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When Election Officials Speak, Do Voters Listen? Trust-Building Communications, Information Seeking, and Voter Confidence in the 2022 U.S. Midterm Elections

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ABSTRACT


In recent U.S. election cycles, elite-driven disinformation has fueled public confusion about voting requirements and eroded confidence that votes are counted accurately, with notable partisan gaps. Declining voter confidence threatens civic participation and faith in democratic systems. In response, election officials (EOs) have launched messaging campaigns to establish themselves as trusted sources and inform the public about election integrity safeguards. In this paper, we argue EOs' trust-building communications increase opportunities for voter exposure to accurate and reliable information about how to participate and how elections are kept safe and secure. In turn, voters will be more likely to listen to their EOs, relying on them for guidance on how to vote and expressing greater confidence in election outcomes. Using a unique dataset of state EO social media communications during the 2022 election cycle and two nationally representative surveys fielded pre- and post-election, we find trust-building campaigns successfully position EOs as key sources of information for voter registration and voting procedures but fall short in bolstering confidence in vote counting. Controlling for positive voter experiences, support for losing candidates (voting for Donald Trump in 2020), and elite-driven disinformation (election deniers running for a state's Chief Election Official), our findings suggest state EOs face distinct challenges in building voter confidence. Unlike local election officials, with whom voters interact more directly, it is more difficult for state EOs to establish public trust. These findings underscore both the potential and limitations of trust-building strategies in countering disinformation and restoring faith in elections.

KEYWORDS

Voter confidence; voter education; election administration; democratic listening

Public confidence in the integrity of elections is a prerequisite for healthy democracies. If the legitimacy of election results is undermined, it can weaken acceptance of the rules of self-government and decrease support for the policies and programs of democratically elected governments (Atkeson et al., 2015; Norris, 2014). Confidence in the accuracy of election outcomes is largely driven by voters' experiences – such as their mode of voting (Bryant, 2020), experiences in polling places (King, 2020) – and electoral competition – the selection of a winning or losing candidate (Sances & Stewart, 2015). Electoral competition

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means that ebbs and flows in partisan control of major elected bodies like the United States presidency are predictable and normal. Given these ebbs and flows, voters' disappointment over the loss of a preferred candidate imposes no long-term impact on confidence in the electoral process (Sinclair et al., 2018).

However, in the United States elite-driven rhetoric and disinformation campaigns questioning whether election results can be trusted create public confusion over voting requirements (Gregorio et al., 2024), shake normal fluctuations in public attitudes about the integrity of elections (Persily & Stewart, 2021). A sharp decline in voter confidence among Republican voters in particular persisted well into the post-2020 electoral environment despite systematic evidence that the 2020 election was one of the most secure in US history.¹ This contradiction is partly explained by false claims about the security of elections perpetuated by highly visible political leaders and candidates like Donald Trump (Levy, 2021) who have sought to redefine healthy electoral competition as a nefarious plot to circumvent the will of the people.

The rise of false narratives that elections are rigged or stolen challenges the public's belief that the means by which their preferences result in election outcomes are free, fair, and secure (Persily & Stewart, 2021), and in turn, their incentive to vote and capacity to self-govern (Birch, 2010; Tenove, 2020). However, public responses to these narratives – like diminished confidence in the integrity of ballot counting – may be understandable. Voters, after all, are not experts in election administration; the average citizen is not equipped to dismiss false claims that elections have vulnerabilities that lead to the loss of their preferred candidate. This is especially likely in the United States, where election systems vary across the 50 states and territories, and thousands of local election jurisdictions. On the one hand, the decentralized election administration structure of the United States is praised for making election interference highly unlikely on a broad scale.² On the other hand, this decentralized structure offers more opportunities to cast doubt that elections in one jurisdiction are more secure than in another.

In the absence of familiarity with how election processes are kept safe and secure in their state and others, the public is left vulnerable to falsehoods about rigged or stolen elections. Even though their personal experiences with voting may be uneventful or even positive, repeated exposure to false narratives that their candidate lost because elections were manipulated by election officials or not securely administered further erodes confidence that votes cast are counted accurately (Berlinski et al., 2023; Levy, 2021). This dynamic raises important questions about whether and when people listen to the individuals tasked with administering elections – election officials – particularly when the information challenges citizens' existing worldview or political interests. The credibility of election officials may be tested most severely in cases where voters have had negative voting experiences, receive contradictory messages from political elites they trust, or face unfavorable election outcomes – precisely the situations where motivated reasoning might lead them to reject election outcomes that do not align with their preferred narrative (der Linden Van, 2023).

In this paper, we use state election officials' responses to the growing threat of election disinformation following the 2016 U.S. presidential election as an opportunity to assess whether and how constituents listen to their election officials on matters of election administration. In their capacity as experts in election rules and procedures (Mansbridge et al., 2012), election officials are on the front lines of democracy and go through extraordinary lengths to ensure that elections are secure (Gronke et al.,

2024).³ But to effectively serve in this function, the public must listen to the messages EOs transmit. EOs have responded to election disinformation and declining voter confidence with coordinated trust-building campaigns that aim to encourage the public to view them as trusted, accurate sources of election-related information and administrators of elections. It is an open question, however, as to whether these campaigns have received uptake from the public.⁴ We theorize that EOs' trust-building communications increase public exposure to accurate and reliable information about elections, and test whether this exposure increases the likelihood of constituent listening to EOs.

We operationalize listening to election officials in two ways: *identifying election officials as top information sources* and *accepting EO's message, ultimately expressing confidence that votes cast in one's state are accurately counted*. While each measure has inherent constraints, they collectively capture different dimensions of listening. The first may overestimate listening, as recognizing EOs as an information source does not necessarily mean constituents will listen to them. The second may underestimate listening, as persuasion is not the only indicator of engagement – one can listen without being convinced. Despite these constraints, we argue that together, these measures provide a nuanced and comprehensive approach to assessing listening.

To assess this relationship, we leverage a one-of-a-kind dataset of trust-building communications from state EOs during the 2022 midterm election cycle and merge these data with two nationally representative pre-2022 election, and post-2022 election surveys. We draw from coordinated national and state-driven trust-building campaigns explicitly responding to the rise in election disinformation and declines in voter confidence in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election: the use of #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag campaign promoted by the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), and the use of trust-building communications not directly associated with the NASS campaign, but that follow the same messaging strategy (Merivaki et al., 2024).⁵

Our analysis shows that trust-building communications from state EOs encourage their constituents to prefer them as top sources of information about how to participate in elections, but that these communications fall short in building confidence in the accuracy of ballot counting, particularly after ballots are cast. These findings suggest that listening between constituents and their EOs is nuanced and context-dependent; trust-building messages may yield higher responsiveness on matters of how to vote *before* constituents formally participate in the electoral process when information about how to vote is needed, but may be harder to transmit when voters are processing the loss of an election, or if they have had bad voting experiences.

