underemployed (Erdogan and Bauer 2021).

Finally, the authors controlled for rural/urban status, and it is not significantly related to inside events. The reader will note that neither more nor fewer inside disruptions were observed on election day. Also note that the authors are not as interested in the individual-level results since, in the present analysis, they are the event observers. However, those individuals with a higher education are more likely

10 For more information on Rural-Urban Continuum Codes, visit https://seer.cancer.gov/seerstat/variables/countyattribs/ruralurban.html

**Table 2. How Does Context Relate to Disruptions Inside the Polling Place?**

| Inside Disruptions | Coef. | Standard Error | t-value | p-value | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Individual Level Variables** | | | | | |
| Voted on Election Day | .07 | .094 | 0.74 | .457 | |
| Respondent Education | .088 | .045 | 1.97 | .049 | ** |
| Races Compared to White | 0 | . | . | . | |
| Black | .573 | .193 | 2.97 | .003 | *** |
| Hispanic | .128 | .206 | 0.62 | .536 | |
| Asian | .963 | .349 | 2.76 | .006 | *** |
| Native American | .734 | .375 | 1.96 | .05 | * |
| Two or more races | -.348 | .688 | -0.51 | .613 | |
| Other | .542 | .337 | 1.61 | .108 | |
| Middle Eastern | 1.209 | .202 | 5.99 | 0 | *** |
| **County Level Variables** | | | | | |
| Respondent Party ID | -.019 | .029 | -0.67 | .5 | |
| Respondent Age | -.013 | .007 | -1.90 | .057 | * |
| Respondent is a Woman | -.082 | .159 | -0.52 | .604 | |
| Rural/Urban Continuum | .049 | .032 | 1.55 | .122 | |
| Bachelor's Degree Proportion | .971 | .542 | 1.79 | .073 | * |
| Unemployment Rate | .132 | .066 | 2.00 | .046 | ** |
| Electoral Competition | -.431 | .293 | -1.47 | .141 | |
| Homogeneity Index | -.705 | .255 | -2.76 | .006 | *** |
| Constant | -.201 | .62 | -0.32 | .746 | |
| Mean dependent var | 0.139 | | SD dependent var | 0.530 | |
| Number of obs. | 5335 | | Chi-square | 292.196 | |
| Prob > chi2 | 0.000 | | Akaike crit. (AIC) | 3646.628 | |

to observe events as are younger people. Those who identify as Black, Native American, more than one race, and Middle Eastern are more likely to report more events.

The results now turn to outside disruptions. See Table 3. When looking at electoral competition, the authors do not observe a significant correlation between disturbances and competition, so there is not support for that hypothesis. Testing

**Table 3. How Does Context Affect Disruptions Outside the Polling Place?**

| Outside Disruptions | Coef. | Standard Error | t-value | p-value | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Individual Level Variables** | | | | | |
| Voted on Election Day | -.074 | .114 | -0.65 | .514 | |
| Respondents Education | .091 | .052 | 1.76 | .078 | * |
| Race Compared to White | 0 | . | . | . | |
| Black | .128 | .274 | 0.47 | .64 | |
| Hispanic | .045 | .256 | 0.17 | .861 | |
| Asian | 1.031 | .341 | 3.02 | .003 | *** |
| Native American | -.086 | .373 | -0.23 | .818 | |
| Two or more races | .787 | .348 | 2.26 | .024 | ** |
| Other | -1.694 | .652 | -2.60 | .009 | *** |
| Midde Eastern | -.392 | .907 | -0.43 | .665 | |
| Respondent Party ID | -.047 | .025 | -1.85 | .065 | * |
| Respondent Age | -.018 | .01 | -1.85 | .064 | * |
| Respondent is a Woman | .061 | .158 | 0.39 | .698 | |
| **County Level Individual** | | | | | |
| Rural/Urban Continuum | .025 | .041 | 0.61 | .544 | |
| Bachelor's Degree Proportion | 1.298 | .638 | 2.03 | .042 | ** |
| Unemployment | .186 | .102 | 1.82 | .068 | * |
| Electoral Competition | -.16 | .339 | -0.47 | .637 | |
| Homogeneity Index | -.672 | .284 | -2.37 | .018 | ** |
| Constant | -.696 | .852 | -0.82 | .414 | |
| Mean dependent var | 0.082 | | SD dependent var | 0.365 | |
| Number of obs. | 5335 | | Chi-square | 62.219 | |
| Prob > chi2 | 0.000 | | Akaike crit. (AIC) | 2504.561 | |

*** *p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1; observations weighted and standard errors are clustered by county*

the second hypothesis about racial homogeneity, there is a negative and statistically significant relationship between homogeneity and disturbances outside the polling place. Racial homogeneity is related to fewer disturbances.

