

# Disagreements about Threats to Electoral Integrity: Beliefs about the Severity and Frequency of Fraudulent, Uncounted, and Forgone Votes in the 2020 and 2024 Elections\*

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## **Abstract**

In a series of surveys and survey experiments ( $n = 14,700$ ) conducted during the 2020 and 2024 elections, we deployed novel measures of concerns about election integrity to investigate beliefs about the frequency and severity of different election errors. In these studies, we measured beliefs about three types of errors: counting fraudulent ballots, failing to count legitimately cast ballots, and causing eligible voters to be unable to vote. In abstract descriptions of election errors (Study 1, 2020 and 2024) and vignettes describing errors alongside other features (Study 2, 2020 and 2024), we find that Republicans believed fraudulent votes were both more frequent and more serious than did Democrats, with the opposite pattern for forgone votes. In the ex-ante choices between election rules (Study 3, only 2020), we find that Democrats give much greater weight to concerns about forgone votes (turnout) than do Republicans. Overall, these three studies point to the importance of improved measurement to understand individual- and group-level differences in concerns about threats to electoral integrity.

**Key Words:** election fraud; public opinion; election integrity; election administration

**Word Count:** 9,265

# 1 Introduction

Doubts about the fair conduct of elections have existed for decades, ranging from concerns about urban political machines inflating turnout to the systematic disenfranchisement of minority voters in the American South. But contemporary distrust in the integrity of American elections has risen substantially in recent years (Grimmer, Herron and Tyler 2024; Grimmer and Ramaswamy 2024). Following President Trump’s defeat in the 2020 election, he alleged that voter fraud explained his loss and some have linked the storming of the Capitol on January 6th, 2021 to beliefs among Republicans that Biden’s victory was illegitimate (Weiner and Hsu 2021). Likewise, in the lead up to the 2020 election, Democrats asserted that Republicans were intentionally trying to suppress voters by slowing down the postal service and encouraging restrictive mail voting rules (Shear, Fuchs and Vogel 2020).

Importantly, these sorts of debates make clear that fraudulently cast ballots are not the only forms of election “errors” and that concerns about fairness are not confined to Republicans alone. The large-scale turn to absentee and mail voting because of the COVID-19 pandemic during the 2020 election was accompanied by broad concerns about two other threats to election integrity, *uncounted votes* and *forgone votes*. Uncounted votes arise if valid ballots are not counted, for example, if mail ballots are lost in the postal system. Forgone votes occur if eligible individuals are unable to exercise their right to vote, for example, because public health fears cause eligible voters to skip voting because of restrictive mail voting rules. Such concerns are not confined to matters of COVID-19; rules about the process for registering to vote (Ansolabehere and Konisky 2006; Burden et al. 2014), purging of apparently stale voter registrations (Komisarchik and White 2025), polling place closures (Curiel and Clark 2021), and voter ID rules (Cantoni and Pons 2021; Grimmer et al. 2018) shape who is able to cast a ballot on Election Day. Table 1 summarizes these three types of errors and gives examples of each.

Given the clear importance of beliefs about the frequency and seriousness of these different types of errors for democratic legitimacy, it is striking how limited our current measurement

Table 1: Types of Election Errors and Examples

Type	Definition	Examples
Fraudulent Votes	Votes that are counted that should not have been	Voter impersonation, Non-citizen voting, Double voting
Uncounted Votes	Legitimately cast ballots that are not counted	Lost ballots during transportation, Absentee ballots discarded due to failed signature matching
Forgone Votes	Eligible voters unable to exercise their right to vote	Polling place closures, Long lines leading voters to leave

techniques are for these key elements of mass opinion. As we detail below, most work to date on perceptions of electoral integrity examines support for relatively high-level summaries of beliefs about the overall fairness of election outcomes. This research finds that both Democrats and Republicans had concerns about the fairness and integrity of the 2020 election leading up to it. Afterwards, aggregate doubts declined among Democrats (the winning party) once the outcome favorable to their party became clear, while increasing among Republicans (the losing party) who had lost (also called the “winners effect”) (Vail et al. 2023). But these summary beliefs are relatively abstract measures of high-level concepts that may obscure differences in perceptions of fairness across individuals and partisan subgroups for two important reasons.

First, differences could originate in concerns about the three different types of election errors introduced above—fraudulent votes, uncounted votes, or forgone votes. Without specifying which election error respondents should think about, partisans might also differ systematically in how they interpret general questions, with differential measurement producing apparent partisan conflict despite common beliefs and preferences (see, e.g., Sheagley and Udani 2021).<sup>1</sup> Differences in interpretations of these broad questions therefore mask

<sup>1</sup>Sheagley and Udani (2021) show, in an analysis of responses to open ended survey items about “what types of actions do you believe count as voter fraud?”, that partisans on average disagree on the meaning of the term. Specifically, they find that Republicans perceive it to be people who should not be voting doing so (what we label fraudulent votes), while Democrats perceive it to be voter suppression or elite manipulation, the former mapping to what we label forgone votes (see also, e.g., Beaulieu 2014; Edelson et al. 2017; Park-Ozee and Jarvis 2021).

important beliefs about what counts as fraud, limiting what one can learn from patterns of responses to these more general items. Second, such concerns could arise because of differences in beliefs about the frequency (preponderance) or seriousness (importance) of each type of error, or some combination of the two (which may be either weakly or strongly correlated).<sup>2</sup>

A better understanding of the structure underlying beliefs about perceptions of overall electoral integrity is essential for understanding and potentially ameliorating the increasingly rancorous partisan clash over elections and potential threats to democratic legitimacy. For example, suppose competing partisans share common beliefs about the importance of different kinds of threats to fair elections but differ in their beliefs about their frequency. Then, efforts to correct misperceptions about their frequency could, if successful, ameliorate partisan differences in concerns about electoral fairness and a key research task would be identifying effective informational correctives. Alternatively, however, partisan disagreements may arise because of differences in beliefs about the importance of different types of errors, such as the conflict between voter fraud and voter suppression in debates over voter ID laws. Then, even common factual beliefs about the prevalence of voter fraud and turnout are unlikely to resolve persistent differences in concerns about electoral fairness, particularly when institutional choices involve trading off among different types of errors. This would help explain the limited effectiveness of correcting misperceptions (which helps respondents more accurately update their perceived *frequency* of specific election errors) on broader downstream doubts about the electoral system as a whole (Carey et al. 2024).

We conducted several studies during the 2020 and 2024 elections to demonstrate the feasibility and importance of more carefully measuring concerns about threats to election integrity across different electoral contexts. In all three studies, we ask respondents to separately describe their beliefs about the *frequency* and *severity* of three different types of election errors: fraudulent votes, uncounted votes, and forgone votes. In Study 1, we begin

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<sup>2</sup>We recognize that such beliefs may be interlinked. For example, if a respondent perceives an election error to be more frequent, they may also believe that it is a more serious problem.

by examining the effect of abstract evaluations of each type of election error. In Study 2, we ask about each election error in a narrative treatment form. Study 2 reveals patterns broadly consistent with Study 1, which means that abstract and narrative treatments produce similar results. Finally, Study 3 fixes the frequency of each election errors and asks respondents to evaluate various trade-offs between each error in a set of revealed preference experiments.

We briefly summarize the results of each study in more detail. In Study 1, conducted in both 2020 and 2024, we find evidence of both frequency and severity divides by partisanship in 2020. These results do not change in 2024 when we specify that respondents should think about the seriousness of a single instance of an election error, reducing concerns that the results from 2020 arise because individuals conflate seriousness and frequency. On average, Republicans believe there are more fraudulent votes than do Democrats. The opposite is true for Democrats and forgone votes. Except for forgone votes, Republicans view all election errors much more seriously compared to Democrats. Thus, there is reinforcing partisan divergence in both factual beliefs about frequency and assessment of the seriousness of different election errors.