These findings also underscore the challenges state election officials face in effectively reaching their constituents, especially when it comes to countering elite-driven disinformation and dissatisfaction over the loss of preferred candidates, particularly Donald Trump's presidential loss in 2020. Unlike local election officials, who enjoy higher levels of trust in their community and with whom voters interact more directly (Adona & Gronke, 2018), state election officials lack the "close to home" connection with constituents and may thus not be the most effective messengers, despite their central role in the administration of elections (Merivaki et al., 2025). To build confidence in election integrity, therefore, state election officials may first need to build trust with their constituents. This is all the more important considering evidence that state election officials may act on their partisanship

while in office, as well as the increase in election deniers running for the state's chief election officer position.⁶

The Relationship Between Election Officials, Constituents, and Information Environments

We situate election officials as experts within a broader democratic system encompassing a range of practices that speak to the problems these systems must solve to be considered democratic: empowered inclusion, collective agenda and will formation, and collective decision-making (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Warren, 2017).⁷ We argue that listening between election officials and their constituents plays a central role in facilitating voting as a practice that supports empowered inclusion and collective decision-making in democratic systems, particularly within the context of an election-information ecosystem threatened by election disinformation (Tenove, 2020).

For voting to satisfy these principles, it requires an inclusive process for participation, and agreement that the results reflected in the election outcomes accurately reflect the will of the people. It is here we suggest that listening between election officials and their constituents plays an important role in facilitating the strengths voting offers democratic systems (Warren, 2017), and in addressing the challenges of false election narratives (Tenove, 2020).

As the official administrators of elections in the United States, EOs are considered authoritative, accurate sources of election-related information by a range of government entities and third-party organizations dedicated to supporting voter participation.⁸ EOs inform constituents about the mechanics of voting, such as registration deadlines, requirements for mail ballots, or polling place locations. They also offer educational content on the ins and outs of administering elections, such as pre-election security measures like logic and accuracy testing to ensure vote machines are functioning properly, and post-election tabulation processes and security measures like audits (Merivaki & Suttman-Lea, 2024; Suttman-Lea & Merivaki, 2024). Altogether, these education efforts promote the democratic “goods” of self-determination, enabling citizens to understand how to formally contribute to “giving themselves rules (such as a right to vote in fair elections)” and have confidence in the representation resulting from elections (Tenove, 2020, p. 525).

In an election environment saturated with disinformation around election administration, we examine two key indicators of constituent listening to election officials (EOs). First, we consider whether constituents view EOs as their *primary source for information on how to vote logistically speaking* (how to register to vote, how to request, complete and return a mail ballot, how to find one's polling place, what form of identification is required, etc.). Identifying EOs as a source of information is a necessary, though perhaps not a sufficient, condition of listening, insofar as equipping voters with the tools to successfully navigate the election process.

Second, we consider constituent *confidence in ballot counting accuracy* as evidence of listening to EOs. Standard voter confidence metrics assess confidence in electoral procedures, particularly ballot tabulation and result certification (Atkeson et al., 2015, p. 209). Since EOs oversee these processes, and are responsible for communicating the integrity of these processes to constituents, we argue that higher confidence levels indicate that constituents have effectively received, or listened to the EO communications about election

administration (Suttmann-Lea & Merivaki, 2023). While it is possible that a constituent could listen to EOs without being persuaded by their election integrity message, we argue that constituents' alignment with EOs' message is suggestive that listening occurred.

This study is concerned primarily with understanding the extent to which constituents listen to their EOs. EOs serve an important democratic function in overseeing elections and ensuring their integrity. The success of these officials' efforts, however, depends on the extent to which constituents listen to them. Still, it is important to note that this relationship is a two-way street, in the sense that EOs must also listen to their constituents. Specifically, EOs should listen to and be responsive to constituent concerns over voter access and election integrity, for example.

Although much of the election information shared by EOs remains static from election cycle to election cycle, the development of voter education messaging must also respond to evolving election information environments that create new constituent needs for accurate, trusted sources of election-related information. For instance, voting requirements and access laws change from election cycle to election cycle (Carter, 2024). Lawsuits brought by political parties or candidates close to Election Day can create confusion around voting requirements that can lead to disenfranchisement (Hasen, 2020). Most significantly, for this research, elite-driven disinformation can generate false beliefs about the security of election administration that threatens voter access and perceptions of election integrity (DeRista et al., 2018; Gregorio et al., 2024; Levy, 2021; Persily & Stewart, 2021). To the extent that EOs craft their specific messages in response to constituent concerns over election integrity, we might say that they are "listening" to their constituents.

How EOs Trust-Building Efforts Shape Information Seeking and Build Confidence

Extant research on EOs' voter education and outreach theorizes that EOs cultivate election information environments that increase the likelihood of voter exposure to accurate and timely information about elections, also increasing transparency in election administration and offering opportunities for election officials to connect with constituents (Merivaki et al., 2025; Suttmann-Lea & Merivaki, 2023). These communications have tangible educative effects – they teach constituents how to navigate the voting process and avoid potentially disenfranchising errors along the way. For example, in states and jurisdictions where EOs share information about how to vote by mail or registering to vote by mailing information postcards, placing newspaper and radio ads, or posting on social media, voters are more likely to successfully use these processes and new voting technologies (Herrnson et al., 2018; Merivaki & Suttmann-Lea, 2023; Mann & Bryant, 2020; Suttmann-Lea & Merivaki, 2022).

The educative effects of EO voter education extend beyond ensuring inclusive access to voting. When state EOs are more consistent in their day-to-day communications to voters and invest more resources in voter education, their constituents are more likely to have confidence in the accuracy of ballot counting in different contexts, such as confidence that one's own ballot was counted as intended, and confidence that ballots in one's state were counted as intended. These differences hold even for voters who supported losing candidates campaigning on false election narratives like Donald Trump and MAGA affiliated candidates (Suttmann-Lea & Merivaki, 2023). Moreover, individuals who prefer local election officials as a top source for information about how to register and vote are also

more likely to express confidence in ballot counting, suggesting that the “close to home” relationship with one’s local election official can play an important role in facilitating voter confidence (Merivaki et al., 2025). These findings suggest that voter education from EOs can facilitate public listening to election outcomes.

