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Candidate Cues and Voter Confidence in American Elections

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ABSTRACT *A primary objective of election administration is ensuring voter confidence. Logically, this entails meeting two conditions: procedures should insure that elections are fair and accurate, and voters should be aware of the procedures. Yet American election procedures such as ballot access and design, post-election audits and recounts, voter registration, and polling place operations are complex and highly decentralized. Given the complexity of the information environment and the relatively limited information most voters have about politics, what (if any) connection is there between election administration and voter confidence? We consider whether candidates fill the gap between election administration and voter confidence in elections. We test several hypotheses using an experimental design with multiple measures of voter confidence. The results show that candidates have a significant effect on voter confidence.*

Only when citizens can freely and privately exercise their right to vote and have their vote recorded correctly can they hold their leaders accountable. Democracy is endangered when people believe that their votes do not matter or are not counted correctly. (Commission on Federal Election Reform, 2005)

Democratic elections inevitably create electoral losers. Despite the dissatisfaction with losing, democratic institutions survive when voters are confident that election procedures are fair and those that lose the election defer to those that win. Instances of voter intimidation, ballot mishaps, and other voting irregularities can diminish voter confidence.¹ For example, a NYT/CBS poll from October 2008 found that only 32% of Americans had “a lot” of confidence that all of the votes for president would be counted accurately and 35% were very or somewhat concerned they would encounter problems voting. Procedural safeguards designed to assure that elections are fair entail complex rules of administration, audits, recounts, and litigation across all levels of government. However, most voters are not highly engaged in politics generally and far fewer are involved in the intricacies of election administration. This leaves unresolved how voters evaluate election procedures on their own.

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Even though voter confidence is critical, information about election procedures in the United States remains low. The problem is twofold. First, election procedures are legally complex and highly decentralized across state and local governments (Ewald, 2009; Gronke et al., 2008). Ewald (2009: 2–3) notes that: “To a degree unique among democracies, the United States has always placed responsibility for running national and state elections in the hands of city, town, and county officials.” Even when federal regulations impose uniform standards on local election officials, local practices and court interpretations vary (Niemi et al., 2009; Shambon & Abouchar, 2006; Tokaji, 2005). So simply gaining information about election procedures is very difficult (to say nothing of evaluating those practices). Second, voters generally have low levels of political knowledge (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997), and this extends to knowledge about even basic election procedures such as voter registration. For example, the 2006 Current Population Survey asked non-registered voters to indicate the main reason they were not registered, and 10% of individuals in states with Election Day registration (EDR) reported missing the registration deadline (compared to 14% in non-EDR states).² This creates a logical puzzle as to how we can link largely opaque election procedures to voter confidence.

To resolve this logical puzzle, we propose that candidates provide an accessible source of information as to the quality of election administration. As candidates have greater expertise and resources with which to monitor elections, they can provide a signal to voters about their fairness. In this study, we examine whether cues from candidates about the fairness of an election inform voter confidence. We explore this possibility with an experimental design that employs numerous measures of voter confidence and varies the cue from candidates. This research has important policy implications. If candidates provide cues to voters regarding the fairness of the election, then ensuring voter confidence coincides with ensuring elite confidence.

Election Administration and Voter Confidence

In the aftermath of the 2000 US presidential election, politicians, pundits, and ordinary citizens pressed for reform to the electoral process and increased funding for new voting technologies. Concomitantly, research on election administration in the United States focused on the performance of various voting technologies (e.g., Alvarez et al., 2005, 2008; Herrnson et al., 2008; Kimball & Kropf, 2008; Stein et al., 2008) and the importance of ballot design (Kimball & Kropf, 2005). For example, Alvarez et al. (2008) find that voter confidence varies by both voter characteristics and voting technologies. Similarly, Herrnson et al. (2008) explore the joint effect of voting technology and ballot design on voter confidence. In doing so, the authors demonstrate that both features of the voting process affect voter confidence.

