Public Opinion Quarterly (2024) **Vol 88 No 3,** 933–961

The Long Shadow of the Big Lie: How Beliefs about the Legitimacy of the 2020 Election Spill Over onto Future Elections

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Abstract Has the "big lie"—the false claim that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump—shaped citizens' views of the legitimacy of other US elections? We argue that it has. Those who believe Trump's claim, whom we call election skeptics, lack confidence in elections for two interrelated reasons. First, because they think 2020 was inaccurately and unfairly conducted, they think that other elections will suffer a similar fate, and hence think these elections are illegitimate even before any votes are cast. Second, while most voters think elections are less legitimate when their preferred candidate loses, this effect will be especially large for election skeptics, because voter fraud gives them a mechanism to explain their candidate's loss. Using an original panel dataset spanning the 2020 and 2022 elections, we show strong support for these hypotheses. This has important implications for our elections, and their legitimacy, moving forward.

In his 2000 concession speech, Al Gore emphasized a fundamental tradition in American politics: after "the honored institutions of our democracy" have acted, "both the victor and the vanquished have accepted the result

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Advance Access publication October 30, 2024
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https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfae047

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peacefully and in a spirit of reconciliation" (Gore 2000). Gore's words echoed those of every other candidate who lost a presidential election before or since. Every candidate, of course, except Donald Trump in 2020. Trump refused to accept that he had lost, arguing that President Biden's victory was due to voter fraud. Numerous secretaries of state, academics, and even Trump's own attorney general rejected this claim, as did more than sixty courts. But nevertheless, he persisted. As a result, the belief that 2020 was fraudulent became an article of faith among many in the Republican base, which was exploited to help instigate the events on January 6 (House Select January 6th Committee 2022).

But the belief that fraud tainted the 2020 election does something more: it also delegitimizes future elections. This is no less consequential, for if elections become illegitimate, then our democratic system unravels: "a lack of faith in elections is a lack of faith in the most fundamental of democratic principles" (Daniller and Mutz 2019, p. 46). Has Trump's "big lie" (to use the language of the House January 6th Committee) cast a pall over elections more generally?

We argue that it has, and that voters who embrace it, whom we call election skeptics, now view elections more generally as fraudulent and suspect. Because these voters think the 2020 election was stolen via voter fraud, they think that the same could happen in future elections and are therefore skeptical of their legitimacy. But this belief has another, arguably more pernicious, effect. Supporters of losing candidates (relative to those that backed winners) are more critical of elections and are less convinced of their legitimacy, as in their view, the "right" candidate lost (Anderson et al. 2005; Sances and Stewart 2015; Daniller and Mutz 2019). But this effect will be larger for election skeptics because they have a mechanism to explain why their candidate lost: voter fraud. Election skepticism, then, undermines confidence in elections both ex ante and ex post.

We test this argument using panel survey data tracking more than 3,800 respondents across the 2020 and 2022 elections. These data illustrate that election skeptics viewed the 2022 elections as less legitimate even before any votes were cast. Post-election, if these skeptics supported a losing candidate, they became even less confident in the election's legitimacy, and more likely to attribute those losses to fraud. Indeed, the effects of election skepticism on perceptions of legitimacy rival those of voting for the winning or losing candidate, the key factor identified in past work. We show how these effects shape views of the upcoming 2024 election as well, highlighting that these effects could persist into the future.

One might have hoped that the defeat of so many candidates in the 2022 elections who publicly doubted the 2020 election meant that the nation was ready to lay this issue to rest. But our results show that for a sizable share of

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the public, election skepticism is no longer just about 2020, and has become a more durable part of our political discourse.

Winning, Losing, and Legitimacy

As Riker (1953) noted more than seventy years ago, "the essential democratic institution is the ballot box and all that goes with it" (p. 28)—elections are the *sine qua non* of a democracy. Beyond the implications this has for how we select our leaders, this also has important consequences for voters' attitudes. Because elections are the "essential democratic institution," systemic legitimacy is electoral legitimacy: citizens are more likely to accept policy decisions, and the system itself, as legitimate when leaders are chosen fairly (Tyler 2013). Here, by electoral legitimacy, we mean that elections are free and fair, uncorrupted by incompetence, fraud, and chicanery (Tyler 2006).

But the legitimacy of those elections may be perceived quite differently by voters who backed the winning and losing candidates. Those who backed the winner will be satisfied with the outcome, as (from their point of view) the "right" candidate won, and hence the election worked as it should have. But those who backed the losing candidate will not be so sanguine: their side fought and lost, and hence they will think less of the system (Anderson et al. 2005; Sances and Stewart 2015; Sinclair, Smith, and Tucker 2018).[1] These effects are rooted in cognitive dissonance: if the "right" candidate lost, then the system itself was flawed, and the election was not free and fair. But if the right candidate won, the system worked, and hence it was legitimate (Anderson et al. 2005, pp. 25–27; Daniller and Mutz 2019, p. 48).[2] The legitimacy of elections, and the democratic system more broadly, therefore hinges on "losers' consent" (Nadeau and Blais 1993)—it is the attitudes of losers, more so than winners, that allows a democratic system to function effectively.

But in these previous elections, the loser graciously conceded to the winner. What happens when the loser refuses to accept their loss, instead

1. One might argue that these effects should only occur when people are surprised that their candidate lost: if the loss was expected (for example, if pre-election polling predicted a decisive victory for the other candidate), then losing should not be delegitimizing. But voters almost always think their candidate is going to win, even if the polling suggests otherwise (Granberg and Brent 1983). Further, given substantial polling errors in recent elections, even those supporting candidates trailing in the polls may have thought they would be vindicated on Election Day.

2. There are, of course, other mechanisms to reduce cognitive dissonance: for example, those backing the losing candidate could adjust their views of the candidates, perceiving the winner more positively and the loser less positively (Beasley and Josyln 2001). But this mechanism is less relevant here because this strategy rests on the logic that everyone accepts that the winner actually won the election (see their discussion on p. 524). In 2020, election skeptics simply did not believe that Biden was the winner.

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arguing that the election was stolen via fraud, as Trump did in 2020? This should amplify the cognitive dissonance mechanism: the right candidate did not just lose; their victory was stolen from them. This should be an especially powerful effect in this case because so many prominent Republicans accepted Trump's narrative. While some Republicans publicly broke with Trump, most of those that did faced retribution, such as Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, much of the rest of the party fell into line. For example, the 2022 Republican candidate for Senate in Nevada, Adam Laxalt, called preventing voter fraud the "biggest issue" in the campaign and was training election observers and developing a litigation strategy for fraud cases even before he became his party's nominee (Corasaniti, Housnshell, and Askarinam 2022). Laxalt was not an isolated case: nearly one-half of 2022 Republican nominees for Congress, secretary of state, and governor across the United States publicly doubted the results of the 2020 election (Rakich and Rogers 2022).

