

Why has Confidence in US Presidential Election Results Declined?

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ABSTRACT: In this research I posit and examine for a relationship between affective polarisation and trust in the accuracy of the Presidential election results in the United States. Specifically, I look at whether American adults scoring higher in affective polarisation are more likely to have lower confidence in the Presidential election results than those scoring lower in affective polarisation. Using surveys conducted across multiple elections by the American National Election Study Series, and evaluating original items placed on the 2021 Colorado Political Climate Survey, I find that affective polarisation is positively and significantly related to declining trust in election results. I discuss ways in which this negative consequence can be addressed to improve the strength of American democracy.

I. Introduction: More Than Just a Saying

“Not my President.” These words took off after the 2016 Presidential election, and have remained part of the public discussion since. However, these are more than just words; they allude to one of the most problematic themes in current American politics, going further than simply expressing disagreement with the elected President on terms of policy. Behind “not my President” lies intensely emotional responses to election outcomes, deep rooted criticism of political institutions, and most importantly, an indication of fundamental mistrust in the election process. That fundamental mistrust can be summarised by one word: disbelief. Disbelief in the outcome, disbelief in the direction the nation is headed, and disbelief that the electoral process could elect a specific candidate with which one disagrees.

From 2000 to 2012, aggregate confidence in the country’s Presidential vote declined by thirty percent, with Republicans alone falling by forty percentage points (Sances, and Stewart, 2015, see Appendix A). More recently in 2019, fifty-nine percent of Americans interviewed by Gallup determined they did not believe in the honesty of the US election results, these confidence levels that are so low, they are only exceeded by Chile and Mexico (Reinhart, 2020). In 2020, forty percent of Americans were not confident that the votes were counted accurately in the Presidential election (Griffin, and Quasem, 2021). How did the electorate come to this point? Why is the public increasingly distrusting of election results?

Answering this question is important because the health and practise of democracy is at the crux of the matter. If the American people do not believe their electoral system generates fair and true results, it takes away the mandate of the government more generally, and the President specifically. The electorate gives authority to rule by way of the electoral process. However, if the public do not believe that process is credible, it undermines the legitimacy of the government

(Enders et al., 2021), which is detrimental to democracy. A consequence of lack of legitimacy could be that people are less likely to obey the laws of the government, and are more likely to take action involving political violence (Otaola, 2017; Iyengar et al., 2012). This may seem far-fetched when talking about the contemporary United States, but the 2020 election proved to be filled with prime examples of acts and threats of political violence. There were nationwide concerns prior to the election concerning the response from Trump supporters should he lose (Byman, and Clarke, 2021). Of course, the Capital Riot on January 6, 2021 was a clear example of unlawful action in response to an election result, proving that sizeable and prominent acts of political violence can no longer be considered hypothetical when talking about the United States.

This research aims to help us better understand why the American electorate seems to be under the impression that election results are illegitimate. In the sections that follow, I examine the relationship between polarisation and trust in Presidential election results. If my hypotheses with respect to this relationship are supported - that polarisation would seem to be driving declines in trust - the results suggest a way to strengthen democracy going forward. If American democracy has been weakened due to polarisation, then we need to think carefully about potential ways to tackle such polarisation. I discuss some of these possibilities in the concluding sections.

There has been lots of research into the winner's effect of elections and perceptions of illegitimate elections (Anderson, 2001; Bower et al., 2015; Levy, 2020; Mochtak et al., 2021), however existing research is limited as it misses out an area of the problem. The winner's effect regarding electoral integrity is as follows: those that are more satisfied with the election outcome are more likely to view the election as fair and accurate than those who experience the feeling of being a loser in the election (Mochtak et al., 2021). The winner's effect does, without argument,

have an effect on people's perceptions of the election, but for the most part this seems to be a temporary consequence of specific elections, and not something that explains the cumulating distrust in election results year to year (Levy, 2020).

What the research does not consider - which I aim to in this project - is how respect in politics may contribute to distrust. When thinking about political respect there are a lots of interactions to consider: respect of the institutions; respect of the political actors; respect of political policies; respect for members of the opposing parties; politicians respecting the public; politicians respecting other politicians, etc. When looking at the deteriorating trust in election results in the American public, most of these come into play. If America is losing respect for important aspects of American politics, there must be consequences.

In focusing on and modelling affective polarisation, I look specifically at the respect that members of one party has for the other. Furthermore, I consider the loss of respect for Presidential legitimacy, or what scholars of institutions might call diffuse support (Caldeira, and Gibson, 1992, pg 4). Diffuse support refers to the ongoing support of an institution regardless of its output, as opposed to specific support which hinges upon support for output the institution is generating. If the electorate does not maintain a basic level of diffuse support for election processes, they will not respect a winning candidate in the absence of some kind of indisputable mandate. As just discussed, the consequences of that could be severe. Previous work has not given much attention to how affective polarisation - and its associated emotional responses towards out-parties - may contribute to such electoral consequences. I test how emotional responses towards an individual's out party contribute to the effect of increasing election distrust. Examining this could offer a possible answer to why there is cumulating distrust in elections, beyond the temporary nature of winner's effect.

II. Relevant Literature

Electoral Fairness

What determines perceptions of electoral fairness? There are two theories addressing this question: the causal argument and the competition argument. The causal argument goes as follows: the quality of the election processes itself justifies perceptions of election integrity. One study focuses on the United States' quality of elections state by state and finds that those states with the highest quality of election execution also have the highest rates of faith in the election results (Bowler, Shaun et al., 2015). The most crucial part of these scholars' results is "that large numbers of Americans remain sceptical of a key feature of their democratic process," (Bowler, Shaun et al., 2015). This conclusion - that a large part of the country does not trust their electoral system to produce accurate results that reflect the will of the people (Bowler, Shaun et al, 2015; Sances, and Stewart, 2015) - forms the basis for the main question of this thesis.

The competition argument, by contrast, argues that increased competition in elections stimulates thoughts about electoral reliability. This is because those involved are engaging more frequently and in depth with both parties' arguments, and have a better understanding of the other side's policies (Wolak, 2014). The increase in political sophistication that comes from more competitive elections can make people more respectful, but also heightens their emotional investment in such elections. Accordingly, the extra investment means that a winner's effect has a larger impact for those that are more knowledgeable (Wolak, 2014).

These two arguments can be applied to recent Presidential elections. The causal argument would suggest that if the quality of election procedures are declining, then people are distrusting of results. There is some possibility for this in the much-talked about issue of mail in voting but

most election procedures have not changed. Therefore, it is more likely that the electorate does not like the Presidents that are being produced by the system and are turning to blame the procedure (instead of the “inconceivable” fact that the people fairly chose these winning candidates).

The competition argument also seems to be an insufficient explanation in looking at the last few elections. The 2020 election was a very competitive election and increased people’s emotional investment in the results significantly. This is seen by turnout increasing by five-point-four percent from the last election, and being four-point-eight percent higher than the mean of the last five elections (Bureau, 2021). Furthermore, close to the election - in the first week of September - sixty-six percent of Americans were following political news, compared to only fifty-four percent that June; this suggests that political sophistication was increasing due to the the Presidential election (Mitchell, et al., 2020). However, this did not mean that people were satisfied and trusting in the result, as some of the research would suggest (Wolak, 2014). The electorate was may have been emotionally invested and more politically sophisticated but trust in the election still decreased (Laughlin, and Shelburne, 2021). To summarise, neither the competition nor casual arguments seem completely satisfactory. Therefore, there must be an alternative explanation driving the trend of confidence in Presidential elections.