In the second study, also conducted in 2020 and 2024, we focus on measuring severity by asking respondents about their reactions to vignettes describing specific hypothetical instances of election errors. We randomize the type of error and which party benefits. These stimuli approximate the type of information circulated on mainstream and social media about instances of alleged election errors and allow us to understand if the patterns we find in abstract evaluations (Study 1) are similar for more concrete narrative treatments and when holding fixed its electoral implications. The 2024 implementation of Study 2 also allows us to show that the measures of severity used in Study 1 produces results similar to asking directly about seriousness.

Finally, our third study is from a pair of revealed preference experiments fielded before the 2020 election. In these randomized experiments we ask respondents to choose between pairs of election rules for a hypothetical election that differ in the preponderance of fraudulent

and uncounted votes they produce, as well as overall turnout rates (a proxy for forgone votes, only in Study 3A). We give information about the frequency of election errors and abstract away from the context of the 2020 election and then ask respondents to make specific tradeoffs among potential threats to election integrity. When we fix factual measurements about the frequency of election errors in these studies, we do not find partisan differences in the weight given to fraudulent and uncounted votes. However, when choosing electoral systems, Democrats appear to care more about turnout (forgone votes) than do Republicans, although both partisans give it less weight than the other types of errors, consistent with the partisan differences in measures of severity found in both Study 1 and Study 2.

Stepping back, these results may help understand the persistent and changing contours of debates about election rules, election administration, and democratic legitimacy in the contemporary United States. Partisan differences in preferences over election rules and evaluations of fairness do not appear to arise solely due to how frequently election fraud occurs, but also because of partisan differences in how seriously respondents view various types of election errors. Additionally, Republicans report that fraud and uncounted votes are more common and serious than do Democrats, with the opposite being true for forgone votes, implying partisans have different concerns when evaluating the resilience of elections. Thus, efforts to ameliorate partisan enmity about election rules must grapple with partisan differences in both underlying concerns about seriousness and beliefs about the frequency of different types of election errors.

## **2 Measuring Election Integrity: Defining Concepts and Distinguishing Prevalence and Seriousness**

At least since the 2000 election, scholars and policymakers alike have given deep attention to potential threats to fair elections in the contemporary United States ([Sances and Stewart 2015](#); [Stewart 2017](#)). For example, the multifaceted federal Help America Vote Act of 2002

sought to improve election administration by, among other things, providing federal funds to improve polling place access and replacing outdated voting machines, while also requiring states to adopt and maintain statewide voter rolls and verify the identification of new registrants. These reforms built on earlier efforts, such as the federal 1993 “Motor Voter” law, which sought to facilitate voter registration and limit and standardize the conditions under which registrants could be removed from state voter rolls ([Alvarez et al. 2011](#)).

It is notable that these laws, as well as others, address diverse threats to election integrity, which is itself a broad term encompassing “the entire process from voter registration to election certification, and everything in between” ([McCormick 2020](#), 213). Focusing on the ability of individuals to cast votes as they intend, threats to the integrity or the fairness of elections can be decomposed into three broad categories: barriers to eligible citizens registering and gaining access to the ballot (forgone votes), instances in which ineligible individuals vote (fraudulent votes), and cases in which validly cast ballots are miscounted, invalidated, or discarded (uncounted votes). Importantly, reforms that attempt to reduce the frequency of one sort of error may increase the chance (or perceived chance) of other errors, such as the debate over signature matching for mail ballots or photo identification. For example, a strict voter ID law may reduce the chance that someone impersonates another voter, decreasing the probability of fraud, but may also cause an eligible voter who lacks the requisite identification to forgo voting altogether.

While empirically this tradeoff may be minimal, debates about the conflict between fraud and suppression appears salient in public opinion among partisans. For example, [Wilson and Brewer \(2013\)](#) show that in debates about voter ID laws, only Democrats respond much less favorably to voter ID laws when they are framed as keeping eligible people from voting (forgone votes) while Republican support for voter ID laws remain consistent. Similarly, [Bowler and Donovan \(2016\)](#) find that confidence in states’ elections increases for Republicans in states with stronger voter identification requirements while decreasing for Democrats, but it is unclear if this is because of Republican concerns about fraud and Democratic concerns



about turnout. Notably, however, both studies lack direct evidence about how individuals would tradeoff among these different errors if given the chance to. It is also unclear whether partisan differences in reactions to various threats to election integrity rest on differences in beliefs about the prevalence or severity of each type of error. (An added concern, which we address in Study 2B, is that revealed preferences about severity may reflect beliefs about which party benefits from each type of error, on average.)

Indeed, despite these different threats to integrity and the potential tradeoffs among them, most empirical research on election rules has not gathered information about public opinion beyond voter ID laws. A general feature of the important empirical work on election administration is that it has focused on assessing the frequency of these different threats to integrity in isolation and without attention to public perceptions (e.g., [Eggers, Garro and Grimmer 2021](#); [Herron 2019](#)).

Work focusing on mass opinion, meanwhile, has generally followed the same pattern of focusing on high level concepts like “election integrity” or “voter confidence” (e.g., [Alvarez, Hall and Llewellyn 2008](#); [Norris, Frank and Martínez i Coma 2014](#); [Sinclair, Smith and Tucker 2018](#)).<sup>3</sup> While other studies, like the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAEE), consider multiple definitions of election fraud in conjunction with each other, they often focus solely on fraudulent votes or conflate them with uncounted votes, while ignoring forgone votes altogether (e.g., [Ansolabehere and Persily 2008](#)). None of this work that focuses on public perceptions isolates beliefs about the seriousness of different types of errors from beliefs about their prevalence, information that is essential if one wants to understand consensus and conflict in the mass public about whether and how to make institutional reforms ([Biggers 2019](#); [Biggers and Bowler 2022](#)).

We summarize past work on perceptions of election errors in Table 2. For each study, we list whether it measures each of three distinct components of election errors (fraudu-

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<sup>3</sup>Work on voter confidence finds, for example, that Black Americans are less likely to believe that their votes are counted fairly ([Alvarez, Hall and Llewellyn 2008](#)), as are those who believe in conspiracies (e.g., [Enders et al. 2021](#); [Edelson et al. 2017](#)).

Table 2: Summary of Selected Work on Perceptions of Election Integrity and Dimensions of Beliefs Measured

Study Name	Measures <b>fraudu- lent</b> votes	Measures <b>un- counted</b> votes	Measures <b>forgone</b> votes	Distinguishes <i>frequency</i> from <i>severity</i>
Alvarez and Hall (2008), Mass Survey	✓			
Alvarez and Hall (2008), Elite Survey	✓	✓	✓	✓
Alvarez, Cao and Li (2021)	Only top-level (confidence in vote count)			
Alvarez, Hall and Llewellyn (2008)	Only top-level (confidence in vote count)			
Atkeson and Saunders (2007)	Only top-level (confidence in vote count)			
Atkeson et al. (2014)	✓		✓	
Ansolabehere and Persily (2008)	✓			
Bowler et al. (2015)	Only top-level (are elections fair)			
Bowler and Donovan (2016)	✓			
Clayton et al. (2021)	Only top-level (confidence in vote count)			
Edelson et al. (2017)	✓			
Enders et al. (2021)	✓	✓		
Levy (2021)	✓			
Norris, Garnett and Grömping (2020)	Only top-level (are votes counted fairly)			
Sances and Stewart (2015)	Only top-level (confidence in vote count)			
Sinclair, Smith and Tucker (2018)	Only top-level (confidence in vote count)			
Stewart, Ansolabehere and Persily (2016)	✓	✓		
Vail et al. (2023)	✓			

*Note:* See Table A1 for exact question wordings for each study.

lent, uncounted, and forgone votes) and whether it distinguishes measures of frequency from severity. While there are a few studies that measure beliefs about the frequency of multiple types of errors (see, e.g., Ansolabehere and Persily 2008; Bowler and Donovan 2016; Stewart, Ansolabehere and Persily 2016), no extant work simultaneously measures beliefs about all three types of errors. Furthermore, no study of which we are aware distinguishes between public assessments of seriousness and frequency. (A notable exception is Alvarez and Hall (2008), but they only deploy these measures in a survey of elite perceptions with 23 respondents who are academic researchers or election officials.)