Our argument is not that no one else has ever made claims of fraud before; of course, many others have. For example, some Democrats argued that Bush's victory in Ohio in 2004, and hence his Electoral College win, was due to fraud (AP 2006). What makes Trump's efforts different is not that he alleged that fraud took place, but that his claims have taken hold of the party and have been actively supported by a significant portion of it. The 2004 skeptics were always a relatively small group confined to the fringes of the Democratic Party. The same cannot be said of 2020 skeptics within the Republican Party, making Trump's case unique. Put differently, this issue has become a polarizing party cue (Zaller 1992), giving us an extremely unique case in which to test the logic of losers' consent.[3]

This has three important implications for Americans' confidence in elections in the contemporary era. First, election skepticism will be a strong and stable attitude, resistant to change over time (Arceneaux and Truex 2023; Jacobson 2023). Indeed, given the elite party messages about election skepticism, it should not be surprising that embracing it has become a core ingredient of what it means to be a Republican for many voters (Cillizza 2021). Consistent with this logic, efforts to correct this misperception typically fail (Fahey 2023; Graham and Yair forthcoming).

Second, because election skepticism is rooted in arguments about voter fraud, its logic applies to future elections, not just past ones. Trump seeded this claim in 2016, when he argued that Hillary Clinton's popular vote victory was due to illegal balloting, and then reinforced it in 2020, arguing that

3. The limitation of our argument, however, is that earlier studies did not ask similar questions about the longer-term consequences of election skepticism, so we lack a baseline comparison for the Trump case. This makes it difficult to rule out other factors here, but given the consistency of our results below, we do not view that as a critical limitation. We thank a reviewer for making this point to us.

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mail-in ballots were used to steal the Electoral College from him. If 2020 was stolen via voter fraud (and so was the 2016 popular vote), so too can future contests, and hence all elections—such as the 2022 midterm and 2024 presidential elections—are suspect, even before they take place.

Third, while most voters will think elections are less legitimate if their candidate loses (Anderson et al. 2005), that effect should be especially large for election skeptics. Our claim is not simply that losing multiple elections lowers trust; that has already been established (Daniller and Mutz 2019). Rather, our claim is that election skepticism—because it is a strong, stable belief with a mechanism that travels across elections—magnifies the cognitive dissonance effects of losing on electoral legitimacy. Most voters would dislike losing multiple elections, but given that election skeptics believe their preferred candidates' losses are due to voter fraud (and not, say, being too extreme or running a bad campaign), these losses have an especially delegitimizing effect. Election skepticism, then, erodes confidence in elections both ex ante (because of the possibility/suspicion of fraud) and ex post (because, when a preferred candidate loses, it demonstrates that fraud took place).

Does the Big Lie Cast a Shadow on Future Elections?

To test whether the shadow of 2020 looms over subsequent elections, we turn to data from the Annenberg Institutions of Democracy (hereafter, AIOD) panel data, an ongoing survey of voters in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. The AIOD first recruited subjects to join an original survey panel in late 2019 and early 2020 via address-based sampling; as such, these data constitute a random sample of voters in each state. Throughout the study, panelists have taken the AIOD surveys via a custom web portal hosted by the survey firm SSRS. To ensure that the survey does not miss important groups with low rates of internet usage, especially those in more rural areas and those with lower levels of formal education, the AIOD provides respondents the opportunity to take the study via the telephone if they wish to do so; approximately 2.3 percent of the sample does so, and this figure has been relatively constant across time. Full details on the recruitment of these panelists, response rates, construction of the post-stratification weights used in our analyses, and so on are provided in Annenberg IOD Collaborative (2023).

This sort of longitudinal data allows us to track how the perceived legitimacy of the 2020 election—as measured in 2020, 2021, and 2022—affected the perceived legitimacy of the 2022 midterm elections. By looking at states with ex ante uncertain statewide races, these data are uniquely positioned to answer the questions we pose here. In waves bookending the 2022 elections (the former in September–October 2022, the latter in November 2022; see Supplementary Material section A for the specific dates and other survey

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details), the AIOD asked respondents for their beliefs about the legitimacy of their state's 2022 election for governor and senate (separately), the legitimacy of the 2024 presidential election, which candidates they supported in 2022 (to determine who backed the winning and losing candidates), and the impact of voter fraud in their state's senatorial and gubernatorial contests. Table 1 below provides full question wordings and response options, notes when each question was asked in our panel, and indicates which analyses use it in what follows below.

Table 1. Concepts and question wording for items used in our analysis.

Concept and question wording	Waves asked	Used in
2020 Legitimacy: How confident, if at all, are you that the 2020 presidential general election [will be/was] conducted fairly and accurately? [Not at all confident, Not too confident, Somewhat confident, Very confident]	June 2020, October 2020, November 2020, January 2021, May 2022	Figures 1–5, tables 2–4
2020 Vote Choice: In the 2020 presidential general election, who did you vote for? [Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, the Democrats; Donald Trump and Mike Pence, the Republicans; Someone else; Did not select a candidate for president]	November 2020	Figures 2–6
2022 Legitimacy: How confident, if at all, are you that the 2022 election for $OFFICE in $STATE [will be/was] conducted fairly and accurately? [Not at all confident, Not too confident, Somewhat confident, Very confident]	October 2022, November 2022	Figures 3–6
2024 Legitimacy: Looking ahead, how confident, if at all, are you that the 2024 presidential general election will be conducted fairly and accurately? [Not at all confident, Not too confident, Somewhat confident, Very confident]	October 2022, November 2022	Table 2
2022 Vote Choice: In the 2022 election for $OFFICE in $STATE, who did you vote for? [$DEMCAND, $REPCAND, Someone else, I did not vote for $OFFICE]	November 2022	Figures 3–6, tables 2–4

(continued)

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Table 1. Continued.

Concept and question wording	Waves asked	Used in
Impact of Fraud: How much of an impact, if any, do you think voter fraud [will have/had] on the 2022 $OFFICE election in $STATE? [None at all, A little, A moderate amount, A lot, A great deal]	October 2022, November 2022	Figures 5 and 6, table 4
Why Did the Winner Win: As you may know, $WINNER won the race for $OFFICE in $STATE. In your opinion, why did $WINNER win? Please just tell us in a few sentences why you think this happened.	November 2022	Supplementary Material section D

Note: This gives the question wording and response options used for each key variable in our analysis, the waves of the AIOD data in which it was asked, as well as the specific table/figure in which it is used. Here, tense was varied as appropriate for pre- and post-election items, $OFFICE indicates either governor or senator, $STATE indicates Pennsylvania, Michigan, or Wisconsin, $DEMNAME and $REPNAME give the name of the Democratic and Republican candidate for a given race, and $WINNER indicates the candidate who won an office in a given state.

