

# Comparing Elite and Public Opinion on Election Administration and Reform

Paper Prepared for the 2021 Meeting of Election Sciences,  
Reform, and Administration

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## Abstract

Public opinion is a critical force in American politics, and public beliefs about election integrity are frequently cited in policy debates. Due to their role in administering elections, local election officials (LEOs) also provide an authoritative voice on election-related matters. How do the views of LEOs compare to public opinion on election issues and reform proposals? In an earlier paper we find some significant differences in the distribution of LEO and public opinion on election issues. Are these differences simply due to demographic differences between the two groups, or do LEOs think about election integrity differently than the mass public? In this paper we examine whether the main predictors of election administration opinions, particularly partisanship and jurisdiction size, are similar for LEOs and the public.

We compare LEO and public opinion on several election attitudes using identically-worded questions in two national surveys conducted prior to the 2020 election: (1) a poll of LEOs and (2) a survey of the public. This comparison is important in the current political environment where election officials are often forced to respond to unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud. We find that opinions of LEOs and the public diverge most on questions about election integrity. We find more similarities between public and LEO opinion on questions about election security and reform proposals, including significant partisan differences.

## Introduction

This paper uses survey data to compare the opinions of Local Election Officials (LEOs) with those of the mass public toward election administration and reform policies. Understanding how LEOs and the public perceive electoral integrity and voting reform may provide new insights into how accurately LEOs represent the public in their policy views, and whether the same factors--such as partisan affiliation--influence their respective opinions about elections policies.

LEOs are sometimes described as the “[stewards of democracy](#)” or the “[street level bureaucrats](#)” that connect election laws, policies, and procedures to individual voters. Due to their role in administering elections, LEOs provide an authoritative voice on election-related matters. More than 8,000 local officials in the U.S. implement and interpret election laws and administrative procedures when conducting local, state, and federal elections. They interact on a regular basis with voters, aspiring politicians, and elected officials. Local elections officials are part of the connective tissue that links citizens to government.

LEOs also service candidates, parties, and groups which want access to the ballot and press for timely, accurate, and trustworthy election results. This makes relationships between LEOs and their “service populations” particularly interesting and important to understand in American democracy. As administrators, LEOs are more directly involved in elections and are more knowledgeable about voting laws and procedures than the average citizen. In contrast, the mass public is less aware of election policies and more prone to influence by rhetoric from other elites such as politicians, party leaders, and organized interests.

LEOs occupy a unique bureaucratic position. The right to vote is not like other governmental services. Elections are more than just “delivered”; they undergird the foundations of our government and democratic society. LEOs also provide access to the ballot for candidates, parties, and petitioners, and help connect all these pieces through the ballot box. Understanding and embracing that role may lead LEOs to bring a different set of values and illustrate a different structure to their opinions about election integrity and reform.

LEOs are highly diverse in their backgrounds, life experiences, and political beliefs, even while they are less heterogeneous than the public at large. While they are deeply embedded in local administration, LEOs are exposed to much of the same rhetoric regarding voter fraud and election integrity, though they are possibly less likely to be swayed by claims that run counter to their own professional experiences and knowledge of the field. It is possible that their views of national reforms follow some of the same partisan and demographic patterns as the general public.

Public opinion is a critical force in American politics, and public beliefs about election procedures are frequently cited in policy debates. Politicians and reformers claim that reforms like online and automatic voter registration, expanded use of voting by mail, photo ID, and reductions in the time allowed for early voting all have some level of public support and will positively impact voter confidence in ballot and system integrity (Minnite 2010; Hasen 2012; Udani and Kimball 2017).

This paper examines data from a national survey experiment that shows where LEOs and the public converge and diverge on their opinions about electoral reforms and administration. We think understanding how LEOs and the public reason about election integrity and voting reform is a fascinating and heretofore unexplored question that may provide new insights into the role that election administration and public opinion play in fostering trust and legitimacy in the American election system. This is the question we intend to investigate in this paper.

## **Theory and Hypotheses**

### **Representative Bureaucracy**

The theory of representative bureaucracy posits that bureaucracies that are reflective of the public they represent in characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and gender will be more responsive to the diverse needs of the public (Kim 1994; Meier and Nigro 1976, Mosher 1968; Thieleman and Stewart 1996). J. Donald Kingsley (1944) established the concept of representative bureaucracy in his analysis of the British Civil Service, asserting that “No group can safely be entrusted with power who do not themselves mirror the dominant forces in society” (p. 282). Proponents of

representative bureaucracy argue that there are insufficient controls in place to restrain the large, powerful bureaucracy, but if the bureaucracy has the same values as the people it represents, then the decisions made by bureaucrats will be in line with the decisions Americans would prefer (Levitan 1946; Meier 1975).

David Levitan (1946) brought the concept of representative bureaucracy to the study of American systems, and he argues that in order to have accountability and effectively represent the will of the people, the bureaucracy should be [demographically] reflective of the public it serves—this is known as “passive representation.” Paul Van Riper (1958) built on this work by adding that in addition to reflecting demographic characteristics, representative democracy “must be in tune with the ethos and attitudes of the society of which it is part;” this is known as “active representation” (p. 552). Passive representation occurs when governments hire bureaucrats who are reflective demographically of the populations they serve; so, roughly the same percentage of women, people of color, and other groups would be represented in the bureaucracy as in society, and thus may act in ways that would benefit these groups of people (Atkins & Wilkins 2013, Mosher 1968). Passive representation in government also conveys “important democratic values and serves important goals related to fairness and equity in society” (Ricucci and Ryzin 2017, p. 3). The belief that government is fair and reflects the values of a diverse society is important to build trust in democracy and in free and fair elections.

When it comes to local election officials, the bureaucracy is not demographically representative of the electorate in regard to race or gender, but it is representative by a characteristic that has more recently been considered in representative bureaucracy—partisanship. Kropf et al (2012) found that partisanship could be included as a characteristic in representative bureaucracy.

Because the demographic makeup of LEOs does not mirror the demographic makeup of the American public, this paper focuses primarily on the partisanship element of LEOs and the mass public in comparing public opinion across these two

groups. Additionally, this paper taps into the literature on differences in opinion between political elites and the mass public toward election reform policies.

## **Public and Elite Opinions Toward Election Reform**

For all the study of election reforms and public/elite opinion as separate issues in political science, there is a dearth of research on comparisons between public and elite opinions toward election reform and the specific policies encompassed within this arena; the findings in this study aim to begin to cover this gap. It is important to understand where patterns in public and elite opinions converge and diverge around election reform policies, particularly in the wake of the 2020 election cycle. Former President Trump and his allies, including conservative media outlets and elected officials, have propagated a narrative of “massive” voter fraud and have attempted to undermine trust in voting by mail and other alternatives to in-person voting on election day (Wolf 2021). On January 6, following the deadly riot at the Capitol, 147 Republican members of Congress voted against certifying the Electoral College vote, sending a message that the election was illegitimate (Kahn et al 2021). At the same time, Republican state and local election officials have consistently said that the 2020 election was free and fair, and there is no evidence of widespread voter fraud (Parks 2020). In some key battleground states election officials, regardless of party affiliation, resisted efforts to prevent the certification of the 2020 presidential election results. These allegations of a rigged election were also found to be unsubstantiated in more than 60 lawsuits (Kahn et al 2021). This public narrative leads to several questions regarding elite theory in the context of mass and elite opinion of election integrity and proposals for reform. We hypothesize that the opinion of local election officials as elites who have greater expertise, sophistication, and professionalism will be less influenced by these incendiary narratives about voter fraud than the public at large, though partisan differences will shine through for both the public and elites. In addition to partisanship, we will also examine differences in mass and elite public opinion based on age, gender, and race.

In the 2020 election cycle and early 2021 Senate runoff elections in Georgia, competing narratives and cues emerged from elites regarding the integrity of elections and their administration. Former President Trump and his allies established a strong and consistent narrative that the elections were “rigged” and “stolen;” at the same time, state and local election officials—including many GOP election officials—directly countered this narrative and consistently claimed that the elections process was fair and accurate. Local election officials are “stewards of democracy” who view their primary role as serving the public (Adona, Gronke, Manson, & Cole 2019). According to national surveys, local election officials are frontline workers who tend to hold a customer service orientation; they see it as their primary job to help voters successfully register to vote and cast their ballot. In this way, LEOs are “voter-centric” in their beliefs and practices as administrators (Adona et al. 2019: 32). Even though many of these stewards of democracy are elected or appointed as partisans, they tend to remove themselves from partisan rhetoric and from partisan interpretations in the implementation of election policies. Some of the claims made by former President Trump in 2020 were that elections were being run fraudulently, that ballots were not being counted, and that the election was being “stolen” from Republican voters and candidates; state and local election officials across both parties consistently refuted these claims.

