

Winners, Losers, and Voter Confidence in Response to Partisan Electoral Reform

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Abstract

In this article, we examine individual- and state-level voter confidence in Georgia from 2020 to 2022—an extremely contentious moment in Georgia politics. For the first time in 28 years, Georgia’s electoral votes went to a Democrat, Joe Biden, in 2020. Then, in early January 2021, Democrats won both of Georgia’s two U.S. Senate runoffs, giving their party majority control. In the wake of these surprising, historic, and consequential losses, Georgia Republicans’ voter confidence plummeted, and their party responded by passing comprehensive electoral reform in Senate Bill (SB) 202. Using survey data, we tracked voter confidence in Georgia before and after 2020, after passage of SB 202 in 2021, and after the 2022 midterm. Partisans’ voter confidence is greatly affected by the winner/loser effect in election outcomes. Also, SB 202 did boost Republicans’ confidence in Georgia’s election system, which, in turn, increased their individual- and state-level voter confidence in the 2022 midterm. In contrast, Georgia Democrats overwhelmingly opposed SB 202; therefore, the bill did not have the same salutary effect on their voter confidence in the 2022 elections.

Keywords: Georgia; voter confidence; SB 202; 2020 election; 2022 midterm; winner/loser effect

In his remarks to close out the 2023 Election Science, Reform, and Administration (ESRA) Conference, Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger stressed the importance of voter confidence.¹ Raffensperger was making the case that it was vital for the health of American democracy that citizens trust their vote is counted correctly and, likewise, that the aggregation of votes in a given political jurisdiction is tallied as intended. Of course, Raffensperger endured a trial by fire in the wake of the highly contentious 2020 presidential election. Statewide, Georgia’s 2020 presidential vote was counted three times and, ultimately, 11,779 votes favored Democrat Joe Biden over Republican Donald Trump, making it the narrowest election margin in the nation.² It was 2 January 2021, when Trump called Raffensperger, advising him “to ‘find’ [Trump] 11,780 votes to overturn the

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¹ The 7th Annual 2023 ESRA Conference was held at the University of Georgia on May 31 to June 2.

² Of the total number of Democratic and Republican votes cast for president, Biden won Georgia by a 0.2 percent margin ($n = 11,779$ of 4,935,487).

Hence, in a span of ten weeks (3 November 2020 to 5 January 2021), erstwhile deep-red Georgia delivered its 16 electoral votes to Democrat Joe Biden and then ceded Republican Senate representation to Democrats. Prior to 5 January 2021, conservative Zell Miller was the last Democratic senator to represent Georgia in 2004. And the last time a Democratic presidential nominee won the Peach State was when Bill Clinton was elected in 1992. For Georgia Republicans, these remarkably close and unexpected losses in the 2020–21 election cycle were historic, consequential, and demoralizing. As a means to restore voter confidence,⁵ especially for the segment of the electorate that had lost it (namely, Republicans), the Georgia General Assembly, on 25 March 2021, passed comprehensive electoral reform in Senate Bill (SB) 202, also called the Election Integrity Act of 2021. The legislation passed on purely partisan lines, with only Republican legislators voting in favor and only Democrats voting against SB 202.⁶ The word “confidence” appears nine times in SB 202. Indeed, Section 2(4) provides a clear rationale for passage of SB 202, where it states:

The aforementioned language is inclusive regarding the objective of restoring voter confidence in Georgia’s election system, irrespective of party affiliation. But, as we will demonstrate, only Republican voters needed a confidence boost—the result of stinging election losses that were amplified by Trump’s messaging. Furthermore, despite the inclusive rhetoric in SB 202, elites (elected officials) and the mass public both viewed the legislation as a partisan electoral reform,⁷ which is hard to dispute

⁷ M. V. Hood III and Seth C. McKee, “Getting the Message: Opinion Polarization over Election Law,” *Election Law Journal* 21, no. 2 (2022): 124–34; Hood and McKee, “Partisan Schism in America’s Newest Swing State.”

given that the legislation was crafted by Republicans and only Republican (GOP) lawmakers voted for it.

In this study, we rely on survey data to chronicle the changing dynamics of voter confidence in Georgia from 2020 to 2022. With the 2020 election as the starting point, we show that asymmetric changes in voter confidence based on party identification (PID) are principally tied to election outcomes. Specifically, Republican voters exhibit a steep decline in voter confidence at the individual and state levels after the 2020 election. In contrast, Democratic voters' confidence shows relatively little movement and is extremely high, in part a function of being on the winning side of the 2020–21 election cycle. However, a key question we seek to answer in the main analysis is whether confidence in Republican-passed SB 202 had the effect of boosting voters' confidence in the 2022 midterm. We find Republicans expressing greater confidence in SB 202 had more confidence in their vote and the statewide count in the 2022 contests. By comparison, because Democratic voters opposed SB 202 as a detrimental partisan electoral reform, their confidence in SB 202 is markedly lower and almost wholly unrelated to their individual- and state-level voter confidence in the 2022 elections.

The article proceeds in the following order. We review the voter confidence literature as it pertains to our study. Next, voter confidence in Georgia is presented in a national context, tracking changes from 2012 to 2022. Then, we turn to data documenting Georgia voters' confidence from 2020 to 2022 and report some of their opinions on SB 202. Lastly, the main analysis examines the relationship between confidence in SB 202 and its influence on voter confidence in the 2022 midterm. We conclude with some final thoughts on how voter confidence has varied in the tumultuous political context of recent Georgia elections.

Voter Confidence

The health of a democracy rests upon its legitimacy, as determined by voters holding the power to decide who represents them. “How confident voters are that their ballots are counted correctly is a normative issue within a representative democracy as a lack of confidence threatens the perceived legitimacy of an elected government,” state Alvarez et al.⁸ In the wake of the 2000 presidential election, which was decided by the Supreme Court in *Bush v. Gore* (2001), scholars turned their attention to questions of election administration and voter confidence. Not surprisingly, flaws in election administration, rampant in the pivotal state of Florida in 2000,⁹ affected trust in the political system and especially among voters on the losing end of the outcome.¹⁰

⁸ R. Michael Alvarez, Thad E. Hall, and Morgan H. Llewellyn, “Are Americans Confident Their Ballots Are Counted?”, *Journal of Politics* 70, no. 3 (2008): 754–66, 764.

⁹ Charles S. Bullock III, M. V. Hood III, and Richard Clark, “Punch Cards, Jim Crow, and Al Gore: Explaining Voter Trust in the Electoral System in Georgia, 2000,” *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (2005): 283–94.

¹⁰ Stephen C. Craig, Michael D. Martinez, Jason Gainous, and James G. Kane, “Winners, Losers, and Election Context: Voter Responses to the 2000 Presidential Election,” *Political Research Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2006): 579–92.

Although related to measures of trust in government and political efficacy, voter confidence is a separable and distinct concept.¹¹ Typically, voter confidence is measured on an ordinal scale, with response options as follows: (1) very confident, (2) somewhat confident, (3) not too confident, and (4) not at all confident. The first two categories are combined to connote a positive affirmation of voter confidence. The referent for voter confidence is typically the degree of confidence an individual has in their own vote being counted as intended. In addition to the individual-level assessment of voter confidence, it is often asked at the state level; that is, the degree of confidence that the statewide vote was counted as intended. Thus, this kind of question is easily modified for any other political jurisdiction.¹² Voters routinely show the most confidence in their own vote being counted properly, and hence, as noted by Atkeson et al., “voter confidence decreases, as voters get further away from their own vote experience.”¹³ Also, a decline in voter confidence is accentuated among voters on the losing side “when considering election administration that is at a far geographic remove from the voter”¹⁴—for instance, state- and national-level voter confidence.

In this article, we focus on voter confidence at the individual and state levels. The accumulation of research shows that voter confidence is highly responsive and malleable. In other words, many factors affect voter confidence. The context of the voter’s experience,¹⁵ including interactions with poll workers,¹⁶ the voting method,¹⁷ administrative issues related to the voting apparatus or equipment or ballot type,¹⁸ voter demographics,¹⁹ descriptive representation with poll workers,²⁰ and voter education,²¹ all influence voter confidence.

With our focus on Georgia voters in recent election cycles, we emphasize how election outcomes, partisan messaging, and partisan electoral reform all conspire

¹¹ Lonna Rae Atkeson, “Election Data Transparency,” in *The Measure of American Elections*, ed. Barry Burden and Charles Stewart III (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Lonna Rae Atkeson, R. Michael Alvarez, and Thad E. Hall, “Voter Confidence: How to Measure It and How It Differs from Government Support,” *Election Law Journal* 14, no. 3 (2015): 207–19.

¹² For example, precinct level, county level, national level.

¹³ Atkeson, Alvarez, and Hall, “Voter Confidence,” 216.

¹⁴ Michael W. Sances and Charles Stewart III, “Partisanship and Confidence in the Vote Count: Evidence from U.S. National Elections since 2000,” *Electoral Studies* 40 (2015): 176–88, 184.

¹⁵ R. Michael Alvarez, Jian Cao, and Yimeng Li, “Voting Experiences, Perceptions of Fraud, and Voter Confidence,” *Social Science Quarterly* 102, no. 4 (2021): 1225–38.