For example, consider prior empirical work on election fraud, or instances in which ballots that should not be counted have been. Scholars have attempted to measure actual rates of non-citizen voting ([Ansolabehere, Luks and Schaffner 2015](#)), double voting ([Goel et al. 2020](#)), false representation at the polls ([Ahlquist, Mayer and Jackman 2014](#)), or some combination of these ([Cottrell, Herron and Westwood 2018](#)) and found that all errors of this type are rare. But public opinion does not appear to reflect these findings. [Stewart, Ansolabehere and Persily \(2016\)](#) analyzed 2014 survey data in which individuals were asked about the frequency of various forms of fraud, including (1) noncitizen voting and (2) impersonating another voter. They find that 13% think the former is “very common” and 8% think the latter is “very common.”<sup>4</sup> We therefore know that individuals appear to overestimate the frequency of certain forms of fraud, but we lack comparative evidence about beliefs for the three different types of errors introduced earlier as well as assessments of the relative seriousness of each type of error.

Potential limitations of extant survey data aside, what data we have today provide insights into a recent pattern of partisan divergence in concerns about election integrity. In particular, in addition to the aforementioned work on partisan divergence in the interpretation of the term “fraud,” there is also evidence that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to believe in threats to election integrity ([Ansolabehere and Persily 2008](#); [Stewart, Ansolabehere and Persily 2016](#)). Some of this evidence predates Trump’s 2016 candidacy, but during the “Trump era,” concerns about voter fraud appeared to spike among Republicans compared to Democrats, perhaps in part because of Trump’s claims about the frequency of voter fraud ([Cottrell, Herron and Westwood 2018](#)). The survey data supporting these conclusions tend to focus on aggregate assessments of frequency and/or individual forms of fraud, so it is unclear what exactly undergirds these partisan differences, that is, beliefs about which specific electoral errors exist and whether there are differences in beliefs

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<sup>4</sup>In 2007 survey data, [Ansolabehere and Persily \(2008\)](#) also found that concerns about miscounting of ballots was frequent (which they label voter theft), as 23% of respondents reported this was very common. We note labels such as “very common” have imprecise meanings.

about frequency, severity, or both.

For both Republicans and Democrats, their perceptions of election errors are likely influenced by elite cues about the election. [Clayton et al. \(2021\)](#) shows that Republicans who were exposed to hypothetical messages about voter fraud from President Trump were more likely to believe the election was rigged. By contrast, such messages from President Trump (i.e., an elite cue from an ideological opponent) increased Democrats’ confidence in the election ([Sinclair, Smith and Tucker 2018](#)). Democrats were more likely to support electoral reforms that made it easier to vote when elite cues supporting such reforms were introduced ([McCarthy 2023](#)). Once again, we note that these studies tend to focus on aggregate assessments of fairness, which is potentially problematic because it obscures partisan differences in beliefs across types of election errors and in differences in beliefs about frequency and severity.

## 3 Data and Methodology

### 3.1 Study 1

Study 1 measures beliefs about the frequency and seriousness of the three types of election errors introduced earlier: fraudulent, uncounted, and forgone votes. We field two sets of studies: Study 1A with waves before, during, and after the 2020 election, and Study 1B before the 2024 election. We focus on average perceptions of the frequency and seriousness of each type of error among partisan subgroups. Because Study 1 includes multiple waves, we examine over time dynamics in Appendix C.1.

The 2020 pre-election survey was fielded between October 29th and November 2nd, 2020 ( $n = 1,946$  completed respondents). The during-election survey was fielded between November 5th and 13th, 2020 ( $n = 2,014$ ) when there was uncertainty about which candidate had won the presidency. The post-election survey was conducted between January 15th and January 20th, 2021 ( $n = 1,796$ ), ending on the day of the presidential inauguration. Participants

for all three surveys, which were fielded online using the Qualtrics platform, were recruited using Lucid Marketplace, which also provides us with basic demographic information about each respondent.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in a comprehension check related to the definitions of different electoral errors on all of our Lucid surveys, we find comprehension rates ranging from 70 to 84%, but do not restrict the sample to those who passed to avoid sample selection bias. For complete details about survey sample exclusions and subject comprehension, see Appendix B.

In each survey, we asked respondents questions about three different types of election errors. We began by defining legitimate votes and the three types of election errors. The first error, which we call *uncounted* votes, occurs when “legitimate votes . . . are not counted because they are wrongfully determined to be fraudulent.” The second error, which we call *fraudulent* votes, occurs when “votes [are] cast . . . that should not be counted.” Finally, the third error, which we call *forgone* votes, occurs when “eligible voters who could cast legitimate votes are not able to vote.”

We asked respondents two different types of questions about each of these election errors. First, we asked respondents about the frequency of each type of error, a measure of factual perceptions. Specifically, respondents were asked to estimate for every 100 legitimate votes, how many of each type of error occurred using a text box. Numeric responses greater than 100 were top-coded at 100 to eliminate large outliers.<sup>6</sup>

Second, we asked respondents about their emotional reactions to an occurrence of each type of error along multiple dimensions to understand how *serious* they perceive each elec-

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<sup>5</sup>Coppock and McClellan (2019) have validated survey experimental responses from Lucid Marketplace to national benchmarks. We note, however, that convenience samples tend to underrepresent Republicans, so our primary analysis focuses on differences between partisan subgroups. Additionally, in light of concerns about the declining quality of Lucid samples and following recommendations for best practices to deal with respondent attentiveness on Lucid (see, e.g., Stagnaro et al. 2024; Ternovski and Orr 2022), we also restrict our survey to subjects who passed an unrelated attention check placed at the beginning of our survey. We allowed respondents to answer the survey on either laptops or mobile devices, which reduces concerns about the representativeness of our sample (Stagnaro et al. 2024).

<sup>6</sup>Note that the total number of election errors should not sum to any given number, as they are not part of the 100 legitimate votes that were cast. 1.92% of responses were greater than 100, while .07% of responses were missing. Missing values were list-wise deleted.

tion error to be. Specifically, respondents answered 7-point Likert scale items for each election error: “Thinking about elections in general...how [morally wrong/morally outraged/angry/disgusted] would you be if . . .” We then created an additive emotional reaction scale composed of their responses to these items for each of the three election errors (range 0 to 1,  $\alpha = .881$ ), in which higher scores on this measure indicate that the election error is more serious.

In light of concerns about the representativeness and quality of Lucid samples, whether results obtained during the 2020 election were an artifact of an election held during the COVID-19 pandemic when Trump was the incumbent, and specific survey implementation details discussed below, we fielded Study 1B during the lead-up to the 2024 election. Study 1B was fielded on a sample provided by YouGov from May 29th to June 4th, 2024 ( $n = 5,305$ ) and our analysis employs weights designed to approximate a nationally representative sample. Additionally, the context of the 2024 election was different, with COVID-era concerns about ballot access largely having dissipated and former president Trump widely perceived to be leading in his quest to regain the presidency against President Biden (at the time of the survey). (At the same time, Republicans’ elite rhetoric continued to highlight fears that the election would be “stolen again” in 2024, see, e.g., [Steinhauser 2024](#).) Finally, in this iteration, we did not use the emotional reaction scale, but rather asked respondents to think about the seriousness of “a single” instance of an election error. Specifically, we asked respondents to “[t]hink about the 2024 presidential election in November. How wrong would it be if a single [legitimate vote/fraudulent vote/eligible voter] is [not counted/counted/prevented from going to vote]? This was meant to ameliorate concerns that respondents were conflating frequency and severity when providing assessments of seriousness.

