

2024 New Mexico Election Studies: Election Observers & Election Confidence

Dr. Lonna Atkeson | Florida State University

Marli Dunietz | Florida State University

Dr. Wendy Hansen | University of New Mexico

Public Agenda Final Report

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Lonna Atkeson, Florida State University
Marli Dunietz, Florida State University
Wendy Hansen, University of New Mexico

For the 2024 election, we surveyed New Mexico voters to determine whether their confidence in the election and their trust that the election was free from fraud was affected by the presence of student and faculty election observers and/or affirmation that nonpartisan election observers confirmed the legitimacy of the election results. During the election, we placed election observers on the ground in vote centers in Sandoval County at different times and locations throughout early voting and on Election Day. We conducted an exit poll at select vote centers in Sandoval County where the presence of election observers was varied. In a statewide survey conducted after the election, we included an experiment varying information vignettes about different types of election observers who confirmed the election results. Although not very strong, we found consistent evidence that the presence of nonpartisan, especially UNM observers, increased voter confidence.

Exit Poll Design

The exit poll was administered in Sandoval County in early and Election Day voting at primarily five vote centers, which were selected based on their historically heavy turnout.¹ At these locations, we varied the presence of election observers so that at some times, observers were present, and at other times, they were absent. Voters leaving the vote center were asked if they were willing to complete the survey. If they agreed, they were handed a clipboard and pencil to complete it after which they dropped it into a box. On average, more than ½ of voters who were asked to participate completed a survey. In total, 1,495 voters completed our exit poll as they left the vote centers after voting.

The exit poll was a two-page, front and back, paper questionnaire (see Appendix A for a copy of the exit poll) which included questions on voter confidence and trust in the election system. Our first questions asked the traditional confidence questions scaled to federalism, “how confident are you that your ballot was counted correctly”, along with questions on how confident are you that votes in your county [your state or the nation] will be counted correctly. Respondents answered on a four-point scale: not confident at all (1), not too confident (2), somewhat confident (3), or very confident (4). We also had three 11-point questions (0 to 10) asking (1) how confident are you that no ballots are stolen or changed in elections in your state, (2) how confident are you that all eligible citizens who want to vote can vote in your state, and (3) how confident are you that only eligible citizens vote in your state.

Postelection Survey Design

The postelection survey is part of a larger project that examines voter experiences in New Mexico. It included an oversample of voters who voted in Sandoval County in the vote centers where election observers were sometimes stationed for various periods of time during early voting and on Election Day. The sample of voters was drawn from the e-poll book files that keep

¹ New Mexico does not have precinct voting, and both early and Election Day voting uses vote centers at which any county voter can vote at any county vote center.

track of voters during an election. The e-poll book data provided by the NM Secretary of State included the date, time and location (if in-person) that each person voted. This information was used to identify and oversample voters who were in the vote center at the same time as the election observers and voters who were in the same vote centers when election observers were not present, on the same or adjacent days.

The statewide survey was administered from November 16, 2024, through February 11, 2025. The 2024 New Mexico Election Administration Survey (NMES) is based on a sample of approximately 225,000 voters in New Mexico, stratified by vote mode (early or Election Day, and in-person or absentee), age group, party registration, race/ethnicity, and gender.

Our sampling method used a mixed mode design which contacted voters by either postcard or email. Our mail sample consisted of about 25,200 voters sampled from the voter file, which included a simple random sample of 14,100 voters from the voter file, an oversample of about 4,100 voters who were sampled by inverse probability weighting based on vote mode, age group, party registration, race/ethnicity, and gender (which sampled low-response rate voters with higher probability, based on response rates from our 2020 survey), and an oversample of 7,000 in-person voters who voted in Sandoval County at locations in our observation experiment. All mail sample members were initially sent a first-class postcard after the election requesting their participation in our survey. The postcard provided sample respondents with a QR code and URL (vote2024.unm.edu) that directed them to the survey. Sampled voters who did not respond were contacted one additional time with a reminder postcard. In addition to the mail sample, all other voters with accessible emails were contacted by email at least once. For households with shared email addresses, we sampled one household voter at random. Approximately 200,000 voters in New Mexico received email invitations to take our survey. We received 5,279 responses to our survey.²

In the statewide survey, we included an experiment with four randomized treatments to test the effect of information about election observers on voters:

1. **No Information**
2. **Nonpartisan election observers** confirmed the official results of the 2024 election. In a public statement issued several days after the vote, they reported they found no evidence of fraud or major problems.
3. **Nonpartisan election observers from the University of New Mexico** watched all parts of the election process during and after the election including voting and vote counting. In a public statement issued several days after the vote, they reported they found no evidence of fraud or major problems.

