

The Effect of Conspiratorial Thinking and Motivated Reasoning on Belief in Election Fraud

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Abstract: Belief in electoral fraud has received heightened attention due to controversial voter identification laws. Using a two-wave national survey administered before and after the 2012 election, we examine the individual-level correlates of belief in a range of election related conspiracy theories. Our data show that partisanship affects the timing and content of belief in election related conspiracy theories, but a general disposition toward conspiratorial thinking strongly influences those beliefs. Support for voter identification laws, in contrast, appears to be driven largely by party identification through elite-mass linkages. Our analysis suggests that belief in election fraud is a common and predictable consequence of both underlying conspiratorial thinking and motivated partisan reasoning.

Despite the assumption that they operate at the fringes of political thought, conspiracy theories influence debates over many policies. For example, movements for vaccine regulations, genetically-modified food labeling, and campaign finance reform are to some degree fueled by a belief that shadowy figures are aligned against the public's interest. Social scientists are currently trying to understand whether conspiracy theories are sometimes "politics by other means" (i.e., overly-heated partisan rhetoric) or if they are the product of a separate social-psychological process (e.g. Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016, Oliver and Wood 2014, Radnitz and Underwood 2015). We seek to answer this question by examining the determinants of belief in election fraud.

We treat beliefs about election fraud as conspiracy theories because they fit the classic definition: unsubstantiated accusatory beliefs positing small groups working in secret, for their own benefit, and against the common good (Uscinski and Parent 2014, pg. 32). The common good in this case is majority rule over free and fair elections. For simplicity, we use *election fraud* as a blanket term to refer to all forms of fraud that may affect elections, including casting multiple ballots, casting illegal ballots, voter suppression, bribery, dirty tricks, and fraudulent counting.

Recently enacted policies intended to protect the sanctity of the vote have paradoxically led to more accusations of fraud. The accusations arise because the policies appear, to some, to benefit one party over the other. Several states have passed voter identification laws since the turn of the millennium (Hicks, et al. 2014). Though the US Supreme Court ruled certain types of voter ID laws constitutional in *Crawford v. Marion County Election Board* (2008), the public debate over these measures has a decidedly conspiratorial tenor. Opponents claim that fraud is not rampant, and that voter ID laws would not prevent the most probable types of fraud if it were (Overton 2007). Moreover, opponents argue the burdens of voter ID laws fall most heavily on

poor, minority, and elderly voters (Barreto, Nuno and Sanchez 2009, Atkeson, et al. 2010), tilting elections in favor of the Republicans who passed the laws (Leighley and Nagler 2013, pg. 1).

Our purpose is not to adjudicate the consequences of voter ID laws. Nor do we take a position on the existence of electoral fraud, except to say that the US has well-functioning institutions that make attempts at widespread fraud difficult to manage (Svolik and Rundlett 2016, pg. 180, see also Grimes 2016). We do examine, however, why Americans *believe* electoral fraud exists. This question is particularly important because the Supreme Court justified voter ID laws in part as a reaction not to actual fraud, but rather to widespread rational *belief* in fraud (Ansolabehere and Persily 2008).

We begin by detailing the prevalence of belief in election fraud. Next, we discuss what underlying conspiratorial predispositions are and how they could drive belief in election fraud. We then exploit unique pre- and post-election survey data from the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). We show that many electoral fraud beliefs are the predictable consequence of a predisposition towards viewing events and circumstances as the product of conspiracy. Motivated partisan reasoning also contributes to beliefs about electoral fraud in two ways: (1) one's partisanship determines who will be accused, and of what specific type of fraud, and (2) the status of one's party drives belief in fraud in certain circumstances (i.e. after an electoral loss).

In contrast, our subsequent investigation into opinions toward voter ID laws find, in accord with extant scholarship (e.g. Bowler, et al. 2015, Bowler and Donovan 2016, Wilson and Brewer 2013), that partisanship plays the central organizing role. To conclude, we argue that, because beliefs about voter fraud are largely the product of non-rational social-psychological

processes (i.e., motivated reasoning and conspiratorial thinking) rather than responses to instances of actual fraud, mere belief in voter fraud should not be used to justify election policies which can potentially disenfranchise citizens.

Belief in Voter Fraud

Voter fraud is a controversial topic in the US. Some are convinced it is pervasive (von Spakovsky 2012); others argue it's a "myth" (Minnite 2010). While we do not speak to this directly, it appears that the specific type of fraud recent incarnations of voter ID laws are designed to prevent – voter impersonation – is not at all common (Christensen and Schultz 2013). Ahlquist, Mayer and Jackman (2014) find that the number of people who impersonated others in order to vote fraudulently is roughly equivalent to the number of people abducted (and returned!) by extraterrestrials. With this said, there are many types of fraud that could occur beyond voter impersonation.

While research suggests that various types of fraud are almost non-existent in US elections, there remains widespread belief in malfeasance. After Mitt Romney's defeat in 2012, 49 percent of Republicans believed that the community activist group, ACORN, had stolen the election for Barack Obama (only 6 percent of Democrats believed this). It did not matter much that ACORN no longer existed in 2012. This might give the impression that being a Republican drives belief in election fraud. However, instances where Democrats lose show parity. For example, a 2013 national poll asked respondents about fraud in the 2004 and 2008 elections (Cassino and Jenkins 2013). Thirty-seven percent of Democrats believed the statement, "President Bush's supporters committed significant voter fraud in order to win Ohio in 2004,"

was probably true, while only nine percent of Republicans agreed. This reverses in a question about President Obama's victory in 2012: 36 percent of Republicans believed it was probably true that "President Obama's supporters committed significant voter fraud in the 2012 presidential election," while only four percent of Democrats agreed. In addition, following the contentious presidential election of 2000, 31 percent of Democrats believed that George W. Bush had stolen the election (only three percent of Republicans agreed),¹ and thirty percent of Democrats stated that they would not accept George W. Bush as a "legitimate president."² Significant portions of both parties cry foul after they lose. Thus, the public's opinions stand in stark contrast to a scholarly consensus that voter fraud is negligible.

