Are hashtags enough? Assessing the role of state election officials as information and opinion leaders

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Abstract

State election officials play a unique role in the information ecosystem of American elections. They operate largely as *information leaders*, educating the public about how to vote, but can also serve as a form *opinion leaders*, shaping voters' attitudes towards election administration. In this paper, we merge a novel dataset of social media use by state election offices during the 2022 election cycle with two nationally representative surveys fielded before and after the election to evaluate the impacts of state EOs on voters' information-seeking behavior and attitudes towards election administration. Specifically, we evaluate whether EOs' trust-building social media campaigns motivate voters to look to them as sources of election information, and shape prospective and retrospective voter attitudes about ballot accuracy. In states where state EOs shared trust-building messages during the early weeks of the general election cycle, voters were more likely to look to these officials for information about how to register and vote. Comparing voter confidence at the state level before and after the election, our findings suggest trust-building messages by EOs help voters identify them as information leaders about how to vote, but that voters may require more time to view EOs as opinion leaders about ballot accuracy in their state. Our research has important implications for understanding how state EOs can connect with voters and build statewide voter confidence at comparable rates to confidence at the personal and local levels.

Keywords: voter confidence, election denial, election officials, election administration, voter education, voter confidence

In the lead up to and aftermath of the 2020 United States presidential elections, state election officials drew the attention of competing spotlights centered around their promotion of election integrity. On the one hand, they received praise from a range stakeholders, scholars, and public servants for the steps taken to ensure elections in their state are run safely and securely, and to communicate these efforts to the public. On the other, they faced criticism from high-level political leaders that elections in their state were administered poorly or run fraudulently (Persily and Stewart III 2021). Further compounding the challenges faced by these officials were the presence of election deniers running for office on the platform that the 2020 presidential election was fraudulently decided. Many opted to run for their states' chief election office, openly challenging the system by which they would be elected.

These countervailing narratives highlight the unique role played by election officials in maintaining a healthy information ecosystem in American democracy. Tasked with overseeing the administration of elections and informing voters about what is needed to vote, they also convey messages meant to highlight the integrity with which they administer elections. As such, they may operate as a type of *opinion leader* for the public's attitudes towards the administration of elections (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948), and *information leaders* for voters seeking accurate, trusted information about how to participate in elections and cast a ballot that counts (McDevitt and Butler 2011; McDevitt and Sindorf 2014). These dynamics were evident in state election officials' development of intentional communication strategies with constituents as a response to the rise of high-profile election deniers. They cultivated trust-building campaigns with the goal of directing voters to their offices for accurate information about how to vote, and to shore up confidence in election administration. These efforts include coordinated messaging strategies across and within states, as well as efforts to humanize the individuals occupying these offices as trusted friends and neighbors. [1]

It is an open question whether state election officials have been able to effectively serve as information and opinion leaders, encouraging voters to look to them as trusted sources for election-related information and as the primary authority on the topic of election integrity. Without trusted and accurate sources of information about how to participate in a democracy, voters are less resilient to the election disinformation spread by election deniers (Levy 2021). Voters with incorrect or insufficient information also risk making mistakes in the voting process

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[1]Pam Fessler for the Election Group. "Telling our story: An elections communication guide.": https://www.electionsgroup.com/telling-our-story-guide.

that can result in disenfranchisement (Shino, Suttmann-Lea and Smith 2021; Baringer, Herron and Smith 2020; Merivaki and Smith 2019).

In this paper, we assess the role of state election officials (EOs) as *information leaders* and *opinion leaders* during the 2022 midterm elections (McDevitt and Sindorf 2014; Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948). Intentional trust-building and humanization efforts undertaken by election officials in the lead up to and wake of the 2020 U.S. presidential election offer an opportunity to assess whether election officials can effectively serve in these roles. To assess EOs' capacity as information leaders, we first examine whether their trust-building communications can encourage voters to look to their offices as official sources of information about how to vote. We then consider whether these efforts also translate into effective *opinion leadership*, evaluating whether they bolster voter confidence in vote counting at the state-level, which consistently lags behind confidence in vote counting personal- and community-level vote counting (Atkeson, Alvarez and Hall 2015). We assess these questions by merging a unique dataset of trust-building communications shared by state election officials during the election cycle on social media, a nationally representative pre-election survey conducted by Morning Consult for the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) during the 2022 midterm elections, and the 2022 Survey of the Performance American Elections (SPAE), which was conducted after the midterm elections ended.

We argue EOs who prioritize trust-building messages can encourage voters to see them as information leaders about how to vote because their efforts bear the hallmarks of effective messaging campaigns: consistency and repetition. Over time, we contend voters are likely to develop awareness of election officials as trusted sources of information about how to participate in elections (Hill et al. 2013; Zaller 1992; Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948). We suggest similar dynamics are at play with the relationship between EO messaging and voter confidence. Consistent, long-term messages aimed at spotlighting election officials as trusted sources of information about how elections are administered should bolster confidence in vote counting statewide (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2023). While we do not directly test for the effects of EOs' efforts to humanize their offices and counterparts in local election offices, we also theorize these efforts can play an important role in bolstering the impact of election officials as information and opinion leaders during a period where they are being consistently attacked and castigated by election deniers (Kalla and Broockman. Forthcoming).

We find state election officials can effectively serve as information leaders; people living

where these officials prioritize trust-building messages are more likely to look to their state election office as a source of information about how to register and vote. These results hold even when accounting for other types of communication more directly related to the mechanics of voting, such as content about how to register and different options for casting a ballot. We also show people living where EOs prioritize trust-building communications have higher confidence in state-wide ballot counting, although only for retrospective evaluations of confidence. Finally, signaling terms used within EOs trust-building communication campaigns—in this case, the #trustedinfo campaign—can help voters identify their EOs as leaders of information about how to register and vote, but we find that the use of such signaling terms does not impact EOs' effectiveness as opinion leaders in ballot counting.

Our analysis is the first to establish election officials as information and opinion leaders in the American election information ecosystem, linking election officials' intentional trust-building campaigns to the public's information seeking behavior and attitudes toward election administration. Our findings suggest additional theoretical development and empirical assessment is needed to understand the role election officials play as information and opinion leaders, and to understand whether and how this filters down to the role played by local election officials. While it is encouraging that officials who deploy trust-building messages are able to increase the likelihood that voters look to them as a source of information about how to vote, different strategies may be necessary for communications from election officials to yield confidence in the administration of elections.

Background - State Election Officials as Opinion and Information Leaders

A healthy democracy requires a well-informed public willing to engage in the project of self-governance (Valelly 1993; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). The normative significance of this need is typically discussed in relationship to the information the public needs to make decisions about elected officials that best suit their interests, values, and needs. However, it is also necessary for the public to know *how* to register those preferences at the ballot box in the first place, and to have confidence in the means through which they are expressing those preferences (Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea 2021; Atkeson, Alvarez and Hall 2015). This is especially so in the midst of an information ecosystem plagued with misinformation about the administration

of elections and what is needed to vote. Without accurate information about how to vote and the process of administering elections, voters are more likely to face barriers when they attempt to vote, and thus have diminished confidence in the administration of elections (Shino, Suttmann-Lea and Smith 2021; Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2022, 2023).

