



Ethical Frontlines:

Stewarding Trust as Election Officials

WORKSHOP PREVIEW

Understand the pressures. Prepare for what-ifs.



Mounting **public concerns** fuel distrust.



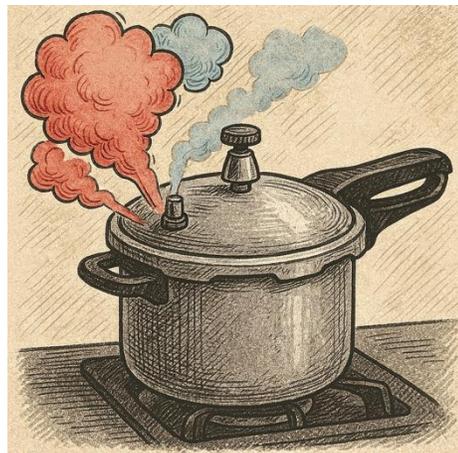
Party pressures put unfair strains on EOs.



Outdated laws make your job harder.



The combination of forces puts EOs in a pressure cooker.



SOLUTIONS

Practicing ethical decision-making with realistic training scenarios helps EOs plan to counter these problems – and let off some steam.



CONTEXT

What does ethics mean to you?

Philosophers might say:

The science of duty.

Ethicists might say:

A self-defined and internally consistent code of moral principles that governs an individual's behavior.

Your grandma might say:

Doing the right thing, whether or not people are looking.



CONTEXT

Compliance versus ethics

THE TAKEAWAY:

EOs often focus on **compliance**.

But **principled actions** in response to pressures *outside their control* are critically important.



Compliance:

What I *must* do...

- Adhere to laws to guarantee accurate outcomes.
- Comply with regulations, manuals, accuracy testing.
- Respond to formal requests from boards or other elected officials.



Ethical duty:

What I *should* do...

- Act with **impartiality**.
- Behave in a way that **builds trust** in election outcomes.
- Ensure candidates *feel treated fairly*.
- Put principle **above party**.
- Sustain **my own** moral code.



Introductions

- Your name
- Your day job
- **One thing** you think is important about election official ethics

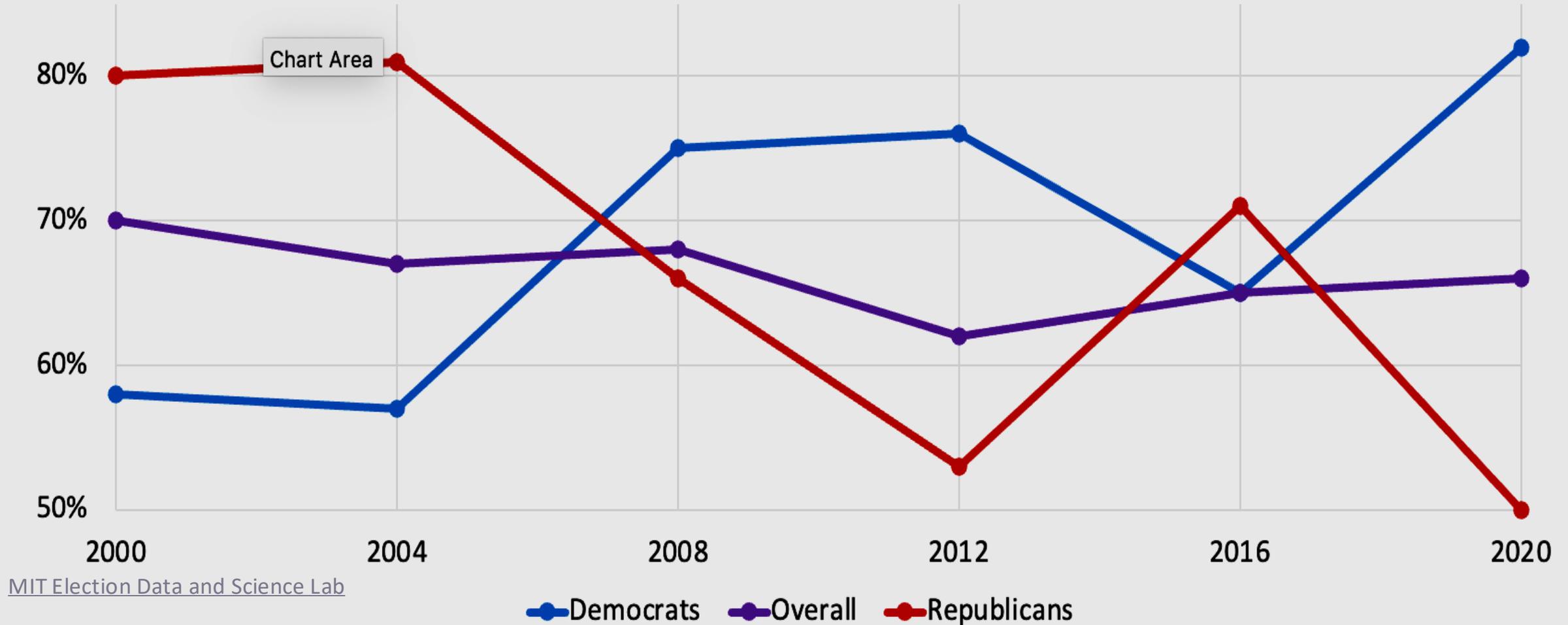
Pressure Point #1:

Mounting public concerns fuel distrust.

- Confidence in elections is declining.
- Voters want election officials to prove their impartiality.
- Some people even turn to threats.



Confidence that Presidential Vote Was Counted as Intended

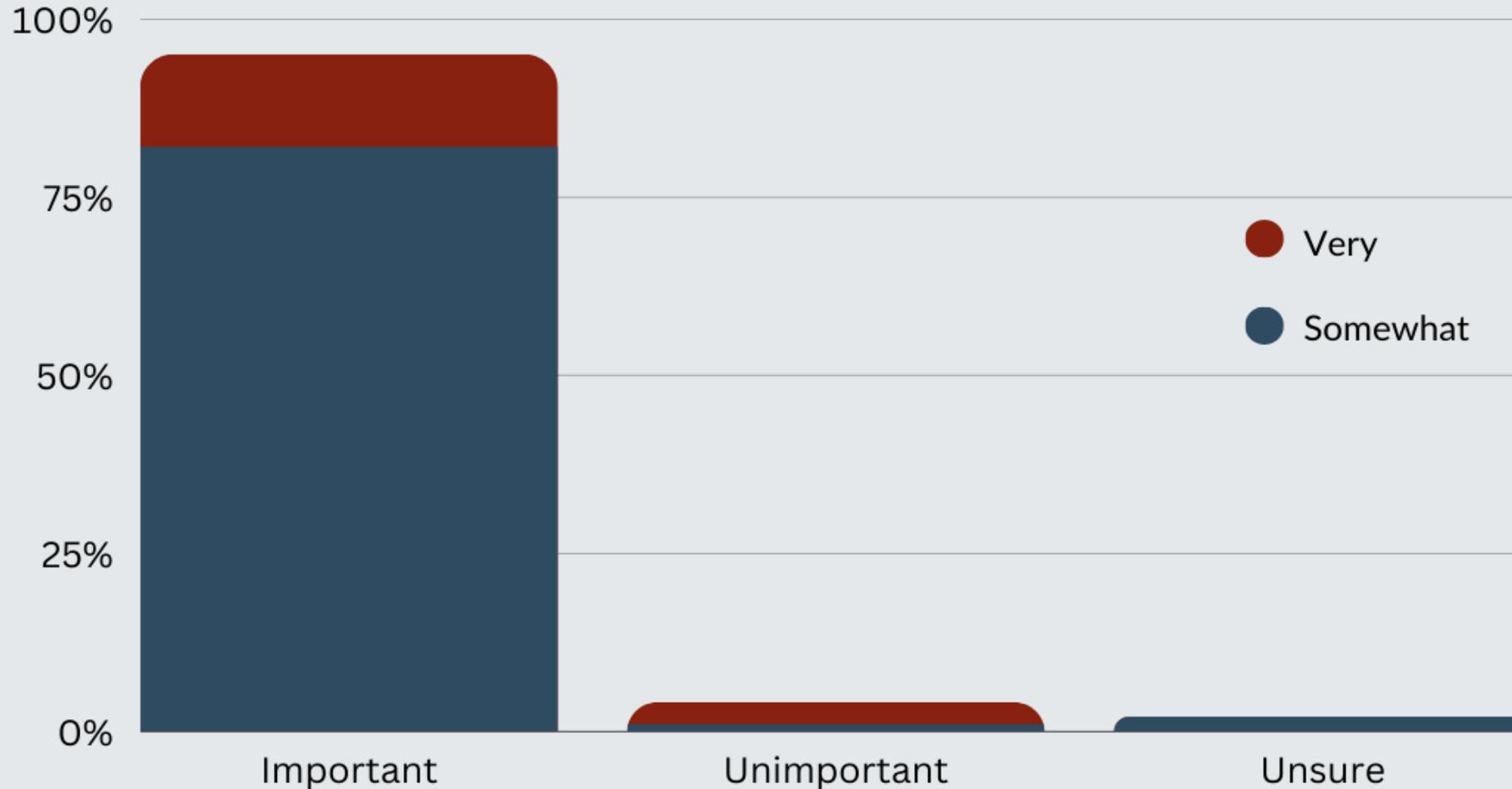