Our core empirical strategy is a difference-in-differences model:

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_0 Wave_j + \beta_1 Lost_i * Wave_j + \beta_2 2020\ Illegitimate_i * Wave_j + \beta_3 Wave_j * Lost_i * 2020\ Illegitimate_i + a_i + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

where i indexes respondents, j indexes survey waves (pre- and post-2022 election), Y is the outcome of interest (legitimacy of the 2022 senatorial and gubernatorial elections, as well as the belief in the impact of voter fraud in those contests), *Wave* is an indicator for survey wave, *Lost* is an indicator for supporting the losing candidate, *2020 Illegitimate* is belief that 2020 was illegitimate (i.e., being an election skeptic), and a_i is a respondent fixed effect. We estimate this model separately for senatorial and gubernatorial races.

Here, β_0 tells us the shift in the dependent variable post-election among those who supported the winning candidate, β_1 tells us the effect of losing among those who thought that 2020 was legitimate, β_2 tells us the effect of supporting the winning candidate for election skeptics, and β_3 is our key coefficient, testing if election skeptics become especially skeptical of elections when their preferred candidate loses. If 2020 attitudes spill over onto those about 2022, then we should see a large negative β_3 throughout the results. β_2 is also telling, because it indicates whether 2022 victories counteract beliefs

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about 2020: if one's preferred candidate wins, do elections become more legitimate, or even then do doubts remain? Note, however, that because of the respondent fixed effects (the α_i terms), the time-invariant, individual-level effects (i.e., terms indexed only by i and not by j) are dropped given their collinearity, so there is no direct effect of 2020 illegitimacy, supporting a losing candidate, or their interaction.

The advantage of this empirical strategy is twofold. First, our difference-in-differences strategy examines within-respondent change, avoiding the problem that those who embrace 2020 election skepticism likely have different ex ante views about the 2022 elections (which, as we show in table 2 below, they do). Second, because the panel waves are tightly spaced around the 2022 election—the pre- and post-election interviews are only approximately one month apart—we can be more confident that the attitudinal changes we observe are a function of electoral choices themselves, and not some other unobserved factor. We preregistered these hypotheses and models at OSF in September 2022. In Supplementary Material section B, we provide a link to our pre-analysis plan, and Supplementary Material section C details our deviations from it.

Results

Before turning to our regression models, we first document that election skepticism is indeed a strong and stable attitude. Figures 1 and 2 shows the distribution of beliefs about the legitimacy of the 2020 election as measured in five panel survey waves: June 2020, October 2020, November 2020, January 2021, and May 2022. In each of these waves, the AIOD asked respondents how confident they were that the 2020 election would be (had been) conducted fairly and accurately on a four-point scale: not at all, not too, somewhat, and very confident (that is, how confident they were in its legitimacy; see table 1).

Figure 1 shows the average confidence (left-hand panel), the percent who were not at all confident (center panel), and the percent who were very confident (right-hand panel) in the legitimacy of the 2020 election. In figure 2, we present the Sankey flow diagram for three key groups of respondents: Trump (left-hand panel) and Biden (right-hand panel) voters, as well as those who voted for a third-party candidate or did not vote (center panel). These panels highlight how respondents' attitudes changed across the 23 months where the AIOD asked this question.

Three important points emerge from figures 1 and 2. First, in the spring of 2020, there was little partisan difference in electoral legitimacy, with most voters being somewhat confident that the election would be conducted fairly. That changed slightly before the election, and then dramatically immediately afterward, where it has remained since then. Post-election, nearly all Biden

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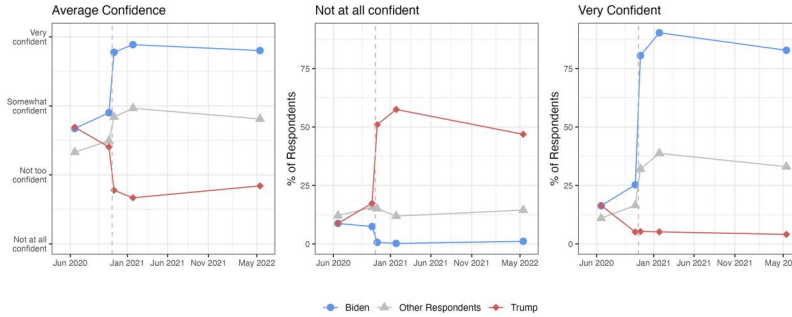

Figure 1. The evolution of 2020 election skepticism over time. The plot shows the average confidence that Trump (red diamonds) and Biden (blue circles) voters, as well as third-party/nonvoters (gray triangles), have that the 2020 election was conducted fairly and accurately (left), as well as the share of respondents "not at all" (center) and "very" confident (right; the ends of our scale).

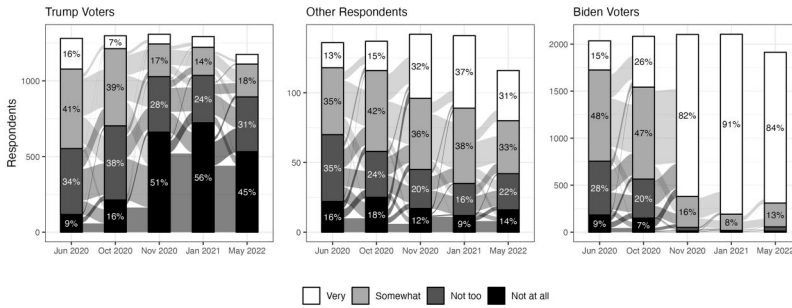

Figure 2. Sankey flow diagram of 2020 election skepticism over time. The plot provides Sankey flow diagrams showing how voters' confidence that the 2020 election was conducted fairly and accurately changed over time among Trump voters (left), third-party/nonvoters (center), and Biden voters (right).

voters were "very confident" that it had been free and fair, while the plurality of Trump voters were "not at all confident" in it. Simply put, the two parties perceived—and continue to perceive—the 2020 election in nearly opposite terms.

Second, it is not just the average levels that are different between the parties, but the variation within each party is quite different as well (see the Sankey flow diagrams in figure 2). Among Biden supporters, there was almost unanimity that 2020 was free and fair (84 percent were "very

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confident" in May 2022), whereas among Trump voters, there was much more variation. While the plurality was "not at all confident" (45 percent), many others were "not too confident" (31 percent) or "somewhat confident" (18 percent). It is this variation among Trump voters that is key to estimating our models below.[4]

Finally, while there were pre- to post-election shifts, after the 2020 election, this attitude became remarkably stable. For the post-election data, the Heise (1969) reliability coefficient is 0.93, with between-wave stability estimates of between 0.90 and 0.95. To put those figures into context, these estimates are similar to those for demographic variables or long-term stable identities such as partisanship (Hout and Hastings 2016). Election skepticism has solidified, and hence is likely to shape beliefs about future elections.

Our core question, though, is whether this belief about the 2020 election spills over onto views about the 2022 elections. To begin, consider whether election skeptics were less confident—even before the 2022 election—that their state's 2022 gubernatorial and senatorial contests, as well as the 2024 presidential election, would be free and fair. If our argument is correct, then for these voters, the fraudulent nature of 2020 implies that 2022 and 2024 will similarly be illegitimate, even before any votes are cast.

