

# **The Big Lie Is Destroying Democracy; As an Election Official, I've Witnessed This First-Hand**

By: William Stevenson

“Does my vote matter?” Whether a person participates in America’s democratic process or not can greatly depend on how they answer that question. Their belief that their vote matters - their belief that after their ballot is cast in any given election, their vote will be counted with all the others and whoever received the most votes is the legitimate winner - is crucial to determining whether or not that person will vote. While Donald Trump failed to overturn the 2020 presidential election through the spread of his Big Lie, he eroded the confidence in America's electoral system among a significant portion of its electorate. This consequence of the Big Lie - this loss of confidence in American elections - is something I've seen the impact of first-hand.

During the 2022 Pennsylvania primary elections, I had the honor of serving as a Judge of Elections in my home county, a swing county in a swing state. During this time, I interacted with many Republican voters - a lot of whom were voting for the first time since 2020 - who believed that the 2020 election was stolen and that their votes were actively being manipulated by poll workers and election administrators. Many of these interactions revolved around offhand comments about the election being tampered with in one way or another. A lot of the more common remarks I heard involved the equipment used to cast ballots and count votes, with some voters stating that they didn't trust the machines used in the voting process. A number of Republican voters especially took issue with the computerized “ballot box” - which is a machine that scans the ballots and tabulates the votes - in stating that once their ballot was inserted in the machine then all their votes would be secretly changed by the computer tabulating them.

Another key area of tension between poll workers and those who believed the Big Lie often arose from the need to set the machine based on the party of the voter due to the closed nature of the Pennsylvania primaries. Since the Pennsylvania primaries are closed, a poll worker had to enter the polling booth to select which party the voter was affiliated with on the voting machine before the voter could begin marking their ballot. For some voters, despite being able to view the poll worker setting the machine, this was wrongly perceived as election interference, and would often lead to arguments between the poll worker and the voter. There was one instance I

witnessed where an individual angrily stormed out of a polling location without voting because a poll worker was “programming the machine to steal their votes,” despite the poll worker merely entering the booth to bring up the Republican primary ballot on the voting machine.

Other election conspiracies that led to the beratement of poll workers included not requiring a driver’s license to vote so that “illegal immigrants could cast ballots,” and I remember having a conversation with one voter who told me that they saw on the news that “Democrats want to make people pay to vote so that only their rich, elitist supporters could afford to vote.” When I attempted to explain to them that such a measure would be unconstitutional, my remarks were dismissed with a comment about how Democrats don’t care about the Constitution, saying that they wouldn’t have stolen the 2020 elections if they did. While these interactions were limited to those who, despite believing in Trump’s Big Lie, still made the effort to vote, it is clear that a significant amount of Republican voters have come to doubt the integrity of American elections and mistrust those who run them. In addition, there are likely many Trump supporters both in my home county and throughout the nation whose faith in elections was so diminished by the Big Lie that they might choose to not vote at all.

While these anecdotes are just from one area of one state, [polling data from Axios](#) would suggest that such stories are just a sample of how Trump’s Big Lie impacted the attitudes of millions of Americans regarding voting. In discussing the extensiveness of Trump’s Big Lie, the data shows that roughly 37% of Americans say they've lost faith in American democracy and 10% never had any faith, while the same polling data also shows that a quarter of all Americans do not believe Joe Biden legitimately won the 2020 presidential election. While the amount of people in America who are or are not confident in their country’s voting process [has fluctuated greatly over the past two decades](#), this has previously been due to, at least in part, the natural flaws within America’s democratic institutions; during my lifetime, the Electoral College overruled the popular vote twice, gerrymandering has become more prominent, and U.S. Senate malapportionment has become more obvious, among other issues.

The Big Lie, however, is different. When Trump and his Republican supporters spewed numerous false claims and conspiracy theories in an attempt to overturn the 2020 presidential election, they sowed doubt over the integrity of America’s electoral system into the minds of

millions across the nation. In baselessly claiming that the 2020 election was stolen, that America's elections are being tampered with and that voting machines are being manipulated, Trump and other leading Republicans have led more and more Americans - especially those who are Republicans themselves - to believe that their votes don't matter and won't be counted as the elections have already been rigged and their outcomes predetermined. Even Republicans from counties where Donald Trump won 85% of the vote in 2020 believe that their home county's voting machines were manipulated, [as the Associated Press reports](#), showing how widespread the Big Lie has become.