Thus, the two conflicting narratives from political elites (President Trump and election officials) likely impacted election officials and the public in different ways. We suspect that the narratives stating that the election process was unfair had a greater influence on the public at large than it did on LEOs (elites). Previous research suggests that mass public opinion is more likely to diverge from elite opinion when the public thinks the issues impact them directly. Elite theory in part rests on the assumption that the public is apathetic to issues of policy and politics and knows too little to form opinions without cues from elites (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017; Kertzer, 2020). Cunningham and Moore (1997) found that public and elite opinions diverged more when the public saw the issue as impacting their life, for example the effect tariffs could have on their jobs. However, on issues that were less salient to the daily life of the public, such as the level of NATO involvement, domain-specific expertise seemed to play a

role, and elite and mass opinion were more aligned. When it comes to opinions such as election integrity and voting rights, the public may view these as important and salient issues that affect them and form their opinions more independently from elite influence.

Much of the extant work comparing elite and mass opinion has been in the area of U.S. foreign policy. Oldendick and Bardes (1982) examined mass and elite public opinion related to U.S. foreign policy and concluded that while there are cleavages between mass and elite opinion on foreign policy, there is not significant evidence that policy elites have influence over mass opinion. Cunningham and Moore's (1997) findings suggest that in U.S. foreign policy the opinions of elites are not very influential on mass opinion. Another important finding from the work of Cunningham and Moore (1997) is that while elite and mass opinion differs, when patterns are examined over time, there is evidence that the opinions of both groups move in the same direction. This suggests the two groups respond to each other--that mass and elite influence is reciprocal. Of course, it is also possible that both groups are responding to external stimuli such as media coverage or foreign policy events. Consistent with these findings, Kertzer's (2020) meta-analysis suggests that elites and masses "generally respond to treatments in strikingly similar ways." This raises questions about not just whether elite and mass opinions differ, but whether elites influence mass opinion. For example, while many Republican election officials spoke out to say the November 2020 election was free and fair (Parks 2020), polling by the Pew Research Center in January of 2021 indicates that 46% of Trump voters think Trump definitely won the election and another 36% think Trump probably won the election. This is consistent with other polling conducted in the days and months after the election (Pennycook and Rand 2021). This suggests that the narrative and cues being sent by elites such as former President Trump and conservative media outlets may have had a greater influence on public opinion than bureaucratic elites in the form of election officials, even if they were also Republicans. Given the likely differences between LEOs and the public in terms of education and knowledge of election laws and procedures and the greater susceptibility of public opinion to political rhetoric about voter fraud, *we expect LEOs to express more positive assessments of election integrity than the public (H1).*

Partisanship and ideology tend to be the strongest factors that structure public beliefs about voter fraud and support for election reforms; this reflects the partisan nature of many debates over election policies. Republicans and conservatives tend to believe voter fraud is more frequent than Democrats and liberals (Wilson and Brewer 2013; Bowler et al. 2015; Udani and Kimball 2017). Similarly, Republicans are more supportive of restrictive policies (like photo ID requirements) and more opposed to access-oriented policies (like Election Day registration) than Democrats (Bowler and Donovan 2016; Hale, Montjoy, and Brown 2015; Kropf 2016). In addition, people with higher levels of education and political knowledge tend to have more positive assessments of the integrity of American elections (Bowler et al. 2015; Wolak 2014; Udani and Kimball 2017).

Meanwhile, partisan and ideological differences in LEO opinions about election integrity tend to be minimal or limited to a few of the most contentious policy proposals (Moynihan and Silva 2008; Burden et al. 2011; Kimball and Baybeck 2013). Instead, LEOs generally worry about administrative burdens and resource constraints that limit their ability to fulfill all of their job responsibilities. These administrative and resource concerns also motivate LEO opposition to several election reform proposals (Moynihan and Silva 2008; Burden et al. 2012; Adona et al. 2019; Anthony and Kimball 2021). These results suggest that LEOs use a different decision-making process to form opinions about election reforms. *Thus, we expect to observe larger partisan differences in opinion of voting values, voter confidence, election reforms, and perceptions of voter fraud among the mass public than among LEOs (H2).* In addition, due to LEO concerns about administrative burden and resource constraints, *we expect LEOs to report greater opposition to election reforms than the public, particularly reforms that require significant effort from local officials to implement (H3).*

The main cleavage in LEO assessments of election integrity and reform is the size of a jurisdiction's electorate. As noted above, there are huge disparities in the number of voters served by different local jurisdictions. LEOs in large jurisdictions serve a younger, more diverse, and more mobile electorate. Many challenging and contested aspects of election administration (like provisional ballots, undeliverable mail, rejected



absentee ballots) occur disproportionately in large jurisdictions (Kimball and Baybeck 2013). Similarly, poll worker recruitment is more challenging for large jurisdictions (Kimball and Baybeck 2013; Ramsberger and Van Trieste 2013). Thus, LEOs in large jurisdictions constantly seek out administrative innovations and new technologies that can improve registration and voting processes. By contrast, LEOs in smaller jurisdictions, who have little budget or staff resources and are more likely to have other non-election responsibilities, tend to see little reason to make administrative changes (Kimball et al. 2010; Creek and Karnes 2010; Adona et al. 2019; Manson et al. 2020). Furthermore, LEOs in large jurisdictions are more likely to support certain convenience reforms, like vote centers, provisional voting, expanding early and absentee voting, and voting by mail (Montjoy 2008; Burden et al. 2011; Kimball and Baybeck 2013; Kropf, Vercellotti, and Kimball 2012). Even the commitment to public service and voter education is stronger among LEOs in larger jurisdictions (Adona et al. 2019). Thus, we expect larger divisions in LEO opinions based on jurisdiction size than among the mass public (*H4*). The findings in this study support some of the existing literature examining differences in opinion between elites and the mass public, though our findings diverge from previous studies as well in some important ways.

## **Data and Methods**

Our interest in this study is to examine how LEOs and the public reason about election integrity and voting reform. Do they think about these issues in the same way? We use parallel regression models to test whether the same factors explain attitudes in samples of local election officials who administer and deliver democracy to the voting public in the United States and voting-eligible citizens.

We rely on two survey datasets to compare the opinions of the mass public and LEOs. For the mass public opinion data, research teams from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, University of Missouri-St Louis, Oklahoma State University, and Reed College coordinated efforts to yield representative national estimates on a set of opinion items about voter confidence at the state and national level, perceptions of the frequency of various types of voting fraud, support or opposition for a variety of election changes and reforms, and opinions on a set of “voting values”. The survey data comes from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study. A number of these same items were fielded

as part of the 2020 Democracy Fund/Reed College LEO survey, administered by the Early Voting Information Center (EVIC) at Reed and in collaboration with and supported by Democracy Fund.<sup>1</sup> We examine data from both surveys that were in deployed before the November 2020 election.

## Public Opinion Measures

The Cooperative Election Study (CES, previously known as the CCES) is a cooperative election survey project which seeks to understand how Americans view Congress, hold their representatives accountable during elections, how they voted and their electoral experiences, and how their behavior and experiences vary with political geography and social context (Ansolabehere, Schaffner, and Luks 2017). The CES is an online survey administered by YouGov, and has a pre- and a post-election panel structure.<sup>2</sup>

The CES uses an innovative cooperative model whereby individual academic teams contribute to the costs of the fielding the *common content* and are able to field their own separate modules (leveraging the the contributions from individual separate teams is how the CES is able to support a comparatively massive survey – N = 64,600 in 2020 – and simultaneously provide low cost research opportunities for a broad and diverse set of academic teams).

This paper relies on survey items that were shared between three research teams in order to yield larger samples and allow for more detailed breakdowns by key demographic and attitudinal indicators. Because of some question wording experiments, unanticipated errors in coordination and a survey fielding problem, our mass samples for key questions vary from 500 (half sample in one module) to 2,000 (fully fielded across two modules).

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<sup>1</sup> The Democracy Fund supported the DF/RC LEO Survey as part of a research contract with EVIC and Reed College. The DF/RC Survey project is described here: <https://evic.reed.edu/leo-survey-summary/>. This research and conclusions reached are solely the responsibility of the authors.

<sup>2</sup> Further details on the Cooperative Election Study are provided at the CES website <https://cces.gov.harvard.edu>.