For the third hypothesis, there is a statistically significant relationship between unemployment and disturbances. This is consistent with the hypothesis. Similarly, education level is positively related to disturbances, but this is inconsistent with the hypothesis. Again this raises the potential concern that those who are more highly educated might be underemployed causing dissatisfaction and potential unrest.

The county-level control—urban-rural status—is not related to disturbances, and neither is whether the respondent voted on election day versus voting early. Considering the other individual-level variables, respondents with more education are more likely to observe disruptions than those who identify as Democrats or younger people.[11] When looking at the race of the respondents, those who identify as Black were neither more nor less likely to see disruption, but the small amount of Native American individuals were more likely to see disruptions and so were people who identified with two or more races. Those who identified as "other" were less likely to see disruptions.

## Conclusion

The analysis primarily examined how county level attributes—electoral competition, racial composition, education, and unemployment correlated with disruptions that survey respondents reported after the 2022 election. Seemingly, the relationship in indoor and outdoor polling places is not that different, even though the authors argue that there may be normative differences in how citizens regard these spaces. With more racial homogeneity, there are fewer of both types of observations and not more as predicted by Nemeth and Hansen (2022). These findings do not necessarily directly test the racial threat hypothesis, but they are in line with it.

Finally, election officials presiding where more individuals with college degrees live should not be complacent. The findings indicate higher education is correlated with disturbances both inside and outside polling places. Not surprisingly, those areas with higher levels of unemployment are also more likely to experience disturbances. Through the research on election violence in the media as well as the analysis of threats at the polling sites, the authors hope to provide insight into how to better safeguard local election officials and volunteers at the polling sites. Overall, the authors believe that through a concerted effort to protect local election officials and create greater transparency, elections will become safer and more efficient. As future elections approach, it is more important than ever to invest in the security of the election system.

A limitation of these findings is it is not clear whether future elections will be the same as the 2022 election. These data are specific to polling places and may not reflect exactly what LEOs will experience. Finally, some of the disturbances may not seem all that disturbing. Still, the authors think analyzing where disruptions happened may be helpful in thinking about how to allocate resources. Policy works such as that by Gordon and colleagues criticize the Department of Justice for not clarifying when law enforcement agencies can get involved in incidents involving election threats and potential violence. Certainly, the DOJ does need to define what is a true threat (Gordon et al. 2022, 6). This remains an issue for law enforcement and LEOs as there is much confusion and disagreement on what a true threat is.

11 See the appendix Tables 1 and 2 for the inflation models.

Additional DOJ guidelines could serve three purposes: 1) offer clarity on what is prosecutable, 2) offer ideas on improving safety, and 3) reaffirm the issue of threats as a priority for the DOJ (Gordon et al. 2022, 3–4). Fortunately, these results indicate that the polling place disruptions are relatively rare, but election officials need to keep their eyes open.

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# Appendix

## *Calculating the HHI Index*

Hispanic and Non-Hispanic White, Black, American Indian and Native Alaskan, Asian, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander groups are considered in the analysis. To calculate the HHI, one multiplies each racial group proportion by itself and adds all the products of the multiplication (see also Alesina and LaFerrara, 1999).

## *Yougov Survey Methods*

The survey samples by state to allow researchers to make state-level inferences with at least 200 respondents in each state in all 50 states. The authors note that Yougov utilizes a nonprobability panel sample wherein they note they invite a "representative sample of panelists to take each survey and apply statistical weighting to adjust for differences between the sample and the target population." See https://today.yougov.com/about/panel-methodology for more information. These weights are used in the analysis.

## *Do the Dependent Variable Components Really Belong Together in an Index?*

In order to assess that question, a tetrachoric factor analysis for a series of binary variables was conducted on the inside variables and yielded an eigenvalue of 3.82. The tetrachoric factor analysis for the outside variables yielded an eigenvalue of 2.62. To check the robustness of the eigenvalue, a parallel analysis is also run yielding an adjusted eigenvalue of 2.16 for the internal dependent variables and 1.71 for the external dependent variables. An eigenvalue of greater than one essentially indicates that these variables together represent one concept.