Table 2 shows our three sets of models one on top of the other, with 2022 senatorial elections at the top, 2022 gubernatorial elections in the middle, and 2024 presidential elections on the bottom. Begin with model 1 (the model without any controls). This examines the pre-2022-election data to see if, ex ante, 2020 election skepticism spills over onto beliefs about 2022 and 2024. Reliably across models, we see that those with less confidence in the 2020 election were similarly less confident in both 2022 contests and the 2024 presidential election (consistent with Pew Research Center 2022). It is not simply that this effect exists that is noteworthy, so too is its size. Here, we scaled our dependent variable from 0 to 1, so the effect of being not at all confident in 2020 (versus very confident) moved respondents by more than one-half the full response scale for beliefs about 2022 or 2024. This is a stunning effect size, much larger than for any other variable in the data.

Indeed, even after we controlled for a host of other variables in models 2 and 3, including vote choice, partisanship, liberal-conservative self-identification, and state fixed effects (to control for any between-state differences), we still found huge effects of election skepticism. Indeed, Republicans who did not doubt the legitimacy of the 2020 election were (if anything) *more* confident that the 2022 and 2024 elections would be free and fair. This is the first sign that this is not simply an argument that those who lose one

4. There is variation among third-party and nonvoters as well, but because fewer of these individuals voted in 2022, they played a less central role in our analyses.

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Table 2. Beliefs about 2020 legitimacy shape ex ante views of 2022 and 2024 legitimacy.

Senatorial elections			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
2020 illegitimate	−0.530 0.012 (<0.001)	−0.536 0.018 (<0.001)	−0.514 0.022 (<0.001)
25–34		−0.031 0.026 (0.224)	−0.038 0.027 (0.163)
35–44		−0.023 0.025 (0.372)	−0.034 0.027 (0.202)
45–54		0.008 0.025 (0.743)	−0.003 0.027 (0.902)
55–64		0.002 0.025 (0.921)	−0.013 0.026 (0.614)
65+		0.003 0.024 (0.903)	−0.012 0.026 (0.643)
4-year degree+		0.031 0.010 (0.002)	0.027 0.010 (0.009)
Male		0.034 0.010 (<0.001)	0.027 0.010 (0.007)
Black		−0.057 0.024 (0.020)	−0.054 0.026 (0.036)
Hispanic		−0.072 0.025 (0.004)	−0.046 0.027 (0.088)
Asian		0.048 0.032 (0.128)	0.029 0.032 (0.375)
Other race		−0.012 0.029 (0.696)	−0.026 0.030 (0.392)
Democrat		0.018 0.019 (0.327)	
Republican		0.066 0.019 (<0.001)	
Trump voter			0.018 0.019 (0.350)
Liberal		0.001 0.013 (0.966)	−0.016 0.013 (0.207)

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Table 2. Continued.

Senatorial elections			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Conservative		−0.026	−0.028
		0.015 (0.086)	0.015 (0.074)
MI			
PA		−0.004	−0.005
		0.010 (0.642)	0.010 (0.609)
Num.Obs.	2,290	2,124	1,906
R2	0.461	0.477	0.472
R2 Adj.	0.461	0.473	0.468
RMSE	0.22	0.22	0.21
Gubernatorial elections			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
2020 illegitimate	−0.536	−0.540	−0.524
	0.010 (<0.001)	0.014 (<0.001)	0.017 (<0.001)
25–34		−0.016	−0.006
		0.020 (0.419)	0.022 (0.767)
35–44		−0.005	0.003
		0.020 (0.789)	0.022 (0.876)
45–54		0.024	0.038
		0.020 (0.231)	0.022 (0.080)
55–64		0.017	0.022
		0.020 (0.379)	0.021 (0.302)
65+		0.020	0.023
		0.020 (0.319)	0.021 (0.264)
4-year degree+		0.017	0.014
		0.008 (0.035)	0.008 (0.103)
Male		0.029	0.022
		0.008 (<0.001)	0.008 (0.006)
Black		−0.043	−0.051
		0.016 (0.008)	0.017 (0.002)
Hispanic		−0.049	−0.040
		0.020 (0.014)	0.021 (0.059)
Asian		0.006	−0.009
		0.026 (0.816)	0.027 (0.728)

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Table 2. Continued.

Gubernatorial elections	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Other race		0.005	−0.006
		0.023 (0.834)	0.024 (0.809)
Democrat		0.020	
		0.015 (0.176)	
Republican		0.063	
		0.015 (<0.001)	
Trump voter			0.012
			0.015 (0.442)
Liberal		0.005	−0.007
		0.010 (0.605)	0.010 (0.478)
Conservative		−0.027	−0.024
		0.012 (0.021)	0.012 (0.046)
MI		0.036	0.029
		0.010 (<0.001)	0.010 (0.003)
PA		−0.002	−0.005
		0.010 (0.847)	0.010 (0.589)
Num.Obs.	3,408	3,171	2,840
R2	0.474	0.482	0.485
R2 Adj.	0.474	0.479	0.482
RMSE	0.22	0.22	0.21

2024 elections	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
2020 illegitimate	−0.588	−0.604	−0.593
	0.011 (<0.001)	0.016 (<0.001)	0.020 (<0.001)
25–34		−0.034	−0.016
		0.023 (0.141)	0.025 (0.516)
35–44		−0.026	−0.026
		0.023 (0.267)	0.025 (0.309)
45–54		−0.011	−0.002
		0.023 (0.624)	0.025 (0.951)
55–64		−0.020	−0.015
		0.023 (0.385)	0.024 (0.529)

(continued)

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Table 2. Continued.

2024 elections	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
65+		−0.022	−0.014
		0.023 (0.325)	0.024 (0.557)
4-year degree+		0.018	0.015
		0.009 (0.058)	0.010 (0.128)
Male		0.035	0.031
		0.009 (<0.001)	0.009 (<0.001)
Black		−0.033	−0.035
		0.018 (0.078)	0.019 (0.073)
Hispanic		−0.032	−0.019
		0.023 (0.166)	0.024 (0.438)
Asian		0.032	0.024
		0.030 (0.281)	0.031 (0.434)
Other race		−0.019	−0.024
		0.026 (0.472)	0.028 (0.388)
Democrat		−0.014	
		0.017 (0.419)	
Republican		0.027	
		0.017 (0.118)	
Trump voter			0.010
			0.017 (0.556)
Liberal		−0.022	−0.034
		0.012 (0.065)	0.012 (0.004)
Conservative		−0.032	−0.030
		0.014 (0.019)	0.014 (0.035)
MI		0.015	0.008
		0.011 (0.170)	0.011 (0.484)
PA		0.000	−0.004
		0.011 (0.974)	0.011 (0.704)
Num.Obs.	3,409	3,171	2,840
R2	0.458	0.461	0.470
R2 Adj.	0.458	0.458	0.467
RMSE	0.25	0.25	0.24

Note: Cell entries are OLS coefficients with the associated standard errors and (*p*-values) below.

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election think future elections will be less legitimate, but instead highlights the central role of beliefs about the 2020 election.