In the mass surveys we asked respondents about their:

- “Voter confidence” in the integrity of the ballot count in their states (N = 1,000).<sup>3</sup>
- Attitudes toward several election reforms: running all elections by mail; allowing people to register to vote on Election Day; requiring the use of photo identification; moving Election Day to a weekend; making Election Day a national holiday; consolidating local, state, and federal elections; and increasing the use of Internet voting (N = 2,000).
- Attitudes on several paired statements about “voting values”: voting on Election Day versus having multiple options, ease of access versus security in elections (N = 500), individual versus government responsibility for voter registration, and whether voting is a duty or a choice (N = 1,000).<sup>4</sup>

The CES also asks respondents a battery of demographic and partisanship questions, including age, race, gender, and level of education, and provides information about state of residence. To some degree, we can provide comparative measures for local elections officials, although we did not match the CES measures in the LEO survey (for more information, see below and in the results section).

### **Local Election Official Opinion Measures**

The 2020 DF/RC Local Election Official survey was conducted by the Early Voting Information Center at Reed College, in collaboration with Democracy Fund, to create space for LEOs to be heard in local, regional, and national discussions about electoral integrity, administration, and reform; and to help identify ways to support and promote an expert, diverse, and thriving professional community of LEOs and election staffs. In 2020, the DF/RC Survey agreed to coordinate some items with a number of CES modules as a way to advance research into election sciences and election administration.

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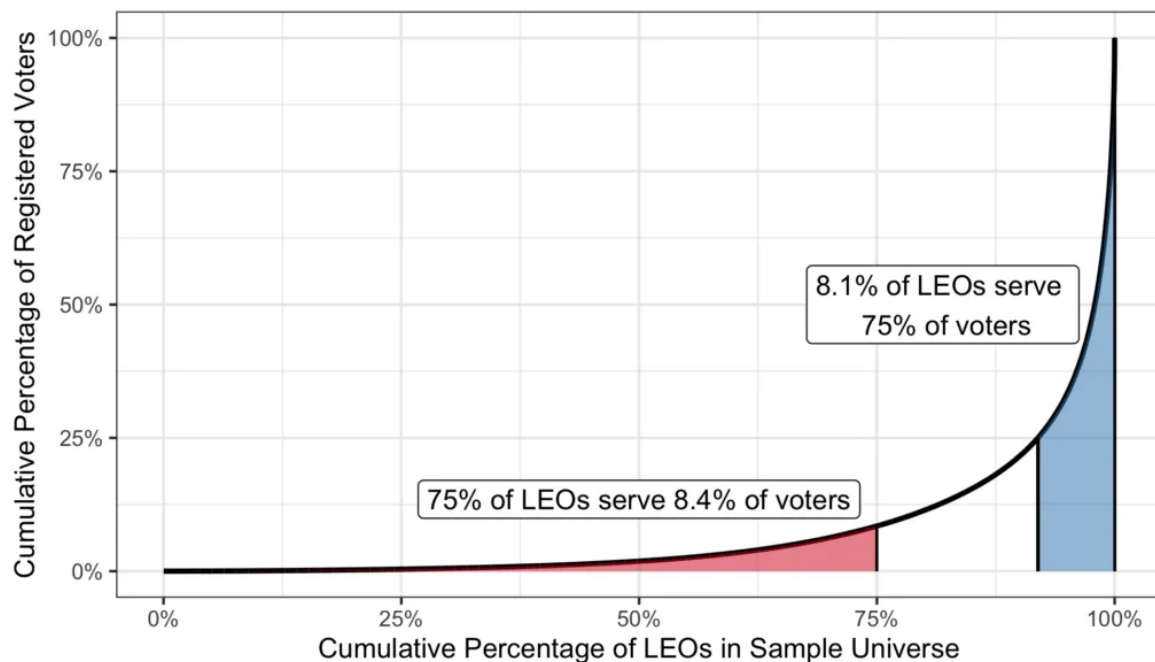
<sup>3</sup> A question wording experiment reduces the sample size. Fielded only on the Reed module.

<sup>4</sup> A question wording experiment reduces the sample size for two of the questions. Fielded only on the Reed module.

However, the LEO survey was designed to produce responses generalizable to the *population* of LEOs nationwide, which has unique characteristics, both political and geographical, because of federalism - namely variations in the number and population size of counties within and across states, and the use of municipalities and townships to administer elections in a number of states. Two observations illustrate the challenge of making generalizable statements about United States LEOs.

First, there is the “75:8 problem,” illustrated below. Because three-quarters of LEOs serve just over 8% of the general population, almost by definition the distribution of opinions among LEOs is likely to differ substantially from the general population.

**Figure 1: The LEO Population and the Registered Voter Population**



Second, and closely related, eight states administer their elections at the township and municipality level. Of the 7,800 LEOs<sup>5</sup> that form the universe of LEOs,

<sup>5</sup> There is no single, comprehensive list of local election jurisdictions, or the civil servant (or servants) who has (or have) statutory responsibility for conducting elections in that jurisdiction, and the existing literature does not use the same list – and uses different procedures for sampling within that list. Depending on how you count, there are between 7,800 (Lee and Gronke 2020; Kimball and Baybeck 2013) and 10,370 (Kimball et al. 2010; Gambler 2016) local jurisdictions with the primary responsibility for

3,400 work in just two states – Michigan and Wisconsin – and another 1,500 administer elections in the towns and villages of New England. In short, the “LEO population” is made up of experts in the administration of elections in their respective states and localities, and is also a population of which 43% are either Wisconsinites or Michiganders. There are other distinctive features of the LEO population which we detail below.

The 2020 DF/RC Survey was conducted as an online survey. 3,000 officials were selected using unequal sampling probabilities, with inclusion probabilities proportionate to the number of registered voters. In practice, this meant that LEOs in jurisdictions greater than 16,808 were selected with a probability of 1 (Lee and Gronke 2020, pg. 10-11). The total number of responses in 2020 was 857, for a response rate of 29%. This is lower than the 2019 and 2018 surveys, but is within range of the 31% achieved by Kimball and Baybeck (2013) and our representation in jurisdiction size categories closely matches Kimball and Baybeck and the GAO (Gambler 2016).

### **Demographic Comparisons of the LEO and Mass Samples**

As a starting point, it is important to recognize that the demographic profile of a population of agency managers nationwide does not match the mass public. We put aside for the moment the question of the disparity in the demographic profiles of LEOs and their service population is a point of concern from the perspective of representative bureaucracy theory. Independently of the different information and experience bases that will lead these two groups to vary in their attitudes, the demographic differences may also be a source of variability.

Table 1 compares the CES sample and the LEO sample on gender, race, education, income, age, and partisanship. We have produced mass sample measures that match the categories used in the LEO survey to make as close to an apples-to-apples comparison as is possible. In Table 1 we also report breakdowns of the LEO

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conducting elections in the United States. The primary difference between those estimating a total of approximately 8,000 and those that estimate over 10,000 depends on the statutory responsibility that is under study. See Gronke and Lee (2020) for more discussion.

sample by jurisdiction size, an important source of variation in the challenges facing LEOs.

Overall, local officials are older, whiter, and more female than the general public; these differences are especially pronounced among officials from small and medium-sized jurisdictions. We also note that LEOs overall are slightly wealthier and more educated than the mass public, but these differences are driven by officials in large and medium-sized jurisdictions. Reflecting the politics of populous urban areas, LEOs in large jurisdictions are less likely to be Republican than officials in smaller jurisdictions and the general public.

**Table 1: Demographic Comparisons of LEOs and the Mass Public**

| Demographic      | Public | LEOs | LEO Size (Registered Voters) |                   |           |
|------------------|--------|------|------------------------------|-------------------|-----------|
|                  |        |      | < 25,000                     | 25,000 to 250,000 | > 250,000 |
| Female           | 51%    | 81%  | 85%                          | 68%               | 47%       |
| White            | 69%    | 94%  | 94%                          | 93%               | 85%       |
| College          | 41%    | 50%  | 47%                          | 62%               | 82%       |
| \$50,000 or more | 51%    | 45%  | 37%                          | 84%               | 95%       |
| 50 or older      | 49%    | 74%  | 75%                          | 66%               | 61%       |
| Republican       | 40%    | 44%  | 46%                          | 40%               | 17%       |
| Elected          | -      | 57%  | 61%                          | 35%               | 18%       |

These demographic gaps may be a cause of concern for advocates of representative bureaucracy. The extreme level of homogeneity on racial grounds is a cause for concern, one which has been raised in other work (Adona, Manson, and Gronke 2019), although it is not clear how distinctive LEOs are from other similarly-situated local officials. We are not surprised that officials heading up offices in the larger jurisdictions are more likely to have a college education and have compensation levels far above the population median. As Kimball and Baybeck (2013) note, administering an election to hundreds of thousands to millions of voters is a highly complex enterprise.

