

The background of the cover is a photograph of the United States Capitol building. The image shows the classical architecture with its columns and arches. In the foreground, an American flag is flying on a tall pole. The text '2024' is written in large white numbers, and 'ELECTIONS EDITION' is written in smaller blue letters across the middle of the image.

2024

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Table of Contents

Breaking Through the Noise and Building Trust in Elections: Election Officials as Brand Ambassadors	4
Priyasha Chakravarti, Matt Steinberg, Santiago Vidal Calvo, Adi Vishahan, Thessalia Merivaki	
Saying “I do” and “I voted.” Married people were more likely to vote than unmarried people in the 2020 election, data shows	12
Jane Wright	
Moral Rhetoric in the 2024 Presidential Election	15
Ella Hayes	
Leveraging Non-Alignment in the East-West Dichotomy: Azerbaijan’s Divergence from “Balanced Foreign Policy” Reveals New Epicenter in Southern Caucasus	20
Kaitlyn Vana	
Court Decisions on Gerrymandering Can Mobilize Voters	26
Lew San Hong, Shin Jun Hyun (Arthur), Moritz Ludwig	
Shattered Legitimacy: The July 28 Electoral Crisis in Venezuela	31
Santiago Vidal Calvo	



Breaking Through the Noise and Building Trust in Elections: Election Officials as Brand Ambassadors

Priyasha Chakravarti, Matt Steinberg, Santiago Vidal Calvo, Adi Vishahan, Thessalia Merivaki

This essay explores the critical role of election officials in combating misinformation and fostering voter trust in U.S. elections. As misinformation increasingly distorts the information ecosystem, public confidence in the integrity of elections is at risk. Election officials who oversee the administration of elections have emerged as key actors in countering this threat through strategic voter education efforts. These officials work to inform voters about the mechanics of voting, election security, and key electoral processes by using various communication channels, including social media. Drawing from the 2024 Election Communications Tracker, a data collection project run at the Massive Data Institute at the McCourt School of Public Policy, we identify common strategies across states aiming to build trust in the election process and inoculate voters against election misinformation. Finally, we discuss the importance of public policy in supporting election officials, advocating for the allocation of resources and tools to enhance their communication efforts in building information ecosystems resilient against misinformation.

An election information ecosystem polluted by misinformation

Americans of all ages are increasingly turning to platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube for election-related information. While more people are connecting with political candidates and officials by following them on these platforms, others are leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) tools including ChatGPT to stay informed about politics and the voting process. This shift highlights the growing reliance on digital spaces for engaging with and understanding the political landscape (McClain 2024).

Whereas access to information is undoubtedly easier with social media, so is exposure to and consumption of low-quality information. The rise of generative AI, as well as increasing partisan polarization on digital platforms, have further distorted the information ecosystem. These developments in how information is produced and disseminated have profound implications for democratic institutions. In January 2022, a year after the attack on the U.S. Capitol, 41% of the U.S. public expressed low confidence in the integrity of U.S. elections (Newall and Lloyd 2022). Fueled by misinformation and election denial perpetuated by political elites, voter confidence is split along partisan lines, with Republicans being notably less likely to express confidence in the accuracy of election outcomes, compared to Democrats (Saad 2024).

Aside from the impact of elite cues on attitudes about election integrity (Sinclair, Smith, and Tucker 2018), misinformation in online spaces can severely disrupt voting and sow distrust in elections. For instance, during the New Hampshire Primary, AI-generated Biden robocalls instructed Democratic registered voters not to vote (Rosen 2024; Kulemben, Wooley, and Joseff 2022). Relatedly,

digital misinformation targeting communities of color (Kulemben, Wooley and Joseff 2022) propels misguided perceptions among the general public about non-White individuals committing voter fraud, which affects trust in election integrity (Alvarez et al. 2021).

Given the persistence of misinformation and the presence of actors who engage in spreading low-quality information, it is imperative to build a resilient information infrastructure where accurate, verified information is not only accessible but amplified. Election officials can play this role. However, their efforts to infuse the ecosystem with accurate information about elections may not be enough, as their messages can get lost in the misinformation noise.

Combating misinformation and building trust: election officials as brand ambassadors

In the election information ecosystem, election officials - those authorized to administer elections, like the Secretary of State or the local county clerk - play an important role in educating voters about voting needs and how to keep elections safe and secure. Furthermore, rapid response communications are the new normal: either to debunk false information about election processes or alert voters about changes in voting operations due to emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, or weather-related crises, such as Hurricanes Helene and Milton in 2024 (Devine, Cole, and Batra 2024).

How do election officials like county clerks, local registrar of voters, or Secretaries of State communicate with voters online about what is needed to vote in a timely manner? How do they help voters navigate an information environment full of misinformation? More

importantly, which strategies do they use to build trust in the integrity of elections?

Here, we use data from the 2024 Election Officials Communication Tracker at the Massive Data Institute at the McCourt School of Public Policy by Professor Thessalia Merivaki, with Professor Mara Suttman-Lea at Connecticut College. This innovative research project tracked and analyzed communication shared by state and local election officials on mainstream social media platforms - Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok, Threads, and YouTube - during the 2024 election cycle. We monitored and labeled content shared by over 1,500 social media accounts of election officials with a platform called Junkipedia (Algorithmic Transparency Institute). Between September and October 12 alone, we collected roughly 18,000 posts across these platforms, and anticipate collecting about 50,000 by the end of our data collection period (November 30, 2024).

Our work involves labeling this content to produce a state-by-state communications dataset that will be used to assess the effectiveness of various messages on voter confidence. We use a nested, hierarchical codebook of labels that classify election-related content

based on various topics, from election deadlines and methods of voting, outreach to communities of interest, emergency response, and accessibility of content, as well as the deployment of trust-building communication strategies, such as messages containing explicitly *how* elections are kept safe and secure, and those that aim to build trust in the *people* who run elections.

Figure 1 shows the social media activity of state election officials - Secretaries of State and State Election Directors - from September 1 to October 12, 2024. We are tracking a total of 4,235 posts across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Youtube, with very few shared in Threads and TikTok. As the figure shows, the volume of posts shared across platforms fluctuates over time, with notable spikes in communications during critical election dates and events: National Disability Voting Rights Week (Sept 9-13), and National Voter Registration week (Sept 17). Between the end of September and early October 2024, communications from state election officials prioritized upcoming voter registration deadlines, and emergency response - local office closures, voting operation changes, misinformation alerts - regarding Hurricane Helene and Milton.

Figure 1. Social Media Activity, State Election Officials, September 1 - October 12, 2024 (N=4,235, 23.5% of all content collected)

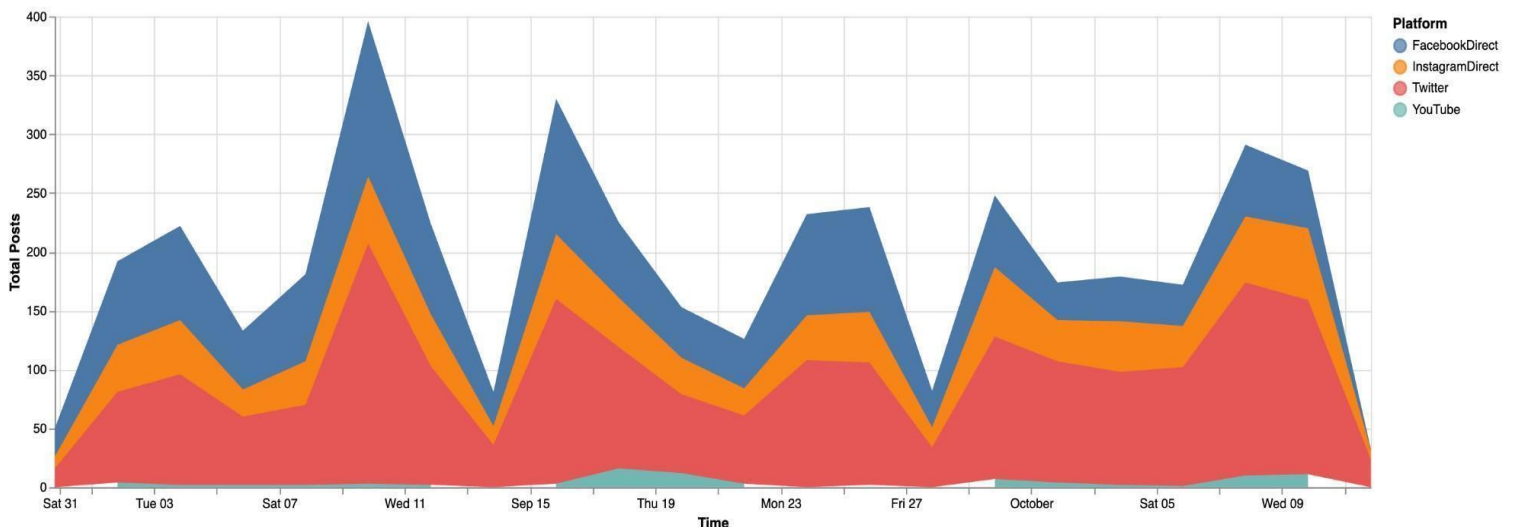


Figure 2. Example of Trust-building Communications by State Election Officials, North Carolina (left) and Illinois (right)

 **NCSBE**  @NCSBE

FACT: 75 of 80 planned early voting sites in Western NC will be open throughout the early voting period, from Oct. 17 through Nov. 2. That is remarkable, considering Helene's destruction.

Please stop spreading false information.

[#ncpol #YourVoteCountsNC](#)

12:00 PM · Oct 12, 2024 · 104K Views




 **NCSBE**  @NCSBE

The State Board of Elections today unanimously approved a long list of emergency measures designed to help people in WNC vote in 2024. See release, which includes link to resolution detailing these measures: tinyurl.com/mr3abjkm

[#ncpol #YourVoteCountsNC](#)

 ncsbe.gov
Bipartisan State Board Unanimously Approves Measures to Help WNC Voters






1:36 PM · Oct 7, 2024 · 19.1K Views

 **Illinois State Board of Elections**  October 10 at 10:14 AM · 

The election results you see on the news and the election authority's website on the night of the election are not official. Keep in mind that the results displayed on these sites are unofficial and may be updated until official results are certified on December 2, 2024.

