

How Do Local Certification Officials Evaluate Their Elections? A Survey of Michigan County Canvassers

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Abstract

Recent local refusals to certify elections have highlighted the peculiar and politically-charged role local certification officials potentially play within our election administration process. Yet, little is known about these officials. What type of people serve on local canvassing boards? Are they national partisan activists? What do they think about elections? We report the initial results of a voter-file matching and survey of Michigan county canvassers, a mail-to-web survey conducted over the spring of 2025. Across both parties, county canvassers in Michigan are relatively older females, who have lived in their community over ten years longer than a typical county resident. Using the 2020 and 2022 SPAE surveys of Michigan voters as a comparison, we find canvasser opinions on elections and partisan officials largely replicate state partisan difference except in one key area: beliefs of local election fraud. Republican canvassers believe rates of election fraud are much rarer even compared to Democratic voters in the state, likely because they positively perceive their role in the process.

Recent elections demonstrate the peculiar role local certification boards and officials play as a focal point for election disputes and disbelief. Although rare, local refusals to certify elections have grown in prominence across recent federal elections (Clark 2023). And battleground states like Georgia and Michigan introduced laws to either empower or restrict local certification officials' right to conduct independent inquiries (Eisen and Boone 2024a).

Despite partisan and news media attention on these boards as political battlegrounds, scholarly understanding of certification and certification boards is notably sparse. Legal scholars have been active in summarizing legal battles over certification (Gimian 2025; Miller and Wilder 2024), but social science studies of the boards themselves are lacking. In their textbook review of the scholarly literature on administering elections, Hale, Montjoy, and Brown (2015, 22) "found no research on certification" outside of studies focusing on electoral challenges. And, even among these studies, the central focus of certification studies is on reviewing recount disputes or court rulings on disputes post *Bush v. Gore* (e.g., Braden and Tucker 2014; Hasen 2007; Schragger 2002). Outside of some studies of provisional ballots, which may or may not involve local certification boards (e.g., Shino, Suttman-Lea, and Smith 2022), the characteristics and beliefs of local certification officials are missing from election administration research.

We report the initial results of a study that seeks to understand who serves on local canvassing boards and what do they think about elections. What is their background? Do they largely reflect the opinions of the people, activist partisans, or local election officials? How do they evaluate their role in the process? We sought to address these questions by identifying Michigan county canvassers in the state voter file and then sending them a mail-to-web survey conducted over the spring of 2025. Our initial focus of this study is to report how Michigan canvassers view elections compared to partisan voters living in the state, by comparing the results of our survey to a set of questions also available on the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAЕ, Stewart 2021, 2023).

After placing Michigan county certification boards in the national landscape, we present the initial findings of our survey. Although not as extreme as Michigan voters in the SPAЕ, we find that Republican and Democratic canvassers largely mimic partisan differences across the state in terms

of their beliefs in election accuracy, trust in governing officials, and support for specific election reforms. Despite these similarities, party canvassers are a clear outlier in one key area: their beliefs about rates of election fraud. Republican and Democrat canvassers are much less likely to believe acts of voter fraud occur in their county compared to partisan voter averages. Although preliminary, these findings suggest that appointed certification officials who serve with limited scope are willing to prioritize their local knowledge and experience over partisan narratives when formulating their beliefs about elections.

Local certification and nationalized partisan politics

The nationalized partisan focus on local certification has produced a mismatch in popular perceptions of the political role and nature of these boards. From an institutional perspective, local certification is largely inconsequential for federal and state elections; state boards are the ultimate authority on multi-jurisdiction counts. However, they remain very important for the certification of elections within their jurisdictions. Even with these limitations, national partisan interests have promoted them as politically important in presidential or statewide elections, bringing pressure (or temptation) on these boards to act as if they are the frontline for national partisan disputes. This dynamic has most recently been associated with Trump-supporting Republicans. But, from a broader viewpoint, the obscure and localized nature of the certification process makes it especially vulnerable to getting entangled in nationalized party politics.

Notably, partisan actors advocate different political and legal arguments concerning the rights and responsibilities of local certifying boards depending on the political context. Al Gore pushed for Florida counties to recount ballots before certifying in 2000, and George W. Bush fought efforts by Florida county boards to conduct recounts. The conservative majority of the Supreme Court in *Bush v. Gore* ultimately halted Florida's recount, partially on the basis that county variations in methods and standards violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (Schragger 2002).

Twenty years later and partisan sentiments on local certification have switched. In 2020, Republican members of the Wayne County Canvassing Board (which includes Detroit, Michigan) initially

refused to certify the canvass, but then did certify after two hours of citizen testimony and a conciliatory motion. President Trump, seeking to perpetuate claims of local malfeasance in election administration in Democratic areas, then personally pressured the two Republican representatives to change their vote (Mauger 2023). The actions of these canvassers were then cited in court cases arguing for the reversal of the state certified results.¹

Local refusals to certify saw a notable increase in 2022, across states like Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania, in what is largely seen as a Republican effort to discredit elections (Clark 2023; Gimian 2025; Miller and Wilder 2024). But partisans on both sides sought to change the laws in anticipation of local certification fights before 2024. Georgia Republicans on the State Election Board passed a “Reasonable Inquiry Rule” that expressly allowed counties to conduct inquiries into the accuracy of their results before certification, only to be struck down by the state courts (Cole 2024). Liberals succeeded in Michigan by proposing an expansive constitutional amendment which voters passed in 2022. The amendment included language limiting local county boards to only ministerial duties along with a huge package of popular early voting measures.