As one possibility, it could be that Presidential candidates are just becoming more unlikable and that is why people distrust election results. The argument would go follows: people do not want these candidates, are disbelieving that such personalities could be elected President and therefore try and find fault with the election process. For example, in the past two elections, (Trump/Hillary, Trump/Biden) many people felt as though they were settling for a candidate, and twenty-five percent of registered voters that did not vote attributed their non-participation to

not liking either candidate (Lopez, and Flores, 2017). Christenson and Weisburg (2019) researched this theory, and looked at candidates' ratings on certain aspects of their personalities. Specifically, candidates were judged on four traits: competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy. With the exception of the 2016 Presidential election candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, the seven most recent Presidents were scored fairly similarly in ratings (see Appendix A). This is not to say all candidates were seen as competent, high in integrity etc., but each President had similar ratings to the last. Notably, candidates across this period were always rated more highly by their own parties than the out-party except in the anomalous 2016 election - in that year the candidates were not rated more highly by member of their own party; both candidates had similarly low ratings from each party. This tells us that with the exception of one election, Presidents in recent years have been relatively consistent in how they have been favoured/unfavoured by the electorate. Therefore, the data does not really support the hypothesis that Presidential candidates are just becoming more unlikable, and forces us to continue looking for explanations.

Of course, this does not mean that the rhetoric surrounding elections and candidates is not shifting in ways that might produce harmful outcomes. Elite rhetoric concerning the opposing party is becoming increasingly negative (Benkler et al, 2018), as is media rhetoric and partisanship rhetoric (Wilson et al., 2020). The 2016 election sorely sticks out in the public's memory for this, with pejoratives such as "crooked Hillary" (Andrews, 2017) and "the deplorables" (Roberts, 2021) being hard to forget, especially when coming from the Presidential candidates themselves (in what was meant to be) a serious Presidential debate. Some scholars have suggested that Presidential candidates are having to say more provoking statements to gain media attention (Robison, and Mullinix, 2015). The most liberal politicians in the House and

Senate receive three and two times as more coverage respectively, than more moderate politicians (Wagner, and Gruszczynski, 2017). It makes sense to think that this affects polarisation - as people listen to extreme positions of the other party, they become more inclined to support the more radical policies of their own party (Wilson et al., 2020). Hence, an unintentional side-effect of generating media business may be polarising the electorate (Benkler et al, 2018).

What may be Driving Affective Evaluations? One Explanation: Rhetoric and Strategic Coverage

That said, not all of media influence on polarisation comes from coverage of elites. In a report by Facebook covering the 2020 election, the company details how on the platform there were warnings displayed on one-hundred-and-eighty million pieces of information that were deemed to be incorrect by fact-checkers (Facebook, 2021). Why is social media concerning as it relates to affective polarisation? Congenial media effects - this refers to how a person is more likely to judge a news source as credible if the content agrees with the viewers pre-determined opinions (vs. a source they disagree with) (Kelly, 2018). This is another example of motivated reasoning that is having a damaging effect on the narrative of truth in politics. If on Facebook alone there are millions of pieces of fake news, the information does not have to be right or wrong to have an effect. Wilson et al.'s (2020) research suggests that the kind of news shared on Facebook - radical/extreme opinions, some of which are false or misleading will increase affective polarisation.

Listening and paying attention to rhetoric is vital as it fuels conspiracy thinking and anomie, and importantly for this research, encourages partisan sorting (Davis, and Dunway, 2016). With respect to conspiracy theories, research suggests that believing in conspiracy

theories, anomie, dark triad personality traits and denialism all contribute towards belief in voter fraud (Enders et al., 2021). It's not very surprising to see research suggesting that negative thoughts lead to negative outcomes. However, what is concerning is how much the media is contributing to widely spreading conspiracy theories (and the like) through strategic journalism (Bowler, Shaun et al, 2015; Zoizner et al., 2020); this could lead more people to believe voter fraud is happening. Strategic coverage refers to a journalistic style that uncovers campaign strategy and party motivation in order to create dramatic narratives - these make the campaign more entertaining and scandalous than news outlets simply following candidates and covering their speeches. Such coverage present politicians as manipulative, conniving and obsessed with winning instead of caring about people (Zoizner et al., 2020). Such a focus may lead to mistrust in politics generally, and mistrust in election processes specifically.

A Second Explanation: Partisan Sorting

Partisan sorting may also play an important part in this research. Sorting is highly correlated with the aforementioned winner's effect, and evaluations of electoral fairness (Christenson, and Weisburg, 2019). As noted previously, the winner's effect is a psychological response that comes from being emotionally invested in the election's outcome, and in feeling satisfaction or loss when the results are announced (Levy, 2020). The effect varies across individuals based on factors such as sorting and partisanship. The specific winner's effect regarding electoral integrity would go as follows: those satisfied with the election outcome (perhaps because their candidate won) would be more likely to view the election as fair and accurate than those experiencing the feeling of being a loser (Mochtak et al., 2021). It is important to recognise that the feeling of being a winner or loser does not necessarily hinge upon

whether an individual voted for the winner of the (Presidential) election. For example, in proportional democracies, some people feel winner's satisfaction if their party gains more representation than the last election they participated in (Anderson, and Tverdova, 2001). In the United States, years when Presidents are elected with a minority in Congress could mute feelings of winning.

Not only does satisfaction with election outcomes have a positive correlation with confidence in electoral processes, but the intensity of that correlation is dependent on whether someone is a strong partisan or a weak partisan (Levy, 2020). Thus, if a person is more invested in their party and the views they hold, they are more likely to have a stronger emotional response to the outcome and judge the accuracy of the election accordingly. Winning renders thoughts that the votes were not counted correctly to be less likely, and may actually have a positive relationship with thinking the votes were counted accurately (Sances, and Stewart, 2015). As the number of Americans that identify as Democrat or Republican has increased in the last fifty years (Iyengar et al., 2019), it is possible that the winner's effect is having an impact on a larger group of people - after all, more than forty percent of Americans believe that if their candidate loses the election, it is due to election fraud (Enders et al., 2021). It is important, however, to include the whole population when looking at the electorate, not just the partisans - as by some counts thirty-three percent of the registered population identifies as being independent (Gramlich, 2021). Again, all this suggests that the net declining confidence in elections we observe is likely not due solely or largely to winner's effects.

Another way to look at the electorate is by political sophistication. There is a common misconception that those with lower levels of political sophistication are more likely to vote emotionally rather than with reason and logic (Gibson et al., 2019). This proves to be untrue, as

those with higher political efficacy and comprehension may actually have more of an emotional reactions than those without such high investment. In looking at the electorate, there is also research on the internal biases that all people, not just partisans, hold concerning politics. Iyengar, and Westwood (2014) conducted American Brief Implicit Biases tests on 2000 participants through a Survey Sampling International Panel. They found that partisan biases are stronger than biases on race - something often deemed to be America's deepest bias - and that animosity towards the out-party is stronger than favouritism towards the in-party. These findings highlight the prevalence (and seriousness) of affective polarisation in the United States, as there are developed societal pressures pushing against race biases and gender biases, but few against partisan biases.

Instead, partisanship is actively encouraged by elites (Robinson and Mullinix, 2015; Wilson et al., 2020; Iyengar, and Westwood, 2014). That is, partisan biases may be becoming engrained in people to such an extent, demonstrated by career politicians, that there is discrimination against people that support an out-party (Iyengar, and Westwood, 2014), with people making other, seemingly non-political decisions (e.g., approval of marriage partners) based on party alignment. These hyper-partisan effects contribute to the overall aggregate levels of polarisation. If individuals are harbouring (perhaps unwittingly) animosity, affective polarisation becomes no longer just a concept but a basis for discrimination in the United States. Consequentially, it would be unwise to underestimate the significance of partisanship in society - any analysis must give careful attention to its effects.

III. Theory and Hypotheses

In the contemporary United States we see an increase in emotional responses, an increase in partisan sorting, and documented implicit biases based in partisanship. At the same time, there is a decrease in voter confidence in Presidential election results. In this thesis, I link the two, testing polarisation as the driving factor. More people are identifying as partisans and are more emotionally involved in elections, leaving more residual animosity during losing years. On top of that, affective polarisation is increasing (Iyengar et al., 2019). In 2016, ninety-one percent of Republicans viewed Democrats unfavourably, while eighty-six percent of Democrats viewed Republicans unfavourably (Benkler et al, 2018); this demonstrates the extent to which such feelings have become widespread. By Election Day of that same year, people were fifty percent to one-hundred-and-fifty percent more affectively polarised than one year prior (Sood, and Iyengar, 2016), exposing the emotional turmoil elections create.