Trust-building campaigns by election officials and democracy stakeholders have evolved in the post-2016 environment through coordinated, cross-state, bipartisan messaging efforts that go beyond sharing information about how to cast a vote, to a focus on *how elections are kept safe and secure*. Run during every on-year election cycle, these campaigns allow officials to explain election security measures and address disinformation-driven concerns directly with voters. This responsive approach not only addresses declining voter confidence (Merivaki & Suttman-Lea, 2024; Suttman-Lea & Merivaki, 2024), but also embodies core elements of democratic trustworthiness – demonstrating competence, responsiveness, accountability, and commitment to constituent interests (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Persily & Stewart, 2021; Tenove, 2020). Through consistent trust-building communications, election officials further increase voter exposure to accurate information about voting procedures and security measures while reinforcing their dedication to maintaining election integrity (Brown et al., 2024; Gerber et al., 2014; Merivaki et al., 2024).

While we know that EOs respond to declining trust with trust-building campaigns, the question remains as to whether constituents receive these messages in the sense of both hearing them and taking them on board. Importantly, the transmission of a message does not ensure that it will be heard and fairly considered (Scudder, 2020). While our data and research design cannot directly measure listener exposure to EO communications (Neblo et al., 2018; Neijens et al., 2024; Scudder, 2022), we can analyze the relationship between trust-building communication volume and listening outcomes. For example, when constituents express higher-than-expected preferences for EOs as information sources, and these preferences correlate with the volume of EO messaging, we can reasonably infer that listening to these messages serves as the connecting mechanism. We conceptualize listening through this relationship between trust-building communications, the public’s preferred election information sources, and confidence in ballot counting (Button & Garrett, 2016; Steiner, 2012).

This conceptualization is particularly relevant given that election disinformation reflects an unhealthy election information environment where individuals may be motivated to resist factual election information (der Linden Van, 2023). As previous research suggests, the infusion of trust-building messages by EOs into the election information ecosystem can increase audience receptivity because these messages come from established process experts and are amplified by other stakeholders in the same network (Brown et al., 2024).

The key message of the post-2016 trust-building campaign – formally branded as #TrustedInfo and collaboratively designed by the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), the oldest professional association whose membership includes over 40 secretaries of state serving as their state’s Chief Election Official – is that *election officials are trusted sources of information, and their efforts keep elections safe and secure*. The primary goal of these initiatives is to directly respond to public concerns about election integrity, exposing them to information that minimizes confusion about which voting options are available, and explains the safeguards in place to ensure election outcomes can be trusted.⁹ Importantly, this campaign also situates EOs within a network of trusted peers and opinion leaders. As Mansbridge et al. (2012, p. 15) suggest, “in such circumstances we may trust

experts because we can ask them to explain and justify their advice or decisions, if not to us directly then to a group of their peers who in turn have earned their credentials in a deliberately trustworthy manner.” For EOs, these include federal agencies,¹⁰ national organizations,¹¹ and civic organizations¹² who support EOs by amplifying their messages within their networks.

Given EOs’ trust-building campaigns, we theorize that these concerted, repeated efforts to position EOs as trusted sources of information increase the likelihood voters will identify EOs as key sources of election-related information (Hill et al., 2013). We expect, therefore, that *in states where election officials prioritize trust-building communications, constituents will be more likely to identify their state EOs as a top information source about voting procedures and election security (H1)*.

Furthermore, the relationship between voter communications and confidence is mediated by the voter experience (Atkeson et al., 2015; Suttman-Lea & Merivaki, 2022). The act of voting shapes both the voter experience and perceptions about election integrity. In-person voting, for example, typically generates higher confidence in vote counting compared to mail-in voting, regardless of the experience’s smoothness (Bryant, 2020). Conversely, negative experiences like long wait times, polling place access difficulties, or technical issues can adversely affect attitudes about election outcomes (Claassen et al., 2013; Curiel & Clark, 2021).

We expect that EOs can mitigate the effects of negative voting experiences through trust-building communications and increase voter confidence in ballot counting by directly addressing vote-counting concerns. Our second hypothesis (H2a) *predicts higher levels of confidence in election outcomes where state EOs prioritize communications establishing themselves as trusted information sources and/or emphasizing election security* (Alvarez et al., 2008; Claassen et al., 2013). Additionally, *we expect these campaigns will be particularly effective for voters with negative experiences who might otherwise express lower confidence (H2b)*.

Finally, we consider whether those who are more prone to question election integrity will express higher confidence if their state election officials prioritize trust-building messages. Although selecting a losing candidate is a persistent marker of lower confidence in ballot counting that nevertheless ebbs and flows with electoral competition (Sances & Stewart, 2015; Sinclair et al., 2018), research also documents a relationship between elite cue-taking and demonization of the voting process (Shino et al., 2022), which negatively impacts trust in electoral integrity (Levy, 2021). However, transparent, neutral communications from election officials can insulate voters from both these partisan and electoral dynamics (Brown et al., 2024; Jaffe et al., 2024). As such, our *third hypothesis (H3a-loser effect) is that those who supported Donald Trump during the 2020 election will more likely express higher confidence in statewide ballot counting if their EOs prioritize trust-building communications to their constituents*. We expect the same relationship to exist for *those who live in states where an election denier ran for the state’s Chief election official position (H3b-elite-driven disinformation)*.

Research Design and Variables of Interest

We test our hypotheses with two nationally representative surveys that took place before and after the 2022 U.S. midterm elections. The first survey was fielded online by Morning

Consult for the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) between October 14 and 15, 2022, using a sample of 2,002 registered voters nationally,¹³ and captures prospective voters' behavior with respect to selecting election information sources and expressing confidence in ballot accuracy in the forthcoming midterm elections. Because the BPC survey ran before the 2022 midterm election and does not capture voters' experiences at the polls (Claassen et al., 2013), we also use the 2022 Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAЕ), which was fielded online by YouGov for the MIT Election Data Science Lab between November 9 and December 15, 2022. YouGov interviewed 11,675 respondents who were then matched down to 200 respondents per state plus the District of Columbia to produce a sample of 10,200 in the final dataset. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education.¹⁴

Our first dependent variable measures the information-seeking choices of voters before they cast a vote, including local and national TV organizations, print media, websites, local election offices, and state election offices. Here, we use the pre-election survey and construct a binary measure that takes the value of one if respondents report that their state election office is one of their top three sources of information about registration and voting.¹⁵ Approximately 34% of respondents reported state election offices are among their top three sources for voting and registration information, with online searches and local election offices being among the top information choices (37% and 39% respectively).¹⁶

Our second dependent variable measures confidence in statewide ballot accuracy before and after the 2022 midterms. For the prospective confidence variable, we use the pre-election survey, and for the post-election variable, we use the SPAЕ survey. The pre-election survey asks if votes statewide *will be counted accurately*, whereas the SPAЕ survey asks if votes statewide *were counted as voters intended*. We consider this wording sufficient to treat the two questions as valid measures of prospective and retrospective ballot accuracy. Responses to both measures range from "Very confident" to "Not at all confident" (four categories). We collapse the four-categories into two – higher and lower confidence – because we are interested in comparing differences between the two levels of confidence rather than across them.