With this said, belief in fraud is not just a symptom of an election night hangover. Prior to an electoral outcome, belief in fraud is also widespread. In 2007, 62 percent of respondents in a nationally representative poll believed that people voting more than once was either "very common" or "occurs occasionally"; 60 percent believed that vote tampering or ballot theft was either "very common" or "occurs occasionally" (Ansolabehere and Persily 2008, see Table 1). To take a high-profile example, during the protracted recount in 2000, both parties were equally weary of fraud prior to the announcement of an official winner: 52 percent of Republicans were either "not too confident" or "not at all confident" that the recount process in Florida would be fair; a similar number of Democrats, 47 percent, agreed with them.³

Republicans and Democrats appear equally concerned about election fraud; however, they appear concerned about different forms of it. Republicans are especially prone to believing that people are casting ballots they should not, whereas Democrats are more concerned that they are not able to cast ballots (Ansolabehere and Persily 2008). A national poll taken in July 2012 showed 54 percent of Democrats believed that voter suppression was a major problem. Only half

as many Republicans (27 percent) agreed. When asked about the casting of illegal ballots, *mutatis mutandis*, 57 percent of Republicans believed that it was a major problem while only 38 percent of Democrats did.⁴

These beliefs mesh well with the parties' recent histories, constituencies, and priorities. The Democratic Party passed several pieces of legislation in the 1960s to ensure that African Americans, one of their key constituencies, could vote, and it remains a fear of many in the Democratic Party, particularly minorities, that they will be denied the right to vote. Thus, Democratic electoral fraud conspiracy theories focus on institutional actors, such as state legislators or state elections officials. Republicans, on the other hand, are concerned that individuals and small groups abuse enfranchisement efforts. In light of the number of undocumented immigrants and inner-city community organizations, Republicans formulate theories that put the locus of conspiracy on individual voters, in concert with community organizers and others. Reminiscent of a security dilemma, each party thinks the other is cheating, and attempts to curb such cheating (whether it exists or not) are seen as further attempts to cheat (Beaulieu 2014).

We can make four observations from the above polling data: (1) members of both parties believe in election fraud, writ large, roughly equally, (2) partisans tend to accuse the opposing party of fraud, (3) electoral losers, rather than winners, believe in fraud following losses, and (4) Republicans believe in different forms of fraud than do Democrats.

The extant scholarly literature suggests the same. Republicans and Democrats are equally convinced that fraud is prevalent and that it is being carried out for the benefit of their opponents (Uscinski and Parent 2014). Partisans also exhibit motivated reasoning to dismiss the misdeeds of their party. At the same time, they express outrage when the opposition perpetrates similar

acts (Beaulieu 2014, Claassen and Ensley 2016). These findings comport with more general studies of conspiracy beliefs (McClosky and Chong 1985).

Belief in election fraud is likely not a response to actual fraud or irregularities, but rather the product of underlying dispositions. For example, Fogarty et al. conclude that “public beliefs about voter fraud appear to be unrelated to the frequency of actual fraud cases in their own state, and public concerns about voter fraud do not recede after the adoption of photo-identification requirements” (2015, pg. 2, see also Ansolabehere and Persily 2008, Bowler, et al. 2015). However, the United States Supreme Court, in adjudicating their constitutionality, concluded that voter ID laws were sufficiently justified by their *perceived* effect on the integrity of the election process (Ansolabehere 2009). Thus, the perception rather than the existence of fraud serves as a rationale for voter ID laws. However, voter ID and other such laws intended to combat fraud are unlikely to reduce belief in fraud (Ansolabehere 2009), and may even increase belief in illicit voter suppression (Bowler, et al. 2015, Bowler and Donovan 2016).

If widespread electoral fraud is virtually non-existent, what then leads to the development of such beliefs? Researchers have pointed to several commonly measured demographics which appear to be associated with belief in electoral fraud. These include education, gender, income, and race (Atkeson and Saunders 2007, Beaulieu 2014, Banks and Hicks 2015, Ansolabehere and Persily 2008). Additionally, Wilson and Brewer (2013) find that racial resentment and being from the South are positively correlated with belief in electoral fraud (see also Udani and Kimball 2015). Environmental factors, such as voting technology, voter experiences, voter ID laws, the candidates on the ballot, and electoral competitiveness have also been identified to either exacerbate or diminish concerns of voter fraud (Barnes and Beaulieu 2014, Bowler and Donovan 2016, Herrnson, et al. 2013). While these factors may drive belief in election fraud, we

argue that the primary causes are larger and more generalizable: motivated partisan reasoning and conspiratorial thinking. We begin with motivated partisan reasoning.

Partisanship could drive belief in electoral fraud in two critical ways. First, people are quick to form in- and out-groups and then behave in invidious ways because group categories furnish identity and self-esteem (Sherif, et al. 1961). Given positive in-group attachment, partisans may resort to motivated reasoning to view their party as acting on good intentions (Lodge and Taber 2013), while the other side is, of course, working towards immoral ends by fraudulent means (Miller, et al. 2016, Hartman and Newmark 2012, Claassen and Ensley 2016, Carlin and Love 2016). On their own, group attachments would lead to the expectation that members of both parties would suspect electoral fraud about equally, both prior to and after elections.

Second, a person's partisanship may also drive belief in voter fraud vis-à-vis the amount of power their party currently has. Politics ain't beanbag: there is considerable power at stake (particularly in presidential elections), thus there are reasons both to cheat and to expect others to cheat (Bost and Prunier 2013). Those with the power to affect resource distribution are more likely to view it as fair and just; those without such power are more likely to view current resource distribution as unfair and corrupt (Uscinski and Parent 2014, ch. 6). After the election, we therefore expect partisans on the losing side to be most likely to suspect fraud because they will feel cheated. This is consonant with a long line of studies on the tie between feelings of powerlessness and belief in conspiracy theories (e.g. Abalakina-Paap, et al. 1999, Jolley and Douglas 2014, Sutton and Douglas 2014).

If electoral loss drives belief in fraud, then we would expect that, in an environment where power switched back and forth between the two parties about equally, partisans on both

sides would exhibit beliefs about election fraud about equally over time. Existing polls largely show this pattern. However, there is a great deal of within-party heterogeneity; that is, some partisans believe in fraud while other do not. Ansolabehere and Persily (2008) suggest that the strongest predictor of belief in a particular form of election fraud is belief in other types of election fraud, which in turn implies the existence of a powerful, non-partisan predisposition. The reasoning comports with Fogarty et al.'s (2015, pg. 2) conclusion that “some people may have a penchant for believing in voter fraud.” We argue this penchant is a predisposition for interpreting events and circumstances as the product of conspiracy.

Conspiratorial Predispositions

A *conspiracy* is “a secret arrangement between two or more actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government institutions” and a *conspiracy theory* is a proposed “explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good” (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 31-32). A conspiracy theory is one possible explanation for events which may or may not be accurate, whereas a conspiracy is an agreed-upon authoritative account. As an example of an actual voter fraud conspiracy, consider an incident in the 2003 Tallahatchie County, Mississippi district supervisor runoff election. Voters were bribed with beer to cast fraudulent ballots; one perpetrator was found guilty and sentenced to prison (Snead 2015).