Voter confidence is volatile.

Trust in results often hinges on whether your side won.

How important is it that state and local election officials act in an impartial manner?

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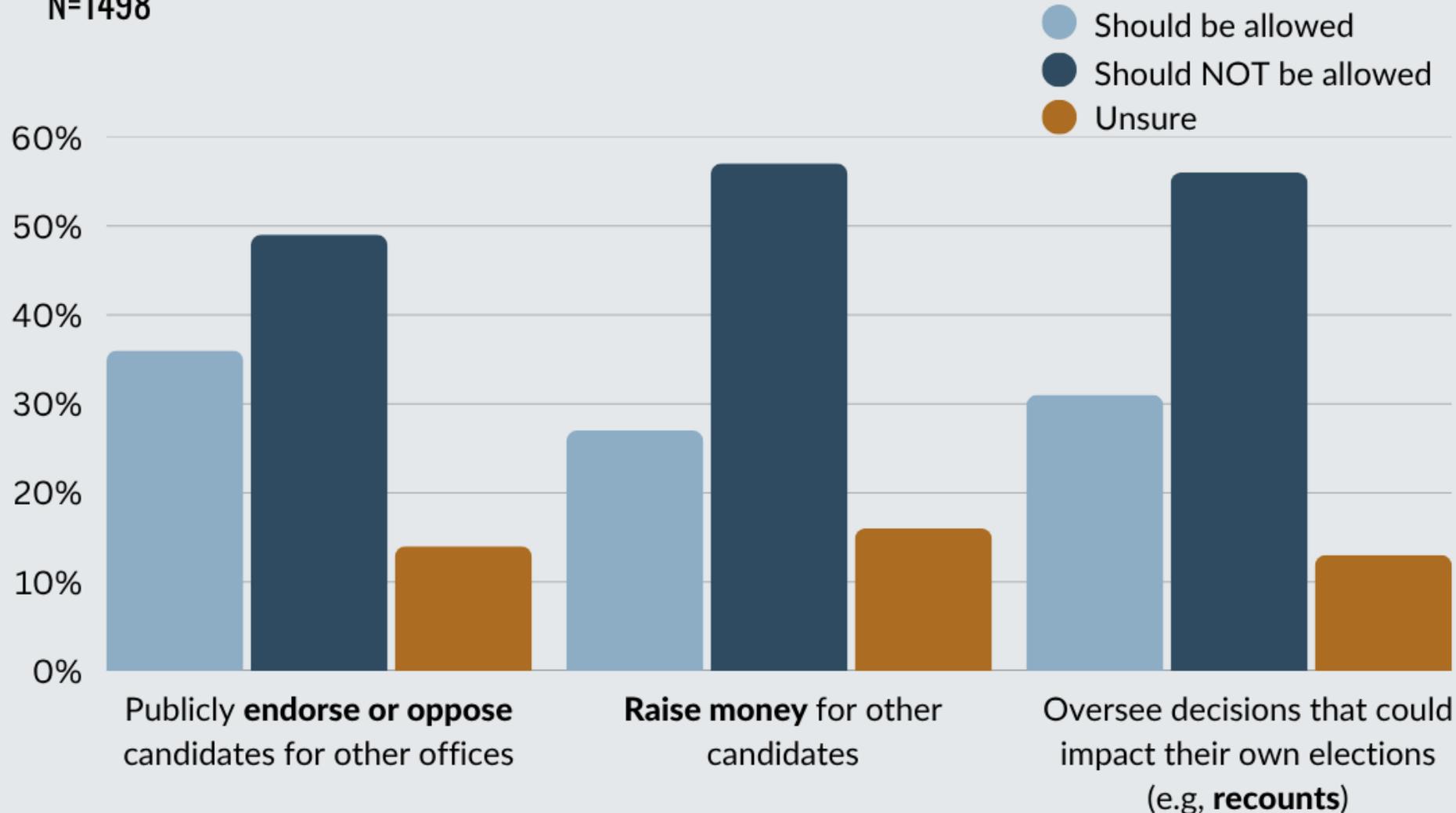