To construct our explanatory variables, we use a unique dataset of all communications by state EOs on social media during the 2022 election cycle (Merivaki et al., 2024). We focus on social media activity on Facebook because it was used by all states except Massachusetts. Using manual quantitative content analysis, posts were coded for the presence of terms that explicitly signal to voters EOs are trusted sources of information and/or that elections in the voter's state are safe and secure. We coded content shared between September 10 and November 15, 2022, to capture the period immediately after Labor Day, when campaign activity and overall interest in voting heightens. The November 15 cutoff covers communications to voters about post-election processes such as recounts, audits, and certifying election results.¹⁷ From this dataset, we exported data based on two cutoff dates – September 10 to October 15, 2022, to merge with the pre-election survey, and September 10 to November 15 to merge with the post-election survey.

There are two limitations in our research design. First, the question about prospective voters' information seeking choices only exists in the pre-election survey. Second, our research design strategy does not follow the traditional pre- and post-experimental test approach, where we evaluate voters' information seeking choices

after establishing that EOs, or other sources, are included in voters' top choices for election-related information. We are careful, therefore, not to make causal arguments about how trust-building communications impact voter confidence. Despite these limitations, our research design strategy offers a unique opportunity to capture how durable EOs' trust-building efforts are, particularly in the immediate aftermath of an election, when voters may be dissatisfied because their preferred candidates lost in the midterm elections, have had negative attitudes about elections because of a negative experience at the polls, or were exposed to consistent election disinformation narratives.

In [Figure 1](#), we present the total number of posts shared by state EO accounts on Facebook, categorized by whether the post included trust-building messages – usage of explicit terms like “trust,” “trusted,” “safe,” “secure,” “accurate,” and “integrity” - or the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag. We also include an indicator for whether a state EO pledged to incorporate the NASS #TrustedInfo2022 message into their social media communications.¹⁸ We do not include the hashtag into our trust-building measure – percentage of trust-building posts from the total of posts shared – because it would inflate the number of posts among states whose messages included both the term “trust” in the post and the hashtag. What is more, messages that included the hashtag often included information unrelated to election security (Merivaki et al., 2024). As such, we created a separate measure of the percentage of posts that include the hashtag regardless of whether the content of the post was about election integrity.¹⁹ We also include two binary variables that capture whether the state election office officially pledged to adopt the #TrustedInfo

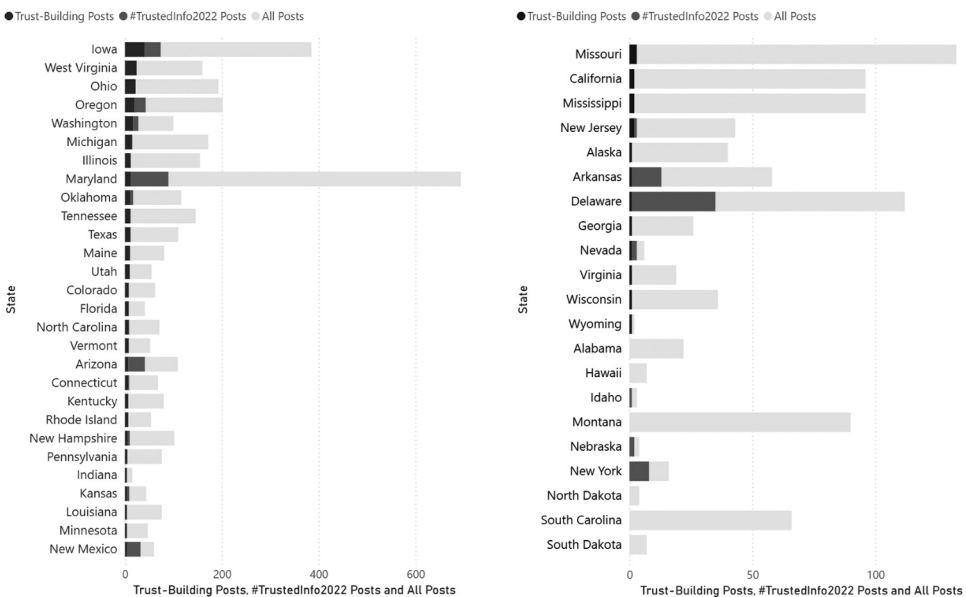


Figure 1. Volume of EO posts with trust-building or #TrustedInfo2022 content. Caption: States are ordered by the volume of trust-building posts shared on Facebook (highest = Iowa, to lowest = South Carolina)

message in their communications in 2022 and 2020. According to the NASS #TrustedInfo toolkit, public announcements or press releases are examples of an official pledge (Merivaki et al., 2024). We consider these variables as proxies for the state's broader commitment to invest in trust-building communications (Suttmann-Lea & Merivaki, 2023).

As Figure 1 shows, there is significant variation in social media posting patterns across the states both in terms of the volume of content shared, but also in how trust-building messages were incorporated into EOs' communications. Some states used explicit terms like "trust," "trusted," "safe," "secure," and "integrity." The Louisiana Secretary of State, for instance, shared several messages on social media about Louisiana being ranked first in election integrity. The Arizona, Delaware, Arkansas, and Maryland Secretary of State's accounts, had the highest rate of posts using the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag among states. Other states, like Mississippi and Idaho, did not share any content beyond a couple of posts using the hashtag.

