


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Who Buys the “Big Lie”? White Racial Grievance and Confidence in the Fairness of American Elections

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(Received 10 May 2023; revised 28 October 2023; accepted 30 October 2023; first published online 01 December 2023)

Abstract

Election skepticism has become a persistent feature of American politics since the Obama era. Such beliefs are most prevalent among White Americans and especially Republicans, and they are resistant to change. Conspiracy theory studies have shown that such beliefs are linked to feelings of ingroup victimization, at times associated with election loss. We draw on theories of White ingroup processes to argue that White grievance—the belief that Whites are victims of discrimination—is a key correlate of election skepticism among White Americans. White grievance was employed in the Obama era, but it was weaponized by Trump in the 2020 election. Our results based on four national datasets (2012–2020 ANES, 2021 YouGov) show that controlling for negative outgroup attitudes and other factors, White grievance is a significant predictor of election skepticism in all four studies. In 2020, the effect is stronger among White Republicans and independents. We also show that White identity/consciousness has the opposite effect, generally boosting trust in elections. Furthermore, a lagged dependent variable model using the 2016–2020 ANES panel shows that White grievance remains significant even after an LDV is included in the model.

Keywords: election fairness; discrimination against Whites; White grievance; racial prejudice

Introduction

Democracy is founded on the loser’s consent; when losers do not accept the outcomes of fair elections, institutions can be imperiled (Anderson et al. 2005; Birch 2008; Flesken and Hartl 2018). A growing literature across the world substantiates that even though healthy skepticism of elites and institutions is salutary, chronic skepticism about election processes in democracies can have negative consequences (Karp, Nai, and Norris 2018; Norris, Garnett, and Grömping 2020; Norris 2022). Voters who mistrust elections may support deepening authoritarianism and even political violence (Filindra 2023; Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Rose and Mishler 2009).

Studies show that unhealthy skepticism of elections often takes the form of conspiracy theories, that is false narratives involving shadowy and powerful disliked

groups that undermine the will of “the people” (Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012). Especially when politicized groups find themselves on the losing end of an electoral contest, some among the losers have psychological incentives to endorse conspiracy theories as a protection from the negative feelings associated with loss (Douglas et al. 2019; Mashuri and Zaduqisti 2014; Uscinski and Parent 2014). Unhealthy skepticism of elections is a threat to democracy because it can feed group resentments and victimhood, and at the extreme, it can contribute to the mobilization of violent and anti-democratic movements (Moskalenko and McCauley 2021).

Since the 2008 Obama election, the United States has witnessed several conspiracy theories targeting election outcomes and portraying the Republican party as the victim of election fraud by sinister actors favoring the opposition. These include “birtherism,” the belief that Obama was not a true American citizen (Jardina and Traugott 2019; Pasek et al. 2015), rumors that millions of non-citizens voted in presidential elections (Cottrell, Herron, and Westwood 2018), and stories that foreign and domestic foes tampered with voting machines, or mail-in ballots (Herron 2023).

Since the Republican party largely consists of White Americans and it reflects the racial anxieties of the White population (Smith and King 2021), it is not surprising that these conspiracy theories were especially popular among White Americans. For example, the vast majority of White Republicans were convinced by the “Bog Lie” or “Stop the Steal” conspiracy theory that Trump and his aides spun in the aftermath of the 2020 election. Almost half of all Whites continued to have no confidence in the outcome of that election two years later (Ognyanova et al. 2022), and their position appears unchangeable (Fahey 2022).

White mistrust in institutions is not new. Studies show that White Americans’ trust in government declined sharply in the late 1960s at the time of civil rights and welfare expansion (Aberbach and Walker 1970; Filindra, Kaplan, and Buyuker 2022; Hetherington 2005). More recently, the Obama election, and the conspiracy theories it generated, brought this mistrust into election processes and outcomes (Jardina and Traugott 2019). Studies show a persistent positive link between negative outgroup attitudes among Whites and mistrust in government (Filindra, Kaplan, and Buyuker 2022; Filindra, Buyuker, and Kaplan 2023; Macdonald 2020; Macdonald and Cornacchione 2021) as well as election skepticism (Appleby and Federico 2018; Jardina and Traugott 2019). However, even though the conspiracy theories literature emphasizes the role of ingroup identity processes as central to support for political conspiracies such as election denialism (Armaly, Buckley, and Enders 2022; Douglas et al. 2019), less is known about how White ingroup identity processes may influence election skepticism.

We draw on the literature on White ingroup identity processes and theories about the political importance of group victimhood (Armaly, Buckley, and Enders 2022; Boehme and Isom Scott 2020; Gurr 1970) to argue that election skepticism may be associated with White grievance, an attitude that, as we show, is distinct from White consciousness or racial prejudice. In the 21st century, many White Americans have come to express the belief that their group is faced with discrimination, also referred to as “racial grievance” (Boehme and Isom Scott 2020; Isom et al. 2022). Claims that Whites are the victims of discrimination and that their rights are being violated have become commonplace since the 1960s, linked to opposition to affirmative action and other race-based policies. The growth of racial

minorities relative to Whites has further strengthened beliefs that White America is losing social and political ground (Wellman, Liu, and Wilkins 2016; Wilkins *et al.* 2015). The social and political changes of our era fuel the perception that discrimination against Whites is on the rise (Norton and Sommers 2011; Peacock and Biernat 2023). Studies show that White grievance motivates mistrust in government (Filindra, Buyuker, and Kaplan 2023) and vote choice in support of the Republicans (Berry, Cepuran, and Garcia-Rios 2020). This can have important adverse consequences as studies show a decline in support for democratic norms and a tendency to justify political violence (Filindra 2023a, 2023b; Kalmoe 2014).

America's shifting racial and social dynamics, especially the emergence of a majority-minority society, have put pressure on the Republican party which is broadly perceived to represent White racial interests and angst. Indeed, Republican elites have persistently exploited White grievance as a strategy to motivate their White base and ensure its loyalty at the polls. In 2016, Trump portrayed White people as the victims of discrimination (Wootson 2022). The "MAGA" movement promised to make the injustices experienced by "real people" (White Americans) the center of political life and reverse their perceived social and political losses (Langman and Lundskow 2022).