The threat of local certification of the 2024 presidential election being disrupted by partisan politics looked near certain early in 2024. Counties in Nevada and Michigan saw local boards refuse to certify spring elections (LeBlanc 2024; May 2024). Think-tank and news reports pushed impressions that Republicans were empowering election deniers and placing them on local boards (Eisen and Boone 2024b; Mauger 2024; May and Huey-Burns 2024). And legal groups like the ACLU filed preemptive lawsuits against canvasser who suggested an unwillingness to certify the election (Harding 2024). The clarity of 2024 November election ultimately produced a relatively quiet 2024 certification process. But legal battles over the prior local certification disputes, means that states continue to face partisan-charged disputes over the discretion local canvassers should and can have in certifying elections (Fifield 2025).

1. See, for instance, paragraphs 99-101 in *State of Texas v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, State of Georgia, State of Michigan, and State of Wisconsin*.

Are local certification officials nationalized partisans?

Despite the quiet certification process of the 2024 presidential election, the unknown fears entering that election still deserve scholarly attention. Journalist portrayals of local certification boards since 2020 identify an institution vulnerable to Republican activists who were eager to deny unfavorable election outcomes and fight for a Trump win at all costs (Clark 2023; Eisen and Boone 2024b; May and Huey-Burns 2024). But is this the case? Do local certification officials view elections more like national partisans or the local election officials whose work they oversee?

There is no clear theoretical or evidential basis to decipher claims that local certifying officials are more prone to act as nationalized partisan through either incentives or composition.² On a theoretical basis, it is fair to assume local partisan appointees act in a partisan manner. This tendency has likely strengthened as local partisan divides increasingly match national partisan and ideological divides (Warshaw 2019). But national and local partisan interests are not uniform and can still conflict (Anzia 2021). Partisans must preside over a county canvass where the party faces little cost from dissent. In many instances, the local election official is also a prominent, elected official of the same party of the board's majority in the jurisdiction.

The nature of local certification boards greatly differs across the states across multiple factors, including whether they are appointed or elected, appointed at the state or local level, or the partisan nature of their composition.³ These variations belie generalizations. Table 1 provides a glimpse of the variability in composition and features to local certification boards by comparing a few core features across the top seven battleground states of the 2024 presidential campaign. Multiple variations exist across the nature of partisan power, the basis of appointment, the role of the LEO, and the scope of these boards.

2. For instance, Mauger (2024) reported that over 50% of Republican canvassers had been replaced since the 2020 election, and quoted expert concerns this was a strategic political act to put in Trump loyalists. But, by Michigan law, all of Republican canvassers would have had their terms expire, and there is no known past rate of replacement of canvassers who are locally appointed to four-year terms.

3. For example, local certification officials vary by whether they: are locally elected representatives by the entire jurisdiction (e.g., Alabama); locally elected, district-based representatives (e.g., Texas); state executive or state-board appointed representatives (e.g., North Carolina); state appointed local judges (e.g., Delaware); locally appointed representatives (e.g., New York); and even whether they are unitary actors (e.g., Oregon).

Table 1. Variation in Local Certifying Board Composition by Battleground State

State	Certifying Board	Number	Selection	Partisan Power	Election-specific	LEO Role
Arizona	County Supervisors	3 or 5	Elected by County	Local majority	No	Non-voting
Georgia	County Board of Elections	3 or 5	Appointed by County Commissioners	State majority	Yes	Non-voting
Michigan	Board of County Canvassers	4	Appointed by County Commissioners	Local balance	Yes	Non-voting
Nevada	County Commissioners	3, 5, or 7	Elected by County	Local majority	No	Non-voting, but certifies [#]
North Carolina	County Board of Elections	5	Appointed/Approved by Gov. and State BOE	State majority	Yes	Non-voting
Pennsylvania	County Board of Elections	3	Served/Appointed by County Commissioners	Local majority	Yes	Non-voting
Wisconsin	County Canvassing Board	3	Clerk elected Clerk appoints other 2	Local majority	Yes	Voting

[#] - Nevada county commissioners conduct and finalize the canvass, but the clerk officially certifies the vote of the commissioners. State majorities are based on the party receiving most votes for governor.

States like Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and Pennsylvania have seen multiple local certification disputes. It is possible they are more prone to certification disputes because they each rely on their locally elected, general legislative body of county supervisors or commissioners to canvass and certify. But it is unclear if these disputes signify their beliefs about all elections or just statewide elections. These officials may be more willing to fight certification battles in statewide elections to score partisan points among their local electorate but much less likely to do so for their own local elections. And in other battleground states, like Georgia, Michigan, and North Carolina, local partisans serve on specific certification boards with limited scope and a near-constant working relationship with the local election official. It may be state or local election officials are the dominant force driving their selection. Partisans in these states who failed to certify in 2020 or 2022 have not been reappointed. And in Wisconsin, which has failed to have a prominent local dispute, the county clerk serves on the board and appoints the canvassers from both parties to serve with them.

Moreover, although we have some idea of the composition and nature of directly elected county commissioners (e.g., Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020; Kellogg et al. 2019), a majority of local certification officials are unelected partisans who are appointed to serve on a board specific to election canvassing or, more broadly, elections. Much of this work is more so civic than political in nature and outside the public's attention. The relative obscurity of certification and the limited role it plays does not obviously attract a set of partisan activist appointees into its ranks.