For voters to have the most accurate information about how to participate in elections, two key mechanisms need to be at play. First, voters have to know where to look to get official information about the voting process. Second, they must trust the sources they are looking to. While campaigns, party organizations, and third-party civil society groups often invest efforts in communicating this information to voters, election officials remain the most accurate, official sources of information for how to vote. As such, they serve as *information leaders*, conveying messages and signaling themselves as the most trusted sources of information about how to vote. The term *information leader* reflects the ability of a leader to have broader influence outside of questions pertaining directly to vote choice, in our case the means of voting (McDevitt and Sindorf 2014). Information leaders operate in a similar capacity to *opinion leaders*. Given their greater (perceived) expertise on election choices, opinion leaders are traditionally understood as those who can shape voter attitudes among those within their networks (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948). In the context of election administration, we argue information leaders are those who voters look to about how to vote, while opinion leaders are those who shape how voters perceive the legitimacy of election processes and results. Depending on communication strategies implemented, we contend election officials can serve as both.

In the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, election officials have increasingly engaged in concerted trust-building efforts to encourage voters to look to their offices as the the most accurate, trusted sources of information about how to vote and how elections are administered.[2] These efforts mirror the dynamics of both opinion and information leadership, in that EOs are attempting to position themselves as leaders in information about how to vote, and shape public attitudes towards election administration through their network of constituents. Moreover, their efforts to humanize themselves and local election officials as "friends and neighbors" may cultivate a stronger sense of interpersonal connection to their constituents that amplifies their credibility as both information and opinion leaders.[3]

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[2] National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), TrustedInfo initiative:
https://www.nass.org/initiatives/trustedinfo.
[3] Pam Fessler for the Elections Group. "Telling our Story: An Elections Communication Guide."

The primary goal of trust-building initiatives is to ensure voters are seeking information about how to vote from official election sources, limiting instances of voter mistakes that might otherwise lead to confusion, diminished confidence, or even disenfranchisement. Developed in late 2019 as a precursor to the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, these efforts represent a coordinated, cross-state, bipartisan messaging campaign devoted to motivating voters to look to official sources about election-related information.

The two-step-flow model of communication in elections derived from Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) offers a helpful foundation for understanding how messaging from election officials might shape voters' information seeking behavior about how to vote, as well as their attitudes towards election administration. Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) suggest information about political campaigns is initially received by a smaller number of knowledgeable "opinion leaders" with strong interest in elections and who enjoy a trustworthy reputation within their communities. Next occurs the transition of political information from these leaders to less engaged members of the community. In short, this work and its offshoots suggest people are more influenced by interpersonal communication than the content shared through media outlets itself.

The development of the internet and social media platforms have complicated this two-step-flow process, raising questions about the extent to which opinion leaders can infiltrate complex networks of information and compete for the attention of the public. Given today's information environment, one way people decide what to pay attention to is through recommendations from online social networks, creating an important, evolving role for opinion leaders to play in motivating the public towards certain sources of information (Mutz and Young 2011; Turcotte et al. 2011).

While there is extensive research assessing the influence of opinion leaders in public attention to news sources, issue attitudes, and vote choice (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948; Turcotte et al. 2011), expectations for the impact of efforts by election officials to shape information seeking behavior and attitudes towards election administration are under explored. Although their offices have become the source of partisan controversy in recent years (Hayes and Gross 2021), these officials are institutionally meant to serve the role of neutral arbiters of elections. As such, we suggest they serve as a different kind of opinion leader, shaping the

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https://www.electionsgroup.com/telling-our-story-guide.

public's views of election administration with the broader goal of highlighting the efficiency and integrity with which they oversee elections in their state. Other stakeholders in the election information ecosystem, such as federal agencies, national organizations, and civic organizations also engage in spotlighting election officials, further increasing their exposure to voters who may be aware of their state's chief election officer, but not necessarily view them as a key information source or a leading authority in election integrity.

Overall, the growing presence of state election officials in the media spotlight since the 2020 U.S. presidential election, combined with intentional and coordinated efforts to promote trust-building campaigns among the American public, suggest there may be a meaningful path linking election officials as both "information leaders" to voters decisions about where to get election-related information and as "opinion leaders" shaping voters' attitudes towards election administration. This expectation is informed by established research suggesting that institutions can shift mass opinion towards the position of that institutions' endorsement—in this case, attitudes towards election administration (Bartels and Mutz 2009)

How State Election Officials' Trust Building Efforts Can Shape Information Seeking and Confidence

Voter confidence is driven by experiences that shape *perceptions* of electoral legitimacy (Norris 2014). Most relevant for our purposes are the experiences voters have while voting. Voters who have poor experiences while voting—whether through their own mistakes or poor polling places experiences—are more prone to question the validity of ballot counting (Claasen et al. 2013; Hall, Monson and Patterson 2009). Access to accurate information about what is needed to cast a ballot that counts, however, can cultivate more positive voting experiences which in turn may bolster confidence in ballot counting (Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea 2022; Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2022, 2023). Moreover, voters who live in jurisdictions where the quality of election administration is higher tend to view electoral legitimacy more favorably. In other words, voters are more likely to perceive elections as legitimate where objective measures show they are better administered (Bowler et al. N.d.).

Finally, support of a losing candidate may motivate voters to perceive problems with the administration of elections. Instead of wholesale accepting the loss of their preferred candidates, they are prone to entertain and accept alternative explanations for their candidates' loss, such

as a mishandled or fraudulent election (Sances and Stewart III 2015). These perceptions are amplified in the presence of rhetoric from political leaders that openly challenge election results and administration (Levy 2021), but are mitigated if co-partisans make statements that highlight the legitimacy of election results (Clayton and Willer 2023).

This literature offers a robust picture of how different voter experiences shape perceptions of and confidence in election administration. It does not, however, speak to whether election administrators—in this case, state election officials - can effectively serve as both information and opinion leaders through intentional trust-building efforts, driving voters to look for information about how to vote from accurate sources and bolstering confidence in ballot counting. When voters have access to accurate information about how to participate in elections, they are more likely to have a positive voting experience and in turn, greater confidence in the administration of a given election (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2023)The coordinated #TrustedInfo campaign launched by the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) in 2019 and the growth of concerted voter outreach efforts by state and local election officials since the 2020 U.S. presidential elections offer a chance to assess the possibility that election officials can intentionally position themselves as information and opinion leaders.

When compared to other sources of information, messages from an official source who enjoys high credibility are more effective in motivating voters to change behavior and try new voting technologies (Herrnson et al. 2015; Malhotra, Michelson and Valenzuela 2012). At the same time, state election officials arguably face significant hurdles in making trusted connections with voters. While *local* election officials enjoy greater trust relative to other government officials (Adona and Gronke 2018), the politicization of the position of state election official and their disconnection from the day-to-day operations of elections in local jurisdictions may make it more difficult for these officials to generate effective trust-building campaigns. The lower rates of confidence in statewide ballot accuracy compared to personal and local confidence is indicative of this weaker connection the further away "from home" voters are asked to make considerations about election administration (Atkeson, Alvarez and Hall 2015; Merivaki, Suttmann-Lea and Orey 2023).