Since the 1990s, and apart from 2004, the Republican party has consistently lost the popular vote even when it has won the presidency. Since election loss (actual or anticipated) motivates support for conspiracy beliefs to manage the powerlessness and victimization associated with loss (Douglas *et al.* 2019; Papaioannou, Pantazi, and van Prooijen 2023), when Whites experience political loss or are feared to lose (as in 2016), White grievance may become salient. This means that people with high levels of White grievance can become more susceptible to conspiratorial thinking as a psychological defense leading them to doubt the integrity of election institutions and outcomes. Furthermore, in 2020, the effects of White grievance should be stronger among White Republicans when the party lost the Presidential election, and its leaders promoted the "Stop the Steal" or "Big Lie" conspiracy theory.

We test our hypothesis of a negative relationship between White grievance and beliefs that elections are conducted fairly using multiple datasets. Multivariate analyses of three American National Election Surveys (2012–2020 ANES) and a 2021 YouGov survey of non-Hispanic Whites show that White grievance is a negative and significant predictor of beliefs in electoral fairness in all four years. A lagged DV analysis using the 2016–2020 ANES panel data shows that the effect of White grievance persists even after the lagged DV is included in the model. This alleviates concerns related to omitted variable bias. Consistent with the proposition that the "Big Lie" has had unique effects on White skepticism of elections, there is evidence that the effect of White grievance on beliefs about election fairness was stronger among White Republicans in 2020 but not earlier. Furthermore, we demonstrate that the White identity measure (Jardina 2019) is not strongly correlated with White grievance and produces a positive and significant association with beliefs in election fairness across most analyses, indicating that the two items measure distinct underlying attitudes.

These findings are important for several reasons. First, the results show that even after controlling for negative outgroup attitudes, White grievance is an important independent predictor of mistrust in American elections going back to 2012. This

adds credence to research that emphasizes ingroup processes as important predictors in shaping political attitudes and especially political conspiracy theory beliefs (Cichocka, Marchlewska, and De Zavala 2016; Wellman, Liu, and Wilkins 2016). Second, it validates recent work that suggests that White grievance and White identity are distinct measures and perhaps White identity has multiple dimensions (Cole 2018; Filindra, Buyuker, and Kaplan 2023). We speculate that the ingroup solidarity and affect captured by White identity incentivizes people to support majoritarian institutions, whereas the victimhood orientation captured by White grievance makes them hostile to institutions. More research is needed to understand these differences. Third, our analysis suggests that White grievance may have become more consequential overtime as the political rhetoric on the Right switched from one racial dimension (prejudice) to another (White grievance) (also see: Smith & King, 2021).

Unhealthy Election Skepticism and Conspiracy Theories

In recent years, scholars of democratic politics have expressed concerns about the lacking depth of support among the mass public for democratic institutions and processes in Western democracies. First, studies have long shown that public trust is in short supply (Hetherington 2005; Pew Research Center 2017). Second, a growing scholarship suggests that mistrust has transformed from generalized skepticism of government to noxious suspicions over political institutions that undergird democracy, such as the fairness of election systems (e.g., Norris, Garnett, and Grömping 2020). These doubts are often sowed and magnified by political losers who spin conspiracy theories as a way to rationalize the electoral outcome, soothe their followers' political anxieties and feelings of powerlessness, and stoke outrage (Douglas et al. 2019; Federico, Williams, and Vitriol 2018; Papaioannou, Pantazi, and van Prooijen 2023). As partisan identities have aligned with other social identities and their effect on attitudes and behavior has strengthened (Mason 2018), and the media environment has become more fragmented, insular, and partisan (Banducci and Karp 2003), skepticism, doubt, and conspiracy theories are easy to spread.

For the mass public, support for conspiracy theories satisfies important psychological needs such as a desire to understand and control the social world, maintain a positive image of one's group, and account for beliefs that one's group is victimized and undervalued (Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka 2017; Mashuri and Zaduqisti 2014; Uscinski and Parent 2014). Political elites can use conspiracy theories to mobilize their supporters and retain political power. As a result, after a political loss, the emergence of elite-promoted conspiracy theories can transform mild anxieties into deep hostility against the system of elections (Fahey 2022; Vail et al. 2022). This hostility can persist over time, especially if one's side experiences repeated defeats at the polls (Daniller and Mutz 2019).

Scholars warn that unwarranted skepticism of democratic institutions can have deleterious effects (Norris 2014, 2022). Democracy depends on the losing side's consent; if losers do not accept their defeat or don't believe that they have a fair chance to prevail in future elections, democratic systems may collapse (Anderson et al. 2005; Anderson and LoTempio 2002; Cantú and García-Ponce 2015; Flesken and Hartl 2018). Mistrust in elections can depress voter turnout and alienate citizens

from the political system (Birch 2010). Such doubts may also incentivize people to support authoritarian leaders and parties or endorse political violence (Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Rose and Mishler 2009).

The United States of the 21st century is not a stranger to election-related conspiracy theories and many of them have been pushed by right-wing elites and draw on White Americans' racial anxieties. The elevation of the first African American to the U.S. presidency in 2008 was accompanied by conspiratorial theories that Obama was not a "natural born" American citizen, he lacked a U.S. birth certificate, and thus could not be the legitimate president of the country. Others falsely claimed that Obama was a secret Muslim which was meant to further impugn his legitimacy (Jardina and Traugott 2019; Pasek *et al.* 2015). Other conspiracy theories popular in 2016 and 2020 drew on the country's changing racial dynamics. Some claimed that sinister elites are orchestrating the extinction of the White population and its replacement with racial and ethnic minorities and only Trump could stop this plan (Obaidi *et al.* 2022). Others held that millions of non-citizens had been allowed to participate in presidential elections skewing outcomes in favor of the Democratic party. When Trump lost to Joe Biden in the 2020 election, the former president promoted a conspiracy theory known as "Stop the Steal." Promoters of this fiction, including popular media elites, argued that the election results in several states were illegitimate because various bad actors—from individual "illegal" voters to local election officials to companies that build voting machines—had committed fraud at the expense of (mostly White) Trump voters (Herron 2023).