Studying Michigan County Canvassers

With no clear expectations, we examine county canvassers in a single state, Michigan, to answer whether local certification officials view elections in anyway different from typical partisan in their state that they represent.

A study of Michigan canvassers offers some unique advantages. First, it is state where nationalized party activists had both the motivation and ease of opportunity to serve on county canvassing boards. As a presidential battleground state, Michigan's local certification has been under intense national partisan scrutiny since 2020, being one of the few states to witness repeated local efforts

to refuse certification across 2020 and 2024 (Mauger 2023; LeBlanc 2024). The state's open primary system and low turnout August primary allowed grassroots activists to effectively take over local and state party following 2020, with an outspoken 2022 election-denier taking over in 2023 (Corasaniti 2023; Oosting 2023). Since canvassing board members are, by law, nominated by the local party committee and approved by the local county commission for four-year terms, local party activists likely had sufficient support to receive appointment. And news reports of the high rate of replacement among Republican canvassers entering the 2024 election suggested as much (Mauger 2024).

Second, compared to other states, Michigan's local certification structure offers benefits for comparing across parties. Outside of New York, Michigan is the only other state where county canvassing boards are balanced by partisanship; both Republicans and Democratic canvassers have equal power and opportunity within the county canvassing board. This means that we can eliminate differences in power or responsibility as an explanation for partisan differences in opinions. They all operate within a similar power structure and role.

Although these canvassers may not have the electoral incentive to be partisan compared to certifying officials in states that have the county board act as canvassers (e.g., Arizona and Pennsylvania). Michigan's board is more representative of the majority of states that have locally appointed certification boards. They are also very localized and separate from public accountability, since each county appoints canvassers without state party or government approval. In summary, we believe this case provides a reflective case of what would happen to local certification for a majority of states if they were to be placed under the scrutiny of national party pressures.

Comparing County Canvassers to County Residents in Michigan Voter File

Our study population Michigan county canvassers who served during the 2024 election who were still registered in the state in February 2025.⁴ The Michigan Constitution requires each of the 83 counties in Michigan have at least a four-member county canvassing board, with each party holding two seats. Iron County appoints six official board members to serve to ensure at least three members

4. By law, Michigan county canvasser terms start in the November of odd-numbered years, so all canvassers on appointment in 2024 were still serving in Spring of 2025. A few canvassers, however, died or resigned from their position because they moved.

(and at least one of each party) attend a canvass meeting. As a result, there are approximately 334 county canvassing board officials in Michigan. Of those, we were able to identify the names and addresses of 312 from county directories or through email and phone correspondence with local county officials. And among those 312, we were clearly able to match 308 individuals within the Michigan Qualified Voter File (QVF) and identify a mailing address, although one since passed away following the 2024 election.

We first sought to get a sense of how representative county canvassers are of their county by comparing them to the typical registered voter in their county. On average, county canvassing board members are generally more likely to be female (66%), older (71.2 years of age) and have been registered voters in their current community since the 2000 general election. Not surprisingly, these rates of age and residency are higher compared to the registered voters in their county. Canvassers are typically about 17 years older than the median county registered voter and have lived at about 11 years longer, typically placing them around the 75th percentile among registered voters by age and years of residency. Differences in income by zip code are minor; canvassers live in zip codes with an median family income of \$66,610, which is about \$520 more than the median household income zip for the average voter in their county.

Figure 1 compares these calculations by political party and to show their canvassers are mostly similar. Democrats are slightly older and Republicans have resided in their community slightly longer, but both groups of canvassers are over 15 years older and have lived 10 years longer in the same community compared to the typical registered voter in their county. Democrat canvassers live in slightly poorer zip codes compared to the typical county voter (by about \$1163) and Republican canvassers live in slightly richer zip codes (by about \$2170). Although not shown, both Republicans and Democrat canvassers are disproportionately female (63% and 68% respectively).

Beyond being predominately female, older, and having lived in their community longer, county canvassers from both parties are also much more likely to vote compared to registered voters in the county. Figure 2 shows that canvassers typically turnout at over a 90% rate for every statewide election, and approach nearly 100% turnout rates for the November general elections. Although not