Nevertheless, the trust-building voter outreach to voters undertaken by state election officials and other democracy stakeholders since the 2020 presidential elections mirrors other effective persuasion campaigns, in that they they have been consistent over a long period of time (Hill et al. 2013). The key components of their campaign message are that ***election of-***

ficials are trusted sources of information, and their efforts keep elections safe and secure. This message has been consistently used over this period not only by election officials, but by multiple stakeholders who may also be perceived as information and opinion leaders for voters. These stakeholders include federal agencies, such as the Election Assistance Commission (EAC)[4], Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA),[5] and the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP)[6]; national organizations, such as the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) and the National Association of State Election Directors (NASED)[7]; and civic organizations, such as the Brennan Center for Justice and the R Street Institute.[8] The goal of these efforts is to increase the visibility of state election officials and ensure that voters have access to accurate information about elections.

Moreover, in response to increasing attacks and threats against election officials, there has been a concerted public relations effort to humanize their positions, casting them as trustworthy friends and neighbors. As a result, state election officials are more intentional in how they communicate with voters, advised to tell a "story about elections" connecting themselves to their voters and humanizes them rather than sharing largely administrative jargon about the election process [9] We suggest these efforts have the potential to position election officials as information and opinion leaders by establishing them as a trusted part of voters' interpersonal networks (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948; McDevitt and Sindorf 2014)

Evidence from recent elections show that when EOs frequently share election-related information on social media, voters are more likely to use recommended methods of participation, such as registering to vote online rather than in-person (Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea 2022), or voting early in-person instead of voting by mail (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2022). The availability of online information lookup tools facilitates access to these resources, but in order

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[4]EAC, "Communicating Election and Post-Election Processes Toolkit", https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/communicating-election-and-post-election-processes-toolkit

[5]CISA, "Election Security Rumor & Reality" https://www.cisa.gov/rumor-vs-reality.

[6]FVAP, #TrustedInfo2022: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2jCOpEoKrE.

[7]NASS, TrustedInfo Initiative: https://www.nass.org/initiatives/trustedinfo. NASED, Election Communications Toolkit: https://www.nased.org/electioncommstoolkit.

[8]Brennan Center for Justice. "Information gaps and misinformation in 2022." https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/information-gaps-and-misinformation-2022-elections. R Institute. "Election night coverage is a breeding ground for misinformation." https://www.rstreet.org/commentary/election-night-coverage-is-a-breeding-ground-for-misinformation/.

[9]Pam Fessler for the Elections Group. "Telling our Story: An Elections Communication Guide." https://www.electionsgroup.com/telling-our-story-guide.

for voters to familiarize with them, they need to be informed about their availability in the first place (Adona and Gronke 2018). Considering that state election officials actively engage in election information sharing with voters through multiple modes of outreach, including social media as well as traditional postal mail, they can increase exposure of their office to voters who already see them as trusted sources by prioritizing trust-building content on social media; these efforts also increase exposure to voters who may have been getting their information from other sources, such as TV outlets or political campaigns.

Taken together, the amplification of the message that EOs are trusted messengers by other stakeholders in the election information ecosystem in conjunction with efforts to humanize the role of election officials increase the likelihood that voters are aware that their EO is a reliable information source, and will therefore be more likely to look to them for election related information. This expectation is supported by testimonies from EOs who measure the success of their communication efforts by increases in the number of followers they have on social media or increased traffic on their state election website.[10]

We argue state EOs concerted, repeated efforts to position themselves as information leaders increases the likelihood voters will be exposed to them as a trusted source of information about how to register and vote (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948; McDevitt and Sindorf 2014; Hill et al. 2013). Our *first hypothesis*, therefore, is that the more state EOs *prioritize* communications to voters that they are trusted sources of election related information and / or that elections are secure, voters will be more likely to choose them as a primary source for information about elections. The prioritization of this information is key, as information consistently repeated can nevertheless be drowned out if shared in conjunction with other types of messages (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2022).

Alongside encouraging voters to look to them as trusted sources of information about how to register and vote, election officials can also shape voter attitudes about election administration, ideally engaging in communications that bolster voter confidence in the ballot counting process. These officials follow various tactics to communicate their message to their voters, yet the overarching strategy is the same: message repetition and consistency. The #TrustedInfo initiative promoted by NASS is a useful example. States can share this message by incorporat-

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[10]Kristen Bell, NCSBE during the "Election Accuracy: Going on the Offensive" webinar (State Innovations panel): https://www.hhh.umn.edu/certificate-programs/certificate-election-administration/election-accuracy-going-offensive.

ing the hashtag into their social media communications. Even though hashtags are a feature most effectively used for Twitter, part of the campaign strategy is to associate it with any communications shared by election officials, hence the recommendation to use it across all social media platforms. A secondary strategy of these trust-building campaigns is to frequently remind voters about the multiple ways elections are kept secure during the whole election cycle, from preparing for election day to managing voting operations, closing polling places, processing ballots, and certifying election results.

The long-term goal of these trust-building campaigns, which take place primarily on social media, are to build confidence in the administration of elections. Once voters view EOs as their primary sources of information, exposure to trust-building messages are expected to inoculate them against misinformation, as well as increase their knowledge of the multiple safeguards embedded in the election process that lead to accurate vote counting. A big challenge for election officials to overcome, however, is satisfying voters' concerns about ballot accuracy when moving away "from home": voters consistently express high confidence their vote and that votes in their jurisdiction counted, but they express lower confidence that votes in their state counted, and the lowest confidence in the accuracy of ballot counting nationwide (Atkeson, Alvarez and Hall 2015).

Local election officials are better situated to communicate to voters about their votes being counted, since they interact with their constituents more in multiple modes. Voters, for example, may visit local election offices in-person, call their election officials on the phone, or follow their local election administrators on social media. Voters also express higher confidence that their vote counted because of their direct experiences, so they may be more skeptical to apply the same level of confidence for votes cast across different parts of their own state. This trend is exacerbated by differences in administrative approaches within and across states; voters may be skeptical of a system that differs from their own. Further compounding skepticism of systems farther away from home is a new trend of state election officials shoring up the integrity of their own system while casting doubt on others'.[11] This is where election officials' trust-building efforts can signal to these voters about safeguards implemented statewide that

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[11]For example, in the aftermath of the 2022 midterm election Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose tweeted, "Dear Arizona, need some advice on how to run an election the right way?", insinuating that Arizona's election system is inferior to Ohio's, feeding distrust of nationwide results. https://twitter.com/FrankLaRose/status/1591562512935583744?lang=en

ensure ballot accuracy regardless of where the voter resides. Our *second hypothesis*, therefore, is that the more state EOs *prioritize* communications to voters that they are trusted sources of election related information and / or that elections are secure, voters will be more likely to express confidence that votes in their state are counted as intended.