In a previous study, we compared aggregate attitudes of the mass public and LEOs on election integrity and voter reform measures. LEOs reported greater confidence in the vote count than the public, and LEOs believe that voter fraud occurs less frequently than the public. When it comes to reform proposals, we find greater support for voting by mail and a photo ID requirement among LEOs than among the public. On the other hand, we find more support for Election Day registration, moving Election Day to the weekend, and making Election Day a holiday among the public than among LEOs.

We are also interested in whether both groups evaluate election issues in the same way. Do the same predictors explain variation in opinion in both samples? As a first cut at this question, we estimate the same regression models using a set of variables common to both samples. One set of dependent variables asks about confidence in the vote count in one's own state and in the nation. These items ask respondents to answer on a five-point scale, with higher values indicating greater confidence. For the LEO sample "don't know" responses (1% on the state question, 9% on the national question) were recoded to the midpoint of the scale.

A second set of dependent variables are four questions that present two opposing voting values and ask respondents to choose the one they prefer. These include: (1) whether they prefer more voting options versus only voting on Election Day; (2) whether voting should be made easier or more secure; (3) whether voting is a duty or a choice; and (4) whether individuals or the government should bear more responsibility for voter registration. For each pair, we coded the more permissive or liberal response as 1 and the alternative as 0. Finally, both surveys asked respondents their level of support for several election policies on a five-point scale, with higher values indicating greater support.

As predictors of election attitudes, we examine several independent variables common to both datasets. Given longstanding and often heated partisan disagreements over voting rules, party identification is one important independent variable. Both surveys measure partisanship on a seven-point scale. Those who answered "not sure" (five percent in the public sample) or "prefer not to answer" (one-third of the LEO

sample) are recoded as pure Independents. We then created separate dummy variables for Republicans and Democrats, including leaners. The remainder were coded as Independent.

The second predictor is jurisdiction size, since previous studies show that size is an important source of variation in local conditions and LEO attitudes. We measured jurisdiction size by the number of registered voters in the November 2018 election. For North Dakota, which has no voter registration, we used the number of eligible voters. We then collapsed the data into three categories: small (no more than 25,000 registered voters), medium (25,001 to 250,000 registered), and large (more than 250,000 registered). Finally, we include several demographic variables. These binary variables are for education (college degree), age (65 and older), sex (female), and race (non-white). Since there is not much racial or ethnic diversity among LEOs the sample is not large enough to make more detailed comparisons. For the results presented below, we apply sampling weights in each dataset.

## **Results**

We estimate an OLS regression function to examine the relationship between each dependent variable and the independent variables described above. Each independent variable is binary, so the coefficient estimates can be compared to see which factors best explain variation in opinion.

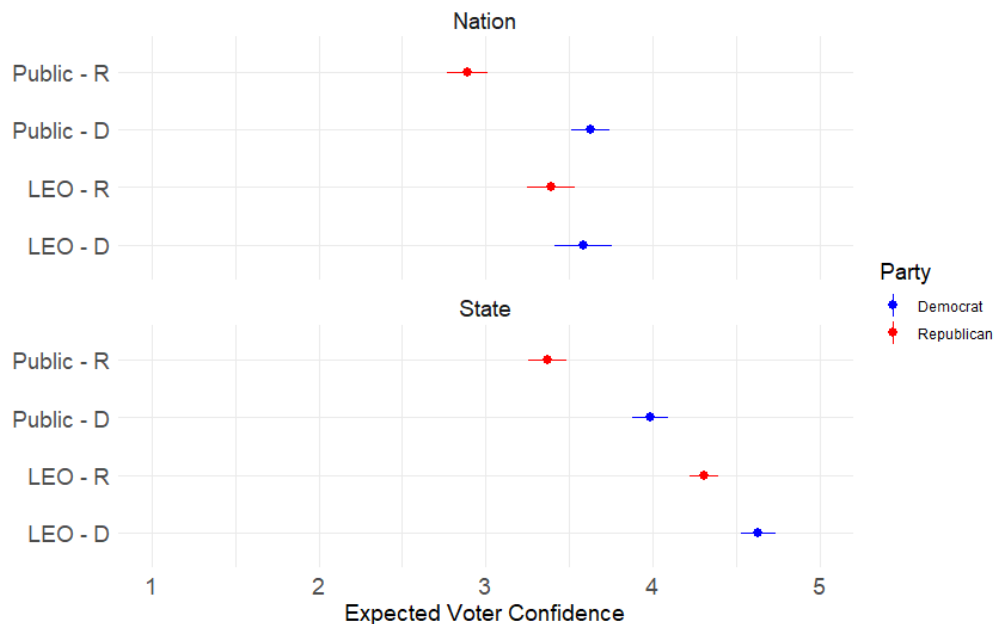
We start with measures of voter confidence. Heading into the 2020 election, LEOs report greater voter confidence than the public, particularly at the state level. Among the mass public we observe substantial partisan differences, with Republicans and Independents expressing less confidence than Democrats. In the public sample there is also evidence of a positive correlation between education and voter confidence. The other demographic variables are unrelated to voter confidence measures in the mass public. We also observe smaller partisan differences in state voter confidence among LEOs, with Democrats and Independents reporting greater confidence than Republicans. We also see significant differences associated with jurisdiction size, with LEOs from medium and large jurisdictions reporting greater confidence in the national



vote count than LEOs in small jurisdictions. Female LEOs also report slightly lower levels of voter confidence than male LEOs.

For a more thorough illustration of partisan differences, use the model estimates to plot expected levels of voter confidence on the five-point scale for Democrats and Republicans in both samples (see Figure 2). The expected values are computed from the model estimates by averaging across all observations in each sample. The top panel reports confidence in the national vote count; the bottom panel reports state voter confidence. Each subgroup is identified on the left side of the figure. As the figure shows, partisan differences are more pronounced in the public than among LEOs. Furthermore, Republicans in the mass public are distinct from the other three subgroups in terms of holding lower levels of voter confidence heading into the 2020 election. See Table A1 in the Appendix for regression results on predictors of voter confidence.

**Figure 2. Expected Voter Confidence**



We next turn to voting values. These questions ask respondents to choose between two competing values in election administration. Since the dependent variable is binary, the coefficient estimates indicated the expected change in probability of

choosing the more progressive value in the pair. Once again, we see significant partisan differences among the mass public, with Democrats expressing a stronger preference for liberal voting values than Republicans in each of the four questions. On two of the four value pairs we also observe a positive correlation between education and a preference for the more liberal value. When it comes to voter registration, non-white respondents express a stronger preference for more government responsibility than whites, while older citizens prefer more individual responsibility. Aside from that, the demographic variables account for very little variation in public preferences on voting values.

In the LEO sample we also find partisan differences in voting values, with Democrats expressing a stronger preference for progressive values than Republicans or Independents on three of the four pairs. Jurisdiction size appears to have little impact on LEO voting values, except that LEOs in medium and large jurisdictions report a stronger preference for more government responsibility in voter registration than LEOs in small jurisdictions. This may reflect the increased difficulty of maintaining a voter list in larger jurisdictions. Female LEOs report a stronger preference for conservative values than male LEOs on two of the items (making voting more secure and individual responsibility for voter registration). Older LEOs are more likely to report that voting is a duty than younger LEOs, and older LEOs also report a stronger preference for limiting voting options to Election Day. Beyond that, there are minimal demographic differences in voting values among LEOs.

To illustrate partisan comparisons in each sample we again use the model estimates to plot expected voting values. Based on our coding of the questions, we show the expected probability of preferring the more liberal value in each pair. In Figure 3, we start with two value items that pose the access versus integrity choice that is common in election reform debates. The top panel reports preferences for making it easier to vote (versus more security); the bottom panel reports preferences for more voting options (versus voting only on Election Day). See Table A2 in the Appendix for regression results for predictors of voting values.

Large and significant partisan differences are evident on both value choice and in both samples, although again the party differences are larger among the mass public. On the ease versus security selection, partisans in both samples hold similar views (with majorities among Democrats preferring to make voting easier and majorities of Republicans preferring more security. On the question of voting options, Republicans in the mass public stand out as the only subgroup where a majority prefer only Election Day voting.