It is important to note that the effect of election skepticism on beliefs about 2022 and 2024 does not simply stem from Trump voters or Republicans being more skeptical about elections before November 2020. As seen in figures 1 and 2, there functionally was no difference in beliefs about 2020's legitimacy in June 2020, and the gap remained quite modest in October 2020, but then exploded post-election.

In Supplementary Material section E, we use the June 2020 and October 2020 data to further demonstrate that our effects stem from arguments about the 2020 election, rather than preexisting partisan differences. There, we test the alternative hypothesis that Republicans were just always more skeptical of elections: it wasn't Trump 2020 that did it, but rather Trump 2016 or some earlier election (i.e., Republicans were more skeptical even before the 2020 campaign, and that explains our results). But as our results there make clear, that is not the case. Using the pre-election data (where there was a much smaller partisan gap), we show that the effect on the 2022 elections was reversed: those who were more concerned about the 2020 election's legitimacy were *more* convinced that 2022 would be legitimate (Supplementary Material table S10). Why? As we saw in figures 1 and 2, there were many Democrats who, remembering Trump's 2016 rhetoric, were worried about what he might do in 2020. We do not see the expected relationship until the post-election data, suggesting that we needed the partisan sorting—driven by the partisan messaging—to generate the effects we observe in table 2 and elsewhere throughout the paper.

We also look at the effects of the over-time change in beliefs about 2020 legitimacy in Supplementary Material table S12 (i.e., looking at the June 2020–May 2022 shift in beliefs about 2020 as a predictor of views about 2022 legitimacy). Our results here are also quite consistent with our argument. Voters who became less confident in 2020's legitimacy over time, and who backed a losing candidate, experienced the steepest declines in 2022 legitimacy (comparing pre- to post-election). But we know from figures 1 and 2 which voters became less confident in 2020 over time: Trump voters. When Trump and other Republicans told them 2020 was illegitimate, they extrapolated that argument to 2022, just as our theory would have predicted. Together, these results bolster our claim that it is beliefs about the 2020 election—and not simply preexisting partisan differences—that drive our results.

In Supplementary Material section E, we also discuss three further robustness checks to bolster our results. First, in table 2, we measured belief in the legitimacy of the 2020 election using the measure from the May 2022 wave of the AIOD data. But, as seen in figures 1 and 2, this item was also included in the January 2021 and November 2020 post-election waves. Consistent with

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these figures, substituting these measures would not change our results given the over-time stability we observe in this measure (see Supplementary Material table S8).

Second, the AIOD's post-election November 2020 survey asked a broader set of items to assess respondents' beliefs about the legitimacy of the 2020 election: whether more Americans voted for Biden or Trump in 2020, how much of an impact voter fraud had on the 2020 election (and if it had an impact, whether it benefited Trump or Biden), whether Trump or Biden was trying to steal the 2020 election, and whether Biden was legitimately elected president. When we created an index of these items to fashion an alternative measure of belief in the legitimacy of the 2020 election, we found the same pattern of results (Supplementary Material table S8). Clearly, it was not the specific measure of 2020 legitimacy, but rather simply skepticism about the election, that drove down confidence in future elections.

Finally, we also control for a set of factors known to shape election skepticism: racial attitudes, conservative media consumption, and conspiratorial thinking (Annenberg IOD Collaborative 2023). Controlling for these variables does not change our basic pattern of results (Supplementary Material table S9). In short, the findings in table 2 are incredibly robust: 2020 election skepticism erodes confidence in other elections even before they take place.

This supports our claim that election skepticism weakens trust in elections ex ante. But if our argument is correct, then we should see an effect ex post as well: while most voters will think elections are less legitimate when their candidate loses, that effect should be larger for election skeptics because election skepticism magnifies the cognitive dissonance generated by electoral loss. To help understand whether that took place, we first plot the average legitimacy levels of the 2022 senatorial and gubernatorial elections both pre- and post-election in figure 3.

In figure 3, we show results separately for senatorial (left-hand panel) and gubernatorial elections (right-hand panel). In each panel, we show election skeptics with gray lines, and nonskeptics with black lines.[5] Those who voted for a winning candidate are shown with filled circles, and those who backed a losing candidate have hollow diamonds. So, for example, election skeptics who voted for a losing candidate are shown in the gray line with a hollow diamond.

Consistent with the findings in table 2 above, note that election skeptics had lower confidence even before the election took place (i.e., in both panels, the gray lines are below the black ones in the pre-election period). This pattern is especially stark for senatorial elections. There, in our pre-election

5. To simplify the visualization, we dichotomize election skepticism in our graphs: those who are "not at all confident" in 2020 are skeptics, everyone else is a nonskeptic (other splits yield substantively similar results). In the statistical models, we treat election skepticism as a continuous variable.

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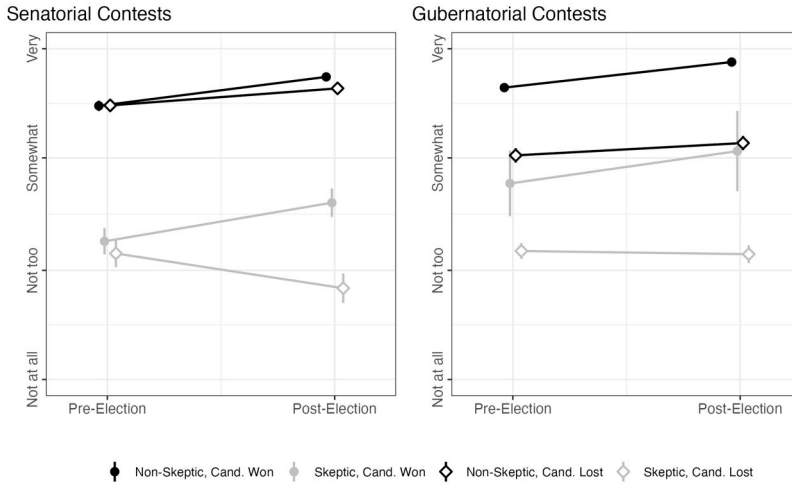

Figure 3. Average confidence that 2022 elections will be conducted fairly and accurately. The figure shows the average legitimacy of the 2022 senatorial (left-hand panel) and gubernatorial (right-hand panel) elections both pre- and post-election. Election skeptics are shown with gray lines, nonskeptics are shown with black lines; vertical bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. Those who backed a winning candidate are shown with filled circles, those who backed a losing candidate have hollow diamonds. So, for example, election skeptics who voted for a losing candidate are shown in the gray line with hollow diamonds.

wave, election skeptics were approximately 1.5 scale points less confident that the election would be free and fair, which is nearly 40 percent of the entire scale. Post-election, however, we observed some important changes. Note that confidence in the election's legitimacy went up for every group but one: election skeptics who backed a losing candidate. Pre-election, these individuals were between "not too confident" and "somewhat confident" that the Senate election would be free and fair, but post-election, they fell below "not too confident" in its legitimacy. In gubernatorial elections, we see a similar, albeit less stark, pattern.[6] There, comparing pre- to post-election values, election skeptics who backed a loser became slightly less confident in the election's legitimacy (though, as we will see below, that decline was not statistically significant). But because every other group thought the election was more legitimate ex post, there was a larger post-election

6. One interesting question is why the effects are larger for senatorial vs. gubernatorial contests (as seen below, this is a general pattern in our results). We leave this as a topic for future research, noting here that it may be a feature of these particular contests.