Research Design and Variables of Interest

We test our hypotheses with two nationally representative surveys that took place before after the midterm elections. The first survey was fielded by Morning Consult between October 14 and 15, 2022, and aims to capture prospective voters' behavior with respect to seeking election information sources (N=2,000). The survey also asks voters if they feel confident that votes cast in their state in November 2022 would be counted as intended.

We also use the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAE)[12], which is the most comprehensive survey of public attitudes towards election administration (N=10,200). SPAE includes the standard 4-level voter confidence question: if the voter feels confident their vote was counted accurately, and if votes in their local jurisdiction, state, and votes cast nationwide were counted accurately.

We draw from a dynamic dataset of state election officials' social media communications between September 10 and November 15, 2022 to capture trust-building efforts at two distinct time frames during an election cycle: over a month prior to November 8, 2022, and the week following Election Day. We then merge these data with the pre- and post-election surveys. Together, these datasets offer a unique opportunity to capture how EOs' trust-building efforts on social media shape voters' information seeking behavior, as well as their attitudes about statewide ballot accuracy.

Our first dependent variable measures the **information seeking choices** of prospective voters among a range of options, including local and national TV organizations, print media, websites, local election offices, and state election offices. For this variable, we draw from the pre-election survey (Morning Consult) and construct a binary measure that takes the value of one if respondents report seeking information about registration and voting from their state election office. Approximately 32% of respondents reported that state election offices are among

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[12]A special thank you to Charles Stewart III for sharing the survey with us prior to its public release.

their top three sources for voting and registration information, with online searches and local election offices being among the top information choices (37% and 39% respectively).[13]

Our second dependent variable measures **confidence in statewide ballot accuracy** before and after the 2022 midterms. For the prospective confidence variable, we use the pre-election survey, and for the post-election variable, we use the SPAE survey. The questions are worded slightly differently with respect to ballot accuracy. The pre-election survey asks if votes statewide will be counted *accurately*, whereas the SPAE survey asks if votes statewide were counted *as voters intended*. We consider this wording sufficient to treat the two questions as valid measures of prospective and retrospective ballot accuracy.

To construct our explanatory variables, namely trust-building communications on social media, we use the 2022 EO social media dataset, which tracks organic posts shared by official state EO accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.[14] We focus on social media activity on Facebook, because it is used by all states except Kansas, Massachusetts and Montana. Using manual quantitative content analysis, posts were coded for the presence of terms that explicitly signal to voters that EOs are trusted sources of information and / or that elections in the voter's state are safe and secure. We coded content shared between September 10 and November 15, 2022, to capture the period immediately after Labor Day, when campaign activity heightens but also because voter registration activity peaks between mid-September and early October(Merivaki 2020). Our cutoff date is November 15 and aims to cover communications to voters about post-election processes such as recounts, audits, curing mail ballots, and certifying election results.

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[13]See Appendix Figure 5.

[14]Merivaki, Thessalia and Mara Suttmann-Lea. March 20, 2023. "Building voter trust on social media." MIT Election Data & Science Lab: https://electionlab.mit.edu/articles/building-voter-trust-social-media.

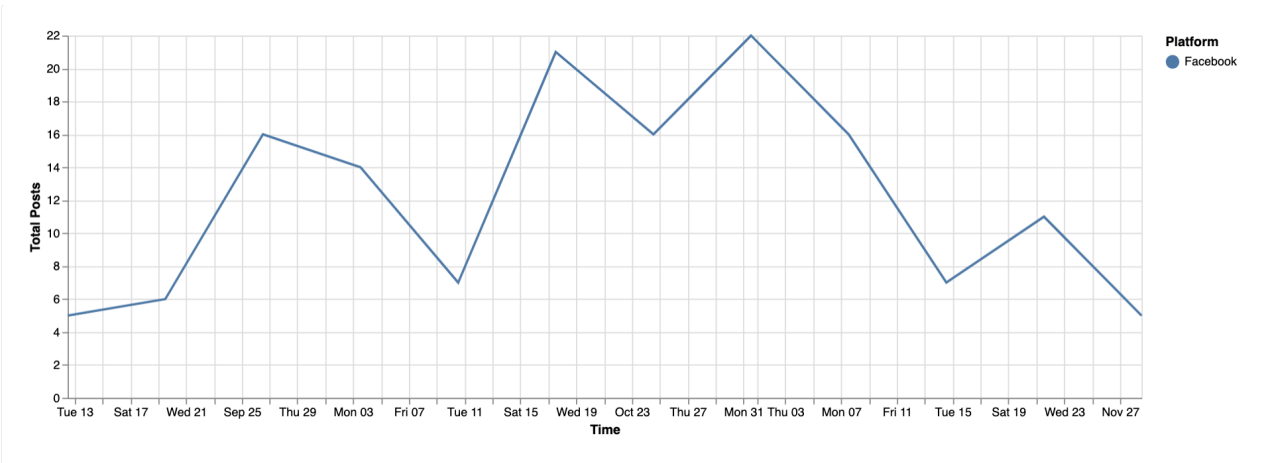Figure 1: Volume of Trust-Building messages during the 2022 election cycle

Figure 1 shows the number of posts that include trust-building messages across all states with an official Facebook account between September 10 and November 15, 2022. It is clear the flow of these messages varies depending on the time of the election cycle, with a higher volume of posts shared between the last two weeks in October. In Figure 2, we present the total number of posts shared by EO accounts on Facebook, categorized by whether the post included trust-building messages or a #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag. We also include an indicator for whether a state EO pledged to incorporate the NASS #TrustedInfo2022 message into their social media communications. We do not include the hashtag into our trust-building measure, because it would inflate the number of posts among states whose messages included both the term "trust" in the post and the hashtag. We created a separate measure of the proportion of posts that include the hashtag regardless of whether the content of the post was about election integrity.[15]

As Figure 2 shows, there is significant variation in social media posting patterns across the states both in terms of volume of content shared, but also in how trust-building messages were incorporated into EOs' communications to voters. Some states were more intentional than others in using explicit terms like "trust," "trusted," "safe," and "secure." The Arizona Secretary of State's account, for instance, had the highest rate of posts that included the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag among states that posted consistently on social media. Other states, like Missouri and Mississippi were not sharing any content beyond a couple of posts over the

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[15]The correlation between the two measures is low (r<|.40|).

course of three months. This is noteworthy because states that pledged to share trust-building messages, like Montana, did not engage in any explicit messaging campaigns on social media as they do not operate any official social media accounts.

An important caveat to the trust-building indicators we constructed is that they may not capture efforts by states to send the same message, namely that elections are secure and that EOs are trusted messengers, using other terms. The Louisiana Secretary of State, for instance, shared several posts on social media about Louisiana being ranked first in election *integrity*. The Kentucky Secretary of State would frequently share news articles about misinformation narratives without explicitly using the term "trust." The North Carolina State Board of Elections adopted their own hashtag campaign #YourVoteCountsNC and used it consistently in all social media communications. On the other hand, the Wisconsin Elections Commission ran a hashtagless voter education campaign, with post-election posts stating that election results are "triple-checked" for accuracy. We recognize this is a limitation in the analysis and that there are other approaches for EOs to build trust that extend beyond the use of a hashtag or a specific term. In the future, we plan to incorporate coding of content that implicitly signals trust-building efforts to better parse out the effects of different kinds of trust-building measures.