DID YOU KNOW?

THE RESULTS YOU SEE ON THE NEWS AND THE ELECTION AUTHORITY'S WEBSITE ON THE NIGHT OF THE ELECTION ARE NOT OFFICIAL RESULTS.

-  ELECTION OFFICIALS USE WEBSITES TO SHARE UNOFFICIAL RESULTS WITH THE PUBLIC AS VOTES ARE BEING COUNTED.
-  THE RESULTS DISPLAYED ON THESE SITES ARE UNOFFICIAL AND MAY BE UPDATED, AS NECESSARY, UNTIL OFFICIAL RESULTS ARE CERTIFIED.
-  THESE SITES MAY EXPERIENCE OUTAGES DUE TO A VARIETY OF ISSUES INCLUDING A HIGH VOLUME OF INTERNET TRAFFIC.
-  MAJOR NEWS OUTLETS USE EXIT POLLING, ONLINE SURVEYS, TURNOUT NUMBERS, VOTING PATTERNS, AND ELECTION RETURN TRENDS TO PROJECT WINNERS.
-  IN ILLINOIS, ELECTION RESULTS ARE NOT OFFICIAL UNTIL ALL THE BALLOTS HAVE BEEN COUNTED AND THE ELECTION HAS BEEN CERTIFIED. THE GENERAL ELECTION WILL BE CERTIFIED THIS YEAR ON DECEMBER 2, 2024.

In Figure 2, we showcase a few examples of communications aimed at building trust in election integrity. On the bottom left-hand side, the North Carolina State Board of Elections (NCSBE) shared a press release on October 7, informing voters about emergency response measures taken by the State Board of Elections to maintain accessible voting in counties affected by Hurricane Helene. Five days later, NCSBE put out a statement about early voting being available in affected counties, directly in response to misinformation. All messages shared by NCSBE and local election officials in the state, include the #YourVoteCountsNC, a state-led campaign explicitly designed to build voter confidence (Merivaki et al. *Forthcoming*).

On the right-hand side of Figure 2 the Illinois State Board of Elections clarifies the difference between unofficial election night results and projections of election winners. Procedurally, vote counting does not end on election night for many states, mainly because of state election policies that allow, or do not allow, pre-processing of mail ballots (Firing Line 2024). Additionally, provisional ballots and ballots cast by military and overseas voters that arrive after Election Day—but whose postmark dates comply with state mail ballot return deadlines—are processed after Election Day (Federal Voter Assistance Program 2024). This post also cautions the public about potential disruptions in reporting unofficial results due to outages, aiming to

provide context to any speculations and misinformation regarding gaps in information sharing by the state election authority, which can sow trust in the integrity of Illinois' elections.

Are Election Officials' Efforts Enough to Break Through The Noise?

Since the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, election officials have partnered with federal agencies like the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), and national professional associations like the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), the National Association of State Election Directors (NASED), and the Election Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center (EI-ISAC) to develop and deploy coordinated trust-building campaigns to communicate that elections in all states are free, fair, and secure (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency 2024). These partnerships reflect a commitment to combat election misinformation and build trust in election integrity.

Research from the 2020 and 2022 election cycles shows that when election officials implement strategic communications on social media, voters benefit. Clear and concise messages about how to vote help voters avoid registration or mail-in ballot mistakes, and build public trust that votes are counted accurately, even among those more prone to election integrity skepticism, like Republicans (Merivaki and Suttman-Lea 2023; Suttman-Lea and Merivaki 2023; Suttman-Lea and Merivaki 2022). Whereas election officials have multiple tools to educate voters, including traditional media (TV, print), radio and in-person outreach events (Suttman-Lea and Merivaki 2024), this scholarship strongly suggests that strategic social media

communications are central to safeguarding electoral integrity because these can strengthen voters' knowledge about how elections work and build resilience against misinformation.

That said, even the most sophisticated communication strategies may not be enough to break through the noise of misinformation on social media (Alkhalili-Stefan, 2021). That is because algorithms employed by platforms like Facebook and X tend to favor sensationalist content that provokes high engagement, including misleading or fake news (Aïmeur-Amri-Brassard 2023). Additionally, the likelihood of exposure to content different from one's ideology is minimal, creating robust and hard-to-penetrate echo chambers (Rhodes 2021). Within these "bubbles," misinformation and dangerous speech spread like wildfire; between Election Day 2020 and January 6, 2021, numerous Facebook posts were found to actively promote political violence, with many calling for extreme actions like executions or a civil war, driven by false accusations that the 2020 election was stolen (Silverman et al. 2022).

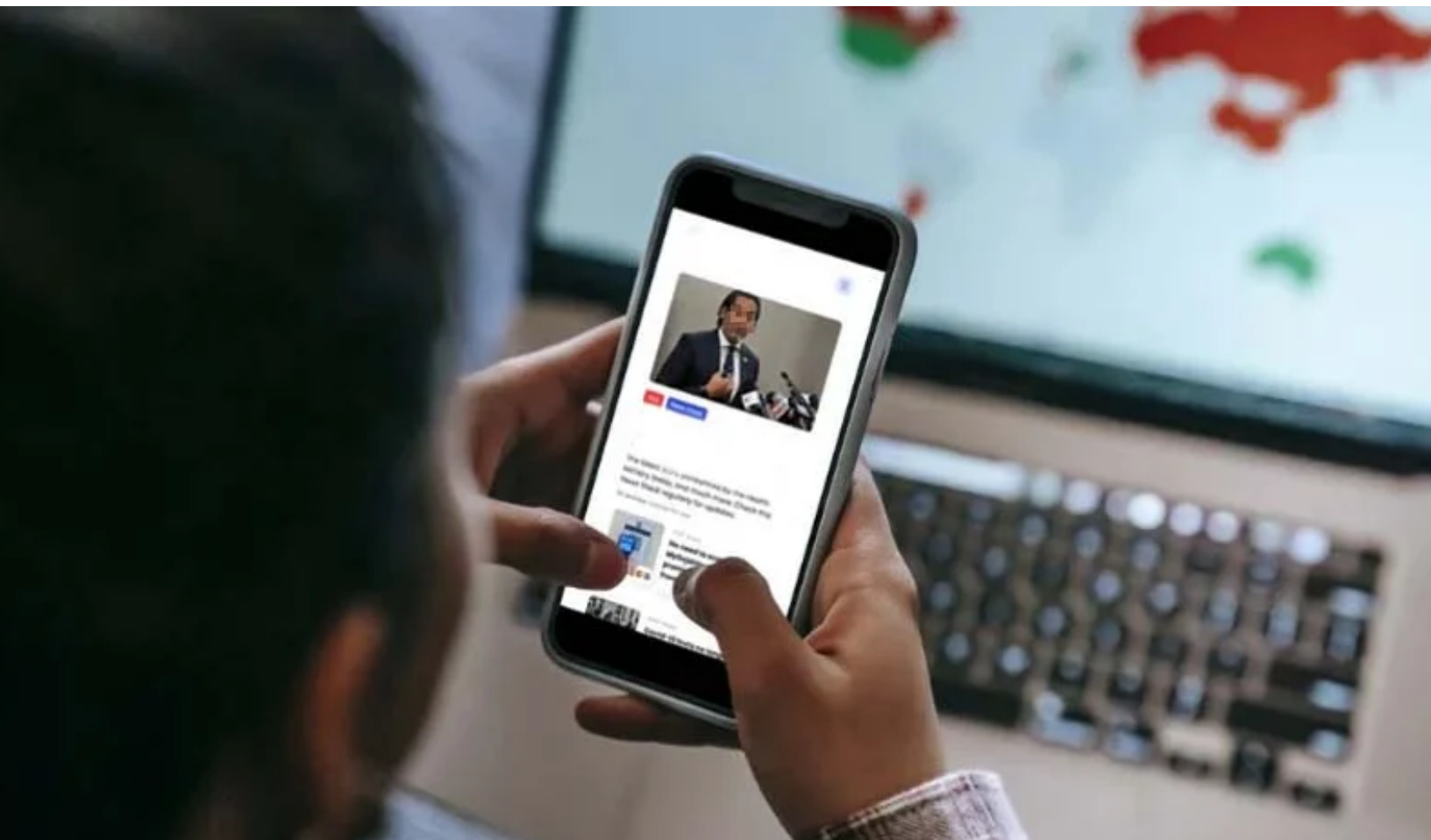
Content moderation policies such as pre-bunking, fact-checking and even de-platforming accounts that spread false content have been effective in reducing the volume of low-quality information on social media (Carey et al. 2024; Lewandowsky and Van Der Linden 2021). However, tech platforms struggle with implementing such policies at the expense of free speech. In the United States, tech giants like Meta, TikTok and X have significantly scaled back content moderation policies, as well as safeguards to ensure accurate information produced by genAI technology (Accountable Tech 2024). Such decisions have raised concerns about the ability of authoritative sources of information, like election officials, to reach voters. In

August 2024, state election officials from Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Washington sent a letter to Elon Musk, owner of X, expressing concerns that X's AI search assistant, Grok, shared false information about state voting policies and deadlines, and that "37 million constituents were impacted by false information provided by [your] platform" (Minnesota Secretary of State 2024). And in May 2024, state election officials from Colorado, Maine, New Jersey, Oregon, Rhode Island, Washington and Vermont criticized Meta's political ads policies allowing content that shares lies about the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, arguing that "Meta is allowing extremists and election deniers to further undermine our elections." (Cassidy 2024)

The debate around protecting citizens from the online harms of misinformation, while not infringing on free speech has shaped how tech platforms approach content moderation, but also how federal and state governments can intervene (Center for News, Technology

and Innovation 2024). In August 2024, Mark Zuckerberg testified to the U.S. House Judiciary Committee that the Biden administration had pressured Meta to censor content related to COVID-19, particularly around vaccine misinformation (Rajan and Bose 2024). This statement was made in the context of ongoing legal battles regarding the government's "coerced censorship" efforts as in the case of *Murthy v. Missouri* (formerly *Missouri v. Biden*).