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winner-loser gap for this group as well. Election skepticism undermines electoral legitimacy not only before the vote count, but then when a skeptic's preferred candidate loses, that loss—which can be explained via fraud—further delegitimizes the process.

Our results underscore that the largest declines in electoral legitimacy come from both backing the losing candidate and being an election skeptic. Election skeptics who voted for the winner became more confident in the election's legitimacy, not less. Likewise, among nonskeptics, even those backing a losing candidate became more confident post-election that it had been free and fair (though there was still a winner-loser gap, as those backing the winning candidate increased even more). It is the combination of election skepticism and loss that generates the most delegitimization, just as our theory predicted.

But of course, figure 3 only contains means, not model estimates, so we estimated the difference-in-differences specification discussed earlier in the paper and present the results in table 3. Figure 3 provides an easy-to-understand sense of the substantive shifts, and table 3 allows us to see which shifts are statistically significant, even accounting for the fixed effects (ensuring that these are based on within-respondent changes, and not just between-respondent differences). Because these coefficient estimates are difficult to interpret, figure 4 visually presents the marginal effect of the shift from the pre-election to the post-election period—how do voters change their beliefs once their candidate wins or loses, and how does that differ for election skeptics versus nonskeptics?

The results in table 3 and figure 4 show us that the effects seen in figure 3 above are, indeed, significant effects, even when including the individual-level fixed effects. Beginning with β_3, we see that for election skeptics, there is an especially large and negative effect of supporting a losing candidate on electoral legitimacy. The contrast with the statistically insignificant β_1—which gives the effect among those who saw 2020 as legitimate—is instructive, in that it suggests the effect of a 2022 loss was primarily concentrated among 2020 election skeptics.

Looking at the marginal effects plot in figure 4 only strengthens this conclusion. In particular, it underscores the magnitude of the difference in the size of the winner-loser gap between skeptics and nonskeptics. In the Senate contests (the black hollow circles), the winner-loser gap among non-skeptics was quite modest (0.04, $p = 0.001$), as both groups saw the election as more legitimate after the fact (i.e., both marginal effects are positive and significant). But for election skeptics, it was notably larger (0.22, $p < 0.001$): 5.5 times as large, in fact. Because election skeptics who backed a loser were the only group to be less confident post-election (note their negative marginal effect), the legitimacy gap was greater for them. This group exacerbated the problem of loser's consent, and one can imagine a troubling spiral

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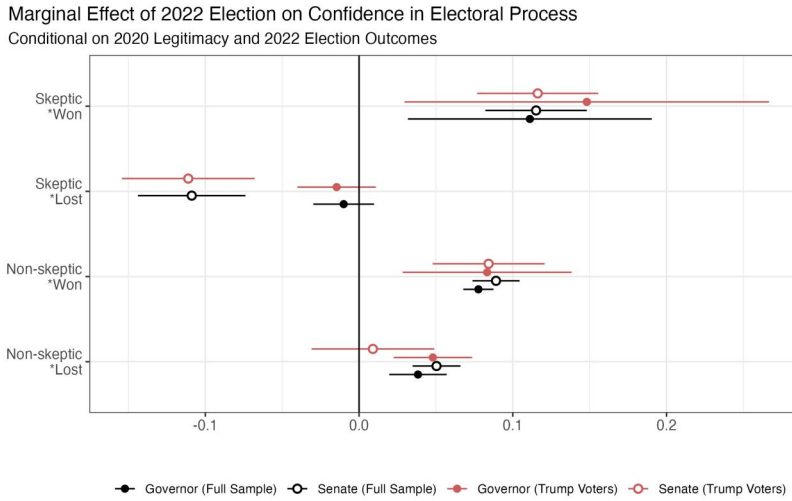

Figure 4. Marginal effect of 2022 election on confidence in electoral process, conditional on 2020 legitimacy and 2022 election outcomes. The circles are the marginal effect (with 95 percent confidence intervals) of moving from the pre- to post-election period on perceptions of the legitimacy of the 2022 election. We estimate this separately for the interaction of election skepticism and backing a winning/losing candidate. Results for the full sample are shown in black, results for those who voted for Trump in 2020 are shown in red. Circles showing gubernatorial elections are filled, those showing senatorial elections are hollow.

emerging if they experience multiple losses, even beyond what earlier studies have argued.

But of course, given the correlation between belief in the legitimacy of 2020 and partisanship/vote choice, it is possible that what we uncovered above is simply another version of Daniller and Mutz's (2019) argument: because Trump voters are much more likely to doubt the legitimacy of the 2020 election, perhaps our findings above reflect not the power of election skepticism, but rather the effect of voting for the losing candidate in both 2020 and 2022. To test this alternative explanation, we re-estimate our model just among those who voted for Trump in 2020; we present these results in red in figure 4. If we replicate our findings here (where *everyone* backed the losing 2020 candidate), then we have found something important and novel, and not just something that replicates past studies (i.e., there is an effect of election skepticism, even above and beyond the effect of multiple losses). This is exactly what we found: the findings for Trump voters directly parallel those for the whole sample. Nonskeptical Trump voters did

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Table 3. Beliefs about 2020 legitimacy interact with losing to shape 2022 legitimacy.

	Governor	Governor	Governor	Governor	Governor
Post-election (PE)	0.056	0.079	0.070	0.046	0.070
	0.004 (<0.001)	0.005 (<0.001)	0.005 (<0.001)	0.045 (0.311)	0.005 (<0.001)
PE*Candidate lost (CL)		−0.065	−0.019	0.034	−0.041
		0.008 (<0.001)	0.019 (0.324)	0.052 (0.516)	0.042 (0.330)
PE*2020 illegitimate (IL)			0.090	0.100	0.053
			0.025 (<0.001)	0.076 (0.187)	0.032 (0.092)
PE*CL*IL			−0.140	−0.183	−0.218
			0.034 (<0.001)	0.082 (0.026)	0.120 (0.069)
Sample	Full	Full	Full	Trump	Biden
Num.Obs.	7,408	5,970	5,551	1,802	3,151
R2	0.867	0.867	0.866	0.822	0.685
R2 Adj.	0.716	0.723	0.724	0.633	0.353
RMSE	0.11	0.10	0.10	0.13	0.08
	Senate	Senate	Senate	Senate	Senate
Post-election (PE)	0.052	0.094	0.085	0.069	0.085
	0.005 (<0.001)	0.007 (<0.001)	0.009 (<0.001)	0.035 (0.053)	0.009 (<0.001)
PE*Candidate lost (CL)		−0.071	−0.020	0.004	−0.027
		0.010 (<0.001)	0.013 (0.126)	0.051 (0.943)	0.012 (0.029)

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Table 3. Continued.