Figure 2: Proportion of EO Posts with Trust-Building or #TrustedInfo2022 Message

	Number of Posts
Maryland	13%
Iowa*	8%
Ohio	0%
Oregon	12%
Michigan	0%
Illinois	0%
West Virginia	0%
Tennessee	1%
Missouri	0%
Texas	1%
California	0%
Mississippi*	0%
New Hampshire	5%
Arizona*	47%
Kentucky	0%
Oklahoma	10%
Louisiana	0%
Washington	14%
Maine	2%
Pennsylvania	0%
South Carolina	0%
Delaware	38%
North Carolina	1%
Connecticut	4%
Colorado	0%
Arkansas	23%
Rhode Island*	0%
Vermont	0%
Utah	0%
New Jersey	2%
Wisconsin	0%
Minnesota	0%
Alaska	0%
Georgia	0%
New Mexico	0%
Florida	0%
Alabama	0%
Virginia	0%
Indiana	0%
New York	0%
South Dakota	0%
Hawaii	0%
North Dakota	0%
Nevada	75%
Idaho*	50%
Nebraska	0%
Wyoming	0%
Kansas	
Massachusetts	
Montana*	

● Non Trust-Building Posts ● #TrustedInfo2022 Posts ● Trust-Building Posts   % of total posts with #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag

State election official pledged to incorporate the NASS #TrustedInfo2022 message into their social media communication.

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Because we are interested in what **type of content** shared by EOs draws voters to select them as information sources, we include the proportion of posts that inform voters about how to register and vote, such as the deadline to register to vote, whether online or same-day registration is available, how to request and return a mail ballot, and who is eligible to vote by mail in states where an excuse is required. Theoretically, voters should me more likely to connect with their state EO if this information is prioritized, which is why we consider it an important indicator to account for alongside trust-building messages. This inclusion will help us better explain voters' information choices and how specific types of messages influence confidence in elections.

It is possible voters may not be aware their election official has a social media account, and so they would miss messages shared on social media about how to participate in elections.[16] Given that a significant portion of the U.S. population reports seeking election-related information online, we control for the availability of online information look up tools on state election websites using the Election Performance Index's indicator "election information lookup tools." States are ranked based on the availability of "tools that allow voters to find their registration status or their polling place; track the status of their absentee or provisional ballots; or look up voter-specific ballot information."[17]

The next variable of interest is the presence of **election denier candidates** across the states. To evaluate whether the participation of election denial influences where voters look for information and voters' confidence in results, we control for whether an election denier ran for Secretary of State in 2022 using FiveThirtyEight's database of election deniers who run for statewide office. Candidates are classified based on their public statements about the 2020 election: full denial; raised questions; accepted with reservations; avoided to answer; did not comment; and fully accepted. Candidates who fully denied the results of the 2020 election or raised questions about the legitimacy of the 2020 election are coded as election deniers.[18] Based on this classification, election deniers ran for Secretary of State in eleven states in the

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[16]Thessalia Merivaki and Mara Suttmann-Lea, 2022. "Local election offices often are missing on social media - and the information they do post often gets ignored." The Conversation: https://theconversation.com/local-election-offices-often-are-missing-on-social-media-and-the-information-they-do-post-often-gets-ignored-184359.

[17]Election Performance Index, Voting Information Lookup Tools Available: https://elections.mit.edu/#/data/indicators?view=indicator-profileindicator=OLTyear=2020.

[18]FiveThirtyEight, Election Deniers. Available at https://github.com/fivethirtyeight/data/tree/master/election-deniers. We thank Janet Malzahn and Andrew Hall for directing us to this source.

2022 midterm election.[19]

Control variables - Pre-election Survey

For the pre-election analysis, we control for attitudes about ballot accuracy from the 2020 election at the personal, local, state, and national levels. We also control for ideology, whether respondents reported voting for a Democratic or "Other" candidate in the 2018 midterm elections, as well whether they voted for Trump in 2020. This latter variable serves as an indicator for the loser effect, and we expect that these voters would express lower confidence in ballot accuracy in 2022 if their preferred candidate lost in 2020 (Sances and Stewart III 2015). Because Trump publicly undermined the integrity of election officials, we expect a negative relationship between Trump voters and the likelihood that they will choose the state elections office to get informed about how to register and vote. With respect to demographics, we control for gender, age, race, and education.

Control variables - Post-election Survey

For the post-election analysis (SPAE survey) we control for vote method in 2022 (voted in-person early or voted by mail, with voting in-person on Election Day as a reference category), and voting behavior in 2020 (namely if the respondent reported voting in 2020), and whether they reported voting for Trump or a candidate other than Biden. We include controls for partisanship and ideology, age, gender, race, disability status, and education.

Analysis and Findings

We run logistic regressions with robust standard errors using registered population weights and cluster by state. We plot the statistically significant coefficients in Figures 3 and 4 and discuss the substantive findings with regard to choice of the state EO as a primary source of information about voting and confidence in statewide ballot accuracy pre- and post-election. We find evidence to support our hypothesis that when state election officials prioritize trust-building content, it shapes voters' election-related information seeking behavior. We also find that efforts to build trust can meet the goal of increasing voter confidence at the state level,

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[19]See Appendix Table 1.

but only after the election cycle is over.

As we show in Figure 3, both of our trust-building measures have a positive and statistically significant relationship with a voter's choice to include their state election office among their top three choices when seeking information about voting. The effect of trust-building messages seems to be greater compared to any post that includes the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag. Interestingly, we find that voters were less likely to report that their state EO is a top information source when they reside in states that took the pledge in 2020 and 2022. Although this finding may be counter-intuitive, it may reflect negative reactions to partnerships between election officials and organizations that voters may not be familiar with, such as NASS. It may also reflect important nuances in how these campaigns are communicated to voters and how they are implemented during the election cycle.