A number of studies also examine the consequences of electoral procedures and the adoption of voting reforms (e.g., Berinsky, 2005; Hanmer & Traugott, 2004). Proponents of election reform argue that reforming the process will enhance the voting experience, increase voter turnout, and improve voter confidence. Berinsky (2005) questions this contention as he demonstrates that voter turnout increases only

modestly with reform efforts and does so among citizens very likely to vote without the reforms. Similarly, Atkeson and Saunders (2007) discover that early voting and absentee voting actually reduce voter confidence as compared to Election Day voting.

Further, researchers have found that voting for losing candidates has a negative effect on voter confidence (Alvarez et al., 2008; Atkeson & Saunders, 2007). This corresponds to findings on attitudes toward electoral reform, trust in government, democratic satisfaction, and other forms of political support (Anderson & LoTempio, 2002; Anderson et al., 2005; Craig et al., 2006; Nadeau & Blais, 1993). For example, Bowler and Donovan (2007) find that individuals supporting losing candidates were more likely to question the rules governing elections and support change to a proportional representation system and direct presidential elections.

Scholars have also examined the role of the voting experience, ballot usability, and poll workers (Atkeson & Saunders, 2007; Claassen et al., 2008; Hall et al., 2009). Atkeson and Saunders (2007) find that certain features of the voting experience (confusing ballots, voting absentee, etc.) make voters less confident in the electoral process while other features (helpful poll workers, satisfaction with the voting method, etc.) are positively related to voter confidence. Similarly, Hall et al. (2009) argue that the interactions between voters and poll workers affect assessments of electoral fairness and their confidence in the tabulation of election results.

Yet the central theoretical dilemma remains the gap between voters' knowledge of the many election procedures and their confidence in those procedures. The present study anticipates that signals from candidates will affect voter confidence. For example, the Republican candidate for Connecticut governor in 2010, Tom Foley, refused to concede defeat after the election citing ballot mishandling. Foley argued that election officials used photocopied ballots when the printed ballots ran out. Additionally, there were allegations that 300 photocopied ballots had been found in a gym bag two days after the election. Foley refused to concede until he was confident that votes were counted accurately: "I am determined, and I think the voters of Connecticut should be as determined, that we have an accurate count of how they voted on Tuesday."³ Such challenges are not isolated (e.g., the 2010 midterm elections featured a number of challenges by losing candidates including candidates in the Illinois gubernatorial race, the 11th Congressional District in Virginia, and the 4th Congressional District in Wisconsin). By contrast, Charles Baker called for unity after he lost the 2010 Massachusetts gubernatorial election stating "It's important that all of us get behind the governor and do all that we can to make sure that he succeeds in pulling our economy out of the doldrums and getting us back on the right track."⁴ This article examines whether such distinct signals from candidates affect voter confidence.

Signals from Candidates

Whereas the vast majority of voters are not heavily involved in election administration, candidates and campaigns have more resources at their disposal including professional staff, prior experience with elections, and higher levels of education.

In addition to greater resources, candidates and campaigns also have a greater stake in the outcome of an election and thus are more motivated than voters to understand the procedures and monitor how the election is conducted before, during, and after Election Day. Candidates are therefore in a better position to directly and systematically assess the fairness of election procedures.⁵ When conveyed to voters, candidate assessments provide a heuristic for voter assessments of the election.

Rather than expend valuable cognitive resources on gathering and processing information, individuals often rely on heuristics to make decisions (e.g., Chaiken, 1980; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Hamill et al., 1985; Iyengar, 1990; Jervis, 1986; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Lodge & Hamill, 1986; Ottati, 1990; Ottati et al., 1988; Scholz, 1998). Heuristics often facilitate decision-making by allowing individuals to rely on cues from “more informed” others like politicians and political actors (e.g., Arceneaux & Kolodny, 2009; Brady & Sniderman, 1985; Carmines & Kuklinski, 1990; Lupia, 1994; Mondak, 1993; Page & Shapiro, 1992; Sniderman et al., 1986, 1991).

Prior research indicates that the complexity of the judgment task can make the use of heuristics more likely. As the decision task becomes more difficult, the use of heuristics becomes more cognitively expedient (Bodenhausen & Lichtenstein, 1987; Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1985). Given the complexity of election administration, voters are likely to rely on elite cues in evaluating the fairness of election procedures.

