



Voter Fraud

Executive Summary

Electoral fraud refers to concerted attempts to unlawfully alter the results of an election. Voter fraud refers to a subset of electoral fraud conducted by individual voters. Typical categories of voter fraud claims include: 1) voter impersonation, where an individual attempts to impersonate a registered voter or deceased person; and 2) double voting, when a voter attempts to vote multiple times. Studies that estimate the prevalence of voter impersonation, double voting, and other claims of voter fraud find that rates of voter fraud are extremely low.

Highlights

- There is no evidence for widespread voter fraud in U.S. elections, including in recent national elections.
- The psychological effects of winning an election and messaging by political leaders may alter voter confidence and public perceptions of voter fraud beyond its demonstrated occurrence.
- There is no evidence that voter ID laws cause a significant decrease in rates of voter fraud, or that voter ID laws increase voter confidence in elections.

Limitations

- Given the decentralized nature of U.S. elections, no single data source contains the information needed to study the rates of all types of voter fraud at the same time.
- Inconsistent quality of voter registration and vote record data from different states can affect the quality and size of usable data sets.
- More studies may be needed to determine the effects of voter ID laws on voter turnout.

Research Background

Overall Rates of Observed and Estimated Voter Fraud

Electoral fraud generally refers to any type of concerted fraud that attempts to corrupt the results of an election. Voter fraud specifically refers to types of election fraud conducted by individual voters. Typical types of voter fraud claims include 1) double voting, where one voter attempts to vote multiple times; and 2) voter impersonation, in which an individual impersonates other registered voters or deceased voters. While high-profile occurrences of voter fraud have been documented,^{1,2} overall estimated and observed rates of voter fraud are very low.³⁻⁸

To estimate the rate of **double voting**, one study compared the number of voters who participated in the 2012 presidential election and have matching first names, last names, and dates of birth with the number of voters that are statistically expected to share those same characteristics.³ Using this method, it was estimated that one in 4,000 (0.025%) votes cast in the 2012 presidential election were double votes, assuming there were no clerical errors. A 1.3% clerical error rate would explain all the apparent double votes; however, data to determine the true clerical error rate across the nation does not exist. In the same study, an audit of voter records in Philadelphia found a clerical error rate of 1%. While this can not be extrapolated to the entire U.S., it suggests that a portion of the estimated double vote rate can be attributed to clerical errors, lowering the estimated double voting rate.

Several other studies have investigated the prevalence of **voter impersonation** and find no evidence for widespread voter fraud.⁴⁻⁶ One study of the 2006 general election in Georgia found no evidence that a single deceased individual's voter registration had been used to cast a fraudulent vote.⁶ Using voting record data via an open records request, in every instance in which a deceased individual had appeared to vote and voter information was available, the voter had either requested their ballot before they passed away or there was a verified clerical error.

The COVID pandemic saw many states expand eligibility for absentee voting and voting by mail in the 2020 presidential election. Studies find no evidence that voting by mail increases the risk of voter fraud.^{9,10} To learn more, see our previously published Science Notes on [absentee voting](#) and [ballot signature verification](#).

Election Integrity in the 2016 and 2020 Presidential Elections

Recent studies of voter fraud in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections have similarly found no evidence of widespread voter fraud. One study looked for fraudulent votes cast by non-citizen voters, voters from out of state voting in New Hampshire, and corrupt actions by election officials in the 2016 election.⁸ Another study investigated claims of supposed anomalies in vote totals, that voting machines changed votes, that absentee ballots exhibited unfair partisan advantages, and claims of unusually high turnout in certain counties.⁷ No evidence of fraud was found after the investigation of any of these claims; in all cases, proper statistical analysis indicates that voting patterns in recent presidential elections adhere to historical trends.

Perceptions of Voter Fraud

There are large partisan differences in perceptions of voter fraud. A poll published by Pew Research Center, based on surveys conducted January 8-12, 2021, found that 2% of people who voted for Joe Biden say there was widespread illegal voting and fraud in the 2020 presidential election, whereas 70% of people who voted for Donald Trump say the same.¹¹ Messaging by political leaders claiming that widespread voter fraud exists has been shown to have an effect on voter confidence;¹² this phenomenon may account for observed partisan differences in attitudes in recent elections.

In addition to messaging cues from political leaders, the “winner effect” may also account for some of these differences. The “winner effect” describes an effect where voters who voted for the winner of an election have more confidence that their vote was counted correctly and that there was not significant amounts of voter fraud than those who voted for the candidate who lost the election.¹²⁻¹⁴ This winner effect was seen in the 2016 presidential election, but research has not yet been conducted regarding the winner effect and the 2020 presidential election.^{12,14}

Other factors such as racial resentment have also been found to be correlated with perceptions of election fairness. An analysis of data from two national surveys found that strong feelings of racial resentment were linked with a higher likelihood to believe that the 2008 and 2012 elections were not conducted fairly.¹⁵ These results only applied to years that Barack Obama was running for president. Negative attitudes towards immigrants have also been shown to correlate with heightened perceptions of voter fraud.¹⁶

The Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles in Florida estimated that a potential 180,000 registered voters were noncitizens in 2011. This estimate included extensive errors and a further investigation found just 38 alleged noncitizen voters. A nationwide assessment of voter fraud from 2000 to 2012 found just 56 cases of alleged noncitizen voting.¹⁶

Errors in voter registration records can increase the perception of double voting. When U.S. residents move between states, they can end up with voter registration in both states.¹⁷ This can create the appearance of a greater occurrence or intent to commit voter fraud than actually exists.

State Policy and Legislation for Preventing Voter Fraud

The National Council of State Legislatures provides a list of processes and procedures that legislatures around the nation can consider in order to improve election security.¹⁸ The list of procedures includes suggestions such as testing and certifying voting systems, backing up vote totals on redundant storage devices, cross-state database matching to potentially catch double voters, and investing in security. Thirty-three states including Missouri also have state statutes prohibiting tampering with voting systems or machines, and all 50 states have laws on double voting.

Voter ID Laws

Thirty-five states have laws that request or require voters to present some type of identification at the polls.¹⁹ The other 15 states require that voters either provide a signature or personal information such as a name and address. The states that require a voter ID vary in terms of photo vs non-photo ID requirements, and their levels of strictness. In some states, at least some voters have an option to cast a ballot if they do not have an acceptable form of ID (non-strict), but in other states voters must vote on a provisional ballot and also take additional steps for their vote to count (strict). In Missouri there is a voter ID requirement ([RSMo 115.427](#)). The ID is not required to have a photo, and if a voter does not possess an acceptable form of identification they may cast a provisional ballot.

Research does not find that voter ID laws cause a significant decrease in the number of detected cases of fraud.²⁰ Voter ID laws also do not have an observable effect on voter perception of election integrity.^{20,21} The effect of voter ID laws on voter turnout however, is mixed. Several studies have found a discriminatory effect on Hispanic and Black voter turnout.^{22,23} Other studies do not find a strong effect of voter ID laws on voter turnout.^{24,25} More research may be needed to come to a consensus on the impact of voter ID laws on voter turnout.

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