It remains to be seen how social media companies will approach content moderation on their platforms, especially information that has significant impacts on election integrity or protected communities. As the task of defining social media 'skid' controls continues, election officials across the United States are bolstering trust-building communication to reassure voters about the integrity of elections by focusing on bipartisanship, checks and balances, professionalism, and civility amid ongoing threats and harassment (Bliss and Glassman 2024).



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Saying “I do” and “I voted.” Married people were more likely to vote than unmarried people in the 2020 election, data shows

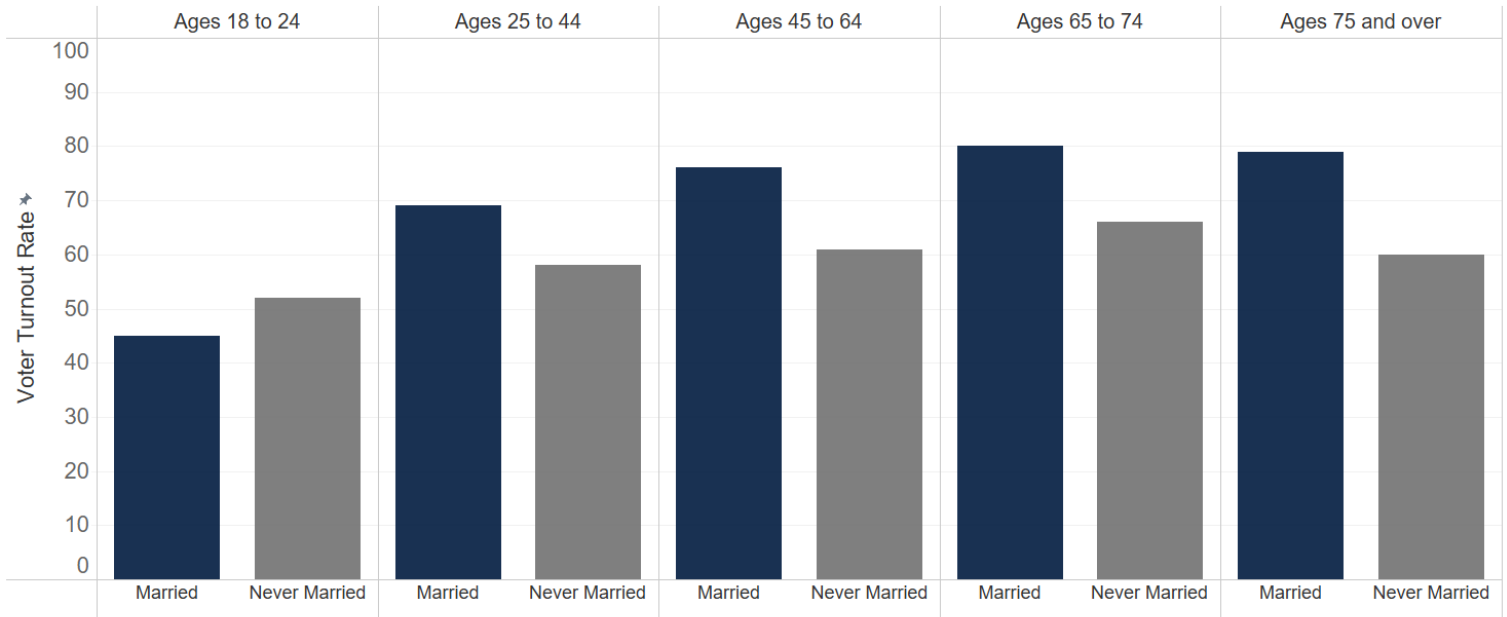
Jane Wright

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that, in terms of marital status, married individuals outperformed others in showing up to the polls in the 2020 presidential election.

Overall, the voter turnout rate in 2020 was 74% for married individuals but only about 57% for people who were never married. This analysis explores a sample of voting-age U.S. citizens and their self-reported voting behavior with data from the voting and registration supplement of the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (US Census Bureau 2021).

What explains this difference in voter turnout? Firstly, age is a key factor to consider regarding lower overall rates for unmarried individuals. Consistently, younger voters have the lowest turnout rates and are simply less likely to be married than older adults (US Elections Project 2023). Data shows that for 18- to 24-year-olds, never-married individuals actually had higher turnout rates than married individuals. Still, for all other age categories, married individuals voted at meaningfully higher rates in 2020.

Voter turnout in 2020 U.S. general election by age and marital status



Note: Weighted data is from tables published from the Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement. The survey was conducted between November 15 and November 24, 2020, on 60,000 households across the United States. Voting and registration questions were asked of all persons who were both U.S. citizens and 18 years or older.

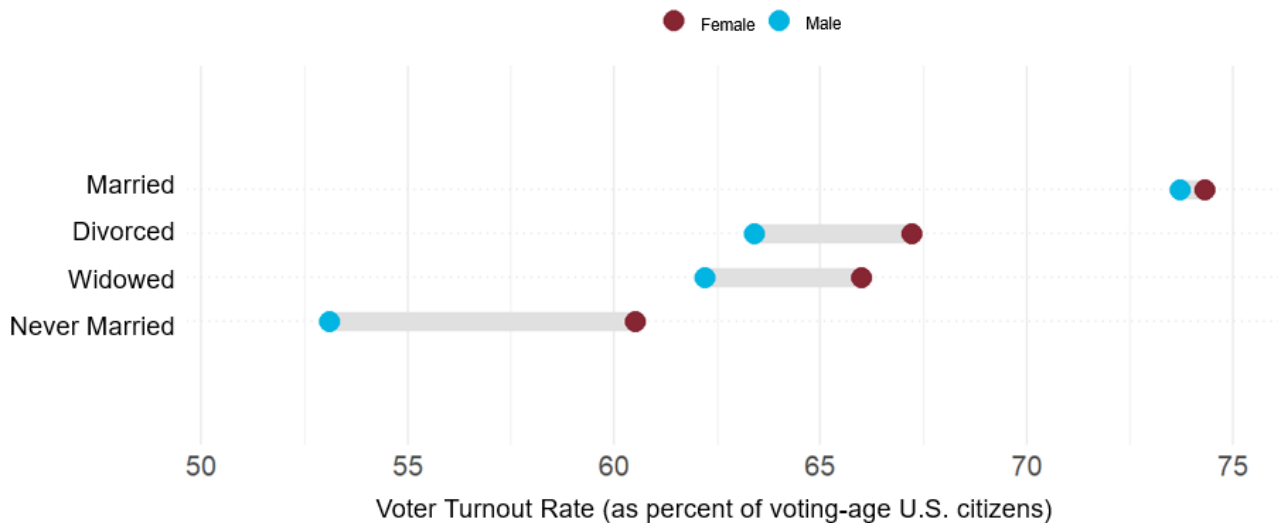
Additionally, past research has explored what is sometimes referred to as the “partner effect” on voting, finding that higher education levels and residential stability are characteristics that are both higher among married couples and positively associated with likelihood of voting (University of Utah 2006). These social characteristics help explain the differences in voter turnout rates.

In particular, stability might explain why married people even have higher turnout rates than people who are divorced or widowed, as shown in the analysis below. Compared to other groups, married people may be more likely to live somewhere permanently and have a social network in the community which are aspects that increase the likelihood of voting. Likewise, individuals no longer with a partner may be more likely to be in a

stressful transition or temporary living situation, thereby negatively impacting their ability to vote.

Furthermore, data from 2020 shows that women vote at higher rates than men across different marital statuses, consistent with the gender gap in voting that has persisted for decades (O’Neil 2024). Notably, however, the difference is minimal for married individuals, and much more significant for never-married people. Voter turnout rate is 74.3% for married women versus 73.7% for married men. For never-married people, on the other hand, the difference in turnout rate is about 7 percentage points between men and women, with never-married women at a turnout rate of 60.5 percent and never-married men at a turnout rate of only 53.1 percent.

In the 2020 U.S. presidential election, married people had highest voter turnout rate and lowest gender gap



Note: Weighted data is from tables published from the Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement. The survey was conducted between November 15 and November 24, 2020, on 60,000 households across the United States. Voting and registration questions were asked of all persons who were both U.S. citizens and 18 years or older.

One theory is that partnerships encourage voting simply through social mobilization. Previous research has referred to this as the “companion effect” on voting, which is evident even among young adults who live with parents that vote (Gruneau 2018). This is the idea that simply living with someone who is voting in an election can make someone more likely to vote. This mobilization happens through channels such as social pressure or sharing of information that increases someone in a partnership’s likelihood to vote. As most marriages are heterosexual couples, this

effect might explain the minimal gender gap observed in the married group.

So, going forward should candidates be trying to win over married people? Are more marriages a tool to increase voter turnout? Not necessarily, as numerous social factors are at play regarding why married people are voting more. Rather, understanding the social mechanisms that encourage voting can be useful in making voting more accessible to certain demographics and increasing civic engagement in future elections.

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Moral Rhetoric in the 2024 Presidential Election

Ella Hayes

American politics holds rhetoric in a place of high regard. In no place is this clearer than in our elections. Fundamentally, a political campaign is a rhetorical affair. We choose our chief executive through a rhetorical contest, filled with rallies, speeches and debates in which candidates attempt to persuade an audience to vote for them, rather than hold a technical or philosophical contest (Burke 1982). As such, Richard J. Burke argues that we should see modern American politics as one giant ongoing debate.