Figure 1. County Canvasser Differences with County Voters by Party

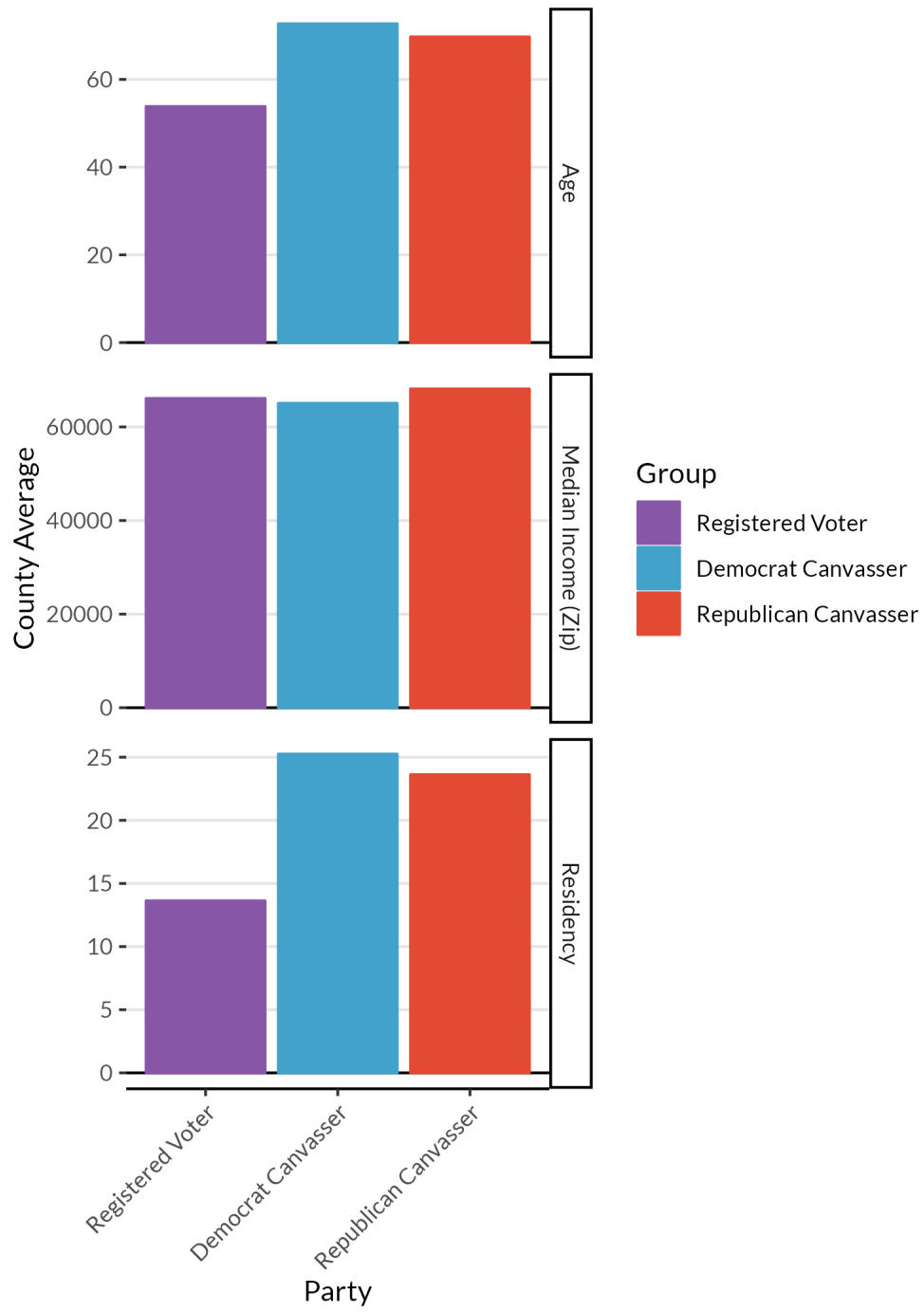
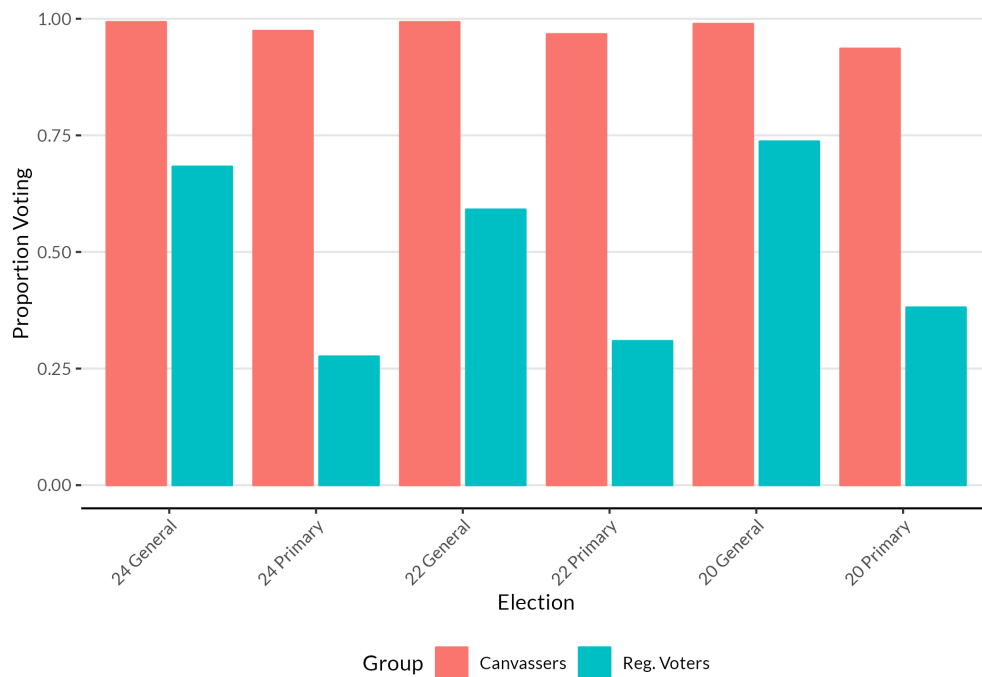


Figure 2. County Canvasser Turnout Rates vs. County Averages



surprising, the differences in statewide primary rates are the biggest, with canvasser turnout rates voting nearly three times higher than that of registered voters across their counties.

In summary, the voterfile records indicate that county canvassers are much more politically active, older, and longer term residents in their community; on average, they appear similar to county residents in terms of their neighborhood's economic profile.