## *Statistical Method*

The reader will notice an issue with the dependent variable—there are a lot of respondents who do not report any disruptions. For the inside dependent variable, 458/5,335 reported at least one disruption. For the outside dependent variable, 312/5,335 reported at least one. Therefore, scholars recommend a type of regression that will factor in all the zeros but also take into account that the reports are essentially counts as to the number of events: Zero-Inflated Poisson regression (ZIP). See Greene (2000) for an example.[1] This type of regression assumes there is a reason for the all the zero reports, and as noted, the authors hypothesize that some individuals are more observant than others as noted above due to race, gender, age, or education.

1 Another technique often used is zero inflated negative binomial regression. This is often used when there is overdispersion in the counts. The technique estimates a parameter—an alpha—to test for overdispersion. In this case, when utilizing this method, the alpha was not greater than one on either of the two models used. However, the lnalpha was statistically significant, indicating overdispersion, in only the outside model. The authors decided it was best for presentation to include only one type of statistical analysis, so they use zip for both. Results are substantially similar.

Since ZIP models include variables that explain the high number of zeros in the model, the reader will see two models below—the inflation parts of the ZIP model, which are the variables argued to consider the zeroes. The authors note that race, gender, age, and education were included. Earlier empirical analyses do not show that political party is related to disruptions, so partisanship is not included in the model of inflation. If partisan identification is included in the inflation model, the results do not substantially change.

**Appendix Table 1. Model of Zero Inflation for Inside Disruptions**

| Inside Disruptions | Coef. | Standard Error | t-value | p-value | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Respondent Education | -.029 | .056 | -0.53 | .597 | |
| Races Compared to White | 0 | . | . | . | |
| Black | .201 | .239 | 0.84 | .4 | |
| Hispanic | -.595 | .312 | -1.91 | .056 | * |
| Asian | .263 | .446 | 0.59 | .554 | |
| Native American | -.028 | .561 | -0.05 | .961 | |
| Two or more races | .054 | 1.106 | 0.05 | .961 | |
| Other | .393 | .492 | 0.80 | .425 | |
| Middle Eastern | .166 | 1.42 | 0.12 | .907 | |
| Respondent Party ID | .009 | .036 | 0.24 | .811 | |
| Respondent Age | .059 | .008 | 7.81 | 0 | *** |
| Respondent is a Woman | .429 | .184 | 2.33 | .02 | ** |
| Constant | -1.308 | .465 | -2.81 | .005 | *** |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mean dependent var | 0.139 | SD dependent var | 0.530 |
| Number of obs. | 5335 | Chi-square | 292.196 |
| Prob > chi2 | 0.000 | Akaike crit. (AIC) | 3646.628 |

*$^{***}p<.01$, $^{**}p<.05$, $^{*}p<.1$*

**Appendix Table 2. Model of Zero Inflation for Outside Disruptions**

| Outside Disruptions | Coef. | Standard Error | t-value | p-value | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Respondent Education | -.052 | .067 | -0.77 | .441 | |
| Races Compared to White | 0 | . | . | . | |
| Black | -.358 | .411 | -0.87 | .384 | |
| Hispanic | -.803 | .406 | -1.98 | .048 | ** |
| Asian | -.046 | .56 | -0.08 | .934 | |
| Native American | -1.667 | .658 | -2.53 | .011 | ** |
| Two or more races | .818 | .681 | 1.20 | .23 | |
| Other | -3.468 | 2.171 | -1.60 | .11 | |
| Middle Eastern | -2.124 | 1.047 | -2.03 | .042 | ** |
| Respondent Age | .06 | .012 | 5.11 | 0 | *** |
| Respondent is a Woman | .951 | .222 | 4.27 | 0 | *** |
| Constant | -1.212 | .623 | -1.95 | .052 | * |
| Mean dependent var | 0.082 | SD dependent var | 0.365 | | |
| Number of obs. | 5335 | Chi-square | 62.219 | | |
| Prob > chi2 | 0.000 | Akaike crit. (AIC) | 2504.561 | | |

****p<.01, **p<.05, *p<.1; observations weighted and standard errors are clustered by county*

## *Appendix Citation*

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# Response to "Deterring Threats or Deterring Voters? Identifying Trends in Electoral Disruptions"

Richard Keech[1a]

[1] *Loudoun County, Virginia*

Based on the author's original hypothesis, Loudoun County is the perfect example of a county that should see little electoral disruption. Loudoun County is the wealthiest county in the nation based on household income. We are diverse and highly educated, and the unemployment level is one of the lowest in the nation.