Foundational to political rhetoric is conceptual metaphor theory, which posits that our perception and understanding of the world around us is primarily based in metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1984). In other words, language shapes our thoughts and behaviors, allowing politicians to deploy language and rhetoric to influence how their audiences perceive issues and events. Metaphors mold the way we think by hiding or highlighting certain features of reality. When speakers carefully invoke these metaphors or frameworks, they can influence which features of reality we focus on and reinforce their own ideas about how the world should be conceptualized (Lakoff and Johnson 1984). For instance, take former President Jimmy Carter's "declaration of war" on the energy crisis during his presidency. It fits into a broader metaphor of Politics as War, as Carter invoked an entire web of related entailments about wartime actions. As presidents are afforded an expansion of power during wartime, Carter metaphorically reinforced the idea that he should be allowed a similar expansion of power by framing the domestic issue as a war.

A particularly salient metaphor is that of the Nation as a Family, which informs how the American people view the role of the government (Lakoff 1995). Under this metaphor, the government acts as the parent of its constituents. According to Lakoff, conservatives and liberals have different views of the ideal family model and how parents should raise their children, and therefore fundamentally disagree on how the government should operate in the lives of its citizens. Generally, conservatives align with the 'Strict Father' model, where the government acts as a strict parental figure, placing high demands and expectations of independence and self-sufficiency on its children/citizens. Liberals, on the other hand, generally ascribe to the 'Nurturant Parent' model, where the government assists and supports its children/citizens to reach their full potential. These models help explain the divergence of liberal and conservative policy positions, as well as the language they use to talk about those positions.

Lakoff, who is a linguist rather than a political scientist, has been criticized for putting forward his theory before submitting it for empirical testing (Etzioni 2006). But in the years since, there has been considerable literature published that supports his theories. A University of Pittsburgh study asked 1,084 adults which qualities they preferred children to have when interacting with adults. This included independence or respect for elders, curiosity or good manners, being considerate or well-behaved, among several others (Barker and Tinnick 2006). Results indicated that the stronger a person's views on either strict discipline or nurturance in child-rearing, the more consistently their political views align as

conservative or liberal respectively, which suggests Lakoff is potentially accurate in arguing that one's ideal family model is a useful predictor for political views. Additionally, other studies have indicated that these models seep into the language of campaign advertisements, with Republicans using more Strict Father language and Democrats using more Nurturant Parent language (Ohl et al 2013, Moses and Gonzales 2015).

A central question arises: how did the language and policy positions of presidential candidates Donald Trump and Kamala Harris align with these models? Diving deeper into the moral underpinnings and key policies each candidate held will provide insight into how their rhetoric shapes public perception and mobilizes support.

Conservative “Morality as Strength” and the Strict Father Model

The reason conservatives and liberals have such varying views of the ideal family model, Lakoff (1995) argues, boils down to the different ways they conceptualize morality. In this paradigm, conservatives conceptualize morality as strength, heavily tied up in uprightness, discipline, self-reliance and seeing things through a lens of good vs. evil. To be a morally strong citizen is to be a citizen who has become self-reliant through discipline, hard work and pursuit of their self-interest.

The Strict Father model is predicated on the Morality as Strength metaphor; the government's job is to enforce moral uprightness and punish moral weakness. Citizens are supposed to be self-sufficient, disciplined and morally strong, which helps motivate policies like reducing funding for welfare programs (encouraging self-sufficiency), criminalizing drugs (individuals who find themselves addicted lack the discipline to “just say no” and

are therefore morally weak), and limited government (just as how you would not want a parent meddling in the lives of their adult children, the government should not meddle in the lives of its morally strong constituents). Another key feature of the Strict Father model is it is deeply rooted in patriarchy (Lakoff 1995), leading to an emphasis on protecting women and children that comes from a place of paternalistic authority.

Notably, this model was consistently reflected in former President Donald Trump's rhetoric and policies, especially with respect to immigration. During the September 2024 presidential debate, Trump repeatedly called immigrants “criminals” and talked about them being bad for the United States, leaning into previous rhetoric about immigrants stealing jobs from hardworking Americans who are trying to support themselves (i.e., be self-sufficient/moral citizens) (“Presidential Debate in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania” 2024). Furthermore, his policy solutions are to punish those who illegally cross the border with mass deportations, strengthen U.S. Immigration and Customs and reinstitute the Trump-era travel ban (“Platform” 2024).

Another example of Strict Father language is how Trump discussed abortion in the debate, which exemplifies Morality as Strength. Under the Strict Father model, women seeking an abortion typically became pregnant due to a lack of self-control, a form of moral weakness (Lakoff 1995). Additionally, seeing politics as a battle between good and evil encourages the idea of abortion as murder, an evil that the government is charged with eradicating. In the debate, Trump leaned into this sentiment, saying Democrats “have abortion in the ninth month... [The governor of West Virginia] said the baby will be born and we will decide what to do with the baby. In other words, we'll execute the baby.” Such rhetoric

sets up abortion bans as a useful policy solution under the Strict Father Model.

Liberal “Morality as Empathy” and the Nurturant Parent Model

For liberals, the moral metaphor is that of Morality as Empathy, rather than Morality as Strength, which emphasizes happiness, fairness, growth, and nurturance of both oneself and the surrounding society. Moral citizens are realized through their contributions to their community, with commitments and responsibilities arising out of empathy for others (Lakoff 1995).

Under this framework, the government’s job is to help their constituents reach their full potential, just as a nurturing parent should help their children grow into fully mature, empathetic, successful adults. This helps explain the motivation behind social welfare programs (providing support for citizens who have fallen on hard times), higher taxes on the wealthy (so those who are better off can help those who are worse off), and tighter regulations on corporations (to avoid constituents being taken advantage of, restricting their ability to grow into their full potential).

We saw this model regularly in Vice President Kamala Harris’ rhetoric and policy proposals. For instance, under the Nurturant Parent model, access to safe, affordable abortions is imperative because “women seeking abortion are either women who want to take control of their lives or teenage children needing help” (Lakoff 1995, 201). Valuing nurturance requires providing that help in the form of an abortion, and it is the government’s job to ensure abortion remains an option. Harris’ campaign platform reflects this sentiment, saying “as President, she will never allow a national abortion ban to become law. And when Congress passes a bill to restore

reproductive freedom nationwide, she will sign it” (“Issues” 2024). During the September presidential debate, Harris said, “Pregnant women who want to carry a pregnancy to term suffering from a miscarriage, being denied care in an emergency room because the health care providers are afraid they might go to jail and she’s bleeding out in a car in the parking lot? She didn’t want that. Her husband didn’t want that. A 12 or 13-year-old survivor of incest being forced to carry a pregnancy to term? They don’t want that” (“Presidential Debate in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania” 2024). This language appeals to empathy and calls on the government to nurture those in trouble.

Another example is how Harris discussed the economy. “Creating an opportunity economy” became a staple sound bite in her campaign, which itself promoted Nurturant Parent values, such as giving everyone a chance to succeed. Her economic plan included rolling back tax cuts for the rich and increasing the capital gains tax rate to 28% (“Issues,” 2024). Again, this is justified through the Nurturant Parent model in the name of fairness, with her website advocating that these policies are “to ensure the very wealthy are playing by the same rules as the middle class” (“Issues,” 2024). Moral citizens look out for each other and build community, and these moral values are beneficial when the rich pay their fair share to help the poor.

Nurturant Parent language was everywhere in Harris’ campaign. Her story about helping her friend who was being sexually abused by the friend’s stepfather segues into her rhetorical emphasis on “the importance of standing up for those who are most vulnerable... The true measure of a leader is the leader who actually understands that strength is not in beating people down, it’s in lifting people up.

I intend to be that president” (“Presidential Debate in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania” 2024).

Rhetoric’s Influence on Policy

Rhetoric is powerful because it tells people what the key issue at hand is. It allows politicians to define what the problems are, setting the stage for their policy proposals. The way candidates talk about issues sets the stage for their specific policy solutions. When candidates use the Nation as Family models, the metaphors in their audiences’ minds are strengthened, helping influence which features of reality the audience focuses on and reinforcing their own ideas about how the world should be conceptualized (Lakoff and Johnson 1984).

The rise in the use of the “pro-woman frame” in anti-abortion legislation paints abortion as both physically and psychologically harmful to women. Amanda Roberti (2021), a political scientist at San Francisco State University, noted that anti-abortion bills increased from 2008 to 2017, and the pro-woman frame was

present in 70% of the bills introduced. Bills that fall under this framework include bills that require a waiting period, or for a woman to get an ultrasound beforehand. They strongly correlate with the idea of ensuring women have full access to all information regarding the implications of receiving an abortion. (Roberti 2021). This fits with the Strict Father model, under its patriarchal bent towards protecting women from those looking to take advantage of them (namely, abortion providers who are hiding information from women), and goes on to promote Strict Father values on other issues (Lakoff 1995).

It is important to understand the moral language politicians use to communicate with their bases because it tells us which values and frameworks are being reinforced to the American public, and consequently, the policy solutions that get advanced. Campaign rhetoric sets the terms of debate for any given issue. If either party wants to accomplish their legislative goals, they’ll have to control the narrative around those issues first.



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Leveraging Non-Alignment in the East-West Dichotomy: Azerbaijan's Divergence from "Balanced Foreign Policy" Reveals New Epicenter in Southern Caucasus

Kaitlyn Vana

Following an expected presidential election in February 2024, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev spent this year strengthening multilateral relationships, diverging from Baku's "balanced foreign policy." Three decades of non-alignment permitted a relatively autonomous environment for Azerbaijan to achieve its goal of domestic stability. Similarly, the reclamation of Nagorno-Karabakh marks another national goal first promised by President Heydar Aliyev in the 1990s. The achievement of both goals has positioned Azerbaijan to take more definitive steps toward a leadership role in the Southern Caucasus and serve as a connective point between the East and West. The result has been deepening economic relations with China and Russia, with the worsening of an already unfriendly relationship with Iran. Continued economic and defense relations with Israel in the face of the conflict in Gaza have also picked at Azerbaijan's fraternal relationship with Türkiye, threatening attempts at a Turkic hegemony with Central Asia.

