Can prebunking messages convince voters to trust delayed results?

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What you need to know:

Voters are inherently skeptical of election results released after Election Night. However simple messages explaining why election results might take time can, when presented before Election Day, prevent this decline in trust. Our study looked at what happens when you inform Americans that election results took multiple days to be reported in Arizona. We find that: 1. Learning that votes took multiple days to count makes Americans less trusting, but 2. They can be inoculated against this decline in trust through a factual message produced by election officials. The message in this video was simple, explaining that taking time to count ballots was normal and included security measures. Similar videos tailored to other jurisdictions could be made relatively inexpensively.

How we learned this:

We conducted a nationwide survey of eligible voters in the Spring of 2023 including over 10,000 Americans. Respondents were randomized into four groups:

1. A group who only received information about the outcome of the 2022 Arizona governor's race
2. A group who received information about the outcome and how long vote counting took
3. A group who was presented with an informational video about why vote counting might take time but only received outcome information
4. A group who was presented with an informational video about why vote counting might take time and were told how long vote counting took

We examined the level of trust in each of these four groups, measuring as the percentage who said they trusted the accuracy and integrity of Arizona elections "a lot" or "somewhat,"

versus those who distrusted Arizona elections somewhat or a lot. We when made two comparisons – the difference between those who heard about the slower vote counting and those who did not, and the difference between those who saw the prebunking video and those who did not.

Results: Percent who report they trust elections in Arizona, by group.

No delay info + no explanation 66.7%	**Delay info + no explanation** 60.2%
No delay info + explanation video 69.1%	**Delay info + explanation** 64.1%
Notes: All results are statistically significant: Large enough that they would not be produced by random chance alone in 95 out of 100 cases.	

How can election officials act on these findings?

Being transparent with voters and explaining why election results take time is critical. Our evidence suggests "prebunking" (or showing voters information explaining why counting ballots takes time before they learn about the election) is an effective tool available to election officials. In cases where ballots can't be counted on Election Day, clearly explaining to voters in advance so they know what to expect and why the counting takes longer in some cases can reduce the impact of delays on trust and increase trust among all voters.

What we don't know yet:

How long do the effects of messaging last? We don't know exactly what is going on in voters' minds when they see the videos – do they really learn about why votes take time to count in Arizona? We also do not know how this interacts with misinformation spreading specific theories about fraud in the vote counting process.

Learn more:

Full research paper available online

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