When using elite cues to process information, individuals do not necessarily evaluate the underlying information being provided (Kuklinski & Hurley, 1994; McGuire, 1969). Instead, positive or negative feelings toward the cue-giver are often used to either accept or reject the conclusions from the message without examining the rationale behind the conclusions. Therefore, when a politician expresses a position publicly, the logic underlying the position may not receive critical attention even though the position may be absorbed. This is especially true in “low information” contexts. That is, when individuals lack significant prior information about an issue, they are likely to rely on cues from elites without carefully evaluating the underlying information.

To argue that candidates have greater knowledge of election administration raises the issue as to whether they can or will credibly reveal the information to voters. Of particular concern is that a winning candidate might defend an election to protect the outcome and her mandate. Losing candidates have no such incentives to defend the outcome of the election and may even incur a reputational cost for acknowledging that the campaign was legitimately defeated, so if they accept the results of an election voter confidence should increase.

H1: A candidate who accepts the results of an election should increase voter confidence.

On the other hand, a candidate that challenges the outcome of an election might initially be dismissed as a sore loser, but challenges are not just “cheap talk” and we anticipate that such challenges will be credible (i.e., costly signal). Candidates

that challenge the outcome of an election will need to maintain campaign staff, potentially hire attorneys to pursue litigation or pay costs associated with a recount, and risk their reputation if allegations of misconduct or irregularities are later shown to be unfounded. For example, Norm Coleman incurred over \$1 million in expenses during the post-election challenge to the 2008 Minnesota Senate election, according to FEC filings. This leads to our second hypothesis.

H2: A candidate who challenges the results of an election should reduce voter confidence.

When a candidate claims that there were irregularities, voters receive a non-specific cue. However, when a candidate calls the election results into question because of a particular problem (e.g., ballot mishandling, voter deception, poor training of poll workers, etc.), voters have been given both a cue (the candidate believes the election is flawed) and descriptive information about the argument underlying the candidate's conclusion (the candidate believes the process is flawed and has specific reasons to question the process). This might further contribute to the credibility of the message such that the candidate is at greater risk of incurring a reputational cost, as it could more easily be disproven than vague claims.

H3: A specific challenge (e.g., ballot mishandling) has a greater effect on voter confidence than a non-specific challenge (e.g., voting irregularities).

This hypothesis also allows us to examine McGuire's (1969) contention that cues may be used without consideration of the information or argument underlying the source's conclusions. If voters simply rely on signals from candidates in judging the fairness and legitimacy of an election, then there should be no discernible difference when the details of the argument vary. However, if voters are considering not just the cue but the informational content of the cue, then the effect of the signal on voter confidence should vary.

Moreover, the type of challenge offered by the candidate may differentially affect voter confidence. In the analyses reported below, we consider two types of specific allegations: allegations of malicious behaviour and allegations of incompetence. Malicious behaviour would include deliberate actions aimed at manipulating whether and how individuals vote such as violence, legal threats, or economic threats. In contrast, incompetence normally refers to problems emerging as a result of poor training of poll workers, ballot design, equipment breakdowns, or resource allocation. We explore whether these challenges have a differential effect on voter confidence.

H4: An allegation of intentional manipulation has a greater effect on voter confidence than an allegation of incompetence.

While signals from candidates are expected to matter, we also anticipate that the margin of victory will influence voter confidence. Whereas administrative procedures

could affect the outcome of an election at the margins, a landslide election is more likely to reflect popular will regardless of administrative procedures. Thus, we anticipate that a large margin of victory will increase voter confidence in the election. This also allows us to differentiate between two distinct but related functions of elections: correctly identify the winner and provide an accurate vote count. A landslide election (barring egregious failures) will correctly identify the winner but could be susceptible to some inaccuracy in the vote count. To what extent are voters mainly concerned that the correct candidate is deemed the winner, and to what extent do they want every vote to count in the final tally? We tentatively expect that a landslide election will increase voter confidence, but we anticipate that this could be disproven in the empirical analysis if voters are more concerned with the accuracy of the vote count.

H5: A large margin of victory should be associated with greater voter confidence than a close margin of victory.

