

Public Confidence in Elections

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Since the 2016 election cycle, election officials have warned about ongoing efforts to undermine public confidence in American political institutions. They also have consistently reassured Americans that there is no publicly available evidence that foreign or domestic interference have changed or likely could change official election results. This CRS Insight discusses recent policy issues and selected factors that could affect public confidence in voting and elections.

Recent Concerns About Election Confidence

Recent congressional attention to public confidence in elections and voting has focused on two topics. First, discussions of [campaign and election security](#) tend to emphasize the risks of foreign interference. Second, oversight (such as in [Committee on House Administration](#) and [Senate Committee on Rules and Administration](#) hearings) of [voting changes responding to COVID-19](#) and related [litigation](#), and of support for or opposition to different voting methods, tends to emphasize domestic issues. Because these foreign and domestic concerns are related but distinct, Congress might consider them separately or jointly in the future.

On both topics, federal agencies have issued guidance to election administrators and voters in 2020. Some of this information warns about deliberate attempts to undermine public confidence, while other outreach seeks to educate the public generally about elections processes and [resources](#). Election officials also have cautioned that the period between preliminary [election night results and certification of official results](#) could be accompanied by public concern about irregularities, provide opportunities for disinformation campaigns, or both. The U.S. Election Assistance Commission provides information about [state-specific requirements](#) and [general tips](#) for topics such as voter registration and early voting.

Recent warnings about foreign interference can be traced to the 2016 election cycle. A 2017 [Intelligence Community Assessment](#); the [investigation led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller](#); and congressional investigations (for example, the [one conducted by the Senate Intelligence Committee](#)) found that Russian operatives, in particular, used [disinformation, misinformation, or similar tactics](#) in attempts to undermine confidence in American campaigns and elections.

More recently, federal agencies have issued other statements advising voters to be alert to potential disinformation or simple confusion during the 2020 general elections. For example, on October 20, Chris Krebs, Director of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Cybersecurity and Infrastructure

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Security Agency (CISA), reiterated overall confidence in the election system. He also [cautioned](#) that in the final weeks of the election cycle, “various actors [could] try to introduce chaos into our elections and make sensational claims that overstate their capabilities” to disrupt election systems. CISA also unveiled a [website](#) designed to counter erroneous information about election vulnerabilities.

The next day, Director of National Intelligence (DNI) John Ratcliffe and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Christopher Wray held a [press conference](#) discussing law enforcement and intelligence agency findings regarding Iranian and Russian efforts to interfere with the 2020 general elections. Wray [encouraged](#) voters to “seek election and voting information from reliable sources—namely, your state election officials.”

Selected Factors that Could Shape Voter Confidence

Public opinion on voting and elections has occupied [decades of scholarly study](#), but empirical data on effects of recent election interference are limited. Existing research also tends to focus on voter confidence and participation [generally](#) rather than specifically examining foreign or domestic influence campaigns. Whether from domestic or foreign influences, at least three factors might be relevant for understanding voter confidence in elections. Each could affect voters differently and vary by jurisdiction.

First, personal experiences shape voter attitudes. For example, [scholarly research](#) has shown that “costs” of voting requirements vary substantially by state or territory. Other [research shows](#) that voter assessments of election administration can affect views on the fairness of election outcomes. These first-hand experiences may, therefore, cause voters to feel more or less optimistic about their abilities to vote successfully, and that their votes will be counted accurately.

Second, in the 2020 case, at least, there is some evidence that voters anticipate difficulties casting ballots. Election administrators have reported increased voter concern about election integrity, sometimes based on [anecdotal reports](#) of irregularities or from [misinformation generally](#). Social media has fueled such concerns well beyond the jurisdictions involved.

Survey data show that many remained skeptical well into the present election season. Pew Research Center [survey data](#) collected in July and August 2020 found that 50% of registered voters expected that it would be “very easy” or “somewhat easy” to vote in the general election, compared with 49% who expected that doing so would be “very difficult” or “somewhat difficult.” [More recent data](#) show that 90% of registered voters have confidence in their communities’ election administration, but deep partisan divides remain over the reliability of voting methods and expected accuracy of election results. As with all survey research, reported public confidence in elections varies widely with [different question wording, timing, and methodology](#).

Finally, even without specific concerns ahead of the 2020 elections, some voters (or potential voters who abstain) lack confidence in American political institutions generally. [Gallup polling data](#) collected from 1993 to 2020 found public confidence in institutions to be stable, but generally low. High-confidence levels hovered around 35% during most of the almost 30-year study period. Those who already view traditional pillars of society and government with suspicion could be further demoralized by statements or experiences that discourage confidence in elections.

Other evidence points to factors that may bolster confidence in the electoral system. The same foreign interference that concerns election administrators and Congress also has spurred substantial governmental and nongovernmental efforts to inform voters about election processes since 2016. Concerns about the ability to cast a ballot successfully also might mobilize voters. For example, [scholarly data](#) show that as of October 25, 2020, early voting nationwide was far outpacing commensurate 2016 figures.

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