² We do not know how many people saw the email or opened it to ensure a contact. Therefore, we do not calculate a response rate or a contact rate.

4. **Nonpartisan election observers from Observe NM Elections**, as part of a mission of **The Carter Center**, watched all parts of the election process in NM during and after the election including voting and vote counting. In a public statement issued several days after the vote, they reported they found no evidence of fraud or major problems.

The random treatment vignettes were a slight modification from our initial design because we were not initially aware that the Carter Center planned to do election observation statewide in New Mexico.

We additionally included an experiment testing the framing of our confidence questions. This experiment asked voters about their confidence that ballot integrity was maintained and that citizens were able to exercise their right to vote. Voters were asked either about their confidence that:

- A. “No ballots were stolen or changed in your state” OR
- B. “All ballots that are cast are protected from theft or change in your state”

And about their confidence that

- C. “No eligible voter was denied their chance to vote in your state” OR
- D. “All eligible voters can vote in your state”

For purpose of analysis, we collapsed them into one condition each. To control for any differences, we included a dummy variable for response frame.

Election Observation:

We chose to do our election observation on the ground in Sandoval County. We chose Sandoval County for a variety of reasons. First, it is the most competitive county in the state.³ It includes a mixture of both urban and rural voters, including several Indian reservations, and it is near enough to the University of New Mexico to deploy student observers. Sandoval is a medium-size election jurisdiction with about 113,000 registered voters. In addition, Sandoval voters reflect the state’s diverse population: its voters are 41% white, 41% Hispanic, 12% Native American, 2% African American, 2% Asian, and 2% multiracial (non-Hispanic).

Each election observer participated in UNM and statewide election observer training and poll worker training in Sandoval County, so they were aware of NM election laws and processes. Observations took place in Sandoval County during both early (October 8-November 2, 2024) and Election Day voting (November 5). Observers stayed at each location for around 4-6 hours observing voting and answering a paper questionnaire about the quality of the vote center and whether and how well poll workers were following the rules and processes related to voting.

³ See Atkeson, Lonna Rae and Wendy L. Hansen, 2022. “2020 NM Election Administration, Security, and Election Reform Report, Typescript, University of New Mexico. Available at: <https://www.sos.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/2020-UNM-Voter-Report.pdf>.

Comparing survey respondents who voted in the same vote centers, we investigated the differences in confidence and their trust in the process between voters who voted in the presence of election observers and voters who voted when observers were absent. In addition, we investigated how confidence varied among voters who were given each of the four random information treatment conditions in the survey. The goal is to determine whether and by how much the presence of different types of election observers on the ground and the type of information vignette that they received about the election results helped to shape their attitudes on the election outcome. In three of the four information treatment groups, we varied our description of the election observers to determine if their association or description impacted voter confidence, with the fourth group receiving no information.

Given that Democratic support for our voting institutions and trust in professional expertise is currently higher, we hypothesized that academic observers might get lower levels of support from Republicans. More specifically, we had the following hypotheses:

- 1) Voters will express higher confidence in election results and the election process if they voted in the presence of nonpartisan election observers.
- 2) Voters who receive information about the presence of election observers and their findings will be more confident than those who do not.
- 3) The effects of confidence building will vary based on how the observers are framed (University of New Mexico election observers, Carter Center election observers, or nonpartisan election observers) and the partisanship of the voter.
- 4) Voters who voted in the presence of election observers will express higher levels of confidence in the election results and the election process when they are reminded that nonpartisan observers confirmed the quality of the election, than if they are not reminded that their election was observed.

RESULTS

Exit Poll

Our first hypothesis, regarding the confidence-building consequences of election observation, can be tested at two points in time: first, using the exit poll conducted in Sandoval County, and then using responses from Sandoval voters to our New Mexico survey, which was conducted after the election.

In our exit poll, we asked voters about their confidence that their own vote was counted correctly, as well as confidence in vote-counting at the county, state, and national levels.