	Senate	Senate	Senate	Senate	Senate
PE*2020 illegitimate (IL)			0.027	0.042	0.029
			0.018 (0.132)	0.045 (0.352)	0.061 (0.636)
PE*CL*IL			−0.171	−0.208	−0.076
			0.026 (<0.001)	0.065 (0.002)	0.085 (0.367)
Sample	Full	Full	Full	Trump	Biden
Num.Obs.	4,994	4,026	3,729	1,232	2,133
R2	0.857	0.855	0.858	0.834	0.693
R2 Adj.	0.694	0.698	0.708	0.659	0.370
RMSE	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.12	0.09

Note: Cell entries are OLS coefficients with the associated standard errors and (*p*-values) below.

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not react strongly to their 2022 candidate losing (i.e., the marginal effect was insignificant). Rather, we observed significant effects only among 2020 skeptics who backed a losing candidate. Skepticism and winning/losing jointly drive these results.[7]

Why Do 2020 Election Beliefs Cast a Shadow on 2022?

The power of election skepticism stems from the fact that it provides a mechanism that travels across elections: election losses are due to voter fraud. When election skeptics backed a losing candidate in 2022, they should have become more likely to believe that voter fraud impacted that race as well, arguing that what happened in 2020 replicated itself in 2022. We re-estimate the difference-in-differences specification discussed above using beliefs about the impact of fraud in the election as the dependent variable. As above, we present the means (figure 5; paralleling figure 3), as well as the difference-in-differences regression estimates (table 4; paralleling table 3) and the marginal effect of time (figure 6; paralleling figure 4).

Election skepticism, combined with support for a candidate who lost, heightened voters' belief that fraud impacted the 2022 elections. It is important to underline that we need both factors for this effect to occur. For non-skeptics (the black lines in figure 5), even in the pre-election period, they thought it was unlikely to have much of an impact on the 2022 elections: they argued that fraud's impact would be between "none at all" and "a little." Then post-election, regardless of whether they voted for a winner or a loser, they thought that fraud became less important (i.e., there were negative marginal effects in figure 6). For election skeptics, in contrast, we see a more interesting pattern. The marginal effect of backing a winning candidate for election skeptics was negative: they became *less* likely to argue that fraud influenced the election (i.e., β_2 is negative). The effect was positive only for election skeptics who balloted for the loser. While skeptics were more likely to think fraud would impact the Senate elections even pre-election (saying it would have "a moderate amount" of impact on the 2022 results), that belief increased by 5.3 percent after the election. For these voters, once their candidate lost, they had an explanation at the ready: voter fraud. But without both election skepticism and loss, this effect did not occur.[8]

7. In column 5 of table 3, we show that among Biden voters, there is no effect of election skepticism, consistent with our argument that this is driven by Trump's argument about 2020 electoral fraud.

8. Given these beliefs about voter fraud, one might ask whether election skepticism then affects 2022 turnout decisions: if it's all rigged, why bother to vote? We can use both self-reported and verified 2020 vote to investigate this claim. When we do so, we find no effect of election skepticism controlling for 2020 turnout (Supplementary Material table S13). But, as we explain in

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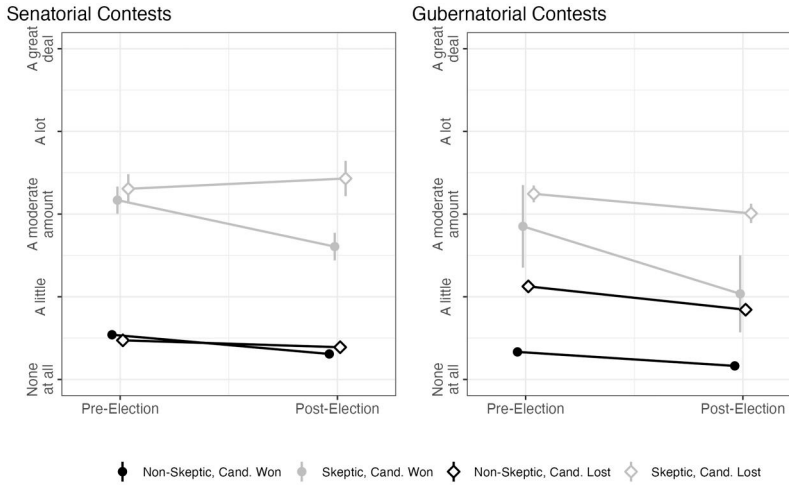

Figure 5. Average belief in the impact of voter fraud on 2022 elections. The figure shows the average belief in the impact of voter fraud in the 2022 senatorial (left-hand panel) and gubernatorial (right-hand panel) elections both pre- and post-election. Election skeptics are shown with gray lines, nonskeptics are shown with black lines; vertical bars indicated 95 percent confidence intervals. Those who back a winning candidate are shown with filled circles, those who backed a losing candidate have unfilled diamonds. So, for example, election skeptics who voted for a losing candidate are shown in the gray line with hollow diamonds.

To further explore the mechanisms behind the effects of election skepticism, the AIOD asked respondents in the post-election wave to explain, in their own words, why the winning candidate won their state's gubernatorial or senatorial election. Using an unsupervised analysis of topic model networks (Walter and Ophir 2019), we analyzed these data and found the election skeptics were especially likely to invoke delegitimizing explanations centered on voter fraud, corruption, negative and dirty campaigning, and so forth. Nonskeptics, in contrast, were more likely to talk about key issues, especially the mobilizing power of abortion, candidates' skills and competencies, and so forth. The contrast is stark: election skeptics explain winning and losing not as a function of candidates or issues, but rather in terms of fraud, graft, and so forth. This reinforces what we have seen throughout the paper: for these voters, far from being the essential democratic institution, elections are an exercise in fraud and chicanery. Given space limitations, we

Supplementary Material section E, this may be a function of power, so we leave exploring this in more detail to future analyses.