Trust-building messages shared on social media are comparably shared through other mediums, like in-person events, interviews, press releases, media interviews, paid media – and consequently increase the likelihood of voter exposure to these messages.²⁰ We attempt to partially capture these dynamics, by measuring EOs' online paid advertisement activity. We include a dummy variable that is assigned the value of 1 if the state election office advertised online on Google, Facebook, or Snapchat during the pre- and post-election time frames.²¹ We also control for the availability of online information look up tools on state election websites using the Election Performance Index's indicator *election information lookup tools*.²²

The next variable of interest is the presence of elite-driven disinformation: the presence of election denier candidates. To evaluate whether elite cues of election denial shape 1) where voters look for information and 2) public confidence in election outcomes, we control for whether an election denier ran for Secretary of State in 2022 using FiveThirtyEight's database of election deniers who run for statewide office. Candidates are classified based on their public statements about the 2020 election: full denial; raised questions; accepted with reservations; avoided to answer; did not comment; and fully accepted. Candidates who fully denied the results of the 2020 election or raised questions about the legitimacy of the 2020 election are coded as election deniers.²³ Based on this classification, election deniers ran for Secretary of State in 11 states in the 2022 midterm election.²⁴

Finally, we control for a series of state-level electoral and campaign factors that could explain variation in voter confidence. Specifically, we control for battleground status in the 2020 presidential election, and U.S. Senate battleground status in the 2022 midterms. We also include a control for the existence of at least one competitive U.S. House race in a state.²⁵

Control Variables – Pre-Election Survey

For the pre-election analysis, we control for attitudes about ballot accuracy from the 2020 election at the personal, local, and state levels. We treat personal and local-level confidence from the previous federal election as proxies for perceptions about voters' experiences with casting a vote (Atkeson & Saunders, 2007; Merivaki et al., 2025). We include 2020 statewide confidence as a benchmark since this is one of our outcome variables. We also control for

ideology, whether respondents reported voting for a Democratic or “Other” candidate in the 2018 midterm elections, as well whether they voted for Trump in 2020. This latter variable serves as an indicator for the loser effect, and we expect that these voters would express lower confidence in ballot accuracy in 2022 if their preferred candidate lost in 2020 (Sances & Stewart, 2015). With respect to demographics, we control for gender, age, race, and education.

Control Variables – Post-Election Survey

For the post-election analysis (SPAЕ survey), we control for voting behavior in 2022, voting behavior in 2020 (namely if the respondent reported voting in 2022 and 2020), and whether respondents reported voting for Trump, or a candidate other than Biden in 2020. We also include a binary variable that has a value of 1 if the respondent reported having a positive voting experience.²⁶ We include controls for partisanship and ideology, age, gender, race, disability status, and education.

Analysis and Findings

We run logistic regressions with robust standard errors using registered voter population weights, and cluster by state. We begin with top-level findings for our two models – State EO as a top information source, and statewide voter confidence – by plotting the statistically significant coefficients in Figures 2 and 3. We then discuss the substantive findings relating to our hypotheses, and evaluate the relationship between trust-building communications and confidence in election outcomes across two dimensions: the voter experience, and elite-driven disinformation in Figures 4 and 5.

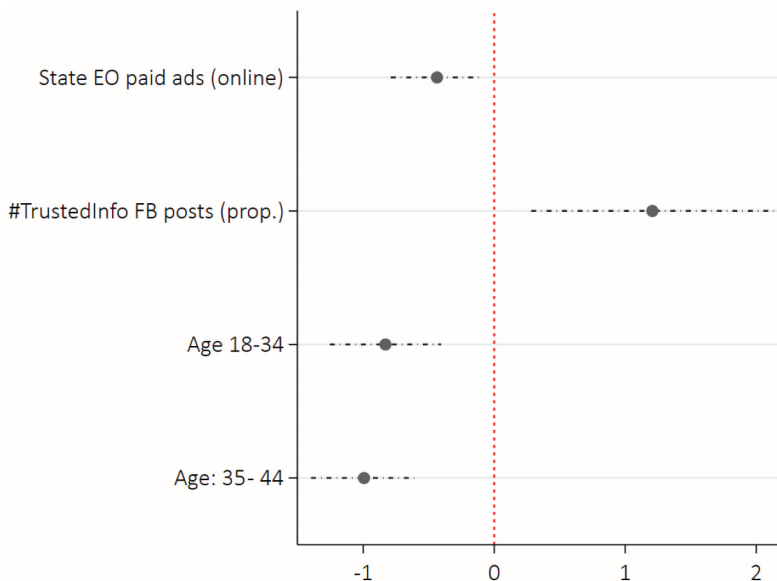


Figure 2. State EO among top 3 for information on voting and registration, pre-election sample.

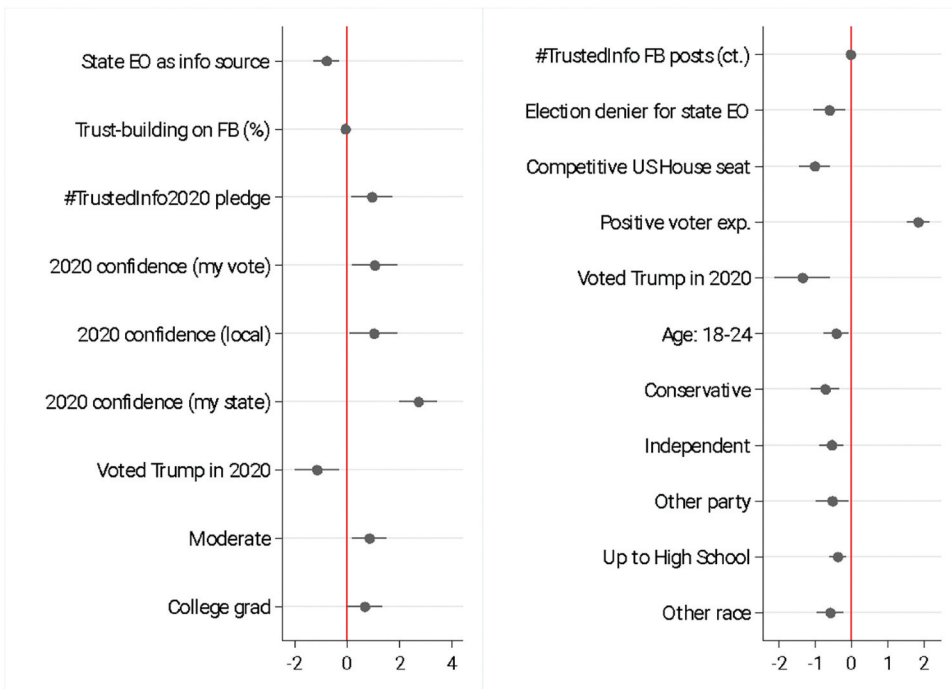


Figure 3. 2022 statewide confidence in ballot accuracy, pre- and post-election samples.

