Why Are Some Americans Skeptical of 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.

1. The details of how elections work are invisible to most voters.

People have greater confidence in the levels of government with which they are most familiar—their own state and local jurisdictions. The current legitimacy crisis over US elections may be less reflective of their personal experiences and more reflective of what voters have learned from news coverage, social media, and online sources of information about jurisdictions other than their own. The MIT Election Data and Science lab finds that voters are mostly unaware of the procedures that election administrators follow. In some instances, the procedures voters thought would give them more confidence in the elections process were already in place.

2. Our federalist system means there are ten thousand voting jurisdictions, many with different rules.

Voters are often surprised to learn that other states have laws and procedures different from those in their own state for running elections. A voter residing in a state that requires a notary to verify a signature on a mail-in ballot is less accustomed to, and hence more suspicious of, absentee ballots in states that do not require the same kind of verification. A voter in a state that allows same-day voter registration might regard another state as overly restrictive for requiring voter registration to be completed four weeks before an election. In addition, unlike many other countries, the United States allows many officials who administer elections (e.g., a state's secretary of state) to be elected on a partisan basis. Boskin and Te Kolste provide a state-by-state summary of the most contentious election rules in "A Summary of What States Do on the Most Contentious Election Rules."

3. Political polarization leads voters to view the same issues differently.

Many Republicans worry about voter fraud while many Democrats worry about voter suppression. At the moment, Republicans prefer voting in person while Democrats are more likely to vote by mail. And since some states allow the processing of mail-in ballots to begin only on Election Day and others require the tabulation of mail-in votes only after in-person voting has ended, vote totals can experience a "blue shift," where many votes among Democrats come in late in the evening or over the next few days. If not all votes are tabulated on Election Day, results can shift after people have gone to bed, which has led to (inaccurate) claims that the election must have been rigged. Counts that remain incomplete after Election Day can undermine public confidence in the electoral process.

4. Close elections are now contested more visibly (although they occur less frequently).

If the margin between two candidates in the initial count is narrow, many states mandate recounts. Other states allow losing candidates to ask for recounts and contest the determination in administrative procedures or court even if they are not as close. Notably, the raw number of contested congressional seats has generally

dropped in recent decades as the number of competitive districts has dropped due to geographic sorting and redistricting practices. In both 2020 and 2022, only 37 of the 435 House of Representative seats were decided by less than 5 percentage points.

HOOVER INSTITUTION
TENNENBAUM PROGRAM
FOR FACT-BASED POLICY

The Tennenbaum Program for Fact-Based Policy is a Hoover Institution initiative that collects and analyzes facts, provides easy-to-digest nontechnical essays and derivative products, and shares reliable information on the nation's highly debated policy issues.