A Strategy of Non-Alignment

At first glance, Azerbaijan's year of elections was typical. In February 2024, as predicted, President Ilham Aliyev won his seventh term in a record landslide (AP News 2024). Predictably, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) called the election's fairness into question due to three decades of the Aliyev family dominating the presidency (Bagirova 2024). Aliyev's party also maintained its majority in Azerbaijan's parliament following the September elections,

which received similar criticisms from the OSCE (EEAS 2024). However, what is perhaps not as typical is how Aliyev's foreign and economic policies have manifested following his re-election. Analyzing the policy initiatives between the presidential election in February and the successive legislative elections in September reveals a transformational period for Azerbaijan and the Southern Caucasus as a central connection point in joining Europe and Central Asia.

Historically, Azerbaijan has used a "balanced foreign policy" strategy to maintain its interests with both the West and Russia. Developing strong bilateral relations with Türkiye on a cultural and linguistic basis institutionalized a nonalignment strategy, which in past decades has afforded Azerbaijan relative stability and autonomy to focus on domestic growth. In *Nationalities Papers* this past May, Farid Guliyev (2024) published an article that comprehensibly distills previous presidential rhetoric in Azerbaijan into two facets: one that pertains to Turkic solidarity, and another to the establishment of a modern "Silk Road" connecting Europe and Asia, for which Azerbaijan would serve as a crucial node. Guliyev also addresses the sources of Azerbaijan's strategy and how it stems from an inability of the Caucasus to integrate regionally. He describes this political security and economic regionalism as an intentional strategy institutionalized by the Aliyevs' presidential rhetoric over the past three decades. After watching Aliyev execute his foreign policy strategy in 2024, there are several departures from the historical foreign policy tactics Guliyev

describes, complicating multilateral relationships on a global and regional scale.

Presidential Discourses on Azerbaijan's Regionalism

Aliyev's foreign policy initiatives this year mark a vast change in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Much of the country's three-decade history of independence has focused on two specific goals: reclaiming Karabakh and advancing the domestic economy in the fuel and energy sector, as articulated in the "Azerbaijan 2020" development concept. A promise first made by his father, Aliyev finally achieved the first national goal this past year of reclaiming Karabakh. It follows that Aliyev would want to use his father's long-awaited promise to propel his presidency and party's parliamentary majority with snap elections. However, Guliyev predicts several complications with Azerbaijan's foreign policy approach, some of which came to fruition or were resolved within the months following his article. Most of these issues stem from the nature of the regionalist policy narrative the Aliyevs have spent 30 years building. The shift away from nonalignment may draw unwanted attention to its pursuit of deepening cooperation between Turkic-speaking states and the idea of a "Turkic World," as first officially pursued in 2009 with the founding of the Turkic Council, which was restructured in 2021 as the Organization of Turkic States.

Aliyev's foreign policies in 2024 see Azerbaijan stepping into a leadership role in the South Caucasus, for which its successful pursuit of nonalignment set the foundation.

However, Aliyev may quickly run into setbacks given the historically entangled and complicated alliances that have characterized the Caucasus since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Aliyev's foreign policy transition

comes not only with new partnerships with Russia and China but also the potential exacerbation of long-standing issues with Iran and new issues with its long-standing ally, Türkiye, due to Azerbaijan's close relationship with Israel. Aliyev and Baku's 2024 crusade to get Armenia to sign an interim peace agreement, as well as make several heavy concessions also threatens to draw in the United States and France. Presently, the war in Gaza may hold the West's attention, but it is crucial to global security that the United States does not again underestimate the impact of unrest in post-Soviet spaces.

Russia and Iran

Unsurprisingly, Azerbaijan's plan to become a joining point between the East and West does not include Armenia, and herein lie the modern issues of bilateral economic relations with Russia. Guliyev discusses the effects Soviet occupation had on developing regionalism as an ideology in Azerbaijan, and how Aliyev used condemnation of Russia's hegemony in the Caucasus as rhetorical strategies to regionalize Azerbaijan's foreign policies. Russia's military support for Armenia, however, had been waning over the past decades, despite the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) defense alliance. This is something that Armenia realized this past summer and that led to its eventual withdrawal from CSTO (Kaleji 2024). Traditionally, Russia is a long-standing supporter of Armenia, particularly by way of being anti-Azerbaijan like Iran and France. Aliyev's recent meeting and the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers mark the emergence of a new power structure in the Southern Caucasus.

More immediately, plans with Russia for transport corridors and energy pipelines have implications for Middle East relations.

In April, Aliyev met with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss the “North-South” Transport Corridor project (NSTC) and reaffirm intentions to elevate relations between the two countries, as officially presented in the 2022 Declaration on Allied Interaction (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2024). In conjunction with Russia’s retraction of peacekeepers from the Nagorno-Karabakh region last year, this hints at a rewriting of foreign relations in the Southern Caucasus. As Guliyev highlights, Azerbaijan’s ability to build up its domestic economy relatively autonomously was largely due to its ability to evade alignment with Russia in Russian-led trade and defense organizations. Balanced foreign policy and involvement in the Non-Alignment Movement is central to Azerbaijan’s and Central Asia’s attempt to eliminate the West vs. Russia dichotomy and “neo-Cold War ‘choice’” completely, which means elevating the effects of Azerbaijan’s policy decisions to an international level (Strakes 2015). In a rare callout, Iran, a traditional ally of Armenia, and a frequent source of friction with Azerbaijan, released a September statement warning Russia about siding with Azerbaijan in the border conflicts with Armenia (The Guardian 2024). Projects such as the Zangezur Corridor, or any such construction of a route that connects the Nakhchivan Enclave and the rest of Azerbaijan, threaten Iran’s ability to access Europe. Armenia has historically been Iran’s one strong link to the West, and recent shifts in foreign policy moves have indicated Russia’s interest in controlling a transit route between Central Asia and the rest of Europe. In August, Aliyev agreed to withdraw the issue of the Zangezur Corridor in the interim peace agreement, the deadline for which is in November. Transit corridors and border conflicts are only a small part of the deep-seated conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Whether dropping the Zangezur Corridor issue is enough to

encourage Armenia’s concession is yet to be seen. In light of European Union sanctions on Iran over the country supplying ballistic missiles to Russia in the invasion of Ukraine, foreign policy tensions between these regions will only intensify. With the involvement of Türkiye, and potentially through its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Southern Caucasus will become increasingly relevant to global security.

China

An additional foreign policy achievement following the February presidential election was that Azerbaijan and China signed a joint declaration in July, establishing a strategic partnership and expanding cooperation “in the political, economic, and cultural spheres” (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2024). This significant expansion of bilateral relations is another departure from Azerbaijan’s long-standing balanced foreign policy, especially compared to the memorandum of understanding on the “Silk Road Economic Belt” signed in 2015, which displayed Azerbaijan’s support of the Belt and Road Initiative and established China’s interest in the Trans-Caucasus Transit Corridor (TCTC) (World Bank 2020). Guliyev discusses Azerbaijan’s long-standing support of Chinese initiatives as another strategy in pursuit of the modern “Silk Road.” However, up until this point, the investment on China’s part had been minimal and posed a potential barrier to transit development in the region. He describes not only China’s reluctance to invest in high-capital projects, but also its reluctance to interfere in a previously Russian-dominated region. The Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor (“Middle Corridor”) is explicitly discussed in this declaration as a point of interest and investment for China, demonstrating a willingness on

Beijing's part to begin fiscally investing in the Caucasus.

Guliyev also argues Azerbaijan's partnership with China may cause competition in the region between Baku and Tbilisi, given Georgia's historical efforts to build bilaterally with the EU and China. Azerbaijan and Georgia are perhaps the Caucasus' best chance at regional integration, and Azerbaijan's increasing prominence may cause competition between the countries in a bid to be the best location for an East-West corridor. Similarly, Guliyev also describes the potential of the Middle Corridor to connect other Turkic-speaking countries, encouraging nationalist sentiments from China's Turkic-speaking populations in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, all of which mirror the alliance entanglements between Russia, Iran and Armenia. Again, Aliyev appears to desire the deconstruction of a strictly East-West dichotomy, as evidenced by the Türkiye- and Azerbaijan-led Organization of Turkic States founded in 2009. Aliyev's movement away from a balanced foreign policy within a still fractured, unintegrated region may create new contests and complications as Azerbaijan draws in larger global powers.

Türkiye and Israel

The October 2023 retaliation against Hamas and the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war drew international attention and controversy. Paid little attention by the Western public, a thematically similar campaign occurred the month before on the opposite side of Türkiye. Azerbaijan's nine-month blockade last year pushed the remaining Armenian enclave to the brink of annihilation, with the enclave facing certain starvation should they remain in the contested region. A conflict first began in 1988 following the formerly autonomous region's decision to join Armenia, the last of

its Armenian residents began a mass exodus of Nagorno-Karabakh in late September 2023 (The Economist 2023). Armenia, perhaps as an act of solidarity to draw attention and parallels between the two conflicts, recognized Palestine as a country this past June. Notably, Azerbaijan has not officially recognized Palestine (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2024) despite being one of the few Muslim-majority countries with a close relationship with Israel. Historically, Israel has imported Azerbaijani oil due to poor relations with other Middle Eastern countries, and in return, Azerbaijan has purchased Israeli military weaponry, most of which was used to take back the Nagorno-Karabakh region from Armenia. This perhaps initially surprising alliance is an "enemy of my enemy" legacy left over from the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the two countries' common enemy being Iran (ibid). As this energy and defense partnership has become more open to the global public since 2020, Azerbaijan's hesitancy to condemn Israel in the Israel-Hamas war has created tension between Baku and Istanbul, and it is one obstacle left undiscussed in Guliyev's otherwise thorough analysis (Stimson Center 2024).