We find a small but significant positive effect on confidence for all four measures, as well as on confidence that ballots were not stolen or tampered, and that only citizens voted. When separate models are run with (1) party, (2) vote choice, and (3) demographic controls, the effects remain

positive but are statistically significant only at the personal vote and county levels, and for our question about ballot theft and tampering. Since election observation occurs at the local level, this is where we had the strongest expectations of an effect on voter confidence. Therefore, these results are consistent with our expectations.

Figures 1-3 disaggregate the effects in our exit poll by self-reported major party (Democrat or Republican) and by voters in non-major parties (e.g. Green, Libertarian) and those who decline to state a party, often called independents, which are combined. The four-point and 11-point confidence scales are rescaled to 0-1. To not be repetitive, we focus our attention on our most robust variable, confidence at the county level. Having observers present improved confidence in vote counting and ballot integrity for all three groups, and improved confidence among Republicans and Independents most. When it comes to confidence that only citizens vote, confidence improves significantly only for Independents.

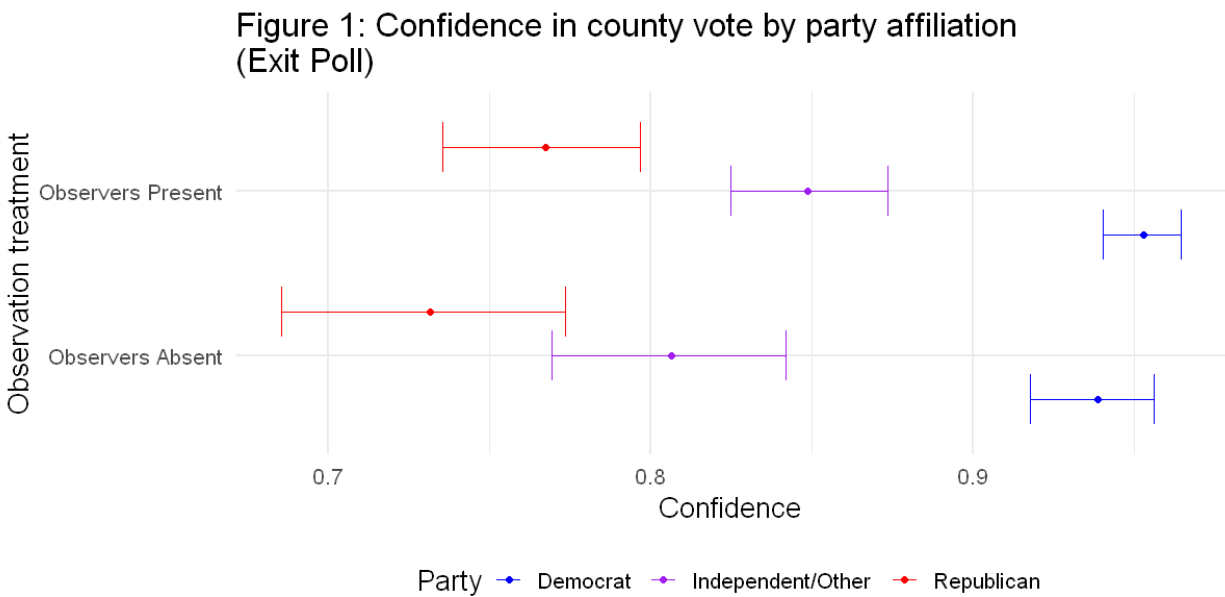


Figure 2: Confidence no ballots stolen or changed (Exit Poll)