## 3.2 Study 2

Study 2 uses a vignette design to measure how seriously individuals view specific cases of election errors, rather than reactions to the abstract instances of election errors we asked

about in Study 1. For Study 2A, the vignette experiments were embedded in the same three surveys used to gather data for Study 1A. As before, we can again examine average emotional reactions to these scenarios, as well as how they vary by partisanship and over time (in Appendix D.1). We presented respondents with three vignettes. To measure seriousness, after reading each vignette, we asked respondents “How outraged does the story make you feel?” with reactions measured on a 7-point scale from “Not at all” to “Very,” which we rescale linearly to range from 0 to 1 with higher values indicating more outrage.

In each vignette, respondents read three scenarios that contained undercounted, overcounted, and forgone election errors, which mirror the types of election errors used in Study 1A and 1B. We also randomized which party benefits from the error (Republican or Democrat) to isolate responses to how respondents would react when they are told that a particular election error hurt or benefited their own party. As an example, one vignette about fraudulent votes that hurt Democrats read “it appears that there are about twice as many votes being reported in certain heavily Republican precincts compared to . . . the number of voters who are listed as having voted on Election Day. The error is believed to have added votes to the Republican candidate, Donald Trump.” Because we specify which particular error occurred and which party benefited from such an error, we fix inferences people may otherwise make about the likelihood an error actually took place or who benefited when thinking about these types of errors (i.e., forgone votes are typically thought to hurt Democrats, while fraudulent votes are typically thought to hurt Republicans).

Study 2B follows a similar vignette design and was fielded on the same survey used for Study 1B in the pre-election period before the 2024 election. We take the most important vignettes from Study 2A to create a similar 3 x 3 factorial design: party benefiting (Democrats, Republicans, or unspecified) and election error (fraudulent, uncounted, and forgone votes). Unlike Study 2A, respondents are exposed to only one election error scenario and we also have a condition in which an unspecified party benefits, which serves as a baseline to understand if reactions differ when individuals are left to fill in their own beliefs about which group

likely benefits from each type of error (analysis appears in Table E1 in Appendix E). Finally, we test whether our results are consistent when we use a different measure of seriousness by randomizing respondents to either answer how *wrong* what happened in the story was (same outcome measure as Study 1A) or directly solicit their evaluation of how *serious* of a problem the specific circumstance was.

### 3.3 Study 3

In contrast to Studies 1 and 2, which asked respondents about their beliefs about the frequency (Study 1 only) and reactions to election errors, Study 3 directly measures the relative importance respondents assign to these different types of election errors. We did so by adopting a revealed preference framework in which we asked respondents to choose between pairs of election rules after specifying the relative frequency of each type of error in each scenario. This allows us to understand how individuals traded off among potential election errors when forced to do so. Additionally, this study specified a state or local election, which are distinct election contexts from Studies 1 and 2.

Study 3 is composed of two conjoint experiments conducted in 2020 in which respondents were presented with a series of 5 pairs of hypothetical election rules. There were two iterations of this study. Study 3A was fielded between August 14th and 15th, 2020 ( $n = 691$ ), and Study 3B was fielded between October 29th and November 1st, 2020 ( $n = 2,938$ ). These surveys were also fielded on the Qualtrics platform using samples recruited by Lucid Marketplace. In both studies, we again conducted a similar comprehension check as in Study 1A that explained each type of election error and asked respondents to correctly answer a question about each election error. Similarly high proportions of respondents passed: around 84% for both Studies 3A and 3B.

For each pair of election rules, respondents were asked to choose between keeping the current election rule (selected at random) and adopting the proposed new rule for a hypothetical upcoming election. This configuration was meant to reflect a real-life situation in



which legislators or election administrators have to decide between the status quo and a new law that changes how elections are run. In Study 3A, we asked, “Which set of election rules should the city use for the upcoming mayoral election?” In Study 3B, we asked a similar question, except replacing mayoral with gubernatorial elections.

In Study 3A, we randomized three attributes for each election rule: turnout (reflecting forgone votes), fraudulent votes, and uncounted votes. There were five potential levels for each attribute. Turnout levels ranged from 45 to 65% in increments of 5%, while fraudulent and uncounted votes both ranged from 1% to 5% in increments of 1%.<sup>7</sup> This randomization procedure resulted in a range of 9 possible values for each measure compared to the (randomly selected) status quo rule. That is, the new rule could produce a  $-20$  to a  $20\%$  change in turnout and a  $-4\%$  to  $4\%$  change in both fraudulent and uncounted votes, while undersampling scenarios with no changes in votes. A more detailed explanation of the randomization procedure is presented in Appendix B. An example of the presentation of one paired choice appears in Table 3.

Study 3B was similar to Study 3A but turnout is held constant at 1,931,000 votes and the fraudulent and uncounted vote differences are more granular.<sup>8</sup> Because of the larger sample size and more granular differences, this study is better powered to detect differences in response to changes in fraudulent and uncounted votes but does not allow us to understand relative preferences over forgone votes.

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<sup>7</sup>We chose the numbers presented in the vignette because they are close to the (inflated) numbers that respondents give when asked about the frequency of these errors, meaning the numbers we use are likely close to what individuals are thinking about when considering potential tradeoffs among election rules. If any election error is less common in the real world than it is perceived by respondents, then our findings would still accurately measure the *relative weight* given to these concerns.

<sup>8</sup>The turnout is the average state-level turnout in a presidential election year, which is meant to represent a large and fixed turnout level. Each measure was independently randomly assigned, so that differences in fraudulent and uncounted votes between the current and new election rules were each  $-2\%$ ,  $-1.5\%$ ,  $-1\%$ ,  $-0.5\%$ ,  $-0.1\%$ ,  $0\%$ ,  $0.1\%$ ,  $0.5\%$ ,  $1\%$ ,  $1.5\%$ , or  $2\%$ .

Table 3: Example of Question Wording in Study 3A

Current Election Rules	Proposed New Rules
Voter turnout: 45% of total eligible voters (45000 votes)	Voter turnout: 55% of total eligible voters (55000 votes)
Fraudulent votes: 1% of votes cast (450 votes)	Fraudulent votes: 1% of votes cast (550 votes)
Wrongfully disqualified votes: 1% of votes cast (450 votes)	Wrongfully disqualified votes: 3% of votes cast (1650 votes)

*Note:* See Figure G1 for the full question wording, including the dependent variables that respondents answered.