**Figure 3. Expected Voting Values (Access vs. Integrity)**

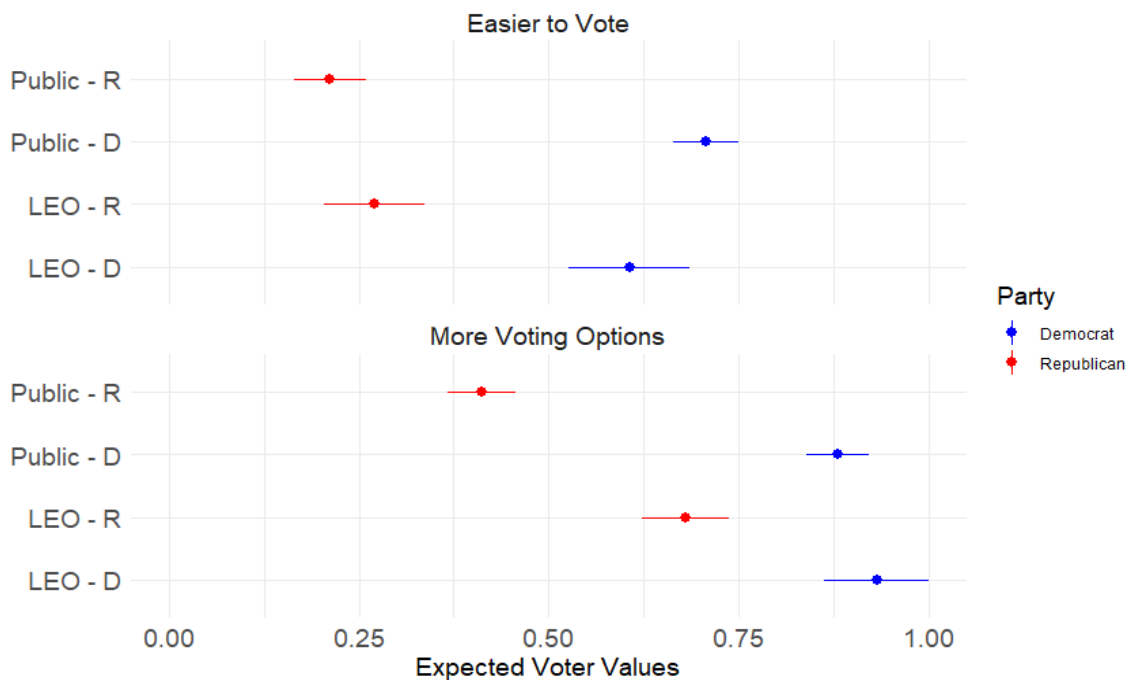
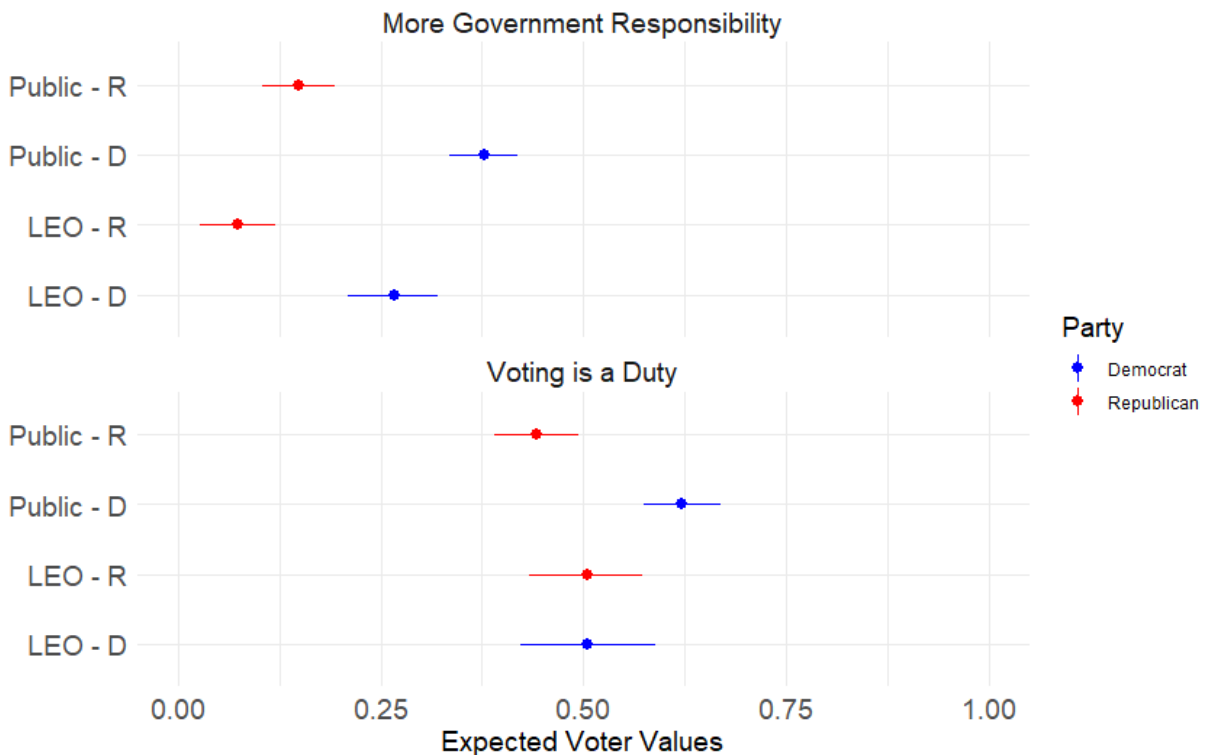


Figure 4 plots expected preferences by party and sample for the other two value items that deal with personal responsibility. The top panel reports preferences for more government responsibility for voter registration (versus more individual responsibility); the bottom panel reports preferences for viewing voting as a duty (versus a choice). Most respondents in all subgroups prefer more individual responsibility for voter

registration, but in both samples Democrats are more likely than Republicans to prefer a stronger role for government in voter registration. Both samples are equally divided over whether voting is a duty or a choice. Democrats in the public are more likely than Republicans to see voting as a duty, while there are no partisan differences among LEOs on that value question. See Table A2 in the Appendix for the regression results for voting values.

**Figure 4. Expected Voting Values (Individual Responsibility)**



Our final set of analyses examines election reform preferences for seven policies, measured on a five-point scale. Once again, partisanship is the main source of division in the public sample. We observe significant partisan differences among the mass public on each policy question, with Democrats expressing a stronger preference for convenience reforms and Republicans registering stronger support for security measures. These partisan differences are largest on some of the most contentious

policies (photo ID, voting by mail, and Election Day registration). In the public sample, education is positively correlated with support for some convenience reforms and negatively correlated with support for a photo ID requirement. Furthermore, older voters are more opposed to some convenience reforms than younger voters. Non-white respondents are more opposed to making Election Day a holiday and consolidating local, state, and federal elections than white respondents. Other demographic differences in the public sample are small or insignificant.

Partisanship also appears to be the largest source of division in the LEO sample. We also observe significant partisan differences among LEOs on six of the seven policy questions. Jurisdiction size is another important factor for LEOs on these questions. LEOs in larger jurisdictions tend to oppose photo ID requirements and Election Day registration more than LEOs in small jurisdictions. Meanwhile, officials in larger jurisdictions indicate greater support for moving Election Day to the weekend or a holiday than LEOs in small jurisdictions. Female and older LEOs tend to be more opposed to some convenience reforms than male and younger LEOs. Beyond that, we do not observe consistent or large demographic differences among LEOs on election reforms. See Table A3 in the Appendix for the regression results for voting by mail and Table A4 for Election Day registration.

To further probe partisan comparisons we plot support for each policy on the five-point scale. In Figure 5, we start with two convenience reforms that have been debated in many states in recent years. The top panel reports expected support for Election Day registration (EDR); the bottom panel reports expected support for running all elections by mail. Large and significant partisan differences are visible in all subgroups, although these differences are again somewhat larger in the public sample. Reflecting the political debates on these issues, Democrats express more support for EDR and voting by mail than Republicans. In each sample, the average Democrat supports both policies while the average Republican opposes both policies. GOP opposition to voting by mail is especially strong in the mass public.