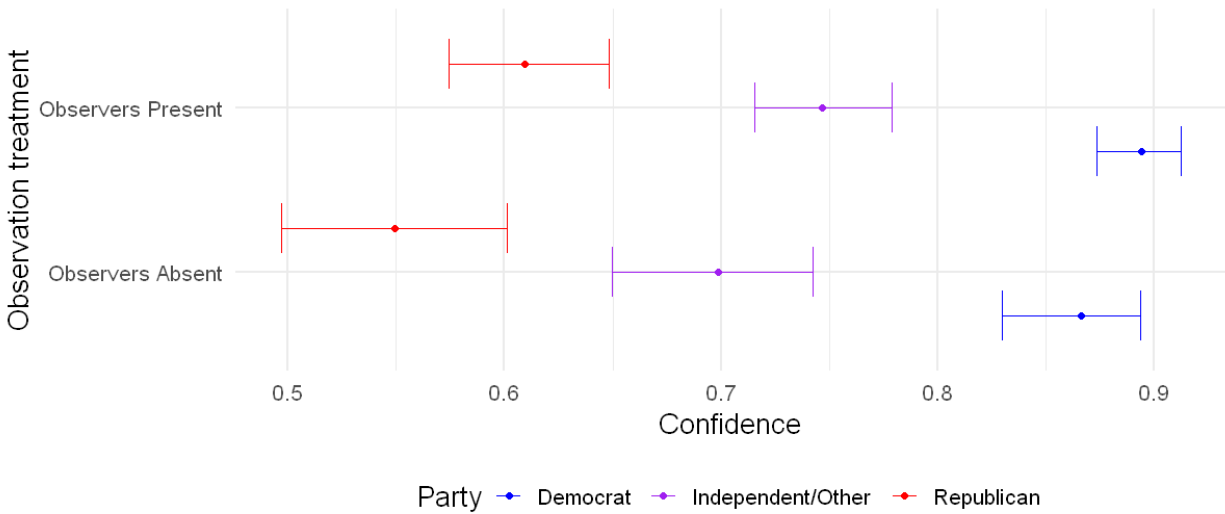
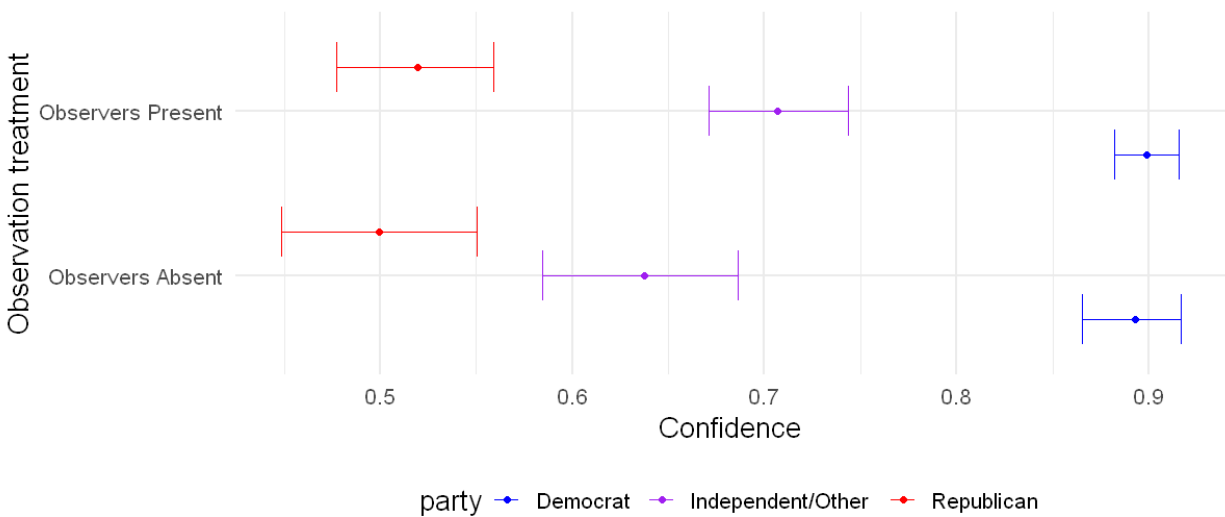


Figure 3: Confidence only citizens vote (Exit Poll)

