THE LONG FUSE:

MISINFORMATION AND THE 2020 ELECTION

ELECTION INTEGRITY PARTNERSHIP

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The Election Integrity Partnership

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Executive Summary

On January 6, 2021, an armed mob stormed the US Capitol to prevent the certification of what they claimed was a "fraudulent election." Many Americans were shocked, but they needn't have been. The January 6 insurrection was the culmination of months of online mis- and disinformation directed toward eroding American faith in the 2020 election.

US elections are decentralized: almost 10,000 state and local election offices are primarily responsible for the operation of elections. Dozens of federal agencies support this effort, including the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) within the Department of Homeland Security, the United States Election Assistance Commission (EAC), the FBI, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Defense. However, none of these federal agencies has a focus on, or authority regarding, election misinformation originating from domestic sources within the United States. This limited federal role reveals a critical gap for non-governmental entities to fill. Increasingly pervasive mis- and disinformation, both foreign and domestic, creates an urgent need for collaboration across government, civil society, media, and social media platforms.

The Election Integrity Partnership, comprising organizations that specialize in understanding those information dynamics, aimed to create a model for whole-of-society collaboration and facilitate cooperation among partners dedicated to a free and fair election. With the narrow aim of defending the 2020 election against voting-related mis- and disinformation, it bridged the gap between government and civil society, helped to strengthen platform standards for combating election-related misinformation, and shared its findings with its stakeholders, media, and the American public. This report details our process and findings, and provides recommendations for future actions.

Who We Are: EIP and Its Members

The Election Integrity Partnership was formed to enable real-time information exchange between election officials, government agencies, civil society organizations, social media platforms, the media, and the research community.[1] It aimed to identify and analyze online mis- and disinformation, and to communicate important findings across stakeholders. It represented a novel collaboration between four of the nation's leading institutions focused on researching mis- and disinformation in the social media landscape:

- The Stanford Internet Observatory (SIO)
- The University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public (CIP)
- Graphika
- The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)

What We Did

The EIP's primary goals were to: (1) identify mis- and disinformation before it went viral and during viral outbreaks, (2) share clear and accurate counter-messaging, and (3) document the specific misinformation actors, transmission pathways, narrative evolutions, and information infrastructures that enabled these narratives to propagate. To identify the scope of our work, we built a framework to compare the policies of 15 social media platforms[2] across four categories:

- *Procedural interference*: misinformation related to actual election procedures
- *Participation interference*: content that includes intimidation to personal safety or deterrence to participation in the election process
- *Fraud*: content that encourages people to misrepresent themselves to affect the electoral process or illegally cast or destroy ballots
- *Delegitimization of election results*: content aiming to delegitimize election results on the basis of false or misleading claims

The EIP used an innovative internal research structure that leveraged the capabilities of the partner organizations through a tiered analysis model based on "tickets" collected internally and from our external stakeholders. Of the tickets we processed, 72% were related to delegitimization of the election.

Key Takeaways

Misleading and false claims and narratives coalesced into the meta-narrative of a "stolen election," which later propelled the January 6 insurrection.

- Right-leaning "blue-check" influencers transformed one-off stories, sometimes based on honest voter concerns or genuine misunderstandings, into cohesive narratives of systemic election fraud.
- Warped stories frequently centered on mail-in voting and accusations of found, discarded, or destroyed ballots, particularly in swing states. Misleading framing of real-world incidents often took the form of falsely assigning intent, exaggerating impact, falsely framing the date, or altering locale.
- The meta-narrative of a "stolen election" coalesced into the #StopTheSteal movement, encompassing many of the previous narratives. The narrative appeared across platforms and quickly inspired online organizing and offline protests, leading ultimately to the January 6 rally at the White House and the insurrection at the Capitol.
- Fact-checking of narratives had mixed results; non-falsifiable narratives presented a particular challenge. In some cases, social media platform fact-checks risked drawing further attention to the claims they sought to debunk.

The production and spread of misinformation was multidirectional and participatory.

- Individuals participated in the creation and spread of narratives. Bottom-up false and misleading narratives started with individuals identifying real-world or one-off incidents and posting them to social media. Influencers and hyperpartisan media leveraged this grassroots content, assembling it into overarching narratives about fraud, and disseminating it across platforms to their large audiences. Mass media often picked up these stories after they had reached a critical mass of engagement.
- Top-down mis- and disinformation moved in the opposite direction, with claims first made by prominent political operatives and influencers, often on mass media, which were then discussed and shared by people across social media properties.

Narrative spread was cross-platform: repeat spreaders leveraged the specific features of each platform for maximum amplification.

- The cross-platform nature of misinformation content and narrative spread limited the efficacy of any single platform's response.
- Smaller, niche, and hyperpartisan platforms, which were often less moderated or completely unmoderated, hosted and discussed content that had been moderated elsewhere. Parler in particular saw a remarkable increase in its active user base, as users rejected the "censorship" they perceived on other platforms.

The primary repeat spreaders of false and misleading narratives were verified, blue-check accounts belonging to partisan media outlets, social media influencers, and political figures, including President Trump and his family.

- These repeat spreaders amplified the majority of the investigated incidents aggressively across multiple platforms.
- Repeat spreaders often promoted and spread each others' content. Once content from misleading narratives entered this network, it spread quickly across the overlapping audiences.

Many platforms expanded their election-related policies during the 2020 election cycle. However, application of moderation policies was inconsistent or unclear.

- Platforms took action against policy violations by suspending users or removing content, downranking or preventing content sharing, and applying informational labels. However, moderation efforts were applied inconsistently on and across platforms, and policy language and updates were often unclear.
- Account suspensions and content removal or labeling sometimes contributed to conspiratorial narratives that platforms were "covering up the truth," entangling platforms with the narratives they wished to eliminate.
- Lack of transparency and access to platform APIs hindered external research into the effectiveness of platform policies and interventions.

Key Recommendations

Federal Government

- Establish clear authorities and roles for identifying and countering election related mis- and disinformation. Build on the federal interagency movement toward recognizing elections as a national security priority and critical infrastructure.
- Create clear standards for consistent disclosures of mis- and disinformation from foreign and domestic sources as a core function of facilitating free and fair elections, including via CISA's Rumor Control and joint interagency statements.

Congress

- Pass existing bipartisan proposals for increased appropriations marked for federal and state election security.
- Codify the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's bipartisan recommendations related to the depoliticization of election security and the behavior of public officials and candidates for federal office noted in Volumes 3 and 5 of the Committee's report on foreign influence in 2016 elections.

State and Local Officials

- Establish trusted channels of communication with voters. This should include a .gov website and use of both traditional and social media.
- Ensure that all votes cast are on auditable paper records and that efficient, effective, and transparent post-election audits are conducted after each election.

Platforms

- Provide proactive information regarding anticipated election misinformation. For example, if researchers expect a narrative will emerge, platforms should explain that narrative's history or provide fact-checks or context related to its prior iterations.
- Invest in research into the efficacy of internal policy interventions (such as labeling) and share those results with external researchers, civil society, and the public.

- Increase the amount and granularity of data regarding interventions, takedowns, and labeling to allow for independent analysis of the efficacy of these policies.
- Impose clear consequences for accounts that repeatedly violate platform policies. These accounts could be placed on explicit probationary status, facing a mixture of monitoring and sanctions.
- Prioritize election officials' efforts to educate voters within their jurisdiction and respond to misinformation. This could include the promotion of content from election officials through curation or advertisement credits, especially in the lead-up to Election Day.

Conclusion

The 2020 election demonstrated that actors—both foreign and domestic—remain committed to weaponizing viral false and misleading narratives to undermine confidence in the US electoral system and erode Americans' faith in our democracy. Mis- and disinformation were pervasive throughout the campaign, the election, and its aftermath, spreading across all social platforms. The Election Integrity Partnership was formed out of a recognition that the vulnerabilities in the current information environment require urgent collective action.

While the Partnership was intended to meet an immediate need, the conditions that necessitated its creation have not abated, and in fact may have worsened. Academia, platforms, civil society, and all levels of government must be committed, in their own ways, to truth in the service of a free and open society. All stakeholders must focus on predicting and pre-bunking false narratives, detecting mis- and disinformation as it occurs, and countering it whenever appropriate.

Notes

1. (page vi) "Announcing the EIP," Election Integrity Partnership, July 27, 2020, https://www.eipartnership.net/news/announcing-the-eip

2. (page vi) The platforms evaluated during EIP's operation include: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Nextdoor, TikTok, Snapchat, Parler, Gab, Discord, WhatsApp, Telegram, Reddit, and Twitch. Twitch was added to our list during our blog post update in October.

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https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/annual-report-2019-2020-shaping-the-global-future-together/

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Chapter 1

The Election Integrity Partnership

1.1 Introduction

The 2016 presidential election in the United States demonstrated to the world the potential of wide-scale information operations. Since 2016, these efforts have grown, often aimed at developed democracies and operated by state-sponsored adversaries and domestic activists alike. Misinformation and disinformation can disenfranchise voters and diminish trust in the results of electoral contests, eroding public confidence in the integrity of democratic processes and leadership transitions overall. For the purposes of this report, we use "misinformation" as an umbrella term to describe false, misleading, or exaggerated information or claims. We differentiate this from "disinformation," which is false or misleading information that is *purposefully* produced, seeded, or spread, with the intent to manipulate in service to an objective; the manipulation may also take the form of leveraging fake accounts or pages. (We define these terms more fully in Appendix A on page 245: Definitions).

Elections in the United States are highly decentralized.[1] Over 10,000 individual jurisdictions—covering state, county, and municipal levels—are responsible for administering the vote on Election Day. Voter registration systems and databases are centralized at the state level in some states and administered by states, counties, and municipalities in others. Vote casting, in contrast, is organized at the local level, with each locality responsible for administering ballots, counting votes, and educating voters about the local system.[2] There is no centralized support to aid this vast number of jurisdictions in identifying and responding to emerging election-related mis- and disinformation.

In 2020, adding to the complexity, the global COVID-19 pandemic forced rapid changes to voting procedures. States and counties had to quickly adapt their electoral processes to new public health guidelines. Existing state laws on elec-

tion procedure were in many cases not adaptable to the emergency conditions, leading to late executive and legislative action and court decisions.[3]

Voters, many of whom were sheltering at home, followed election conversations on broadcast as well as social media. This included searching for information about where and how to vote in light of pandemic restrictions.

The initial idea for the Partnership came from four students that the Stanford Internet Observatory (SIO) funded to complete volunteer internships at the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) at the Department of Homeland Security. Responsibility for election information security is divided across government offices: CISA has authority to coordinate on cybersecurity issues related to the election, the FBI to investigate cyber incidents and enforce election laws, and intelligence agencies to monitor for foreign interference. Yet, no government agency in the United States has the explicit mandate to monitor and correct election mis- and disinformation. This is especially true for election disinformation that originates from within the United States, which would likely be excluded from law enforcement action under the First Amendment and not appropriate for study by intelligence agencies restricted from operating inside the United States. As a result, during the 2020 election, local and state election officials, who had a strong partner on election-system and overall cybersecurity efforts in CISA, were without a clearinghouse for assessing mis- and disinformation targeting their voting operations. The students approached SIO leadership in the early summer, and, in consultation with CISA and other stakeholders, a coalition was assembled with like-minded partner institutions.

The Election Integrity Partnership (EIP) was officially formed on July 26, 2020—100 days before the November election—as a coalition of research entities who would focus on supporting real-time information exchange between the research community, election officials, government agencies, civil society organizations, and social media platforms.

1.2 The EIP: Partner Organizations and Structure

The Partnership was formed between four of the nation's leading institutions focused on understanding misinformation and disinformation in the social media landscape: the Stanford Internet Observatory, the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public, Graphika, and the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab.

The **Stanford Internet Observatory** (SIO) was founded in June 2019 to study the misuse of the internet to cause harm, formulate technical and policy responses to said misuse, and teach the next generation how to avoid the mistakes of the past. Founded by former Silicon Valley cybersecurity executive Alex Stamos, the

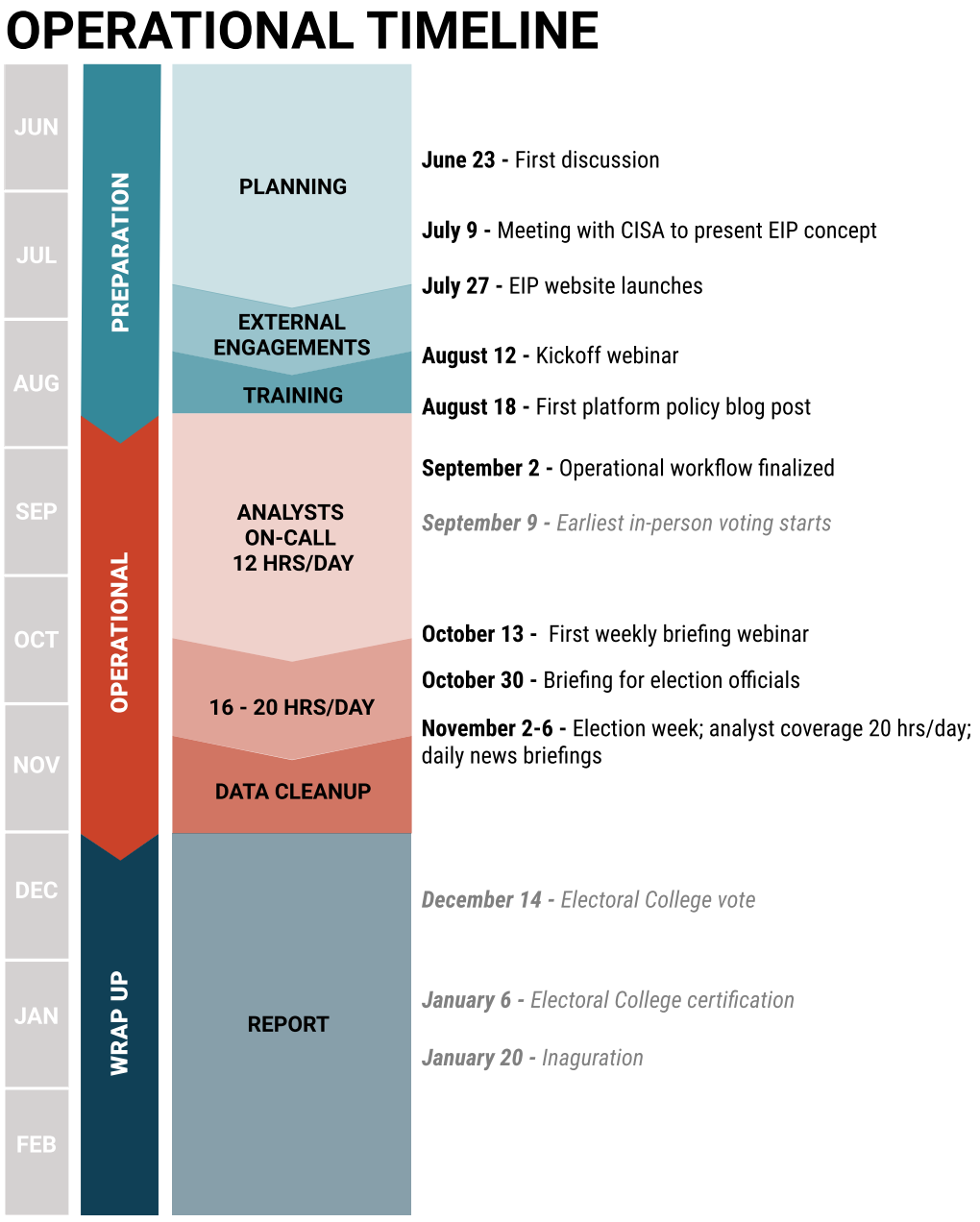


Figure 1.1: Timeline of the Election Integrity Partnership's work.