When evaluating the damage done by Trump to American democracy, [some have argued](#) that the impacts Trump made are minute. These people are quick to point out where Trump failed: He failed to overturn the 2020 presidential election, he failed to undermine the checks and balances of both the legislative and judicial branches, and he failed to tear down the major guardrails of democracy. Yet a democracy only works if the people participate and have faith in it, and what Trump succeeded in doing is eroding the confidence in America's electoral system among a significant portion of its electorate. Because of Trump and his supporters, more Americans - especially Republicans - are not only doubting the integrity of American elections but are also increasingly mistrusting those who run them.

While it is difficult to foretell what the exact effect of the Big Lie on voter turnout will be, an indicator can be seen when analyzing the two 2021 Georgia runoff elections for U.S. Senate seats - elections that took place just one day before believers in Trump's Big Lie attacked the United States Capitol. When [researchers cross-referenced social media posts](#) from roughly 45,000 Georgia voters with state voter records, they found that voters who liked or shared posts that promoted Trump's Big Lie "turned out in fewer numbers than those voters whose posts expressed the opposite sentiment," according to a Northeastern University report on the research. The report does, however, follow up by noting that it is still too early to tell whether this decrease in turnout among Big Lie believers will be lasting, stating that these "election conspiracy theories could also encourage participation in subsequent elections by stoking political anger, directing adherents to continue democratic participation as a means of rectifying political opponents' previous malfeasance." This latter scenario could potentially play out as

soon as the 2022 midterms, with [sixty percent of Americans](#) having at least one election denier on their ballot in November.

While data suggesting that Trump's Big Lie could lower voter turnout among Republicans might sound like music to the ears of some Democrats hoping to hold on to their slim Congressional majorities this November, Americans losing confidence in their electoral system is not the only danger caused by the Big Lie. Since the January 6th attack on the United States Capitol took place, Republicans in state legislatures, directly influenced by the Big Lie and its supporters, have introduced [hundreds of voter restriction bills](#) under the guise of "election integrity." These bills, which vary from limiting polling times and locations to purging voter rolls and increasing voter surveillance, showcase what FiveThirtyEight reporter Kaleigh Rogers describes as "an anti-democratic shift among the GOP, catalyzed by the Big Lie and ushered in by a network of right-wing power brokers." Moreover, with [the Supreme Court about to weigh in](#) on the 'independent state legislature theory' in *Moore v. Harper*, these GOP state legislators could potentially gain a lot more power to influence and attack American democracy while justifying their actions with the Big Lie.

In addition to the threat posed by already-elected Republicans using the Big Lie to pass voter restriction bills, there is also the threat that Republican candidates seeking office could utilize the Big Lie to deny the results of an election they lose. When the [Washington Post contacted the nominees](#) for the most closely watched gubernatorial and U.S. Senate elections of the 2022 midterms, a majority of the Republican candidates refused to say that they will accept the results of their respective elections. If these Republican candidates lose, we could easily see a state-level repeat of Trump's attempts to overturn the election he lost; if these Republican candidates win, however, then they could use their positions to further attack and damage America's democratic institutions. Doug Mastriano, the Republican nominee for Pennsylvania governor and participant in the January 6th attack on the United States Capitol, has already stated that he will decertify voting machines and appoint a secretary of state that will prevent elections from being certified should Mastriano not like the outcome.

Although Donald Trump failed to overturn the 2020 presidential election and keep himself in power, the conspiracies he spread trying to do so have already caused great harm to American

democracy. By spreading his Big Lie, Trump eroded the confidence in America's electoral system for many of his supporters, leading them to not only doubt the integrity of American elections but also mistrust those who run them. As an election official, I've seen this consequence of the Big Lie first-hand, and as an American, I'm concerned about the threat to America's entire electoral system the Big Lie presents.