**Figure 5. Expected Support for Convenience Reforms**

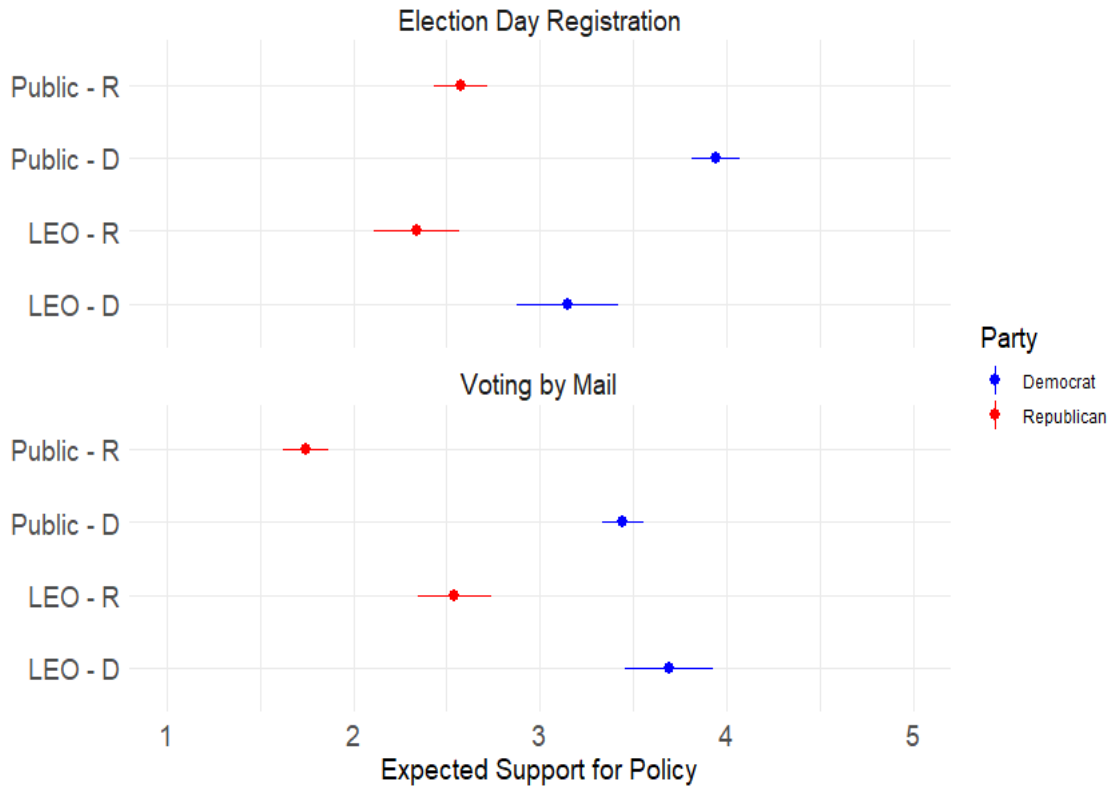


Figure 6 illustrates expected support for a photo ID requirement among partisan subgroups. The figure shows large and significant partisan differences in all subgroups, with Republicans strongly supporting the policy and Democrats divided (the mean position for Democrats is near the midpoint of the scale). Across the two samples, fellow partisans hold very similar positions on the photo ID policy. See Table A3 in the Appendix for the regression results for support for photo ID requirement.

**Figure 6. Expected Support for Photo ID Requirement**

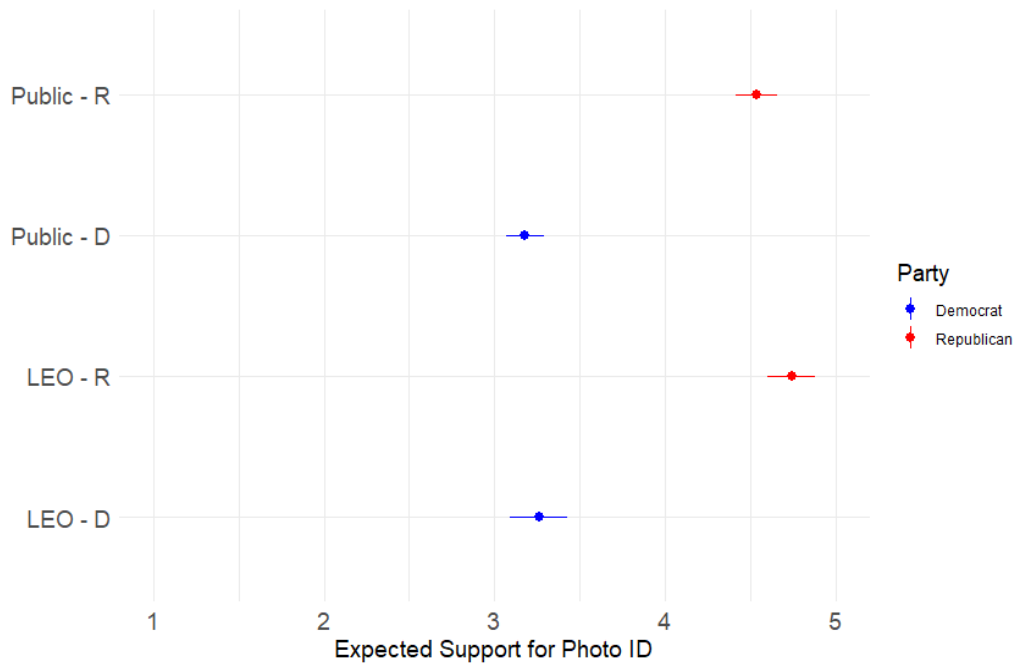
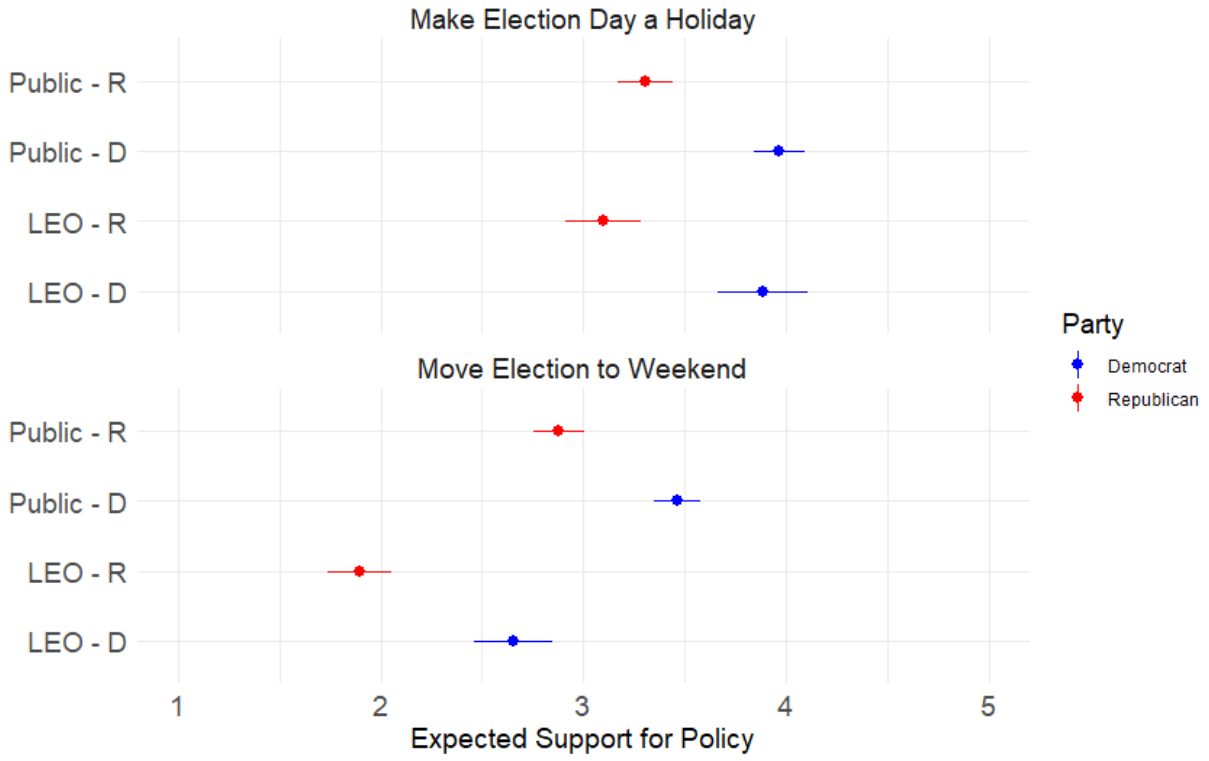


Figure 7 plots expected support for two proposed changes to the scheduling of Election Day. The top panel indicates expected support for making Election Day a holiday; the bottom panel reports expected support for moving Election Day to the weekend. Partisan differences are evident and roughly equal in magnitude on these two policies, although they are not as large as in the more contentious policies reported above. In each sample, Democrats support these two measures more than Republicans. Fellow partisans across the two samples express similar positions on making Election Day a holiday. LEOs are particularly opposed to moving Election Day to the weekend. See Table A4 in the Appendix for the regression results for making Election Day a holiday and moving Election Day to the weekend.