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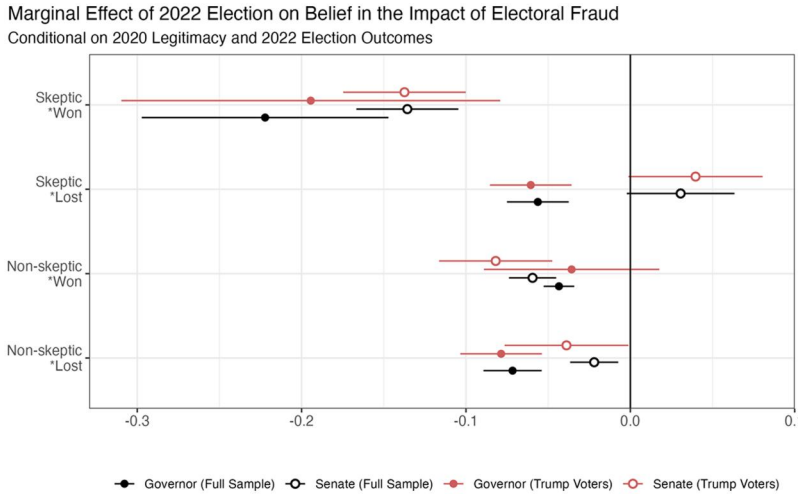

Figure 6. Marginal effect of 2022 election on belief in the impact of electoral fraud, conditional on 2020 legitimacy and 2022 electoral outcomes. The circles are the marginal effect (and the lines are the 95 percent confidence interval) of moving from the pre- to post-election period on the impact of voter fraud in the 2022 election. We estimate this separately for the interaction of election skepticism and backing a winning/losing candidate. Results for the full sample are shown in black, results for those who voted for Trump in 2020 are shown in red. Circles showing gubernatorial elections are filled, those showing senatorial elections are hollow.

defer a full presentation of these results to Supplementary Material section D and note here that they underscore and reinforce the findings presented throughout our analysis.[9]

Conclusions

Has the "big lie"—the claim that Democrats stole the 2020 election from Trump using voter fraud—affected the legitimacy of other elections in the

9. These open-ended results, and the results about voter fraud in figures 4 and 5, further reinforce our argument that our effects are due to Trump's arguments about the 2020 election, and not pre-2020-election differences between Democrats and Republicans. If it was just about losing and using fraud as a rationalization, then everyone who lost—regardless of views about 2020—should adopt this argument. But that is not what we find; instead, we only observe this pattern among those who are election skeptics. Further, the open-ended text analysis shows that, when given the opportunity to explain fraud in their own words, election skeptics invoke the arguments Trump made about a rigged system as their explanation, underscoring how his arguments shaped their view of the matter.

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Table 4. Beliefs about 2020 legitimacy drive belief in 2022 voter fraud.

	Governor	Governor	Governor	Senate	Senate	Senate
Post-election (PE)	−0.047	−0.038	0.014	−0.075	−0.047	−0.032
	0.005 (<0.001)	0.005 (<0.001)	0.044 (0.755)	0.007 (<0.001)	0.009 (<0.001)	0.033 (0.337)
PE*Candidate lost (CL)	−0.016	−0.018	−0.092	0.062	0.023	−0.029
	0.008 (0.047)	0.018 (0.299)	0.050 (0.069)	0.009 (<0.001)	0.012 (0.055)	0.048 (0.555)
PE*2020 illegitimate (IL)		−0.087	−0.158		−0.083	−0.104
		0.023 (<0.001)	0.074 (0.032)		0.017 (<0.001)	0.043 (0.015)
PE*CL*IL		0.077	0.169		0.119	0.185
		0.032 (0.016)	0.080 (0.034)		0.024 (<0.001)	0.062 (0.003)
Sample	Full	Full	Trump	Full	Full	Trump
Num.Obs.	5,966	5,547	1,800	4,021	3724	1,230
R2	0.856	0.855	0.815	0.852	0.853	0.836
R2 Adj.	0.700	0.701	0.620	0.692	0.698	0.663
RMSE	0.10	0.10	0.12	0.10	0.10	0.12

Note: Cell entries are OLS coefficients with the associated standard errors and (*p*-values) below.

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United States? Analyzing the AIOD's panel data, we show that it has. First, we show that beliefs about the legitimacy of the 2020 election have persisted since then, and even today, a plurality of Republicans are "not at all confident" in that election. Second, we show that this has real, and important, consequences: this lack of legitimacy undercuts electoral legitimacy both ex ante and ex post. Voters who believed that the 2020 election was not legitimate thought that the 2022 and 2024 elections would be illegitimate even before any votes had been cast. Further, if they then supported a losing candidate in 2022, their confidence in that election's legitimacy declined even further, as that strengthened their belief that voter fraud had occurred. This is not simply the well-documented finding that losing multiple times delegitimizes elections. Rather, once someone believes that 2020 was stolen, future elections are also called into question. The past is not even past.

Many commentators had hoped that the results of the 2022 elections would have allowed the country to put debates about 2020 to rest. But our results show that such hopes were premature. Yes, it matters that so many candidates who doubted the 2020 election lost. But for a not insignificant part of the public, 2020 is still very much a live issue, and as we saw in figure 1, for these voters, this is a strong, stable belief that is unlikely to change anytime soon. Indeed, with 60 percent of likely 2024 Republican primary voters wanting a candidate who believes that Trump won the 2020 election (Salvanto et al. 2023), election skeptics increasingly winning power in state and local parties (Homans 2023; Vigdor 2023), and 2020 skepticism leading to state-level changes in voting procedures (Rogers 2022), these debates will linger for years to come. Indeed, given these shifts, it is unlikely that they will fade away post-Trump: while the specific *cause célèbre* of the 2020 election will likely fade when he does, the broader debate over election integrity will linger on given the findings we document here.

Our findings here underscore how the narrative of electoral illegitimacy undercuts trust in the system more generally. Further, these findings underscore that it is not just winning and losing that matter; how a candidate concedes—or even if they concede—also has effects. But just as important is how others in that party react. Election skepticism spread not only because of Trump's actions, but also because so many Republican elected officials failed to acknowledge Biden's victory. Speaking to the *Washington Post* shortly after the 2020 election, one unnamed Republican official said, "What is the downside for humoring him [Donald Trump] for this little bit of time? No one seriously thinks the results will change … It's not like he's plotting how to prevent Joe Biden from taking power on Jan. 20" (Gardner et al. 2020). The problem is that by humoring Trump, January 6 occurred. Losing candidates and their party more generally—by graciously accepting their loss and unifying the country—play a vital role in democracy, even more so than we had thought before.

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Third, one might argue that the "solution" to this problem is to have election-skeptical candidates win more races. As our results show, when candidates backed by election skeptics win (like, say, Ron Johnson in Wisconsin), then election skeptics think elections are more legitimate. But this is a pyrrhic victory, as it suggests elections are only legitimate when one party wins. As Prezworski (1991) famously noted, democracy is "a system in which parties lose elections" (p. 10), and we all have to accept that our party will sometimes lose races, even ones we expected they would win.

Finally, and perhaps most disquietingly, for some, these effects are not simply rhetorical, but rather can lead to threats of physical violence. The US Department of Justice investigated more than 1,000 threats to election officials in 2022, more than 100 of which were serious enough to merit a full federal investigation (U.S. Department of Justice 2022), with many of these stemming from election skepticism. How this gets resolved could hardly be more important for the future of American democracy.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary Material may be found in the online version of this article: https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfae047.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the reviewers and editors, as well as Neil Malhotra, Marc Meredith, and seminar audiences at Aarhus, Harvard, Northwestern, and Princeton universities for helpful comments, and the Annenberg Public Policy Center for generously funding the data collection that made this study possible.

Data Availability

Replication data and documentation are available at https://doi.org/10.5061/dryad.08kprr590.

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Public Opinion Quarterly, 2024, 88, 933–961
https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfae047
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