Voters don't want their EO to favor their side. They want impartiality.



Should State or Local Election Officials Be Allowed to Take Partisan Actions in Elections They Oversee?

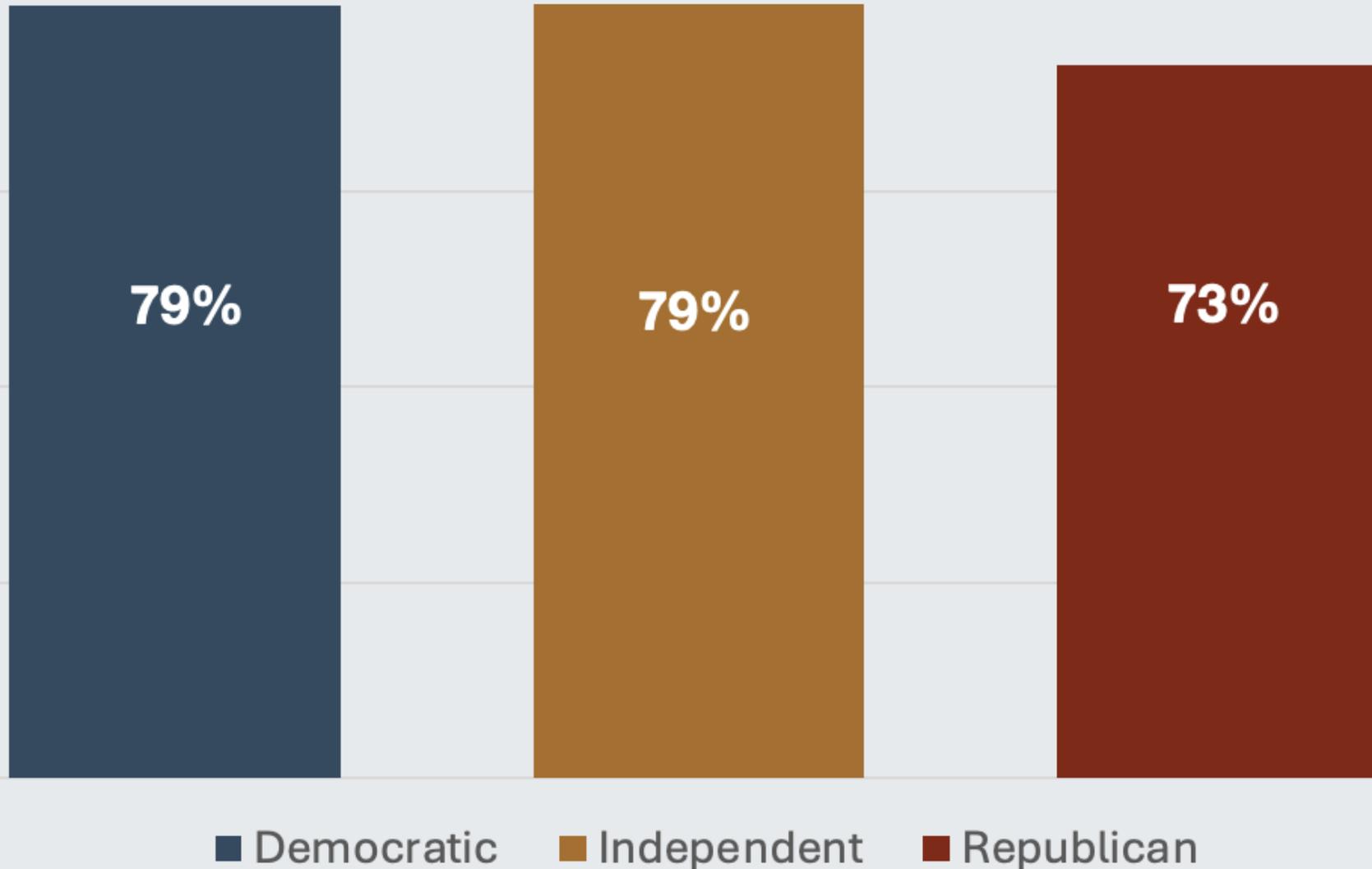
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Voters prefer when EOs don't oversee their own elections – or back candidates