## 4 Analysis and Results

### 4.1 Study 1

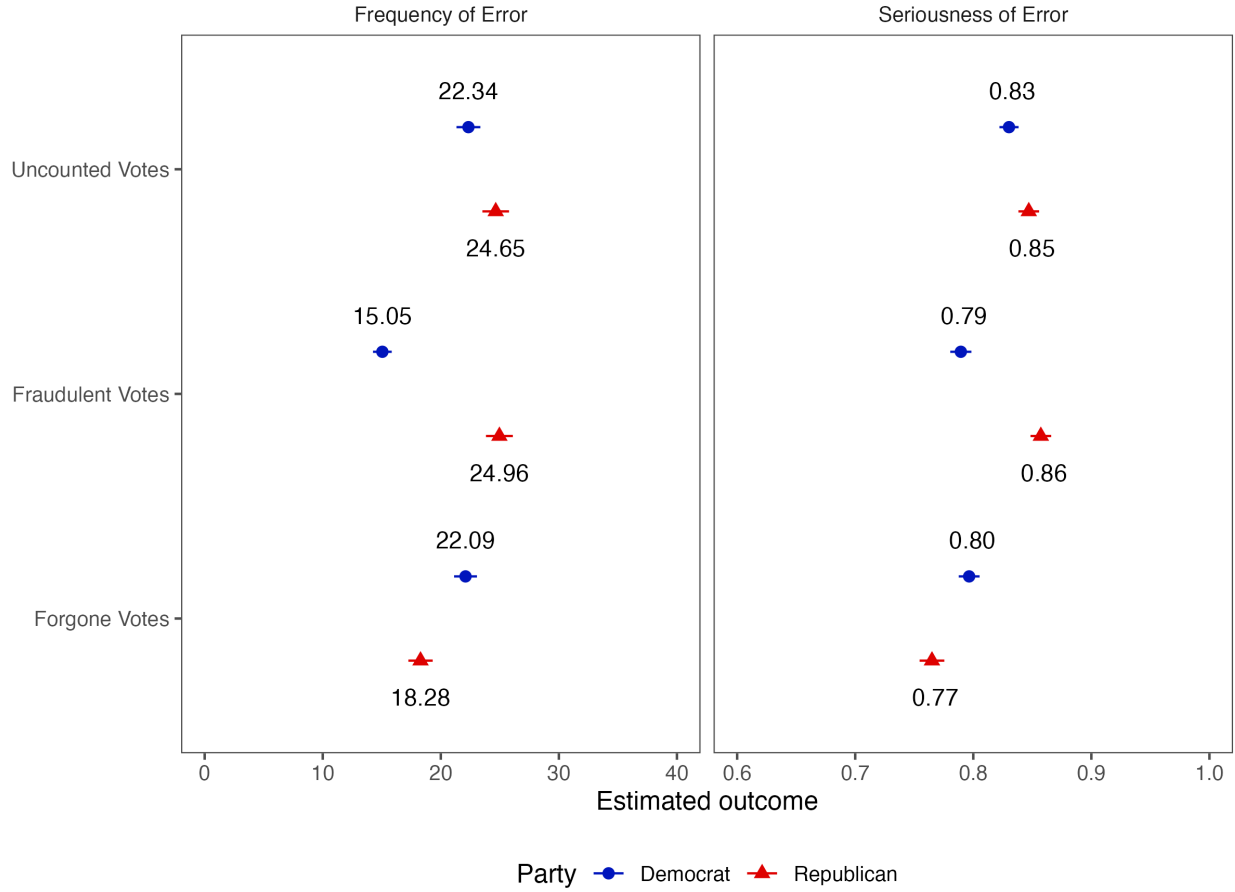
#### 4.1.1 Study 1A

We begin our analysis by presenting partisan beliefs about the frequency and seriousness of each type of election error in Study 1A. We use OLS regression (with robust standard errors clustered by respondent throughout, with the exception of Study 2B where we have only a single observation per respondent) with partisanship indicators to estimate Democratic and Republican averages. (We include leaners in all partisan subgroup analysis because of evidence that they are more partisan than weak partisans in their views, see [Keith et al. 1986](#)). The left panel of Figure 1 displays the average estimates of the frequency of each types of election error by partisanship (blue circles = Democrat, red triangles = Republican; including partisan leaners) pooling across the three survey waves.<sup>9</sup>

We see that Democrats (the blue circles) on average believe uncounted and forgone votes are similarly common (22.3 and 22.1 votes, respectively, per 100 legitimately cast ballots) while fraudulent votes are less common (15.1 votes). By contrast, Republicans (the red

<sup>9</sup>We also analyze how responses change over time for frequency (Figure C1) and severity (Figure C2). Generally, we find that partisan differences worsen over time from the pre-election period to the post-election period in 2020. We find the largest differences in the surveys fielded in 2024 (with the exception of the frequency and severity of forgone votes), although such shifts in the 2024 survey may also be in part due to differences in question wording and sample.

Figure 1: Mean Estimates of the Frequency and Seriousness of Election Error, Study 1A



*Note:* The horizontal lines reflect 95% confidence intervals. Models estimated using ordinary least squares regression, with robust standard errors clustered by respondent. The left panel displays the estimated number of votes affected by each type of election error (per 100 legitimate votes cast). The right panel displays the estimated seriousness of each election error (using a scaled emotional reaction score).

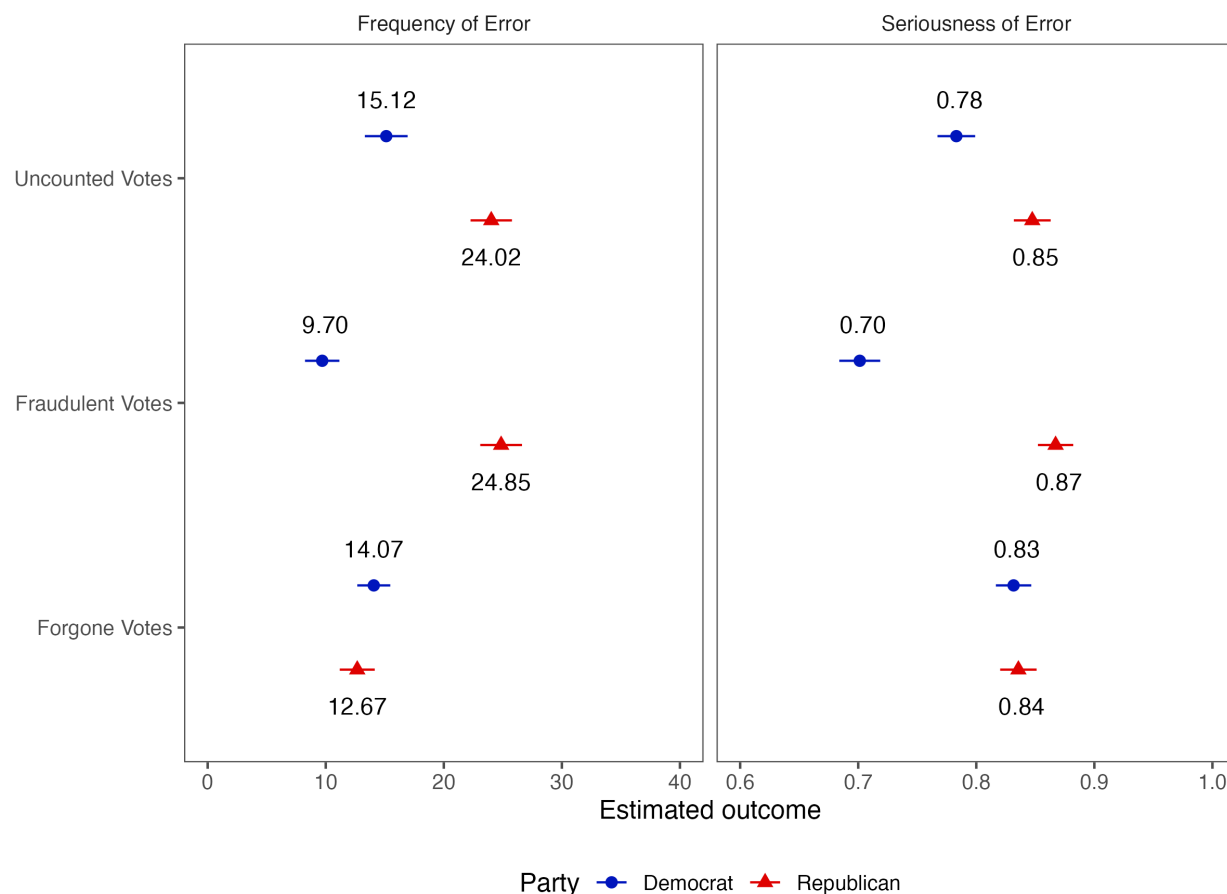
triangles) believe uncounted and fraudulent votes are about as common (24.7 and 25.0 votes, respectively), with forgone votes less common (18.3 votes). Thus, while there are not large differences between the parties in beliefs about the frequency of uncounted votes (about 2.3 points), there are much larger differences in beliefs about the frequency of fraud (Republicans estimates are about 9.9 points greater) and forgone votes (Democratic estimates are about 3.8 points higher). (All of the estimates between parties are statistically distinguishable at  $p < .01$ .) Because partisans agree about the relatively high frequency of uncounted votes, this suggests the salient point of conflict between partisans about the frequency of election

errors is disagreements about how often forgone and fraudulent votes occur. Notably, all of these numbers are very large, which, if taken at face value, suggest there are massive errors in election results.