Survey Administration and Response Rate

The 307 canvassers with confirmed matches in the voterfile were mailed a letter in early Spring 2025. Of those, 57 Democrats and 31 Republicans took the web survey after the initial mailing, for an initial response rate of 37% among Democrats and 20% among Republicans. An additional 12 respondents sent in requests for a paper survey copy. These paper copies are not all returned and have not been added, but will likely raise the overall response rate to over 30%.

Since this was an initial study and a volunteer survey, a limited selection of approximately 40 survey items were chosen. These items covered demographics, canvasser perception of threats and

safety, evaluation of serving on the certification board, and perceptions of elections more generally. The largest portion of the survey re-used items from the Survey of the Performance of the American Electorate to allow a meaningful comparison on attitudes towards elections. In 2020, Michigan was one of the few over-sampled states and had 1000 respondents, so we can be reasonably confident those percentages are close to the actual population. In 2022, the SPAE sample size in Michigan was only 200, so the differences between the two SPAE percentages may more so represent added error rather than a trend.

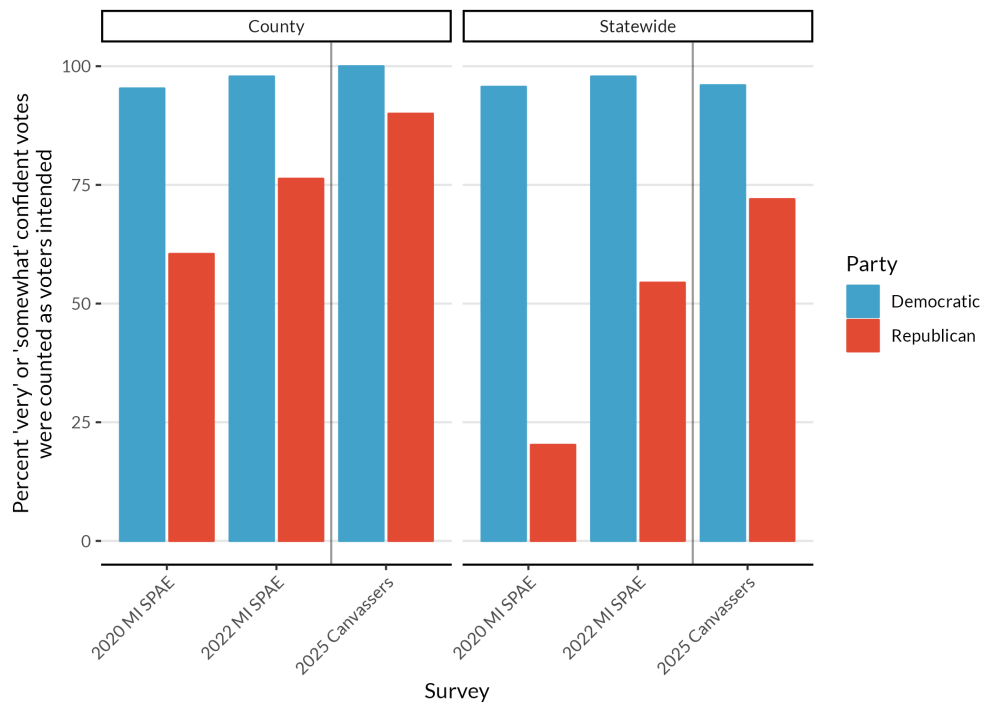
Survey Results

This study focuses on how partisan differences among county canvassers compare to the partisan differences observed across all Michigan voters. We use the unweighted averages from the 2025 county canvasser survey and compares it to the overall state-weighted averages observed in the 2020 ($n = 1000$) and 2022 SPAE ($n = 200$). Future analyses will include estimates from the 2024 SPAE and explore adjustments based on county population and canvasser demographics to account for the political role of these beliefs.

We start with a set of items tapping beliefs in the the overall accuracy of counts. Following the SPAE, our survey asked canvassers their level of confidence in whether “votes in your county” and “votes across Michigan” were counted as voters intended in the 2024 general election. Figure 3 compares the percent of canvassers responding that they were “very” or “somewhat” confident, as opposed to “not too” or “not at all” confident.

Not surprisingly, both Michigan voters and county canvassers were more confident in their county count than the vote count statewide. The massive partisan divide in perceptions of Michigan’s 2020 count shrank in 2022, and likely did in 2024 with Trump’s win, which we can eventually confirm with the 2024 SPAE. Even if we assume only a portion of that trend continues toward 2024, partisan differences among canvassers are not that different than the differences among Michigan voters, especially in terms of state evaluations. Despite having certified their county’s vote, ten percent of Republicans reported a lack of confidence in the accuracy of their county’s vote. And, in