Percent of U.S. voters who want election officials to be selected on a nonpartisan basis



Voters wish their EOs were selected on a non-partisan basis.



Discussion of voter viewpoints

- Which survey findings surprised you most?
- With which do you most agree or disagree?
- How might these voter perspectives influence the public actions election officials should take? (e.g., endorsing, fundraising, recusing?)
- What about other election officials and staff members? How might these findings influence the types of public actions they take?





Pressure Point #2:

Polarization and partisan influences are worsening.

THIS IS THE
DOOR TO LOOP.



UNITE

The parties have realigned, making our two-party system much more of a problem.



THEN:

Overlapping coalitions
constrained hostility
and allowed compromise.



VS

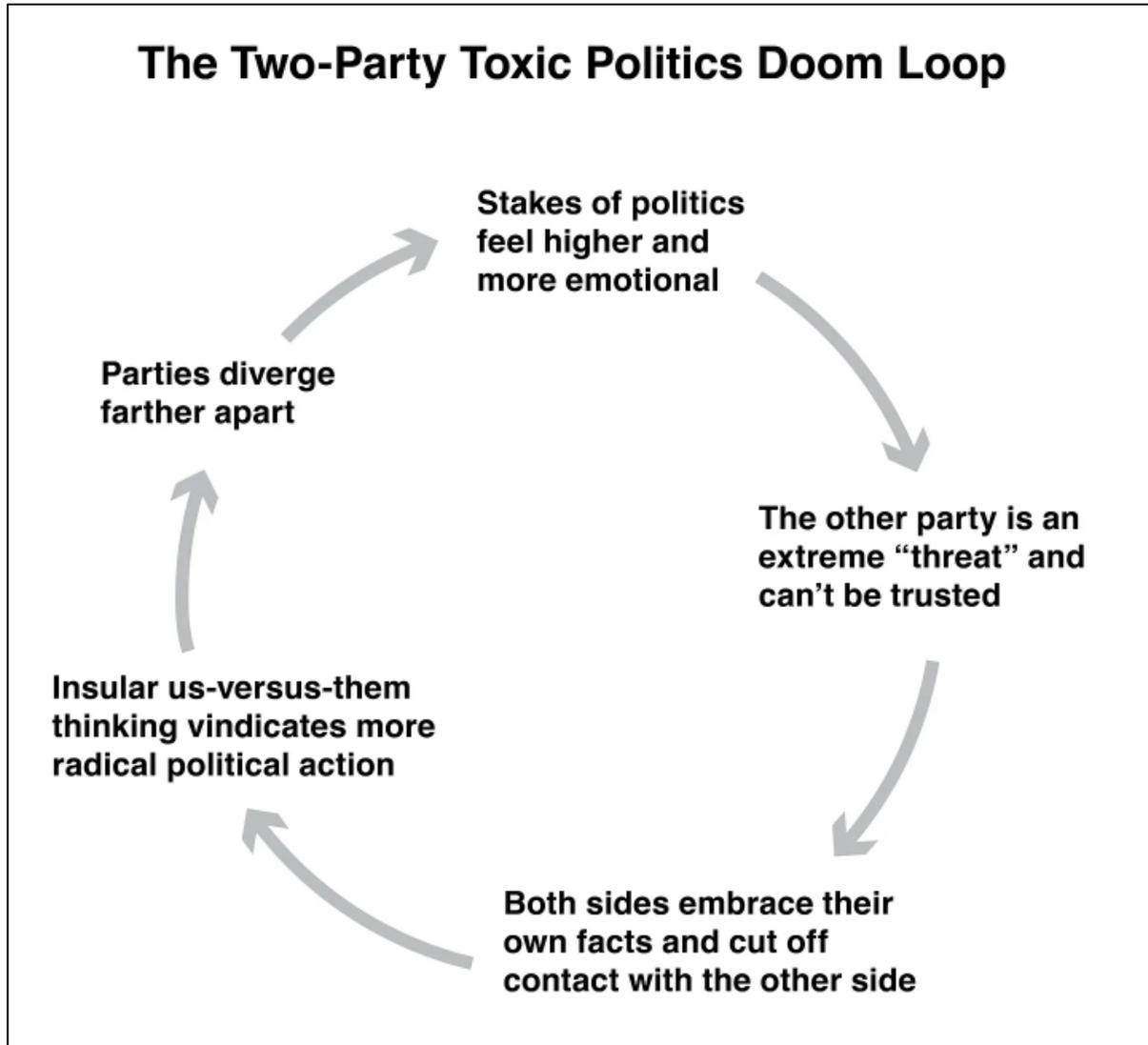


NOW:

Politics is largely about making your side hate and fear the other side.

See *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America*, Lee Drutman. Short video [here](#).

The “Doom Loop” makes politics ever more toxic.



“Toxic politics destroys trust in institutions and in fellow citizens. Unremedied, it kills democracy.”

— Lee Drutman

Source: Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America

**Some
partisans
insist that
elections go
their way.**

Refusal to certify by county officials in 2020 and 2022:

- More than 33 occurrences by public officials
- Across eight states
- Disrupting what by law is a ministerial responsibility to certify

Source: [CREW](#), 2024



“My vote to remain a ‘no’ isn’t based on any evidence. It’s not based on any facts ... It’s only based on my gut feeling and my own intuition.”

—Couy Griffin
former commissioner
Otero County, New Mexico
(2022)



MEDIA INPUTS

When election officials are in the news, it often causes voter confidence to deteriorate.

The Guardian

Arizona Republican official who refused to certify 2022 midterm election pleads guilty

BRENNAN
CENTER
FOR JUSTICE

States Cave to
Conspiracy
Theories and
Leave Voter Data
Cooperative, ERIC

B B C

Ex-county clerk jailed for tampering with voting machines

 PBS

Georgia county election officials must certify election results, judge rules

 NBC NEWS

Nevada county refuses to certify results of two local primaries

GEORGIA RECORDER 

Judge calls for daily fines after Fulton County panel refuses to seat GOP picks for election board

Discussion of partisan influences

- What do you think of the “Doom Loop” research?