In the right panel of Figure 1, we display group-level estimates of the negative emotional reaction scale, our proxy measure of seriousness, for each election error. For Democrats, uncounted votes warrant the most negative reaction (.83), followed by forgone and fraudulent votes with scores of .80 and .79, respectively. For Republicans, fraudulent and uncounted votes generate the most negative reactions (.86 and .85, respectively), while forgone votes are clearly viewed less seriously (.77). As with estimates of frequency, here we again see clear evidence of partisan differences in which errors are viewed as more important, and these views tend to reinforce beliefs about frequency (the only distinction from the frequency measures is that the seriousness of fraudulent votes rises to match forgone votes for Democrats, even though they still view forgone votes as far more common). While uncounted votes are viewed slightly more seriously by Republicans, (.83 for Democrats and .85 for Republicans, a difference of .02), Republicans view fraudulent votes as more serious (estimates are .07 units higher, the largest difference again) and Democrats view forgone votes as more serious (estimates are .03 units higher). All estimates of differences between the parties are again significant at the  $p < .01$  level.

### 4.1.2 Study 1B

Figure 2: Mean Estimates of the Frequency and Seriousness of Election Error, Study 1B



*Note:* The horizontal lines reflect 95% confidence intervals. Models estimated using ordinary least squares regression, with robust standard errors clustered by respondent. The left panel displays the estimated number of votes affected by each type of election error (per 100 legitimate votes cast). The right panel displays the estimated seriousness of each election error (how wrong a single occurrence of each election error is).

In Study 1B, we examine whether results from 2020 replicate in the 2024 electoral context, when using a different survey vendor, and when specifying that we are asking about how serious a single instance is of each type of error. The left panel of Figure 2 displays party-level estimates of frequency while the right panel displays estimates of seriousness, this time by asking respondents how wrong it would be for each election error to occur. Beginning with frequencies, across the board, Democratic estimates of frequency are substantially lower

in 2024 than in 2020, but the ordering of relative frequencies remains the same: uncounted votes are perceived to be most common (15.1), followed by forgone votes (14.1, difference not significant), with fraudulent votes perceived to be much less common (9.7). For Republicans, estimates for fraudulent (24.9) and uncounted (24.0, difference not significant) votes remain almost identical to 2020, but forgone votes are perceived as less common (12.7 votes in 2024 versus 18.3 votes in 2020).

In terms of seriousness (right panel of Figure 2), Democratic estimates of seriousness are largest for forgone votes (.83), followed by uncounted (.78) and then fraudulent votes (.70). The decline in negative reactions to fraudulent votes is relatively large (.09 points compared to 2020), while forgone votes are now viewed more seriously than uncounted votes (difference = .05,  $p < .01$ ). For Republicans, estimates of seriousness are very close to their 2020 numbers for both fraudulent (.87) and uncounted (.85) votes (difference = .02,  $p = .07$ ), but what is most stark is that negative reactions to forgone votes are substantially heightened relative to 2020 (.84 versus .77). In fact, across the board, Republicans are more concerned than Democrats about all errors including forgone votes in 2024, whereas in 2020 (which was during the COVID-19 pandemic and without specifying that respondents should think about a single instance of an error), Democrats were more concerned about forgone votes than Republicans.

Overall, the Study 1B results suggest that beliefs about both frequency and seriousness are likely to continue to underpin partisan conflicts about election errors. Republicans believe fraud and uncounted votes are far more common than do Democrats. They also believe that these errors are relatively more common than forgone votes, while Democrats view fraud as the least common of the three election errors. At the same time, Democrats now appear to give comparatively less weight to fraud and the most weight to forgone votes, while Republicans view all errors almost equally seriously.

## 4.2 Study 2

### 4.2.1 Study 2A

Table 4: Mean Seriousness of Vignette when Election Error Hurts Own Party, Study 2A (2020)

	Democrat	Republican
Uncounted Votes	0.743 (0.007)	0.783 (0.008)
Fraudulent Votes	0.735 (0.008)	0.780 (0.008)
Forgone Votes	0.748 (0.007)	0.756 (0.008)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.877	0.896
Observations	4124	3272
Respondents	1376	1092

*Note:* The dependent variable is feelings of outrage, which ranges from 0–1. Models estimated using ordinary least squares regression, with robust standard errors clustered by respondent. An election error hurts one’s own party when uncounted votes get rid of cast votes for own party candidates, fraudulent votes are counted for opposite party candidates, and forgone voters are unable to vote for their own party candidates.

Study 1 presents information about beliefs surrounding the frequency and importance of different forms of election errors. By contrast, Study 2 is an experiment in which we examine reactions to specific instances of election errors with different characteristics, with the design of these vignettes approximating the sorts of narratives an individual might be exposed to.

For simplicity, our analysis approach is to examine how respondents react to each vignette when it hurts their own party by respondent partisanship, which we present in Table 4. (For Democrats, this is an uncounted or forgone vote that would have gone to Biden and a fraudulent Trump vote; for Republicans, it is an uncounted or forgone vote that would have

gone to Trump and a fraudulent Biden vote).<sup>10</sup>

We find that Democrats view forgone and uncounted votes most seriously when told that these election errors will harm their own party. Forgone votes are perceived most seriously by a small margin (.748), followed by uncounted votes (.743, difference is not significant). (In Study 1A, Democrats reacted most negatively to uncounted votes followed by forgone votes). Once again, fraudulent votes are considered the least serious by Democrats, even when they are explicitly told that they benefit the opposite party (.735,  $p = .05$ , difference from forgone votes).

For Republicans, uncounted votes (harming their own party) and fraudulent votes (benefiting the opposite party) are considered to be the most serious election errors, with both outcomes around .78 units. Republicans evaluate forgone votes as the least serious(.756 units,  $p < .01$ , difference from fraudulent votes). Even so, Republicans believe all types of election errors to be more serious than do Democrats (the only partisan difference that is not significant is forgone votes).

#### 4.2.2 Study 2B

We repeated a modified version of this vignette experiment in Study 2B during the 2024 election and find similar patterns. Here there are only two dimensions of manipulation: Type of error and who benefits (Democrats, Republicans, or unspecified [not included in 2020 study]). Additionally, we find that randomizing the outcome measurement between how “wrong” or “serious” the election error was has minimal effects (see columns (3) to (6) of Appendix Table E1), which suggest our earlier measure in Study 1B is a suitable proxy for seriousness.

We again focus on seriousness estimates for errors that hurt one’s party. Complete regression analysis for this experiment, including the control condition, appears in Appendix

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<sup>10</sup>We also randomized whether the error was intentional and whether the error occurred as a result of a mail-in ballot, with only the mail-in ballot manipulation having an effect on seriousness. See Table D1 in Appendix D.1 for full analysis of all vignette conditions, along with over time analysis.



Table 5: Mean Seriousness of Vignette when Election Error Hurts Own Party, Study 2B (2024)

	Democrat	Republican
Uncounted Votes	0.830 (0.019)	0.890 (0.019)
Fraudulent Votes	0.712 (0.016)	0.866 (0.017)
Forgone Votes	0.811 (0.021)	0.769 (0.030)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.906	0.929
Observations	1233	1164

*Note:* The dependent variable is a combined measure of how wrong or serious the election error in the vignette was, which ranges from 0–1. Models estimated using ordinary least squares regression, with robust standard errors. An election error hurts one’s own party when uncounted votes get rid of cast votes for own party candidates, fraudulent votes are counted for opposite party candidates, and forgone voters are unable to vote for their own party candidates.

Table E1.