Our findings support our expectation that trust-building campaigns can foster listening insofar as they establish EOs as worth listening to. We find that when state EOs prioritize trust-building communications, their constituents are more likely to recognize them as top sources of information for how to register and vote (*HI*). As we show in [Figure 2](#), one of our trust-building measures – the proportion of posts with the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag²⁷ – has a positive and statistically significant relationship with respondents’ likelihood of selecting their state EO as a top source for information. This finding suggests these communications are effectively “transmitted” to voters, and can increase reliance on EOs for information on how to vote. Interestingly, we find that running paid ads online in the pre-election period was negatively associated with the likelihood of looking to the state EO as a top information source. While this finding might suggest a limit to the power of EO messaging to break through low trust, it could also suggest an endogenous relationship between EO communications and voters’ information-seeking behavior. For example, assuming strategic behavior on the part of EOs, they might seek to supplement organic content on social media with paid ads precisely when there is already low trust in that specific state, or low trust in the state EO. If this is true, it would suggest caution when interpreting this negative relationship as evidence that these paid ads do not work to increase trust. At the same time, voters’ likelihood to rely on state EOs for election information as a result of being exposed to paid ads may also be negative because of low trust in the EO. Future research is needed to determine what exactly is driving this effect.

In [Figure 3](#), we plot the statistically significant coefficients in our statewide voter confidence models in the pre- and post-election periods. Our findings show that trust-

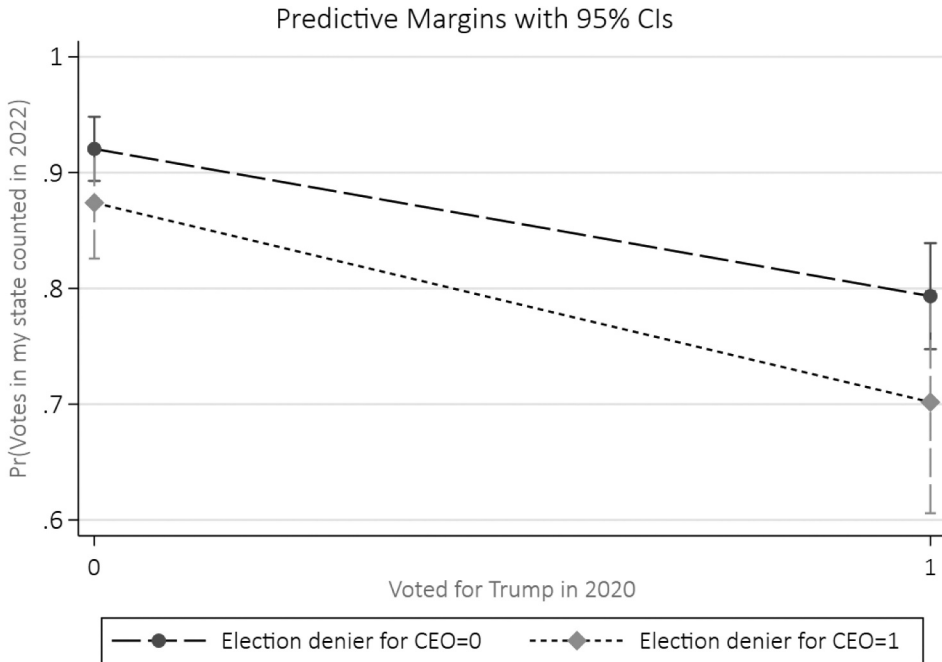


Figure 4. Election denier running for state EO in 2022, and trump 2020 vote, post-election sample.

building campaigns fall short on increasing public confidence in that votes cast in their state are counted accurately. Specifically, they may not be enough to counter the loser effect (voting for Trump in 2020) and elite-driven disinformation (election denier candidates running for the state EO position). In the pre-election period, we find a negative, but small, relationship between the percentage of trust-building communications shared on Facebook and prospective voter confidence.²⁸ We also find that those who reported that state election offices are among their top sources for election information expressed *lower* prospective confidence in the pre-election period. These findings run contrary to our expectations (*H2 and H3*), and raise questions about the factors that drive the public's attitudes about election integrity, such as trust in state election officials or preexisting concerns that elections are not secure. In both cases, the possibility of an endogenous relationship – that trust-building campaigns are responding to endemically low levels of confidence in election outcomes or activating latent concerns about election integrity – is possible and should be more closely investigated in future research.

Additionally, these findings may be less counterintuitive when considering that voter attitudes about election integrity are strongly shaped by information environments where local election officials and local news media are present (Brown et al., 2024; Merivaki et al., 2025). Local election officials connect with voters more directly, and thus may be able to facilitate two-way communications – and listening – more successfully than state election officials.

Moving to election-driven disinformation and the loser effect, our analysis confirms that those who reported voting for Trump in 2020 were less likely to express confidence that votes in their state would be counted accurately (pre-election) and that they were counted

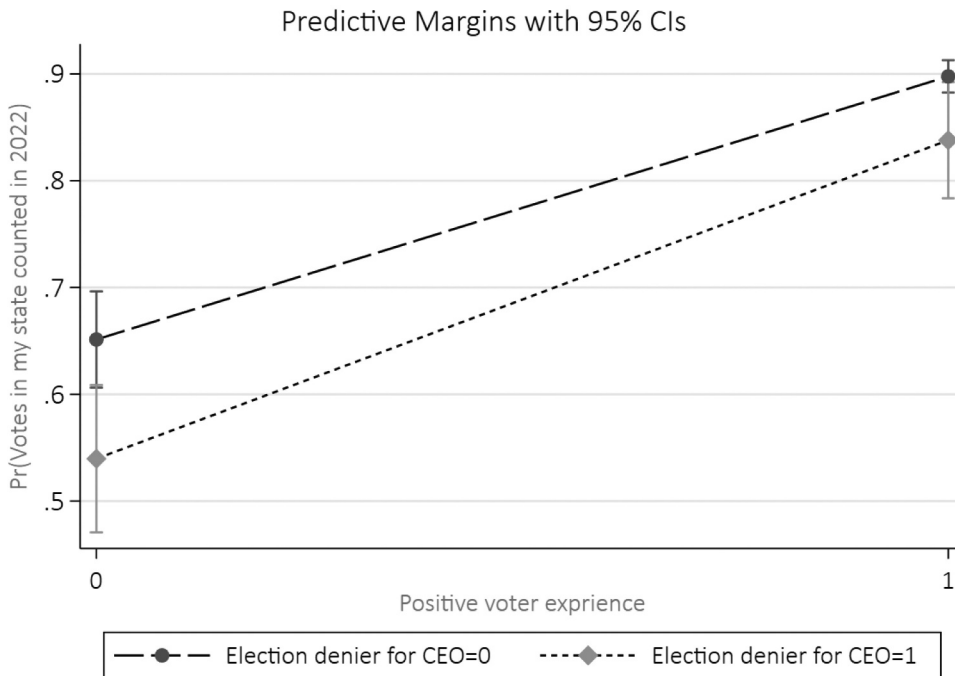


Figure 5. Election denier running for state EO in 2022, and positive voter experience, post-election sample.

accurately after voting ended (post-election). The negative relationship between the competitiveness of U.S. House races in one's state and voter confidence in the post-election survey is also indicative of the loser effect, in that those whose preferred candidate lost are dissatisfied and thus attribute the loss to inaccurate vote counting.