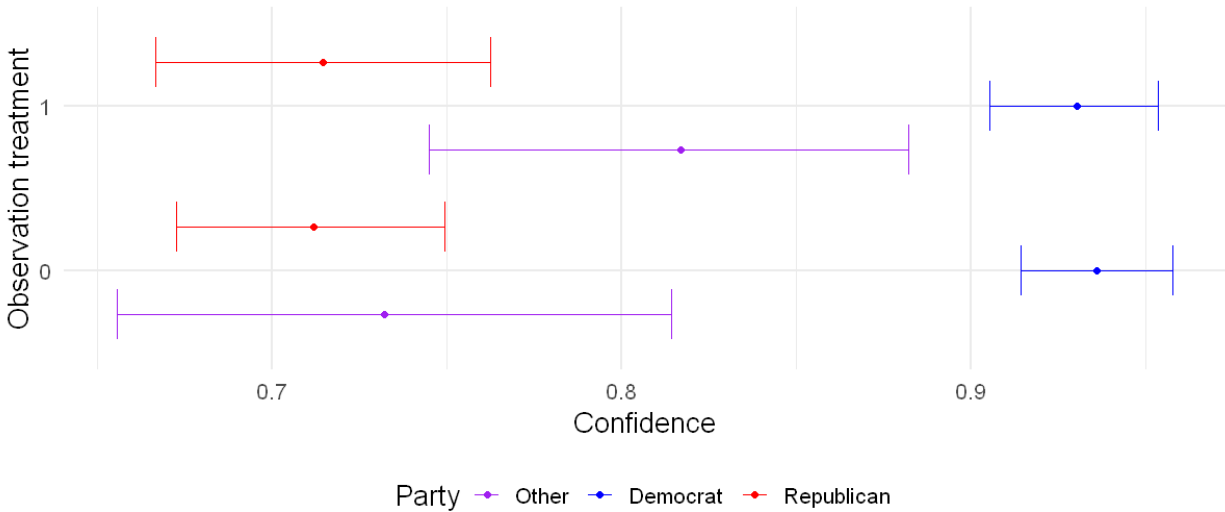


New Mexico Postelection Survey

We included the same 4-point confidence questions for personal, county, state, and national votes at the beginning of the NMES, which we fielded after the election. Respondents therefore answered these questions before they saw the information vignettes. We did not find significant effects for any level of confidence in the NMES. Given that the effect size is small in the exit poll, we are not surprised that we do not see effects here. Below in Figure 4, we focus again on county results controlling for party ID to parallel what we did above and because this variable shows a small effect for independents. Comparing Sandoval respondents who voted in the

presence of observers to those who voted in the absence of observers, we find persistent effects only among those who declined to state a party or did not identify with a major party.

Figure 4: Confidence in county vote by party affiliation (NMES)



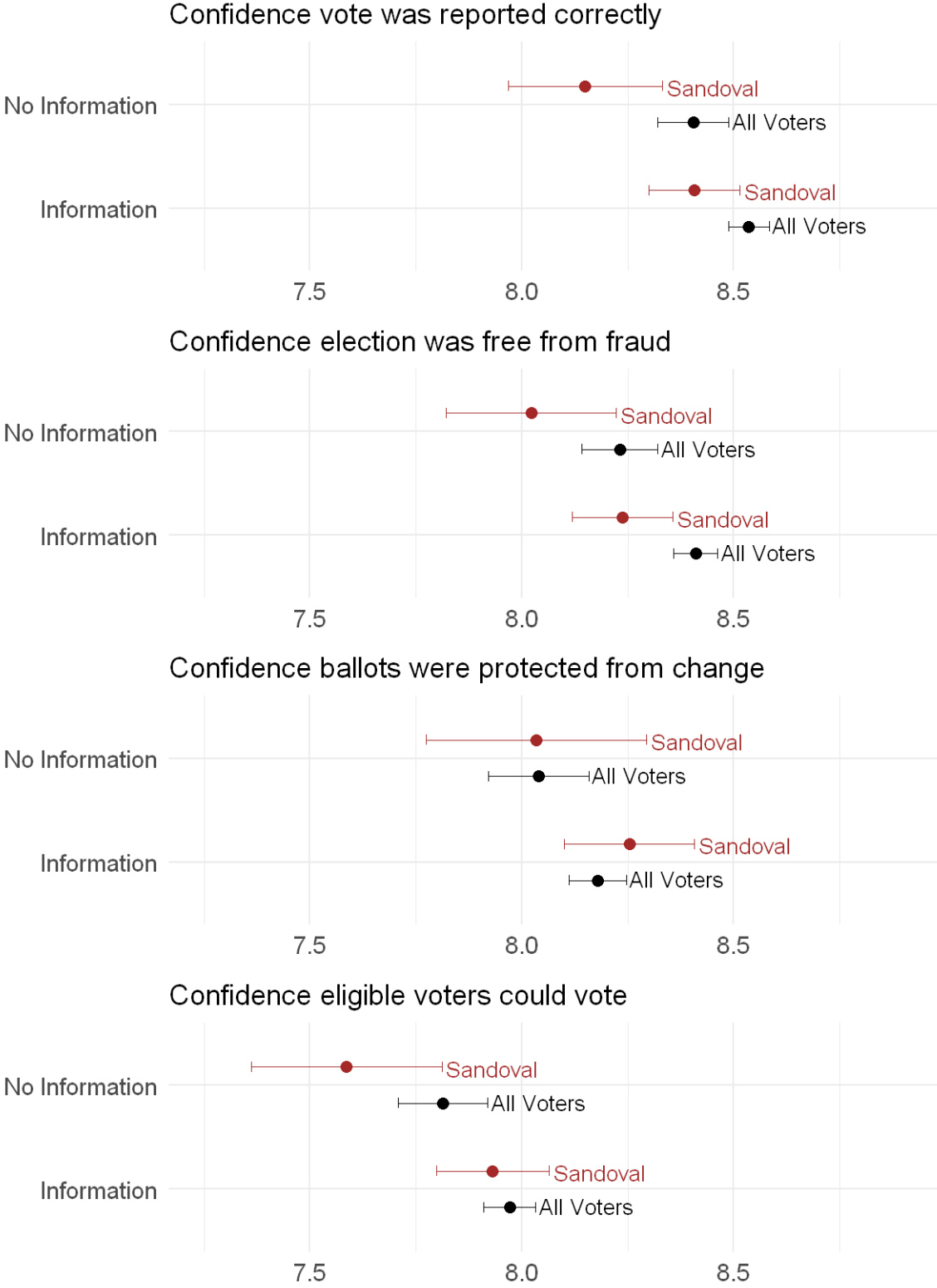
The remaining three hypotheses also rely on data from the postelection New Mexico Election Survey. In each analysis, we include a control for the voter’s self-reported party, to make it more parallel to the exit poll, as well as any randomly assigned experimental framing variations (e.g. “No ballots were stolen or changed” vs “All ballots were protected from theft or change”).

