

President Trump's Rhetoric Undermined Confidence in Elections Among His Supporters

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We are a team of political scientists affiliated with six research universities across the U.S. This testimony reports the key findings from our research on the effect that former President Trump’s false claims of widespread voter and electoral fraud had on public faith in the election system.

In short, our research shows that Trump’s baseless attacks on election integrity during the 2020 campaign reduced trust and confidence in elections and increased beliefs that elections are rigged among his supporters. This conclusion is based on a peer-reviewed experiment we conducted that was published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (Clayton et al. 2021).

Shared faith in the integrity of elections is essential to democracy, which requires losers to accept the other side holding power. Dissatisfaction with the outcome of an election must be offset by belief in the legitimacy of the process that produced it. In other countries, decreased confidence in electoral integrity is associated with lower voter turnout and civic engagement as well as increased social instability and violence (Norris 2014).

President Trump’s increasingly frequent claims about election fraud in summer 2020 therefore raised alarms among experts and election observers. On May 26, for instance, he tweeted that “There is NO WAY (ZERO!) that Mail-In Ballots will be anything less than substantially fraudulent” (Clark 2020). In a June 23 speech, he stated that “This will be, in my opinion, the most corrupt election in the history of our country” (Shear and Kanno-Youngs 2020). Between January 1 and July 30, 2020, Trump had already made 91 such claims (Glasser 2020), raising concerns that the frequency of his claims would increase as the election drew nearer.

Research design

We designed an experiment to measure the effects of these unprecedented attacks on public confidence in America’s election system. The experiment was administered to a sample of more than 2,000 Democratic and Republican participants in the U.S. in four online survey waves that were fielded from October 7–24, 2020. This period coincided with the peak of Trump’s fraud claims in the pre-election period (Volz and Glaser 2020).

In the first wave of the experiment, participants answered a series of questions about their baseline political attitudes and their beliefs about elections. In the next two waves of the experiment, we showed participants a series of real tweets from Trump (which varied by condition) and asked them several additional questions about their election attitudes. The final survey wave consisted only of questions about election attitudes.

Participants were randomized to either see real tweets from Trump that reflected ordinary behavior for a U.S. president¹ or to see real tweets in which Trump violated the norm against

¹ The control condition consisted of two types of tweets that were perceived as reflecting ordinary behavior for a U.S. president by participants in a separate survey – those rated as unrelated to elections (e.g., “It was my honor to welcome our nation’s Mayors to the @WhiteHouse...”) or related to elections (e.g., “VOTE TODAY! Go to <http://vote.gop> to find your polling location. We are going to Make America Great Again! #VoteTrump

attacking the integrity of the election system. Our goal was to compare the beliefs of participants in these two experimental conditions. We provide examples of each below.²

Experimental condition	Example tweets
Control group	<p>“Saddened to hear the news of civil rights hero John Lewis passing. Melania and I send our prayers to he and his family.”</p> <p>“Republicans, get out and vote today for those great candidates that will lead to big victories on November 3rd. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!”</p>
Election norm violation group	<p>“The greatest Election Fraud in our history is about to happen. This may top the Democrats illegally spying on my campaign!”</p> <p>“Rigged Election, and EVERYONE knows it!”</p>

All participants answered questions about their trust and confidence in elections and their support for election-related norms. Specifically, we asked whether they trust elections, whether they are confident votes will be counted as intended, whether they are confident the ballot count will be run fairly, whether they believe elections are rigged in favor of the other party, whether they believe violence is justified to ensure votes are counted properly, and whether they believe that it is important to accept election losses peacefully. Research shows that the belief in widespread fraud measured by questions like these appear to be sincere (Graham and Yair N.d.). Our analysis compares responses to these questions in the second, third, and fourth survey waves between the conditions. We analyze results for respondents who approved and disapproved of Trump separately because we expected that they would respond differently to the experiment.