The negative relationship between an election denier for state EO and voter confidence is in the post-election period also suggests that elite-driven disinformation can be particularly influential in specific contexts, in this case after votes are cast and when post-election procedures take place, including the reporting of unofficial results about who won, recounts and audits, as well as contests of election results by candidates. This finding may also capture important nuances in how election misinformation, the loser/winner effect, and trust in the state EO interact and shape confidence; in 2022, 2 out of the 11 election denier candidates who ran for secretary of state – the state EO position – won (Alabama and Wyoming). On the one hand, elite cues about vulnerable elections may affect voters whose confidence threshold is low, and thus reinforce their attitudes. What is more, in states where election deniers lost, voter confidence may have remained low because of dissatisfaction with the outcome. On the other hand, voters in states where election deniers won and who did not like the outcome may have also expressed their dissatisfaction by expressing low confidence in their state's ballot counting.

As we show in [Figure 4](#), the predicted probability of expressing higher confidence in statewide ballot accuracy (post-election) decreases from 0.92 to 0.70 for voters living in states where election deniers ran for the state's chief election official and who reported voting for Trump in 2020 compared to voters who did not vote for Trump in 2020 and who

lived in states without an election denier on the ballot for secretary of state. Comparing Trump 2020 voters, the predicted probability decreases by 0.09 for voters in states where election deniers run for the state EO position. This finding is indicative of the time-dependent role of elite-driven disinformation on voter confidence for all voters, but more so for those whose dissatisfaction with the 2020 presidential election outcome shaped attitudes about election integrity in the subsequent election. The tight interplay between election denial and the loser/winner effect is certainly unique to recent U.S. election cycles, and requires further exploration.

Our analysis pre- and post-election confirms that the voter experience is among the strongest drivers of voter confidence (King, 2020). In the pre-election survey, we capture this relationship with voters' attitudes about their own ballot, and votes in their community counting in 2020, confirming findings from existing literature (Atkeson & Saunders, 2007; Merivaki et al., 2025). In the post-election wave, we have a more direct way to capture voters' recall of the voter experience, and find a strong and positive relationship with voting and statewide voter confidence, all else equal.

Compared to voters with positive experiences, voters with negative experiences have overall lower confidence that votes in their state counted. As we show in Figure 5, however, even among voters with positive experiences, elite-driven disinformation can depress voter confidence: the predicted probability for these voters in states where election deniers ran for secretary of state was 0.84, compared to 0.89 for these voters in states without an election denier running for this position. This suggests that personal experiences with voting may somewhat withstand elite-driven disinformation, but that voters are not immune to elite rhetoric undermining election integrity, more so if it comes from candidates who run for the position of the state's chief election official.

Discussion

Since the 2016 presidential election, election disinformation and false narratives about the security of election administration have threatened the election information ecosystem in the United States. In response, election officials (EOs) launched trust-building campaigns designed to restore public confidence in elections by positioning themselves as trusted information sources. Campaigns like the National Association of Secretaries of State's #TrustedInfo are illustrative of these EOs' responsiveness to public attitudes about election administration and concerns about election integrity.

In this paper, we evaluate the effectiveness of these trust-building communications, disseminated through various communication channels but primarily on social media, and amplified by a range of stakeholders in the information ecosystem, such as federal agencies, civil society, and media. Given the central role EOs play in election administration, including educating voters about how to participate in elections, we focus on their ability to create two-way listening networks that facilitate constituent engagement and foster inclusion in the democratic process (Neblo et al., 2018; Warren, 2017). By leveraging a unique dataset of state election officials' social media communications during the 2022 U.S. midterm election cycle and merging it with nationally representative surveys that ran before and after the 2022 midterm elections, we investigate whether voters listen to EOs' intentional and coordinated efforts to establish themselves as credible sources of voting information. Our central hypothesis is that voters will listen to EOs, evidenced by their

recognizing EOs as a top information source for election-related information, and accepting the content of their messages, thus increasing their confidence in ballot accuracy.

We find that trust-building communications increase the likelihood constituents will identify EOs as sources of election information, but they fall short in increasing the likelihood of higher confidence in statewide ballot counting, particularly after ballots are cast. Campaigns such as #TrustedInfo2022 can be effective in helping voters identify who to listen to on matters of *how* to vote – their EOs. But they may not be enough to counter dissatisfaction over the loss of a preferred candidate, elite-driven misinformation, and negative voter experiences, and thus ineffective in bolstering public confidence in election outcomes.

Possible explanations for these unanticipated findings could be the presence of endogenous relationships between EO's trust-building campaigns and constituents' responsiveness. First, it is possible that messages about election integrity could themselves undermine confidence for those who have a higher confidence baseline, but may now, because of the messaging, have concerns about whether there will be efforts to question or overturn the results. In this case, respondents may not be linking the message (that EOs are trusted election administrators) to the process (the counting of ballots by EOs). In other words, the negative relationship between trust-building communications and confidence in ballot counting may reflect hearing the wrong message; constituents see trust-building messages that nevertheless signal concerns about electoral integrity as a reminder that there are *other* actors who may attempt to ensure election results do not reflect the intention of voters' ballots.

Second, the negative relationship observed in our confidence variables may be driven by an endogenous relationship between election officials' (EOs) messaging and constituent concerns about electoral integrity. If EOs are listening to constituent concerns by responding with trust-building messages, then the baseline level of trust in a given state may be endogenous to the volume of EO messaging. According to election officials, the decision to invest in trust-building campaigns is directly related to declining confidence (Merivaki & Suttman-Lea, 2024; Suttman-Lea & Merivaki, 2024), but these decisions are also grounded in experiences with voters – receiving threatening calls, experiencing harassment, receiving lawsuits challenging election results or demanding forensic investigations of vote tabulators.²⁹ Although our data do not allow us to empirically parse out this relationship, future research should explore whether variation in public confidence in election outcomes across the states might explain, in part, EO investments in trust-building campaigns.