Observatory has a specific interest in applying the learnings of major technology platforms from the 2016 election to prevent a repeat in future years. The Observatory sits at Stanford's Cyber Policy Center under the direction of Professors Nate Persily and Dan Boneh.

The Internet Observatory team was led by Assistant Director Elena Cryst, Research Manager Renée DiResta, CTO David Thiel, and Director Alex Stamos. SIO graduate student Isabella García-Camargo served as the project manager for the overall Partnership. SIO engaged its team of seven staff researchers and five postdoctoral scholars from the Stanford Cyber Policy Center, and hired a team of 38 undergraduate and graduate research assistants from Stanford to serve as analysts on the project.

The **University of Washington Center for an Informed Public** (CIP) was founded in December 2019 with the mission of marshalling the resources of a public university to address mis- and disinformation through research, education, policy development, and outreach. The Center's interdisciplinary faculty brought deep methodological expertise at systematically analyzing "big" social data at macro-, meso-, and micro- scales to track the spread of misinformation online, and contextual expertise in online disinformation.

The CIP contributing team was led by three founding faculty members: Kate Starbird, Emma Spiro, and Jevin West. The team also included one affiliate faculty member, three postdoctoral researchers (all of whom started after the Partnership launched), nine undergraduate and PhD students from the University of Washington, a data engineer, and a communications specialist.

Graphika is a social media analytics firm trusted by Fortune 500 companies, human rights organizations, and universities to map and navigate complex social media landscapes. The company was founded in 2013 by Dr. John Kelly, a pioneer in this field and source of expert testimony on foreign interference in the 2016 US presidential election before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Graphika helps partners around the world to discover how communities form online and map the flow of influence and information within large-scale social networks. It reports on information operations carried out by various foreign actors around the world. In addition, Graphika regularly briefs the House and Senate Intelligence Committees on a range of topics, including the growth of the QAnon movement and the spread of misinformation around COVID-19.

Graphika's team was led by their Chief Innovation Officer Camille François and Head of Analysis Melanie Smith, and included 13 analysts, data scientists, and open source investigators. This unique combination of skills and expertise enables Graphika to take an innovative approach to detecting and monitoring disinformation.

The **Digital Forensic Research Lab** (DFRLab) was founded at the Atlantic Council

in 2016 to operationalize the study of disinformation by exposing falsehoods and fake news, documenting human rights abuses, and building digital resilience worldwide. Its mission is to identify, expose, and explain disinformation where and when it occurs using open source research, create a new model of expertise adapted for impact and real-world results, and forge digital resilience at a time when humans are more interconnected than at any point in history.

DFRLab's contributing team was led by Director Graham Brookie and Resident Fellow Emerson Brooking and included 13 DFRLab research assistants and communications staff. These professionals brought extensive digital forensic research experience and language skills to the work of the Partnership.

The EIP was not set up as a legal entity; rather, it was a consortium based on good-faith agreements. While future models should certainly consider more formal arrangements, the time-sensitive nature of the project required organizations to rely on interinstitutional trust and rapport built over several years of collaboration.

1.3 The EIP: Goals and Scope

The stated objective of the EIP was to detect and mitigate the impact of attempts to prevent or deter people from voting or to delegitimize election results.[4] The EIP was not a fact-checking partnership, and was not focused on debunking misinformation more generally; our objective explicitly excluded addressing comments made about candidates' character or actions and was focused narrowly on content intended to suppress voting, reduce participation, confuse voters as to election processes, or delegitimize election results without evidence (see Table 1.1 on the next page).

To determine what was in and out of scope for the EIP, one of our first tasks was to build a framework that identified potential types of election-related mis- and disinformation. This process identified four core categories that we defined as our scope of focus (see Table 1.2 on page 7).

GOALS OF THE ELECTION INTEGRITY PARTNERSHIP		
Goal 1: **Identify misinformation** before it goes viral.	Goal 2: Share clear, accurate **counter-messaging**.	Goal 3: Increase **transparency** into what happened during the 2020 elections.
Activities		
• Establish a collaboration between the top misinformation research organizations • Operationalize the misinformation research process with tiered research and workspace management systems • Train analysts to identify cross-platform trends for earlier platform notification and action when appropriate	• Build critical bridges between election officials, platforms, and civil society organizations • Provide local and state officials with a partner that could research and help mitigate misinformation about their local operations • Generate rapid research findings that have the ability to disrupt the misinformation environment in real time	• Collect data in real-time for empirical analysis that would be difficult to assemble after the fact • Build an annotated database of archived misinformation content • Provide visibility into how narratives spread across multiple social media platforms
Outputs		
• Flag policy violations to platforms • Communicate to stakeholders	• Live media briefings • Blog posts • Tweet threads	• Final report • Dataset of content for future academic use

Table 1.1: Goals of the Election Integrity Partnership.

SCOPE OF THE ELECTION INTEGRITY PARTNERSHIP			
Procedural Interference: Misleading or false information about the actual election procedures. Content directly related to dates and components of the voting process that prevents people from engaging in the electoral process.	**Participation Interference:** Content that deters people from voting or engaging in the electoral process, sometimes related to voter suppression or intimidation.	**Fraud:** Content that encourages people to misrepresent themselves to affect the electoral process or illegally cast or destroy ballots.	**Delegitimization of Election Results:** Content that delegitimizes election results on the basis of false or misleading claims.
Example Content			
Content that misleads voters about how to correctly sign a mail-in ballot. Content that encourages voters to vote on a different day.	Content that affects the desire or perceived safety of voters engaging in the electoral process. Misleading or false information about the length of lines at a polling station, to deter in-person voting.	Offers to buy or sell votes with cash or gifts. Calls for non-citizens to vote.	Claims of fraud or malfeasance with inaccurate or missing evidence.

Table 1.2: Scope of the Election Integrity Partnership.

In addition to determining the EIP's scope, this content-centric framework enabled us to evaluate and compare platform policies across 15 different popular social media platforms in the US, and to help civil society, government, academia, and the public better understand what election-related content platforms can and will moderate.[5]

Organizational Structure and Workflow Management

One of the innovative aspects of the EIP was its internal research structure, which had to operationalize the misinformation research process in such a way as to best leverage the capabilities of the partner organizations. There is often an abundance of data involved in the analysis of information operations, and the process of following threads can take weeks or months. In order to meet the need for real-time or rapid analysis while maintaining the high standard of investigations that each partner holds itself to, the Partnership developed a tiered analysis model that leveraged "on-call" staffing of different analyst types.

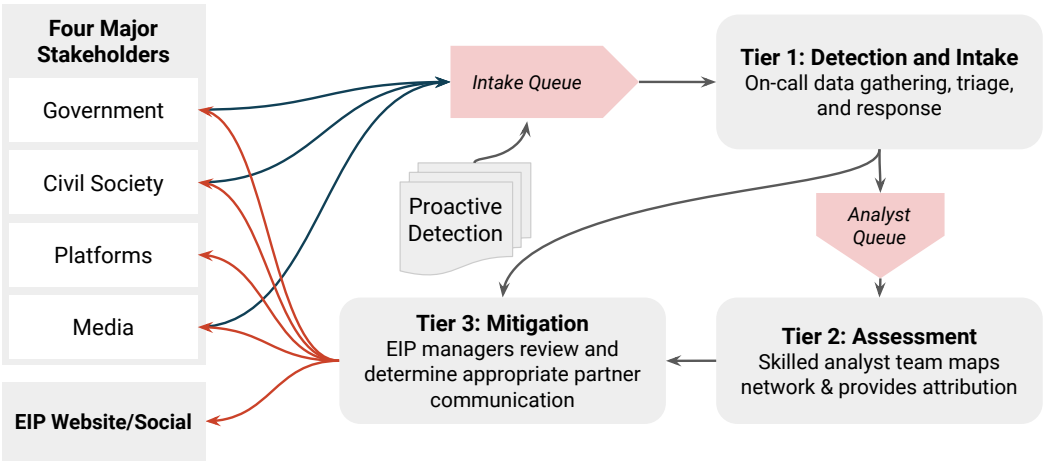


Figure 1.2: The EIP internal workflow. Filed tickets moved through the listed queues per the directional arrows.

The EIP tracked its analysis topics and engaged with outside stakeholder organizations using an internal ticketing workflow management system. Each identified informational event was filed as a unique ticket in the system.[6] Tickets were submitted by both trusted external stakeholders (detailed in Section 1.4 on page 11) and internal EIP analysts. For example, an email from an external stakeholder to the dedicated tip line would automatically generate a ticket to the internal team for quick response. Similarly, if during online monitoring an analyst came across a piece of content that might be an instance of election-related misinformation, that analyst would open a ticket on the case and put it

in the analyst queue for investigation. A single ticket could map to one piece of content, an idea or narrative, or hundreds of URLs pulled in a data dump. The ticket tracked analysts' research into this event, comments from platform partners, and other developments. Related tickets were then grouped into distinct information events or incidents, described more in Chapter 5.[7]

Analysis Tiers

Each ticket traveled through a series of analysis queues before reaching a final resolution. In the investigation process, analysts completed specific forms that contained a series of required fields detailing the information incident and documented essential data such as target audience, subject, engagement, and spread. The overall research process was broken down into three phases: detection, assessment, and mitigation.

- **Tier 1: Detection** — Tier 1 analysts were tasked with conducting the initial analysis on and archiving of potential incidents. These analysts also searched for potential in-scope content by tracking public social media posts to surface incidents. To ensure coverage in the monitoring process, each analyst was assigned to a specific state or interest group (see Section 3.3), which they developed expertise in and followed throughout the project. These analysts classified tickets as in and out of scope for further analysis and closed incidents for which further investigation or external communication was not needed. For in-scope tickets, analysts went through a systematic process that attempted—where possible—to assess the veracity of the underlying claims by locating an external fact-check from election officials, fact-checking organizations, local media, or mainstream outlets. They also made initial recommendations on the prioritization of tickets, assigning high, medium, and low severity based on the risk of the content itself and on its spread across platforms.[8]
- **Tier 2: Assessment** — This team was staffed by senior analysts from each partner organization. Analysts used open source intelligence and other social media analysis methods to delve deeper into the initial analysis from Tier 1 by determining the suspected origins of a piece of information, tracking its spread over time, and identifying additional fact-checks as they became available. Tier 2 analysts also looked for evidence of coordination, potential foreign interference, or inauthentic dynamics related to a given incident. This tier of analysts could recommend actions, such as communication to external partners, as appropriate.
- **Tier 3 (Managers): Mitigation** — This team consisted of leadership from each partnership organization, who signed off on the communication recommendations from Tier 2 senior analysts. The manager had the ability

to tag platform partners on a ticket for action. They also communicated with the EIP's partners in government, and could request further information from election officials if necessary. Once a ticket reached Tier 3, the manager decided whether to put it into a holding queue for ongoing monitoring, assign the ticket back to a Tier 2 analyst to produce a public blog post or Twitter thread discussing the issue, or close a ticket if it had been resolved.

Team members from each of these tiers were divided into on-call shifts. Each shift was four hours long and led by one on-call manager. It was staffed by a mix of Tier 1 and Tier 2 analysts in a 3:1 ratio, ranging from five to 20 people. Analysts were expected to complete between two to five shifts per week. The scheduled shifts ran from 8:00 am to 8:00 pm PT for most of the nine weeks of the partnership, ramping up only in the last week before the election from 12-hour to 16- to 20-hour days with all 120 analysts on deck.

A note on fact-checking: the EIP was not a fact-checking organization, and in preliminary assessments of whether an event in a ticket was potentially misinformation, analysts first looked to the work of others. One of the complexities related to misleading information is that it is not always possible to verify the claims; professional fact-checkers confronted with these situations may use labels like "inconclusive" or "partially true" to convey uncertainty where it exists. Where possible, our analysts identified an external fact-checking source from news sites, credible fact-checking organizations, or statements from a local election official when filing tickets. Analysts also used open source investigation techniques, such as reverse image searches or location identifications, to determine if images or videos tied to an incident were taken out of their original context. Our analysts identified at least one external fact-check source for approximately 42% of the in-scope tickets. For some tickets, it was not possible to find an external fact-check for the content, either because no fact-checker had yet addressed the issue, or because the information was resistant to simple verification—for example, content based on unconfirmed or conflicting claims from a whistleblower, conspiracy theories that claimed invisible forces at work, and narratives based on factual claims (e.g., discarded ballots) but spread within misleading frames that exaggerated the potential impact of these events. Additionally, some tickets were about incitement to violence, which does not lend itself to fact-checking.