Our data support our second hypothesis: confidence levels are significantly higher when voters are informed that nonpartisan election observers observed the election, than when they receive no information about observers. This analysis pooled three treatments (the conditions with anonymous nonpartisan observers, nonpartisan observers from UNM, and nonpartisan observers from Observe NM) and compares the confidence among those voters, who received information about election observers, to that of voters who received no information about observers. Across all four confidence questions, confidence increases by about 0.2 scale points on an 11-point scale from a baseline of about 8-8.5 in the no information condition. This finding is consistent with the effect seen with the exit poll.

In Figure 5 below, we compare within groups, Sandoval voters with and without information and all voters with and without information. This is necessary because our treated county, Sandoval, had, on average, lower starting values for voter confidence than in other counties.⁴ When we examine the data in this way, we see the size of effects is consistent across both groups.

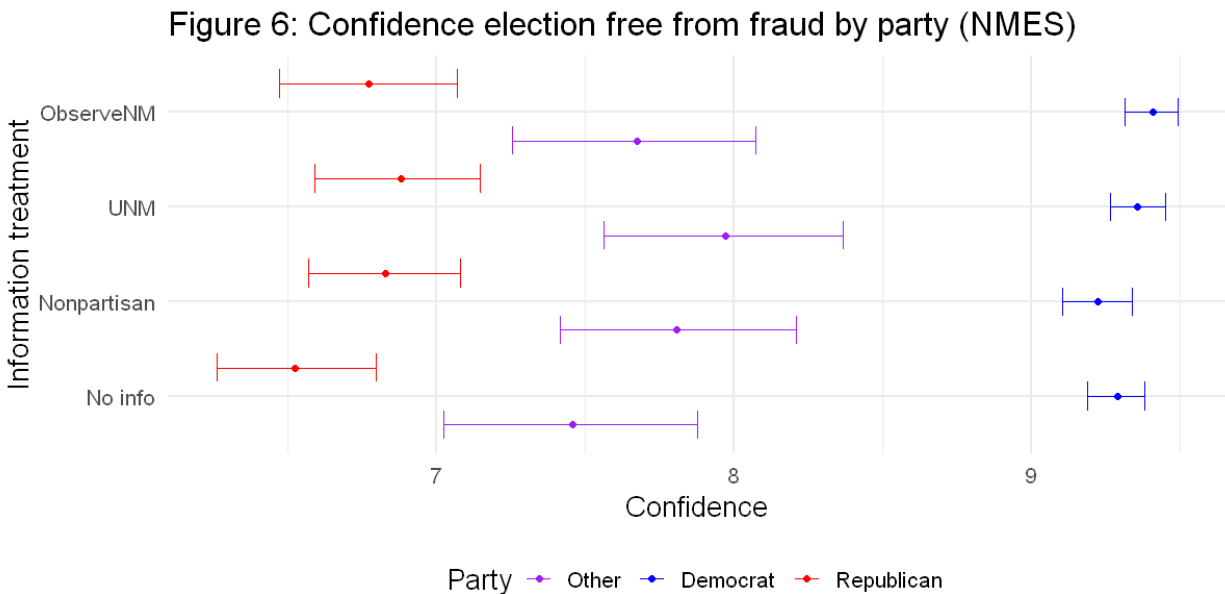
⁴ Historically Sandoval County had one of the lowest levels of voter confidence in the state due to problems in election administration across multiple cycles, but especially on election day in 2012 when equipment problems led to long wait times up to 5 hours.