Results

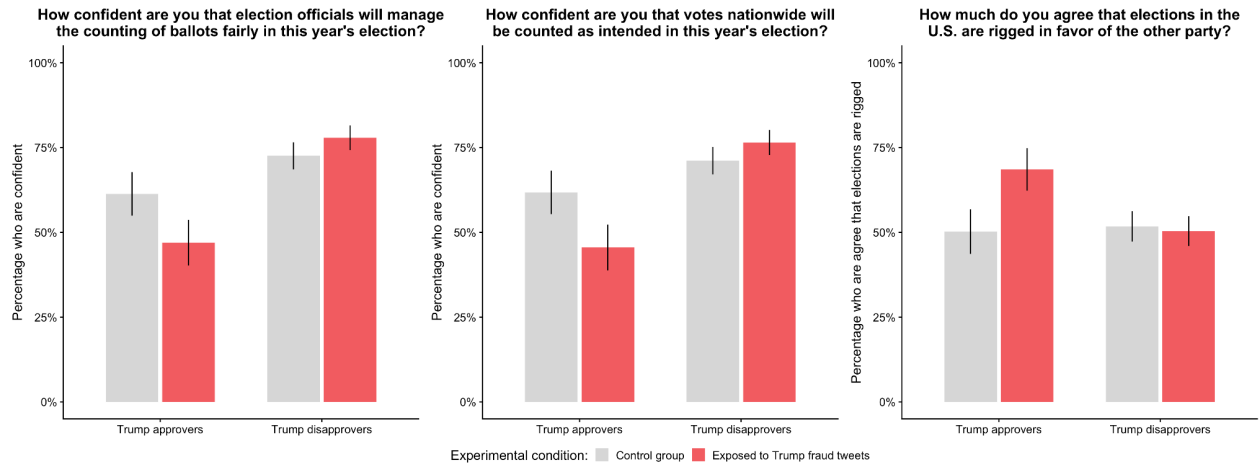
The results of our study are summarized in the figures below, which compare election attitudes between respondents exposed to Trump tweets promoting baseless claims of electoral fraud (plotted in red) to those in the control group (gray). Results are plotted separately for Trump approvers (the left pair of bars) and disapprovers (the right pair). The height of each bar represents the mean percentage of people who express confidence or agreement in survey questions in waves 2, 3, and 4 and the vertical bar represents the 95% confidence interval.

We find a consistent pattern among our participants. As the left and middle figures below indicate, Trump approvers who were shown tweets alleging electoral fraud reported less trust and

#ElectionDay”). We ultimately combined respondents in the two placebo conditions into a single control group in our data analysis.

² Our experiment also included a condition where participants saw norm-violating tweets unrelated to the election. These results were largely null so we omit them here for simplicity. See Clayton et al. (2021) for details.

confidence in elections than those shown the placebo tweets. Specifically, confidence among approvers that election officials will count ballots fairly declined from 61% in the control group to 40% among those who saw Trump’s tweets. Similarly, confidence among approvers that votes will be counted as intended decreased from 62% for controls to 45%. In contrast, the fraud tweets actually increased perceptions of fair ballot counting and confidence in the vote count by about five percentage points each among disapprovers.



The results presented in the figure on the right corroborate this pattern. Exposure to Trump’s election fraud tweets increased agreement that elections are rigged in favor of the other party from 50% to 69% among his supporters but had no effect on his opponents. Again, exposure to Trump’s rhetoric had serious consequences for his supporters’ beliefs about the electoral process. All of these effects are statistically significant by conventional standards.

Finally, we find no evidence of effects on broad measures of support for political violence or belief in democracy. However, we cannot rule out effects on support for specific violent actions or specific democratic principles, especially among small groups of extremists.

Implications

Our results demonstrate how baseless allegations of electoral fraud can threaten public confidence in our democratic institutions. Political science research has repeatedly shown how ordinary people form their political beliefs based on messages from like-minded political elites. When leaders tell them not to trust the electoral process, their supporters will listen. That is why we should worry that so many 2022 GOP candidates and Republican members of the public still refuse to accept the results of the 2020 election (Parker, Gardner, and Dawsey 2022, Bright Line Watch 2022). It is essential to reverse this trend. Another campaign of attacks by former President Trump could inflict further damage on his party’s confidence in the election system, but Republican endorsements are also uniquely capable of restoring faith in elections among GOP voters (Clayton and Willer N.d.). Democracy depends on both sides accepting the legitimacy of the system. Until that bargain is kept, the danger of another January 6 will remain.

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