Election Day-Specific Structures

In the week before and after Election Day, EIP monitoring intensified significantly. Over the two-month-long period from September 3 (the first day of EIP activity) to November 1, EIP researchers had logged 269 tickets. From November 2 to 4,

EIP researchers logged an additional 240 new tickets, as well as monitoring and revising old cases as they related to new narratives. This dramatic increase in tempo required changes to how the EIP identified and evaluated misinformation incidents.

In order to manage an anticipated increase in incidents on Election Day itself, the EIP established five working groups, each organized and led by relevant subject matter experts:

- *State and Regional Monitoring* focused on monitoring narratives related to polling locations in battleground states, particularly Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Florida, and Minnesota. Analysts used platform search features coupled with curated CrowdTangle, Twitter, and Junkipedia lists to aid in detection.
- "*Targeted Group*" *Monitoring* focused on identifying misinformation that seemed to specifically target an ethnic or diaspora community in the United States. This included content targeting the Black community, which was the subject of extensive disinformation campaigns in 2016, as well as Chinese- and Spanish-language content.
- *Influencers and Young Electorate Monitoring* focused on first-time voters, particularly members of Generation Z. This work was conducted by way of close analysis of TikTok and Instagram trends.
- *Political Extremism Monitoring* focused on communities that had previously endorsed political violence, particularly those adjacent to White-identitarian causes. This work was conducted by comprehensive monitoring across 4chan, 8kun, Gab, and Parler. Researchers additionally monitored open Telegram channels and Discord servers linked to extremist causes.
- *Livestream Monitoring* focused on rapidly identifying trending livestreams, which were anticipated to involve both polling location activity and (later) election night protests. This work required assessing popular livestreams across Facebook Live, Periscope, YouTube Live, and Twitch.

These working groups would provide the foundation of EIP monitoring efforts in both the Election Day and post-Election Day periods.

1.4 External Stakeholders

The EIP served as a connector for many stakeholders, who both provided inputs to and received outputs from the internal analysis structure described

above. External stakeholders included government, civil society, social media companies, and news media entities.

Government and civil society partners could create tickets or send notes to EIP analysts, and they used these procedures to flag incidents or emerging narratives to be assessed by EIP analysts. Sometimes the tickets were out of scope, such as those related to general political misinformation that was not election related. In these cases, that was communicated to the reporting partner and the incident was closed. For all that were in scope, the EIP quickly analyzed the issues and provided outputs to external stakeholders. Some of the cases flagged by outside partners led to EIP participation in informing the public of a finding, which was done by way of a rapid-response blog post or Twitter thread, or a discussion during public media briefings.

Figure 1.3: Major stakeholder groups that collaborated with the EIP.

Government

Given the decentralized nature of election administration, government entities at the local, state, and federal level are all responsible in some way for election security and thus for countering election-related mis- and disinformation.

Prior to the 2016 election, the federal government played a very limited role in election security. Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election took the form of several Russia-linked entities engaged in a broad interference effort that included information operations and targeting of election infrastructure as well as hack-and-leak attacks. Operatives of the Russia-based Internet Research Agency used social media to degrade Americans' confidence in their own

democratic process. Since 2016, the US government has declared election systems critical infrastructure and politicians have called for a "whole-of-society" approach to countering attacks against them.[9]

EI-ISAC: Coordination Across State And Local Government

After the 2016 election, government entities at all levels stepped up election security efforts; however, addressing election-related misinformation has remained a gap. For the 2020 election, reporting falsehoods about the election to social media platforms represented significant logistical and jurisdictional challenges. The Election Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center (EI-ISAC), an independent organization run by the non-profit Center for Internet Security (CIS) that connects state and local governments as well as relevant private companies, helps coordinate election security efforts broadly. In this election cycle, the EI-ISAC served as a singular conduit for election officials to report false or misleading information to platforms. By serving as a one-stop reporting interface, the EI-ISAC allowed election officials to focus on detecting and countering election misinformation while CIS and its partners reported content to the proper social media platforms. Additionally, the Countering Foreign Influence Task Force (CFITF), a subcomponent of CISA, aided in the reporting process and in implementing resilience efforts to counter election misinformation.

The EIP engaged with government stakeholders primarily to provide analytical capability and context around election-related misinformation. Content reported by election officials to the EI-ISAC was also routed to the EIP ticketing system. This allowed analysts to find similar content, ascribe individual content pieces to broader narratives, and determine virality and cross-platform spread if applicable. This analysis was then passed back to election officials via the EI-ISAC for their situational awareness, as well as to inform potential counter-narratives. Additionally, if an internally generated EIP ticket targeted a particular region, analysts sent a short write-up to the EI-ISAC to share with the relevant election official. This allowed the state or local official to verify or refute the claim, and enabled analysts to properly assess whether or not the content violated a platform's civic integrity policies. In this way, the EIP demonstrated the upside of using the EI-ISAC coordinating body to connect platforms with authoritative voices to determine truth on the ground and help election officials effectively counter viral falsehoods about election infrastructure.

Civil Society

Civil society organizations fill critical roles in promoting civic engagement, and in organizing and sharing information with their communities. The EIP engaged

with civil society organizations to share findings and build perspective across geographies and demographics. Civil society collaborators submitted tips through the trusted partner tip line and interacted with the EIP research team through briefings, partner meetings, and shared findings. The Partnership engaged with Common Cause,[10] national and regional chapters of the NAACP,[11] the Healthy Elections Project,[12] the Defending Digital Democracy Project,[13] MITRE,[14] regional chapters of the AARP,[15] and the National Conference on Citizenship[16] (the latter two are discussed in more detail below). Some collaborators were integrated into the Jira platform for tip reporting, while others preferred to engage in a more informal capacity such as via email. Onboarded members were able to submit tickets for analysis and receive feedback from the EIP analysts.

The AARP collaboration was maintained by the Center for an Informed Public and was notable because it involved empowering and training retired adults to identify false or misleading information as part of a "Factcheck Ambassador" training program. The EIP worked primarily with the Washington State chapter of the AARP, but informational training sessions were shared with other chapters around the country.[17]

Another noteworthy civil society partner was the National Conference on Citizenship, specifically their Junkipedia team.[18] Junkipedia is a research tool created by the Algorithmic Transparency Institute, a project of the National Conference on Citizenship, to collect false and misleading social media content. The tool served dual purposes: first, it connected EIP to content surfaced through its own network of journalists and reporters, providing visibility into more geographies and communities; and second, it facilitated research and detection by EIP analysts, who were able to use Junkipedia's list feature to track account activity on TikTok and YouTube.

Media

Carefully considered media coverage debunking false and misleading information can help to ensure an informed public and a responsible social media ecosystem. Although mis- and disinformation monitoring and analysis work is valuable on its own, communications with media organizations increased the impact of the EIP's research. The EIP's rapid-response research and analysis work necessitated an adaptive, rapid-response communications strategy in order to share timely insights and key mis- and disinformation concepts with journalists and news outlets. One goal was to ensure that misleading narratives were appropriately contextualized in terms of their reach and velocity, to avoid unnecessarily amplifying something false but very sparse. Investigating and reporting on mis- and disinformation is complex and comes with unique challenges.[19] The EIP held regular news briefings in which analysts and team leads prioritized describing and contextualizing the misinformation incidents

documented in tickets. Journalists who attended the briefings could then reach, educate, and inform the communities they served, contextualizing and countering misleading narratives as they saw fit. Over the time of the EIP's operation, this process resulted in over 60 articles that specifically cited the EIP's work or its researchers.[20]

A thoughtful media strategy was key to our reach and impact as an organization. We met the needs of media stakeholders in three primary ways—public research briefings, responding to media requests, and in-depth collaborations.

Public Research Briefings

On October 13, 2020, the EIP hosted the first in a series of weekly research briefings designed to share the Partnership's rapid-response research and policy analysis more broadly ahead of Election Day. Before each briefing, the EIP used its Twitter account, @2020Partnership, to announce the briefing and promote attendance. These briefings, scheduled for 30 minutes, were hosted virtually on Zoom and featured short presentations from various EIP researchers and analysts. Each briefing reserved time for members of news organizations to ask questions of researchers involved with the Partnership. The briefings were considered "on the record," meaning that anything shared or said during the course of the presentations or from the question-and-answer session could be used and directly quoted from by journalists for their reporting. The Q&A format allowed EIP researchers and analysts to cover a lot of ground in a relatively short amount of time while also allowing journalists to gain additional insights from the other questions asked by reporters from other news organizations. As interest in the EIP's work grew and reports of false and misleading information increased dramatically in the days leading up to the election, briefings increased from once a week to several times a week.

The briefings were open to the public. The first briefing hosted approximately 12 journalists, but as interest grew, so did briefing attendance, with an average of 120 attendees on election week briefings and a peak of 174 attendees at the briefing the day after the election. After each briefing, the EIP communications lead followed up with journalists in attendance.

On Election Day, the EIP hosted a morning and afternoon briefing to report on observations of activity that day. Reporters and editors from outlets including the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *MIT Tech Review*, *Bloomberg Business*, the Associated Press, Reuters, National Public Radio, *Politico*, NBC News, The Markup, The Information, PBS NewsHour, BBC News, Agence France Presse, the *Telegraph*, and Cyberscoop regularly attended.

Responding to Media Requests

Throughout the course of the EIP's work ahead of and after Election Day, our communications lead also fielded inbound requests from the press to assist in assessing specific developing stories. Some of these journalists were dedicated to the "misinformation beat," while others covered peripheral beats such as the election, politics, technology, etc.

The UW team took the lead in tracking and responding to media requests that came in across the Partnership and connecting with the appropriate EIP researcher. For instance, journalists interested in misinformation-related policies developed by social media companies were directed to Stanford Internet Observatory, which closely monitored and analyzed guidelines put forward by platforms. Similarly, journalists interested in EIP research about "repeat spreaders" on Twitter who regularly shared false claims or misleading information about voting procedures were connected with members of the UW team, who were tracking and analyzing how that type of misinformation was shared and amplified.

In-Depth Collaborations

In the days leading up to the election, the EIP set up collaborations with a few journalists who had experience covering the "misinformation beat." These differed from media requests in the length of engagement; in these cases, we set up Slack channels and Google documents to think through trends and emerging data with the journalists, who were also experts in online misinformation. For instance, the UW team fielded more specialized research requests from NBC News, which has dedicated numerous newsroom resources to reporting on mis- and disinformation issues. NBC's Brandy Zadrozny did some of the most substantive reporting on election-related mis- and disinformation ahead of and after Election Day, bolstered by some of the EIP's specialized research. Her election week story about election fraud narratives was driven by this in-depth collaboration.[21] Sheera Frenkel of the *New York Times* spent Election Day co-located with EIP researchers from the Stanford Internet Observatory, with COVID-19 precautions in place. She published an early piece about the emerging "Stop the Steal" narrative, with quotations from an SIO researcher.[22]

The EIP also spent time assisting a local journalist writing specifically about election misinformation in Michigan for the *Detroit Free Press*, whose reporting was funded through a short-term grant from the American Press Institute. The reporter, Ashley Nerbovig, attended numerous research briefings ahead of Election Day and was interested in the EIP's "What to Expect" report that outlined the types of disinformation and misinformation that researchers anticipated would emerge and take root before, during, and after Election Day.[23] A November 17, 2020, article in the *Detroit Free Press* looked at how many of the

EIP's pre-election predictions around voting-specific misinformation emerged in Michigan, where incorrect claims and distorted narratives ran rampant in the days and weeks that followed voting.[24] That *Detroit Free Press* article, featuring interviews with EIP researchers, was republished by *USA Today*[25] and other news publications in the USA Today Network, including the *Arizona Republic*. Although many national newsrooms have one or multiple journalists focused on misinformation, Nerbovig was among the few regional reporters dedicated to covering misinformation from a local perspective, which encouraged us to make researchers available to her as she developed her story.

The EIP's outreach efforts with journalists and media organizations were valuable because they enabled timely sharing of insights and in-depth analysis with the public, policymakers, and social media platforms. During uncertain times, many people turn to journalists. At the same time, journalists themselves were seeking sound information to better contextualize the dynamics of how mis- and disinformation are shared and amplified. By connecting journalists to our research through these media efforts, the EIP was able to have a quick and widespread impact.

Platforms

The EIP established relationships with social media platforms to facilitate flagging of incidents for evaluation when content or behavior appeared to violate platform policies (discussed further in Chapter 6). The EIP reached out to a wide set of social media platforms to engage with the project, and onboarded those that expressed interest in participating. At the start of the EIP analysis period, representatives from the onboarded platforms were granted access to the workspace management system. Analysts conducted their initial assessment on all tickets, and, if content in a ticket appeared to be a violation of a platform's published content policies,[26] an analyst or manager added the platform representative to the ticket. If questions arose, a manager communicated with the platform representative in the ticket comments. Analysts put the ticket back in the queue and updated the ticket to note if the content in question received a moderation action. If analysts identified the content on a ticket as in scope, but not in violation of a platform's published policies, the platform was not tagged.

The EIP onboarded the following social media companies: Facebook and Instagram, Google and YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, Reddit, Nextdoor, Discord, and Pinterest. These platforms were chosen based on several factors including the size of the platform itself, as well as the practical research constraints around the ability to monitor public content on the platform. A platform such as Snapchat, for example, has a large userbase; however, due to its ephemeral content, we did not include this platform in our work.

There were additionally several “alt-platforms” that had no moderation policies, sometimes deliberately so. This included platforms such as Parler, Gab, 4chan, and a handful of message boards. EIP observed false and misleading content on these platforms, but had no interactions with any of their representatives.