Figure 5: Effect of information about observers (NMES)



When we compare voters' responses to the three different nonpartisan observer vignettes, Figure 6, we find that there are different effect sizes. Moreover, for each of our measures of confidence, we find different responses to information from voters of different party affiliations. The largest average improvements in confidence occur when voters are informed that observers from UNM observed all parts of the election and reported no anomalies, while the smallest improvements, which were often statistically insignificant, occur in the unnamed nonpartisan observer treatment, in which the nonpartisan observers confirm the election results.

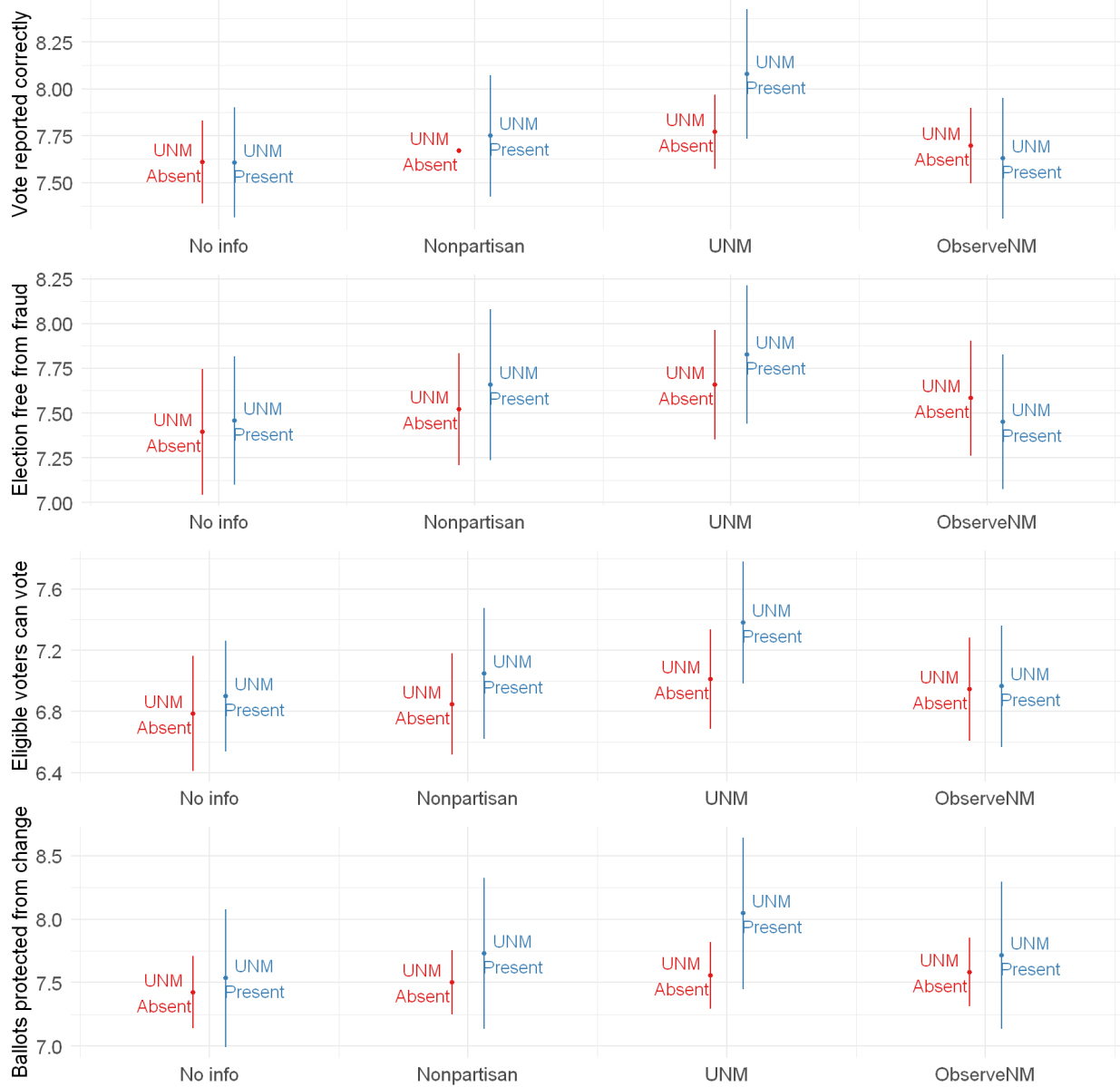
Figure 6 shows the largest improvements in confidence among self-reported Republicans and Independents, whose confidence improved by about 0.4 and 0.8 points respectively. This larger improvement can be attributed to the lower baseline levels of confidence, at about 6.5 and 7.3 on the 11-point scale, compared to Democrats' 9.3. Indeed, our treatments have much smaller (and not always statistically significant) effects for Democrats, who already express nearly the highest possible level of confidence (9.3 of a maximum 10) even when we provide no information about election observation. Thus, for Democrats, as expected, ceiling effects prevent us from observing any significant change.