Method

To explore whether individuals rely on signals from candidates in assessing the fairness of election procedures and the legitimacy of election results, we conducted a laboratory experiment. In the experiment, we varied the cue in a hypothetical election. The experimental design ensures that participants were exposed to the same information about the candidates and then were exposed to a varied cue. Without control over information exposure, we cannot isolate the effect of responses from the losing candidate from other factors that might also influence voter confidence.

Participants

Participants ($n = 150$) in this experiment were recruited from undergraduate political science courses at a large public university in the southern United States in early 2009 and received extra credit for their participation in the study.⁶ The participants ranged in age from 18 to 45 with a mean of 20.6 and 56.4% were male. The racial/ethnic identification of participants was 83% white, 10.9% African-American, 2.0% Latino/Hispanic, 0.7% Native American, and 3.4% other.⁷

Procedures

The experiment was described to participants as a study exploring the way that information about political candidates influences political decisions. After agreeing to participate in the study, participants completed an initial questionnaire including measures for demographic characteristics, political attitudes, and political knowledge.

Having completed the questionnaire, participants read information about two candidates described as running for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2008.

Participants were provided with background information (demographic characteristics, family life, education, and career history), political party affiliation, issue positions, and photographs of the candidates. While the candidates were portrayed as real candidates complete with a photograph of each, they were both fictitious. Brian Hastings was a slightly conservative Republican while Rick Inslee was a slightly liberal Democrat. For example, the Republican candidate supported the death penalty for federal crimes while the Democrat opposed the death penalty; however, both candidates supported offering tax credits to small businesses to offset the cost of health insurance coverage.

After reading about the two candidates, participants were asked to evaluate the candidates. Participants were then told that their preferred candidate had lost the election in 2008⁸ and were randomly assigned to either a control condition or one of five treatment conditions. In the *control condition*, no additional information was presented to participants and they proceeded directly to the post-stimulus questionnaire. Participants in the experimental conditions were given their candidate's response to the election outcome (detailed wording of the different responses is included in the supplementary material).

Participants in the *acceptance condition* read a newspaper article in which the candidate congratulated his opponent and accepted the results of the election as legitimate. However, the article described the election as having been decided by a narrow margin. In the *landslide condition*, participants read the same article, but the election was decided by a large margin.

Participants in the remaining treatment conditions read an article in which the candidate questioned the fairness of the election. In the *irregularities condition*, the candidate questioned the results of the election using vague language. He states: "we have received reports that this election process was beset with voting irregularities. Such reports make us question whether incompetence or something more dishonest has occurred in this election."

Participants assigned to the *deception condition* read that the candidate rejected the election results as illegitimate because of reports of voter deception. The candidate claims that "we have received reports that voters in a dozen or more precincts received deceptive telephone calls in the days before the election providing them with false information that their voting places had changed. These calls are intended to confuse and discourage Washingtonians from voting."

The final condition, *mishandling*, exposed participants to an article in which the candidate questioned the results of the election because of reports of ballot mishandling. The candidate argues that "we have received reports that poll workers in more than a few precincts 'found' boxes of ballots hours after election officials went to these precincts and collected their boxes. Such reports make us question whether incompetence or something more dishonest has occurred in this election."

All participants then answered a post-stimulus questionnaire with questions tapping voter confidence. Participants were also asked to indicate their belief concerning the purpose of the experiment and were debriefed.⁹

Measures

The goal of this study was to explore the effect of signals from candidates on voter confidence. To that end, participants were asked several questions in the post-stimulus questionnaire about their level of confidence in the election.

Voter Confidence. In the first battery of questions participants were asked: “when thinking about the election you just read about, how confident are you that votes were counted as the voters intended,” “how do you feel about the way the election officials handled their jobs,” “how confident are you that the election was conducted in a fair manner,” and “how confident are you that the outcome of the election reflected the true will of the voters.” Responses ranged from one to four with higher numbers reflecting greater confidence in the conduct of the election. The majority of participants indicated that they were very confident or somewhat confident in the way votes were counted (77%), the fairness of the election (74%), and that the election results reflected the true will of voters (75%). A similar percentage (74%) of participants indicated they strongly approved or approved of the way that election officials handled their jobs.