A conspiracy theory is not necessarily “wrong.” It is a theory, and, as such, requires evidence to support or oppose it. The evidentiary threshold, however, is a subject of much debate

(Coady 2006). Conspiracy theories are particularly thorny in that they often incorporate disconfirming evidence or the lack of confirming evidence as support. If one postulates that a powerful group is undertaking malicious activities in secret, then one would reasonably expect that evidence would be hidden and red herrings would be abundant (Keeley 1999). This epistemological trait allows theories of election fraud to escape easy refutation because the lack of evidence demonstrating fraud shows just how widespread and concealed the fraud is.

Conspiratorial predispositions or conspiratorial thinking refer to an underlying worldview in which events and circumstances are more or less the product of conspiracy (Bruder, et al. 2013, Imhoff and Bruder 2013, Brotherton, French and Pickering 2013, Lantian, et al. 2016, Lewandowsky, Gignac and Oberauer 2013, Brotherton 2015, van der Tempel and Alcock 2015, Dagnall, et al. 2015, Swami, et al. 2011, Uscinski, Klofstad and Atkinson 2016). The more a person thinks in conspiratorial terms, the more likely they will be to believe in specific conspiracy theories. For example, previous studies show that those with strong conspiratorial predispositions are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories about media bias (Uscinski, et al. 2016), scientific findings (Lewandowsky, et al. 2013), and downed airliners (Nyhan, et al. *forthcoming*). This worldview can be thought of as a bias that leads a person to view authoritative accounts as fabricated and powerful actors as conspirators (Wood, Douglas and Sutton 2012). Just as underlying political predispositions shape how people form more specific opinions, evaluate information, and choose among alternatives (Lord, Ross and Lepper 1979, Zaller 1992, Berinsky 2009, Lodge and Taber 2013), underlying conspiratorial thinking drives people to attach conspiratorial explanations to specific events and circumstances as they come to pass (Uscinski, et al. 2016). We expect that when people with strong predispositions towards conspiratorial thinking consider elections, they will be more likely to view those

elections with skepticism, expect fraud, and develop conspiratorial explanations for the outcomes.

Though academics (e.g. Hofstadter 1964) and popular commentators (e.g. Krugman 2008) have long argued that conspiracy theorizing exists mainly on the political right, this predisposition has previously been shown to be orthogonal to partisanship and left-right ideology (Uscinski and Parent 2014, Uscinski, et al. 2016). Studies also find that that Republicans and Democrats appear to believe in similar numbers of specific conspiracy theories (Miller, et al. 2016, Oliver and Wood 2014). The prevalence of election fraud conspiracy theories on both sides of the political divide gives anecdotal support to our central contention that they do not spring from a strictly partisan disposition. Instead, belief in election fraud conspiracy theories appear to emanate in part from partisanship, as previously described; however, conspiratorial predispositions exert an effect independent of party (and of general trust in government). This predisposition should therefore account for within-party heterogeneity in the holding of election fraud beliefs.

Expectations

To sum, we expect that conspiratorial predispositions will be positively associated with belief in electoral fraud, and in a similar way for supporters of both parties. However, voters, despite a receptiveness to conspiracy theories, will tend to reject the suggestion that their own party is engaged in, or has prevailed because of, fraud. Individuals will be far more open to the possibility that their opponent is trying to gain an advantage through nefarious means, and those high in conspiratorial predispositions will be the most likely to think this. Finally, while

conspiratorial predispositions form the basis for accusing opponents of fraud, this is not the only reason that one may suspect fraud. Election results will lead members of the losing party to believe fraud has contributed to the result, and members of the winning party to not.

Data and Methods

Our data come from survey responses from YouGov's 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) pre- and post-election surveys (Mann 2012, Ansolabehere 2013). Human subjects research approval was granted by the University of [REDACTED] (Protocol Number 20120757). 1230 respondents participated in the two-wave study.⁵ This pre/post design allows us to see how partisanship and conspiratorial predispositions affected individuals' assessments of the election both before and after the results were known.

Dependent Variables

We employ a unique series of survey questions to measure belief in electoral fraud. Our first two dependent variables measure belief in fraud before and after the election. In the pre-election survey, we asked, "If [respondent's preferred candidate] does not win the presidential election, how likely do you think election fraud will have been involved?" In the post-election survey, we asked, "How likely do you think election fraud was involved in the outcome of the election?" Respondents could answer both questions on a four point scale from "Very Likely" to "Very Unlikely." These two variables are labeled *Fraud if Lose* and *Fraud Affect Outcome* in Table 1. Prior to the election, 62 percent of respondents believed that a loss by their preferred candidate would be have been influenced by fraud. Once the election had occurred, 39 percent of

respondents (largely those on the losing side) thought that fraud was very or somewhat responsible for the outcome.

Our second pair of dependent variables measure belief in the use of “dirty tricks.” In the pre-election survey, we asked, “During this campaign season, both presidential campaigns have been accused of ‘dirty tricks.’ Whose campaign do you think has used dirty tricks to try to win? Choose all that apply.” In the post-election survey, we asked the same question except for a change in tense. Respondents could select “Obama's campaign,” “Democrats and outside groups supporting Obama,” “Romney's campaign,” and/or “Republicans and outside groups supporting Romney.”⁶ Respondents who did not believe dirty tricks were used selected “None.”

We condensed the responses into three categories by combining the “Obama's campaign” and “Democrats and outside groups supporting Obama” options together and the “Romney's campaign” and “Republicans and outside groups supporting Romney” options. We focus on whether the respondent believed that the opposing side engaged in dirty tricks. For Democratic identifiers and leaners, *Opponent Dirty Tricks* is coded 1 if the respondent believed that the Romney side engaged in dirty tricks and 0 otherwise. For Republicans who believed Obama or his supporters engaged in dirty tricks, the variable is coded 1 and 0 otherwise. In the pre-election survey, 85 percent of respondents who identified with or leaned toward a party believed that the opposition engaged in dirty tricks, while in the post-election survey, the figure was 84 percent. Unlike the responses to the questions about fraud contributing to the outcome of the election, these questions ask about party behavior independent of the outcome. This is why the number of people believing in dirty tricks by the opposition remains stable between the pre and post-waves.

Our fifth dependent variable, *Stop Recovery*, was asked in the pre-election survey only. It asked, “Some people believe that one of the two political parties has purposely tried to stop the

economic recovery. Which of these statements most accurately describes your views?”

Respondents could answer that Republicans, Democrats, or neither has tried to stop the recovery.