¹⁶ Lonna Rae Atkeson and Kyle L. Saunders, “The Effect of Election Administration on Voter Confidence: A Local Matter?”, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40, no. 4 (2007): 655–60; Thad E. Hall, J. Quin Monson, and Kelly D. Patterson, “The Human Dimension of Elections: How Poll Workers Shape Public Confidence in Elections,” *Political Research Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2009): 507–22; Bridgett A. King, “Policy and Precinct: Citizen Evaluations and Electoral Confidence,” *Social Science Quarterly* 98, no. 2 (2017): 672–89.

¹⁷ For example, absentee by mail versus in person; see Alvarez, Cao, and Li, “Voting Experiences, Perceptions of Fraud, and Voter Confidence”; Lisa A. Bryant, “Seeing Is Believing: An Experiment on Absentee Ballots and Voter Confidence,” *American Politics Research* 48, no. 6 (2020): 700–704.

¹⁸ Alvarez, Hall, and Llewellyn, “Are Americans Confident?”; Ryan L. Claassen, David B. Magleby, J. Quin Monson, and Kelly D. Patterson, “Voter Confidence and the Election-Day Voting Experience,” *Political Behavior* 35 (2013): 215–35; Hall, Monson, and Patterson, “The Human Dimension of Elections”; Bridgett A. King, “Waiting to Vote: The Effects of Administrative Irregularities at Polling Locations and Voter Confidence,” *Policy Studies* 41, no. 2–3 (2020): 230–48.

¹⁹ Alvarez, Hall, and Llewellyn, “Are Americans Confident?”; Atkeson and Saunders, “The Effect of Election Administration”; Bullock, Hood, and Clark, “Punch Cards”; King, “Policy and Precinct.”

²⁰ Bridgett A. King and Alicia Barnes, “Descriptive Representation in Election Administration: Poll Workers and Voter Confidence,” *Election Law Journal* 18, no. 1 (2019): 16–30.

²¹ Mara Suttman-Lea and Thessalia Merivaki, “The Impact of Voter Education on Voter Confidence: Evidence from the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election,” *Election Law Journal* 22, no. 2 (2023): 145–65.

to affect voter confidence. First, past research²² has established a palpable winner/loser effect on voter confidence, which has also registered a strong influence on attitudes toward democracy in comparative work that includes the United States.²³ Voters on the winning side exhibit a pronounced increase in confidence, particularly at the state level vis-à-vis the individual level.²⁴ Conversely, there is, likewise, a loser effect, meaning voters on the losing side experience a reduction in voter confidence. The winner/loser effect on voter confidence is more notable in the most salient elections (e.g., it matters more in voting for president than it does for lower offices).²⁵

With respect to partisan messaging and partisan electoral reform, two studies in particular²⁶ greatly inform the approach and analysis we use in this article. The first, by Vonnahme and Miller, shows, with an experimental design,²⁷ that because voters lack detailed information and knowledge regarding election administration, they take cues from what candidates say about the election process. In particular, voter confidence is diminished when candidates level accusations of unfairness. This dynamic is viewed as possibly sanguine, assuming there are legitimate reasons to challenge the result.²⁸ But understandably, the authors did not envision Donald Trump, a future candidate leveling a blatant falsehood in the 2020 presidential election. Nevertheless, the significance of this finding²⁹ is that candidate messaging can have a substantial influence on voters' confidence and related opinions.³⁰

Finally, we extend the work of another team of authors, Bowler and Donovan,³¹ within a somewhat different context. Whereas these scholars³² advanced a theory of political behavior on the basis of voter identification (ID) laws, we apply their same theory to the passage and implementation of SB 202.³³ In state legislatures, support for voter ID laws is highly polarizing along partisan lines.³⁴ Republican

²² Bullock, Hood, and Clark, "Punch Cards"; Morris Levy, "Winning Cures Everything? Beliefs about Voter Fraud, Voter Confidence, and the 2016 Election," *Electoral Studies* 74 (2021): 102156; Nathaniel Persily and Charles Stewart III, "The Miracle and Tragedy of the 2020 U.S. Election," *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 2 (2021): 159–78; Vincent Price and Anca Romantan, "Confidence in Institutions before, during, and after 'Indecision 2000,'" *Journal of Politics* 66, no. 3 (2004): 939–56; Sances and Stewart, "Partisanship and Confidence"; Betsy Sinclair, Steven S. Smith, and Patrick D. Tucker, "'It's Largely a Rigged System': Voter Confidence and the Winner Effect in 2016," *Political Research Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (2018): 854–68.

²³ Shane Singh, Ignacio Lago, and André Blais, "Winning and Competitiveness as Determinants of Political Support," *Social Science Quarterly* 92, no. 3 (2011): 695–709.

²⁴ Sances and Stewart, "Partisanship and Confidence."

²⁵ Singh, Lago, and Blais, "Winning and Competitiveness."

²⁶ Greg Vonnahme and Beth Miller, "Candidate Cues and Voter Confidence in American Elections," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties* 23, no. 2 (2013): 223–39; and Shaun Bowler and Todd Donovan, "A Partisan Model of Electoral Reform: Voter Identification Laws and Confidence in State Elections," *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (2016): 340–61.

²⁷ Vonnahme and Miller, "Candidate Cues."

²⁸ Vonnahme and Miller, "Candidate Cues."

²⁹ Vonnahme and Miller, "Candidate Cues."

³⁰ See also Nicolas Berlinski et al., "The Effects of Unsubstantiated Claims of Voter Fraud on Confidence in Elections," *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 10, no. 1 (2023): 34–49.

³¹ Bowler and Donovan, "A Partisan Model."

³² Bowler and Donovan, "A Partisan Model."

³³ The authors conclude their study with the following statement: "We suggest that the prospects for such polarized effects of reform on public confidence in elections are not limited to voter identification laws" (Bowler and Donovan, "A Partisan Model," 355). The findings in this study confirm Bowler and Donovan's suspicions.

³⁴ Paul Gronke, William D. Hicks, Seth C. McKee, Charles Stewart III, and James Dunham, "Voter ID Laws: A View from the Public," *Social Science Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (2019): 215–32; William D. Hicks, Seth C. McKee, Mitchell D. Sellers, and Daniel A. Smith, "A Principle or a Strategy? Voter Identification Laws and Partisan Competition in the American States," *Political Research Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (2015): 18–33; Seth C. McKee, "Politics Is Local: State Legislators Voting on Restrictive Voter Identification Legislation," *Research & Politics* 2, no. 3 (2015): 1–7.

Importantly, we do not consider the reforms found in SB 202 as the principal reason Republican voters' confidence increased; rather, it is awareness that the GOP spearheaded the changes to election administration. The salience of the partisan battle over SB 202, which left no space for Democrats and Republicans to align on the same side, rendered a clear cue³⁸ that this absolute polarization had the GOP favoring electoral reform and Democrats opposing it. Under these conditions, the details of electoral reform likely took a backseat to Republican voters receiving the message that SB 202 was a welcome change for their partisan side, as their representatives claimed credit for the legislation and touted it as a necessary fix for improving election administration and raising confidence in vote counting.

In this section, we present a series of figures charting individual- and state-level voter confidence from 2012 to 2022. The data come from the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAЕ) as well as surveys we administered to registered Georgia voters shortly after the 2020 and 2022 elections.³⁹ Unfortunately, there is no SPAЕ survey for 2018, which was a highly contentious and acrimonious election cycle in Georgia, with voter suppression allegations Democrats made against Republicans and specifically at then-Secretary of State and victorious gubernatorial candidate Brian Kemp.⁴⁰

³⁵ William D. Hicks, Seth C. McKee, and Daniel A. Smith, “The Determinants of State Legislator Support for Restrictive Voter ID Laws,” *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (2016): 411–31.

³⁷ Bowler and Donovan, "A Partisan Model," 353.

³⁸ Arthur Lupia, "Shortcuts versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 1 (1994): 63–76.

³⁹ The SPAE data are publicly available for download and accessed 20 September 2023 at <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/projects/survey-performance-american-elections>. The surveys we administered to registered Georgia voters were conducted through the University of Georgia's School of Public and International Affairs Survey Research Center.

⁴⁰ M. V. Hood III and Seth C. McKee, “Why Georgia, Why? Peach State Residents’ Perceptions of Voting Improperities and their Impact on the 2018 Gubernatorial Election,” *Social Science Quarterly* 100, no. 5 (2019): 1828–47.