Perceptions of electoral fraud are closely related to perceptions of candidates and parties (Sances, and Stewart, 2015; Mochtak et al., 2021). Factors driving perceptions of parties include political sophistication and partisanship; there is reason to think that both can also affect opinions regarding the integrity of Presidential elections (Anderson, and Tverdova, 2001; Levy, 2020; Wolak, 2014). At the individual level, those that are more partisan are more likely to question election integrity than those with weaker partisanship. However, those beliefs dissipate if the individuals' in-party wins the election (Levy, 2020). With these results it seems as though each year, perceptions of electoral results simply fluctuate with the winning party - a winners effect determines that year's impressions of electoral integrity, consistent with party identification. The past six Presidential administrations in the United States interchanged between being Republican

and Democrat (H.W. Bush, Clinton, W. Bush, Obama, Trump, Biden), so theoretically there should be no net impact on the public's assessment of electoral integrity. However, despite this logic, overall perceptions of the accuracy of Presidential election results have declined across this period (Sances, and Stewart, 2015). According to the Gallup World Poll, when asked if they have confidence in the honesty of elections in the United States, the percentage of the American public that answered 'no' rose from forty-seven percent in 2006 to sixty-nine percent in 2016. Additionally, those answering 'yes' fell from fifty-two to thirty percent in regards to those same years. Furthermore, when asked about their confidence that the votes would be counted accurately in the upcoming election, those saying they were 'very confident' fell from seventy-four percent in 2004 to sixty-six percent in 2016 (McCarthy, and Clifton, 2016). Full trends across these years can be seen in the World Gallup graphs in Appendix A.

Political scientist Morris Levy (2020) offers an explanation - he finds that "partisan conflict over integrity of elections may tend to expand and broaden in scope, with distrust solidifying rather than fluctuating or reverting to the mean," (pg. 7). Fundamentally, the idea is that every time one's party loses an election, some residual feeling of distrust remains, and with both parties having a fair share of holding government in recent years, the entirety of the American public is accumulating skepticism.

Why is mistrust in election results increasing? Evidently, the answer cannot simply be a winner's effect. However, there is an element of this that would seem to still be important: partisanship. If people are becoming more partisan, then the disappointment of losing an election - the skepticism that remains, per Levy (2020) - is also increasing, and the emotional impact will be greater (Benkler et al, 2018). Hence, if the entire population is becoming more polarised, the distrust will be greater. Formally, this is expressed by the following central hypothesis:

H1: In looking at American adults, those scoring higher in affective polarisation are more likely to have lower confidence in Presidential election results than those scoring lower in affective polarisation.

Operationalising Key Variables

In this thesis, polarisation is operationalised as affective polarisation, and by affective polarisation I refer to positive feelings towards the in-party and the feelings of animosity towards those that identify with the out-party. Scholars have debated how to best measure affective polarisation, sometimes basing it on overall collective feelings of one party-towards the other (Druckman, and Levendusky, 2018; Iyengar, Shanto et al., 2012). With affective polarisation, the idea is to focus less on specific issues, and more on the generalisations and feelings that often accompany them. For example, pro-life opinions on abortion are commonly associated with the Republican Party, while pro-choice opinions are typically attributed to the Democratic Party. With a process of affective polarisation, people start to make generalisations: all Republicans are pro-life and all Democrats are pro-choice. These generalisations then become associated with feelings towards out-groups. That is, Republicans view all Democrats are pro-choice, with no leeway; they see people as farther away from them on the political spectrum, and feelings of animosity accompany such generalisations (and vice versa for Democrats' feelings towards Republicans).

Of course not every Democrat (Republican) is pro-choice (pro-life). However, affective polarisation focuses on the general opinions - and accompanying feelings - that produce a perceived gap between parties; individuals perceive more distance between the in-party and the out-party. The distinction here is vital as while affective polarisation is increasing, with incivility

and intolerance increasing towards the out-party, ideological polarisation - the public's actual positions on issues - may not necessarily be increasing (Benkler et al., 2018). Put differently, affective polarisation is more about perceived ideological polarisation, not genuine ideological polarisation.

Affective polarisation is alarming because it is associated with biases. And, as we have seen with many biases, discrimination crops up when people view others as out-groups. Partisan biases are no exception, and have been shown to be engrained within us, subconsciously driving our decision making (Iyengar, and Westwood, 2014). These biases have been linked to decreasing respect for out-partisans and elites, including the President that gets elected from the out-party. With affective polarisation people believe the other candidate is so different from them and their side that they disbelieve that the candidate could be legitimately elected. Thus, I believe they blame the process (and distrust the results) as they can't comprehend the possibility of people agreeing with the elected President's policy ideas, and supporting "the other side."

IV. Data and Methods

In order to test my hypothesis about the relationship between affective polarisation and election legitimacy, I gather and analyse data from the American National Election Study, ANES (“Data Center - ANES | American National Election Studies”) and the Colorado Political Climate Survey, or CPC (Sokhey, 2021). The ANES data were collected around the 2012, 2016, and 2020 presidential elections; the CPC data were collected around the 2021 Colorado elections. Both studies survey samples of the public, and include questions tapping into affective polarisation and opinions on fairness and legitimacy.

ANES Data and Analysis

The American National Election Survey aims to analyse American elections through the use of surveys administered to American citizens over the age of 18 years old. Since 1948, the ANES has been distributed every Presidential election year, with one interview conducted before Election Day, and a second conducted after Election Day. I will be using the pre- and post-election surveys from the years 2012, 2016 and 2020 to test my hypothesis about affective polarisation and trust in elections. Short summaries of the main items used from each of these surveys appear below:

2020 ANES Variables (4866 observations used)

- (Main) Independent Variables
 - How would you rate the Democratic Party? (0-100 scale)
 - How would you rate the Republican Party? (0-100 scale)
 - Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as Democrat, Republican, an independent or what?

- Dependent Variables

In your view, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections: votes are counted fairly? ((1) all of the time, most of the time, about half of the time, some if the time, (5) never)

2016 ANES Variables (2278 observations used)

- (Main) Independent Variables

- How would you rate the Democratic Party? (0-100 scale)
- How would you rate the Republican Party? (0-100 scale)
- Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as Democrat, Republican, an independent or what?

- Dependent Variables

In your view, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections: votes are counted fairly? ((1) all of the time, most of the time, about half of the time, some if the time, (5) never)

2012 ANES Variables (3468 observations used)

- (Main) Independent Variables

- How would you rate the Democratic Party? (0-100 scale)
- How would you rate the Republican Party? (0-100 scale)
- Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as Democrat, Republican, an independent or what?

- Dependent Variables

- In your view, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections: votes are counted fairly? ((1) very often, fairly often, not often, (4) not at all often)

Construction of the Key Independent Variable; ANES

The key independent variable is created by taking the absolute value of the rating of a respondent's in party minus the out party, based on their self-identified party identification. This model has been used in previous papers to measure affective polarisation (Iyengar, Shanto et al.,

2012). As affective polarisation is defined as the feeling of animosity from the in-party towards the out-party, taking into account the respondents' self-identified partisanship is necessary. Due to this, I also necessarily disregard respondents who claim they're independents (or "others"); such individuals would not necessarily be affectively polarised as they do not have an identified in-party or out-party. Higher values on my measure indicate higher affective polarisation, as this was generated by taking the difference. If the respondent scores both parties similarly, the difference is smaller and we see a lower value.

Dependent Variables: ANES

I model the dependent variable as a discrete variable to determine those who do trust elections and those who do not. I do this as I am interested in any level of distrust; the amount of distrust is not essential to this research, but determining what predicts levels of distrust would be a good basis for more research moving forwards. For the years 2020 and 2016, the value 0 includes those who believe the votes are counted "all of the time," "most of the time," and "about half the time," while the value 1 indicates responses of "some of the time" and "never." Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents' answers to the question of electoral trust.