What is most interesting about the analysis shown in the table is that again when we fix that one’s party is hurt by an error, the ordering of seriousness estimates is similar to the results from the abstract seriousness estimates reported in Study 1B. For Democrats, the most serious error is an uncounted vote that affects their party’s candidate (.83), followed closely by a forgone vote affecting one’s party (.81), with the least serious error being a fraudulent vote benefiting Trump (.71). As in Study 2A, the difference between uncounted and forgone votes is not significant at about .02 units, while the difference between forgone and fraudulent votes is a much larger .1 units ( $p < .01$ ). In other words, when specific votes are on the line, Democrats are still less concerned about fraudulent votes compared to uncounted or forgone votes.

For Republicans, uncounted votes harming one’s party are viewed most seriously (.89 units), followed closely by fraudulent votes for Biden (.87 units, difference not significant). Forgone votes affecting Trump are viewed much less seriously (.77 units,  $p < .01$ , in compar-

ison with fraudulent votes). Therefore, for Republicans, despite holding the electoral implications of an error constant, their estimates of seriousness suggest uncounted and fraudulent votes are viewed much more seriously than forgone votes.

Cumulatively, both Study 2A and 2B largely comport with the patterns we find in Study 1, which means that eliciting reactions through vignettes and specifying who benefits electorally from an error does not produce large differences in estimates of seriousness. Republicans appear to react comparatively more negatively to fraudulent and uncounted errors relative to forgone votes, while Democrats give much less weight to fraudulent compared to forgone and uncounted votes. This implies that conflict over election errors is not simply a matter of factual disagreement about frequency. Furthermore, beliefs about who on average benefits from each type of error *do not* explain these differences, as both Democrats and Republicans still evaluate fraudulent and forgone votes that have negative electoral implications for their party as the least serious, respectively, among the election errors.

### 4.3 Study 3

Both Study 1, which examined reactions to general instances of election errors and beliefs about their frequency, and Study 2, which examined reactions to specific hypothetical instances of such errors, do not force respondents to choose between different types of election errors. The key partisan difference observed across Studies 1 and 2 is that Democrats appear to view forgone votes more seriously and fraudulent votes less seriously than do Republicans. But do such differences in reactions explain *ex ante* preferences about election rules that would generate different levels of each type of error? More bluntly, if forced to trade off among errors, would the partisan differences in their reactions to these errors predict Democrats giving comparatively more weight to turnout/forgone votes when choosing election rules? To answer this question, we turn to our analysis of Study 3, in which respondents were asked to choose among pairs of election rules.

To conduct our analysis, we predict the probability that a respondent chose the (randomly

selected) new election rule as a function of differences in turnout (representing forgone votes), fraudulent, and uncounted votes between the new and old election rule. In Study 3A, the variable difference in turnout, for example, ranges from  $-20$  to  $20$ . It is  $20$  when the new election rule generates 20% more legitimate ballots cast than the old rule (e.g., a decrease in forgone votes). Regression coefficients estimated using OLS regression with clustered standard errors for Studies 3A and 3B appear in Table 6.

We begin in column (1) with pooled analysis of Study 3A, which shows that across respondents, individuals are more likely to choose an election rule when it yields fewer illegitimate votes counted (less fraud), fewer uncounted votes (fewer discarded ballots), and higher turnout (fewer forgone votes). The magnitudes of these coefficients are large: a 1% increase in fraud decreases the probability an election rule is chosen by 4%, a 1% increase in uncounted ballots decreases it by 5.3%, and a 1% increase in turnout increases it by .8%. Comparing across these coefficients, this suggests that respondents react about 5 to 7 times more to changes in fraud and disqualification, respectively, than to changes in turnout.

We also examine differences across parties in reactions to these experimentally manipulated features. We do so in the model presented in column (2) by interacting the features of each vignette with an indicator for a Republican (rather than Democratic) respondent. Focusing on the interactions between Republicans and each measure of election errors at the bottom of the table, there is only evidence of statistically or substantively significant partisan heterogeneity for a single type of election error: forgone votes (turnout). In particular, Democrats react to a 1-point increase in turnout by being 1.1 points ( $p < .01$ ) more likely to choose an election rule, while for Republicans the effect is only .5 points—an effect half as large ( $p < .01$ ). For the other interactions, Republicans react slightly less to fraudulent and uncounted votes than do Democrats, although neither of these interaction effects are statistically significant.

More generally, the effect of an increase in uncounted votes is larger than the effect of an increase in fraud for both partisan subgroups (about .009 units for Democrats [ $p = .29$ ],

Table 6: Effect of Difference in Election Errors on Choice of Election Rules, Study 3

	Study 3A		Study 3B	
	Base	Interactions	Base	Interactions
Difference in Fraudulent Votes	−0.040*** (0.005)	−0.047*** (0.006)	−0.102*** (0.005)	−0.098*** (0.006)
Difference in Uncounted Votes	−0.053*** (0.005)	−0.056*** (0.006)	−0.117*** (0.005)	−0.121*** (0.007)
Difference in Turnout	0.008*** (0.001)	0.011*** (0.001)		
Vignette Order (2nd Vignette)	0.058* (0.024)	0.060* (0.023)	0.011 (0.012)	0.010 (0.012)
Vignette Order (3rd Vignette)	0.067* (0.026)	0.067* (0.026)	0.029* (0.012)	0.029* (0.012)
Vignette Order (4th Vignette)	0.057* (0.025)	0.059* (0.025)	0.029* (0.012)	0.029* (0.012)
Vignette Order (5th Vignette)	0.062* (0.025)	0.062* (0.025)	0.024* (0.012)	0.024* (0.012)
Republican	−0.061** (0.021)	−0.061** (0.021)	−0.051*** (0.011)	−0.051*** (0.011)
Fraudulent × Republican		0.012 (0.009)		−0.008 (0.009)
Uncounted × Republican		0.003 (0.009)		0.009 (0.009)
Turnout × Republican		−0.005** (0.002)		
Constant	0.392*** (0.022)	0.392*** (0.022)	0.412*** (0.011)	0.412*** (0.011)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.109	0.113	0.081	0.081
Observations	5914	5914	24930	24930
Respondents	595	595	2516	2516

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Dependent variable is a binary 0 or 1, with 1 as choosing the new election rule. Models estimated using ordinary least squares regression, with standard errors clustered by respondent.

or 19% larger, and about .018 units for Republicans [ $p = .05$ ], or 39% larger), and the effect of changes in uncounted and fraudulent votes is significantly larger in magnitude than the effect of a change in turnout for both groups.

The results from Study 3B, in which we give respondents a fixed number for the level

of turnout, are reported in columns (3) and (4) of Table 6. As in Study 3A, there are no statistically significant differences in how Democrats and Republicans choose election rules because of changes in either fraud or uncounted ballots (both of the Republican  $\times$  Uncounted and Republican  $\times$  Forgone coefficients are small and insignificant in column (4)). Additionally, also as in Study 3A, both partisan groups are more likely to choose an election plan with fewer uncounted ballots than fraudulent ones. Here, unlike in Study 3A, the preference for election plans with fewer uncounted ballots is larger for Democrats than Republicans (.022 units for Democrats [ $p < .001$ ], 23% larger, and .005 units for Republicans [ $p = .42$ ], 5% larger).

Comparing these results with the pre-election results from Studies 1 and 2, we find that revealed election rule preferences appear similar to the reaction to general or specific instance of election errors. While both groups give more weight to changes in uncounted and fraudulent votes than changes in forgone votes, Democrats give comparatively greater weight to changes in forgone votes (turnout) than do Republicans. This is consistent with previous observational work finding greater support for election reforms that make voting more convenient among Democrats (e.g., [Alvarez et al. 2011](#)), although here we show that this effect arises not because of differences in concern about fraudulent votes, but instead simply a greater Democratic concern for forgone votes. Overall, even in prospective choices about election rules, we find key differences between Democrats and Republicans about how much weight they give to different types of election errors, which demonstrates that partisan conflict is not simply composed of beliefs about how frequently each type of error occurs, but instead how important they view it to be.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the importance of refining how we measure public perceptions of threats to election integrity. We show that there are important differences in beliefs about

both the prevalence and seriousness of three different types of errors: fraudulent, uncounted, and forgone votes. Additionally, across partisan subgroups, there are salient differences in beliefs about both the frequency and importance of each type of error. Understanding these differences by partisanship also likely explain tensions in debates about election rules and their reform. These patterns persist when directly measuring beliefs about the frequency of these errors and reactions to them (Study 1), as well as when respondents engage with vignettes of election errors that approximate narratives surrounding these events (Study 2). Finally, patterns of ex ante choices in election rules that differ in the rates of fraudulent, uncounted, and forgone votes they produce (Study 3) comport with these patterns of partisan differences in perceptions of the seriousness of different threats to integrity.