Figure 3: State EO among top 3 for information on voting and registration, national sample
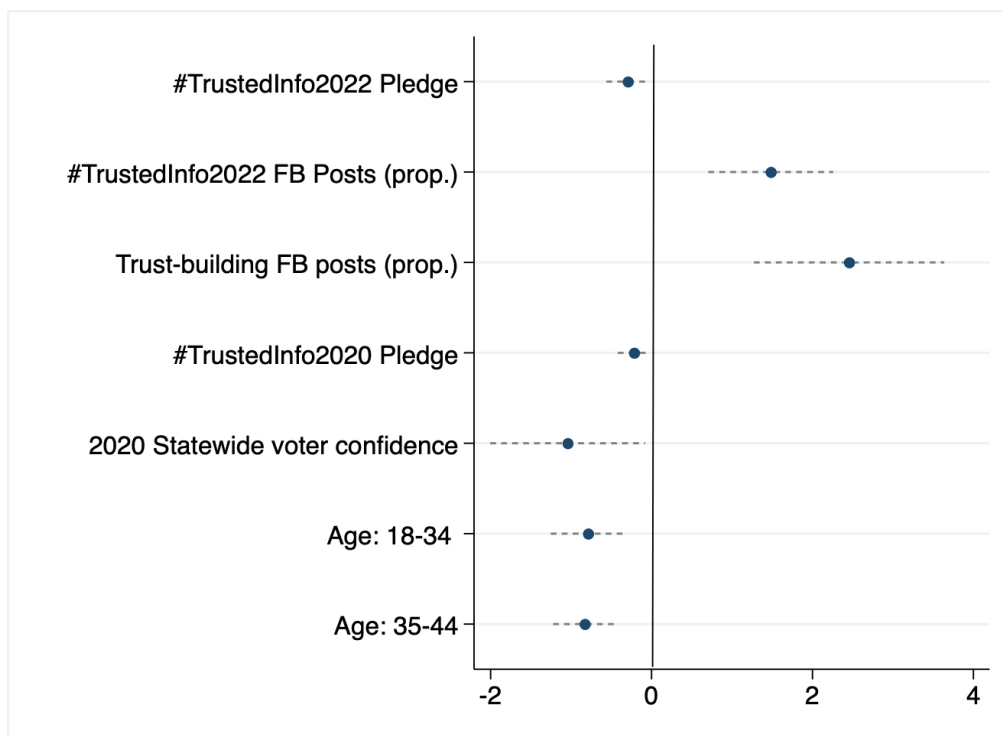

It is noteworthy that voter confidence in 2020 was negatively associated with attitudes about seeing the state EO as a top information source. This may be a byproduct of election denial, or the politicization of the office of the chief election officer. While our control variable for whether an election denier ran for Secretary of State was null, it is possible that this negative finding

captures the politically charged context of election administration due to efforts to undermine the integrity of elections.

It is also important to highlight differences in voters' information seeking behavior depending on their age. Young voters were less likely to report that their state election office as one of their top three sources for information about voting. Despite EO investment in voter outreach on platforms more likely to be used by young voters, such as Instagram and TikTok,[20] this finding suggests that there are persistent gaps in capturing the attention of young voters, who are already less likely to participate in elections. We find similar age affects when it compared to statewide voter confidence, with young voters being less likely to report votes in their state were counted as intended, all else equal.

Figure 4: 2022 Statewide Confidence in Ballot Accuracy
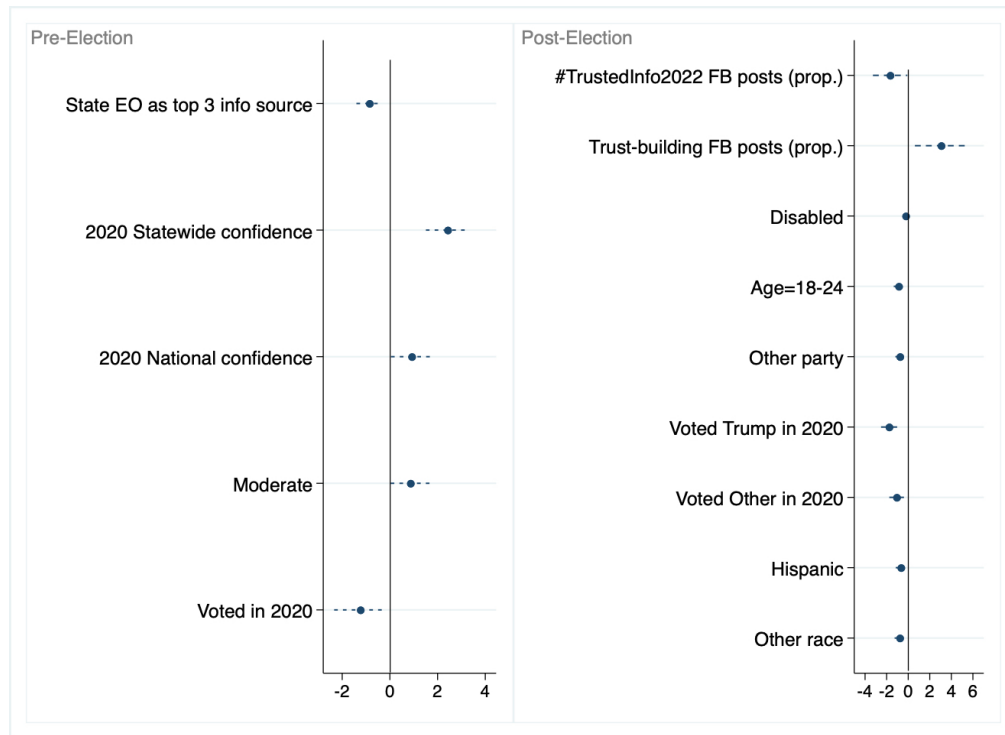
When looking at how voters' information choices affect voter confidence, our analysis offers important insights with respect to the role of state EOs in shaping confidence in statewide ballot accuracy. First, our findings show efforts to build trust yield positive outcomes after

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[20]Brenner, Nate, KOMU.com. July 6, 2022. "Missouri primary election voter registration deadline passes." https://www.komu.com/news/state/missouri-primary-election-voter-registration-deadline-passes/article$_c$db96f40 − fd7d − 11ec − bd8b − 5363ec76103c.html.

voters cast their vote (rather than in preparation for Election Day). Specifically, voters who lived in states where their state EO prioritized trust-building messages on Facebook between September 10 and November 15, 2022, expressed higher confidence that votes in their state were counted accurately when asked after voting concluded. Interestingly, the relationship between sharing posts using the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag and statewide voter confidence was negative, all else equal. Considering that taking the pledge was also negatively associated with voters' preference to look to their state EO for election-related information, this finding suggests that hashtag campaigns such as #TrustedInfo2022 may be insufficient in reaching their ultimate goal, that of confidence in election integrity. It underscores that EOs have to be more intentional in what content they share with voters to help them clearly connect these messages to election integrity generally, and ballot accuracy specifically.

We find evidence of this when evaluating how trust-building efforts from state EOs affect prospective and retrospective confidence that votes in one's state are counted accurately. One of the most concerning findings is that voters who reported that state election offices are among their top sources for election information expressed lower statewide confidence (pre-election survey). This finding is consistent with recent research that finds voters feel more confident about election integrity when they get informed through their local institutions: local election officials and local news media (Merivaki, Suttmann-Lea and Orey 2023). Unfortunately, we cannot test how one's information selection affected statewide voter confidence post-election, as this question was only asked in the pre-election survey. That said, it is promising that there is a positive relationship between EOs prioritizing trust-building messages and voters' confidence that votes statewide were counted accurately.

Paired with the negative coefficient for the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag usage, the positive relationship between trust-building messages and voters' selection of EOs as an information source indicate that EOs' efforts have been successful in establishing themselves as information leaders. Not only do voters prefer to get informed from them, but voter attitudes are influenced by the manner in which an EO communicates. Our analysis suggests that EOs may need time to establish themselves as opinion leaders on the topic of ballot accuracy *specifically*, potentially because it is more relevant to voters after they cast their vote. In effect, engagement with EOs' trust-building posts on social media peaked during the last two weeks before Election Day.[21]

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[21]See Appendix Figure 6.