In 2021, a very small but very vocal disaffected minority began raising its voice. Our office received over 200 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests from one individual in only two months. We were sued, accused of anything and everything, and our public meetings went from sleepy affairs to spectacles where residents would air their concerns not only with the elections office but the government writ large, including the bathroom situation at the public schools. We added security to our meetings. Election administrators went from trusted civil servants to public enemy overnight, and we were not prepared. Have I ever felt truly unsafe? No. But honestly, there have been days when I have wondered why I do this.

There are also other more subtle disruptions that affect voter experience. From 2020 to 2024, we lost over half of our election officers. Subsequently, this led to a large amount of turnover as new election officers who signed up to find fraud found nothing and moved on. Party observer presence in precincts has increased dramatically. These are also generally people who are sent to find fraud. Many spend a day asking questions and then never come back because there is nothing to see. Once people see the truth, elections go back to being boring.

One area of our county has a large Spanish-speaking population. In that area there have been incidents of harassment, including observers attempting to challenge voter eligibility. A precinct chief in that area suspiciously decided to make many people vote provisionally for no apparent reason.

So does the authors' conclusion align with my lived experience? Yes and no. I would say that we have made it through the worst of it unscathed, and I would attribute that to a wealthy, diverse, and educated population. However, there has been an increase in voters of certain demographics being targeted. And yes, while we have been sued and accused of many things, these are generally empty threats. Yet, we have had to take steps just to be safe. Most of our disruption have been in the form

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of election officer turnover, additional staffing needs to handle public education, FOIA requests and observer questions, and the need to take extra security precautions.

The title of this piece is "Deterring Threats or Deterring Voters." While I think the authors did a great job of analyzing the potential for threats, I am personally more interested in the direct effect on voters. I truly think the goal of some people is to get certain groups simply to give up or drive down turnout. The question I would ask is who is being turned away? Research has shown that the harder you make it to vote, the more determined to vote people become. But if you make people question the process and results, they are left thinking, why bother voting? How do you do this? Create a situation where you are running a complex, largely manual operation using brand new volunteers who are incredibly nervous about making mistakes. Throw out wild accusations about results being reported in the middle of the night with absolutely no context. Sow enough seeds of doubt and surely a few will take hold.

I firmly agree with the authors on the point that we, as election administrators, must put security front and center going forward. Our systems are secure; most people realize that. I think the biggest threat to our election system is the loss of qualified election administrators and election officers being experienced around the country and what appears to be a concerted effort to get voters to give up. People are simply walking away or being pushed out, including voters. I never dreamed my number one priority would have to be making the team and voters feel safe, yet here we are. And lastly, we were caught unprepared to handle intense scrutiny, and we have spent four years getting our feet back under us. It is a whole new world, but we can and will adapt and keep elections running. We always do.

# Response to "Deterring Threats or Deterring Voters? Identifying Trends in Electoral Disruptions"

Julian M. Young[1a]

[1] *Florence County, South Carolina*

Through my years of experience in Florence County, our agency has had very few major disruptions before, during, and after electoral processes. We experienced racially motivated verbal threats by a group of young men in a secluded rural precinct many years ago, but the perpetrators did not return to carry out their threats at the end of the voting day. Their method was to scare the women working the polling site.

Through my association with many educational and training groups of election professionals, there has been much discussion on cyber security and physical security/threats of staff members, poll workers, buildings, voting equipment, and registered voters at the polls during early voting and election days. It is easy to assess from the research of the past four-or-so years that our voting society is looking to local, state, and federal bodies to upgrade and provide the newest and best possible security measures to protect election professionals in order to create new boundaries of safety. State by state, the laws vary on how election officials may provide services at the polling places with and without law enforcement presence. The two-edged sword divides those who support law enforcement presence and those who feel threatened by their presence at the polls.

It goes without saying when political races are contested by several high-profile candidates, tensions will be high among the candidates themselves and the rhetoric they use. Today's cultures across America and the international stage have created direct confrontation and vitriol in political races all in the name of freedom of speech. So, of course, the messages will be riddled with criticism and off-putting speech. The authors' first hypothesis relates how the political competition of highly charged candidates will indeed incite supporters to rise up in some fashion and cause disruptions. While their findings do not support their hypothesis, I suggest they do more extensive reviews of sound bites and news reels. They will not be able to deny the power of the speeches given to various audiences that incite strong reactions by the public.

My overall feeling concerning the authors' other hypotheses and findings is that there needs to be more specialized polling of people through surveys along with targeted interviews of particular voter groups. The surveys would provide a greater array of variables to study and review comparatively from individuals or groups.