There are several important empirical patterns that are consistent across all three studies. In Study 1A, we show that there are partisan differences in beliefs about the prevalence and seriousness of different threats to election integrity. While there are slight differences between frequency and seriousness perceptions for some errors, our results generally show that such beliefs closely mirror each other. Democrats consistently view uncounted and forgone votes as the most frequent and serious, while it is fraudulent and uncounted votes for Republicans. Therefore, while Republicans and Democrats tend to agree about uncounted votes, there are large partisan differences for both fraudulent and forgone votes. Our results show that Democrats are the least concerned about fraudulent votes, while Republicans care the least about forgone votes (both in terms of frequency and seriousness). In Study 1B, we show that these results are robust to a vastly different electoral context and refined question wordings, when we ask respondents how serious a *single* election error is. While Democratic estimates of frequency and seriousness are substantially lower in 2024 compared to 2020, Republicans have come to view all election errors as more serious than Democrats because of a rise in seriousness for forgone votes for Republicans. However, Democrats continue to rank uncounted and forgone votes the highest (in contrast to fraudulent votes) and Republicans continue to prioritize fraudulent and uncounted votes (in contrast to forgone votes).

In Study 2, we examine if results differ when asking respondents about narratives surrounding election errors in the 2020 and 2024 elections, rather than election errors in the abstract. These vignettes specify which party benefits from or is hurt by the election error, addressing concerns that our earlier results may be driven by Democrats not believing that voter fraud hurts them or Republicans not believing that voter suppression harms their electoral fortunes. Even when fixing which party is hurt by an election error, we still find that Democrats and Republicans view fraudulent and forgone votes, respectively, to be the least serious. This suggests that there are genuine differences in how seriously partisans view certain election errors that is not just an artifact of asking about election errors in the abstract (Study 1).

Finally, in Studies 3A and 3B, we measure revealed preferences by asking respondents to trade off among election rules that produce different levels of fraud, uncounted, and forgone votes. Here, we see that Democrats and Republicans do not differ in how they penalize election rules that have higher levels of fraudulent and uncounted votes. However, Democrats give much greater weight to forgone votes, validating the patterns of importance of forgone votes for Democrats (and similarly, the lack of importance for Republicans) observed in Studies 1 and 2.

We believe our improved measurements of partisan differences in perceptions of electoral integrity provides two clear benefits. First, our findings about the partisan divergence in evaluations of election errors build upon prior work that has documented differing concerns for and definitions of “election fraud,” which was conceptualized as voter fraud for Republicans and voter suppression for Democrats (see, e.g., [Atkeson et al. 2014](#); [Beaulieu 2014](#); [Sheagley and Udani 2021](#)). These differences imply that top-level work that examines voter confidence in elections or election integrity in the abstract without specifying the election error can result in confusion about what is being measured because question interpretations vary with respondent partisanship.

Thus, our disaggregation of perceptions of election integrity beyond this top-level work

into specific election errors is also an improvement because it improves our capability to test theories of public opinion about election integrity in the future. Importantly, Study 2 provides novel evidence that it is not merely differences in beliefs about which party benefits from an error that explains the relative concern for different types of errors. While developing tests of the theoretical mechanism is beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on improving measurement techniques, preliminary analysis reported in the appendix (see Appendix Section C.3) compares political independents to partisans and examines heterogeneous effects across levels of political engagement to understand how elite cues may shape perceptions. Compared to Independents, partisans' changes in perceptions of frequency and severity over time during the 2020 election match party elite messaging. More politically and socially engaged partisans also more closely mirror elite messaging about the frequency of different errors, but engagement does not consistently predict partisan differences in perceptions of the relative seriousness of different election errors. Future work on this topic exploring the underlying basis for such partisan preferences should use our measures to distinguish across types of election errors and beliefs about the prevalence and seriousness of different types of errors. This may help clarify whether beliefs really originate in elite rhetoric, or some other theoretical mechanism such as partisan differences in media exposure or peer effects.

Second, if one seeks to understand public attitudes toward election rules and potential reforms (which might inevitably trade-off one set of errors for another), one must grapple with the fact that partisan differences exist in perceptions of both the frequency and seriousness of different election errors. Therefore, even before getting to how seriously voters view a particular election error, partisans have different beliefs about the facts surrounding election errors and creating common ground would likely require identifying interventions that could ameliorate differences in factual beliefs.

Therefore, perhaps our most important empirical contribution is showing that simply changing beliefs about the frequency of election errors will not be enough to generate com-



mon partisan ground if reforms involve trading off among threats to election integrity that partisans care about differently. Most starkly, this is because even when facts are held constant (as we do in Studies 2 and 3), Democrats consistently find forgone votes to be more serious than do Republicans, with the opposite true for fraudulent votes. In the context of the fact-checking literature, this finding therefore may help understand why previous research has consistently found that messages counteracting *factual* claims about election fraud do not increase election confidence (Berlinski et al. 2023; Carey et al. 2024; Coppock et al. 2023). Because individuals are often concerned about multiple threats to election integrity with partisan divergence on both the factual and seriousness dimensions, correcting misperceptions about the frequency of voter fraud may not be so effective in buttressing support for our electoral system (a technique political scientists have increasingly focused on, see, e.g., Cottrell, Herron and Westwood 2018; Grimmer, Herron and Tyler 2024; Grimmer and Ramaswamy 2024).

Similarly, such disagreements may also explain why political support for certain reforms is often divided by partisanship, as in the case of debates about strict voter identification or registration rules. For example, if one is worried about fraud but less concerned about forgone votes, then strong voter ID rules may be desirable, while the opposite may be true for those who strongly value forgone votes. Notably, Study 2 shows that it is not just the case that Democrats care more about forgone votes because they assume it benefits their party—even when holding constant which party benefits, Democrats (compared to Republicans) give more weight to avoiding forgone votes.

Nonetheless, we note that there are limitations of, and questions that remain after, our analysis. For one, it takes place during the 2020 and 2024 elections, when elite rhetoric about threats to election integrity were on full display. But we note that in continuing elections, this partisan conflict seems likely to worsen, not ameliorate. Whether such patterns continue to persist over time and for other levels of government and types of elections is less clear (although we note that the elections were subnational in the experiments used in Study 3).

For another, we examine only three broad types of threats to election integrity, and therefore ignore important details that might subdivide or even cross these cases, along with the possibility that frequency and seriousness claims may be impossible to separate altogether. For example, do people perceive postal service delays leading to mail ballots being discarded as forgone votes (because they are invalid by law if delayed in some states) or as uncounted votes (because an individual believed they submitted a valid ballot in time for it to be counted)? Finally, we do not study “common values” reforms that might uniformly improve perceptions of election integrity, such as ballot tracking or online verification of registration status where reforms can increase electoral confidence across all partisan subgroups (Biggers et al. 2022), or other values, like financial cost, which may also divide partisans. Fortunately, the approach we use here can readily be expanded to consider other reforms, as the design for Study 3 shows.

These caveats aside, decomposing threats to election integrity and separately studying beliefs about the frequency and seriousness of these threats provides new insights into a salient area of political conflict in the United States and likely more generally across the world. Even more importantly, this disaggregation provides a detailed window into the dynamics of public opinion on the very issues of election administration itself as it intersects with campaign messaging and electoral strategy.

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