⁴¹ Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

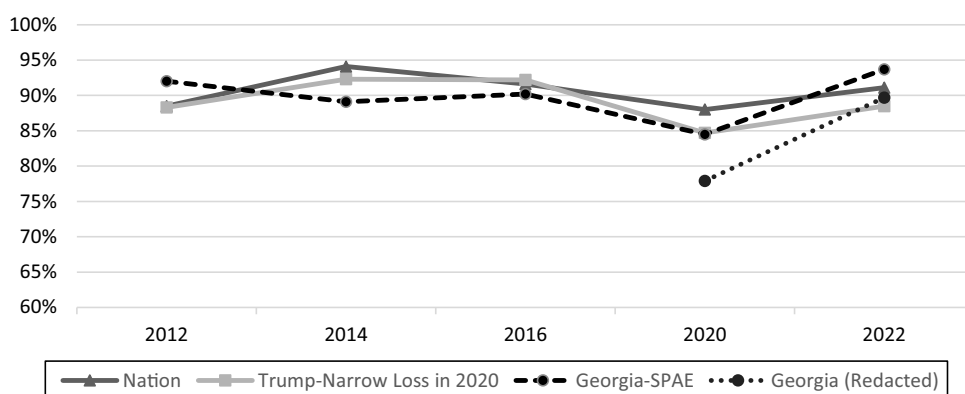


Figure 1. Individual-Level Voter Confidence, All Voters

Note: Data compiled by the authors.

voters from our 2020 and 2022 surveys. The second category of voters, those living in the six states in which Trump experienced his closest losses, is included to highlight the drop in voter confidence in 2020; hence, these voters serve as a placebo effect in the other election years when this loser effect does not manifest.⁴²

Figure 1 displays individual-level voter confidence⁴³ from 2012 to 2022. What stands out is the high level of voter confidence. For all four groups of voters, their confidence equals or surpasses 85 percent in every instance except for the 2020 Georgia survey, where it notches 78 percent. Also notable is the decline in voter confidence from 2016 to 2020, with the latter election now notorious for Trump falsely claiming he lost because of voter fraud. For the three groups in 2016, voter confidence matches or exceeds 90 percent and then falls below 90 percent for all three groups in 2020. Speaking to the loser effect, voter confidence drops more from 2016 to 2020 among Georgia voters and voters residing in the six closest states Trump lost in 2020. Voter confidence then shows an impressive rebound in the first post-Trump 2022 midterm.

Figure 2 is limited to Republicans and highlights the winner effect in boosting voter confidence from 2012 (Democrat Barack Obama reelected) to 2014 (a favorable Republican midterm) and then the subsequent and much more palpable loser effect from 2016 to 2020. The loser effect is most evident in the two Georgia samples—the closest state Trump lost and where his partisan messaging regarding a stolen election was most vociferous and amplified. Like all voters, there is an impressive rebound in Republican voters' confidence in the 2022 midterm.

Lastly, [figure 3](#) shows Democratic voter confidence, which necessarily exhibits a pattern contrary to, and in the case of Georgia voters, inverse to that of Republicans. Focusing on Georgia Democrats, their confidence drops nine percentage points (from 94 percent to 85 percent) from 2012 to 2014 and remains at this lower rate in 2016, but then completely rebounds in the 2020 election of Democrat Joe Biden (back to 94 percent). Georgia Democrats in the SPAE survey then reach their peak confidence at 99 percent in 2022. As a slight contrast, the Georgia surveys for 2020 and 2022 show Democrats holding steady at 96 percent

⁴² We thank Charles Stewart III for bringing this illuminating approach to our attention.

43 Confident that one's own vote was counted as intended.

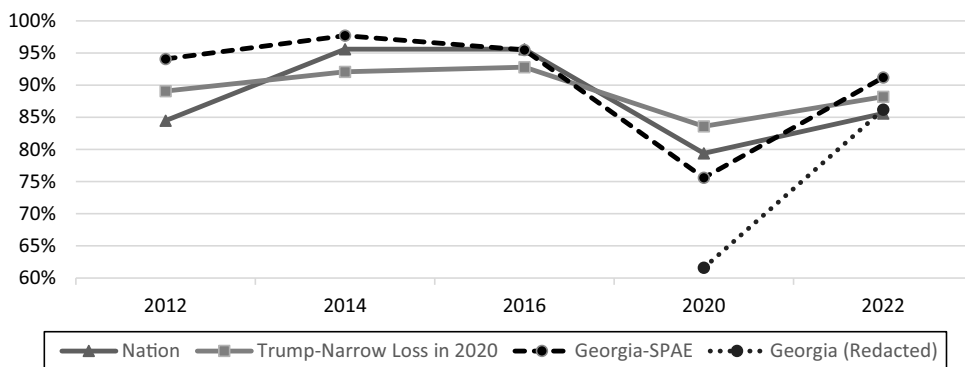


Figure 2. Individual-Level Voter Confidence, Republican Voters

Note: Data compiled by the authors.

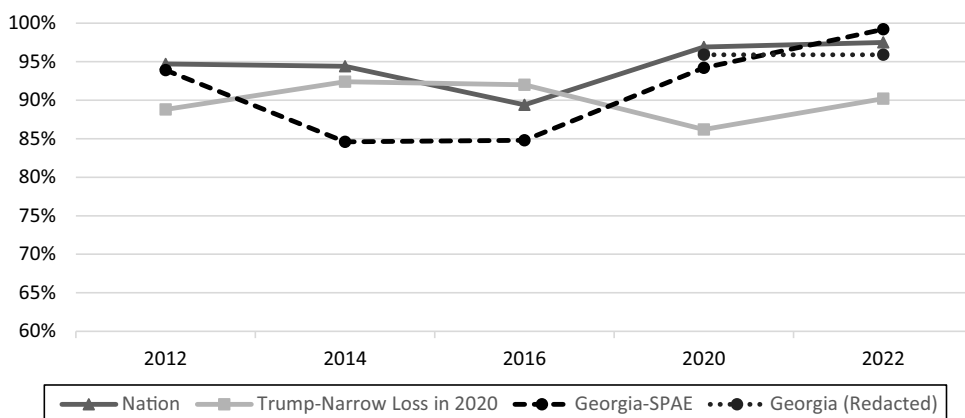


Figure 3. Individual-Level Voter Confidence, Democratic Voters

Note: Data compiled by the authors.

confidence in these two elections. Finally, it is also interesting to see a drop in Democratic voter confidence in the six Trump narrow-loss states in 2020, as though Democratic voters were not entirely immune to Trump's messaging.

Figure 4 presents state-level voter confidence⁴⁴ from 2012 to 2022. The first thing to notice is the alteration in the scaling of the vertical axis, which ranges from 40 percent to 100 percent (60 percent to 100 percent on the individual-level voter confidence scales). Corroborating previous research,⁴⁵ there is much greater variation in state-level voter confidence. Most evident in figure 4 is the plunge in voter confidence from 2016 to 2020, and it is greatest where the loser effect was felt the most, in the six Trump narrow-loss states (a 13-point drop) and among Georgia voters (a 20-point drop in the Georgia SPAE data). But once again, voter confidence shows a healthy uptick in 2022—exceeding 70 percent for all four plotted groups of voters.

⁴⁴ Confident that the statewide vote was counted as intended.

⁴⁵ Atkeson, Alvarez, and Hall, "Voter Confidence"; Sances and Stewart, "Partisanship and Confidence."

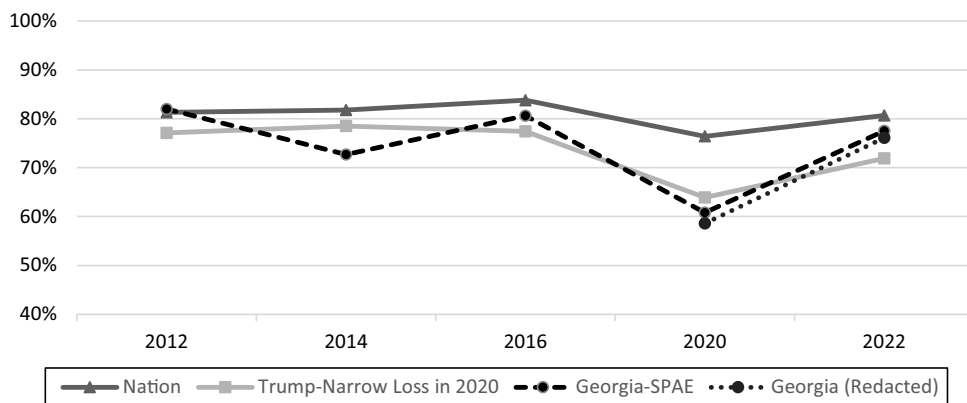


Figure 4. State-Level Voter Confidence, All Voters

Note: Data compiled by the authors.

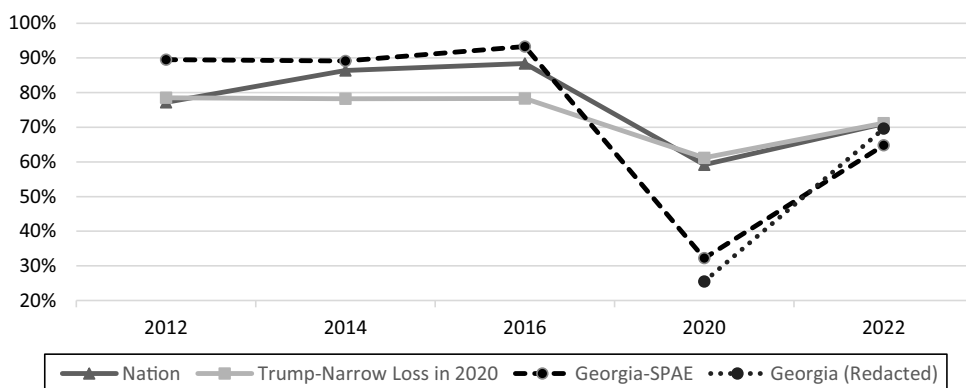


Figure 5. State-Level Voter Confidence, Republican Voters

Note: Data compiled by the authors.