This could explain the null effects of EOs' trust-building message sharing behavior on voter confidence in the pre-election sample (which was fielded roughly three weeks before Election Day).

Discussion

In this paper, we evaluate how state election officials' efforts to position themselves as information and opinion leaders influence voters' information seeking behavior and confidence in statewide ballot accuracy. We leverage a unique dataset of all social media communications of state election officials during the 2022 midterm election cycle and construct measures that capture EOs' trust-building campaigns on Facebook. We merge these data with two nationally representative surveys that took place a month prior to the election and the week following Election Day.

Our findings support our primary expectations that state election officials can be viewed as information leaders by prioritizing trust-building messages to voters. Because voters are more connected to their local election officials and trust them more with their vote, the challenge for state EOs to build this connection is higher. We show these voter education campaigns can yield positive outcomes insofar as establishing EOs as trusted sources, particularly in an era when election denier candidates run with the goal of undermining integrity in the election process.

Our analysis also shows that when EOs communicate consistently to voters about the security of the election process, voters' confidence is higher that votes were counted accurately in their state. These effects are found only after voters cast their vote, which strongly indicates that voters' attention to ballot accuracy is not uniform across the cycle; rather, it peaks during the act of voting. What is more, we find that even though campaigns using signaling terms, such as a hashtag, are effective in helping voters identify their EO as an information leader, they may not be sufficient in establishing the EO as an opinion leader. This means that communications that include more explicit signals about election integrity register with voters' concerns more effectively.

It is important to reiterate that confidence in statewide ballot accuracy is consistently lower compared to confidence in personal and local ballot accuracy. Our findings highlight the tangible ways for EOs to increase these rates by investing in trust-building campaigns on social

media. In the absence of other measures, activity on social media provides a useful insight as to how much EOs talk about these topics in public spaces. For example, in some posts, state election officials give interviews to local news outlets explicitly discussing how elections in their state are safe and secure. In other posts, post-election processes are described in the context of security, such as how signatures are verified, how drop boxes are kept secure, as well as whether voting systems are connected to the internet, a claim that has been subject to misinformation. As EOs increase their communications on social media, their messages are more likely to be amplified by other stakeholders in the information ecosystem, like the news media, and are thus more likely to reach voters, even if they may not consider EOs as information leaders. In other words, for some voters, viewing EOs as information and opinion leaders may be mutually exclusive. More analysis is needed to better flesh out how voters apply these roles when it comes to their state and local election officials.

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Appendix

Figure 5: Preferred sources for information on voting and registration, national sample

Voting and Registration

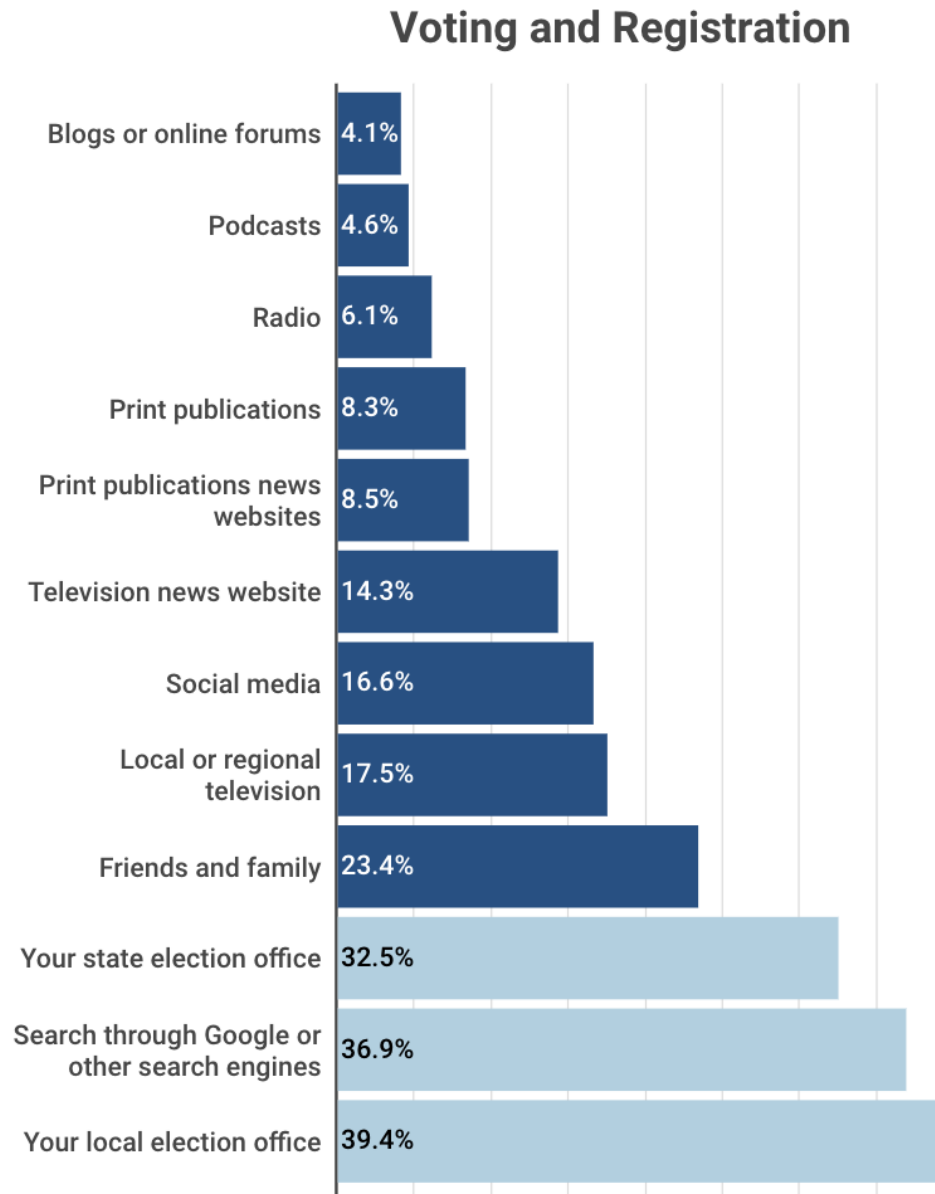| Source	Percentage
Blogs or online forums	4.1%
Podcasts	4.6%
Radio	6.1%
Print publications	8.3%
Print publications news websites	8.5%
Television news website	14.3%
Social media	16.6%
Local or regional television	17.5%
Friends and family	23.4%
Your state election office	32.5%
Search through Google or other search engines	36.9%
Your local election office	39.4%