Table 1

Distribution of Dependent Variable Respondent Answers: 2016 and 2020

	1. All of the time	2. Most of the time	3. About half of the time	4. Some of the time	5. Never
2020	1448	2024	450	658	286
2016	440	1277	274	205	82

The decision to include "about half the time" on the trust side in creating a dichotomous measure is motivated by the fact that "about half of the time" is in the centre of the response options provided. It does not convey complete confidence, but essentially, it implies some

amount of trust. I also view this choice as a cautious one in that I am putting more respondents in the "trust" side of my analysis.

For 2012, the question of trust only had four options that can be split clearly into “trust” and “distrust” categories. The spread for the 2012 dataset is summarised in this table.

Table 2

Distribution of Dependent Variable Respondent Answers: 2012

	1. Very often	2. Fairly often	3. Not often	4. Not at all often
2012	1142	1731	433	162

Control Variables: ANES

Using these data, I will also control for age, race, sex, education and party identification. Race and sex will be modelled as dummy variables, with the rest being continuous measures. Why control for these factors? I need to examine whether any relationship between polarisation and opinion on election legitimacy remains after taking these things into account. Age may have an effect on polarisation and a relationship with opinion on elections; older generations may have higher levels of polarisation than the younger generations due to the experiences with each party (Desilver, 2021). Race also has to be controlled for based on party preferences that tend to correlate with race and the intense emotions for/against parties (perhaps due to racial biases). Non-white voters make up forty percent of Democratic voters, but less than a fifth of Republican voters (Gramlich, 2021); not controlling for this would skew the results to regarding voter confidence in Presidential elections.

Other factors must be accounted for as well. For example, gender must be controlled for as there are differences between the parties in terms of perceptions and support from female and male identifying members of the public (Igielnik, 2021). Likewise, formal education shows a

stark divide in how people judge election accuracy; forty-eight percent of Republicans with a college education believe the election in 2020 was illegitimate, and that percentage rises to seventy-five percent if you take away that college education ("Infographic: Stark Difference In Educated Republican Vote Trust"). By controlling for party and education, I account for the relationship between these factors and affective polarisation, and between these factors and opinions on election accuracy. By doing so, I am able to get an assessment of the true relationship between election confidence and "raw" polarisation.

Assumptions: ANES Analysis

I make a series of assumptions in my analysis. Primarily, I assume that there are no other variables nor controls that are missing that would change or affect the results. Based on previous research, the mentioned controls are likely to be the main variables affecting trust in the vote count. Additionally, I make the assumption that we can trust the ANES data to accurately report the public's opinion - that respondents are being honest and are not being pressured to respond in a certain way by the survey, by the questions asked, or by the organisation that runs the survey.

Colorado Data and Analysis

The Colorado Political Climate (CPC) Survey includes original items that were administered to a representative sample of the Colorado adult population in the autumn of 2021 by the survey company YouGov. The survey is conducted annually by Dr. Anand Sokhey, in conjunction with the American Politics Research Lab in the department of political science, and is sponsored by the APRL lab/the University of Colorado at Boulder. I will be using the Fall, 2021 survey data as it contains original items on election legitimacy and a different way of

getting at affective polarisation. After meeting with Dr. Sokhey in Fall 2021, I was able to place original items on the survey that we developed together. While the ANES polarisation items use feelings towards the parties, the CPC items are more focused more on approval/disapproval of elites. While the ANES data allow me to evaluate my theory as it applies to the broader United States, the CPC data allow me to look at whether any relationships hold up with different measures and in the context of a non-Presidential election year.

2021 CPC Variables (408 observations used)

- Independent Variables
 - How much do you approve or disapprove of the way each of the following is handling their job? ((1) strongly approve, approve, disapprove, strongly disapprove (5) not sure)
 - President Joe Biden
 - Governor Jared Polis
 - How much do you approve or disapprove of the way that each of the following has handled the COVID-19 pandemic? ((1) strongly approve, approve, disapprove, strongly disapprove (5) not sure)
 - President Joe Biden
 - Governor Jared Polis
 - How often do you trust the information provided to you about COVID-19 from each of the following? ((1) always, most of the time, about half of the time, rarely (5) never)
 - President Joe Biden
 - Governor Jared Polis
- Dependent Variables
 - How much do you agree with each of the following statements about the upcoming elections? ((1) strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree (5) not sure)
 - Elections across the country will be conducted fairly and accurately
 - Elections in America reflect the will of the American people
 - Elections in Colorado will be conducted fairly and accurately
 - Elections in Colorado reflect the will of Coloradans

Construction of Key Independent Variable: CPC

I calculate the independent variable - affective polarisation - in the CPC by more general measures of approval and trust rather than an absolute value of feeling thermometers. In Druckman and Levendusky's (2018) research, they find that determining affective polarisation by measuring traits of elites gives an accurate representation of affective polarisation. In the sample of Coloradans, we asked about the handling of leaders' jobs and of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic is a good measure of trust in the elites, as the way events like pandemics play out can be largely attributed to the actions of leaders (or at least the perspective of the public on this is important). The severity of the COVID-19 crisis was handled differently in all countries - for example, compare the measures implemented in New Zealand and Italy.

I created an index, combining approval on all these items. The average of the responses of the questions on elites is used to create a general affective polarisation score; this measure is originally scaled, from 0-1, but then rescaled from 0-100 to more closely mirror the range of the index used in the ANES data.

Dependent Variables: CPC

The dependent variables in these data also ask about how elections will be conducted, and more specifically to this research, whether they will be conducted “accurately.” Such wording (in the ANES, for example) suggests that the votes are counted accurately, but in the CPC this is asked explicitly. For these results I used the question specifically looking at national elections to look at trust in the Presidential elections. But perhaps individuals trust their own state but not nationwide elections? To look at this further, I use the questions regarding Colorado elections to find comparative results that are displayed in Appendix C.

Respondents answering “not sure” are discounted from the regression as they do not give a committed opinion on the fairness of the election results (the distribution for the rest of the answers are displayed in Table 3). The average of the responses for each question are taken, and the items scale from 0-1 (as with the items for the independent variable).

Table 3

Distribution of Dependent Variable Respondent Answers: 2021

	1.Strongly Agree	2. Agree	3. Disagree	4. Strongly Disagree
2021	96	145	103	64

Why else is the Colorado data useful? The CPC gives me a look at an “off” election year with no Presidential campaigns. There is no elite rhetoric surrounding the vote count during this year, unlike that which was prominent in 2012, 2016 and 2020. The CPC data help gauge public perceptions without external narratives coming from Presidential campaigns.

Control Variables: CPC

In these data I use the same controls of sex, age, race, education and party identification as in the ANES analyses. These control variables are included for the same reasons.

Assumptions: CPC Analysis

As with the ANES data, I assume that people are responding honestly, and that I have controlled for essential variables which could lead to misleading results.

V. Results

ANES Results

Before testing the relationship between affective polarisation and election trust with controls, the bivariate regressions in Table 4 examine the presence and significance of the initial relationship. The most direct implication of these results is that affective polarisation does indeed have a statistically significant effect on confidence in the accuracy of the US Presidential election results. Further, the relationship is in the hypothesised direction in all three years.