White Ingroup Processes and White Grievance

Scholars have long documented Whites' mistrust in institutions. Historians and social scientists have argued that after the Civil Rights Revolution of the 1960s that included programs meant to ensure social and economic parity for people of color and women, White trust in government declined precipitously (Filindra, Kaplan, and Buyuker 2022). The political changes of the era gave rise to "an increasingly angry, bitter and frightened group of White people who feel persecuted and unrepresented [by institutions]," suggested analysts at the time (Aberbach and Walker 1970, 64). The result was the racialization of public trust in institutions as more prejudiced and nativist White Americans came to view the government with unhealthy suspicion (Filindra, Kaplan, and Buyuker 2022; Macdonald 2020). The Obama election not only made racial considerations chronic (Tesler 2016), but through conspiracy theories such as "birtherism," it linked election-related beliefs, such as perceptions of election integrity, to racial priors (Appleby and Federico 2018; Jardina and Traugott 2019).

The 1960s and 1970s also transformed how White Americans understood their ingroup. The ascendancy of people of color to positions of political power and the development of racial policies such as affirmative action increased feelings of victimhood and racial grievance among many Whites. This victimization tendency was expressed in terms of beliefs in "anti-White" or "reverse discrimination," a term popularized by Ronald Reagan. To them, racial policies were not meant to produce racial parity, but instead a form of discrimination against their group (Fraser and

Kick 2000; Smith and King 2021). Many White people came to see themselves as the “silent majority” of virtuous citizens whose identities and interests were consistently and intentionally subordinated to those of “undeserving” others (Filindra and Kaplan 2016; Lowndes 2016).

Changing population dynamics may have exacerbated White grievance. Since the 1990s, the country is rapidly turning into a majority-minority society. Many White Americans perceive the decline in the White population and the corresponding increase of minority groups as a threat to their social and political status. In response to these threats to the existing social hierarchy, victimhood was expressed as perceptions of discrimination against Whites soared (Norton and Sommers 2011; Peacock and Biernat 2023). According to the Pew Research Center, 65% of White Americans today believe that their group faces discrimination at least some of the time and that such discrimination will persist into the future (Daniller 2021).

Going back to the classic work of Ted Gurr (1970), scholars have long shown that perceptions of group victimhood are politically consequential, linked to social mobilization and support for violence. Grievances linked to perceptions of victimhood are also easily activated by political elites through inflammatory rhetoric that emphasizes the group’s status as a victim (Armaly, Buckley, and Enders 2022; Armaly and Enders 2022). Scholars have shown that people can experience political dynamics as group-level trauma that targeted themselves or their ancestors and such perceptions affect their response to the political system (Volkan 2001). Studies show that groups often gravitate towards victimhood because such a status confers the aura of innocence and moral superiority (Gray & Wegner, 2011). Oftentimes, groups, including dominant groups, use victimhood to make political claims that are presented as standing for principles of justice (Horwitz, 2018). Yet, such beliefs can have very harmful social consequences because when issued by dominant groups they can undermine the claims to justice of disadvantaged groups (Noor et al. 2012). Claims of discrimination among dominant groups can contribute to intractable social conflict (Volkan 1998), denial of structural inequalities (Taylor Phillips and Lowery 2015), and legitimization of existing social hierarchies (Danbold, Onyeador, and Unzueta 2022; Saguy et al. 2013).

The grievances rooted in Whites’ beliefs that racial policies and the country’s changing population dynamics victimized their group were further boosted by the Obama election. Obama’s elevation to the Presidency contributed to strengthening White Americans’ understanding of their racial identity in political terms, exhibiting ingroup solidarity and White political consciousness, which are distinct from prejudice (Jardina 2019). At the same time, many Whites have embraced the belief that efforts to address racial inequality are a form of anti-White discrimination and understand themselves as innocent victims (Isom et al. 2022). Such beliefs have strengthened overtime (Wellman, Liu, and Wilkins 2016; Wilkins et al. 2015).

Already during the 2016 campaign, anticipating that he may lose to Hillary Clinton, Trump appealed to White grievance while sowing doubt about the integrity of the election process. However, this narrative peaked during and after the 2020 election when the former president and his representatives cast suspicion on Joe Biden’s victory and the legitimacy of the country’s election system. Trump-aligned elites claimed that shadowy elites conspired with companies that make voting

machines to enable illegal voters to cast ballots or to alter the votes of Trump supporters. More recently, Trump drew on White grievance when he proclaimed: “I am your warrior. I am your justice. And for those who have been wronged and betrayed: I am your retribution” (The Guardian 2023). As a result of the “Big Lie,” almost half of all White Americans—the country’s largest racial group and the bulk of Trump’s supporters—expressed low confidence in the 2020 election outcome. According to data from the Pew Research Center, in November 2020, 49% of White Americans expressed a lack of confidence in the outcome of the mail-in vote, 24% doubted the in-person vote, and 15% believed that their own vote was not counted accurately.

It is not surprising that election-related conspiracies are more prevalent on the Right. The Republican party has lost the popular vote in every presidential election since 1992 with the single exception of 2004. Its victories are the result of the structural imbalances of the American electoral college than its popularity among the public. Since the Republican party is also more racially homogeneous with the majority of its voters being non-Hispanic Whites, the fear of electoral loss may motivate stronger conspiracist beliefs among White Republicans who feel victimized and powerless, such as people with high levels of White grievance (Douglas *et al.* 2019; Papaioannou, Pantazi, and van Prooijen 2023). This may be especially the case in the aftermath of the 2020 election when Trump drew on White grievance to spread conspiracy theories about the integrity of the election outcome. However, even though the conspiracy theories literature emphasizes the role of ingroup identity processes as central to support for political conspiracies such as election denialism (Armaly, Buckley, and Enders 2022; Douglas *et al.* 2019), scholars have focused on outgroup attitudes (Appleby and Federico 2018) and less is known about how White grievance may influence election skepticism.