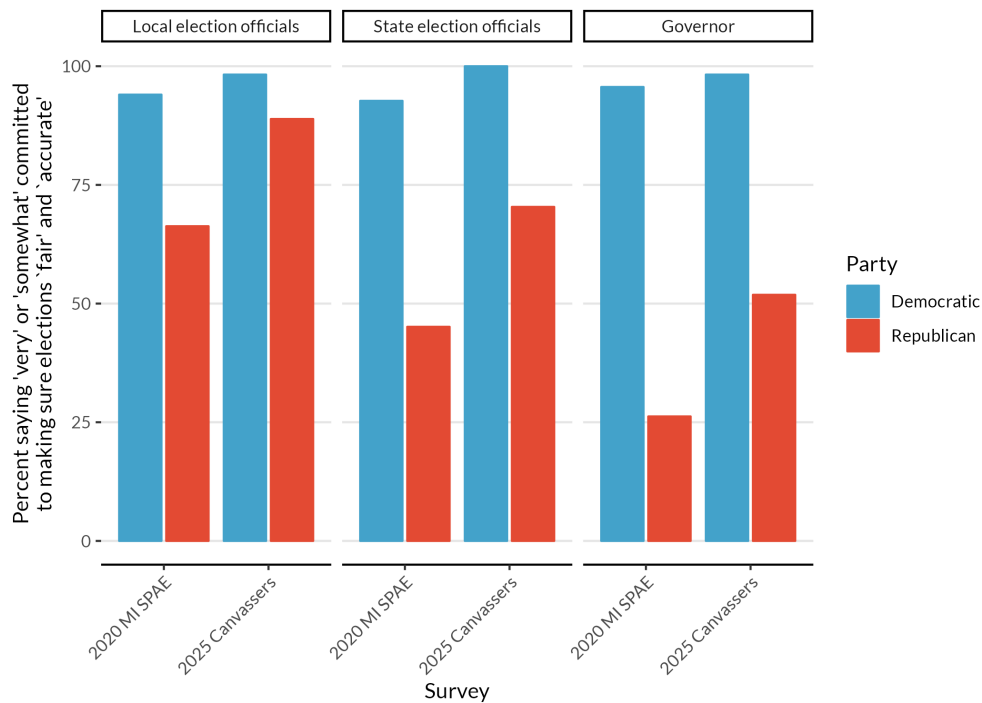
Figure 3. Michigan partisan confidence in election count: voters vs. county canvassers



terms of state counts, Republican canvasser doubts are closer to Republican voters than Democratic canvassers. Even after having concrete experience with state law for certifying local votes, more than a quarter of Republican canvassers reported little confidence that Michigan’s count accurately reflect what voters intended in 2024. Although their county assessments are more uniform and positive, the differences between Republican and Democratic canvasser assessments of the accuracy of the entire state’s count is still stark considering their experience as county canvassers.

Figure 4 provides some insight into why those differences might exist by comparing the percentage of partisan respondents who assessed local election officials, state officials, and the Governor as either “very” or “somewhat” committed to making sure elections are fair and accurate, a replication of items asked in the 2020 SPAE. County canvassers are generally more trusting of each official than a typical voter belonging to their party. But, outside of local election officials, Republican canvassers are closer to 2020 Republican voters in Michigan in their belief that state election officials and Governor Whitmer are committed to making sure elections are fair and accurate.

Figure 4. Michigan partisan trust in government officials: voters vs. county canvassers