1.5 Example Ticket Process

To illustrate the scope of collaboration types discussed above, the following case study documents the value derived from the multistakeholder model that the EIP facilitated. On October 13, 2020, a civil society partner submitted a tip via their submission portal about well-intentioned but misleading information in a Facebook post. The post contained a screenshot (See Figure 1.4).

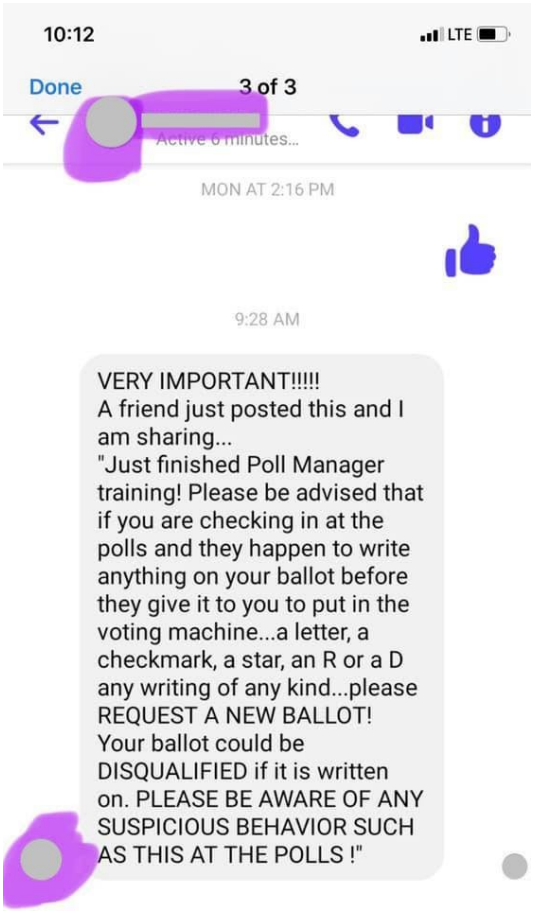


Figure 1.4: Image included in a tip from a civil society partner.

In their comments, the partner stated, “In some states, a mark is intended to denote a follow-up: this advice does not apply to every locality, and may

confuse people. A local board of elections has responded, but the meme is being copy/pasted all over Facebook from various sources." A Tier 1 analyst investigated the report, answering a set of standardized research questions, archiving the content, and appending their findings to the ticket. The analyst identified that the text content of the message had been copied and pasted verbatim by other users and on other platforms. The Tier 1 analyst routed the ticket to Tier 2, where the advanced analyst tagged the platform partners Facebook and Twitter, so that these teams were aware of the content and could independently evaluate the post against their policies. Recognizing the potential for this narrative to spread to multiple jurisdictions, the manager added in the CIS partner as well to provide visibility on this growing narrative and share the information on spread with their election official partners. The manager then routed the ticket to ongoing monitoring. A Tier 1 analyst tracked the ticket until all platform partners had responded, and then closed the ticket as resolved.

1.6 Practical Lessons Learned

The EIP was a first-of-its-kind collaboration between multiple stakeholder types who shared the goal of understanding, and being positioned to rapidly and effectively counter, election-related misinformation. There were several key lessons learned that may be helpful toward informing similar efforts in the future:

Pre-Election Period

1. **Detailed enumeration and comparison of platform policies led to tangible positive changes.** When the EIP was formed in the summer of 2020, no comprehensive comparison of policies around election-related misinformation, or civic integrity, had been published. One of the first efforts of the Partnership was to collect these policies and compare them side-by-side. That policy comparison improved the EIP's quality of content analysis and reporting.

2. **Pre-bunking helped journalists contextualize what they were seeing.** On October 26 the EIP published a blog post predicting the manner and focus of misinformation that its analysts and researchers believed were likely to pervade social media on Election Day and shortly after.[27] This piece was informed by experience from past elections, and observations accrued during the months of monitoring and analysis. Most of the predictions turned out to be accurate. This post, and the subsequent targeted stakeholders briefings around it, provided a rare opportunity to "pre-bunk" narratives

before they reached the mainstream. This sort of effort may be useful in effectively mitigating the effects of misinformation in the future.[28]

3. **Using per-content tickets to represent incidents presented challenges for tracking larger narratives.** As noted in this chapter, the EIP often started analysis by examining content on a very granular level—a ticket might initially represent a single social media post. On the positive side, this approach allowed for nimble Tier 1 analysis, and the Jira platform allowed for aggregation as needed. On the negative side, this approach made tracking narratives significantly more difficult, especially those dormant for a period of time before resurfacing in many online locations at once. Narratives usually spanned multiple types of content pieces across multiple platforms over a broad period of time. While the EIP analysts would eventually merge or link tickets into a broader narrative ticket, this process was labor intensive, and ran the risk of content data getting lost in the effort.

Election Day and Afterward

1. **Public briefings and one-on-one media engagement bolstered real-time information exchange, and helped educate and inform the public.** The EIP's media briefings were not originally a planned part of the effort. However, we found that they were of value for enabling journalists to contextualize observed events and trends and communicate them to the larger public.

2. **The cadence and resource demands of rapid analysis increased as the election cycle progressed, leading to challenges in the logistics of EIP research.** The members of the EIP span the mis- and disinformation research community, which has primarily focused on retrospective analysis. In contrast, demands of the EIP publication schedule represented a novel operational challenge for all organizations involved in a few key ways. First, the EIP analysis and a commitment to quick turnaround required drawing conclusions based on rapidly updating information. Second, the EIP's regular public briefings required updating conclusions and predictions in an episodic manner. Third, a COVID-shortened fall academic quarter for Stanford University and University of Washington student analysts made it challenging to synchronize work after the Thanksgiving break.

1.7 Reading This Report

This report—the conclusion to the Election Integrity Partnership's work—summarizes and details the Partnership's findings since its formation on July

26, 2020. Chapter 2 lays out the metrics and statistics from EIP's detection period, which are the foundation of further analysis. Chapter 3 examines the key false and misleading narratives that emerged and evolved over the course of the 2020 election and after, and Chapter 4 looks at the tactics used to spread the narratives across the information ecosystem. We take a broader perspective in Chapter 5, looking at "repeat spreaders"—individuals, organizations, and media entities that repeatedly promoted numerous false and misleading narratives. In Chapter 6, we review social media platforms' election-related policies and discuss how those policies matured over time and were applied. We conclude the report in Chapter 7 by providing policy recommendations, based on the findings of our work, to government entities, media outlets, platforms, and civil society organizations.

Notes

1. (page 1) Michael McFaul, ed., Securing American Elections: Prescriptions for Enhancing the Integrity and Independence of the 2020 U.S. Election and Beyond (Stanford, CA: Cyber Policy Center, June 2019), https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/stanford_cyber_policy_center-securing_american_elections.pdf

2. (page 1) Herbert Lin, et al., "Increasing the Security of the U.S. Election Infrastructure" in McFaul, Securing American Elections, 17.

3. (page 2) In Wisconsin, for example, federal district court judge William Conley ruled to extend the acceptance date of absentee ballots from November 3 to November 9, citing that "Wisconsin's election system sets [voters] up for failure in light of the near certain impacts of this ongoing pandemic." The judge put his order on hold to give the Wisconsin State Legislature time to appeal. The Circuit court ultimately overruled the lower court ruling and time ran out for the Wisconsin legislature to legislate or appeal an exception to state election law. See Democratic National Committee v. Bostelmann, No. 20-2835 (7th Cir. October 8, 2020); Amy Howe, "Court declines to reinstate COVID-19 accommodations for elections in Wisconsin," SCOTUSblog, October 26, 2020, 11:28 pm, https://www.scotusblog.com/2020/10/court-declines-to-reinstate-covid-19-accommodations-for-elections-in-wisconsin/

4. (page 5) "Announcing the EIP," Election Integrity Partnership, July 27, 2020

5. (page 8) The platforms we evaluated are: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Nextdoor, TikTok, Snapchat, Parler, Gab, Discord, WhatsApp, Telegram, Reddit, and Twitch. We published our initial evaluation on August 18, 2020, and updates on September 4, September 11, October 14, October 19, October 27, and October 28, 2020. Twitch was added to our list of evaluated platforms during our blog post update on October 27. Each update

reflected changes in platforms' published policies. See "Evaluating Election-Related Platform Speech Policies," Election Integrity Partnership, October 28, 2020, https://www.eipartnership.net/policy-analysis/platform-policies

6. (page 8) The EIP used Jira Service Desk software for the project. The team chose Jira because it supported a large team and allowed the addition of workflows that require both robust customer management capabilities and organizational features to reflect the numerous roles needed to respond to any inbound request. Licenses and technical support were provided under Atlassian's community license program.

7. (page 9) See Appendix A on page 245: Definitions for a detailed definition of both Events and Incidents.

8. (page 9) See Appendix B on page 249 for the Tier 1 and Tier 2 analysis questions.

9. (page 13) Sean Lyngaas, "Sen. Warner calls for a 'whole-of-society' U.S. cyber doctrine," CyberScoop, December 7, 2018, https://www.cyberscoop.com/sen-warner-calls-whole-society-u-s-cyber-doctrine/

10. (page 14) Common Cause, https://www.commoncause.org/our-work/voting-and-elections/

11. (page 14) NAACP, https://naacp.org

12. (page 14) Stanford-MIT Healthy Elections Project, https://healthyelections.org/

13. (page 14) Defending Digital Democracy Project, https://www.belfercenter.org/project/defending-digital-democracy

14. (page 14) MITRE, https://www.mitre.org

15. (page 14) AARP, https://www.aarp.org

16. (page 14) National Conference on Citizenship, https://ncoc.org

17. (page 14) Elliot Trotter, "CIP, AARP Washington Factcheck Ambassador Trainings help retirees sort fact from fiction," University of Washington Center for an Informed Public, December 16, 2020, https://www.cip.uw.edu/2020/12/16/cip-aarp-washington-factcheck-ambassador-trainings/

18. (page 14) "About Junkipedia," https://www.junkipedia.org/about

19. (page 14) Melinda McClure Haughy, et al., "On the Misinformation Beat: Understanding the Work of Investigative Journalists Reporting on Problematic Information Online," Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction no. 4, Article 133 (October 2020), https://doi.org/10.1145/3415204

20. (page 15) See Appendix E on page 257 for a list of media citations.

21. (page 16) Brandy Zadrozny, "Misinformation by a thousand cuts: Varied rigged election claims circulate," NBC News online, November 11, 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/misinformation-thousand-cuts-varied-rigged-election-claims-circulate-n1247476

22. (page 16) Sheera Frenkel, "The Rise and Fall of the 'Stop the Steal' Facebook Group," *New York Times*, November 5, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/05/technology/stop-the-steal-facebook-group.html

23. (page 16) Kate Starbird, et al., "Uncertainty and Misinformation: What to Expect on Election Night and Days After," Election Integrity Partnership, October 26, 2020, https://www.eipartnership.net/news/what-to-expect

24. (page 17) Ashley Nerbovig, "'Not a whole lot of innovation': 2020 election misinformation was quite predictable, experts say," The Detroit Free Press, November 17, 2020, https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/11/17/2020-presidential-election-misinformation-predictable-experts/6322926002/

25. (page 17) Ashley Nerbovig, "'Not a whole lot of innovation': 2020 election misinformation was quite predictable, experts say." USA Today, November 17, 2020, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/11/17/2020-presidential-election-misinformation-predictable-experts/6322926002/

26. (page 17) "Evaluating Election-Related Platform Speech Policies," Election Integrity Partnership.

27. (page 19) Kate Starbird, et al., "Uncertainty and Misinformation: What to Expect on Election Night and Days After," Election Integrity Partnership, October 26, 2020, https://www.eipartnership.net/news/what-to-expect

28. (page 20) Brian Freidberg, et al., "A Blueprint for Documenting and Debunking Misinformation Campaigns," Nieman Reports (October 20, 2020), https://niemanreports.org/articles/a-blueprint-for-documenting-and-debunking-misinformation-campaigns/

Chapter 2

Data and Summary Statistics

2.1 Introduction

The Election Integrity Partnership collected data between September 3, 2020 and November 19, 2020. The dataset we discuss in this part of our report comes from tickets: the internal reports within the EIP's system, each of which identified a unique information event.

Key findings

- We processed 639 in-scope tickets. 72% of these tickets were related to delegitimizing the election results.
- Twitter, Google, Facebook, and TikTok all had a 75% or higher response rate (on the EIP Jira ticketing platform) to tickets they were tagged in.
- Our process got tighter—both within the EIP and in terms of our relationship with the platforms—over time, with the time between ticket creation and platform response dropping substantially as we approached Election Day.
- 35% of the URLs we shared with Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube were either labeled, removed, or soft blocked. Platforms were most likely to take action on content that involved premature claims of victory.

Tickets

Most tickets created through the EIP's work represent a unique piece of misinformation or disinformation related to election processes. For example, one

ticket was for a Google ad incorrectly claiming that a Florida official had been caught perpetrating a voter fraud scheme. Other tickets discussed a misinformation narrative that appeared across several platforms. Some tickets would focused on a single website that was generating a lot of misinformation. Other tickets discussed incitement to violence—for example, one ticket discussed all cross-platform instances of a single meme instructing people on how to disguise themselves ostensibly ahead of a violent rally. Tickets were primarily created by members of the four core EIP organizations, though 16% of tickets were filed by the Center for Internet Security (CIS), an election official community partner, in the form of tips.

Figure 2.1 on the facing page shows an excerpt of an example ticket. This ticket was created for #Sharpiegate, the narrative that voters were forced to complete their ballots with Sharpie markers that would invalidate ballots. The "Shared with" list shows the organizations tagged on this ticket—tagging an organization is the equivalent of sharing, making the ticket visible to them. The URLs field includes URLs containing or involved in the spread of the misinformation. We discuss the dataset composed exclusively of those URLs in this section of the report as well.