Table 4

Affective Polarization is a Significant Predictor of Electoral Confidence in 3 Elections

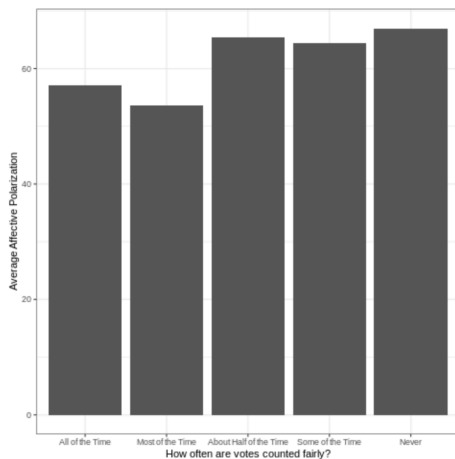
		Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr (> t)	Signif. Code
2020	Intercept	-1.773	0.212	-8.351	1.14E-14	***
	Affective Polarisation	0.007	0.001	4.062	6.99E-05	***
2016	Intercept	-2.105	0.173	-12.132	<2e-16	***
	Affective Polarisation	0.005	0.002	1.996	0.046	*
2012	Intercept	-1.811	0.893	-2.028	0.051	.
	Affective Polarisation	0.005	0.002	2.431	0.021	*

Signif. Codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1

After finding that affective polarisation has a significant relationship with election confidence on its own, I looked to see if mean affective polarisation varied across the answers of the dependent variable (see Histograms 1,2,3). The results were as expected with regards to the hypothesis; the groups that had less trust that the votes were counted accurately had higher affective polarisation scores. In Appendix B, I present additional histograms are split results up by party; they demonstrate the difference in means and distribution between the Democratic and Republican parties. The graphs are basically the same for both parties, but suggest that the Democrats were more affectively polarised than the Republicans.

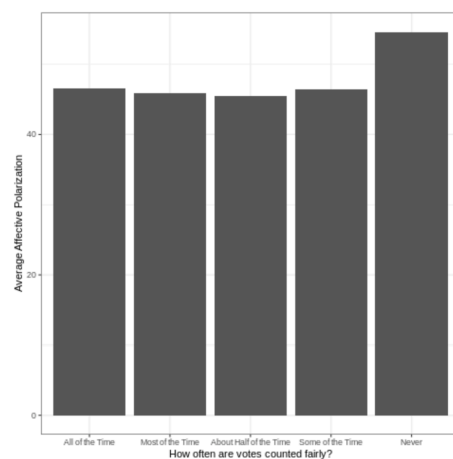
Histogram 1

2020 Average Affective Polarisation by Trust Level



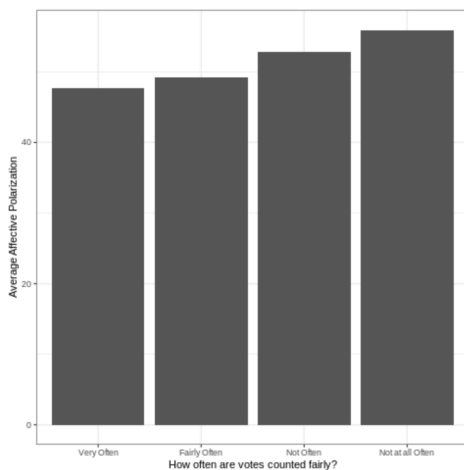
Histogram 2

2016 Average Affective Polarisation by Trust Level



Histogram 3

2012 Average Affective Polarisation by Trust Level



Full Specification Regressions (Additional Controls): ANES

The previous results demonstrate some initial support for the hypothesis; those with higher levels of affective polarisation have higher levels of distrust in the Presidential election than those with lower levels of affective polarisation. Tables 5, 6 and 7 display results from regression specifications that control for additional variables. Tables 5 and 7 provide the estimates for years 2020 and 2012 – they show that the coefficient for affective polarisation is significant at the 0.01 and 0.05 levels, respectively. While Table 6 - displaying estimates for the year 2016 - does not show a significant value for affective polarisation after the inclusion of control variables, it is worth noting that the estimate is still positive, indicating a relationship consistent with my hypothesis (even if not statistically significant).

Table 5

2020 Full Specification Regression - Logit Expectations

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t)	Signif.
Intercept	-3.483	0.556	-6.266	2.42E-09	***
Affective Polarisation	0.006	0.002	2.992	0.003	**
Party Identification	2.061	0.187	11.019	< 2e-16	***
Education	-0.376	0.059	-6.407	1.14E-09	***
Race: Black	0.429	0.266	1.619	0.107	
Race: Asian, Native Hawaiian	0.386	0.216	1.791	0.075	.
Race: Native American, Alaska Native	-0.454	0.453	-1.003	0.317	
Race: Hispanic	0.333	0.607	0.548	0.584	
Race: Other, Non-hispanic	0.458	0.421	1.089	0.278	
Age	-0.015	0.003	-4.342	2.29E-05	***
Sex: Female	0.365	0.121	3.010	0.003	**

Table 6

2016 Full Specification Regression - Logit Expectations

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t)	Signif.
Intercept	-0.740	0.669	-1.105	0.269	
Affective Polarisation	0.004	0.003	1.333	0.183	
Party Identification	-0.317	0.204	-1.555	0.120	
Education	-0.024	0.043	-0.547	0.585	
Race: Black	1.405	0.229	6.113	2.36E-09	***
Race: Asian, Native Hawaiian	0.182	0.499	0.365	0.715	
Race: Native American, Alaska Native	1.716	0.795	2.157	0.032	*
Race: Hispanic	0.673	0.253	2.661	0.008	**
Race: Other, Non-hispanic	0.891	0.363	2.456	0.015	*
Age	-0.022	0.005	-4.315	2.02E-05	***
Sex: Females	0.149111	0.302	0.494	0.621	

Table 7

2012 Full Specification Regression - Logit Expectations

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t)	Signif.
Intercept	-1.335	0.817	-1.633	0.118	
Affective Polarisation	0.006	0.002	2.590	0.018	*
Party Identification	0.666	0.192	3.467	0.002	**
Education	-0.461	0.084	-5.491	2.25E-05	***
Race: Black	-0.041	0.217	-0.188	0.852	
Race: Asian, Native Hawaiian	0.637	0.338	1.883	0.074	.
Race: Native American, Alaska Native	-1.242	0.597	-2.081	0.050	.
Race: Hispanic	0.197	0.172	1.144	0.266	
Race: Other, Non-hispanic	0.680	0.442	1.540	0.139	
Age	-0.009	0.004	-2.377	0.027	*
Sex: Females	0.284	0.097	2.933	0.008	**

2016 is an interesting case to look at as the election candidates themselves were so polarising. After adding controls, affective polarisation falls from significance in the 2016 model. Why? As noted previously, the major party candidates were both very unpopular in 2016, and neither was an incumbent. Thus, if the measure of affective polarisation is based on feelings, and given talk about Russian interference in the election (Trump's surprise victory), it makes sense to think that the relationship between affective polarisation and election confidence became muddled. Note too that the relationship of party identification and election confidence reversed in 2016, when the Democrats lost (vs. 2012 and 2020, when the Republicans lost), and that the effect of education also disappeared.

By contrast, in 2020 we see affective polarisation maintain significance, but we also see an estimate for party identification that is very large. Given how the results were presented by elites in that year - most notably Donald Trump - it seems understandable that we see a substantial party identification effect (as well as one for education, as mentioned previously). Trump contested the results, claimed the election was stolen, and spread a narrative of false election results, making Republicans more distrusting of the results, but also strengthening party effects between 2016 and 2020 with four years of rhetoric.

CPC Results

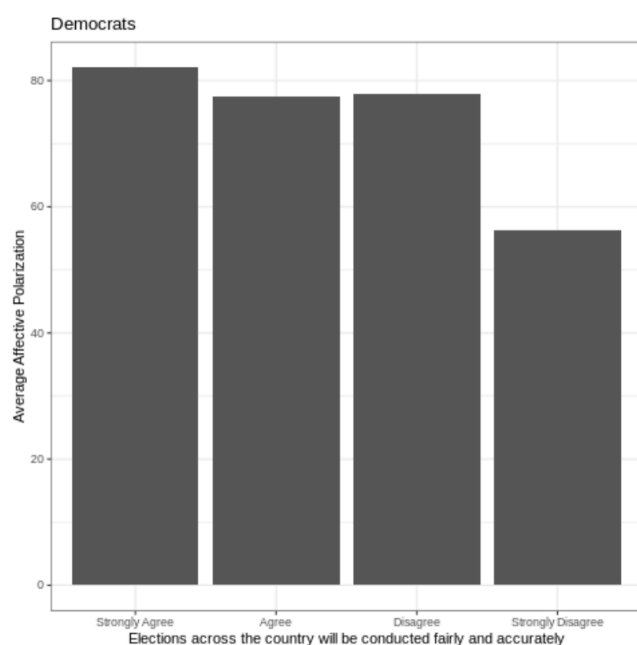
The Colorado Political Climate Survey data add an additional perspective to this study, testing the robustness of my hypothesis. As noted, these data switch from a nation-wide study to a state-wide one, losing the benefit of a larger, more representative study of the American public. However, the CPC gains value as a study that is even more recent, and that provides the opportunity for original data. Specifically, putting questions on the CPC gave me the opportunity to ask multiple questions from different angles, approaching affective polarisation from a perspective of elites. Druckman and Levendusky (2019) note that when people are asked about their feelings towards the other party, they typically first think of the elites of that party. This is what I am tapping into with the CPC measures – affective polarisation based on political elites, and how that may affect confidence in accurate elections.