After decades of strong bilateral relations with Türkiye, described by former president Heydar Aliyev as "one nation, two states," the Israeli-Hamas conflict may test Azerbaijan's ability to move bilaterally in the foreign sphere. Where, in May of this year, Türkiye completely severed trade ties with Israel and continues to vehemently oppose Israel's occupation of Palestine, Aliyev has continued trade with Israel. Consequently, Aliyev's transition out of nonalignment with a more transparent partnership with Israel may create brand-new tensions between the uniquely fraternal Azerbaijan-Türkiye alliance.

Conclusion

Aliyev's new foreign policy initiatives impact more than just localized tensions, especially as the EU looks to Azerbaijan for oil and gas as an alternative to Russia (CEPA 2023). Baku is also hosting this year's United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29) in November and, as demonstrated above, its break away from nonalignment and determination not to fall into an East-West dichotomy

reveal a new economic, security and climate-related epicenter in the Caucasus. This year has demonstrated a stark divergence from Azerbaijan's historical foreign policy pursuits in both a regional and global capacity. In particular, as multilateral relations strengthen between Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Russia, global politics should expect to see a shift in the role of the Southern Caucasus in foreign and security policy.

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Court Decisions on Gerrymandering Can Mobilize Voters

Lew San Hong, Shin Jun Hyun (Arthur), Moritz Ludwig

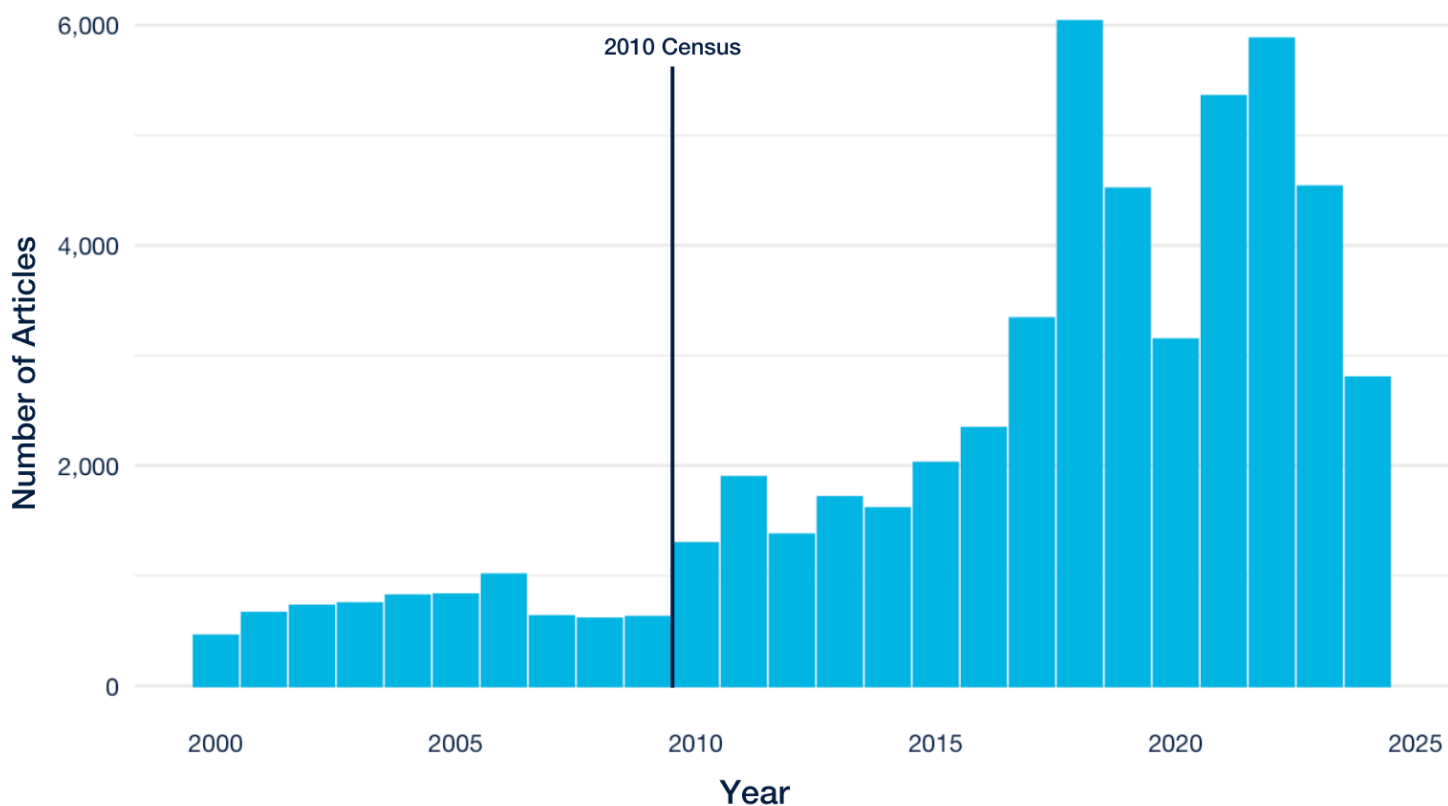
U.S. State legislatures and redistricting commissions redraw congressional voting districts to account for changing demographics and ensure equal weight of votes. The decennial census and subsequent readjustment of district lines invites partisan skew commonly referred to as gerrymandering (Cervas, Grofman and Matsuda 2022).

The manipulation of district lines to favor one party shifts policy decisions away from voter preferences (Caughey, Tausanovitch and Warsaw 2017), decreases political competition, and lowers voter turnout for disadvantaged candidates (Stephanopoulos and Warsaw 2020). Thus, it threatens not only the

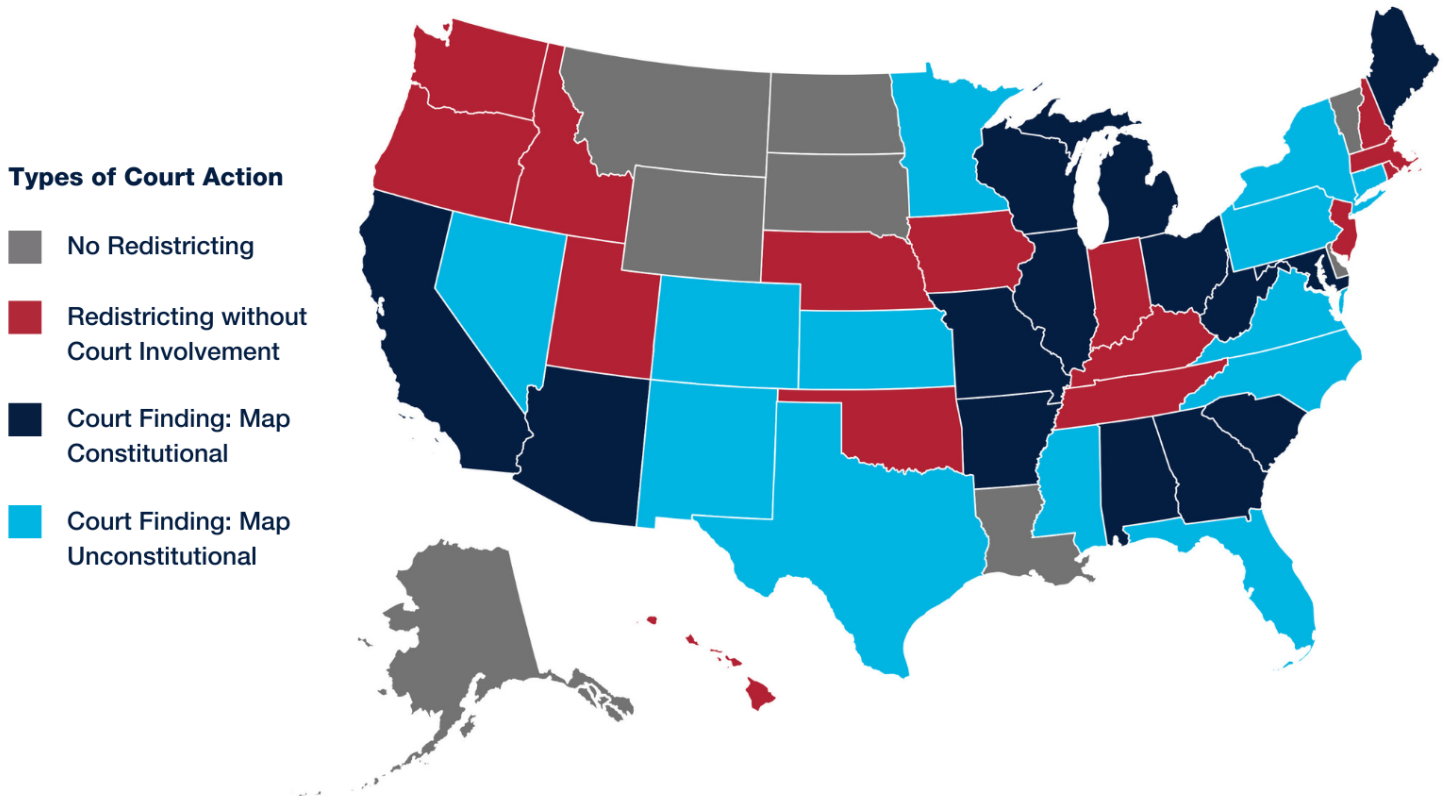
electoral integrity, but also democratic processes as a whole.

Gerrymandering received heightened public attention following the 2010 census, as the redistricting cycle saw major district line shifts, particularly in swing states. Calling it “The Great Gerrymander of 2012”, Sam Wang identified the Republican House flip despite a significant Democratic lead in absolute votes as a clear result of gerrymandering efforts (Wang 2013). This prompted media, academia, policy- and lawmakers to recognize the issue and propose alternatives to the status quo (McGhee 2020).

