

Strict voter ID laws make Republican voters more confident about elections

Recent years have seen a growing number of states adopt stricter voter identification laws, justifying these new laws as guarding against voter fraud. But are citizens actually concerned that voter fraud is going on? In new research [Todd Donovan](#) and [Shaun Bowler](#) find that in states without voter ID laws, Democrats are generally confident that elections are fair while Republicans are not, and that the reverse is true in states with strict voter ID laws.



Can the use of strict photo ID laws improve public confidence in elections? Since the disaster of Florida’s 2000 presidential election whose contested result went all the way to the US Supreme Court, the American states have been struggling to improve the administration of elections. Improved practice was needed for its own sake, and in order to maintain or boost public confidence in elections. The 2002 Help America Vote Act ([HAVA](#)) was designed to do this by promoting reforms in the use of provisional ballots, improved ballot machinery, and better voter registration processes. But HAVA also opened the door for state’s to adopt stricter voter identification laws. Although the US Supreme Court has [acknowledged](#) there is little evidence of actual voter impersonation, it justified strict photo ID laws based on a state’s interest in “protecting public confidence in elections.”



Given the partisan controversy associated with photo ID, we did not expect partisans in the public to have the same response to the laws where they were used in practice. Most strict photo ID laws were adopted along near party-line votes in Republican-controlled legislatures, and the laws have been described as “[Jim Crow 2.0](#)” vote suppression policy. The use of these laws appears to correspond with partisan polarization in confidence about elections, suggesting that photo ID laws could do as much to harm voter confidence as they do good.

A partisan model of reform

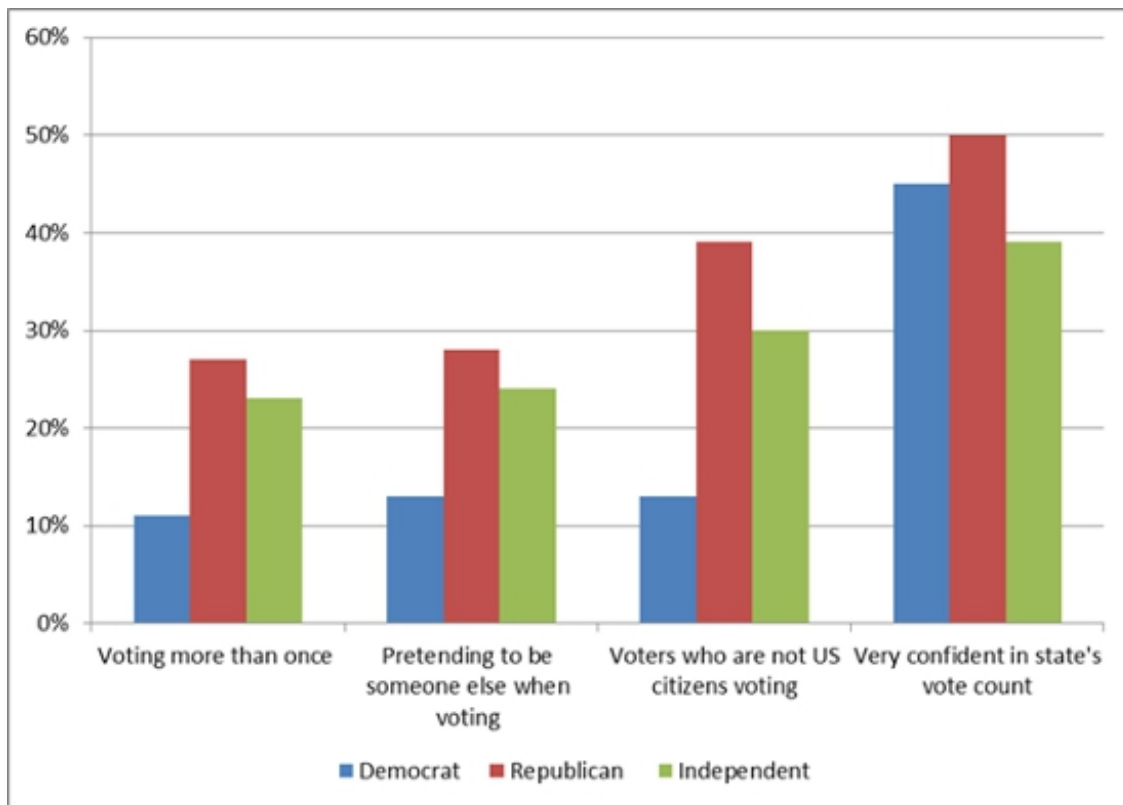
Partisan elites often need to generate popular support for election rules changes that advantage them, or generate opposition to changes that run counter to their interests. Given popular concern for procedural fairness in democratic politics, one party can’t simply argue, ‘this rule change will advantage us, we have the votes, so we will do it.’ Rather, elites have incentives to make (biased) arguments that justify their positions. Given that people rely on partisan cues when reasoning about politics, we expected that mass perceptions of a politicized election rule would reflect polarized signals from partisan elites.