Description of the Election. Participants were also asked to provide up to ten adjectives they might use to describe the election. The average number of adjectives provided by participants was 2.99 and the standard deviation was 2.05. From the open-ended responses to this question, we created four variables: the number of positive adjectives, the number of negative adjectives, the number of adjectives describing the election as fair, and the number of adjectives describing the election as unfair.¹⁰ These measures are not mutually exclusive. A positive adjective might also describe the election as fair whereas a negative adjective might also describe the election as unfair. All fairness adjectives were counted as positive and all adjectives describing the election as unfair were counted as negative adjectives. For example, a number of participants described the election as unjust. Such descriptions were scored as both negative and unfair. However, other participants used positive and negative adjectives that were unrelated to judgments of fairness. For example, one participant described the election as hopeful. This is obviously a positive adjective, but not a description of the election as fair. Such adjectives were coded as positive, but not fair.

Results

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were first performed to examine the extent to which voter confidence varied across the experimental conditions. The null hypothesis was that participants in all conditions would express the exact same level of confidence. The results show variation in voter confidence across the five experimental conditions. In particular, the perception that votes were recorded accurately ($F_{5,148} = 11.65, p < 0.001$), that the election was conducted in a fair manner ($F_{5,148} = 9.87, p < 0.001$), that the outcome reflected the will of voters ($F_{5,148} = 4.22, p < 0.001$), and approval of election officials ($F_{5,148} = 11.98, p < 0.001$) all

varied by assignment to the treatment conditions. Moreover, the open-ended responses also varied by assignment to treatment: positive adjectives ($F_{5,148} = 3.68$, $p < 0.01$), negative adjectives ($F_{5,148} = 5.36$, $p < 0.001$), fair adjectives ($F_{5,148} = 2.59$, $p < 0.05$), and unfair adjectives ($F_{5,148} = 8.05$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that the experimental conditions affect voter confidence.

The statistical results used to test the individual hypotheses are shown in Table 1 and the results with the open-ended measures are in Table 2. These tables include summary information and t-test results for each of the hypotheses. The first hypothesis anticipates that voter confidence increases when a candidate accepts the outcome of the election. To examine this possibility, we compared voter confidence when the candidate expressed acceptance of the results with the control condition (no information from the candidate). Across all eight measures of voter confidence in Tables 1 and 2, we find no evidence that the acceptance cue has a positive effect. We suspect that this finding is driven by one of two possibilities. First, baseline levels of voter confidence are fairly high so there might be a ceiling effect. Second, election challenges can be costly so some “acceptance” might simply be avoiding costly challenges rather than providing an informative cue.

To test the second hypothesis, we compared the challenge conditions (irregularities, mishandling, and deception) to the non-challenge conditions (control, acceptance, and landslide). This hypothesis received much greater support as a challenge led to a significant decline in all eight measures of voter confidence. This finding is of particular interest as it suggests that voter confidence is coincidental with elite confidence, and that an important means of maintaining high levels of voter confidence is to avoid elite challenges. In terms of its policy implications, this is a very promising result as satisfying the procedural preferences of a small number of elites is a much more manageable task than satisfying the procedural preferences of a much larger population of voters. It also suggests that super-majority requirements to alter election procedures might usefully (if indirectly) increase voter confidence by providing a greater elite consensus on the procedures.

The third hypothesis suggests that the type of challenge should affect voter confidence such that a specific challenge should be more credible and thus have a greater effect on voter confidence than a vague challenge. This hypothesis also received support for six of the eight measures of voter confidence ($p < 0.1$). The two measures of voter confidence that were unchanged when moving from a vague to a specific challenge were the open-ended measures of positive adjectives and fair adjectives. These were expected to decrease but showed little change. As shown in Table 2, the average number of positive and fair adjectives is very low, even in the baseline condition, which limits the ability of a specific challenge to further reduce the counts. Participants were significantly more likely to describe the election negatively, for example describing it as shady, fishy, tainted, wrong, and sketchy, when the challenge was specific rather than vague. Taken together, these results show that any challenge, even one that is non-specific, reduces voter confidence, but that a specific challenge such as allegations of ballot mishandling or voter deception has a greater impact. These two hypotheses are the main findings from the paper and support