This question was asked during a time when Republicans had taken control of the House of Representatives and were accused of attempting to stop the economic recovery in order to hurt President Obama’s reelection chances (e.g. Cohen 2012). Stopping an economic recovery for electoral advantage may seem a bit different than most typical schemes people associate with electoral fraud, but it taps a similar idea: a conspiracy to hurt the public for electoral gain. This variable allows us to verify if conspiratorial predispositions are generally doing a good job of predicting conspiracy theories about party behavior by examining a different manifestation. Fifty-six percent of respondents believed one party (mostly the GOP) was stopping the recovery for political advantage.⁷

Our sixth and final dependent variable, *Voter ID*, asked, “States allow people to vote in different ways. Please rate how much you support/oppose allowing each of the following policies about voting in [respondent’s state]: Every voter must provide government issued photo identification before being allowed to vote.” There were seven response options ranging from “strongly oppose” to “strongly support.” This allows us to gauge whether conspiratorial predispositions affect policy positions regarding election fraud. Sixty-seven percent of respondents supported requiring voter identification.

Independent Variables

Our independent variable of note is labeled *Conspiratorial Predispositions*. It is a summary measure of questions intended to tap the essential elements of conspiratorial thinking: small groups working in secret to control events. This measure is an additive scale composed of

three items adapted from McClosky and Chong (1985). Agreement with each statement was measured on a five point scale running from 1 (“strongly agree”) to 5 (“strongly disagree”): “Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places,” “Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things anyway,” and “The people who really 'run' the country, are not known to the voters.” The scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .79. This measure is similar to other measures currently used to tap conspiracy thinking (Lantian, et al. 2016), and it was previously validated by Uscinski and Parent (2014) and Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson (2016).⁸

We measure party identification using a standard seven-point scale, but we operationalize it in two ways to capture its direction and intensity separately. For direction, we treat partisanship as a three category variable (Republican, Democrat, Independent), with identifiers and leaners treated as partisans. As those with stronger partisan loyalties might be more likely to believe that their side has been cheated (e.g. van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet 2015), we include a variable measuring strength of partisanship. This is coded 0 for pure independents, 1 for leaners, 2 for weak partisans, and 3 for strong partisans. We tested models with all of our dependent variables interacting partisanship and conspiratorial predispositions (not shown). The interaction terms were not statistically significant and did not improve model fit (including the model in Table 1 and the model of election cancellation discussed in note 7). The only exception is the model of support for voter ID discussed in table 4; we discuss this in note 9.

It is important to note that there are no partisan differences in conspiratorial predispositions. The mean conspiratorial predisposition score among Democrats is 0.57, while the mean among Republicans is 0.56. Nor is there any relationship between conspiratorial

predispositions and partisan strength ($r = -.07$). This suggests that conspiratorial thinking is separate from both the direction and strength of partisan attachment.

All models include several control variables. *Trust* is based on agreement with the statement, “The government can be trusted most of the time.” This variable ranges from 0 to 1, in 0.25 increments. The correlation between conspiratorial predispositions and distrust of government is only .24, suggesting that even if conspiratorial predispositions are related to trust in government, they are nonetheless distinct. If the effects of conspiratorial predispositions remain significant even when trust in government is included in our models, this suggests that they have an effect on belief about election fraud distinct from conventional trust measures. *Education* is coded from 0 (less than high school) to 1 (postgraduate degree), with each higher level of education increasing the score by 0.2. *Age* is the respondent’s age. *Female* and *Black* indicate whether the respondent is female or black, respectively. *Political Interest* is a measure of interest in political news, also coded from 0 to 1 in increments of one third. All models, except for the ordered logit models, have state fixed effects in order to capture unspecified aspects of states (e.g., culture, competitiveness, history of real or perceived corruption) that may alternatively explain beliefs in election-related conspiracies. Issues with estimating standard errors forced us to remove state fixed effects from the ordered logit models; however, including them does not substantially affect the magnitude or direction of our coefficients of interest.

Results

We begin by examining the determinants of belief in electoral fraud, specifically whether fraud would be to blame if the respondent’s preferred candidate were to lose (or in the post-

election wave, did lose) the election. Again, respondents may agree or disagree strongly or weakly. We report the results of two ordered logistic regression models in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Prior to the election, conspiratorial predispositions strongly predict the belief that if one's candidate were to lose, that fraud would have been involved. The magnitude of this effect is substantial. Holding other variables at typical values and combining the two "agree" categories, a shift across the range of conspiratorial predispositions increases the probability of blaming a potential defeat on fraud by from 33 to 81 percent, with most of the change occurring in the "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree" categories. Figure 1 provides a closer look at the strong effects of conspiratorial predispositions on belief in fraud. For ease of interpretation, we focus on the two extreme categories, "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree," in the figures. The solid line shows that respondents are less likely to strongly disagree that fraud would be a factor in the outcome as they become more conspiratorially minded. The dotted line shows that the likelihood of strongly agreeing increases dramatically as conspiratorial predispositions increase.

Conspiratorial predispositions are powerful enough to convince voters that fraud is the cause of unfavorable outcomes.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Our other key explanatory variable, party identification, predicts little in this model. Democrats are somewhat more likely than independents to fall into one of the two "agree" categories. All else equal, the difference is about 11 percentage points. But, this effect pales in comparison with that of conspiratorial predispositions, and the difference between Democrats and Republicans is small and not statistically significant. It is worth noting that the effect of *Trust* is significant and negative, signifying that greater trust in government leads to less belief in

fraud. While the effects of trust are substantial – a shift across the range of this variable leads to a predicted 17 percentage point shift in the belief in fraud – this is much smaller than the effect of conspiratorial predispositions.

The second model in Table 1 addresses the belief that fraud affected the outcome. Again, *Conspiratorial Predispositions* has a statistically and substantively significant effect, though it is smaller than in the pre-election question. All else equal, among Republicans, a move from the lowest to the highest value results in a predicted 35 percentage point increase across the two “agree” categories of the dependent variable. Among independents, the predicted effect size is 19 percentage points; among Democrats, it is 11.⁹ The effect on the two “strong” categories is highlighted in Figure 2, which shows that conspiratorial predispositions have a distinctive effect in reducing strong disagreement.

Also, Republicans and Democrats lurch, as expected, in opposite directions. Because Obama won reelection, Democrats are less likely to believe there was fraud involved in the victory while Republicans become more convinced of fraud because their candidate lost. Holding all other variables, including conspiratorial predispositions, at their means or medians, pure independents are 16 percentage points more likely to strongly or somewhat agree than are Democrats, and Republicans are 51 percentage points more likely to agree than are Democrats.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

In Table 2 we examine the determinants of the belief that the opposing candidate or party committed “dirty tricks.” In these models, we discard pure independents, because for these voters, there is no “opposing party.” Despite the fact that this question does not require an unusually large level of suspicion of the electoral process (accusations of “dirty tricks” by both sides are routine, and over 80 percent of respondents in both the pre- and post-election surveys

believed the other side engaged in them), conspiratorial predispositions strongly predict belief in the use of dirty tricks in both the pre- and post-election waves.