Measuring White Grievance

White grievance, the belief that Whites are victims of discrimination, is analytically distinct from Jardina’s (2019) White consciousness and likely constitutes a separate dimension of White ingroup identity, capturing the relational dimension of identity rather than ingroup affect or solidarity (Abdelal *et al.* 2006; Filindra, Buyuker, and Kaplan 2023; Fording and Schram 2023). White grievance is rooted in relative deprivation and captures feelings of victimhood that Whites may develop when comparing their group’s social and political status across time and finding it to have declined (Armaly and Enders 2022; Isom *et al.* 2022).

By contrast, White consciousness as designed by Jardina (2019) captures positive ingroup affect, salience of group membership, solidarity with the ingroup, and to a degree outgroup hostility (Fording and Schram 2023). First, the “White identity importance” item lacks the negative emotion associated with deprivation and grievance. Second, some liberal Whites may express high levels of White identity but combine it with an appreciation for White privilege (Cole 2020). As a result, a number of studies have noted that White identity is not always a strong predictor of White conservatism in vote choice and other preferences, and it operates contrary to expectations in some contexts (Buyuker *et al.* 2021; Filindra, Buyuker, and Kaplan 2023; Fording and Schram 2020, 2023).

A factor analysis based on the 2012–2020 ANES shows that White grievance does not load on the same factor dimension as White identity, the White thermometer, or various outgroup measures such as racial resentment, or minority group thermometers (Appendix Tables A1a–c). The correlation between White identity and White grievance is positive but low ($r = 0.13$) which further supports the contention that the two tap distinct aspects of ingroup identity processes (Filindra, Buyuker, and Kaplan 2023). This analysis also suggests that White grievance is not another measure of outgroup hostility or bias, as some have suggested (Fording and Schram 2023). Although Whites who express high levels of grievance may be prejudiced against outgroups, this is not necessarily the case, as indicated by the modest correlations between measures of outgroup prejudice and White grievance (on the low correlation, also see: Jardina 2019).¹

Although beliefs that White Americans face discrimination are objectively untrue, this perception of victimization is not equivalent to a conspiracy theory nor a component of conspiratorial beliefs. In this case, White Americans are making inferences of intent based on government policy and action, so feelings of White grievance are the result of an interpretation of government policy. This is important because if White grievance was not an attitude but another conspiratorial belief, we would be establishing a circular argument, using one measure of conspiracism (White grievance) to explain another (election skepticism).

Analytically, we can document that conspiracism is distinct from White grievance by leveraging the 2020 ANES. That survey has two items measuring conspiracy beliefs. One item asks: “How well does the following statement describe your view? ‘Most business and politics in this country are secretly controlled by the same few powerful people.’” The item is scored on a five-point scale from “not at all well” to “very well” ($M = 0.529$; $SD = 0.284$). The second item asks: “How well does the following statement describe your view? ‘Much of what people hear in schools and the media are lies designed to keep people from learning the real truth about those in power.’” This item is scored on the same scale as the one above ($M = 0.447$; $SD = 0.313$). A factor analysis that includes the two conspiracy theory items and the three White ingroup measures (grievance, thermometer, and identity/consciousness) shows that the White ingroup processes measures do not load on any dimension (Appendix Table A2). This supports our contention that White grievance is not another expression of conspiracist beliefs. This is also the case for the other measures of ingroup identity.

Hypotheses

Our study tests two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Controlling for outgroup prejudice and demographic factors, Whites who score high on White grievance are more likely to doubt the fairness of elections than those who score low.

Hypothesis 2: In the 2020 election, this should be especially the case among White Republicans who score high on White grievance.

Data and Methods

The study utilizes data from two sources: The ANES (2012–2020) and a 2021 YouGov national survey of 1,000 non-Hispanic Whites. For all four datasets, the sample is restricted to non-Hispanic Whites. We have recoded all variables on 0 to 1 scales consistent with the nature of the original scale. This means that an ordinal variable remains ordinal with values that range between 0 and 1. This allows us to interpret the coefficients as “maximum effects,” that is, the change in probability of the dependent variable associated with a switch from the lowest to the highest level of the independent variable. This facilitates the comparison of coefficients. Descriptive statistics for all variables from each dataset are in Appendix Tables A3–A6. All analyses are weighted.

The ANES has asked questions related to election fairness going back to the 1990s; however, it only started asking our key independent variable (White grievance) in 2012. As of 2012, the ANES has included a broader election integrity question, not tied to a given election. Specifically, it asked: “In your view, how often do the following things occur in this country’s elections: Votes are counted fairly?” (5-point scale). In that year, 18% of Whites expressed mistrust in election counts was 18%. In both 2016 and 2020, it stood slightly above 20%, which suggests relative stability over these three cycles. However, given the absence of a measure in 2008 and asking a different question in earlier waves, it is impossible to say whether overtime differences are due to an “Obama effect” (Tesler 2016). What is clear from the ANES data is that about one in five White Americans has had misgivings about the overall administration of American elections since at least 2012.

The 2012 ANES also included a question assessing belief about the fairness of election officials. Specifically, it asked: “In your view, how often do the following things occur in this country’s elections? Very often, fairly often, not often, or not at all often? Election officials are fair.” This was not included in 2016. The 2020 ANES included additional questions asked in the pre-election wave, so respondents’ assessments are based on their expectations, not an actual evaluation of the election itself. Therefore, these results reflect Trump’s efforts to prepare the ground for the “Big Lie.” Specifically, the ANES asked people: “In the November 2020 general election, how accurately do you think the votes will be counted?” (5-pt scale). More than a fourth of White Americans (27%) said that they expected the vote not to be counted accurately (“not at all” or “very little”). Furthermore, 21% said that they had no trust or very little trust in local election officials, and 15% said that people who are eligible to vote are denied the right “very often” or “fairly often” (Fig. 1-denoted as “no confidence”). Therefore, even though two-thirds of White Americans said that they believe votes are counted fairly in American elections overall, substantially fewer (about half) expected this to be the case for the 2020 election.