The ticket also has fields for analyst discussion, data that we also extracted and coded. Figure 2.2 on page 30 shows the discussion for the #Sharpiegate ticket. This example shows responses from our government partners, who provided helpful information, and platform responses.

The ticket-level dataset necessarily reflects the biases of those with the authority to create tickets: internal EIP members and external partners. For example, researchers within the Partnership signed up to monitor particular topic groups, such as influencer accounts or Spanish-language content (see Chapter 1, Section 1.3 on page 10 for a list of these groups). Our finite staff and time meant that we prioritized monitoring some content over others; for example, our prioritization of swing states over non-swing states may cause the dataset to understate the amount of misinformation in the latter. Similarly, we were not able to monitor misinformation in languages not widely spoken in America, and as a result our dataset likely understates the amount of foreign language misinformation. While the dataset has these weaknesses, given our large team and cross-platform monitoring, we believe this dataset is important and unique, and that it can shed light on key misinformation narratives and tactics around the election.

In total, the dataset included 639 distinct, in-scope tickets. Following the elections, we coded the tickets to assess what category of election-related misinformation they fell under (for example, participation interference or fraud), what tactics were used (for example, livestream video), what actor was targeted (for example, poll workers or USPS), what state(s) were targeted, and what part of the

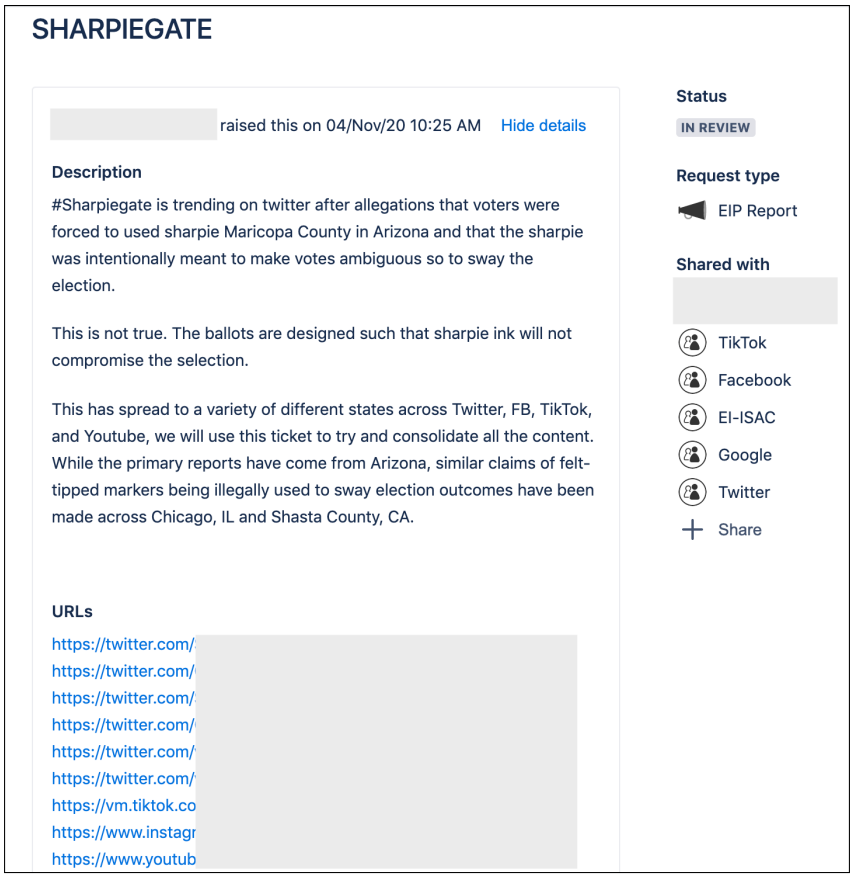


Figure 2.1: An example ticket. We have omitted specific URL information.

electoral process was discussed (for example, voting by mail). Two members of the EIP coded each ticket, and a different member reconciled any discrepancies in coding.

The taxonomy, featuring 10 questions and a total of 71 choices, performed suitably. Intercoder agreement was evaluated with Cohen's Kappa, a metric used to judge coder agreement with consideration for random entries by coders.[1] Cohen's Kappa (K) is represented as a range from 0 to 1, where $K = 0$ indicates random agreement, and $K = 1$ indicates total agreement between coders. Our coding processes and dataset scored $K = 0.629$, which indicates substantial agreement and inspires confidence in the final dataset given the thorough reconciliation process that each ticket went through after its initial coding. The mean percentage agreement across the set was 89.48% with a standard deviation of 0.08%. Given high percentage agreement and a reasonably confident Kappa score, the codified tickets can be reliably used to evaluate our monitoring efforts. We provide more details on findings from the inter-coder reliability analysis in

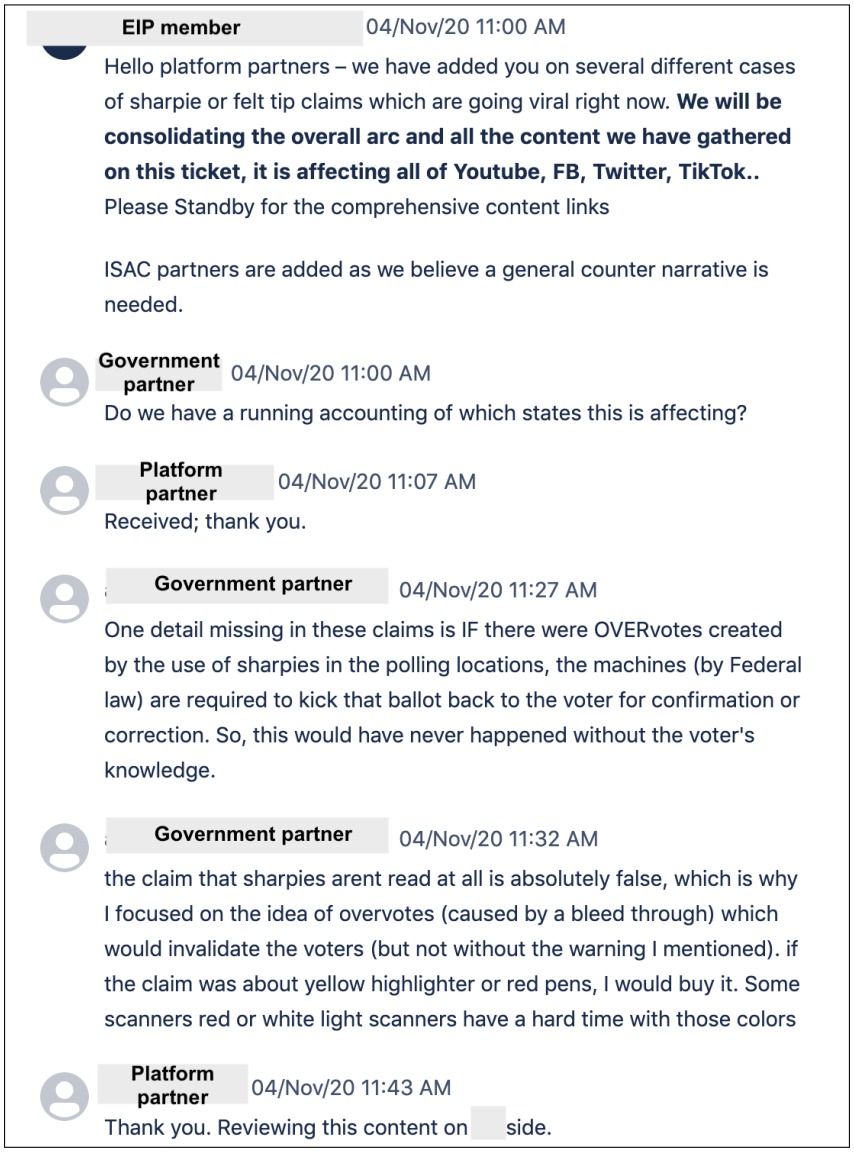


Figure 2.2: Discussion on the #Sharpiegate ticket. The commenters include members of the EIP, government partners, and platform partners.

Appendix B on page 249.

For one of the questions that had lower than normal intercoder agreement—whether or not the ticket related to fraud—we developed a clearer definition of fraud and re-did the coding for all tickets.

Throughout this chapter we will note some important limitations in the dataset. For example, when we discuss platform response rates, these are response rates only from platforms we partnered with. There will be no data for Parler response rates, for example, because Parler was not an external partner of the EIP.

2.2 Summary Statistics

Overview of Tickets

In this section we present summary statistics from the dataset. Figure 2.3 on the following page shows the number of tickets over time, by ticket category. We processed 142 tickets on Election Day, 22% of all tickets. The Election Day spike is likely due to a combination of an increase in election-related online conversations on November 3, significantly more EIP staffing on this day than previous days, and what may have been our partners' greater focus on reporting misinformation on Election Day.

Out of the 639 tickets, 72% were categorized as delegitimization (content aiming to delegitimize election results on the basis of false or misleading claims), 21% as procedural interference (misinformation related to actual election procedures), and 15% as participation interference (posts that include intimidation to personal safety or deterrence to participation in the election process). We note that not all tickets are created equal. Some tickets discussed misinformation that spread far, while other tickets discussed misinformation that might not have been seen by many.

While Chapter 3 will discuss the reach of specific narratives, Table 2.1 on the next page shows the relationship between ticket category and a rough measure of reach that we estimated during the coding process. It suggests that most categories of tickets had a similar distribution of reach, with the exception of fraud narratives, which did not go as widely viral. However, we note that only five of the tickets are categorized as fraud.

Segmentation of Misinformation by Platform and Region

After our last ticket was filed, we coded tickets to assess whether the narrative appeared on one of the platforms we were tracking; of course, many narratives appeared on multiple platforms. 77% of tickets appeared on Twitter, 46% on

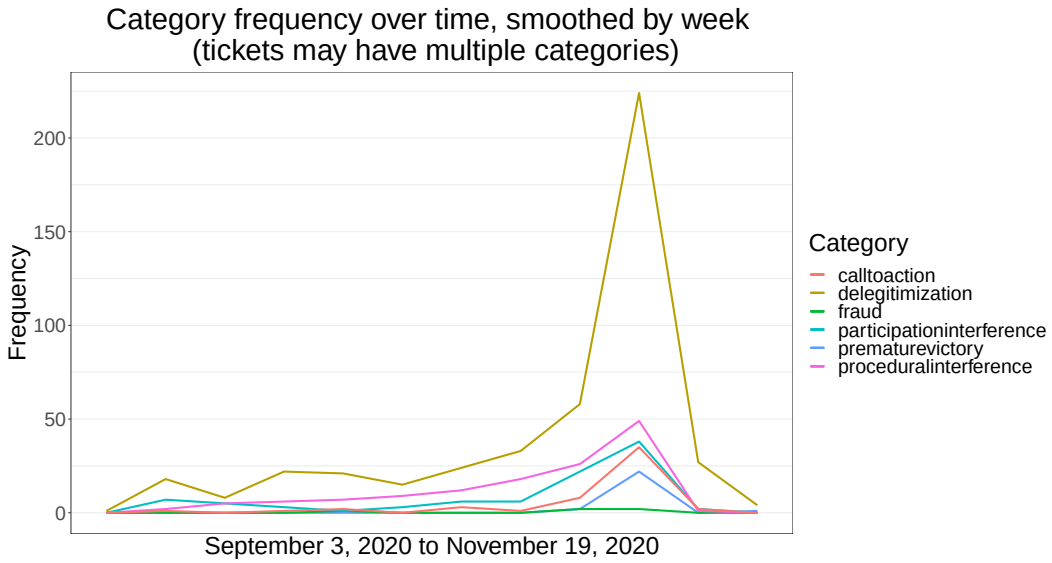


Figure 2.3: Ticket category over time. Tickets may have multiple categories.

	High: >100k engagements	**Medium: 1k–100k engagements**	**Low: < 1k engagements**	**N/A**
Participation Interference	16%	40%	43%	1%
Call to Action	11%	42%	43%	4%
Premature Victory	12%	52%	36%	0
Delegitimiza-tion	15%	49%	35%	1%
Procedural Interference	11%	36%	50%	3%
Fraud	0%	20%	60%	20%

Table 2.1: Relationship between ticket category and estimated reach.

Facebook, 13% on Reddit, 12% on Instagram, 12% on YouTube, and 8% on TikTok. Other platforms, including Parler, 4chan, and Telegram, appeared in less than 5% of tickets. While it is useful to know that the tickets we handled were primarily on the two large platforms—Twitter and Facebook—we caution that these numbers should not be interpreted as "most misinformation appeared on Twitter." Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Instagram have reasonably accessible APIs that made it easier for our team to find misinformation on their platforms. The low percent of tickets for Parler, which is not as easy to observe, should not necessarily be interpreted as Parler having less misinformation.

Many of the tickets discussed misinformation that appeared on websites distinct from social media platforms, such as forums and blogs. The top misinformation-spreading websites in our dataset were the far-right forum thedonald.win, moved from the banned subreddit "r/The_Donald," and thegatewaypundit[.]com, a far-right news website. 65% of these tickets involved an exaggeration of the impact of an issue within the election process.

We also coded tickets based on whether they targeted particular states (Figure 2.4 on the following page). 16% of tickets targeted Pennsylvania, 9% targeted Michigan, and 7% targeted Washington. Many of our state-specific tickets were reported by CIS, reflecting the fact that CIS forwarded reports by state and local election officials, and that certain states sent in many reports while others sent few or none.

Tickets by Tactics and Targets

We also coded tickets based on what tactics we observed being used:

- 49% of tickets involved an exaggerated issue.
- 26% of tickets involved an electoral process issue incorrectly framed as partisan.
- 22% of tickets involved misinformation that was shared by verified users.
- 18% of tickets featured content taken out of context from other places or times to create false impressions of an election issue.
- 17% of tickets involved unverifiable claims, such as friend-of-friend narratives.