[Insert Table 2 here]

In the pre-election survey, moving across the range of conspiratorial predispositions leads to an increase in the predicted probability of believing the other side engaged in dirty tricks from 71 percent to 91 percent for Democrats and from 81 percent to 95 percent for Republicans. In the post-election, the effect holds steady for Democrats, 70 to 89, and for Republicans, 85 to 95. This again shows that partisans engage in motivated reasoning by alleging that their opponents took part in some sort of trickery, and those high on the conspiratorial predispositions scale are even more likely to allege such dirty tricks.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

We next examine the determinants in belief that one of the parties attempted to stop the economic recovery. As respondents were asked whether Democrats, Republicans, or neither party tried to stop the recovery, we estimated a multinomial logistic regression model in which “Neither” is the omitted category. Unsurprisingly, partisanship is the strongest predictor. Holding all other variables constant, a Democrat is predicted to have a 70 percent probability of believing the Republicans tried to stop the recovery, whereas a similar Republican would have only a 4 percent probability of believing this. While Republicans were more likely than Democrats to believe that Democrats tried to stop the recovery, the predicted probability is only 17 percent. The strategic environment of the 2012 election meant that Democrats had little to gain and much to lose by deliberately sabotaging the economy. Therefore, while Democrats accused the Republicans of trying to stop the recovery, Republicans generally believed that neither party did so. Independents were most likely to believe that neither side attempted the recovery, with

predicted probabilities of 30 percent and 6 percent, respectively, for the belief that Republicans and Democrats did so.

That the effects of partisanship are so strong does not mean that conspiratorial positions play no role. Indeed, a Democrat who consistently rejects conspiratorial thinking is predicted to have a 42 percent probability of believing Republicans tried to stop the recovery; for one who consistently embraces it, the number increases to 85 percent. Republicans on the low end of the conspiracy scale have only a 6 percent probability of believing that Democrats tried to stop the recovery; for those on the high end, the probability rises fivefold to 34 percent. For independents, the probability of believing that one of the parties tried to stop the recovery increases from 14 to 59 percent.

[Insert Table 4 here]

Table 4 moves from examining beliefs in electoral fraud to examining the determinants of support for policy, specifically voter identification laws, which are intended to stop some types of fraud. The model shows that conspiratorial predispositions do not have a significant effect on this policy opinion. Instead, partisanship is the most important determinant. All else equal, a Democrat is predicted to have a 51 percent probability of supporting voter ID laws (including a 30 percent probability of strongly supporting them) and a 32 percent probability of opposing (21 percent strongly opposing). A similar independent would have a 71 percent probability of support (50 percent probability of strongly supporting) and a 17 percent probability of opposition (11 percent probability of strongly opposing). For a Republican, the figures are 89 percent support (78 percent probability of strongly supporting) and 6 percent oppose (3 percent probability of strongly opposing). This finding suggests that mass opinion for or against election policy *are* largely organized by partisan elites (e.g. Wilson and Brewer 2013,

Fogarty, et al. 2015) who, in this case, have taken distinct positions for and against such laws. As such, non-conspiratorial Republicans may be likely to support voter ID laws because they have been prompted to do so by their partisan opinion leaders.¹⁰

[Insert Figure 4 here]

Figure 4 looks at which specific forms of fraud partisans suspect. We asked those in the post-election survey who said that fraud was either “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to have affected the outcome which type of fraud they believed occurred.¹¹ Because Republicans were far more likely to believe fraud occurred than were Democrats after the election, 248 Republicans answered this question, while only 55 Democrats did so. Nonetheless, there are striking differences between the two parties which correspond to previous findings (e.g. Ansolabehere and Persily 2008). Republicans are significantly more likely than Democrats to see bribery and false identity as likely, while Democrats are significantly more likely than Republicans to see voter suppression and intimidation as more likely. Indeed, only three percent of Republicans who answered this question gave a response in that category. Members of the two parties do not show significant differences in terms of their belief that the vote counting or voting machines were used in fraud.

Discussion & Conclusion

Political scientists have shown a strong interest in conspiracy theories of late (Miller, et al. 2016, Oliver and Wood 2014, Berinsky 2015, Einstein and Glick 2014). Beliefs in electoral fraud posit a small group of people working for their benefit at the expense of the common good. Therefore, we argue that beliefs in electoral fraud should be considered and analyzed similar to

beliefs in other conspiracy theories. In addition, given the lack of evidence that widespread fraud occurs in US elections, beliefs in electoral fraud are epistemically unwarranted, and conflict with authoritative accounts of election outcomes. For example, historical evidence suggests that accusations of voter fraud have been prominent for as far as records go back. A study of letters to the editor of *The New York Times* from 1890 to 2010 shows that nearly every election is called into question by the disgruntled (Uscinski and Parent 2014, pg. 59, 67). To wit, belief in fraud is not correlated with actual fraud (Fogarty, et al. 2015).

American elections are supposed to be free and fair, but politics is a high-stakes game, so partisans suspect each other of dishonest tactics in their efforts to win elections, and efforts to curb such tactics are met with skepticism. Laws with the stated purpose of reducing cheating, such as voter ID laws, have not increased confidence in elections (Bowler and Donovan 2016). Indeed, mutual partisan distrust has created something of a security dilemma, in which attempts to curb suspected cheating are met with more accusations of cheating (Uscinski and Parent 2014, pg. 92):

Democrats, responding to the belief that their voters had been suppressed in 2000 and 2004, made herculean efforts at voter registration and mobilization in 2008 and 2012. Republicans saw these efforts as an attempt to commit voter fraud by stuffing ballot boxes. Responding to this perception, Republican governors and legislatures across the states attempted to institute tougher restrictions on voting, including requiring voter identification. In response, Democrats have accused Republicans of manufacturing phony assertions of voter fraud as part of a wide-ranging conspiracy to curtail Democratic voters' access to the polls. This spiral of hostility is bound to continue.

Our analysis shows that a predisposition towards conspiratorial thinking has a consistent and statistically significant influence on beliefs in electoral fraud. This research was designed so it can test the common argument that complaints of fraud are motivated primarily by partisanship (or perhaps by a deficit of general trust of in government). Yet, we find consistent evidence

supporting the role of conspiracy predispositions even when controlling for partisan preferences, strength of partisanship, and trust in government. In some instances, partisanship plays a larger role and in others conspiratorial predispositions do. For example, partisanship takes on a larger role following the announcement of a winner (see Table 1): losers are motivated to believe in fraud while winners are not. However, conspiratorial thinking explains more when we ask respondents prior to the election to consider what might be the cause of an unfavorable outcome (Tables 1 & 2).