Table 1. Signals from candidates and voter confidence measures

	(1) Votes recorded accurately	(2) Election officials approval	(3) Election was fair	(4) Will of voters
Hypothesis 1				
Control (n = 22)				
Mean	3.227	3.045	3.227	3.000
Std. Dev.	0.612	0.375	0.612	0.617
Acceptance (n = 50)				
Mean	3.300	3.040	3.160	3.100
Std. Dev.	0.580	0.493	0.650	0.580
T-test	$p = 0.63$	0.963	0.682	0.511
Hypothesis 2				
Challenge (n = 77)				
Mean	2.649	2.558	2.571	2.649
Std. Dev.	0.556	0.573	0.696	0.684
No Challenge (n = 72)				
Mean	3.277	3.042	3.181	3.069
Std. Dev.	0.587	0.458	0.635	0.589
T-test	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***
Hypothesis 3				
Specific (n = 51)				
Mean	2.529	2.373	2.373	2.549
Std. Dev	0.542	0.564	0.692	0.673
Vague (n = 26)				
Mean	2.885	2.923	2.962	2.846
Std. Dev	0.516	0.392	0.528	0.675
T-test	0.007***	0.000***	0.000***	0.071*
Hypothesis 4				
Deception (n = 24)				
Mean	2.625	2.458	2.333	2.500
Std. Dev	0.576	0.509	0.761	0.722
Mishandling (n = 27)				
Mean	2.444	2.296	2.407	2.593
Std. Dev	0.506	0.609	0.636	0.636
T-test	0.239	0.311	0.707	0.629
Hypothesis 5				
Acceptance (n = 23)				
Mean	3.435	3.087	3.261	3.174
Std. Dev	0.507	0.515	0.689	0.576

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

	(1) Votes recorded accurately	(2) Election officials approval	(3) Election was fair	(4) Will of voters
Landslide (n = 27)				
Mean	3.185	3.000	3.074	3.037
Std. Dev	0.622	0.480	0.616	0.587
T-test	0.131	0.540	0.316	0.411

Note: Scales range from 1–4, where higher values indicate greater confidence. P-values were obtained from two-tailed t-tests. * indicates $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

the argument that costly signals from losing candidates inform voters about election procedures and mediate the relationship between election administration and voter confidence.

We also explored whether voter confidence varied according to the type of allegation, comparing malicious behaviour (deceptive telephone calls) to incompetence (mishandling of the ballots). This hypothesis (number 4) was not supported by the data. Although the differences were in the expected direction, they were not large enough to support a definitive conclusion.¹¹

To test the fifth hypothesis about the effect of landslide elections, we compared voter confidence in a landslide election to a close election that is accepted by the candidates. Contrary to the hypothesis, there were no differences in six of the measures of voter confidence. The two that differed were the open-ended fairness and unfairness adjectives. For these two variables, the direction of the effect was contrary to expectation, as the landslide election was associated with fewer “fair” adjectives and more “unfair” adjectives. While the results for the fifth hypothesis are contrary to expectations, they are also revealing. Close elections might attract more challenges and greater scrutiny but the closeness of an election itself does not inherently reduce voter confidence. This is particularly striking for the last item, which asked about participants’ confidence that the outcome reflected the “true will of the voters.” Barring gross procedural failures, the landslide election almost certainly correctly identified the winning candidate whereas a close election could be affected by factors such as voter error through spoiled ballots or misrecorded votes. Nevertheless, even for this measure of voter confidence, there was no increase from the landslide condition suggesting that candidate acceptance is at least as important as a large margin of victory.

These results support the core theoretical argument that signals from candidates affect voter confidence. Candidates might be more likely to challenge the results of a close election, but the tests of hypotheses 1 and 5 show that the closeness of the election itself does not independently affect voter confidence. In fact, a close election