Trend in News Articles Mentioning ‘Gerrymandering’



Types of Court Involvement in State Redistricting During the 2012 Election Cycle



GPPR | GEORGETOWN
PUBLIC POLICY REVIEW

Source: All About Redistricting | Moritz Ludwig

While the practice of partisan gerrymandering is widely recognized, its effects remain less studied (Stephanopoulos and Warshaw 2020). As voter turnout remains an important measure of the quality of democracy, studies that causally explain turnout changes with partisan gerrymandering (Jones, Silveus, and Urban 2023; Fraga 2016) contribute to an understanding of the impacts of the current redistricting system.

Adding to this strand of literature, this analysis assesses the impact of judicial involvement in redistricting on voter turnout rates in U.S. states. Courts become involved in redistricting if a redrawn map is challenged. The U.S. Supreme Court never overturned a district map for this reason nor did the branches of government pass a law regarding partisan

gerrymandering on the federal level (Tapp 2019).

Therefore, state-level courts play a more active role in redistricting, either finding maps unconstitutional and prompting the redrawing of district lines or rejecting a challenge by finding maps constitutional.

The difference-in-differences method allows a comparison over time between treatment groups (court involvement, type of court decision) and comparison groups in a quasi-experimental setting with state-year pairs as unit of analysis. The 2010 census after which voting districts were redrawn functions as the intervention cutoff after which voting districts got redrawn and subsequently challenged. The three congressional elections

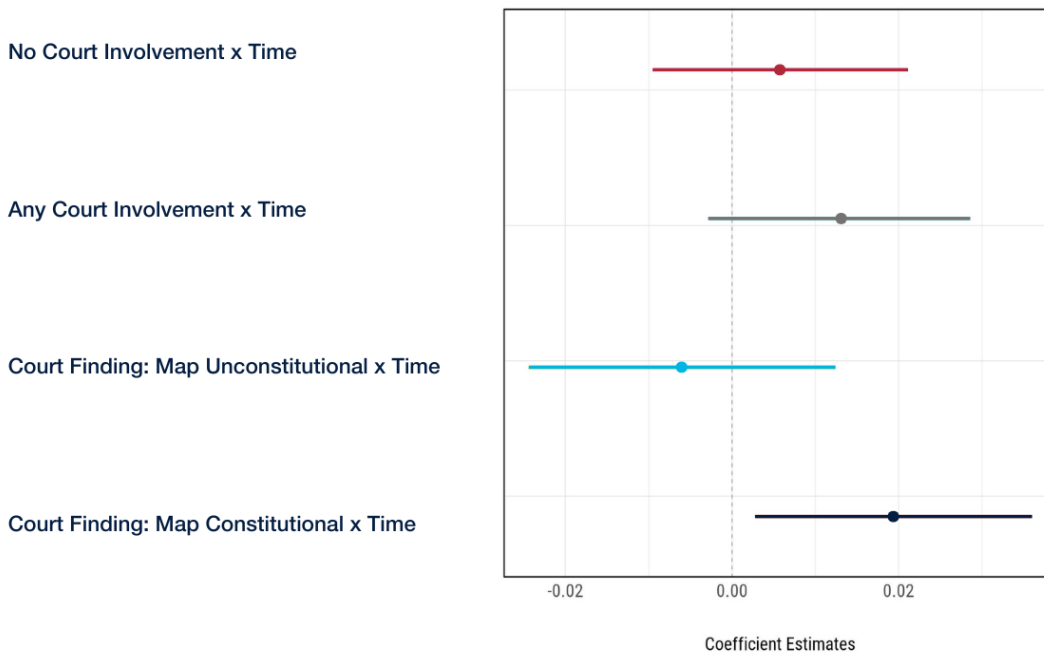
corresponding to presidential cycles before and after the census respectively are considered for the analysis, with a dataset encompassing a timeframe from 2000 until 2020. Controlling for variables found to influence voter turnout in previous studies, such as state-level demographic, political and economic variables (Geys 2006), and the use of state and year fixed effects leads to the following model:

$$\begin{aligned} \ln \ln (\text{Turnout Rate})_{st} &= \alpha + \beta_1 \text{CourtAction}_{st} + \gamma \text{Time}_{st} \\ &+ \lambda \text{CourtAction}_{st} * \text{Time}_{st} + \beta_2 \ln \ln (\text{PopDensity})_{st} + \beta_3 \ln \ln (\text{UnemploymentRate})_{st} \\ &+ \beta_4 \ln (\text{VoteCloseness})_{st} \\ &+ \beta_5 \ln \ln (\text{TurnoutRate})_{s,t-4} + \gamma_s \\ &+ \delta_t + \epsilon_{s,t} \end{aligned}$$

Most forms of judicial involvement do not significantly influence voter turnout. However, when a court finds the redistricted map to be fair and rejects an appeal, the turnout increased by 1.9% on average.

Effects on Logged Voter Turnout Rates by Judicial Involvements in Redistricting

Significance of interaction terms: results from multivariate regression models using time- and state-fixed effects (90% C.I.)



By validating the constitutionality of a proposed map, courts do affect voter mobilization, highlighting the role independent courts can have for increasing trust in electoral processes. This finding suggests that independent institutions continue to have an important role for democracies.

Limitations of the model include timeframe sensitivity and external validity, both to be mitigated in future studies. After the 2024 election, this study can be replicated to assess whether the effects of court involvement persist even in the latest redistricting cycle following the 2020 census.

Table 1: Effects of Judicial Involvement in Redistricting on Voter Turnout Rates

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Voting Eligible Population (VEP) Turnout Rate (Logged)			
	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D
Interaction (NO Court Involvement X Time)	0.006 (0.009) p = 0.536			
Interaction (ANY Court Involvement X Time)		0.013 (0.010) p = 0.179		
Interaction (Court Finding: UNCONSTITUTIONAL Map X Time)			-0.006 (0.011) p = 0.593	
Interaction (Court Finding: CONSTITUTIONAL Map X Time)				0.019* (0.010) p = 0.056
Voter Population Density (Logged)	0.153** (0.061) p = 0.013	0.163*** (0.061) p = 0.009	0.156** (0.061) p = 0.012	0.175*** (0.061) p = 0.005
State Unemployment Rate (Logged)	0.050*** (0.014) p = 0.001	0.050*** (0.014) p = 0.001	0.051*** (0.015) p = 0.001	0.054*** (0.014) p = 0.0003
State legislature control - DEM	-0.012 (0.009) p = 0.182	-0.010 (0.009) p = 0.233	-0.011 (0.009) p = 0.185	-0.010 (0.009) p = 0.223
State legislature control - REP	0.011 (0.009) p = 0.209	0.012 (0.009) p = 0.170	0.011 (0.009) p = 0.229	0.011 (0.009) p = 0.206
Vote Closeness of Candidates (Logged)	0.355*** (0.056) p = 0.000	0.320*** (0.061) p = 0.00000	0.358*** (0.057) p = 0.000	0.323*** (0.057) p = 0.00000
Prev. General Election VEP Turnout Rate (Logged)	-0.006* (0.003) p = 0.058	-0.005* (0.003) p = 0.091	-0.006* (0.003) p = 0.062	-0.005* (0.003) p = 0.079
Observations	249	249	249	249
R ²	0.324	0.329	0.323	0.335
Adjusted R ²	0.108	0.115	0.107	0.123
F Statistic (df = 7; 188)	12.850***	13.153***	12.830***	13.551***

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

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Shattered Legitimacy: The July 28 Electoral Crisis in Venezuela

Santiago Vidal Calvo

In 2024, nearly half of the world's population will head to the polls to determine their nations' futures. In some nations, however, the election winner is already decided, making the democratic process a hollow exercise. Once a shining example of democratic development, Latin America is the focus of world attention today, as it experiences an unheard-of surge of democratic backsliding (Aguilar-Aguilar 2021, Piccone 2019). Venezuela leads the authoritarian resurgent movement, with the outcome of its July 28, 2024, election set long before votes were cast. The National Electoral Council (CNE), firmly captured by Hugo Chavez and Nicolás Maduro's authoritarian regimes, produced election results that starkly contrast with contenders Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia and Maria Corina Machado's "opposition tallies," raising alarm bells over a brazen electoral theft. How does the Maduro regime manage to perform such electoral misconduct? Despite the appearance of a secure and transparent voting system, Venezuela presents a paradox in its electoral process: the July 2024 electoral outcomes were manipulated and fabricated while the electoral process is watertight to fraud and manipulation.

Venezuela's path to democratic backsliding

The path to Venezuela's authoritarianism began in 1998, when the country's impoverished population overwhelmingly elected Hugo Chávez, who positioned himself as the leader of Latin America's 21st-century socialist movement (McCoy 1999).

While Chávez came to office democratically, many analysts saw him as an authoritarian character in the making, consolidating authority with the great oil resources of the country (Corrales 2015, Alvarez 2011). His authoritarian impulses surfaced quickly: in 2002, following two years of parliamentary law manipulation to rule without the checks and balances of other branches, Chávez was momentarily removed from power for 47 hours (Sayagues 2019, Cannon 2004). He rapidly regained authority with substantial military help, launching Venezuela's turbulent history with democracy (Encarnación 2002).

Chávez stayed in power for another 11 years. Before his death in 2013, he finger-appointed Nicolás Maduro as his successor, avoiding the statutory obligation requiring the President of the National Assembly to take over in the case of prolonged absence (Andrews-Lee 2020). Shortly after Chávez's death, an election was conducted, and Maduro emerged just ahead of a united opposition candidate. But the integrity of this election has been hotly contested: opposition leader and presidential candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski claimed fraud, further aggravating Venezuela's political situation (Polga-Hecimovich 2022).

Since then, Venezuela's democracy has been characterized as a "zombie" democracy (Roth 2021). Although elections have been held regularly in Venezuela, the Maduro regime has employed a plethora of tactics over the past decade to weaken the opposition and create internal divisions. Beyond electoral fraud, these strategies have included sowing discord among opposition parties and

fostering mass abstention, which has effectively undermined successful opposition participation in elections. By fracturing opposition forces and discouraging voter turnout, the regime has consistently ensured electoral outcomes that support Maduro's continued hold on power.