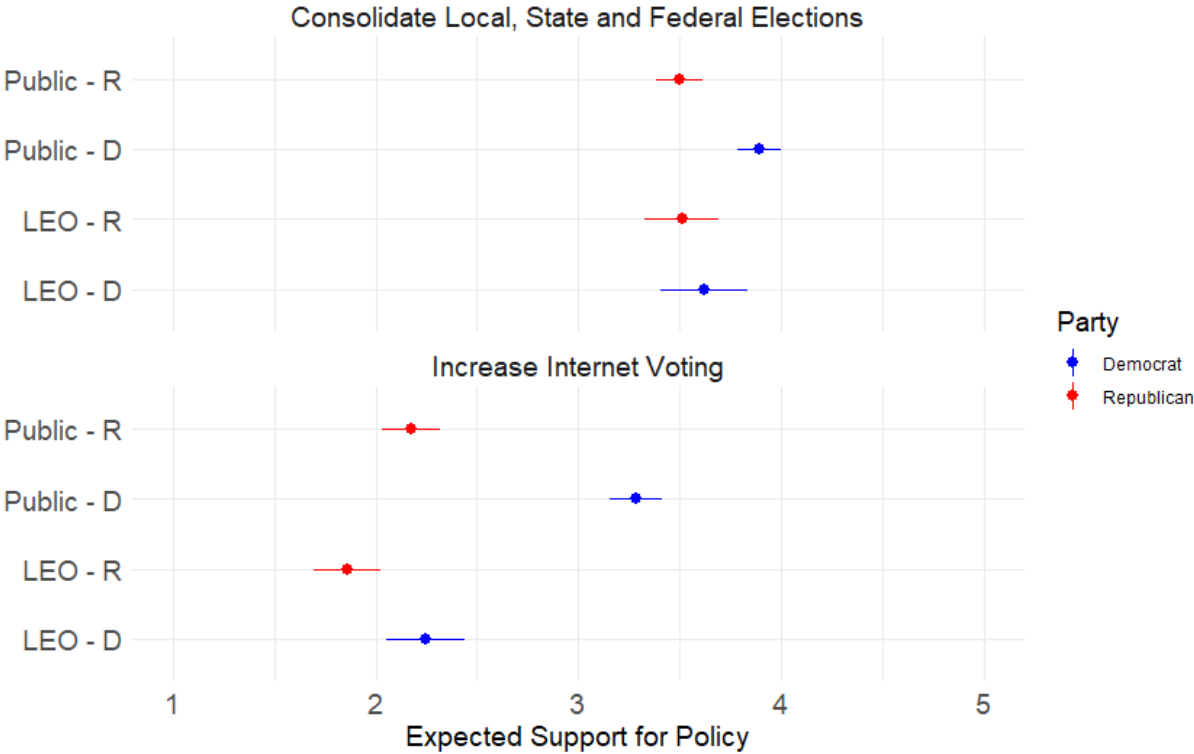
**Figure 7. Expected Support for Election Day Changes**



Finally, Figure 8 plots expected support for two other policies by party and sample. The top panel is expected support for consolidating local, state, and federal elections; the bottom panel plots expected support for increasing the use of Internet voting. These proposals have not yet become hot-button issues. There appears to be a wide base of support for election consolidation, and there are only small partisan differences on that proposal. There is widespread opposition to more Internet voting, with significant partisan differences in the mass public. Democrats in the mass public appear isolated from the other subgroups in supporting Internet voting. See Table A3 in the Appendix for regression results for increasing Internet voting and Table A4 for consolidating local, state, and federal elections.



**Figure 8. Expected Support for Other Election Reforms**



**Conclusion**

This study is part of a broader effort to compare public and LEO opinion on election integrity and reform issues. These comparisons are important in the current political environment where debates over voter fraud and election reform frequently divide along party lines. Election officials are often forced to respond to claims of voter fraud or proposed changes to election laws. This is a largely unexplored question that may provide new insights into the role that election administration and public opinion play in fostering trust and legitimacy in the American election system.

Given the differences between LEOs and the public in terms of their background and knowledge of election rules and procedures, we expected to find significant differences when comparing the opinions of both groups. We do find differences in election integrity attitudes. LEOs believe that voter fraud occurs much less frequently than the mass public, and LEOs report higher levels of voter confidence than the public. LEOs seem to stand apart from the public in resisting claims of widespread voter fraud and rigged vote counts.

However, when we examine voter values and election policies we tend to see more similarities between LEOs and the public. In particular, we find partisan differences on most policy and value questions, although partisan divisions tend to be stronger in the public sample. On some policies, LEO preferences are closer to their fellow partisans in the mass public than to preferences of LEOs of the opposite party. LEOs are not potted plants. They have opinions about elections that are partly shaped by partisanship.

These questions merit further study. Election law and administration have become a source for numerous policy debates in the United States. Election officials are generally seen as trusted sources of information about voting issues. It is important to better understand the decision-making processes used by LEOs and the public to reason about election integrity and reform. This may help inform efforts to counter misinformation about election issues.

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**APPENDIX**

**Table A1  
Predictors of Voter Confidence**

| Independent variable                 | Voter confidence – nation |                  | Voter confidence – state |                  |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|------------------|
|                                      | Public                    | LEO              | Public                   | LEO              |
| Party: Republican (vs. Dem)          | -0.74*<br>(0.09)          | -0.19<br>(0.12)  | -0.62*<br>(0.08)         | -0.33*<br>(0.07) |
| Party: Independent (vs. Dem)         | -0.51*<br>(0.11)          | 0.12<br>(0.11)   | -0.58*<br>(0.10)         | 0.21*<br>(0.06)  |
| Jurisdiction size: Medium (v. Small) | -0.06<br>(0.12)           | 0.33*<br>(0.12)  | -0.11<br>(0.11)          | 0.12<br>(0.07)   |
| Jurisdiction size: Large (v. Small)  | -0.001<br>(0.12)          | 0.66*<br>(0.27)  | -0.21<br>(0.11)          | 0.02<br>(0.16)   |
| Education: College graduate          | 0.14<br>(0.08)            | 0.03<br>(0.09)   | 0.31*<br>(0.08)          | -0.01<br>(0.05)  |
| Age: 65 and above                    | 0.02<br>(0.09)            | 0.07<br>(0.10)   | 0.06<br>(0.09)           | -0.10<br>(0.06)  |
| Sex: Female                          | -0.03<br>(0.08)           | -0.21*<br>(0.11) | -0.07<br>(0.07)          | -0.12*<br>(0.06) |
| Race: Non-white                      | 0.09<br>(0.09)            | 0.26<br>(0.14)   | -0.09<br>(0.08)          | -0.20*<br>(0.08) |
| Constant                             | 3.59*<br>(0.13)           | 3.64*<br>(0.15)  | 4.08*<br>(0.12)          | 4.76*<br>(0.09)  |
| N                                    | 999                       | 695              | 998                      | 695              |
| R <sup>2</sup>                       | .09                       | .06              | .09                      | .14              |

Cell entries are OLS coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

The dependent variables are 5-point scales (5=very confident).

\* p<.05 (one-tailed)

Sources: CES 2020 (UM-St. Louis module); LEO 2020 Survey (Reed College)