We find beliefs in electoral fraud span parties, gender, and race. However, some contend that belief in fraud is asymmetrical between the two parties. For example, according to Jonathan Chait of the *New Republic*, “left-wing electoral conspiracy theories are almost completely marginal...whereas the right-wing equivalent enjoys mainstream support” (2007). Chait expresses a view that is not supported by our data or by other recent polls. While there is a situational component (winning or losing) that drives losing parties to cry foul, both parties are about equally conspiratorial in their view before the results are known.

A reason that some may see asymmetry between the two parties in electoral fraud beliefs is that each party is concerned about different types of fraud. Republicans are worried that some people (Democratic voters) will cast ballots they should not (or otherwise would not have), while Democrats are concerned that some people (Democratic voters) will not be able to cast ballots that they are democratically entitled to cast. Future scholarship addressing belief in election fraud should be careful not to portray the parties as asymmetrical by focusing on only one form of belief in fraud.

Our analysis suggests that both parties are equally concerned about fraud, largely due to underlying conspiratorial thinking, and electoral losers tend to be convinced of it, largely

because of motivated partisan reasoning. Given this, the factors that drive belief in voter fraud do not appear to be evidence-driven. The Supreme Court previously upheld voter ID laws on the basis that they may help combat belief in fraud rather than actual fraud. Given the potential for targeted disenfranchisement (Barreto, et al. 2009), neither conspiratorial thinking nor motivated partisan reasoning should form the basis of election policy. Furthermore, even though voter ID laws receive substantial support in the aggregate (75 percent) and a majority of support in every state (Alvarez, et al. 2011), such policies fail to instill broad-based confidence where they have been implemented (Bowler and Donovan 2016). Conspiratorial thinking is difficult to combat, and it is unlikely that corrective techniques (Nyhan and Reifler 2010) or policy (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009) would significantly reduce beliefs about electoral fraud. Widespread skepticism has its benefits in an open society. It alerts people to potential dangers and keeps the powerful honest. However, it can have unhealthy results if conspiracy theories become the basis for public policy.

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¹ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/2188/black-americans-feel-cheated-election-2000.aspx>

² http://www.gallup.com/poll/2176/Florida-Recount-Controversy-From-Publics-Perspective-Insights.aspx?g_source=election%202000%20fraud&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles

³ http://www.gallup.com/poll/2293/Most-Americans-Will-Accept-Election-Outcome-Republicans-Less-Conc.aspx?g_source=2000%20election%20recount&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/page/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2012/08/12/National-Politics/Polling/question_6227.xml?uuid=Rvao1OQZEeGJ93biOpgtBg#

https://www.washingtonpost.com/page/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2012/08/12/National-Politics/Polling/question_6228.xml?uuid=ah3rLuQZEeGJ93biOpgtBg

⁵ YouGov maintains panels of individuals who volunteer to complete surveys over the Internet. The subset of participants included in the data set was selected using YouGov's matched random sample methodology. This method entailed two steps. First, a representative target sampling frame of U.S. Citizens was created using demographic data from a variety of sources, including the 2010 American Community Survey, the 2008 and 2010 Current Population Surveys, and the 2007 Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Survey. Second, for each member of the target sample, at least one member from the pool of opt-in participants was selected for inclusion in the data set. This matching process was based on the following variables: sex, age, race, years of education, interest in politics, employment status, Evangelical or born again Christian status, marital status, partisanship, and ideology. The result is a data set comprised of participants who have the same measured characteristics as the target sample.

⁶ The response options were randomized.

⁷ In addition to these reported survey questions, we also asked respondents in the pre-election survey if they believed the upcoming presidential election would be cancelled. Regardless of partisanship and conspiratorial predispositions, very few respondents (6 percent) believed the election would be cancelled. This suggests that both conspiratorial predispositions and partisanship have their limits in driving more outlandish and obscure conspiracy beliefs.

⁸ To assess the validity of our conspiratorial predispositions scale we also asked respondents to select from a list which groups they felt “work in secret against the rest of us.” The list included “corporations and the rich,” “Republicans or other conservative groups,” “Democrats or other liberal groups,” “Communists and Socialists,” “the government,” “Foreign countries,” “International Organizations (e.g. United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank),” “the Freemasons, or some other fraternal group,” “labor unions,” and “some other group.” We expect that if our measure of conspiratorial predispositions is valid, those higher on the conspiratorial predispositions measure will identify more groups. A bivariate negative binomial regression analysis indicates exactly this: our conspiratorial thought measure is positively correlated with the number of groups selected ($b = 316, p < .001$). Substantively, an increase in the predisposition measure from its minimum to its maximum is correlated with an increase of about 3 groups.

⁹ Interaction terms between the partisanship categories and conspiratorial predispositions were not significant and did not improve the fit of the model. This is the case for all models except the Voter ID models in Table 5; therefore, we do not discuss models incorporating these interactions except in that case.

¹⁰ Trust in government is inversely related to support for voter ID laws, though the effect is modest; an individual who reports being completely trusting of the government is only about ten

percentage points less likely to support voter ID laws than one who is completely distrustful. As mentioned in the previous note, the Voter ID model is the only one in which a partisanship-conspiratorial predispositions interaction is significant or improves model fit. In this model, conspiratorial predispositions has a positive effect, but only among Democrats. Surprisingly, they greatly reduce the predicted probability that independents or Republicans support voter ID laws. Perhaps conspiratorial predispositions are promoting skepticism of the position taken by the elites of one's party.

¹¹ Respondents could choose from "Bribery or paying for votes," "Someone being improperly denied the chance to vote," "Intimidation at the polling place," "Cheating in the counting of votes," "Voting machines failing to record votes correctly," or "Someone using a false identity to vote illegally." As there are six response options broken down across two parties, and few Democrats were asked this question, we combined responses into three categories. The first and last responses listed were combined into the category "Bribery/ID;" the fourth and fifth into "Counting/Machines," and the second and third into "Suppression/Intimidation." We argue that the two responses within each category are broadly similar; the "Bribery/ID" category involves cheating through illegal or improperly-influenced votes; the second involves fraud in the way votes are counted, and the third involves the suppression of the right to vote.

Table 1: Fraud Affecting Election Results. Coefficients are from ordered logistic regressions; standard errors in parentheses.