Figure 5 shows state-level voter confidence for Republicans. This graphical depiction accounts for why the low end of the vertical axis is set at 20 percent. Notably, the 2016 to 2020 dive in voter confidence is not nearly as severe among all Republicans (a 29-point drop) and those residing in the six Trump narrow-loss states (a 17-point drop), as it was in the most competitive state of Georgia, which saw a 61-point cratering in state-level confidence (going from 93 percent in 2016 to 32 percent in 2020). Still, voter confidence rebounds considerably in 2022, and especially among Georgia Republicans (a 33-point jump in the Georgia SPAE data and a 44-point surge in the Georgia survey).

Finally, figure 6 presents state-level voter confidence for Democrats. Overall, state-level confidence remains high for Democrats from 2012 to 2022 (always greater than 80 percent, and greater than 90 percent in 2020 and 2022). For Democratic voters in Georgia (according to SPAE data), confidence declines in the 2014 midterm (a 14-point drop) but then increases thereafter to a peak of 90 percent in 2022. The Georgia survey data show a somewhat different pattern between 2020 and 2022, exhibiting a 9-point drop (94 percent to 85 percent),

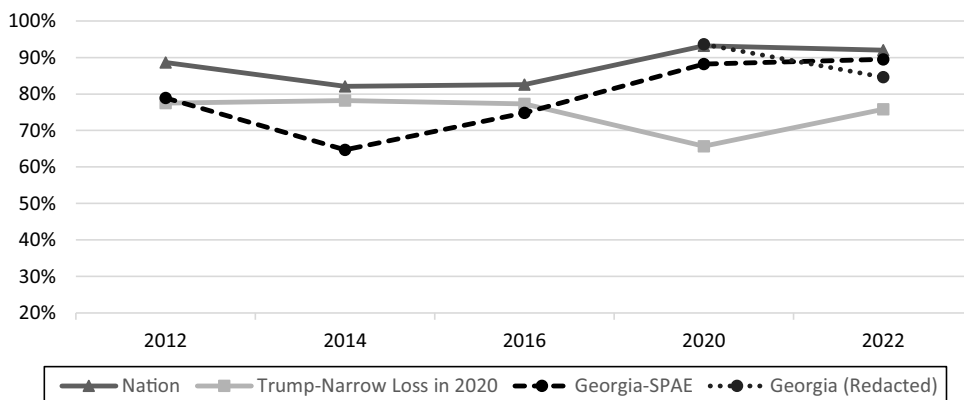


Figure 6. State-Level Voter Confidence, Democratic Voters

Note: Data compiled by the authors.

which resembles a loser effect in the latter election (a good midterm for Georgia Republicans). Again, it appears Democrats in the six Trump narrow-loss states were not shielded from a decline in voter confidence, with Democratic confidence going from 77 percent in 2016 to 66 percent in 2020. But in 2022, Democrats in these states increase their voter confidence by 10 points (back up to 76 percent).

Voter Confidence, SB 202, and Partisan Polarization in Georgia, 2020–22

In this section, the data are limited to a handful of surveys we administered to registered Georgia voters from 2020 to 2022. Consider the partisan breakdown of responses to this question asked of voters prior to the November 2020 election: “Overall, how confident are you that the November election will be conducted fairly and accurately?” The response options were (1) very confident, (2) somewhat confident, (3) not so confident, and (4) and not at all confident. Combining the first two response options, 67.8 percent of Democrats reported being confident that the 2020 election would be conducted fairly and accurately; 62.3 percent of Republicans agreed (as did 69.6 percent of Independents).⁴⁶

In January 2021, we then asked Georgia voters this question: “Do you believe there was widespread voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election, or not?” Among Republicans, 75.8 percent responded yes, whereas 93.5 percent of Democrats responded no (57.8 percent of Independents also responded no). Then, in late March through mid-April (after SB 202 was enacted), we asked Georgia voters this question: “Do you think Joe Biden won the presidential election in Georgia fairly, or do you believe he won as a result of fraud?” Among Republicans, 71.4 percent answered that Biden won due to fraud, and 100 percent of Democrats answered that Biden won fairly (69.7 percent of Independents answered that Biden won fairly). These results demonstrate that Trump had poisoned

⁴⁶ The 5.5 percentage point difference in voter confidence among Democrats (67.8%) and Republicans (62.3%) is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). For Democrats, the percentages in the *very confident* and *some-what confident* categories are 19.6% and 48.2%, respectively; for Republicans they are 21.7% and 40.6%, respectively.

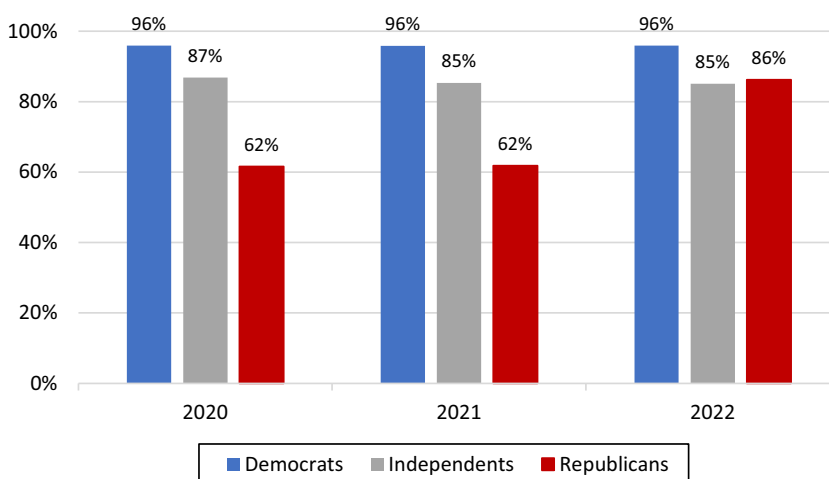


Figure 7. Individual-Level Voter Confidence in Georgia, 2020–22

Note: Georgia surveys administered by the authors.

the well of electoral legitimacy among Republican voters, the lion's share of whom received and accepted his message⁴⁷ of a stolen election.

Because most Republican voters believed Trump's "Big Lie," even as Biden assumed the presidency,⁴⁸ this should be reflected in a much lower level of voter confidence found among rank-and-file GOP voters vis-à-vis Democrats after the 2020 election but before the 2022 midterm. Republicans' voter confidence should rise in 2022 primarily because of the winner effect. Indeed, Georgia Republicans would have run the table in statewide contests if not for their deeply flawed Senate nominee and former football great, Herschel Walker. Figure 7 shows individual-level voter confidence from Georgia surveys conducted after the 2020 election, after passage of SB 202 in 2021 (31 March to 19 April 2021), and after the 2022 midterm. The 2020 and 2022 survey responses are the same ones used for the data reported in the figures in the previous section of this article. We add the 2021 survey data because voter confidence should resemble that in the post-2020 survey, because another election cycle had not taken place.⁴⁹ Lastly, the data show voter confidence according to PID: Democrats, Republicans, and Independents.

As anticipated, individual-level voter confidence is practically frozen in 2020 and 2021, according to the two post-2020 surveys taken before the 2022 midterm. However, even after the 2022 elections, the high levels of voter confidence expressed by Democrats (96 percent) and Independents (85 percent) hold firm. The comparably low level of Republican confidence, at 62 percent in 2020 and 2021, then expectedly jumps to 86 percent in 2022, when the Georgia GOP swept every statewide contest but the U.S. Senate race. Thus, the winner effect narrowed

⁴⁷ John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁴⁸ Gary C. Jacobson, "The Presidential and Congressional Elections of 2020: A National Referendum on the Trump Presidency," *Political Science Quarterly* 136, no. 1 (2021): 11–45.

⁴⁹ Stated differently, the 2021 survey is still gauging voter confidence in the 2020 elections. Although the overall percentages remain essentially the same in adding responses from the "very confident" and "somewhat confident" categories for 2020 and 2021, there is an across-the-board increase in "very confident" responses in 2021 versus 2020: plus 6 points for Republicans, plus 3.4 points for Democrats, and plus 3.3 points for Independents.

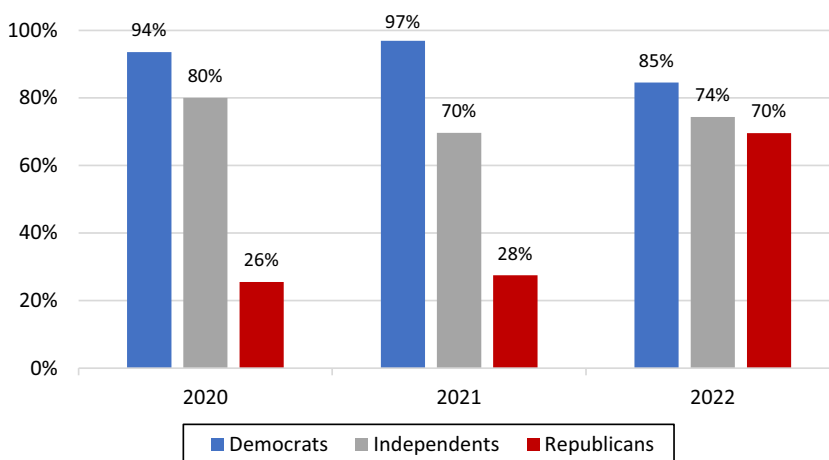


Figure 8. State-Level Voter Confidence in Georgia, 2020–22

Note: Georgia surveys administered by the authors.

a Democratic-Republican voter confidence gap of 34 points (in 2020–21) to 10 points in 2022.