The items on the CPC do pose challenges (but also opportunities) in other ways. In asking Coloradans to give opinions on elites, I noted that both the federal executive branch (the Presidency) and the Colorado executive branch (the Governorship) are currently held by Democrats. Thus, only Democratic leaders are used in the questions. However, by using information about both the Governor and the President – multiple levels – we get additional perspectives on how people feel about in-parties and out-parties. If we get similar results using this measure, and the slightly different dependent variables, then it will speak to the robustness of the support for my hypothesis.

As shown in the histograms in Figures 4 and 5, Democrats that trust the election results across the country score higher on the measure of polarisation than those who do not trust the election results; we see the opposite trend for the Republicans.¹ Due to the fact that the results break in opposite ways based on party, it seems appropriate to model them using an interaction term between polarisation and party identification.

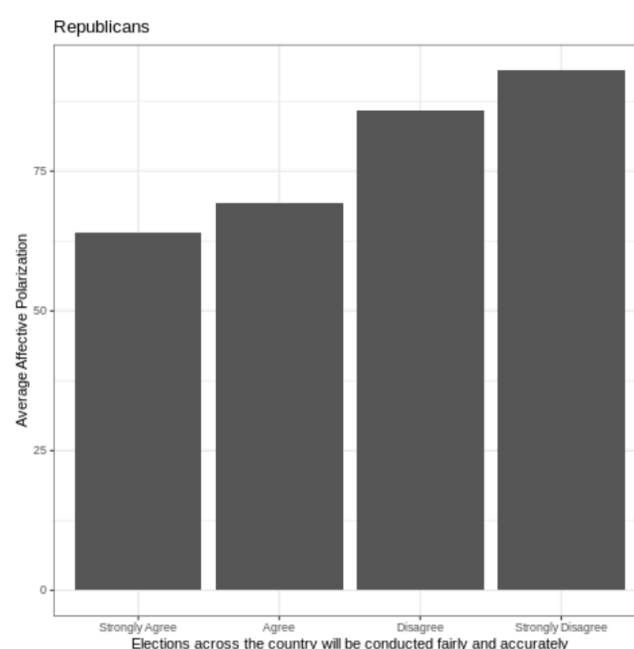
Histogram 4

Democrats: Polarisation and Trust



Histogram

Republican: Polarisation and Trust



The full specification for this logit regression shows that affective polarisation itself has a significant effect, as does party identification (with Republicans being more likely to distrust the election). Importantly, the coefficient on the interaction term between affective polarisation and party identification is significant, indicating that the relationship between affective polarisation and trusting the elections is conditional on party identification.

¹ The same model is demonstrated in Appendix C using a dependent variable based on trust in Colorado elections.

Table 8

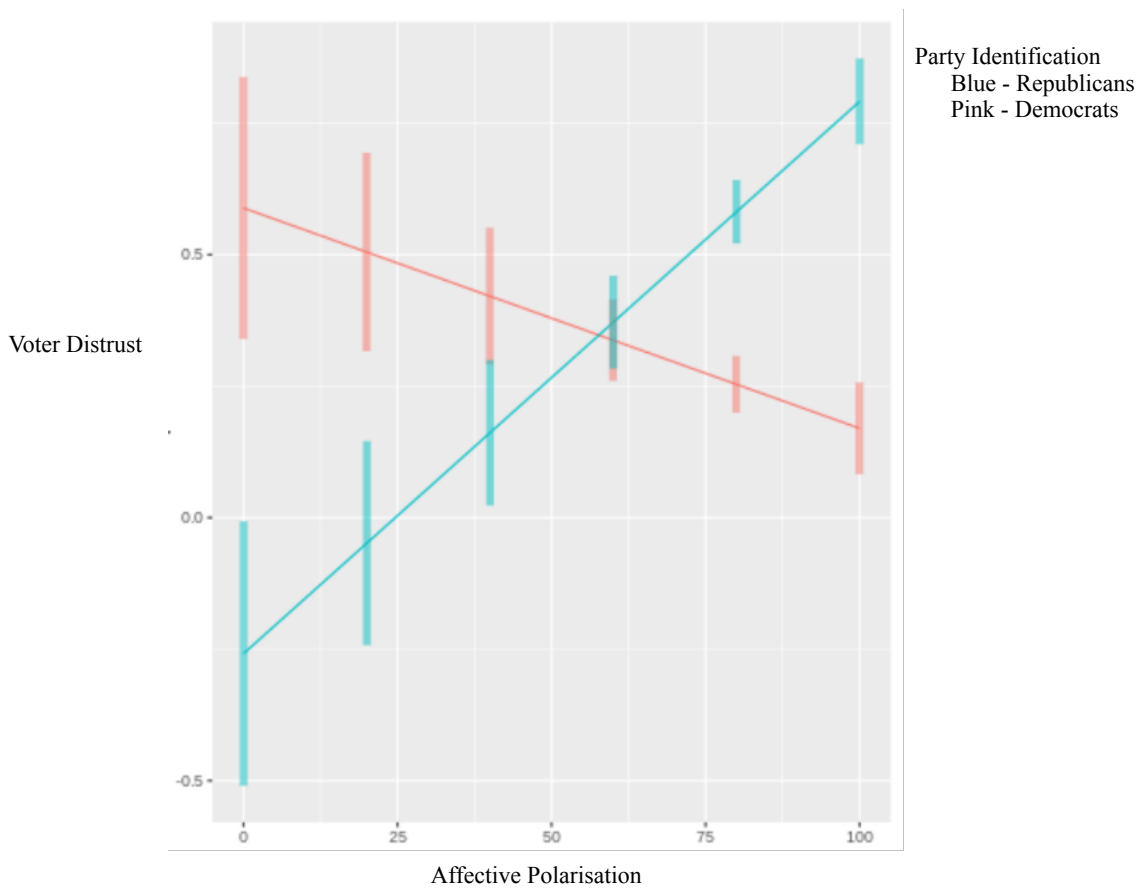
CPC Full Specification Regression

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value
Intercept	6.178	2.084	-2.511
Affective Polarisation	-0.121	0.0399	-3.055
Party Identification	-5.705	1.502	-3.799
Education	0.046	0.095	0.481
Race: Black	-0.261	0.697	-0.374
Race: Hispanic	-0.813	0.183	-4.453
Race: Asian	0.638	1.050	0.607
Race: Native American	0.303	1.333	0.277
Race: Two or more Races	0.525	0.462	1.136
Race: Other	-13.110	1.424	-9.210
Race: Middle Eastern	-13.582	1.428	-9.513
Age	0.012	0.009	1.367
Gender: Females	0.486	0.246	1.977
Affective Polarisation: Party Identification	-0.090	0.026	-3.543

The interaction term being significant implies that affective polarisation influencing election confidence is conditional on party identification, and vice versa (with party identification's effect on confidence being conditional on affective polarisation). When plotting the interaction term - this time from just a simple linear model (vs. the logit produced in the table above) - we can see that no confidence intervals overlap other than at the intersection, which is

close to the midpoint of affective polarisation. This shows a clear interaction term - for Democrats in Colorado in 2021, those with stronger affective polarisation are less likely to say that they distrust the elections. This highlights the relationship between one's candidate winning *and* affective polarisation. Republicans, however, are much more likely to say that they distrust national election results as they become more affectively polarised.