Dependent Variables

We used six dependent variables in the analysis. The first is asked in all three ANES datasets in the post-election wave, while one other is specific to the 2012 ANES (but similar to one of the 2020 items), and the other three are specific to the 2020 election and were included in the 2020 pre-election ANES wave. The wording of all ANES-dependent variables is described above (see section: White Americans’ Confidence

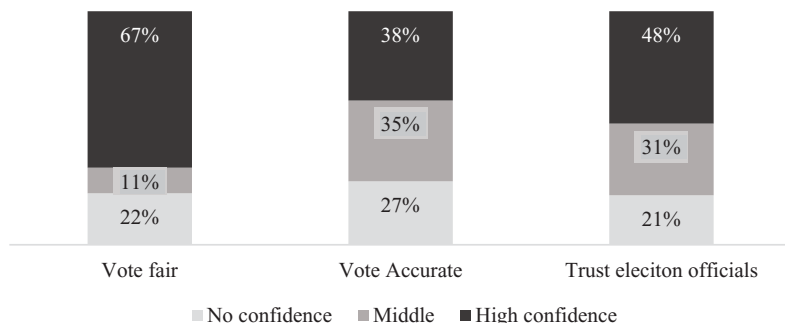


Figure 1. Election Fairness and Prospective Evaluations of 2020 Election (2020 ANES, Whites only)

in Presidential Election Results) and can also be found in the Appendix. The dependent variable from the 2021 YouGov survey asked respondents how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “The 2020 election was conducted fairly and legitimately” (4-point scale). Unlike the ANES “vote fair” question, this question was specific to the 2020 election, and it was the only one that was fielded after the “Big Lie” was deployed. All dependent variables are coded on 0 to 1 ordinal scales, so that “1” represents the most trustful answer option.

Key Independent Variables

We measure White grievance, using an item from the ANES that asks: “How much discrimination is there in the United States today against each of the following groups? [Whites]” The answer categories are: “a great deal, a lot, a moderate amount, a little, and none at all.” The YouGov item was very similar (In American society, how much discrimination is there against each of the following groups? [White]. The categories are: “a lot, some, a little, very little, none at all.”). Given our argument, this item has strong face validity.

Furthermore, we include measures of outgroup attitudes. Our primary measure is the negative Black stereotype measure. The stereotype measure has strong face validity, and it does not suffer the problems associated with racial resentment, another popular measure of racial prejudice. Specifically, racial resentment is thought to conflate ideological conservatism and racial antipathy (Neblo 2009). That said, in the Appendix we include alternate models using racial resentment instead of the stereotype measure. These models produce very similar results. Given evidence that anti-immigrant attitudes may also be implicated in Whites’ mistrust in government and institutions (Filindra, Buyuker, and Kaplan 2023; Macdonald 2020), we also specified models that included the Hispanic thermometer,² the Muslim thermometer, and the illegal immigrant thermometer (Fording and Schram 2020). The inclusion of these measures does not alter our main finding and it does not produce multicollinearity concerns (Appendix Tables A10–A12). Our controls include trust in people (Appleby & Federico 2018), authoritarianism (Stenner 2005), partisanship, ideology, Christian Protestant religion, age, income, education, and gender.

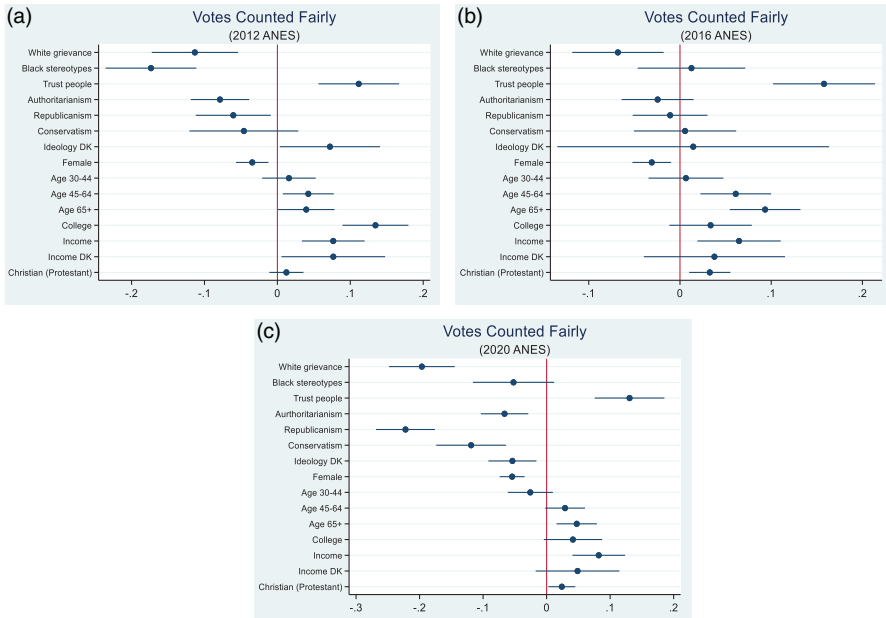


Figure 2. How often votes are counted fairly (2012–2020 ANES)

Analysis

Main effect models

Figure 2 shows the results of OLS regression models for the dependent variable that is common across all three ANES studies. For all models, VIF tests show no evidence of multicollinearity. For the first three models, the dependent variable is whether votes are counted fairly in American elections. This is the item that was asked in all three ANES surveys. It is important to note that the models differ in variance explained, which suggests that the variables in the model have become stronger predictors of mistrust in the vote count in 2020. Specifically, the 2012 model for “votes counted fairly” explains 14% of the total variance, the 2016 model 10%, and the 2020 model explains 33%. (For full results, see: Appendix Table A7).

As the models show, White grievance is negative and statistically significant in all three years. Racial prejudice (negative Black stereotypes) is significant and negative in 2012 but null in 2016 and 2020. Consistent with expectations, trust in people is positive and significant in all three years. Authoritarianism is negative and significant in 2012 and 2020 but not in 2016. Republicans are significantly less likely to think that votes in America are counted fairly in 2012 and 2020, but not in 2016. This may reflect Republican erroneous beliefs that Barack Obama was an illegitimate president because he was not a “natural born” citizen—also known as “the birther conspiracy”—a rumor spread by Donald Trump (Jardina & Traugott, 2019). Conservative ideology is negative and significant only in 2020. College

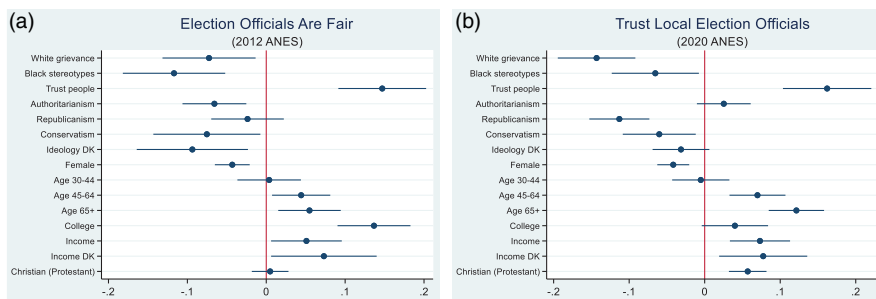


Figure 3. Perceptions of election officials (2012 and 2020 ANES)

graduates and higher-income Whites are more likely to believe that votes are counted fairly across surveys.