**Table A2**  
**Predictors of Voting Values**

| Independent variable                 | More voting options |                  | Make voting easier |                  | Govt. responsibility |                  | Voting is a duty |                  |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
|                                      | Public              | LEO              | Public             | LEO              | Public               | LEO              | Public           | LEO              |
| Party: Republican (vs. Dem)          | -0.47*<br>(0.03)    | -0.25*<br>(0.05) | -0.50*<br>(0.03)   | -0.34*<br>(0.05) | -0.23*<br>(0.03)     | -0.19*<br>(0.04) | -0.18*<br>(0.04) | -0.001<br>(0.06) |
| Party: Independent (vs. Dem)         | -0.14*<br>(0.04)    | -0.20*<br>(0.04) | -0.14*<br>(0.04)   | -0.13*<br>(0.05) | -0.08*<br>(0.04)     | -0.14*<br>(0.03) | -0.24*<br>(0.04) | -0.03<br>(0.05)  |
| Jurisdiction size: Medium (v. Small) | -0.02<br>(0.04)     | 0.08<br>(0.05)   | 0.01<br>(0.04)     | 0.05<br>(0.05)   | 0.001<br>(0.04)      | 0.08*<br>(0.04)  | -0.02<br>(0.05)  | 0.03<br>(0.06)   |
| Jurisdiction size: Large (v. Small)  | -0.02<br>(0.04)     | 0.13<br>(0.11)   | -0.05<br>(0.04)    | 0.10<br>(0.12)   | -0.01<br>(0.04)      | 0.22*<br>(0.09)  | -0.02<br>(0.05)  | -0.03<br>(0.13)  |
| Education: College graduate          | 0.003<br>(0.03)     | -0.02<br>(0.03)  | 0.13*<br>(0.03)    | -0.13*<br>(0.04) | 0.03<br>(0.03)       | 0.02<br>(0.03)   | 0.12*<br>(0.03)  | 0.05<br>(0.04)   |
| Age: 65 and above                    | 0.003<br>(0.03)     | -0.15*<br>(0.04) | -0.01<br>(0.04)    | -0.07<br>(0.04)  | -0.16*<br>(0.03)     | 0.03<br>(0.03)   | 0.05<br>(0.04)   | 0.11*<br>(0.05)  |
| Sex: Female                          | 0.02<br>(0.03)      | 0.002<br>(0.04)  | -0.03<br>(0.03)    | -0.23*<br>(0.05) | -0.01<br>(0.03)      | -0.08*<br>(0.03) | -0.03<br>(0.03)  | -0.06<br>(0.05)  |
| Race: Non-white                      | -0.05<br>(0.03)     | -0.16*<br>(0.06) | -0.05<br>(0.03)    | -0.06<br>(0.06)  | 0.08*<br>(0.03)      | 0.01<br>(0.05)   | -0.09*<br>(0.04) | 0.05<br>(0.07)   |
| Constant                             | 0.90*<br>(0.05)     | 0.98*<br>(0.06)  | 0.72*<br>(0.05)    | 0.87*<br>(0.07)  | 0.38*<br>(0.05)      | 0.30*<br>(0.05)  | 0.64*<br>(0.05)  | 0.49*<br>(0.07)  |
| N                                    | 962                 | 695              | 957                | 694              | 966                  | 693              | 954              | 694              |
| R <sup>2</sup>                       | .20                 | .08              | .22                | .10              | .10                  | .08              | .07              | .02              |

Cell entries are OLS coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).  
The dependent variables are binary (0=conservative value, 1=liberal value).  
\*p<.05 (one-tailed)

Sources: CES 2020 (UM-St. Louis module); LEO 2020 Survey (Reed College)

**Table A3**  
**Predictors of Support for Voting Reforms**

| Independent variable                 | Voting by mail   |                  | Require photo ID |                  | More Internet voting |                  |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------|
|                                      | Public           | LEO              | Public           | LEO              | Public               | LEO              |
| Party: Republican (vs. Dem)          | -1.70*<br>(0.09) | -1.15*<br>(0.16) | 1.36*<br>(0.09)  | 1.48*<br>(0.11)  | -1.11*<br>(0.10)     | -0.39*<br>(0.13) |
| Party: Independent (vs. Dem)         | -0.78*<br>(0.11) | -0.83*<br>(0.14) | 0.45*<br>(0.10)  | 1.12*<br>(0.10)  | -0.50*<br>(0.12)     | -0.48*<br>(0.12) |
| Jurisdiction size: Medium (v. Small) | -0.10<br>(0.11)  | 0.14<br>(0.16)   | -0.06<br>(0.11)  | -0.46*<br>(0.11) | -0.09<br>(0.13)      | -0.07<br>(0.13)  |
| Jurisdiction size: Large (v. Small)  | 0.12<br>(0.11)   | 0.48<br>(0.36)   | -0.07<br>(0.11)  | -0.95*<br>(0.26) | 0.11<br>(0.13)       | 0.17<br>(0.30)   |
| Education: College graduate          | 0.11<br>(0.08)   | 0.15<br>(0.12)   | -0.29*<br>(0.08) | 0.02<br>(0.08)   | 0.06<br>(0.09)       | 0.19*<br>(0.10)  |
| Age: 65 and above                    | 0.03<br>(0.09)   | -0.49*<br>(0.13) | 0.02<br>(0.09)   | -0.06<br>(0.09)  | -0.26*<br>(0.11)     | 0.07<br>(0.11)   |
| Sex: Female                          | 0.09<br>(0.08)   | -0.37*<br>(0.14) | -0.04<br>(0.07)  | 0.20<br>(0.10)   | 0.16<br>(0.09)       | -0.08<br>(0.12)  |
| Race: Non-white                      | -0.17<br>(0.09)  | -0.50*<br>(0.19) | -0.06<br>(0.09)  | 0.06<br>(0.14)   | 0.12<br>(0.10)       | 0.12<br>(0.16)   |
| Constant                             | 3.39*<br>(0.13)  | 4.05*<br>(0.21)  | 3.36*<br>(0.12)  | 3.18*<br>(0.15)  | 3.18*<br>(0.14)      | 2.19*<br>(0.17)  |
| N                                    | 999              | 697              | 998              | 697              | 999                  | 697              |
| R <sup>2</sup>                       | .31              | .14              | .24              | .27              | .15                  | .04              |

Cell entries are OLS coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

The dependent variables are 5-point scales (1=strongly oppose, 5=strongly support).

\*p<.05 (one-tailed)

Sources: CES 2020 (UM-St. Louis module); LEO 2020 Survey (Reed College)

**Table A4**  
**Predictors of Support for Election Reforms**

| Independent variable                 | Election Day registration |                  | Move election to weekend |                  | Move election to holiday |                  | Consolidate elections |                  |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
|                                      | Public                    | LEO              | Public                   | LEO              | Public                   | LEO              | Public                | LEO              |
| Party: Republican (vs. Dem)          | -1.37*<br>(0.10)          | -.81*<br>(0.18)  | -0.58*<br>(0.09)         | -0.76*<br>(0.13) | -0.66*<br>(0.09)         | -0.78*<br>(0.15) | -0.39*<br>(0.08)      | -0.11<br>(0.15)  |
| Party: Independent (vs. Dem)         | -0.80*<br>(0.12)          | -0.16<br>(0.16)  | -0.15<br>(0.11)          | -0.75*<br>(0.12) | -0.43*<br>(0.12)         | -0.74*<br>(0.14) | -0.39*<br>(0.10)      | -0.13<br>(0.13)  |
| Jurisdiction size: Medium (v. Small) | -0.25<br>(0.13)           | -0.55*<br>(0.19) | 0.07<br>(0.12)           | 0.33*<br>(0.13)  | 0.07<br>(0.13)           | 0.58*<br>(0.15)  | 0.12<br>(0.11)        | -0.02<br>(0.15)  |
| Jurisdiction size: Large (v. Small)  | -0.33*<br>(0.13)          | 0.06<br>(0.42)   | 0.05<br>(0.12)           | 0.50<br>(0.30)   | -0.03<br>(0.13)          | 0.18<br>(0.34)   | 0.15<br>(0.11)        | -0.48<br>(0.34)  |
| Education: College graduate          | 0.18<br>(0.09)            | -0.03<br>(0.14)  | 0.39*<br>(0.09)          | 0.24*<br>(0.10)  | 0.62*<br>(0.09)          | 0.20<br>(0.12)   | 0.32*<br>(0.08)       | -0.11<br>(0.11)  |
| Age: 65 and above                    | -0.46*<br>(0.11)          | 0.10<br>(0.15)   | -0.13<br>(0.10)          | 0.20<br>(0.11)   | -0.26*<br>(0.10)         | -0.36*<br>(0.12) | -0.11<br>(0.09)       | -0.32*<br>(0.12) |
| Sex: Female                          | 0.06<br>(0.09)            | 0.05<br>(0.17)   | -0.17*<br>(0.08)         | -0.67*<br>(0.12) | -0.01<br>(0.08)          | -0.44*<br>(0.14) | -0.14*<br>(0.07)      | -0.30*<br>(0.13) |
| Race: Non-white                      | -0.07<br>(0.10)           | -0.24<br>(0.22)  | -0.16<br>(0.09)          | -0.23<br>(0.16)  | -0.27*<br>(0.09)         | -0.16<br>(0.18)  | -0.32*<br>(0.08)      | -0.31<br>(0.18)  |
| Constant                             | 4.23*<br>(0.14)           | 3.19*<br>(0.24)  | 3.45*<br>(0.13)          | 2.99*<br>(0.17)  | 3.90*<br>(0.14)          | 4.16*<br>(0.19)  | 3.87*<br>(0.12)       | 4.04*<br>(0.19)  |
| N                                    | 999                       | 695              | 998                      | 696              | 998                      | 698              | 1000                  | 696              |
| R <sup>2</sup>                       | .19                       | .05              | .08                      | .18              | .12                      | .13              | .07                   | .02              |

Cell entries are OLS coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

The dependent variables are 5-point scales (1=strongly oppose, 5=strongly support).

\*p<.05 (one-tailed)

Sources: CES 2020 (UM-St. Louis module); LEO 2020 Survey (Reed College)