Figure 2.6 on page 35 shows the portion of tickets containing incidents or narratives that targeted different aspects of the electoral process. Not surprisingly, tickets about voting by mail dominated tickets in September, while tickets about ballot counting spiked during the week of the election.

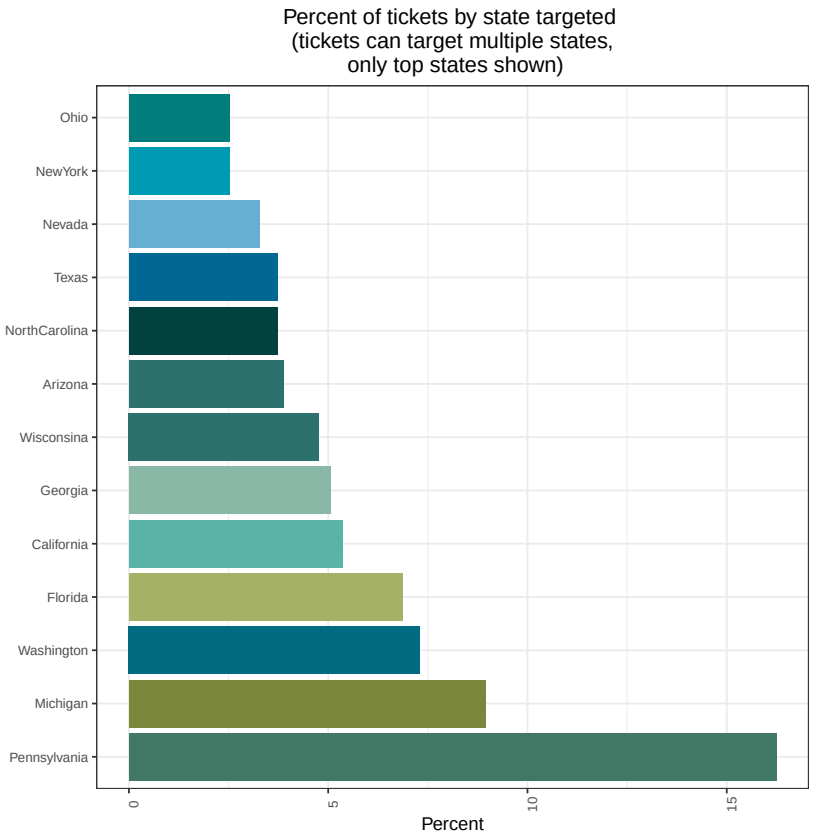


Figure 2.4: Percent of tickets by state targeted.

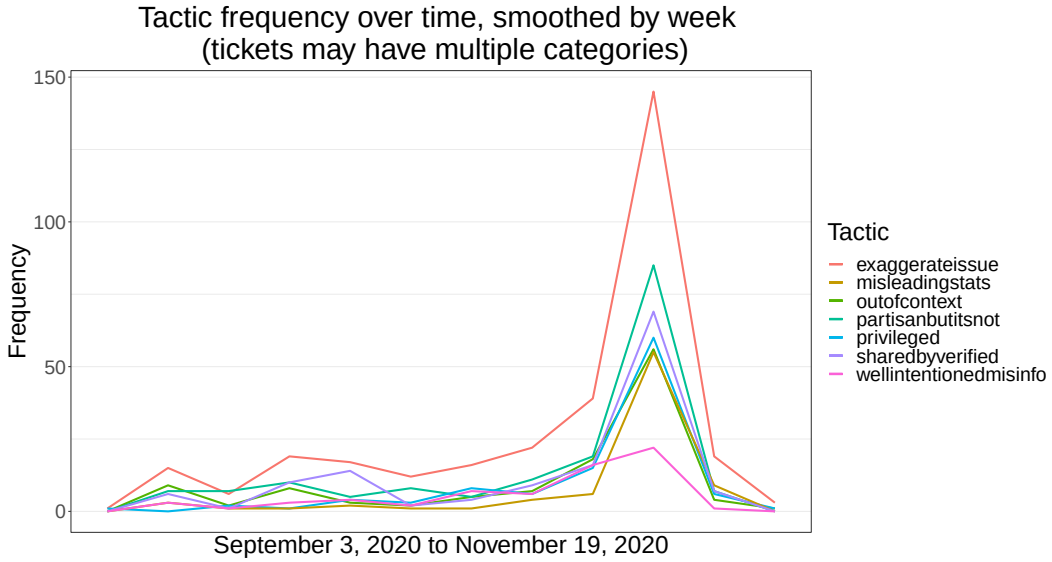


Figure 2.5: Tactic frequency over time.

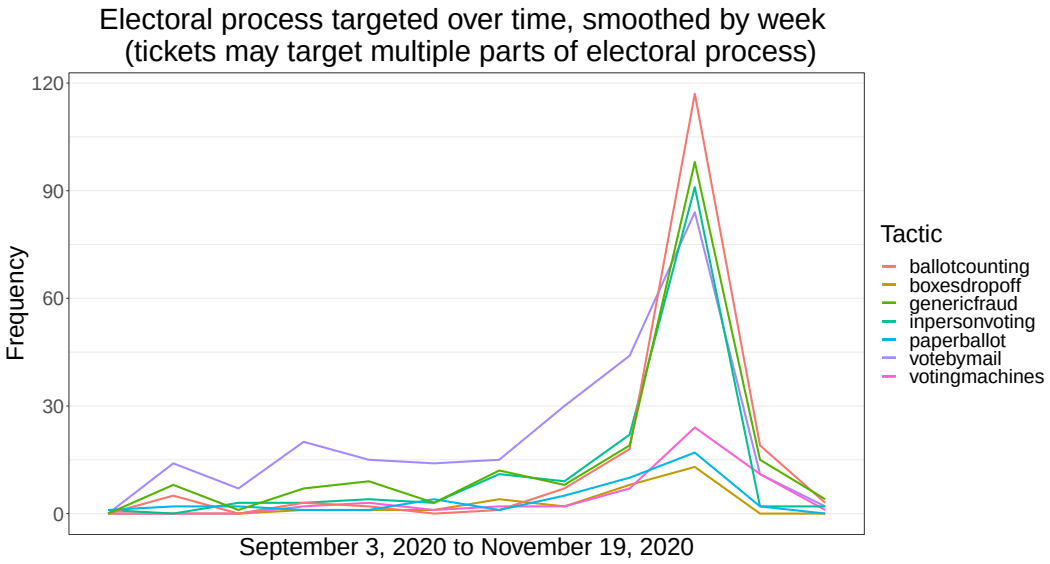


Figure 2.6: Electoral process targeted over time.

Figure 2.7 on the following page shows the actors targeted by the misinformation. The actors most frequently targeted were political affinity groups (for example, Democrats or Republicans, or Biden supporters) with 39% of tickets.

Figure 2.8 on page 37 shows the proportion of tickets that made various claims about the elections. 27% of tickets involved claims about illegal voting.[2]

Last, we coded tickets based on whether they additionally related to COVID-19 narratives, or had an element of foreign interference. Interestingly, just 1% of tickets related to COVID-19, and less than 1% related to foreign interference.

Tickets by Fact-Checking URLs

As the EIP monitored the information space for mis- and disinformation about the 2020 election, analysts consulted published fact-checking resources to assess various claims. 42% of the tickets included fact-checking URLs found by analysts. The most common fact-checking sources were Twitter threads and Facebook posts, often from official government accounts, Snopes, PolitiFact, *USA Today*, the *Washington Post*, and CNN (in that order). The remaining 58% of tickets consisted of misinformation that had low engagement and did not manage to attract the attention of fact-checkers, as well as misleading claims that were not easily falsifiable. Additionally, as noted above, some tickets were about incitement to violence, a topic that does not lend itself to fact-checking. Many tickets included more than one fact-check URL. In total, the dataset included 925 fact-checking URLs.

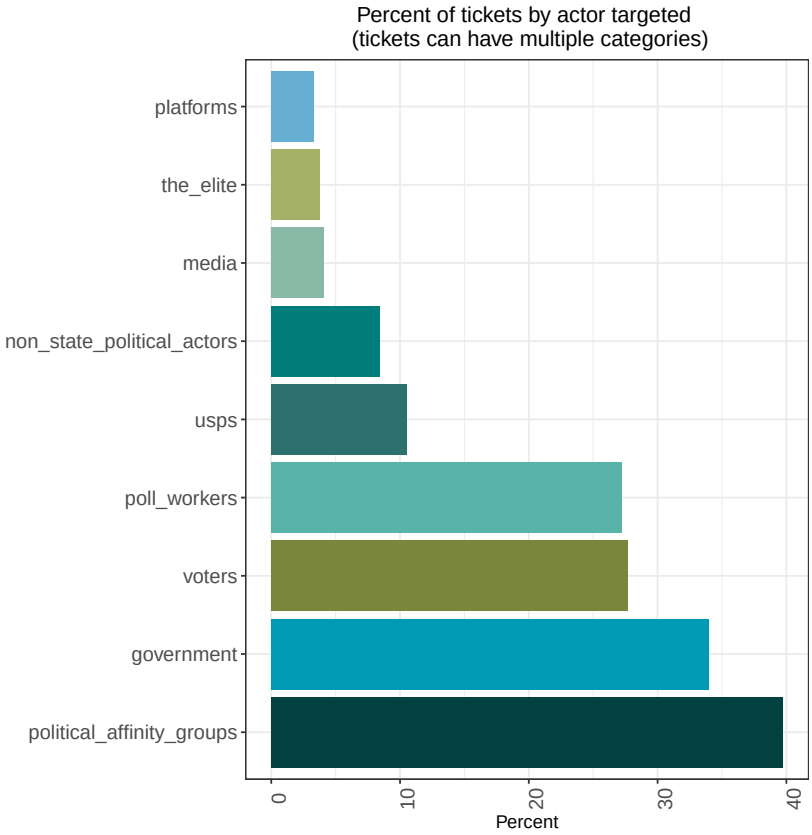


Figure 2.7: Percent of tickets by actor targeted.

Overall, among our tickets we found that higher engagement posts (those with more than 100,000 interactions) contained fact-checking URLs more than posts that had medium to low engagement: 34% of high engagement tickets contained fact-checking URLs, compared to 25% for medium engagement tickets, and 18% for low engagement tickets. EIP researchers also examined the relationship between political ideology and fact-checking, and found that tickets that discussed only left-leaning accounts were as likely to contain fact-checking URLs as tickets discussing only right-leaning accounts.

We also analyzed fact-checking frequency and approaches based on a number of factors, including ticket category. Tickets categorized as "Call to action for protest or mobilization" (often incitements to violence) were least likely to include fact-checking URLs; this makes sense, as these types of tickets are less likely to be appropriate for fact checking.

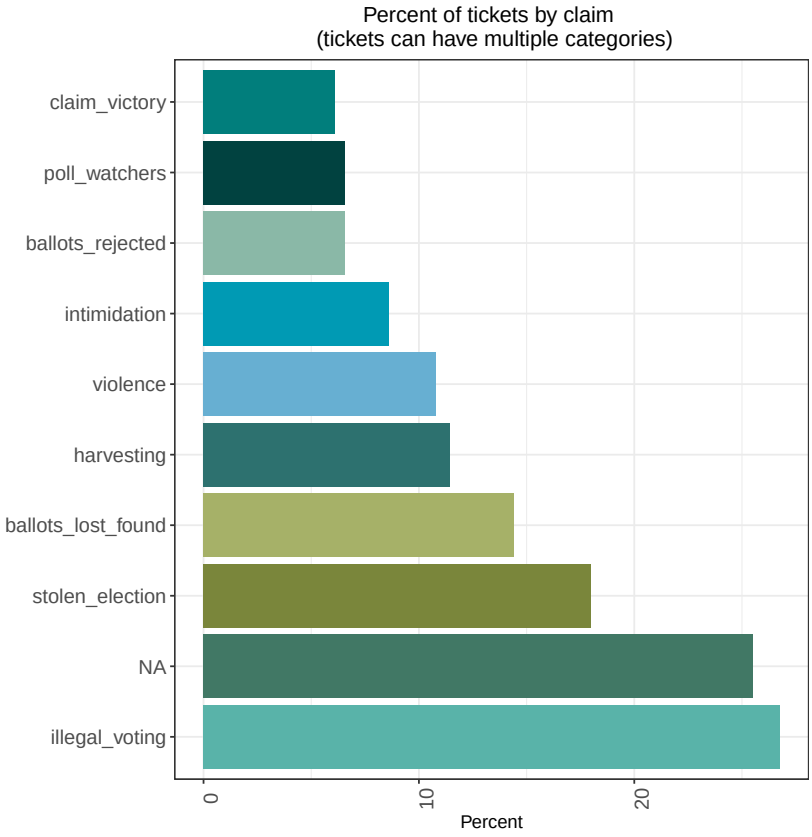


Figure 2.8: Percent of tickets by claim.

2.3 Platform Responsiveness and Moderation Actions Taken

Of our 639 tickets, 363 tickets tagged an external partner organization to either report the content, provide situational awareness, or suggest a possible need for fact-checking or a counter-narrative. Of the tickets in which an external organization was tagged, Figure 2.9 on the following page shows which partner organization was tagged.

In the case where platforms were tagged, we measured the percent of tickets that subsequently received a response from the platforms. A response indicated that the platform confirmed that they were investigating the ticket. We believe these response rates are lower bounds; it is possible platforms investigated tickets, but did not respond on the Jira platform. In total, we believe the four major platforms we worked with all had high response rates to our tickets.

