
Counter-framing and persistence of election messaging on trust in American elections

Research by Cheryl Boudreau (UC Davis), Jennifer Gaudette (UC Riverside), Seth Hill (UC San Diego), Thad Kousser (UC San Diego), Mackenzie Lockhart (Yale University), Mindy Romero (USC Price), and Laura Uribe (UC San Diego). Contact Thad Kousser at tkousser@ucsd.edu

Executive Summary:

We know that informational messages aimed at building trust in election systems work well on their own, but in the real world, people see competing narratives. Do official messages about election security work when presented alongside election misinformation? Do the positive impacts of election security messages persist over time? We find that election security videos increase trust, even when followed by unverified claims of fraud. However, we find the effects are not sustained when tested again a week later. This suggests that we need sustained messaging campaigns to maintain public trust in elections.

Methodology:

We conducted a two-wave experiment before the 2024 presidential election. In the first wave, respondents either saw a video produced by the Election Assistance Commission (“EAC”) on election security, a video of Donald Trump alleging voter fraud, the EAC video followed by the video of Donald Trump, or a “control” video unrelated to elections. We asked respondents questions about trust in elections both before and after they watched these videos. One week later, respondents received a second survey. In this follow-up survey, we asked the same questions about trust in elections.

Results:

	Wave 1 Trust	Wave 2 Trust (1 week later)
Security Video Only	↑	<i>No evidence of effect</i>
Fraud Video Only	↓	<i>No evidence of effect</i>
Security + Fraud Videos	↑	<i>No evidence of effect</i>

We find that trust in the accuracy of votes cast goes up after watching a security video, down after watching a video with claims of voter fraud, and up after watching *both* videos, despite receiving the claims of fraud. No effects last after one week.

How can election officials act on these findings?

Adopting a strategy of repeated messaging explaining the safeguards on elections is necessary to combat election misinformation and reinforce trust in the vote count. Election security messaging effectively inoculates against even high-profile fraud allegations, yet the effects of a single message appear to decay relatively quickly. Consistent and updated messaging is necessary to maintain its impact. Officials can prioritize campaigns that deliver clear, repeated information to counter misinformation as it rises.

What we don't know yet:

The effects of repeated election security messaging over time is still unknown. Longitudinal studies could evaluate the cumulative effects of such sustained messaging explaining protections on the voting process, or whether the same or varied messages build trust most effectively.

Learn more:

Support for this project was provided by the [UC San Diego Yankelovich Center](#) and by the [MIT Election Data and Science Lab](#). You can follow our team's research partnerships with election officials all across the country at elections.ucsd.edu.