Figure 6: Engagement with trust-building posts on Facebook during the 2022 election cycle
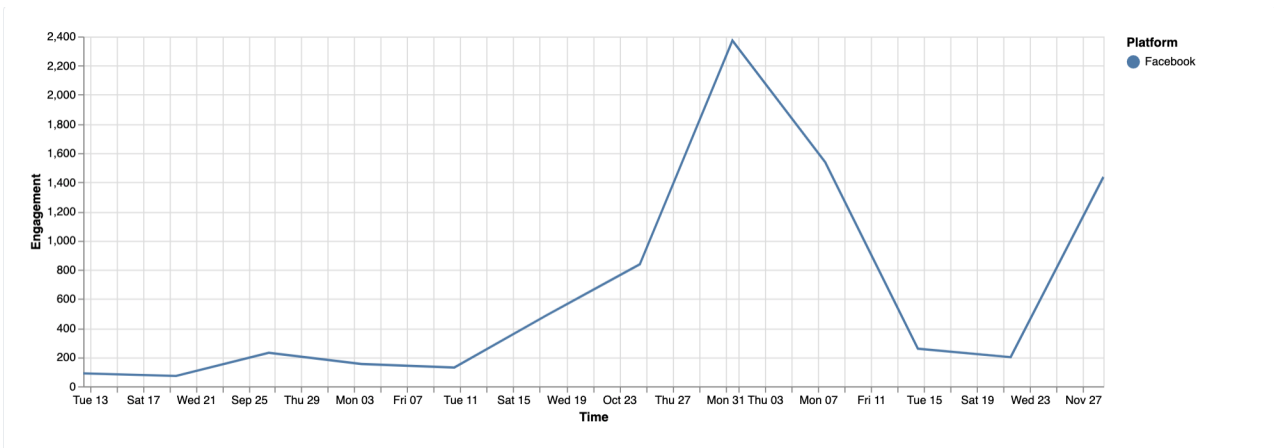
Table 1: States with Election Denier on Statewide Or U.S. Senate Race in 2022

Election Denier on Statewide Ballot	Secretary of State candidate
Alabama	Yes
Alaska	–
Arizona	Yes
Arkansas	–
California	–
Connecticut	Yes
Florida	–
Idaho	–
Illinois	–
Kansas	–
Louisiana	–
Maine	–
Maryland	–
Massachusetts	Yes
Michigan	Yes
Minnesota	Yes
Missouri	–
Nevada	Yes
New Mexico	Yes

Ohio	–
Oregon	–
Pennsylvania	–
South Dakota	Yes
Texas	–
Vermont	Yes
Wisconsin	–
Wyoming	Yes

Table 2: Voter Confidence in 2020 and 2022

	My Vote	My County/City	My State	Nationwide
	2020 vs 2022	**2020 vs 2022**	**2020 vs 2022**	**2020 vs 2022**
Confident	77.2 % 81.2	81 % 82.3	78.4 % 80.2	68 % 73.4
Not Confident	22.8 % 18.8	19 % 17.7	21.6 % 19.7	32 % 26.6

Table A1: Model 1: Information Seeking Choices, Pre-Election

	State EO Among Top 3 for Information
Trust-Building Measures	
#TrustedInfo2022 pledge	−.286* (.142)
#TrustedInfo2022 posts (prop.)	1.493*** (.406)
Trust-building posts (prop.)	2.507*** (.596)
#TrustedInfo2020 pledge	−.225 (0.106)
Registration & voting posts (prop.)	−.075 (.119)
Information lookup tools	
Availability of online lookup tools	.253 (.440)
Voter Confidence in 2020	
My vote counted in 2020	.323 (.320)
Votes in my community counted in 2020	.531 (.419)
Votes in my state counted in 2020	−1.040* (.496)
Votes nationally counted in 2020	.037 (.239)
Individual-level characteristics	
Conservative	.297 (.279)
Moderate	.113 (.185)
Age 18-34	−.793*** (.235)
Age 35-44	−.838*** (.202)
Age 65 and older	.252 (.155)
Female	−.165 (.177)
White	.272 (.173)
Bachelor's Degree	−.237 (.188)
Post-grad	.011 (.196)

Contextual Factors & Voting Behavior

Election denier running for CEO	.257 (.151)
Voted Trump in 2020	−.426 (.223)
Voted "Other" in 2020	.256 (.783)
Non-voter in 2020	.079 (.477)
Voted for Democrats in 2018	.197 (.231)
Voted "Other" in 2018	−.520 (.430)
Constant	−.779 (.509)
N	**1,093**

Note:	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A1: Model 2: 2022 Statewide Voter Confidence, Pre-Election

	Confidence that votes statewide will count in 2022
Preferred Source of Information	
State EO among top 3	−.874 (.284)
Trust-Building Measures	
#TrustedInfo2022 pledge	−.582 (.530)
#TrustedInfo2022 posts (prop.)	−1.448 (.767)
Trust-building posts (prop.)	−2.110 (1.909)
#TrustedInfo2020 pledge	.611 (.357)
Registration & voting posts (prop.)	−.434 (.337)
Information lookup tools	
Availability of online lookup tools	−.551 (1.602)
Voter Confidence in 2020	
My vote counted in 2020	.752 (.526)
Votes in my community counted in 2020	.969 (.520)
Votes in my state counted in 2020	2.443*** (.467)
Votes nationally counted in 2020	.912*** (.441)
Individual-level characteristics	
Conservative	.655 (.453)
Moderate	.865 (.418)
Age 18-34	−.394 (.413)
Age 35-44	−.165 (.397)
Age 65 and older	.228 (.319)
Female	−.245 (.319)
White	.240 (.447)
Bachelor's Degree	.479 (.414)
Post-grad	−.015 (.318)
Contextual Factors & Voting Behavior	
Election denier running for CEO	.671 (.429)
Voted Trump in 2020	−1.178* (.473)
Voted "Other" in 2020 −1.351* (.592)	

Non-voter in 2020 −1.129 (.830)

Voted for Democrats in 2018 −.010 (.564)

Voted "Other" in 2018 −.410 (.715)

Constant	−.155 (1.168)
N	**1,079**

Table A1: Model 2: 2022 Statewide Voter Confidence, Post-Election

	Confidence that votes statewide will count in 2022
Trust-Building Measures	
#TrustedInfo2022 pledge	.251 (.279)
#TrustedInfo2022 posts (prop.)	−1.678* (.815)
Trust-building posts (prop.)	3.056* (1.243)
#TrustedInfo2020 pledge	.249 (.298)
Registration & voting posts (prop.)	−.143 (.451)
Information lookup tools	
Availability of online lookup tools	.704 (.839)
Individual-level characteristics	
Conservative	−.472 (.255)
Moderate	−.084 (.239)
Republican	−.423 (.287)
Independent	−.766*** (.216)
Other party id	−.754** (.232)
Age 18-24	−.881*** (.236)
Age 45-64	−.076 (.126)
Age 65 and older	−.064 (.161)
Female	.038 (.075)
Black	.125 (.297)
Hispanic	−673** (247)
Other race	−.781** (246)
Up to High School	−203 (153)
Some college	−.030 (.187)
Post-grad	.249 (.229)
Disabled	−229* (107)
Contextual Factors & Voting Behavior	
Election denier running for CEO	−.402 (.396)
Voted in-person early	.098 (.277)
Voted by mail	−.100 (.213)

Voted Trump in 2020	-1.773^{***} (.381)
Voted "other" in 2020 -1.073^{**} (.346)	
Voted in 2020 .695 (.374)	
Constant	2.593^{**} (.795)
N	**7,335**

Note:	*p$<$0.05; **p$<$0.01; ***p$<$0.001