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Interviews are quite valuable and provide an overview of various communities within a test area. In these interviews, the variables would present themselves. The uniqueness of the interviews gives insight to the culture in which the interviews would take place. The interviews would provide ideas and opinions with some meat on them.

As an elections' official, I would be interested to see studies on how collaborative community initiatives between the elections offices and the local political parties are being utilized. Bringing the executive leadership of political parties in the community to work on a community project would break down barriers between the individual parties and show a stronger sense of nonpartisan collaboration to help build trust among various groups of people. I am convinced these initiatives would create enough comradery between the political parties that they would become watchdogs against disruption during elections and diffuse confusion. They would carry the message of safe, secure, accessible, and fair election processes in their communities.

I would like more to have seen more action items that election officers could take away from the findings in this article. As an election official, I did not learn anything new from these hypotheses. Election officials live in the war zones and could have written this article with little research. We need action items to explore what could be utilized in our various locations.

# Book Review: *From Pandemic to Insurrection: Voting in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election*

Martha Kropf[1a]

[1] *University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

According to a national CNN poll taken in April 2024, 35 percent of the public still believe Donald Trump won the 2020 election.[1] A follow-up question revealed 18 percent—or about one in five Americans—reported they believe there is "solid evidence" Trump won. Not only that, but election workers have experienced threats, harassment, and abuse. The Brennan Center for Justice surveyed local election officials in 2024 and found that 38 percent experienced threats, harassment, or abuse. The vast majority of the local election officials surveyed—70 percent—report that threats have increased since 2020.[2]

More than four years have passed since our pandemic election, and clearly, we are still feeling the effects. That is why it is instructive to read professor Michael McDonald's book, *From Pandemic to Insurrection: Voting in the 2020 US Presidential Election*. The book begins with a sobering list of election officials who fell ill or died as a result of working during the pandemic. He dedicates the book not only to election workers but also to the voters.

McDonald does not want to ignore the sacrifices made by election workers, but the meat of the book is an attempt to outline and address the efforts, led by former President Trump, to discredit the 2020 election. The main theses herein are that voting by mail is trustworthy and that there was no widespread fraud, points McDonald emphasizes several times in various ways including:

- "[T]here is absolutely no evidence of widespread vote fraud in the 2020 election" (page 234).
- "There is no evidence that nefarious actors stole it from Trump" (page 218).
- "There is no evidence of widespread fraud, despite highly motivated Republicans to find it" (page 220).

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1 CNN. 2024. CNN poll, question 44 [31121007.00060]. SSRS. Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

2 https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/local-election-officials-survey-may-2024?utm_campaign=PANTHEON_STRIPPED&utm_medium=PANTHEON_STRIPPED&utm_source=PANTHEON_STRIPPED&utm_term=PANTHEON_STRIPPED, last accessed July 18, 2024.

McDonald's work is more than these words. A professor at the University of Florida, McDonald is one of the nation's foremost experts when it comes to election administration, especially mail voting. While the title does not reflect it, a major part of this book is addressing misconceptions regarding mail voting. This discussion is embedded in an exceptional amount of contextual information—the sacrifices local officials made, the background of mail voting, and a thick description of the 2020 election, both before and after. It is a strong defense of mail voting.

This is not necessarily an academic book, even though it is authored by a professor. Rather, it is one election officials, journalists, policymakers, and academics should read to help address election misinformation, especially from the 2020 election. This book provides context and information that will help any of those groups see beyond their own state. I suspect most election officials concentrated on getting through the 2020 election in their own jurisdictions, so if anyone is interested in learning about what was going on in other states as well as a national perspective, the book is a worthy purchase.

Saying this book is "not academic" should not suggest it is not full of history, significant numbers of citations from newspaper stories and other analyses, as well as the wisdom that McDonald has learned and collected over time. I only mean to say theoretically based empirical research is rarely mentioned herein, other than noting that political science scholarship has indicated that "supporters of a candidate base their beliefs, in part, on what their political leaders tell them" (McDonald, page 219). He also invokes public opinion scholar John Zaller in showing why the "Big Lie" spread as it did. "When people have little knowledge about an issue, political leaders can step in to fill the void with their version of events" (page 219). However, these points are practical. Political and civic education matter, as well. In fact, McDonald points out that an increase in public education helped reduce the number of rejected mailed ballots from 2016 to 2020.[3]

The attacks on mail balloting started well before 2020. McDonald shares on page 14, "Trump's first documented attack on a government-run electoral system occurred two weeks prior to the November 2016 election when Trump told supporters at a campaign rally in Greely, Colorado, 'Do you think those (mail-in) ballots are properly counted?'" This tweet, among others, laid the groundwork just in case he lost the election in 2016, and then later, in 2020.