Figure 8 displays state-level Georgia voter confidence by PID for 2020–22. The winner/loser effect in voter confidence is, once again, more evident at the state level. Between 2020 and 2021, the only discernible movement in voter confidence is from Independents, whose confidence drops 10 points (80 percent in 2020 to 70 percent in 2021). In contrast, almost all Democrats trust the statewide vote count in the 2020 elections (94 percent in 2020 and 97 percent in 2021), whereas less than a third of Republicans share their Democratic counterparts' confidence (26 percent in 2020 and 28 percent in 2021). The partisan movement in 2022 is a textbook case of the winner/loser effect in state-level voter confidence. In an election cycle hospitable to Georgia Republicans, Democratic confidence dropped 12 points (97 percent in 2021 to 85 percent in 2022), whereas Republican confidence soared 42 points, going from 28 percent in 2021 to 70 percent in 2022.

We now pivot from assessing voter confidence tied to counting votes to confidence in Georgia's Republican-passed electoral reform, embodied in SB 202. We ran back-to-back surveys on registered Georgia voters, the first spanning 31 March to 19 April 2021 and the second covering 20 April to 3 May 2021. Both of these surveys asked voters this question: "In your opinion, do the recent changes made to Georgia's election laws increase or decrease your confidence in the state's election system?" We combine the answers to these surveys because they took place one after the other and posed an identical question. In the post-2022 midterm survey we asked a similar question, but it directly references SB 202, as follows: "Last year the Georgia Legislature passed an election reform bill known as SB 202. In your opinion, did the recent changes made to Georgia's election laws increase or decrease your confidence in the state's election system?" The response options were the same for these questions: (1) greatly increased, (2) somewhat increased, (3) somewhat decreased, and (4) greatly decreased.

Figure 9 displays the answers to the above-mentioned questions by combining response options 1 and 2 (confidence) for registered Georgia voters in 2021 and 2022. Confidence in electoral reform shows a reversed pattern according to PID.

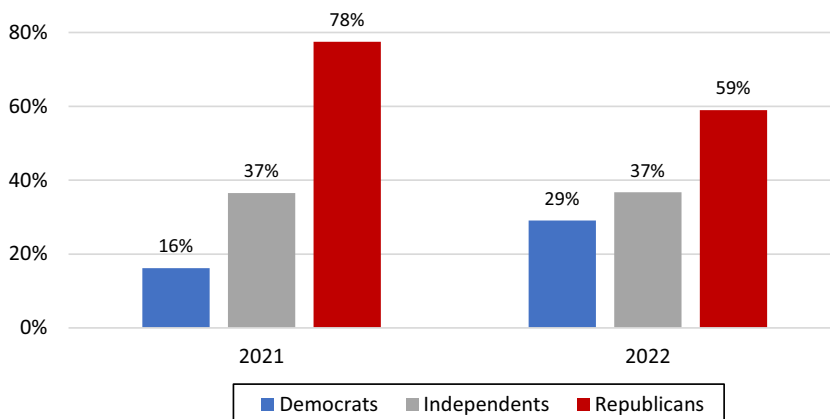


Figure 9. Voter Confidence in Georgia GOP's Electoral Reform

Note: Georgia surveys administered by the authors.

Republicans exhibit the most confidence in SB 202, whereas Democrats have the least. Independents show no movement in opinions toward SB 202, with 37 percent expressing confidence in 2021 and 2022. Interestingly, Democratic confidence in SB 202 increases from 16 percent to 29 percent, whereas Republican confidence declines from 78 percent to 59 percent, which reduces partisan polarization (Republican confidence minus Democratic confidence) considerably in 2022 (a 30-point difference) versus 2021 (a 62-point disparity).

Nevertheless, the data tell a story we expected to see. These findings jibe with the notion that Republican voters are taking cues in line with a partisan electoral reform advanced on their behalf.⁵⁰ Likewise, because Democratic messaging opposed electoral reform as manifest in SB 202,⁵¹ not even a third of Democratic voters expressed confidence in these GOP-produced election measures.

Georgia Republicans and Democrats polarized over SB 202. In the late March to mid-April survey, registered Georgia voters were asked: “In thinking about the recently passed election reform bill, what would you say the primary motivation was?” (A) to make future elections more secure, (B) to make it more difficult for certain groups to vote, or (C) both equally (a volunteered response). Among Republicans, 88.7 percent chose option A, whereas 86.6 percent of Democrats chose option B (51.3 percent of Independents also chose option B). Then, in the survey conducted right after that one (20 April to 3 May 2021), we asked Georgia voters: “In thinking about the recently passed election bill, what would you say the primary motivation was? Was it to increase voter confidence in elections or to make it more difficult for certain groups to vote?” Among Republicans, 77.5 percent answered that the principal objective was to increase voter confidence (46.3 percent of Independents agreed). Among Democrats, 77.3 percent said SB 202 was designed to make it more difficult for certain groups to vote. Finally, we asked Georgia voters, “Recently, Georgia lawmakers made a number of changes to voting laws in the state. Overall, do you approve or disapprove of this law?” Among Republicans, 81.4 percent voiced approval, versus 74.5

⁵⁰ Bowler and Donovan, “A Partisan Model.”

⁵¹ Hood and McKee, “Getting the Message” and “Partisan Schism.”

percent of Democrats who voiced disapproval (a slim 40.4 percent plurality of Independents voiced disapproval).⁵²

Data and Methods

Although SB 202 certainly remained controversial, it nevertheless was in place for the 2022 midterm. After the 2022 general election, one could posit many hypotheses concerning the effects, if any, that SB 202 had on various activities, such as those related to voter turnout or the ease of casting a ballot. We stress the impact of SB 202 on voter confidence in the 2022 elections. Did passage and implementation of SB 202 after the 2020 election cycle boost voter confidence at either the individual or state level? More specifically, because SB 202 was a partisan electoral reform⁵³ advanced by the Georgia GOP, we hypothesize that Republican voters were the most likely to increase their voter confidence in 2022 based on their impressions of this election legislation.

After the 8 November 2022 midterm election, a live-interviewer telephone survey of Georgia voters was undertaken by the University of Georgia's SPIA Survey Research Center. The survey was conducted from 13 November to 6 December 2022 and included a total of 1,253 registrants who reported voting in the 2022 general election. Poststratification weighting was applied to ensure respondents were representative of the 2022 Georgia electorate in terms of education, race, gender, and age.

In the analysis, we use two standard questions that relate to voter confidence. The first captures voter confidence at the individual level by asking respondents, "How confident are you that your vote in this midterm election was counted as you intended?" The second, designed to measure confidence for the state of Georgia as a whole, asked respondents, "Now, think about vote counting throughout the State of Georgia, and not just your own personal situation. How confident are you that votes in Georgia were counted as voters intended?" For both of these measures of voter confidence, higher values are indicative of increasing levels of voter confidence (1 = not at all confident; 2 = not too confident; 3 = somewhat confident; and 4 = very confident). Given the ordinal nature of these two dependent variables, multivariate models are estimated using ordered probit regression.

Our primary independent variable of interest asked respondents about their opinion on SB 202. The exact question is as follows: "Last year the Georgia Legislature passed an election reform bill known as SB 202. In your opinion, did the recent changes made to Georgia's election laws increase or decrease your confidence in the state's election system?" In the analyses, higher numbered values indicate greater confidence levels (1 = greatly decrease; 2 = somewhat decrease; 3 = somewhat increase; and 4 = greatly increase).

Among the key independent variables included in the models are two binary indicators for Republicans and Independents, with Democrats serving as the excluded comparison category. To separate the effects of opinions on SB 202 by partisanship, we also include a set of interactive terms for some of the models.⁵⁴

⁵² In the descriptive statistics reported throughout the article, we include the "Don't Know" answers in the total frequency distribution of response options.

⁵³ Bowler and Donovan, "A Partisan Model."

⁵⁴ For example, SB 202 by Independent and SB 202 by Republican, as shown in Appendix Table A2.

Regarding voting experience, we include a variable to indicate if a respondent was a first-time voter in the 2022 midterm (1 = first-time voter; 0 = repeat voter). Finally, we also include two binary indicators to denote the method a respondent used to cast a ballot—early in person and absentee by mail—with the excluded comparison category defined as those who voted in person at their precinct on Election Day.