Figure 2.10 on page 39 shows the time between a ticket's creation and the

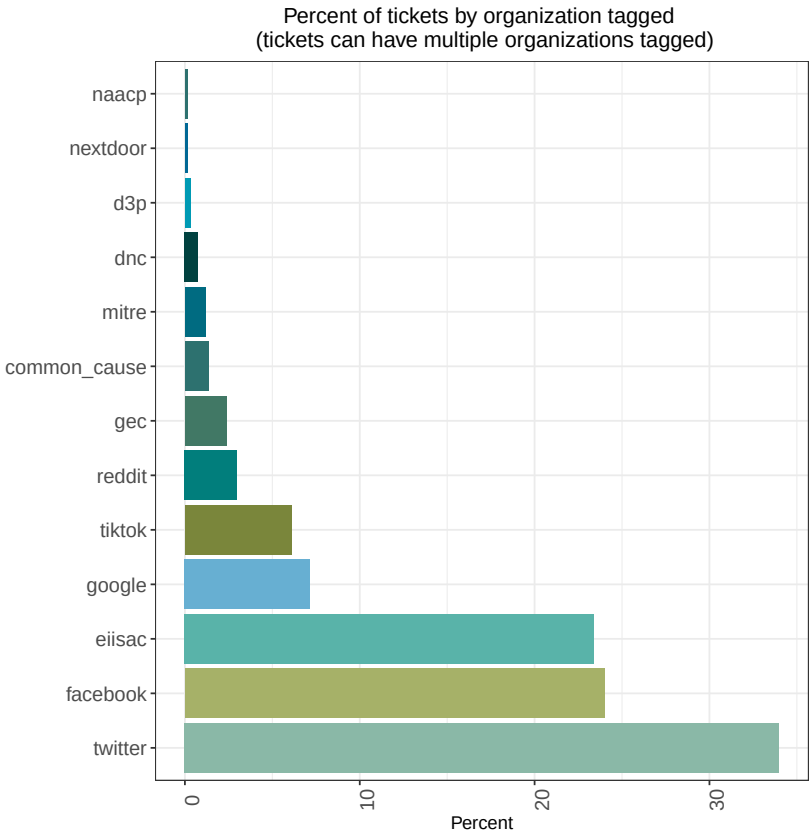


Figure 2.9: Percent of tickets by organization tagged.

	# tickets tagging organization	# tickets that received response	Response Rate
TikTok	40	36	90%
Google	46	41	89%
Twitter	220	185	84%
Facebook	158	120	76%

Table 2.2: Response rate by platform.

platform's response, over time. This data should be interpreted cautiously, as often the ticket creator did not tag the platform; rather, a manager tagged the platform once the ticket was reviewed. So occasionally a ticket was created but the platform not tagged for several hours, or in some rare cases a few days. As such, even if the platforms responded minutes after being tagged, and they often did—particularly on Election Day—this data will not reflect this. However, the data does suggest that the process got much tighter over time. This likely reflects that the EIP shortened the time between ticket creation and platform tagging, and also more engagement from the platforms.

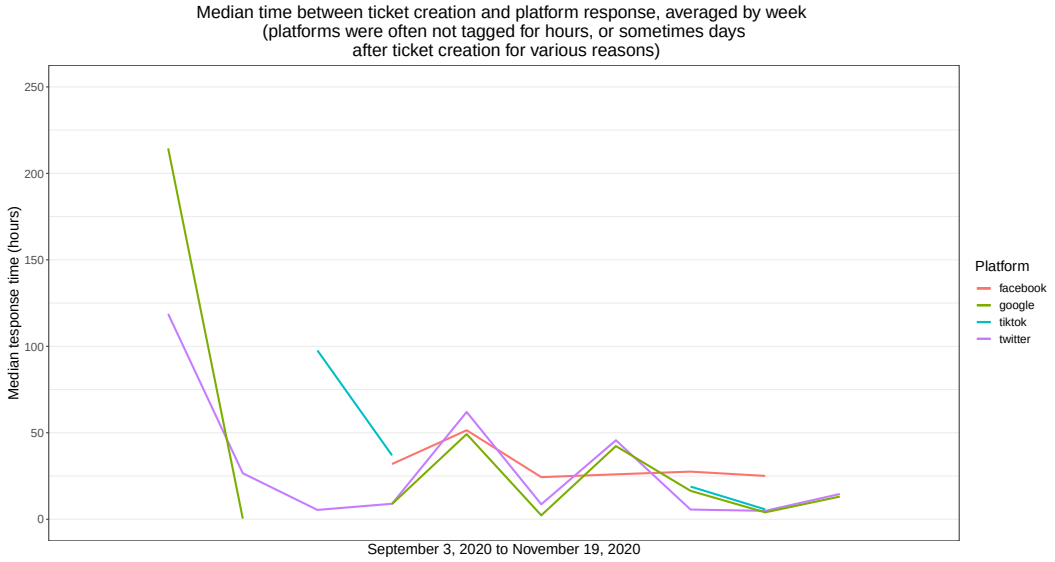


Figure 2.10: Median time between ticket creation and platform response.

Each ticket that tagged a platform partner contained a list of URLs containing the potentially violative content being spread—for example, the URL for a Facebook post or YouTube video. These lists were typically not comprehensive, but intended to highlight a few examples should the platforms decide to investigate further. We developed a web scraping tool that visited each URL to determine what action the platform (limited to Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram) applied to the content, and ran it on all 4,832 URLs from the tickets on December 7, 2020. The tool evaluated what a US-based individual would see if they visited each URL using the Chrome browser on a desktop computer. For Instagram and Facebook, the visitor was logged in to bypass "login walls." We found no evidence of different users observing different platform actions, so the choice of user did not affect results.

The tool grouped each URL into four possible categories: "removed" when the content was not available (most likely taken down by either the platform or the original poster themselves); "soft block" when the content was only visible by

bypassing a warning (this action was only detected on Twitter); "label" when the platform applied some kind of warning label to the content but did not hide the content; and "none" when the platform took no detectable action. Due to the opaque nature of platforms' ranking algorithms, we were not able to directly detect actions like "downranking." Moreover, because platforms often employ aggressive anti-scraping measures and frequently change their interfaces, it is possible that the scraper incorrectly classified some URLs; in a random sample of several dozen classified URLs, however, we found no errors. In this section we will refer to whether or not platforms actioned URLs, but we note that we cannot distinguish between a platform removing content or a user removing content.

We find, overall, that platforms took action on 35% of URLs that we reported to them. 21% of URLs were labeled, 13% were removed, and 1% were soft blocked. No action was taken on 65%. TikTok had the highest action rate: actioning (in their case, their only action was removing) 64% of URLs that the EIP reported to their team.

Figures 2.11 to 2.14 on pages 40–42 show the distribution of platform action by ticket category, tactic, asset, and claim. Platforms were most likely to take action on tickets that involved premature claims of victory; they took action on these tickets about 45% of the time. They also frequently actioned URLs related to election delegitimization and procedural interference. They were least likely to take action on URLs about fraud, but we note that less than 1% of the URLs had this category. URLs with procedural interference were most likely to be removed.

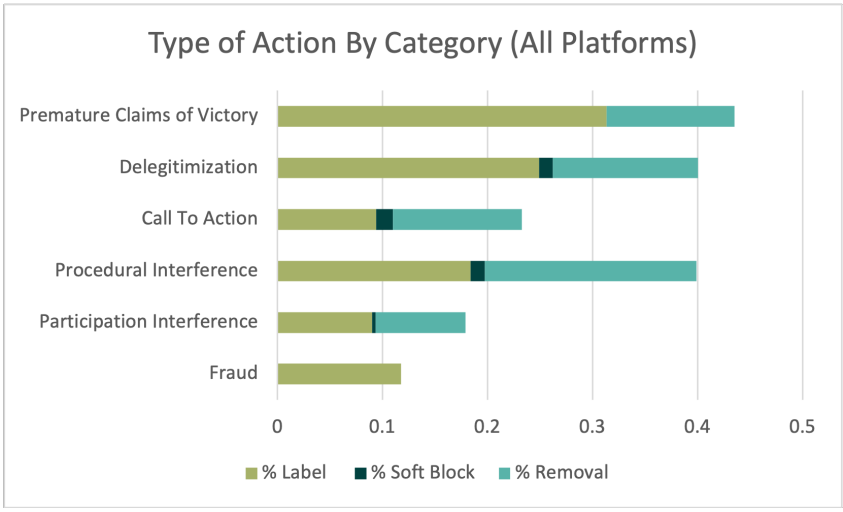


Figure 2.11: Type of action by category.

Platforms were most likely to action URLs that shared misleading statistics, and

most likely to remove phishing content and fake official accounts.

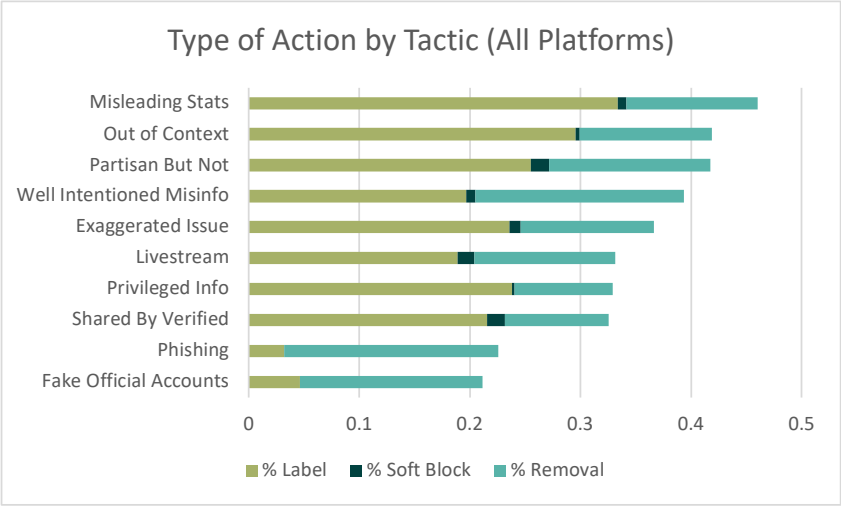


Figure 2.12: Type of action by tactic.

Figure 2.13 shows that there was not large variation in platform action rate across asset types.

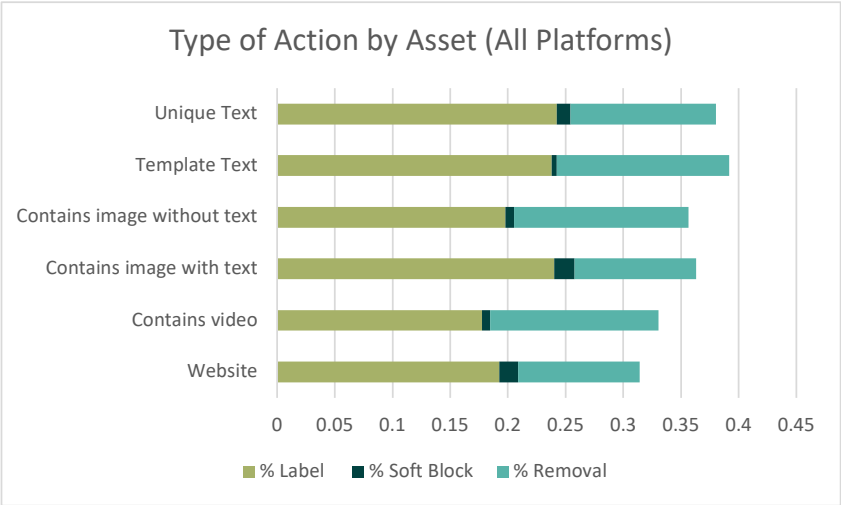


Figure 2.13: Type of action by asset.

More than 50% of URLs that contained premature claims or victory, or claims about the election being stolen, were actioned by platforms. About half of URLs that contained unfounded claims about ballots being rejected were removed—the claim with the highest rate of removal after incitement to violence.

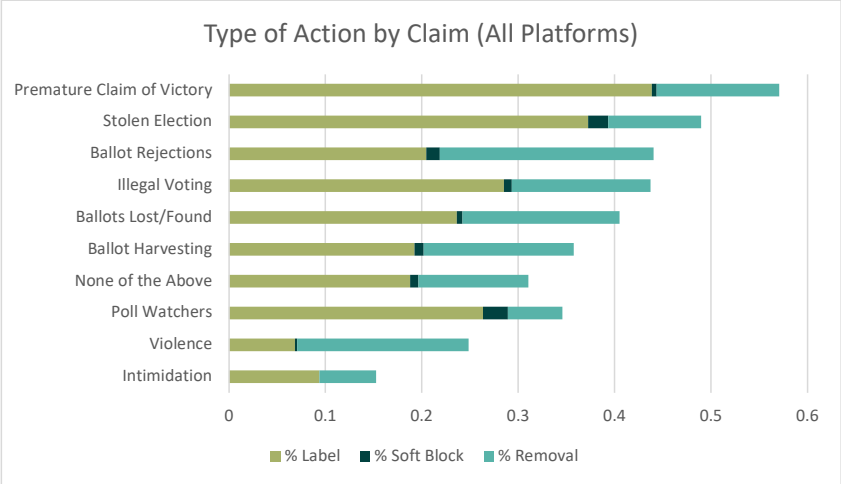


Figure 2.14: Type of action by claim.

2.4 Concerns by Reporting Collaborators

While 79% of tickets were created in-house, CIS reported 16% ($N = 101$) of our tickets. Most reports from CIS originated from election officials. Compared to the dataset as a whole, the CIS tickets were (1) more likely to raise reports about fake official election accounts (CIS raised half of the tickets on this topic), (2) more likely to create tickets about Washington, Connecticut, and Ohio, and (3) more likely to raise reports that were about how to vote and the ballot counting process—CIS raised 42% of the tickets that claimed there were issues about ballots being rejected. CIS also raised four of our nine tickets about phishing. The attacks CIS reported used a combination of mass texts, emails, and spoofed websites to try to obtain personal information about voters, including addresses and Social Security numbers. Three of the four impersonated election official accounts, including one fake Kentucky election website that promoted a narrative that votes had been lost by asking voters to share personal information and anecdotes about why their vote was not counted. Another ticket CIS reported included a phishing email impersonating the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) that was sent to Arizona voters with a link to a spoofed Arizona voting website. There, it asked voters for personal information including their name, birthdate, address, Social Security number, and driver's license number. Other groups that reported tickets include the State Department's Global Engagement Center, MITRE, Common Cause, the DNC, the Defending Digital Democracy Project, and the NAACP.