Table 2. Signals from candidates and descriptive measures

	(1) Positive adjectives	(2) Negative adjectives	(3) Fair adjectives	(4) Unfair adjectives
Hypothesis 1				
Control (n = 22)				
Mean	1.136	0.409	0.773	0.273
Std. Dev.	1.390	0.796	1.020	0.550
Acceptance (n = 50)				
Mean	1.360	0.700	0.680	0.260
Std. Dev.	1.747	1.329	1.019	0.751
T-test	0.598	0.344	0.723	0.943
Hypothesis 2				
Challenge (n = 77)				
Mean	0.481	1.714	0.286	1.117
Std. Dev.	0.837	1.925	0.666	1.405
No Challenge (n = 72)				
Mean	1.319	0.611	0.708	0.222
Std. Dev.	1.643	1.193	0.956	0.562
T-test	0.000***	0.000***	0.002***	0.000***
Hypothesis 3				
Specific (n = 51)				
Mean	0.431	2.078	0.254	1.451
Std. Dev	0.855	2.077	0.627	1.527
Vague (n = 26)				
Mean	0.577	1.000	0.346	0.461
Std. Dev	0.809	1.356	0.745	0.811
T-test	0.474	0.019**	0.573	0.003***
Hypothesis 4				
Deception (n = 24)				
Mean	0.292	2.292	0.208	1.583
Std. Dev	0.690	2.562	0.588	1.792
Mishandling (n = 27)				
Mean	0.556	1.889	0.296	1.333
Std. Dev	0.974	1.553	0.669	1.271
T-test	0.275	0.495	0.622	0.565
Hypothesis 5				
Acceptance (n = 23)				
Mean	1.652	0.478	0.957	0.043
Std. Dev	2.058	0.730	1.147	0.209

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

	(1) Positive adjectives	(2) Negative adjectives	(3) Fair adjectives	(4) Unfair adjectives
Landslide (n = 27)				
Mean	1.111	0.889	0.481	0.333
Std. Dev	1.368	1.672	0.753	0.734
T-test	0.273	0.281	0.086*	0.074*

Note: P-values were obtained from two-tailed t-tests. * indicates $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

that is accepted by the candidates is indistinguishable from a landslide election. Challenges from a candidate reduce voter confidence across all measures of voter confidence. The specificity of the challenge also matters such that a specific challenge has a greater effect on voter confidence than one that references vague “irregularities.” The content of the challenge matters somewhat less as the effect of intentional misconduct was the same as the effect of unintentional procedural failures.

Conclusion

Prior research has demonstrated that losing an election can have significant implications for political support. Supporters of the losing candidate are more likely to be dissatisfied with the institutions of government and democracy. Furthermore, voters losing an election are also more likely to support changes to the rules governing elections. But all elections are not the same and this study shows that candidates are an important source of cues for voter confidence. In so doing, the study also resolves a logical puzzle linking election procedures to voter confidence. Understanding the sources of voter confidence is important as prior research has shown that it has significant implications for voter turnout and confidence varies across racial and political lines (Alvarez et al., 2008). Trust in government has also been shown to affect compliance with laws (Levi & Stoker, 2000) and experimental studies have found that people are more willing to accept even adverse authoritative decisions when a fair method was used to select the decision-maker (Hibbing & Alford, 2004).

The empirical findings support the argument that candidate cues affect voter confidence. The study demonstrates that a candidate’s challenge has an effect across measures of voter confidence and that a specific allegation has a greater effect than a non-specific allegation. We do not find strong support, however, for the expectation that landslide elections affect voter confidence. While a landslide election does suggest a clear winner, there was not a significant difference between confidence in a landslide election and one in which the losing candidate accepts the results of

a close election. This is an unanticipated result that warrants future research, as it suggests that voters are interested in the fairness of election procedures beyond correctly identifying a plurality preferred candidate. This also suggests that some type of active signal of acceptance from a candidate is just as important for voter confidence as a decisive margin of victory. However, when the candidate challenges the results of an election, we find lower levels of voter confidence across several measures.

These results help to resolve a logical puzzle in linking voter confidence to election procedures. While more complex procedures might improve the reliability and accuracy of elections, they also raise issues of transparency. Assessing highly complex and decentralized procedures requires substantial effort and expertise that many voters will not have. This research argues that elites can provide an important heuristic that informs voter confidence. These findings have important policy implications and clarify the relationship between election administration and voter confidence.