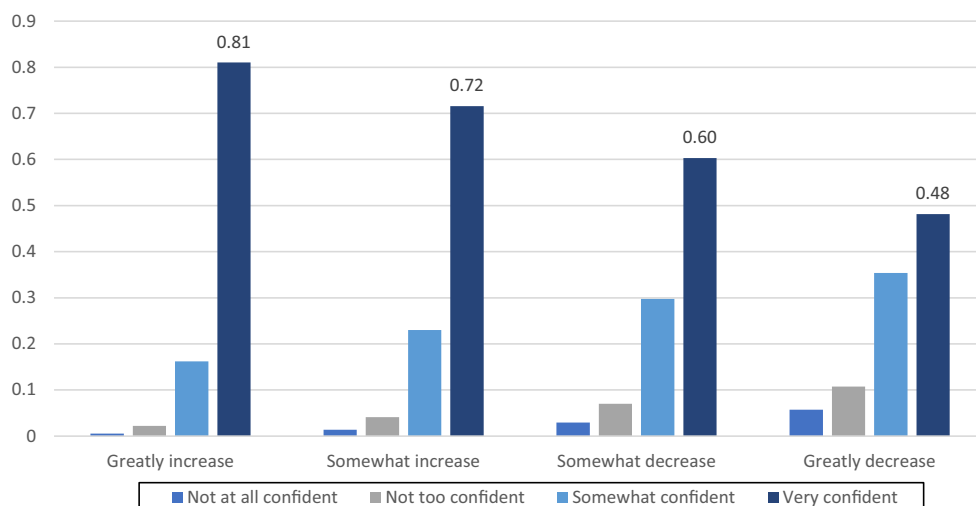
We begin by examining the ordinal distribution of our primary variable of interest: opinions on SB 202, located in [Table 1](#) (previously and partially alluded to in [fig. 9](#)). A plurality of respondents, 42.2 percent, indicated that SB 202 increased their confidence in the state’s election system, whereas a quarter of respondents (24.6 percent) stated that SB 202 decreased their confidence. A third of respondents had no opinion regarding SB 202. This is not a surprise given that SB 202 was passed more than a year and a half prior to the 2022 midterm in the spring of 2021 and, intentionally, the survey question provides as little context as possible.

The high percentage of Don't Know responses (33.2 percent) was also anticipated, not only due to the elapsed time since passage of SB 202 but also because most voters tend to ignore the details of a multifaceted election reform bill.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, around the time SB 202 was passed in late March 2021, it received substantial media coverage and prompted partisan polarization over various provisions in the legislation.⁵⁶ In particular, Democrats mobilized against SB 202, claiming it was little more than a ploy to aid Republicans in future elections.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Mark Niesse, “Georgia Absentee ID Law Has Outsized Impact on Black and Metro Voters,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 1 June 2021, accessed 30 July 2023, available at <https://www.ajc.com/politics/georgia-absentee-id-law-has-outsized-impact-on-black-and-metro-voters/ZFAZVG46EZEL5MUICUQI6SHO44/>.

Table 1. Voter Confidence (%) about SB 202

Category	Total	Republican	Independent	Democrat
Greatly increase	14.7	24.7	9.6	6.2
Somewhat increase	27.5	34.4	27.0	22.9
Somewhat decrease	16.2	3.4	14.7	32.9
Greatly decrease	8.4	3.6	6.6	13.9
Don't know	33.2	33.9	42.1	24.1

**Figure 10.** Opinions on Senate Bill (SB) 202 and Individual-Level Voter Confidence

Salient Democratic opposition to SB 202 perhaps explains why a decidedly lower percentage of Democrats (24.1 percent) register Don't Know responses in Table 1.

For the following analyses, we limit our sample to those respondents who had a substantive opinion on SB 202 one way or the other.⁵⁸ We first examine individual-level confidence that one's vote was counted as intended in the 2022 midterm.⁵⁹ From the results in Table A1, respondents with higher levels of formal education are more likely to also have higher levels of confidence that their vote was counted properly in the 2022 elections. Compared with Democrats, both Independents and Republicans display lower levels of individual-level voter confidence. Finally, the relationship between SB 202 and individual-level voter confidence is positive and statistically significant (as noted in Table A1). Voters with greater confidence in SB 202 were more likely to express confidence that their own vote was counted as intended.

The relationship between opinions on SB 202 and individual-level voter confidence is displayed in figure 10.⁶⁰ Here, we see that those respondents who said SB 202 greatly increased their confidence in Georgia's election system had a 0.81 probability of being very confident that their vote was counted as intended in the 2022 midterm. By comparison, those who said SB 202 had greatly decreased

⁵⁸ That is, those respondents registering "Don't Know" answers are omitted from the analysis.

⁵⁹ Model results are reported in Appendix Tables A1 and A2.

⁶⁰ Predicted probabilities generated using the margin command in Stata 17.



their confidence in the state's election system only had a 0.48 probability of being very confident that their vote was counted properly. The difference in probabilities, at 0.33, is significant and substantial.

As with the model examining individual-level voter confidence, we again plot predicted probabilities across the range of values for our SB 202 measure (figure 11). Respondents who indicated SB 202 greatly increased their confidence in the state's election system had a 0.60 probability of also stating they were very confident that votes at the state-level were counted as intended, as compared with only 0.22 for those who indicated that SB 202 greatly decreased their confidence in Georgia's election administration. The gap between these two views, at 0.38, is even larger than that found for individual-level voter confidence.

⁶¹ Wickerstaff, “Ralston Wants Review.”

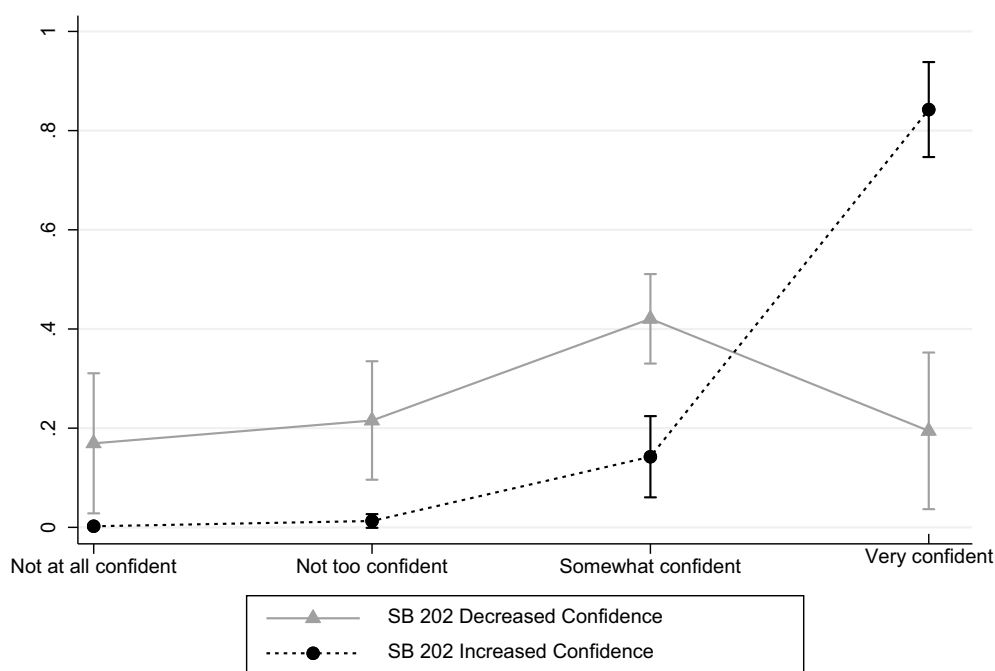


Figure 12. Republicans

party affiliation (model results displayed in [Table A2](#)). To separate the effects of SB 202 by party, we specify a set of models that contain two additional terms where Republican and Independent identifiers are interacted with the SB 202 (confidence) variable. In this way we can disentangle the effects of SB 202 for Democrats, Republicans, and Independents, respectively.⁶²

In [figures 12–14](#), we plot the predicted values for individual-level voter confidence in the 2022 midterm across the high and low values for the SB 202 variable (greatly increased and greatly decreased) for Republicans, Democrats, and Independents, respectively. In [figure 12](#), for Republicans indicating SB 202 had greatly increased their confidence in the state's election system, the predicted probability of falling into the very confident category for individual-level voter confidence is 0.84, compared with only 0.17 for those who stated SB 202 had greatly decreased their confidence in Georgia's election system—a difference of 0.67. Looking at [figure 13](#), it is evident from the almost perfectly overlapping plots that confidence in SB 202 has no mediating effect regarding the extent to which Democrats are confident their vote was counted properly in the 2022 elections. Finally, the pattern for Independents in [figure 14](#) is similar to that found among Republicans: those expressing greater confidence in SB 202 are also more likely to have higher levels of confidence in their vote being correctly tallied in the 2022 midterm (0.78 compared with 0.52).

[Figures 15–17](#) examine the effect of party and opinions toward SB 202 on confidence that statewide votes were correctly counted in the 2022 midterm. In [figure 15](#), Republicans who expressed that SB 202 had greatly increased their confidence in Georgia's election system had a 0.54 probability of also saying

⁶² See [Table A2](#) in the Appendix for full model results.