After all, most people do not experience election fraud personally; they live it vicariously through (polarized) media. Partisan arguments over the adoption of photo identification laws can be simplified as one where Republicans contended that voter impersonation presented risks of elections being “[stolen](#)” while Democrats contended that for photo identification laws were attempts at [voter suppression](#).

Who sees fraud?

Figure 1 illustrates responses to items from the 2014 [Survey on the Performance of the American Electorate](#) that we used to measure perceptions of fraud. For the survey 200 people in each state were asked if they thought voting more than once, impersonation, and non-citizens voting was ‘very common’ or happened at least occasionally.

Figure 1 – Percent saying they think various forms of illegal voting are “very common” and “occasional” in respondent’s city or county, and percent who were “very confident” in their state’s vote count, 2014.



Source: 2014 Survey of the Performance of American Elections.

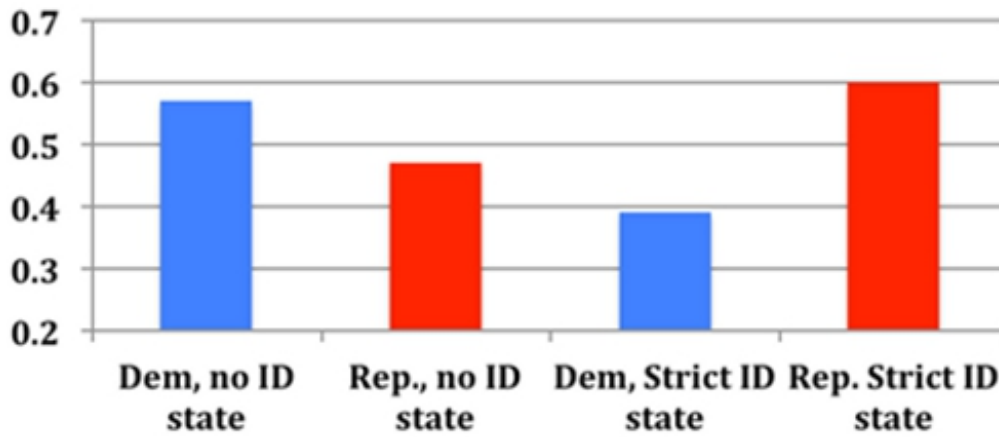
Republicans, African Americans, young people, the less educated, non-voters, and people who voted by mail were significantly more likely to perceive these forms of fraud as occurring. However, residence in a state with strict ID laws, and being asked for ID, had nothing to do with perceptions of fraud.

ID laws and voter confidence

But were people more confident in their state's elections if their state used strict ID laws? No, and sort of. We used responses to the fourth item in Figure 1, as a measure of general confidence in elections. People were asked, 'think about vote counting throughout your state, and not your personal situation, how confident are you that votes in your state were counted as voters intended?'

We found no unconditional link between state use of ID laws, and public confidence in the state's vote count. But there were conditional effects that fit our partisan model. These substantive effects are illustrated in Figure 2. All else equal, in states without ID laws, Democrats had a 57 percent probability of being very confident in the integrity of a state's election outcomes, however, a similar Democrat living in a strict ID state was much less likely to be confident. Conversely, a Republican living in a state with no ID laws had about an even probability of being very confident in her state's elections, but a statistically similar Republican in a strict ID state was significantly more confident in her state's elections.

Figure 2 – Probability of being very confident in state's vote count.



Source: *Estimated from Bowler and Donovan (2016) Table 3, model 1.*

Electoral reforms and partisan polarization

When a feature of election administration is highly partisan and visible, there are reasons to expect that the potential effect of that reform on public confidence will be conditioned by partisanship. Partisans in the electorate likely learn from partisan elites; in this case, we expect Republicans in the public learned from Republican elites that they should worry about fraud, and that photo ID laws would combat fraud. Democrats in the public had developed less concern for fraud, but they likely learned from Democratic elites that strict photo ID laws could keep some Democrats from voting.

Hence, we find the relationship between this 'reform' and perceptions of electoral integrity polarized on party lines. If strict photo ID laws had any positive effects on voter confidence, they were limited to Republicans, with any potential positive effects among Republicans possibly being offset by depressed confidence among Democrats.

These results raise questions about the conditions necessary and sufficient for an election reform to improve voter confidence in elections. With reforms that are the product of a relatively consensual adoption process, or the product of a process where partisan divisions are less overt, we might expect some broad, generalized, positive effect of the reform on voter confidence – particularly where there is high public support for a new election rule and support is not divided along party lines. But this raises questions of how often such conditions can be met. Given the partisan stakes of so many election rules, there is a possibility that many rules changes that do result from elite consensus may only be those so banal that the public may be unaware of them and so have little effect on citizen attitudes towards electoral practices.

This article is based on the paper, 'A Partisan Model of Electoral Reform: Voter Identification Laws and Confidence in State Elections' in State Politics & Policy Quarterly.

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