Next, we turn to the relative substantive effects. In 2012, White grievance (−11ppts), racial prejudice (−17ppts), and trust in people (11ppts) are in a top tier of predictors. Tests of coefficients show that the effects of prejudice and White grievance are equivalent in magnitude. By comparison, the effect of partisanship (republicanism) is substantively smaller (−6ppts). In 2016, trust in people (16ppts) is alone in the top tier and White discrimination (−7ppts) is in a second tier. In 2020, White discrimination (−20ppts) is in the top tier along with partisanship (−22ppts) and these effects are statistically similar in magnitude. Trust in people (13ppts) and ideology (−12ppts) are in a second tier.

Figure 3 shows the results of OLS regression models of two similar questions, one from the 2012 ANES and the second from the 2020 ANES that assess perceptions of election officials (Also see Appendix Table A8). The models explain 13% and 16% of the total variance respectively. The 2016 ANES did not include a similar question. In both models, White grievance is negative and significant: the more one believes that White face discrimination the more likely they are to believe than election officials are not fair or trustworthy. Racial prejudice is also negative and significant in both models. In contrast, racial prejudice is not significant in 2020 when it comes to assessments of election fairness (Figure 2.3 above). Trust in people is positive and significant in both years, and conservative ideology is negative and significant as well. Partisanship is negative in both years but significant only in 2020. Authoritarianism is negative and significant only in 2012. Turning to the substantive effects, trust in people has the largest substantive effect in 2012 (14ppts) and it remains equally strong in 2020 (16ppts). The maximum effect of White grievance is in a second tier (−7ppts) in 2012 but in the top tier of effects in 2020 (−14ppts). A comparison of the two coefficients shows that the effect of trust in people and White grievance are equivalent in 2020 but not in 2012. The effect of racial prejudice is −12ppts in 2012 but only −7ppts in 2020. The two models are not directly comparable, but they suggest an overtime decline in the relative importance of racial prejudice and an increase in that of White grievance when it comes to judgments of election officials. The effect of conservative ideology is modest in both years (−8ppts and −6ppts respectively). Partisanship is null in 2012 but significant and with a top-tier effect (−11ppts).

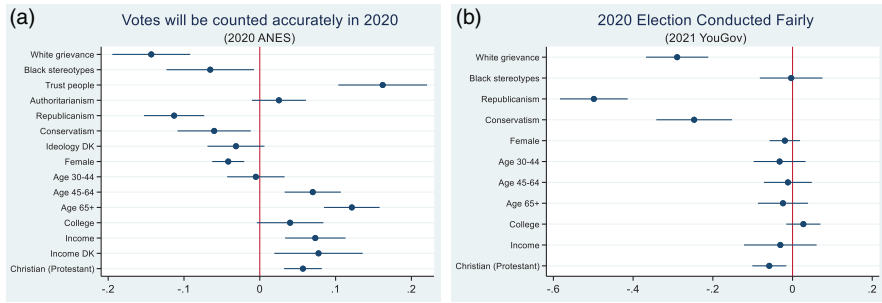


Figure 4. Expectations and evaluations of the 2020 election (2020 ANES and 2021 YouGov)

Figure 4 shows the results of two additional models that specifically ask about the 2020 election. The results in table format are in Appendix Table A7. The first models the item from the 2020 ANES pre-election wave which assesses respondents’ expectations about the accuracy of the 2020 election count. This model explains 13% of the total variance. The second is for the 2021 YouGov survey and asks whether the 2020 election was conducted fairly and legitimately, so this is a retrospective evaluation. The model explains 62% of the total variance. In both models, White grievance is negative and significant along with Republicanism and conservative ideology. Racial prejudice is significant only in the 2020 ANES model but not in the 2021 YouGov analysis. Trust in people is positive and significant in 2020 and authoritarianism is null (these are not included in the 2021 YouGov study). Turning to the substantive effects, in 2020 White grievance is in a top tier of effects along with partisanship, ideology, trust in people, and racial prejudice. A change from the lowest to the highest levels of White grievance in 2020 corresponded to a decline in beliefs that the elections will be conducted accurately of 7ppts. The substantive effect of the Black stereotype is -9 ppts, Republicanism is -9 ppts, and conservative ideology is 12ppts. In 2021, partisanship is alone in the top tier with a substantive effect of -50 ppts. Ideology (-25 ppts) and White grievance (-29 ppts) are in a second tier but their effects are substantively quite large, nevertheless. There are differences in data collection methods and sample size, which means that the two models are not directly comparable. However, they suggest that White grievance, partisanship, and ideology may have become a lot more salient in White Americans’ judgments of the 2020 election as the “Big Lie” conspiracy unfolded after the election.

So far, the results are consistent with the first hypothesis. White grievance correlates with lower levels of trust in the integrity of the vote for the three ANES waves. The relationship is also negative and significant in the models that assess the 2020 election whether prior to the election (2020 ANES)—specifically the models assessing whether the vote in 2020 will be counted fairly and whether local election officials can be trusted—or half a year later (2021 YouGov). Furthermore, our robustness checks show that our findings are very similar even when we include alternate measures of outgroup attitudes, such as racial resentment and anti-immigrant attitudes. The inclusion of these items does not substantively affect the direction or size of the coefficients of White grievance and thus our inferences remain the same (see Appendix Tables A10–A12).