CPC Interaction Plot Showing Significant Interaction Term between Affective Polarisation and Party Identification



VI. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that affective polarisation among the public has some extent of influence on an individual's trust in the accuracy of the election results. After testing both unspecified affective polarisation - using party rating scores in multiple years of the ANES - and to more specific polarisation scores - based on party elites in a sample of Coloradans - I find consistent, significant results. My findings suggest that trust in elections is not merely based on the system that operates elections (or one's party winning or losing), but part of it can also be rooted in feelings towards an individual's out-party.

James Madison warned upon the creation of the United States' political system to be wary of factions and how they can work against the good of democracy - we are seeing the effects of this today. However, this research possibly gives us solutions to improving democracy within the United States and restoring legitimacy when affective polarisation is weakening the trust in the democratic foundations. Given the relationship between affective polarisation and trust in the election, we might turn our attention to ways we can address the problem. There would be three possible logical ways to tackle affective polarisation: politicians would need to revert rhetorically back towards the middle of the political spectrum; the media should encourage and demonstrate civil discourse; and Congress should promote bipartisanship in order for it to relate back to the electorate (based on information in Wilson, et al. (2020)). Only then can faith can be restored in the electoral process and elected officials - including Presidents - can continue to rule with a mandate.

Furthermore, while my work has been focused on the United States, there are implications for new, consolidating democracies. America is the oldest democracy in the world

so it must be considered what happens if democracy turns out to be unsustainable (Mochtak et al, 2021). Within democracy, there could be built in mechanisms, such as factions and affective polarisation, that corrupt the sustainability and legitimacy of democracy from the inside out. Most of the western world is built upon the principle that some type of democracy is the best political system, the most fair and the most just. While it may not be corruption from an individual, affective polarisation could have the potential to undermine democratic elections. What does this mean for those countries that adopted democracy? Is there a better system? Alternatively, this could a phenomenon that is strictly limited to America due to the size of its federalism and the scope of people that it has to accommodate. Then, it would not speak to democracy around the world, but merely as a size restriction to what democracy works for.

Limitations of the research lie in within the time frame of the surveys used. This issue of election confidence is only starting to appear on surveys due to the spotlight it has gained through elite rhetoric. While the respondent pool for the ANES data is large, it only spans across the last three elections, two of which were won by Democrats. By measuring more elections and seeing fluctuations of parties in and out of the executive branch, you could see if years Republicans won (without Trump as a candidate) are significant or strictly a trend we see during Democrat candidate victories.

Future research would benefit from tracking these trends for a longer period of time and measuring the trends of affective polarisation and confidence in US Presidential elections. Additionally, it would be interesting to look at how this effect changes at different levels of government. Does it apply more to Presidential elections than state elections? When looking at Appendix C, we can start to gauge an idea on the comparison between the two. As far as experiments go, it would be interesting to see what specific mechanism of affective polarisation

lead to decreased trust in elections. Is it strong support for their own party or distaste for the other party? Does the media add to this or is it more due to the elites?

By looking at the relationship between affective polarisation and confidence in the accuracy of elections, we see a new trend emerging that is damaging to governmental legitimacy. In order to restore the public's confidence in the Presidency - as well as democratic functioning more generally - there must be an effort by all political actors to highlight the negative consequences of affective polarisation and to combat its effects.

Appendix A

Voter Confidence in the Accuracy of the Vote Count 2000-2012, (Sances, and Stewart, 2015).

President Candidate Personality Characteristic Ratings, (Christenson, and Weisberg, 2019)

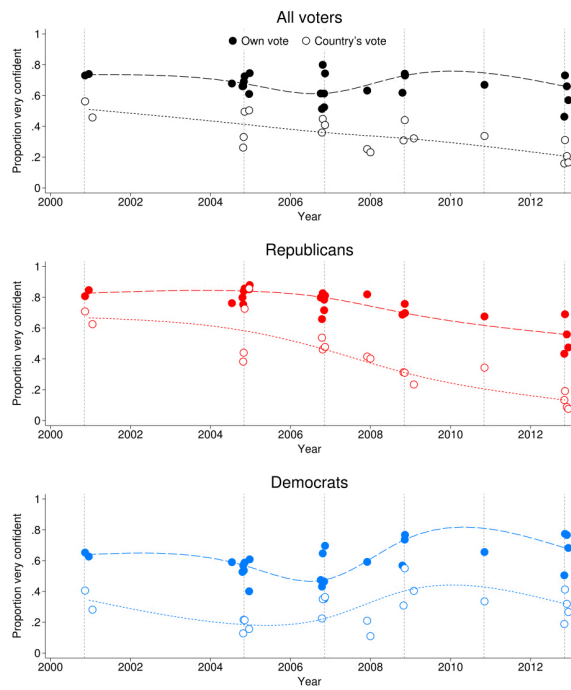


Fig. 1. Voter confidence in the accuracy of the vote count, 2000-2012.