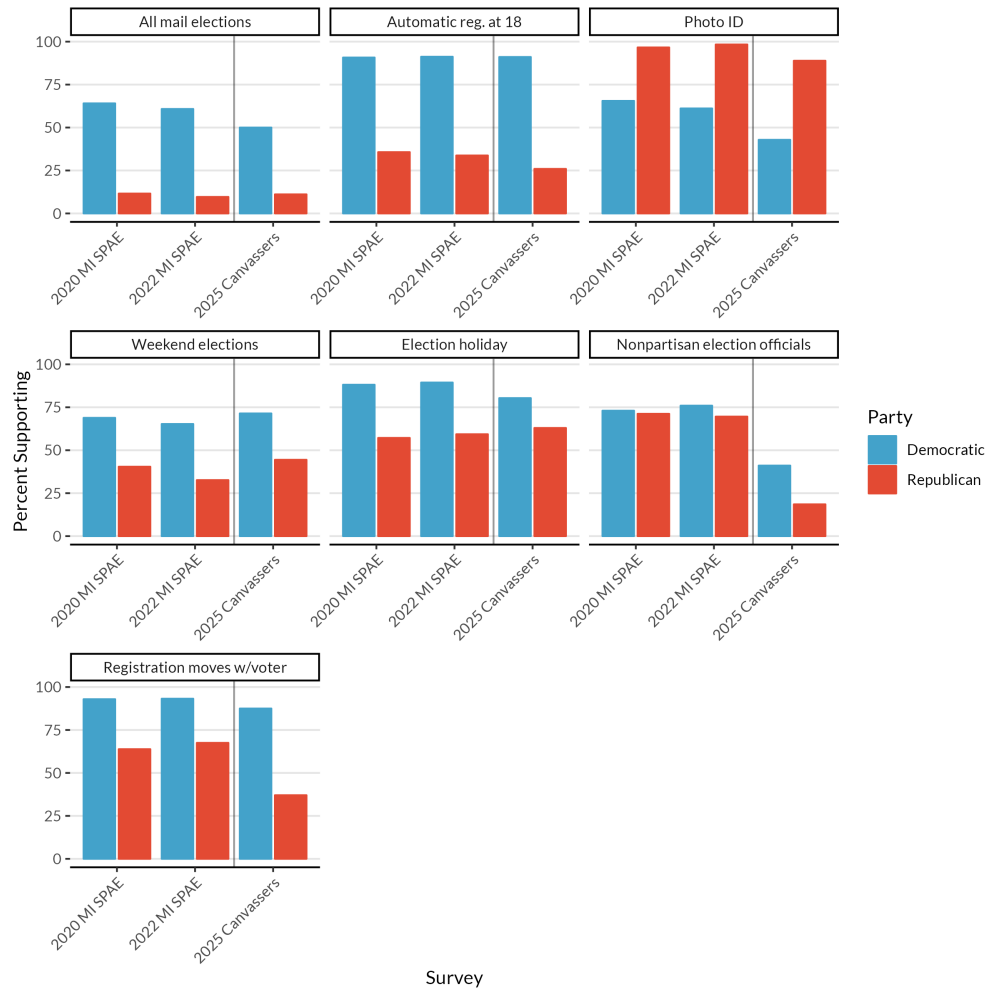


The co-partisan similarity between canvassers and state voters is perhaps clearest when it comes to support for the election reform proposals shown in Figure 5. Except for canvasser support for keeping partisan election officials, the party canvassers have remarkably similar levels of support as their co-partisan voters across the state. The differences between Republican and Democratic canvassers for the other six reform proposals is greater than the differences between canvassers and voters of the same party. While not necessarily surprising, these results suggest that our survey sample of Democratic and Republican canvassers is not a biased selection sample of partisans that are more supportive of elections or less partisan.

Party differences and belief in election fraud

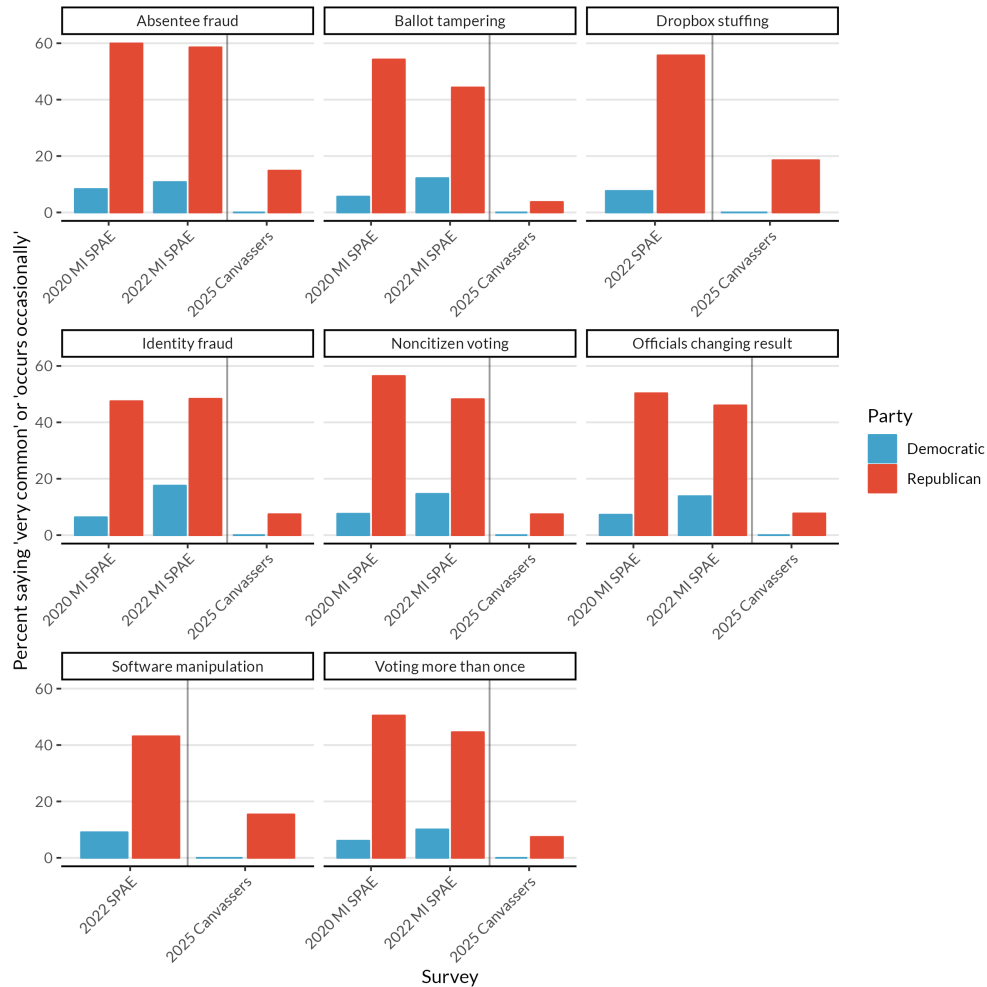
The results from these first set of items paint a similar picture. Despite greater confidence in their local vote count, Republican and Democratic canvassers largely mirror partisan perceptions among Michigan voters regarding the accuracy of the statewide vote, commitment of state officials, and support for election reform proposals at the state level. But there is one key area in which county

Figure 5. Michigan partisan beliefs in election reforms: voters vs. county canvassers



canvassers clearly differ. Across both parties, county canvassers believe rates of local vote and election fraud are rare at the local level.

Figure 6. Michigan partisan beliefs in election fraud: voters vs. county canvassers



Following the SPAE of 2020 and 2022, the county canvasser survey asked respondents to assess how often eight sets of illegal acts occurred at the county level in 2024. Figure 6 compares the percent of respondents who stated each illegal act was “very common” or “occurs occasionally” this past election in their county. The differences are stark. A small minority of both Republican and Democratic canvassers believed that these eight illegal acts were either “very common” or occurred “occasionally.” The differences between voters and canvassers of the same party is much larger than the differences observed between the parties among canvassers. A majority of Republicans in Michi-

gan believe absentee fraud and non-citizen voting are common in their county, whereas less than 20% do so among canvassers. Among canvassers, the largest partisan difference occurs on how often people submit “too many ballots in drop boxes on behalf of others,” but even here the rate of Republican canvasser belief is less than a third of Michigan Republican voters.