- How does rising polarization create the need for new communication tactics and strategies?
- Data shows more than 30 recent instances of county officials trying to block certification. How would instances like that affect your office?
- Are all eyes on you?



The background of the slide is a close-up, slightly blurred image of the United States flag, showing the stars and stripes. The flag is set against a solid dark red background.

Pressure Point #3:

**Your ethical decisions are made harder
because of outdated American laws.**

Peer democracies provide more protections for election officials.

America has the most binary party system in the world.

Polarized U.S. Congress:

In countries that share our voting system—U.K., Canada, Australia—third-party members make up **20%** of their parliamentary bodies.

In the U.S., it's 0.7%.

Why?

Many causes, ranging from party primaries to ballot access rules to the electoral college.

No new parties:

The U.S. is the only democracy in the world that has not had a **new party rise to power** in more than 150 years.

The U.S. is the only major democracy that:

1. Allows states to select **election officials** in partisan elections
2. Allows election officials to **oversee their own election**
3. Allows election officials to **campaign** for candidates running in elections they manage
4. Relies on **party representatives to certify** election results
5. Allows **party-nominated** structures to oversee election management



Case Study: Canada

Opposite extreme: Most chief election officers are barred from voting.

Examples from 12 democratic nations

Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, India, the Netherlands, Poland, South Africa, Spain, and the U.K.

- The certification step is an oddity of the U.S. In other nations, election officials declare results and the courts decide any challenges.
- In all but two nations studied, **political parties have no role in the declaration of results**, aside from their right to observe vote counting and challenge results in court. The “mutual policing” model is considered outdated.

The U.S. approach for judges and accountants is more comparable with peer democracies.

Value-based ethics trainings, here and abroad, go beyond code compliance and prepare judges and accountants to make ethical decisions in realistic circumstances.



Judges

- Continuing education workshops employ interactive structures to apply ethical values to real-life challenges.
- Advisory committees issue opinions on timely and relevant ethical dilemmas facing judges.