Our findings may also be explained by messenger effects not captured in our data; the office of the state election official has become increasingly politicized and the public's reception of their messages is filtered through their co-partisan identity (Brown et al., 2024). The interplay of elite-driven disinformation and the loser effect also confound this relationship, further indicating that the role of state election officials in building information environments that facilitate two-way engagement is complex and nuanced (Merivaki et al., 2025).

Future research should consider how different approaches to building trust – organic vs. paid ads, in-person vs. online, traditional media vs influencer campaigns – shape voter behavior and attitudes toward election integrity. From a theoretical perspective, our findings suggest trust-building strategies that “direct” or “instruct” the public to trust election officials – such as the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag – may provoke a sort of expert backfire

effect that diminishes the public's sense that their perspectives are respected by election officials (Brown et al., 2024).

To our knowledge, our work is the first to develop and assess the role election officials play in bolstering the strengths voting has to offer the broader democratic system threatened by disinformation and false narratives about electoral integrity – ensuring it effectively empowers inclusion and facilitates collective decision-making by encouraging constituents to listen to their election officials as expert sources of election-related information. While our findings suggest election officials' trust-building campaigns can help ensure empowered inclusion in disinformation infected environments by encouraging constituents to listen to them as a source of information for *how* to vote, these campaigns do not appear to encourage listening on matters of the integrity of election outcomes.

Notes

1. Gallup. "Confidence in Election Integrity Hides Deep Partisan Divide." news.gallup.com.
Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. "Joint Statement from Elections Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council & the Election Infrastructure Sector Coordinating Executive Committees." [cisa.gov](https://www.cisa.gov).
2. Sari Horwitz. October 18, 2016. "Can you rig a U.S. presidential election? Experts say it's basically impossible." [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com).
3. Tovah Wang. November 20, 2024. "Election 2024: Appreciating The Front-Line Workers of Democracy." ash.harvard.edu.
4. National Association of Secretaries of State. "The #TrustedInfo initiative." nass.org.
5. National Association of Secretaries of State. "The #TrustedInfo initiative." nass.org.
6. Thom Reilly. October 21, 2022. "The important role played by secretaries of state in administering fair elections is changing – and not in a good way." [The Conversation](https://www.theconversation.com).
7. Warren (2017) argues that political systems that address democratic problems will "make use of seven kinds (or classes) of generic political practices: recognizing, resisting, deliberating, representing, voting, joining, and exiting."
8. See, for example, *Trusted Voting Resources* from National Voter Registration Day: "As always, the most reliable source for up to date voting information continues to be your state and local election officials." <https://nationalvoterregistrationday.org/trusted-voting-resources/>; *Voting 101: Election Information For New Voters* from U.S. Election Assistance Commission: "The fifth video in the EAC's Civic Education series emphasizes the importance of turning to state and local offices for trustworthy information. These officials are your go-to source for accurate details about the voting process, ensuring that elections are conducted securely and transparently." <https://www.eac.gov/voters/voting-101-election-information-new-voters>.
9. National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), TrustedInfo initiative nass.org.
10. EAC, "Communicating Election and Post-Election Processes Toolkit" eac.gov, CISA, "Election Security Rumor & Reality" [cisa.gov](https://www.cisa.gov), Federal Voting Assistance Program, #TrustedInfo2022 FVAP YouTube Channel.
11. NASS, TrustedInfo Initiative nass.org. and NASED, Election Communications Toolkit nased.org.
12. Brennan Center for Justice. "Information gaps and disinformation in 2022." [brennancenter.org](https://www.brennancenter.org) and R Institute. "Election night coverage is a breeding ground for disinformation." [rstreet.org](https://www.rstreet.org).
13. The data were weighted to approximate a target sample of registered voters based on gender by age, educational attainment, race, marital status, home ownership, race by educational attainment, 2020 presidential vote, and region. Results from the full survey have a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points. The survey instrument is available in the Appendix, and the methodology is available here: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/new-survey-data-election-information/>.

14. The frames were constructed by using different subsets of a politically representative “modeled frame” of US adults, based upon the American Community Survey (ACS) public use microdata file, public voter file records, the 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and Registration supplements, the 2020 National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll, and the 2020 CES surveys, including demographics and 2020 presidential vote. The SPAE survey instrument and methodology are also available in the Appendix.
15. We used question BPC 1 from the BPC questionnaire, available in the Online Appendix.
16. Bipartisan Policy Center, “New Survey Data on Who Americans Look to For Election Information,” bipartisanpolicy.org.
17. We include examples of trust-building, and #TrustedInfo2022 messages in the Appendix. For a detailed methodology of the coding process see the Supplementary Materials document in (Merivaki et al., 2024).
18. States in asterisks are those who publicly took the #TrustedInfo2022 campaign pledge.
19. The correlation between the two measures is low ($r < |.40|$).
20. See this example from Kentucky, where the Secretary of State is featured in the Northern Kentucky Tribune on November 3, 2022: “Sec of State Adams says state, local officials assure Nov. 8 election is secure; early voting starts today.” [nkytribune.com](https://www.nkytribune.com).
21. For the pre-election survey, our cutoff date was October 14, and for the post-election survey, our cutoff was November 14, 2022. We thank Andrew Arengé from the University of Pennsylvania for sharing these data.
22. “States are ranked based on the availability of “tools that allow voters to find their registration status or their polling place; track the status of their absentee or provisional ballots; or look up voter-specific ballot information.” Election Performance Index, Voting Information Lookup Tools Available. mit.edu.
23. FiveThirtyEight, Election Deniers. [fivethirtyeight github page](https://github.com/fivethirtyeight). We thank Janet Malzahn and Andrew Hall for directing us to this source.
24. Alabama, Arizona, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming.
25. We rely on Ballotpedia’s sources for these measures: 2020 battleground states, 2022 U.S. Senate battleground states, 2022 U.S. House battleground states.
26. We use Q34 from the SPAE survey. We code “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” and “Somewhat Agree” as 1 and all else as 0.
27. We run this model with a proportional, rather than a percentage measure to facilitate the visualization of the coefficient on the coefficient plot.
28. Coefficient -0.061 , S.E. 0.03 , $p = .40$ (pre-election, percentage of trust-building posts on Facebook);
In the post-election model, the count of #TrustedInfo posts on Facebook are also negative (coefficient -0.021 , S.E. $.007$, $p = .006$). We do not report this finding in our analysis, because the count measures are included as controls rather than key independent variables.
29. Bridging Divides Initiative. “Understanding Threats and Harassments Against Local Election Officials.” Princeton University.

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