	Model 1	Model 2
	Fraud if Lose	Fraud Affect Outcome
Conspiratorial Predispositions	2.161*** (0.323)	1.237*** (0.328)
Democrat	-0.651* (0.327)	-1.051** (0.329)
Republican	-0.392 (0.326)	1.330*** (0.322)
Strength of Partisanship	0.183* (0.091)	0.103 (0.088)
Trust	-0.728* (0.301)	-1.571*** (0.309)
Education	-0.113 (0.231)	-0.558* (0.243)
Age	0.011** (0.004)	-0.003 (0.005)
Female	0.223 (0.137)	0.061 (0.146)
Black	0.373 (0.229)	-0.441 (0.297)
Interest	0.824*** (0.245)	0.720** (0.277)
Observations	736	810
AIC	1940.84	1758.30
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001	

Table 2: Dirty Tricks. Logistic regression with state fixed effects; standard errors in parentheses.

	Opponent Party Tricks	
	Pre	Post
Conspiratorial Predispositions	1.400** (0.499)	1.308* (0.544)
Republican	0.539* (0.238)	0.911*** (0.267)
Strength of Partisanship	0.279* (0.133)	0.130 (0.142)
Trust	-1.096* (0.464)	-1.622** (0.519)
Education	0.513 (0.349)	0.903* (0.372)
Age	0.011 (0.006)	0.020** (0.007)
Female	0.088 (0.214)	-0.707** (0.234)
Black	0.467 (0.369)	0.497 (0.377)
Interest	1.827*** (0.318)	1.003** (0.351)
Constant	14.375 (1,096.469)	0.144 (1.365)
Observations	989	827
AIC	751.05	709.01
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001	

Table 3: Stop Recovery. Multinomial logistic regression with state fixed effects; standard errors in parentheses.

	D (vs. None)	R (vs. None)
Conspiratorial Predispositions	2.245*** (0.512)	2.120*** (0.497)
Democrat	-1.450** (0.490)	1.541*** (0.405)
Republican	0.405 (0.430)	-2.457*** (0.484)
Strength of Partisanship	0.372** (0.138)	0.136 (0.133)
Trust	-0.874 (0.453)	0.625 (0.434)
Education	-0.309 (0.372)	1.108*** (0.326)
Age	-0.001 (0.007)	0.017** (0.006)
Female	0.167 (0.213)	-0.246 (0.199)
Black	-0.918 (0.696)	0.461 (0.296)
Interest	1.069** (0.377)	1.977*** (0.308)
Constant	-5.209*** (1.550)	-7.284*** (0.891)
Observations	1095	
AIC	1648.64	
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001	

Table 4: Voter ID. Ordered logistic regression; standard errors in parentheses.

	Voter ID
Conspiratorial Predispositions	-0.382 (0.300)
Democrat	-0.894*** (0.255)
Republican	1.174*** (0.265)
Strength of Partisanship	0.056 (0.083)
Trust	-0.564* (0.270)
Education	-0.417* (0.208)
Age	-0.00003 (0.004)
Female	0.109 (0.123)
Black	0.043 (0.192)
Interest	-0.410* (0.201)
Observations	1071
Log Likelihood	3023.00
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

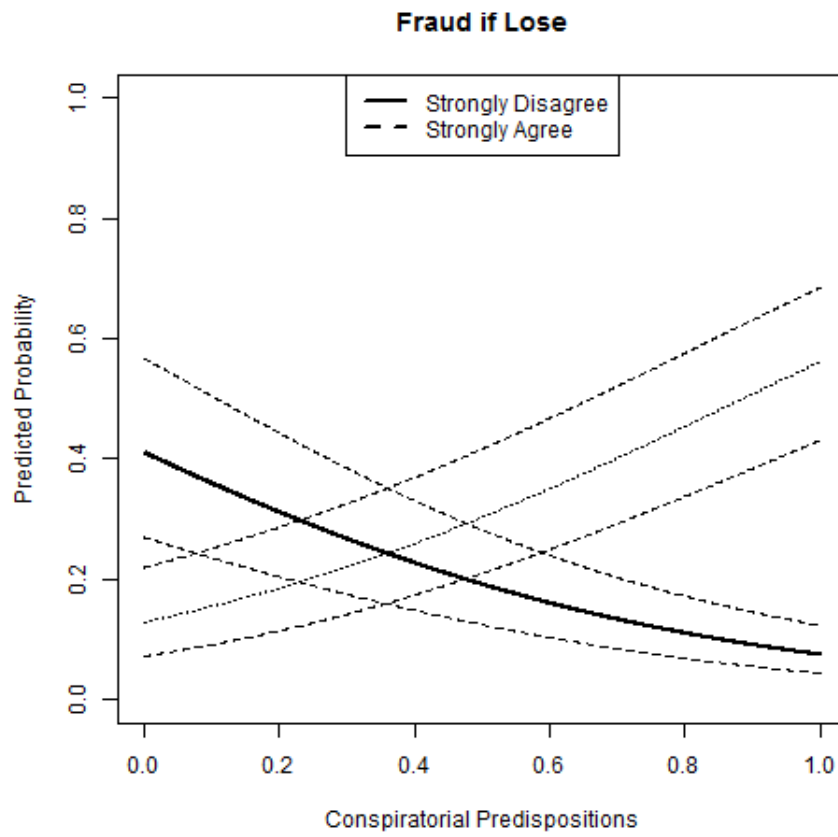


Figure 1: Fraud if Lose. Dashed lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

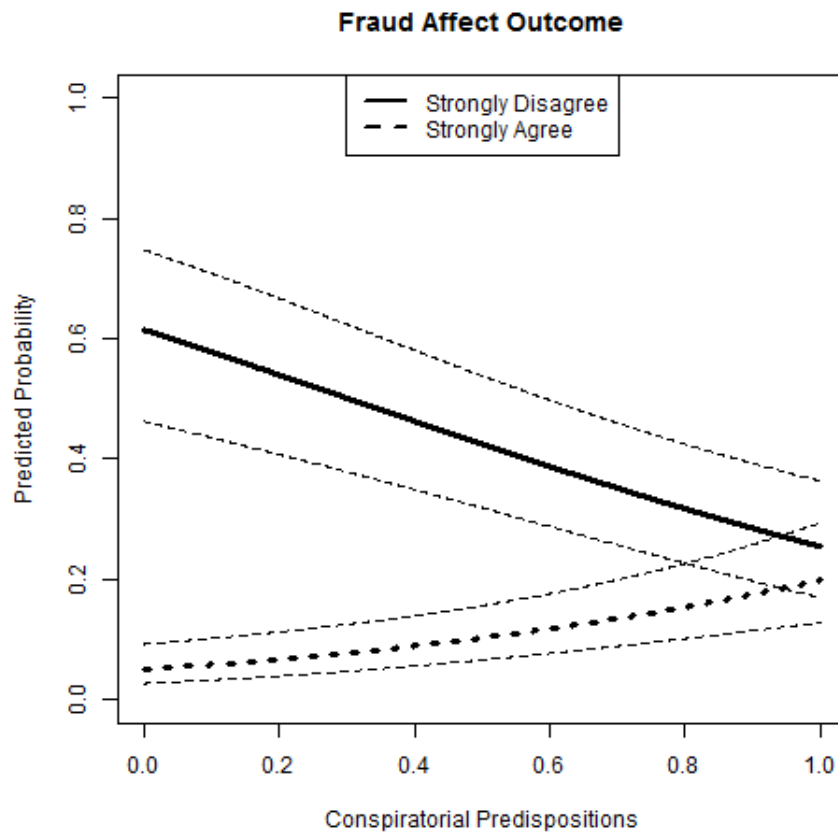


Figure 2: Fraud Affect Outcome. Dashed lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