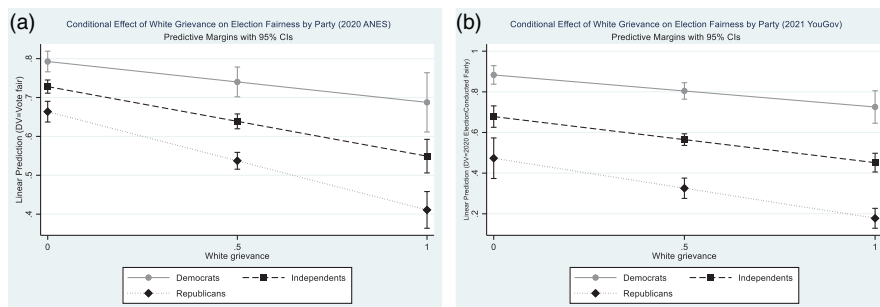


Figure 5. (a) Conditional effect of White Grievance on Election Fairness by Party (2020 ANES) Predictive Margins with 95% CIs. Conditional effect of White Grievance on Election Fairness by Party (2021 YouGov) Predictive Margins with 95% CIs

Notes: Non-Hispanic Whites only. Data are weighted. All variables are recorded as 0–1 scales. Coefficients are maximum effects.

These additional models also show that White identity/consciousness is a positive and significant predictor of election fairness in the 2020 models. This indicates that people who exhibit higher levels of White consciousness are more likely to believe that elections are conducted fairly. This is the case whether it is included as the only ingroup measure in the models or in conjunction with White grievance. The White thermometer is also positive and statistically significant in two 2020 ANES models, but the substantive effect is very small, and it ceases being significant once White grievance is included in the model (Appendix Tables A9–A12). We return to this finding in our discussion.

Interactions with Partisanship

The second hypothesis is that in 2020, the effect of White grievance of beliefs about vote fairness should be stronger among Republicans. Here, we use a three-point version of partisanship for the moderator to facilitate interpretation of the results. Consistent with our expectation, the interaction between White grievance and partisanship is not statistically significant at conventional levels ($p < 0.05$) in 2012 or 2016. Appendix Table A8 shows the full models. Figure 5 shows the results of the interactions for 2020 and 2021, which are statistically significant, in graphical forms. The graphs compare the perceptions of election fairness among Democrats, Republicans, and independents across the range of White grievance. Our expectation was that among Republicans, expectations, and assessments that the 2020 election was fair would decline as a function of White grievance. For both datasets, we find this to be the case: beliefs in election fairness among Republicans are lower among those who score high on White grievance than those who score low. However, other groups are also affected: in 2020, the perceptions of election fairness decline among both independents and Democrats as a function of White grievance, though these effects are smaller than the effect on Republicans. In 2021, independents and Republicans show the largest effects, while Democrats trend in the same direction but the change remains within the margin of error.

Lagged Dependent Variable Analysis

The 2016 and 2020 ANES formed a panel as 1,750 non-Hispanic White respondents responded to both surveys. Since our dependent variable was asked of these respondents both in 2016 and in 2020, we can specify a lagged dependent variable model by including the 2016 election confidence measure as a predictor of the 2020 election confidence measure. LDV models have the added benefit of helping to account for possible omitted variable bias that can influence the results and thus our interpretations. Therefore, the LDV analysis strengthens our causal inferences. Table 1 below shows the results of the LDV analysis. The first model includes a lagged dependent variable from 2016 along with the White grievance and negative Black stereotypes measure. The results show that even after accounting for the LDV, White grievance continues to be a negative and significant predictor of confidence in the administration of elections. It is also important to note that the Black stereotype measure is not significant in the LDV model, only in the cross-sectional analyses. The remaining models (Models 2–6) include alternate measures of ingroup and outgroup attitudes. These results also show White grievance to be negative and significant regardless of model specification. Furthermore, racial resentment is also negative and significant, but as we saw in earlier models, White identity is positive and significant. Measures of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim prejudice are significant and consistent with expectations.

These results provide reassurance that the relationship between White grievance and confidence in elections is robust and not the result of a confounder not measured in our models.

Discussion

Our results are consistent with our contention that feelings of ingroup grievance and victimization can fuel support for unhealthy skepticism about the outcome of American presidential elections. Across all four datasets/years, we find that White grievance is a significant, negative, and substantively large predictor of election skepticism among non-Hispanic Whites. This suggests that Whites who harbor stronger grievances are also more likely to be skeptical about how fairly votes are counted in the country. These results hold even when we include a variety of outgroup attitudes in our models, including racial resentment and anti-immigrant attitudes. The LDV models further strengthen the validity of our hypothesis as they show that White grievance remains statistically significant even when we include a lagged dependent variable.

Our analyses also show that perceptions of election integrity were racialized in 2012 (also see: Appleby and Federico 2018), and in 2020 but not in 2016. Neither the Black stereotypes measure nor racial resentment were significant in the models for that year. The same is the case for anti-immigrant attitudes and the Muslim thermometer: both are null in 2016. Perhaps the rumors about illegal and illegitimate voters that the Trump campaign sought to spread in 2016 in anticipation of a loss to Hillary Clinton did not sprout roots because they were not amplified by other party elites the way they were in 2020. At the same time, Trump leaned on White grievances and anxieties forcefully enough to continue the link between White grievance and election skepticism. Furthermore, it is possible that the link between the two is chronic, and easier to activate, whereas the link between outgroup attitudes and election integrity may be more context-dependent, since it did not predate the 2008

Table 1. Lagged DV models with alternate measures of outgroup and ingroup attitudes