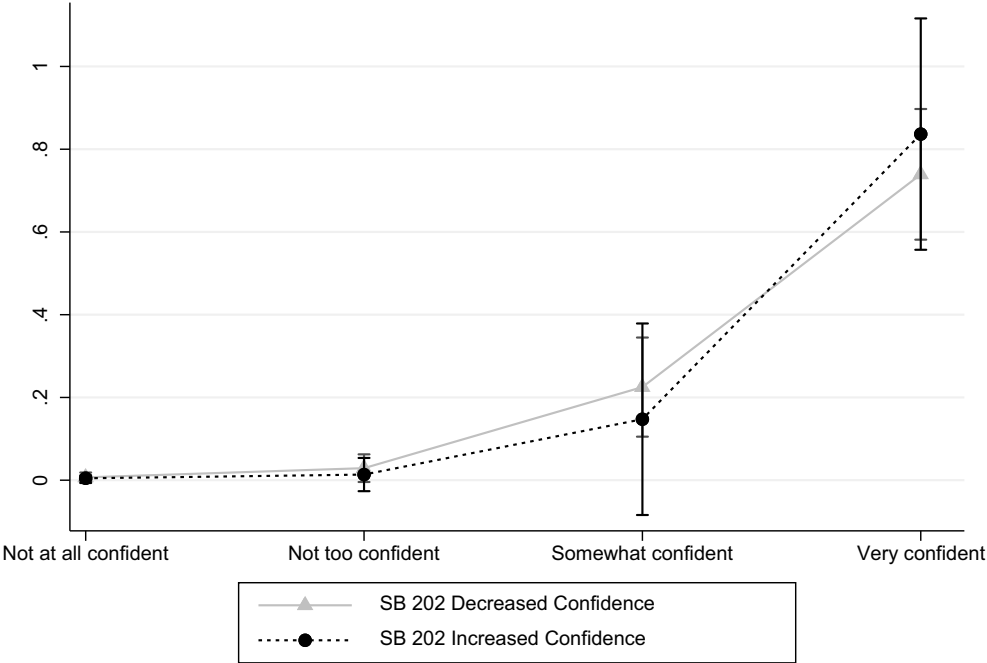


Figure 13. Democrats

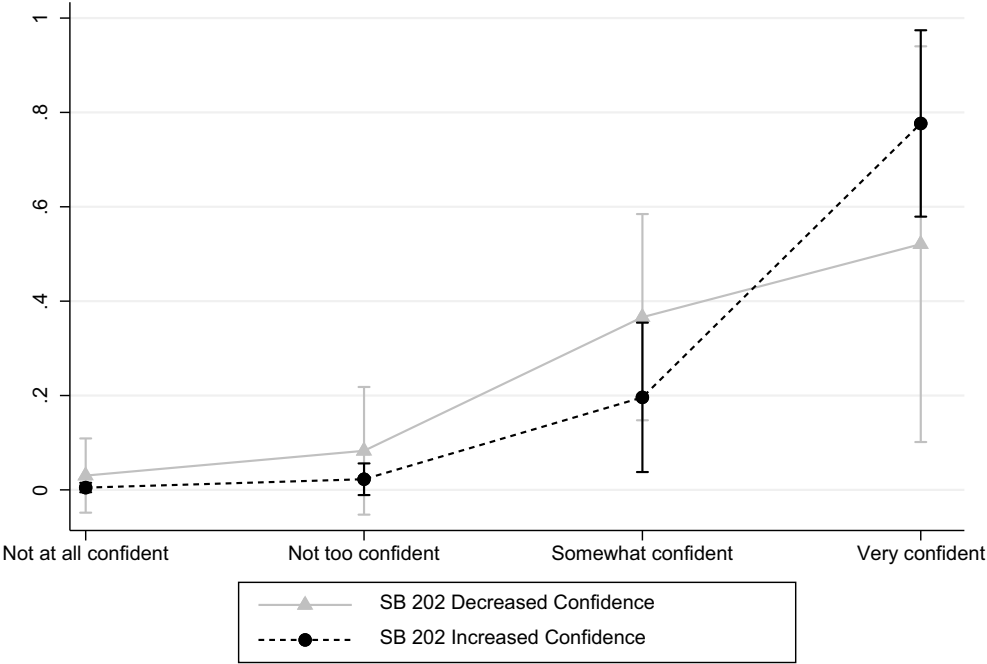


Figure 14. Independents

they were very confident that votes statewide were counted as intended, compared with 0.04 for GOP voters who had a dim view of SB 202, producing a difference of 0.50. In figure 16, Democratic voters in the very confident category for SB 202 had a 0.62 probability of also stating they were very confident that the 2022

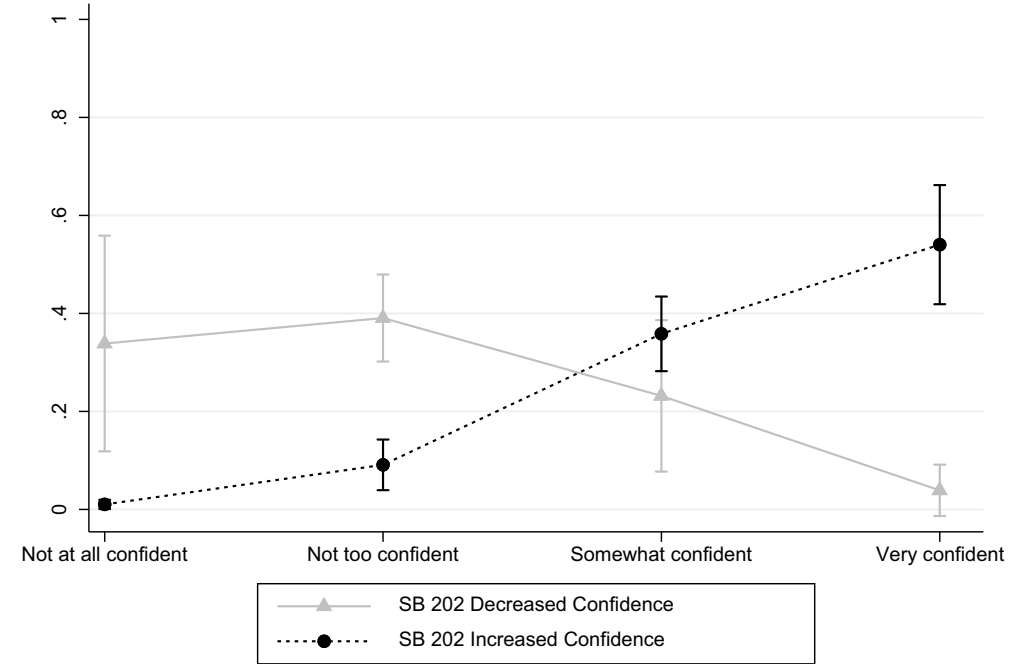


Figure 15. Republicans

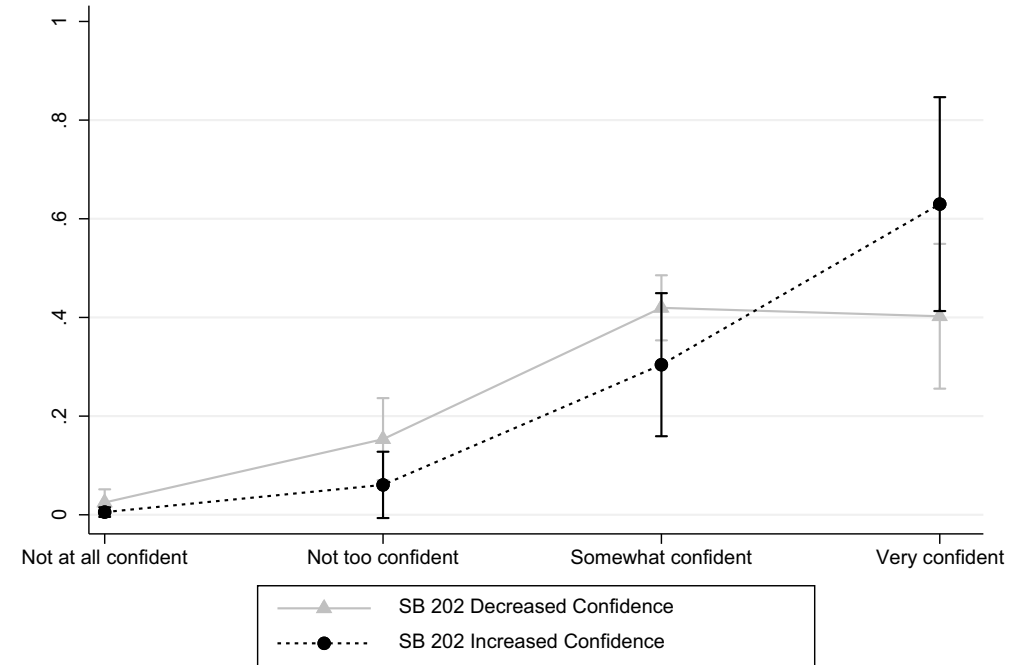


Figure 16. Democrats

statewide vote tally was properly counted, compared with a 0.40 probability for those expressing a negative view of SB 202. A similar pattern manifests in [figure 17](#) for Independents who indicated they were very confident in the statewide vote count based on their confidence in SB 202: 0.53 versus 0.26 for Independents