McDonald shows that election officials have had to walk a tightrope to avoid even the most minor of errors. They can receive significant criticism even when they do not make a mistake. McDonald writes there are six states where if a voter requests a mail ballot for the primary, the request holds for the general election. "Conspiracy theorists would claim vote fraud from testimonies of confused voters who received mail ballots, but either did not remember making their initial request or did not understand their states' policies" (page 115). Certainly, the laws and policies

3 For discussion on how voter education has helped reduce rejected mail ballots, see Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki (2022).

surrounding sending ballots or voters requesting such ballots caused unnecessary controversy. So did problems such as ballot printing vendor errors, lawsuits over mail ballot return deadlines, and outside groups putting up fake drop boxes—as happened in California (see page 133).

One of my favorite parts of the book is a handy summary of points for answering questions about fraud. While he develops the point throughout chapter 3, McDonald provides a handy summary of reasons he has probably given those who ask him why a foreign government cannot commit fraud by printing and submitting ballots (page 82).

McDonald is reasonably fair in his discussion of potential weaknesses in mail balloting. For example, he notes, "If there is a mail ballot vulnerability, it is with the Federal Write-In Ballot since that does not require forging a ballot and return envelope since anyone can download a FWAB" (page 82). However, he states that logic and common sense will help detect such issues. If LEOs received more of these than usual, they will be suspicious.

The chapter entitled "Election Overtime" discusses Trump's efforts to overturn the election via lawsuits as well as a discussion of his encouragement of his supporters to riot and overrun the Capitol on January 6. He discusses various aspects of the court cases, including a critique of the testimony of Matthew Braynard, who was a former Trump campaign staffer. McDonald explains that he served as the expert for the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law to evaluate and rebut Braynard's evidence.

What does this mean in 2025 and beyond? The big question really is how can we restore confidence in American elections? McDonald has few answers. In his final chapter, he dismisses a number of ideas. For example, McDonald notes,

> Some argue election transparency is a tonic that will wash away claims of vote fraud. Election officials have embraced this perspective by providing more robust auditing and public oversight of the election process. While these moves are welcome, there is not evidence that these steps actually have the desired effect to increase public confidence in election outcomes.

In Chapter 6, McDonald showed various instances where increased transparency backfired (see page 164).

One thing McDonald mentions in discussing improved confidence, but does not develop, is that many states have moved to paper ballots in order to increase confidence. Yet, since the 2000 election where ballot design was one of the key issues (see Wand et al. 2001; Kropf and Kimball 2012), paper ballots, in particular, have had ballot design issues. McDonald dismisses ballot design problems as "a curiosity." He should not. McDonald does admit, "[I]n an extremely close election they can be decisive and become fodder for conspiracy theorists who wish to undermine the election outcome" (page 211). Furthermore, ballot design issues have come up over

and over again because policymakers have not done enough to improve ballot design and usability (Kropf and Kimball 2012; Cottrell et al. 2022; Frisina et al. 2008; Kropf 2014). Improved ballot design will not necessarily improve confidence in elections, but it is good public policy for the simple fact that it will make it easier for voters to express their intent when voting.

In order to increase confidence in elections McDonald suggests, "Trump and other prominent Republican leaders could do the right thing and express support for the integrity of America's democracy" (page 218). In 2024, applicants to work at the Republican National Committee were asked whether they believed the election was stolen, which does not bode well for "the right thing" statement that McDonald thinks will help. As noted at the beginning of this review, one-third of Americans believe Trump won the 2020 election.

Ultimately, Trump's rhetoric against mail balloting will hurt the Republican Party. McDonald points out, "For decades, Republicans liked mail ballots. In many states a greater share of Republican voters cast mail ballots than voted in-person early or on Election Day" (page 17). McDonald ends the book by predicting there will be less mail voting than in the past and also, "Republican knee-jerk efforts in the short-run to curtail mail balloting could backfire since, prior to the pandemic, mail balloting was more often a favored voting method among Republicans" (page 235). McDonald is most certainly correct in this statement, but we just do not know how long it will be before they feel those effects.

More importantly, the book will assist us, especially as time passes. In the future, it will be too easy to remember the 2020 election as one with record turnout, as McDonald notes. It is best that we also reflect on what we lost.

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