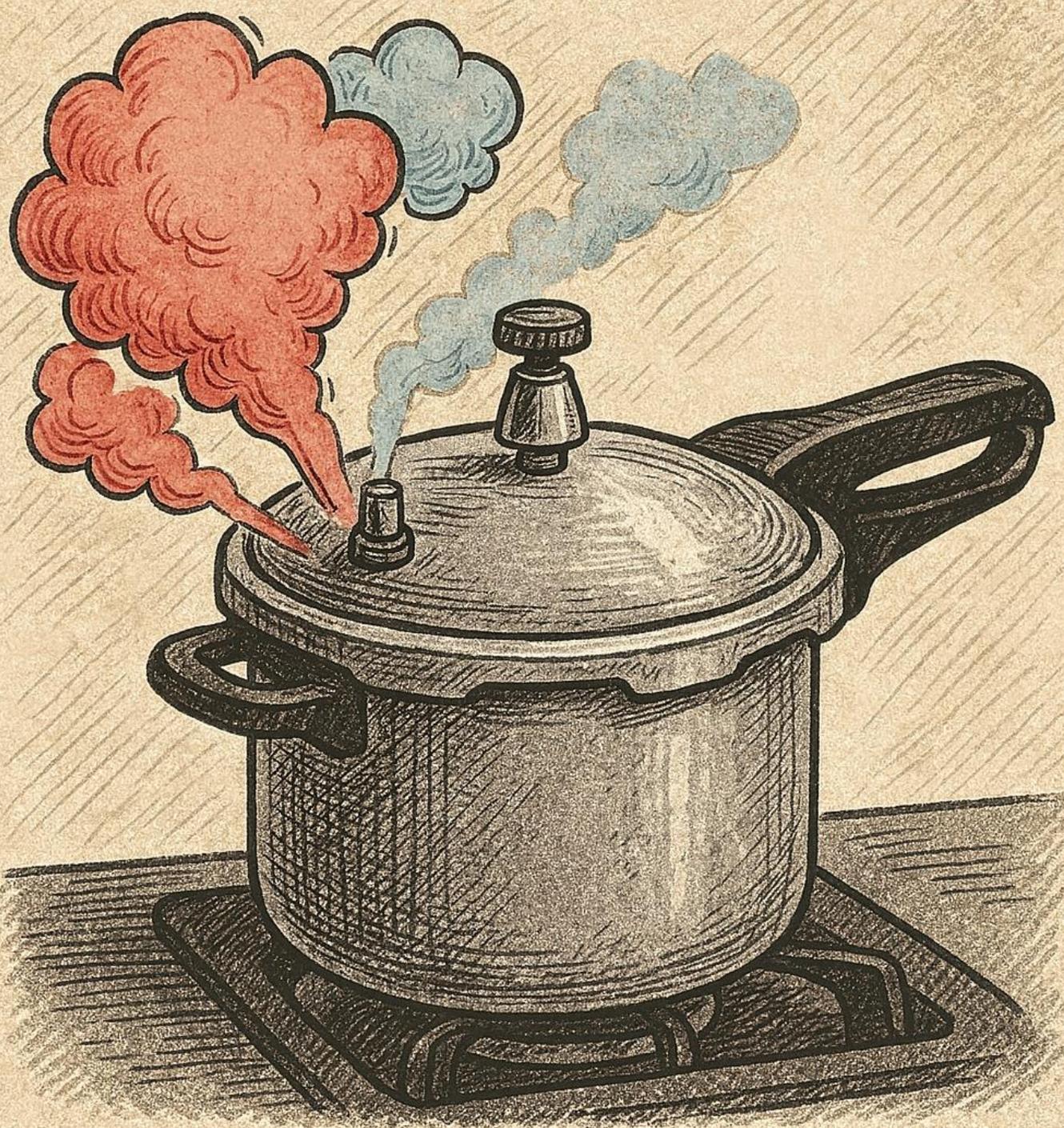
Accountants

- Trainings offer strategies to address conflicts of interest (e.g., recusal, disclosure, informed consent).
- Risk-based conceptual framework for ethical decision-making offers clear steps to apply when assessing ethical issues.