These findings also point to two promising areas of future research. First, future research could examine the mechanism underlying the effect of candidate signals, particularly how other actors affect voter confidence. We anticipate that candidates initially provide signals about election administration which are then transmitted and independently reported on by the media. Other actors such as other candidates, election officials, non-partisan groups, and courts could also provide separate signals and repeated signals over time. Future research could also examine whether the timing of challenges matters, such as challenges that initiate post-election audits and recounts, and challenges that persist after institutional remedies have been exhausted.

Second, this research could be pursued outside of the American context. Though the present study focuses on American elections, the argument itself is not logically restricted to the American case and could apply in nearly any democratic context. The effects certainly might vary in elections that have a greater role for parties or in countries with a less decentralized system of elections. Additionally, allegations of fraud, mishandling, and deception are found in both long established democracies and in newly democratizing countries. For example, the Conservative Party in Canada was recently accused of responsibility for deceptive phone messages informing voters that their polling location had moved.¹² Mexico also experienced widespread protests over voter fraud in the 2006 presidential election.¹³ The present study suggests that such claims of mishandling, deception, and corruption may be consequential to voters as they assess the legitimacy of elections.

Notes

1. Throughout the article, when we refer to voter confidence we are referring to the extent to which voters believe the election was administered competently and fairly.
2. This is particularly notable as EDR is among the most significant voting reforms that states have undertaken. Nevertheless, eliminating registration deadlines only reduces the number of voters that report missing the registration deadline from 14% to 10%, a relative decline of less than 1/3.
3. http://articles.courant.com/2010-11-05/news/hc-ct-governor-election-results-1106-20101105-30_1_vote-count-democrat-dannel-malloy-tom-foley.

4. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/03/us/politics/03mass.html>.
5. Though candidates may be in a better position to evaluate electoral procedures, actual irregularities are not the only motivation for a candidate's claim of irregularities. Candidates may have ulterior motives for suggesting that election procedures are unjust. As Minnite (2010) suggests, candidates may argue that electoral procedures are unfair or poorly administered to ensure that reforms to the process benefit their party in the long-run. While we anticipate that voters rely on such claims in assessing election procedures, an alternative explanation is that voters will simply dismiss any allegations from a candidate as manipulative.
6. This is a convenience sample which can limit the generalizability of the findings. In their assessment of student samples Mintz et al. (2006) argue that student samples are most problematic for studies of elites and least problematic for studies of average citizens. Additionally, Druckman and Kam (2011) find that student samples do not differ from random national samples on a number of key political variables such as partisanship, ideology, media use, discussing politics, and following politics. Mintz and Geva (1998) also consider student samples and argue that since college students are relatively more educated they should be less affected by heuristics, implying that this design might provide a conservative test.
7. We examined the extent to which random assignment successfully distributed participants with differing characteristics into the various treatment groups and this analysis appears in the supplementary materials.
8. This was done to insure that differences in the outcome of the election did not influence voter confidence, as prior research has found.
9. Importantly, not a single participant guessed the purpose of the experiment. This likely stems from the between-subjects experimental design.
10. Three coders were asked to independently code the open-ended responses for these four measures. We examined Cohen's Kappa for these measures to ensure intercoder reliability. Cohen's Kappa captures intercoder agreement by taking into consideration any agreement that may occur by chance. Intercoder reliability was high for all four measures: positive adjectives (kappa = 0.956), negative adjectives (kappa = 0.967), fair adjectives (kappa = 0.967), and unfair adjectives (kappa = 0.976). All disagreements in coding were discussed and decided by consensus.
11. While not statistically significant, the results nevertheless reveal an interesting pattern which suggests that participants were differentiating between the measures of voter confidence. For example, respondents appeared to differentiate between confidence in the votes being recorded accurately and the fairness of the election in expected ways. While deceptive phone calls might interfere with voter turnout or vote choice, they should not impact the accurate recording of votes actually cast. The results bear this out as participants were less confident that votes were recorded accurately in the ballot mishandling condition (this was also the case for approval of local election officials). On the other hand, when asked about the fairness of the election, the average for the deceptive phone calls condition was lower (also true for confidence that the outcome reflected the true will of the voters) than the mishandling condition.
12. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2012/02/29/pol-robocalls-poor-losers.html>.
13. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5161862.stm>.

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