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Lagged DV	0.191*** (0.03)	0.191*** (0.03)	0.183*** (0.03)	0.183*** (0.03)	0.187*** (0.03)	0.189*** (0.03)
White grievance	-0.142*** (0.03)	-0.115*** (0.03)	-0.144*** (0.03)	-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.122*** (0.03)	-0.119*** (0.03)
Black stereotypes	-0.005 (0.03)		-0.011 (0.03)			
Trust in people	0.076*** (0.03)	0.068** (0.03)	0.07** (0.03)	0.062** (0.03)	0.063** (0.03)	0.057** (0.03)
Authoritarianism	-0.067*** (0.02)	-0.035 (0.02)	-0.069*** (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.031 (0.02)	-0.028 (0.02)
Republicanism	-0.224*** (0.02)	-0.187*** (0.02)	-0.225*** (0.02)	-0.188*** (0.02)	-0.18*** (0.02)	-0.177*** (0.02)
Conservatism	-0.133*** (0.03)	-0.106*** (0.03)	-0.14*** (0.03)	-0.113*** (0.03)	-0.111*** (0.03)	-0.106*** (0.03)
Ideology unknown	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.034* (0.02)	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.036** (0.02)	-0.035* (0.02)	-0.032* (0.02)
Female	-0.053*** (0.01)	-0.054*** (0.01)	-0.055*** (0.01)	-0.056*** (0.01)	-0.056*** (0.01)	-0.053*** (0.01)
Age 30–44	-0.009 (0.02)	-0.001 (0.02)	-0.003 (0.02)	0.004 (0.02)	0.003 (0.02)	0.007 (0.02)
Age 45–64	0.032* (0.02)	0.042** (0.02)	0.032* (0.02)	0.042** (0.02)	0.041** (0.02)	0.049*** (0.02)
Age 65+	0.061*** (0.02)	0.071*** (0.02)	0.058*** (0.02)	0.068*** (0.02)	0.075*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)
College degree	0.034 (0.02)	0.023 (0.02)	0.027 (0.02)	0.015 (0.02)	0.016 (0.02)	0.016 (0.02)
Income	0.073*** (0.02)	0.069*** (0.02)	0.073*** (0.02)	0.071*** (0.02)	0.072*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)
Income unknown	0.072 (0.05)	0.072 (0.04)	0.064 (0.05)	0.066 (0.05)	0.066 (0.05)	0.058 (0.05)
Protestant	0.025* (0.01)	0.026* (0.01)	0.027** (0.01)	0.027** (0.01)	0.029** (0.01)	0.027** (0.01)
Racial resentment		-0.15*** (0.03)		-0.151*** (0.03)	-0.139*** (0.03)	-0.12*** (0.03)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
White identity			0.023	0.031*	0.043**	0.045**
			(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
White thermometer			0	0	0	0
			(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Muslim thermometer					0.064**	0.057**
					(0.03)	(0.03)
Anti-immigrant attitudes						-0.053**
						(0.03)
Intercept	0.694***	0.716***	0.682***	0.702***	0.651***	0.665***
	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
<i>N</i>	1842	1851	1768	1772	1757	1752
Adj R ²	0.33	0.341	0.331	0.342	0.349	0.348
<i>F</i> -value	57.548	60.704	49.556	52.089	50.518	47.674

election (Appleby and Federico 2018). Unfortunately, we lack the data to test this hypothesis because White grievance was not included in previous ANES waves.

Equally important, our analyses show that White grievance and White identity/consciousness are not equivalent measures and do not tap the same dimension of White ingroup processes. Specifically, White grievance is an explicitly political measure that relates to White Americans' feelings of political victimization and powerlessness, relative to their past status. White identity captures solidarity but as Cole (2018) notes, this solidarity can be put to different uses among White subgroups, and not all underlying motivations belie hostility and a sense of political status loss. The result is that the strength of White identity/consciousness correlates positively with beliefs in the fairness of the vote count and thus support for institutions. It is thus White grievance not White solidarity—even in its politicized dimension—that drives skepticism for democratic institutions among Whites. It is such grievances (along with hostility to Black people and immigrants), not White racial identification, that undermine trust in government and threaten American democracy (also see: Fording and Schram 2023; Filindra, Buyuker, and Kaplan 2023).

Conclusion

Public trust that elections are conducted fairly and that the outcomes reflect the people's will is fundamental for a functioning democracy. Competitive elections produce winners and losers, and the loser's consent is what allows democracies to survive. America's democracy already shows signs of fraying (Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), 2021). In America's diverse society, the population has been sorted based on ascriptive affiliations into increasingly antagonistic camps. In recent election cycles, popular political elites on the Right—especially Donald Trump, but not Trump alone—have

drawn on negative sentiments associated with group identities and specifically White grievances and beliefs that their group is facing discrimination. This practice may have short-term election benefits because it energizes the White base. However, opportunistic rhetoric of this type can undermine White Americans' support for democratic institutions in the long run. As scholars of democracy well know, mistrust in democratic institutions can lead to further erosion of democratic norms and practices with terrible consequences for the country's political future. We have already witnessed political violence resulting from White Americans' skepticism of election outcomes and hostility to institutions. Fueling such grievances makes more it more probable that recent talk on the Right about the disutility of elections may not remain just talk in the future.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2023.33>

Availability of data and material. Data will be available through Harvard dataverse.

Authors' contributions. The authors claim equal credit for this study.

Code availability. Code will be available in Stata.

Funding. Funding was from the University of Illinois Chicago.

Competing interests. None.

Ethics approval. The YouGov survey was approved by the UIC IRB (protocol #20130959). The approval was granted through expedited review. We certify that the study was performed in accordance with the ethical standards as laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Consent to participate. All respondents were informed about the purposes of the study, the risks and benefits, confidentiality, and privacy. Since the studies were conducted on the Internet, signatures were waived, and informed consent was obtained through selecting to participate in the survey. Participants were told that they could end their participation at any time and withdraw their data if they so wished.

Consent for publication. The IRB-approved consent form either implicitly or explicitly includes consent for publication. In all cases, respondents are told that the researchers are only collecting de-identified data. All data used in the analyses stem from de-identified and aggregated data so there is no way people's individual responses can be tracked from our analysis or the replication code we provide.

Notes

- 1 The correlation with negative Black stereotypes is 0.18; Latino thermometer -0.14 ; Muslim thermometer -0.024 ; illegal immigrant thermometer, -0.025 .
- 2 The 2012 ANES does not have this Latino thermometer measure, so we used anti-immigrant attitudes instead.

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Cite this article: Filindra A, Kaplan NJ, and Manning A (2024). Who Buys the “Big Lie”? White Racial Grievance and Confidence in the Fairness of American Elections. *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 9, 182–203. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2023.33>