Heading towards a Democratic Transition: The 2024 Election

In 2022, María Corina Machado, a prominent opposition figure and former legislator from the National Assembly during Chávez's regime, emerged from the political shadows to become a leading voice for the country's democratic aspirations ahead of the 2024 elections. Once marginalized by her own opposition colleagues due to her strong and uncompromising stance against the Chávez and Maduro regimes—views deemed too extreme by those advocating for dialogue and mediation—Machado's relentless denunciation of authoritarianism placed her at the forefront of Venezuela's struggle for freedom and democracy (Santaulalia and Singer 2023). Long beset by internal strife, the Venezuelan opposition staged a primary election in 2023 to nominate a leader for the first time in 10 years. With 93% of the 2.4 million votes cast by Venezuelan citizens and a clear loss of the 10 other hopeful contenders, Machado became the overwhelming winner (Garcia Cano 2023). This historic victory confirmed Machado's indisputable leadership of the opposition and sent a strong message to the Maduro regime: she embodied an unparalleled and strong challenge to the stability of the autocracy, one that could no longer be disregarded.

Over their 25-year rule, Chávez and Maduro systematically sidelined opposition-elected officials, transforming the Venezuelan state into a unified apparatus dominated

exclusively by members of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) (Ellis 2019). The country's Supreme Court, National Assembly, Executive Office, and all ministries became filled with Maduro loyalists, consolidating the regime's iron grip on power. A few months after Machado's decisive victory in the opposition primaries, the Maduro-controlled Supreme Court disqualified her from running in the 2024 presidential election, citing allegations of political fraud, corruption, and treason (Vaz 2024). Machado received a 15-year ban from holding office, which was widely seen as a calculated move to eliminate the regime's most serious challenger.

Machado appointed Corina Yoris, an eminent, 80-year-old philosophy professor as her surrogate candidate in anticipation of this kind of situation. But the Maduro regime reacted fast to invalidate Yoris, manipulating the CNE's registration process to bar her from filing her candidacy and participating in politics (Sequera and Armas 2024). Just minutes before the presidential candidate registration deadline, Machado was able to effectively register veteran diplomat Edmundo González Urrutia as her surrogate, securing her campaign's place on the ballot (Frangie 2024). During their campaign, Venezuelans rallied support for the upcoming 2024 election, leading them to visit nearly every electoral district across the country.

The National Electoral Council (CNE) is an important actor here. As Venezuela's electoral management body, CNE oversees vote counting and manages the collection of the reported tallies by each polling station behind closed doors under political party observation. Furthermore, several audits are carried out to ensure the tallies produced by every voting machine match the printed records from polling places. On paper, the electoral system

is watertight of fraud and manipulation until the results are publicly released.

Despite election procedures that are seemingly robust and professional, election night was a stark contrast. Reported voting participation rates were average in Venezuela, with 59.9% of the 21.6 million registered voters turning out to vote. Just hours after voting closed, CNE issued the first bulletin of results stating Maduro as the unambiguous winner. The report states that although González obtained 4,445,978 votes, or 44.20000%, Maduro got 5,150,092 votes, or 51.20000%. But this declaration was immediately greeted with mistrust because of a major mathematical error: the reported percentages just had one decimal point and were exactly divisible. Statisticians noted that the likelihood of achieving such a perfectly rounded result was astronomically low, approximately one in one hundred million (Gelman 2024). The opposition swiftly condemned the results as fraudulent, accusing the regime of fabricating the figures to ensure Maduro's victory and further undermining the legitimacy of the election.

While falsifying election results is unprecedented in Venezuela's electoral history, election fraud has been a recurring theme of both the Chávez and Maduro regimes. In past elections, the methods of manipulation were more subdued but still quite powerful. Strategies like food giveaways at polling booths, voter intimidation, threats of layoffs to public sector workers, as well as suppression of the Venezuelan diaspora have constantly been raised by election monitoring teams (Valiquette 2024). Fundamentally, the Maduro regime has been accused of manipulating vote counts in the past, but never to the scale of the 2024 election.

Concerned about efforts to undermine the 2024 Presidential election process, Machado

urged Venezuelans to remain at voting sites to protect the vote, emphasizing the importance of obtaining legally authorized physical copies of the tally sheet results. Anticipating possible fraud, she urged voters to share these results with her campaign. The opposition tallies, reflect, in all reality, the actual election results. More than one million Venezuelans gathered 83.5% of the total tally sheets around the country. This mass organization from Machado-instructed civilians allowed the opposition to post the findings online, offering the world proof of widespread electoral fraud.

These results show a striking difference from Maduro's CNE results with the yet-to-be-released tallies. Machado's team found that Gonzalez defeated Maduro by 7,303,480 votes against 3,316,142 votes, with an overall voter turnout of 60.08% These tallies have been reviewed by independent organizations and are presumed to be the legitimate results of the Venezuelan July 28 election, demonstrating the unlikelihood of fabrication of results by the opposition (Kronick 2024).

In response to growing criticism over electoral misconduct, the CNE quickly published a second bulletin, changing the statistical improbabilities in the vote counts of the contenders ("Second CNE Bulletin Confirms Nicolás Maduro's Victory in July 28 Elections" 2024). But this update neglected another obvious problem: the overall count of valid votes still showed an unlikely split of 99.59000% to 0.41000%, which further increased public scrutiny.

Venezuela's paradox: electoral process and election outcomes

Generally, experts regard Venezuela's electoral process as innovative, transparent, and secure. Venezuela was the first country in the

world to adopt digital voting in 2004 (Renda 2024) and has multiple procedural safeguards to ensure that votes cast are counted accurately and prevent voter fraud, including a manual tally of votes, a digitally encrypted transmitted record of the vote and voters' hand-written signatures from checking in at the polls. At the end of election day, poll workers manually count the votes and verify that the electronic machine results match the physical tally, ensuring accuracy through the electoral record book, and report the results to the CNE, who verify the polling station results with the digitally encrypted record. Venezuelan legislation also allows for direct public participation in the counting process, with citizens counting votes alongside electoral staff and may request printed copies of the polling station results ("Explained: How Voting Works in Venezuela" 2017). Finally, voting machines show the total vote counts for every candidate, so citizens and candidates can ask for the tally sheets.

While the Venezuelan electoral system is, in theory, watertight to fraud, the Chavez and Maduro regimes have a history of election tampering: in past elections under *Chavista* rule (1999-present), there have been over 117 irregularities between 25 elections that served insurances for the continuity of the ruling party, encouraging abstentionism across opposition groups (Corrales, 2020).

In October 2023, the Biden-Harris administration tried to encourage the Maduro regime to institute free and fair elections per the Barbados Agreement, which aims to establish electoral integrity in Venezuela. Among other issues, this agreement involved contentious prisoner swaps in return for democratic election standards (Vidal Calvo 2024). Although many political experts agree that the Maduro regime broke the agreement overall, the negotiations let three

acknowledged international missions—the Carter Center, the United Nations Panel of Experts, and the once approved but subsequently revoked European Union Electoral observation mission—serve as electoral observers. The three foreign delegations confirmed the findings of the opposition tallies, and even held the Venezuelan voting process as neither free nor fair.

Days after the 2024 election, The Carter Center released a comprehensive report based on the observations of its team working on the ground during election day ("Carter Center Statement on Venezuela Election" 2024). The report stated: "Venezuela's 2024 presidential election did not meet international standards of electoral integrity and cannot be considered democratic." It also corroborated fears about systematic voter suppression, stating that: "voter registration was hurt by short deadlines, relatively few places of registration, and minimal public information. Citizens abroad faced excessive legal requirements to register, some of which appeared to be arbitrary." The Carter Center later appeared in a permanent session of the Organization of American States (OAS) with physical tallies that demonstrated Edmundo Gonzalez's overwhelming victory (Garcia Cano 2024).

In its report, the United Nations Panel of Experts confirmed the Carter Center's conclusions about the election: "The results management process of the CNE fell short of the basic transparency and integrity measures that are essential to holding credible elections" ("Interim Report of the Panel of Experts on Venezuela" 2024). The OAS also published a subsequent report, stating that: "the results announced by the National Electoral Council (CNE) proclaiming Nicolás Maduro the winner in the presidential election of Sunday, July 28 in the Bolivarian Republic of

Venezuela cannot be recognized” (“Report for Secretary General Luis Almagro” 2018).

A blueprint for democratic backsliding: Maintaining the facade of free, fair, and secure elections

The CNE has yet to publish the physical tallies from the July 28 election in Venezuela. In fact, there is no evidence that verifies Maduro obtained the results alleged by the CNE. Three days after the election, Maduro attempted to legitimize his electoral results by asking the *Chavista*-controlled Supreme Court to certify the results of the election (Garcia Cano 2024). Regardless of this attempt, mass demonstrations sprang out all around Venezuela, especially in historically pro-*Chavista* areas, which resulted in a strong crackdown by police and state officials. Human rights organizations recorded rampant use of extreme force, including live bullets and arbitrary charges like terrorism and incitement to hatred; at least 24 people were killed and over 2,400 were imprisoned, including over 110 minors (Berg and

Hernandez-Roy 2024). Furthermore, Maduro announced the construction of two “re-education” and “hard labor” camps for those arrested during political demonstrations (“Venezuela: Brutal Crackdown on Protesters, Voters” 2024).

Venezuela's struggle between electoral processes and results could create a disturbing precedent for authoritarian elites around the world, providing a handbook for free manipulation of electoral outcomes. This compromises democratic values not only in Venezuela but in other parts of Latin America, a region with a fraught past of military insurgencies and colonialism. Venezuela's example poses a threat to the democratic progress acquired since the Monroe Doctrine and Washington Consensus era that made Latin America the shining example of democracy across the 20th century; therefore, hastening democratic backsliding and radicalization in other nations teetering on the edge of democratic backsliding.



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