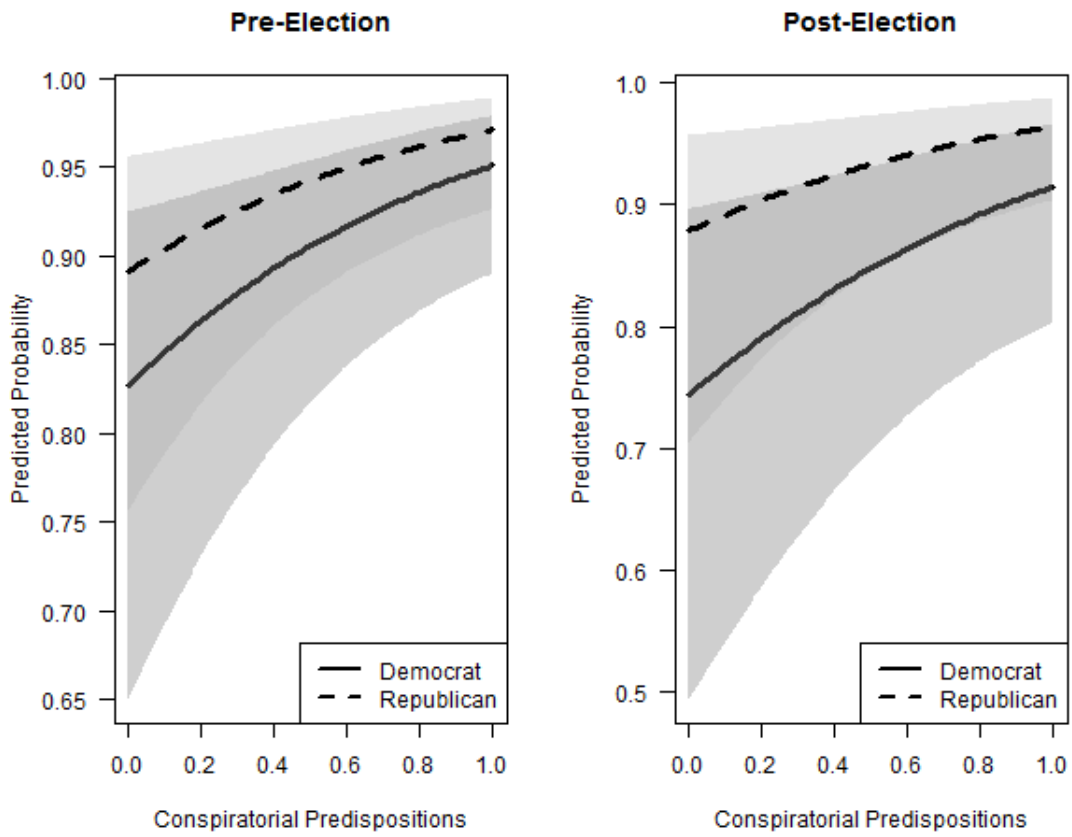


Figure 3: Opponent Dirty Tricks. Shaded regions indicate 95% confidence intervals.

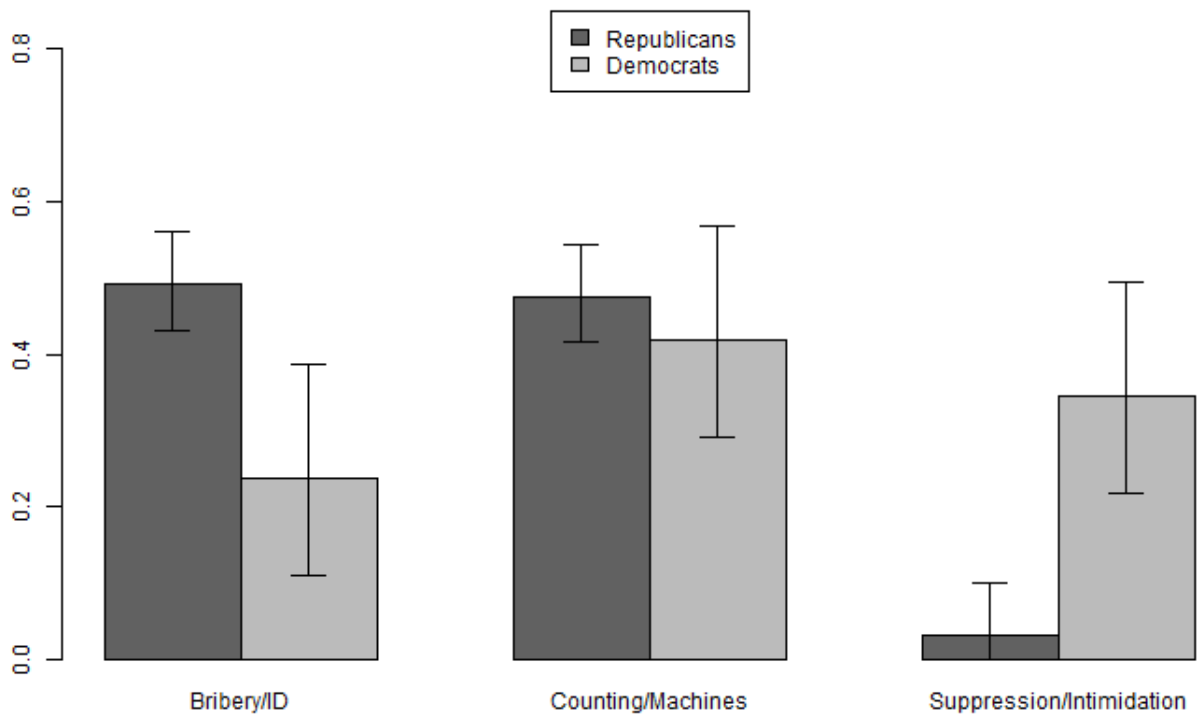


Figure 4: Most Important Type of Fraud, by Party. $N=248$ for Republicans, $N=55$ for Democrats. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.