We also see in Figure 6 that the three nonpartisan observer vignettes perform similarly well for the Republican voters in our sample – thus, we do not find evidence in favor of our initial conjecture that university-affiliated observers would be less effective in improving the confidence of Republican voters. If anything, the opposite is true, information about nonpartisan observers from UNM is particularly effective for independent voters, and the vignette about unnamed nonpartisan observers has a slightly negative and insignificant effect on confidence among Democrats.

Lastly, in Figure 7 we find suggestive evidence that voters who voted in the presence of election observers, when reminded at a later point of the presence of election observers, gain additional confidence in the election results and in election administration.

Figure 7: Interactions between Observer Presence and Information Vignettes (NMES)



In our regression analysis, not shown but included in our replication file, we find a 0.37 scale point improvement in confidence in the vote count in Sandoval County among respondents who were informed or reminded of UNM’s election observation. This increases to 0.5 scale points if we exclude an individual-level control variable that captures confidence in the county vote count,

which respondents answered at the beginning of the survey before receiving the vignette. Therefore, the 0.37 point improvement in confidence is an effect of the information provided *during the survey*, while the 0.5 point improvement is an average treatment effect that includes both the effect of the information provided during the survey and the effect of having voted in the presence of election observers (which was experienced by half of the voters in our Sandoval sample). We do not find similar differences when including or excluding the pre-treatment control outside Sandoval County, or when examining respondents' confidence levels when they receive the ObserveNM vignette.

Furthermore, since our Sandoval sample contained voters who voted in the same locations, and some voted when election observers were present and others voted when observers were absent, we compare responses to the information vignettes among voters who did and did not encounter UNM observers as shown in Figure 7. Since voters who voted in-person outside of Sandoval County, or within Sandoval County but not in observed locations, did not encounter UNM election observers, we conducted an analysis in which we include them in our control group. We find that voters who voted in the presence of UNM election observers gained more confidence when we provided information that UNM observers had observed the election, compared to other information treatments, though the statistical significance varies.

Conclusion

Although we do not find large effects, we do see consistent and positive effects across our measures and survey designs that suggest that election observers have an independent and positive effect on voter confidence in the election. We also find that information about election observers has a consistent, small, and positive effect on voter confidence.

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This report was written by:
Dr. Lonna Atkeson, Florida State University;
Marli Dunietz, Florida State University; and
Dr. Wendy Hansen, University of New Mexico.

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