
How to Talk about Elections in Ways that Won't Dampen People's Desire to Vote

Elections administrators, advocates, and journalists face a heightened challenge: **how to communicate about threats to elections in ways that won't dampen people's desire to vote.** Two online experiments were conducted in October 2018. Both tested the effects of electoral threats on people's feelings about voting.

Threats to Elections in News Coverage

The press has a duty to alert the public to potential complications surrounding the mechanics of elections. Too much of a focus on such concerns, however, could lead to misplaced fears.

An experiment compared news stories featuring threats to elections to the same stories altered to include one paragraph addressing efforts to safeguard elections. The articles focused on cyber security, voter purges, and aging voting machines. Coverage featuring both threats to elections and efforts to address them causes news consumers to have fewer negative emotions and an increased sense that there are ways to address these problems.

Journalists should know that coverage focusing exclusively on threats to elections has negative effects on the public whereas reporting featuring threats and efforts to defend elections leads to fewer negative effects. Elections administrators and advocates should be mindful when speaking to the press that messages focusing solely on election problems can decrease trust, whereas soundbites that feature problems and solutions can inform readers without decreasing trust.

Threats to Elections on Twitter

Many people use Twitter to warn voters about possible problems at the polls. While these efforts may be well-intentioned, there is the potential that tweets highlighting voter suppression could generate unintended consequences.

An experiment compared exposure to tweets featuring threats to elections versus tweets including threats + solutions people can take to protect their votes. Data show how the threat condition decreases trust in elections.

Threat Tweet



If your vote didn't matter, they wouldn't be trying so hard to keep you from voting.

Threat + Solution Tweet



If you are turned away at the polls because your name is not on the register, don't walk away. Say this: I REQUEST A PROVISIONAL BALLOT AS REQUIRED BY LAW.

Don't let them steal your vote.

Advocates for voting should provide steps that people can take when tweeting about threats to the ability to cast a ballot, including confirming registration, requesting a provisional ballot when denied the opportunity to vote, and reminding people what types of information to take to the polls.