Common Myths of American Elections

Based on the work of Bruce E. Cain and Benjamin Ginsberg

"Restoring Confidence in American Elections," a paper by by Bruce E. Cain and Benjamin Ginsberg, provides a brief overview of the evolution of US election disputes, reviews some common myths and misunderstandings that pervade the public debate on elections, and proposes a series of improvements that can help restore confidence in the integrity and fairness of elections.

Myth 1: **US citizens have lost faith in the American electoral process.**

MIT Election Lab data show that most voters have high confidence in their own locality's (and even state's) voting processes versus those in other states or the nation as a whole. In other words, the lack of confidence in the national electoral system is more influenced by what some voters read and watch than by what they experience.

It is true that there is a significant portion of voters (more than 30 percent) who tell pollsters they are not sure that election results will be accurate, despite the absence of any evidence that irregularities or fraud may have changed any election's results. That is too high a proportion to be sustainable in a democracy. To reach those in that group who might be persuadable, a public education campaign could explain the safeguards in the election system that ensure an accurate count. It is also incumbent upon election officials to make the electoral system transparent and to allow election skeptics an opportunity to inspect the process of casting and counting ballots.

Myth 2: **Easing or enhancing rules about voting credentials favors one party over the other.**

Lowering barriers to entry into the electorate has led some voters to believe voter impersonation is easier to accomplish. There are isolated instances in every election cycle of individuals voting fraudulently or mistakenly. The Heritage Foundation Election Database, for instance, keeps tabs of "recent proven instances of election fraud," although the number of actual cases is small. These limited examples feed suspicions of fraud.

Neither large-scale "ballot integrity" or "voter protection" programs by political entities or academic studies have yet to find much beyond scattered individual violations much less any large, coordinated fraud efforts. Short of a coordinated effort by political operatives, it is implausible that duplicate voting by individuals could change the outcome of a congressional or presidential election; the odds of a person's vote being determinative of an election outcome are infinitesimally small. Electoral secrets are particularly hard to keep due to the intense scrutiny by rivals and the media.

Nonetheless, the two major political parties have been in pitched battles in recent years over laws in individual states meant to combat either voter fraud or voter suppression. Recent scholarship shows that these legislative changes have little real impact on the number of votes either party receives, although studies do show that these contested issues have served to lower voter confidence in elections.

Myth 3: **Election machines contribute to fraud and stolen elections.**

Most areas of the country have moved to a system in which ballots are filled out by hand and then tabulated by machine. Others have voters make their selections directly on machines, with a paper-trail ballot generated in case of a recount or contest. Both systems enable a hand count of the physical ballots to check the machine

count. There are many additional measures to ensure that the totals are accurate. However, the MIT Lab has found that many voters simply do not know that these safeguards are in place.

While voting technology vulnerabilities exist, actual cases of machine-aided fraud impacting outcomes are rare. Improved machines with paper trails and audits have reduced risks of election fraud. Much of the skepticism stems from unproven anecdotes and conspiracy theories that circulate among the voting public.

Myth 4: **Higher participation consistently and significantly favors one party.**

Contemporary Democratic party strategy is to expand the electorate by reducing barriers and safeguards to voting under the belief that new voters will generally favor Democrat candidates. Republicans oppose many of these measures and prefer stricter credentialing (i.e., voter ID laws) on the grounds these rules make it harder to cheat but also because they believe low-propensity voters are more supportive of Democrats. In both cases, the motives are a mixture of sincere and pretextual premises and may be based on dated myths about who makes up the base of each party.

Most political scientists who have examined the efficacy of recent efforts to make voting easier or harder have concluded that they have little or no impact on the election outcomes, mostly because the reforms reflect states that are already solidly controlled by one party.

Of the states that permit universal voting by mail, many are solidly blue. Hence, even if the vote-by-mail effects were significant, they would not matter much in the context of solid Democratic majorities. Meanwhile, there is scant evidence that stricter voter ID laws have either negatively impacted voter turnout or increased public confidence in elections. To some degree, this is because most restrictive laws are adopted in red states and most liberalizing laws are adopted in blue states, and their actual electoral import has been overblown.

Partisan beliefs of high or low turnout favoring one party over the other may also be outdated, as the bases of the parties are apparently shifting. Recent studies indicate a migration of non-college-educated, low-propensity voters to the Republican Party and college-educated, high-propensity voters to the Democratic Party, meaning each party's turnout model may now be favoring the other.

**To read the complete essay by Bruce E. Cain and Benjamin Ginsberg,
"Restoring Confidence in American Elections," visit www.hoover.org/fact-based-policy-program.**

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