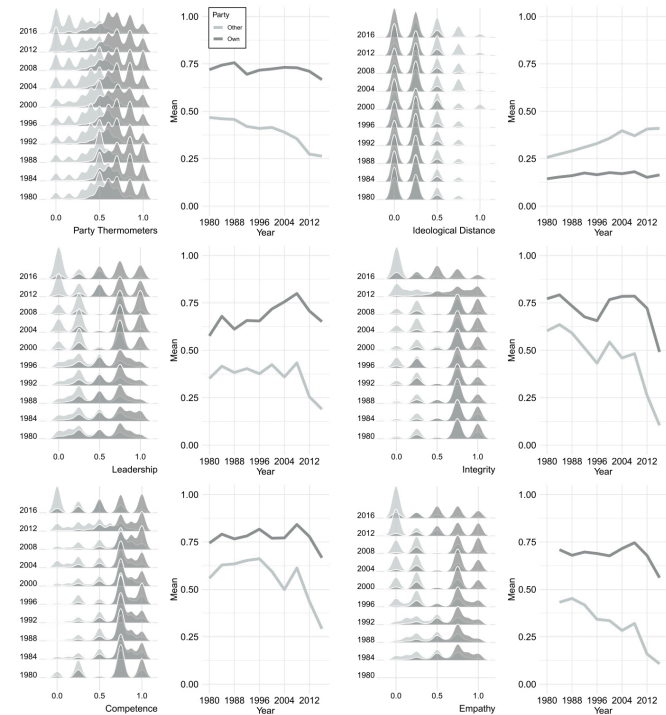
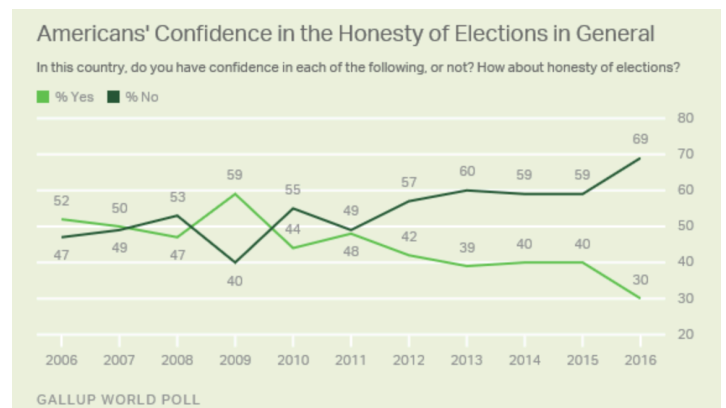
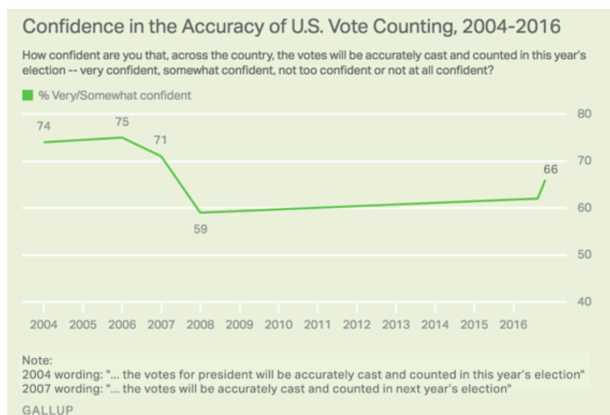
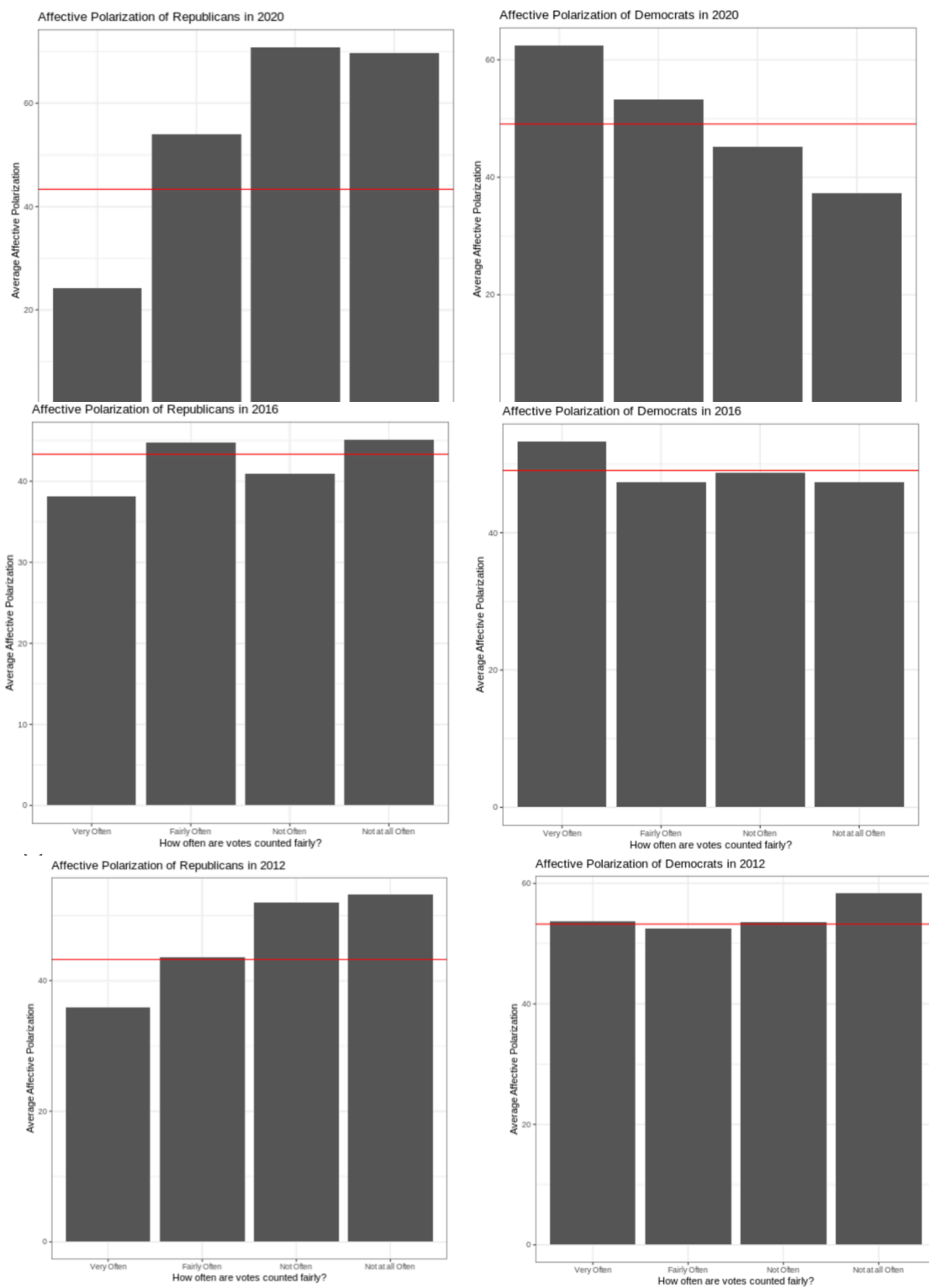


Fig. 2. Key covariate distributions & means by year.

Gallup World Poll, Election Honesty and Accuracy Measures (McCarty, and Clifton, 2016)



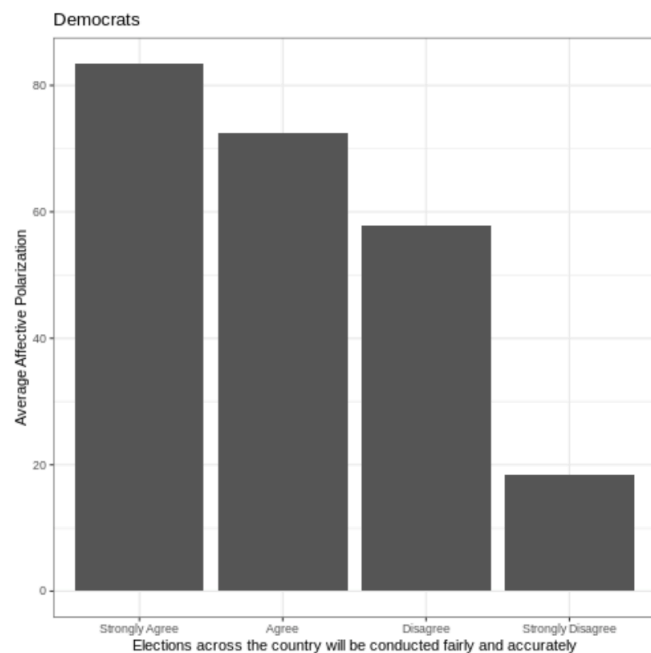
Appendix B



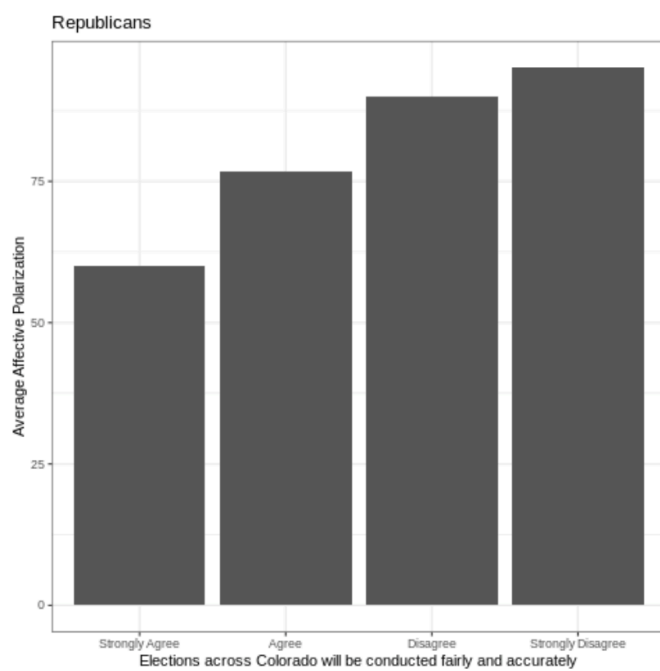
Appendix C

Colorado Public Affective Polarisation and Trust Based On Political Party

Democrats:



Republicans:



CPC Full Specification for Trust In Colorado Election Results

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value
Intercept	10.090	2.903	3.475
Affective Polarisation	-0.238	0.047	-5.019
Party Identification	-8.061	1.465	-5.502
Education	0.011	0.085	0.124
Race: Black	0.846	1.351	0.627
Race: Hispanic	-0.681	0.638	-1.066
Age	-0.003	0.009	-0.320
Gender: Females	0.449	0.207	2.171
Affective Polarisation: Party Identification	0.154	0.029	5.324

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