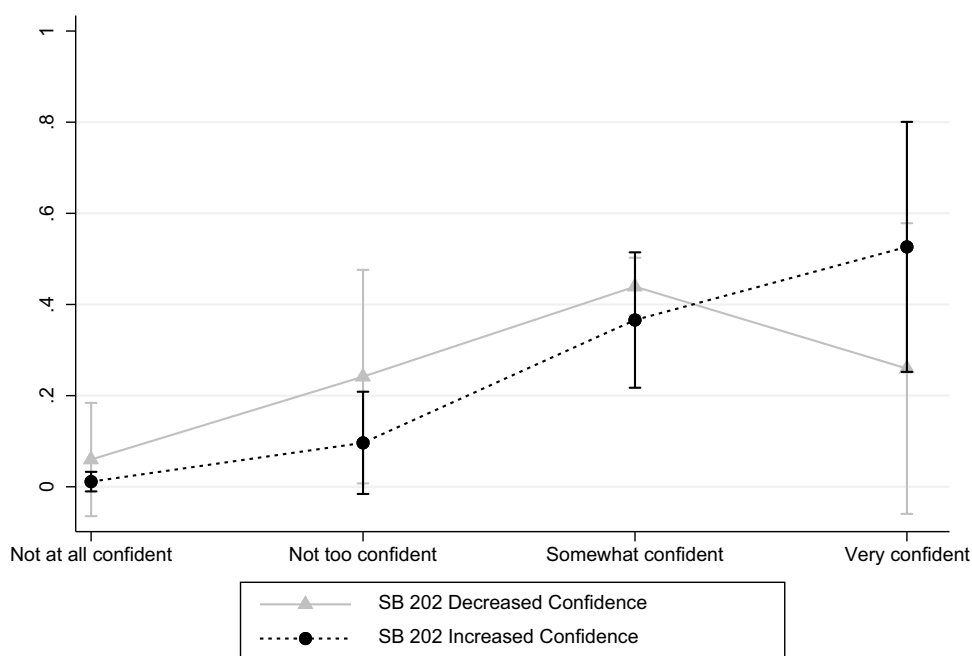


Figure 17. Independents

not expressing confidence in SB 202. Importantly, the confidence intervals across the range of estimates overlap for Democrats and Independents, but not for Republicans.

Conclusion

Although several states can claim plenty of turmoil in the fallout of the 2020 presidential election,⁶³ Georgia captured most of the attention because, in addition to being the closest race, its outcome was the greatest surprise. To be sure, political observers expected the Peach State to be competitive, but the reality of a Deep South state flipping blue was arguably the number one story of the 2020 presidential election. Indeed, it seemed as though a Republican presidential redoubt since the mid-1990s had changed course overnight in the 2020 election. Of course, a variety of factors, like long-term demographic changes, in particular, were moving Georgia to a more politically competitive position for decades, and this made the outcome in 2020 possible.⁶⁴

The shocking 2020 defeat of President Trump in Georgia was a jolt to the state's GOP electorate. As we have shown in this article, voter confidence is highly variable and dependent upon whether the outcome of an election aligns with a voter's preference. Confirming the findings in previous publications, individual-level voter confidence is consistently higher than state-level voter confidence, a result of waning belief in vote tallies more removed from the voter's personal experience. Prior to the 2020 election, Republicans and Democrats shared the same degree of confidence that the contest in Georgia would be fair and result in an accurate vote

⁶³ For example, the five other states that Trump barely lost.

⁶⁴ Charles S. Bullock III, "Georgia: America's Newest Toss-Up State," in *The New Politics of the Old South*, ed. Charles S. Bullock III and Mark J. Rozell (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

count. But after the presidential vote was counted three times in favor of the Democrat Biden, and Trump had effectively convinced his supporters of the falsehood that fraud denied him a victory, our surveys documented Republican voters' acceptance of this narrative and, subsequently, the nosedive in their voter confidence.

Nine weeks after Trump lost Georgia and the 2020 presidential election, Democrats gained majority control of the U.S. Senate by winning both of Georgia's Senate runoffs on the eve of the 6 January 2021 Capitol insurrection. These historic victories for the Georgia Democratic Party translated into sky-high voter confidence among their rank-and-file supporters. In contrast, such crushing defeats not only led most Georgia Republicans to believe in the lie of a stolen election, it greatly diminished their confidence in the electoral process—the manifestation of a palpable loser effect. The Georgia Republican Party decided to do something about the low morale of their constituents, undertaking a massive overhaul of election administration with passage of SB 202 on 25 March 2021.

With one of their principal goals being the restoration of (Republican) voter confidence, the Georgia GOP did, indeed, boost their voters' confidence in the partisan electoral reform encapsulated in SB 202 (Table 1). Furthermore, increased Republican confidence in SB 202 led to greater individual- and state-level confidence in the 2022 midterm vote. By comparison, Democratic voters' confidence was not in need of repair. By dint of the winner effect after the 2020 elections, Democratic voter confidence at the individual and state levels was riding high. Additionally, Georgia Democrats received the message that SB 202 was a GOP electoral reform harmful to their interests⁶⁵ and, therefore, the lion's share of Democrats did not report having confidence in this legislation. Thus, a partisan electoral reform implemented by the GOP opposition did not sway most Democrats.⁶⁶ If anything, the slight downturn in Democrats' state-level voter confidence in 2022⁶⁷ was a function of the loser effect, because Georgia Republicans did very well in this midterm cycle.

Scholars have learned that many things affect voter confidence. Beyond a host of contextual factors tied to the voting experience, voter confidence is highly sensitive to one's self-interest. Winning is likely the best elixir for low voter confidence, whereas losing acts as a poison. Hence, gauging voter confidence illuminates the reality that what voters say about their belief in whether their vote was counted as intended or an aggregated vote tally was accurate is as much a transactional judgment as it is a statement of veracity.

⁶⁵ Hood and McKee, "Getting the Message" and "Partisan Schism."

⁶⁶ Bowler and Donovan, "A Partisan Model."

⁶⁷ See figure 8.

Appendix

Table A1. Predicting Voter Confidence in the 2022 Georgia Elections

	Individual-Level Confidence	State-Level Confidence
Age	0.0087 (0.0050)	−0.0051 (0.0040)
Black respondent	−0.0180 (0.2024)	−0.2589 (0.1856)
Other minority	−0.2617 (0.1968)	−0.1489 (0.2198)
Education	0.1852** (0.0711)	0.1182 (0.0609)
Female	0.1003 (0.1404)	−0.0906 (0.1216)
Income	−0.0275 (0.0490)	−0.0242 (0.0470)
Ideology	−0.0605 (0.0513)	−0.1330** (0.0441)
Republican	−0.6168* (0.2596)	−0.6133** (0.2163)
Independent	−0.5776** (0.2224)	−0.1571 (0.2155)
ABM	0.5774 (0.3414)	0.5503 (0.2834)
EIP	0.2083 (0.1574)	0.2049 (0.1313)
New voter	−1.0377 (0.5339)	0.3593 (0.5257)
Senate Bill 202 opinion	0.3513*** (0.0893)	0.3882*** (0.0756)
Intercept 1	−3.1354 (1.0361)	−1.2693 (1.0749)
Intercept 2	−2.4583 (1.0381)	−0.2036 (1.1297)
Intercept 3	−1.2959 (1.0388)	0.9957 (1.1158)
N	640	630

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.01$. ABM = absentee-by-mail voter and EIP = early in-person voter.

Table A2. Predicting Voter Confidence in the 2022 Georgia Elections (Interactions)

	Individual-Level Confidence	State-Level Confidence
Age	0.0074 (0.0049)	-0.0057 (0.0040)
Black respondent	-0.0378 (0.2019)	-0.2803 (0.1884)
Other minority	-0.2133 (0.2235)	-0.1199 (0.2343)
Education	0.1432* (0.0690)	0.0930 (0.0618)
Female	0.1303 (0.1387)	-0.0830 (0.1220)
Income	-0.0195 (0.0484)	-0.0185 (0.0469)
Ideology	-0.0637 (0.0502)	-0.1349** (0.0444)
Republican	-2.189*** (0.4964)	-1.6256*** (0.4730)
Independent	-1.2371* (0.6067)	-0.4094 (0.6244)
ABM	0.5147 (0.3594)	0.5026 (0.2839)
EIP	0.1518 (0.1549)	0.1713 (0.1324)
New voter	-1.000 (0.5240)	0.3866 (0.5449)
SB 202	0.0420 (0.1380)	0.2242* (0.1048)
SB 202 by Independent	0.2903 (0.2307)	0.1152 (0.2376)
SB 202 by Republican	0.5865*** (0.1715)	0.3583* (0.1530)
Intercept 1	-3.9894 (1.0711)	-1.7226 (1.1420)
Intercept 2	-3.2903 (1.0631)	-0.6330 (1.1961)
Intercept 3	-2.0822 (1.0620)	0.5749 (1.1795)
N	640	630

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.01$. ABM = absentee-by-mail voter and EIP = early in-person voter. SB, Senate Bill.