This finding is politically important. Although some canvassers in others states have refused to certify out of protest of what they perceive happening outside their jurisdiction (Clark 2023), the only area where canvassers have a clear political role is within the confines of their local results and canvass. Canvassers of both parties show uniform opinions in the area in which they work together with to oversee. Local canvassers may not trust state officials or the state count more so than other voters, but they show an ability and willingness to differentiate their perceptions based on where they have a role and responsibility and where they do not.

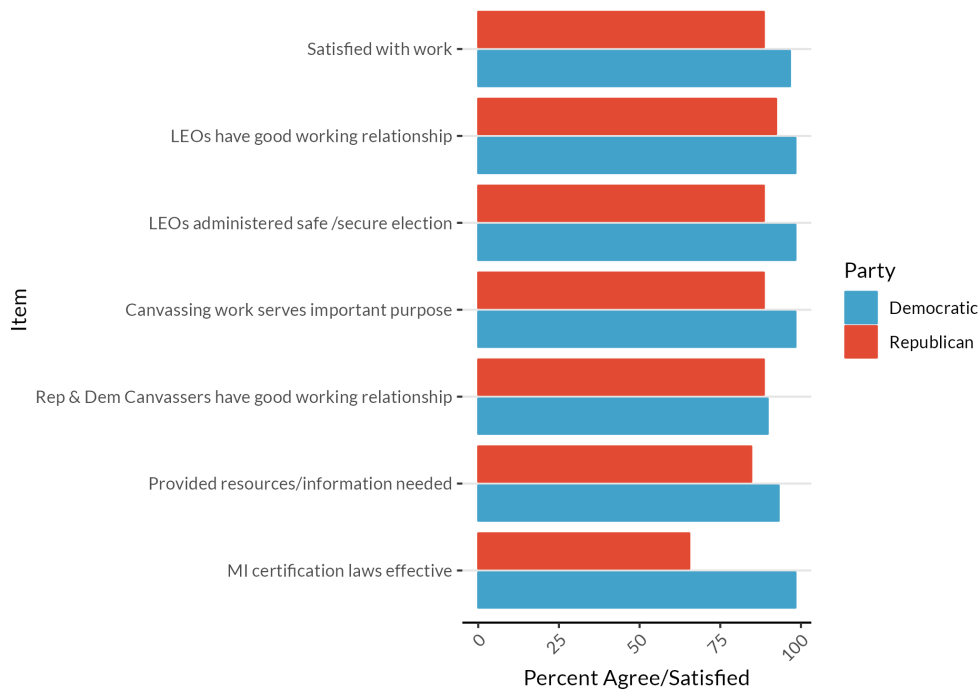
What explains these stark differences among canvassers and voters in beliefs of rates of election fraud at the county level? The most likely explanation is simply that both Republican and Democratic canvasser perspectives are informed by their work on county canvassing boards. Support for this explanation can be found by looking at Democratic and Republican canvasser evaluations of their role.

Figure 7 displays the percent of canvassers of each party that either state they agree with a statement or report positive satisfaction with their work on the canvassing board. Both groups are near unanimity in positively assessing their LEO, and finding their work is meaningful and effective in the local context. The biggest difference between the two is found in their evaluation of the effectiveness of Michigan’s laws. But even here, nearly two-thirds of Republicans are in agreement with Democrats that Michigan’s laws are effective.

Conclusion

Local certification emerged as an important, localized, intermediary step that limits partisan attempts to change close election results (Miller and Wilder 2024). Its obscurity is a core feature to why it benefits elections. But such obscurity is currently being challenged by our current hyper-

Figure 7. Michigan Canvasser Assessment of Job by Party



polarized and hyper-nationalized political environment. This study has sought to evaluate and characterize the composition and beliefs of local certification boards in Michigan, with a specific focus on whether they reflect or counter mass partisan impressions of the accuracy of elections.

Three general themes emerge from our initial study. First, an examination of voterfile records demonstrated that Michigan canvassers tend to be much older, females who have lived in their community for a long time and who religiously vote in elections. Second, although Michigan local canvassers are not polarized party extremists, they more often look more like their co-partisan voters in their state than canvassing members of the opposite party. This dynamic was consistent across most evaluations of recent elections, state officials, and policy reform proposals. Third, one key and dramatic exception to this finding is in the specific area of local voter and election fraud. Unlike voters of both parties, local canvassing board members are in near agreement that local rates of fraud are uncommon. And local contests, importantly, are the one area in which local certification has the final say.

There are multiple steps forward for this analysis to be finalized. First, the 2024 SPAE data needs to be included in the analysis. Second, although the response rates are healthy, the survey's representativeness of large counties needs to be verified. Third, efforts may be needed to recruit additional respondents from the most populous counties. Further analyses are also required to clarify potential mechanisms for why county canvasser are distinct in their views of rates of local fraud. Regardless, the dramatic uniformity among canvasser opinion that rates of local fraud are rare, suggest the current findings will hold.

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