Discussion of comparative examples

- A core difference between the U.S. and other countries is the greater role for political parties, party appointees, and partisan-elected officials in U.S. elections. Does it affect your thinking about this aspect of U.S. elections to learn that other countries do this differently?
- Thinking about the certification example we discussed earlier, what are the pros and cons of the U.S. mirroring the practice of other nations?





The combination of forces puts EOs in a pressure cooker.

Every. Single. Day.

- Worried or angry voters
- 24-hour news
- Social media
- Party loyalists (some of them your friends)
- Outdated laws and systems that make everything worse



The political pressures are real.

Election Reformers Network conducted dozens of confidential interviews with LEOs in five states (2024-2025).

Every interviewee serving in a state that elects EOs reported either:

- Being directly pressured by a leader to support the party line, such as influencing the process or validating false claims; or
- Knowing first-hand a peer LEO who had.

*Note: In Virginia, where local EOs are **appointed** based on qualifications, fewer reported this experience.*



Real quotes from real election officials

“Since 2020, I have been a Republican who stood strong against those who said elections were fraudulent. I have been called a lot of names, sometime by my own peers in the party, people I thought were friends... It’s hard, because voters are coming at me all the time, in the grocery store, at the dinner table at restaurants, on social media. Whether the pressure is to get rid of your voting equipment, or not certify an election, or say there was fraud – it’s been constant. Constant.”

LEO with more than 20 years of service

“Election officials in my state absolutely get party pressure. That’s why I’m now Independent. I decided it is not OK for me to be a member of a party because I don’t want to be beholden.

When others in my profession didn’t do what their party wanted, it was like a divorce.”

LEO with more than 15 years of service



ADDITIONAL INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Election officials struggle with conflicts of interest

Multiple LEOs interviewed for ERN's study reported:

- Struggling with loyalty to their party
- Fear of losing their seat if they crossed their party
- Intermittent challenges with upholding the principles of impartiality in their job



ADDITIONAL INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Opinions vary on endorsements and recusal

Recusals

Most LEOs had clear plans to remove themselves from vote-counting activities if they were on the ballot, some fully recusing. However, none published their policies. So, voters did not know about the protections taken.

Endorsements

A few LEOs believed it was OK to endorse (or fundraise for) qualified candidates on their ballot.

Most did not.



Discussion of ERN findings

- Which of the interview findings or quotes interested you the most?
- Were you surprised by the number of LEOs who reported receiving party pressure?
- What are your thoughts about EOs making recusal provisions (or division of labor protections that keep them away from ballots) but not announcing them?



Hypotheticals

Practical responses to real problems





HYPOTHETICAL #1: Party puts the pressure on

You are a county clerk and a member of the county canvass board that votes to certify results. In this election, there have been some technical problems, but no evidence that these issues changed the results of any race. The phone rings. It's the county chair of the losing party, your party, urging you to vote against certifying the results at the upcoming board meeting.

1. How would you respond at the moment you received the phone call?
2. How would you handle press and other inbound queries?
3. What help would you need?
4. What could this mean for relationships that matter to you with your party, and how would you handle that element?
5. How could you mitigate similar pressure in the future?



HYPOTHETICAL #2: You're on the ballot

You're the county clerk, and a state legislator recently announced retirement. You've just filed to run for the open seat. Local press is already paying attention. You receive an email from an aggressive reporter asking what you have to say "about the conflict of interest." (OR: You are a staffer, and your boss is running.)

1. How do you develop your position on potential conflicts of interest?
2. How proactive are you about communicating your plans regarding potential conflicts of interest?
3. Are there legal barriers to recusal in your state?
4. What help would you need to make your decisions?



HYPOTHETICAL #3: Helping a good candidate win

You are the county Clerk. A good friend and fellow party member has decided to run for mayor in the largest city in the county. You've heard he's organizing a major campaign kickoff event. The phone rings. It's your friend asking if you'll to take the stage and endorse his candidacy.

1. How do you feel about endorsing, given your position?
2. Where do you draw the line for fundraising (e.g., attending events, your photo on flyers, sharing your donor list)?
3. What help would you need?
4. What is the common practice among your peers?
5. Would it help if the law prohibited EOs from endorsing in races other than their own?

Concluding discussion

- What from today informs your own personal decision-making?
- What's one way you can support each other?
- What's one thing you want from your state association to support EO ethics?





Questions?