2.5 Final Observations

This chapter has focused on our ticket-level dataset, which offers a look at the work of the EIP through the duration of our activity. In Chapter 3 of this report we will delve into some of the narratives within the EIP tickets, examining those that achieved the greatest reach or were instrumental for a significant duration of the time leading up to, and following, Election Day.

Notes

1. (page 29) Cohen's Kappa weighs chance in its scoring by evaluating the probability of agreement and the probability of random agreement. The probability of agreement minus the probability of random agreement divided by 1 minus the probability of random agreement is how Kappa is calculated. With this in mind, a Kappa value that is less than zero indicates that there is less agreement than chance and is evidence that the taxonomy or intercoder process is somehow flawed.

2. (page 35) "Political affinity groups" includes references to "the Democrats" or "the Republicans" or particular politicians. "Government" refers to any government entity. "Non-state political actors" includes groups like Black Lives Matter or antifa. "The elite" references people like George Soros or Bill Gates. "Platforms" references social media platforms like Facebook. Voters, poll workers, USPS, and the media are self explanatory.

Chapter 3

Incidents and Narratives: The Evolution of Election Misinformation

3.1 Introduction

The 2020 election was the subject of hundreds of false and misleading claims about voter qualifications, voting processes, and even the basic nature of American democracy. Some claims spread like wildfire across social media only to fade just as quickly. Others circulated unnoticed for days or weeks before igniting with lasting viral momentum. Sometimes, contradictory claims battled for supremacy. Other times, they settled into a surreal coexistence. Some of these claims would ultimately form the foundation of "Stop the Steal"—the 2020 election's most expansive and enduring misinformation narrative, which ultimately culminated in the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol—though it was a long and complicated journey.

In this chapter, we examine some of the 2020 election's most noteworthy pieces of election-related misinformation, exploring the character of these claims and charting the messy process by which claims coalesced into broader narratives. We also trace how one narrative gave way to another, forming a conspiratorial canon that is likely to persist for many years to come. In order to identify and differentiate these narratives, we consider the following questions:

What was the first claim that formed the basis of a given narrative? Was there a precipitating event? How did the story develop? What pieces or types of content helped shape it? How did the narrative echo and build upon the narratives that preceded it? How did it bolster the narratives that followed it? Indeed, did it fade away at all?

We begin the chapter with a discussion of our methodology and definitions.

From there, we explore the evolution of narratives in the 2020 election, following their progression to the events of January 6. Then, we discuss the spread of misinformation narratives in non-English communities, focusing on Chinese- and Spanish-speaking Americans (foreign state-backed actors in the 2020 election are described in a box somewhere). Finally, we examine the obstacles these dynamics posed to fact-checkers, and conclude with observations regarding the narrative landscape as a whole.

Because the purpose of democratic elections is a transparent, regularized transfer of political power, they are gravely endangered by misinformation narratives. If citizens are made to feel that a vote was compromised or rigged, then the election cannot be trusted. If the election cannot be trusted, then (at least in the mind of the true believer of such narratives) the democracy itself is invalid. Looking back on the election of 2020 and the January 6 attack, this chapter addresses the resounding question: how did we get here?

3.2 Narratives: Methodology and Identification

Narratives are stories. They draw from a common set of building blocks—characters, scenes, and themes—and assemble them in novel ways. Good narratives inspire suspense and excitement in their audience.[1] A successful book, for instance, is one whose narrative clings to the imagination of its reader. Similarly, a successful conspiracy theory is one whose narrative is especially compelling and emotionally resonant—the audience itself is made to feel that they are the protagonists in a story that only they can interpret and understand.

In daily life, the creation of narratives is aided by a parallel process of framing. Frames are mental schemas that shape how people interpret the world; they highlight specific pieces of information, as Robert Entman writes, "in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described."[2] Framing, i.e., the production of frames, is a process of selecting certain information and providing a kind of scaffolding that shapes how people interpret a series of events. (The process of framing will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 4.)

Viral misinformation works by decontextualizing and recombining real-world events into compelling narratives with minimal regard for the truth. Some of these narratives are "bottom-up," in which a narrative emerges organically from the post hoc interpretation of disparate events and claims, often beginning with a single post by an individual user. Others are "top-down," consciously created and first disseminated by one or more powerful media or social media influencers. Often, the reach and staying power of certain narratives becomes clear only after the precipitating event has concluded. In complex events like

the 2020 election, multiple narratives can exist side by side, contradicting or reinforcing each other and receiving widely variable attention.

The Election Integrity Partnership's initial monitoring for voting-related misinformation focused on claims, not narratives. Each of the 639 tickets in the EIP database was tied to a particular claim: a fake viral video of ballots being burned, for instance, or an allegation that a Philadelphia poll watcher was improperly barred from entering a voting precinct.

The work of narrative identification began on November 30, 2020, after the EIP's monitoring mission had concluded. We first grouped tickets into "information cascades," or incidents, tracing how a single real-world event (like a video of poll workers collecting ballots in California) could generate a number of different false claims, spread at different rates on different platforms by different actors. After that, we grouped similar incidents together, collapsing them into a small number of distinct narratives. In some cases, the narratives coalesced into umbrella meta-narratives. These narratives formed the basis of the information conflict that would consume the 2020 election.

3.3 The Evolution of Narratives in the 2020 Election

The most destructive misinformation narratives came in waves. As fresh events presented themselves and public attention shifted, old narratives lent their momentum and "evidence" to new ones; incidents were framed so as to "prime" audiences to perceive future similar events as part of a broader pattern. This meant that, while specific falsehoods and delusions might fade, they were never truly forgotten. This process carried some Americans from their first exposure to voting-related misinformation in the summer of 2020 all the way through the violent, far-reaching conspiracy theories that compelled them to storm the US Capitol on January 6.

In the lead-up to the 2020 election, misinformation centered on mail-in voting: the destruction and discarding of real ballots and the "discovery" of fake ones. Such misinformation typically took the form of misleading photos or decontextualized video clips of crumpled mail allegedly found in dumpsters or abandoned trucks. This misinformation was widely amplified by Republican politicians and far-right operatives, including by the Trump White House. After the election, public polling indicated a lack of trust in mail-in voting;[3] while it is difficult to state to what extent that was caused by the media and social media activity, given the amount of misinformation about the process spread from the start, this finding is not surprising.

Concurrently, other popular misinformation narratives suggested that the election had been "stolen" before it even took place. Concerns about disproportionate mail-in voting by Democrats and disproportionate in-person voting by Republicans led partisans on both sides to fear that there would be a manipulation of votes on election night. The Trump campaign primed Republican voters to expect wrongdoing by calling for an "Army for Trump" to safeguard the polls. In turn, Democrats worried that polling places might be invaded by far-right militias. And far-right activists argued that the United States was held in the grip of a "color revolution" orchestrated by an imagined "Deep State" intent on stealing the election.

On November 3 and immediately afterward, misinformation shifted to focus on vote counting and tabulation. This was embodied by the #Sharpiegate narrative, which alleged that poll workers were giving felt-tip pens to voters in conservative precincts to render their ballots unreadable. Despite repeated attempts to debunk it, the narrative found a receptive audience who set to work flooding all social platforms, mainstream and niche, with the claim. After #Sharpiegate gained viral traction, it drew hundreds of Trump supporters to protest outside the recorder's office of Arizona's Maricopa County.

As millions of mail-in ballots were slowly counted and voting returns shifted to favor Joe Biden, this anger and disbelief intensified. A growing swell of misinformation narratives, including Sharpiegate, coalesced under the hashtag #StopTheSteal, which spawned a movement of the same name. Some narratives claimed that hundreds of thousands of deceased citizens had cast Democratic votes; others suggested that Trump was one lawsuit away from victory. Together, these narratives infused their followers with a sense of urgency and a call to action.

As Stop the Steal grew in popularity over the next two months, its allegations of legal and procedural fraud were supplemented by increasingly colorful, outlandish conspiracy theories. Some claimed that Trump's loss had been the work of a CIA supercomputer commissioned by former President Barack Obama. Others argued that Trump's loss had been orchestrated by Dominion Voting Systems, a company that was (falsely) tied to Bill Gates, George Soros, or even the government of Venezuela. The more that these narratives took hold, the further their believers slipped from reality.

Throughout the entire voting period, both Democrats and Republicans had been consumed by fears of election-related violence—of the Proud Boys targeting Black Lives Matter protesters or secret "antifa comrades" infiltrating conservative polling locations. Outside of a surge in use of the #civilwar hashtag on

Twitter, however, little of this rhetoric translated into action in the immediate aftermath of the election. Instead, the creep toward organized violence occurred more slowly. It would explode with fury on January 6, 2021, changing the course of American politics with it.

Ballot-Related Narratives

Setting the Stage for Ballot Irregularity Claims

The process by which votes were cast in the 2020 election was significantly influenced by the global COVID-19 pandemic. By September, when the EIP began monitoring election-related misinformation, nearly 200,000 Americans had already died from COVID-19.[4] In order to prevent COVID-19 transmission at crowded polling places and to accommodate citizens who preferred not to come to the polls, a number of states opted to expand the qualifications for absentee ballots or to alter the vote-by-mail process. For example, dozens of states significantly increased the use of ballot drop boxes.[5]

Changes to electoral processes and sometimes-unclear communications regarding the changes created an ecosystem ripe for mis- and disinformation around the mechanics of voting. Experts predicted that Democrats would rely on mail-in voting more than Republicans,[6] a reality that resulted in the rapid politicization of the process and that stymied many attempts to make it clearer or more accessible.[7] Meanwhile, legitimate confusion about voting procedures offered political activists, influencers, and politicians a receptive environment to sow doubt in the integrity of the voting process as a whole.

General concerns related to mail-in ballots constituted the most prominent type of misinformation assessed in the months before Election Day (see Figure 3.1 on the next page), foreshadowing claims of mass irregularities and "found ballots" following the election. The EIP processed tickets that included claims of mail dumping; mistreated, shredded, or dumped ballots; non-eligible people casting ballots (e.g., dead voters); ballots cast on behalf of others; and voting multiple times by mail.

In this section we highlight two types of ballot-related narratives: "bottom-up" misinformation rooted in real-world events reported by concerned individuals, and "top-down" mis- and disinformation in the form of claims of hidden conspiracies first made by influencers and media personalities who had political or financial incentive to spread falsehoods (see Figure 3.2 on page 53). For the former, we present some claims related to found, discarded, and destroyed ballots, primarily isolated instances of wrongdoing reframed and misconstrued in partisan terms. For the latter, we discuss a video created by Project Veritas (described below), shared widely by right-wing influencers, that claimed

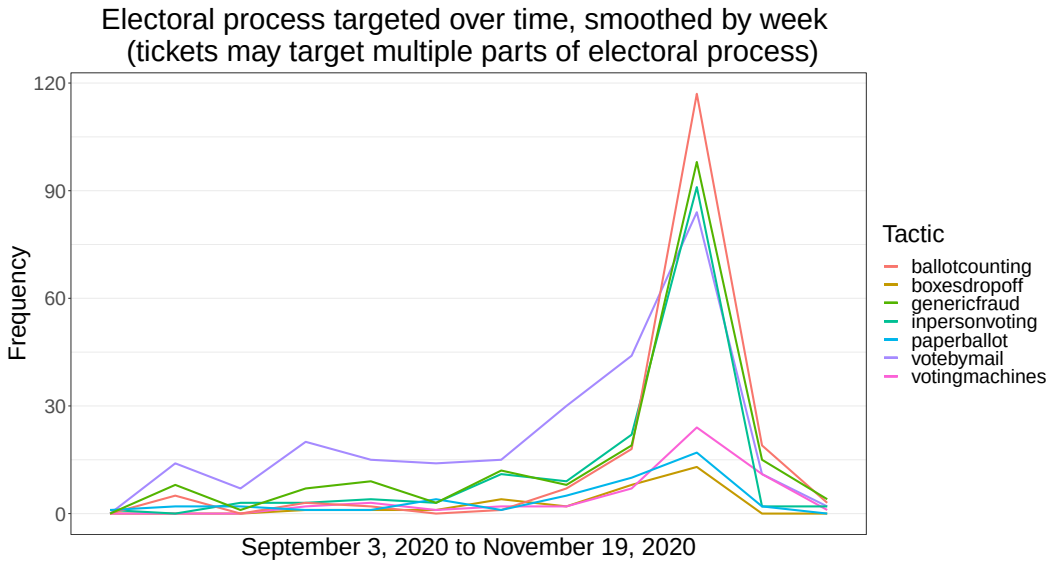


Figure 3.1: The number of tickets that targeted different parts of the electoral process. The spike of tickets occurred on Election Day.

the existence of widespread fraud in the form of ballot harvesting funded and condoned by political elites.

Misinformation For and By the People: How Documented Incidents of Found, Discarded, or Destroyed Ballots Became Narratives

Allegations of mail dumping—real or purported—can be used to mislead audiences in service of particular agendas, such as undermining confidence in mail-in voting or advancing claims that the election is rigged. Narratives around found, discarded, or destroyed ballots circulated through various platforms before, during, and after the election. Though it is illegal for US Postal Service (USPS) letter carriers or related partners to improperly dispose of mail, it does sometimes occur. Overall, however, the USPS is overwhelmingly secure and letter carriers face severe penalties for dumping mail, including jail time.[8]

The incidents in EIP tickets ranged from claims of a handful of ballots found on the side of the road or under a rock to allegations of hundreds of thousands of ballots lost at once in Pennsylvania. Mail-dumping narratives also connected disparate real-world events, pulling them into a broader storyline in which these were falsely portrayed as frequent occurrences, and in which each individual incident was cited as further evidence of an irreparably corrupt and broken system. The EIP team identified five techniques used to leverage these real incidents for broader purposes:[9]

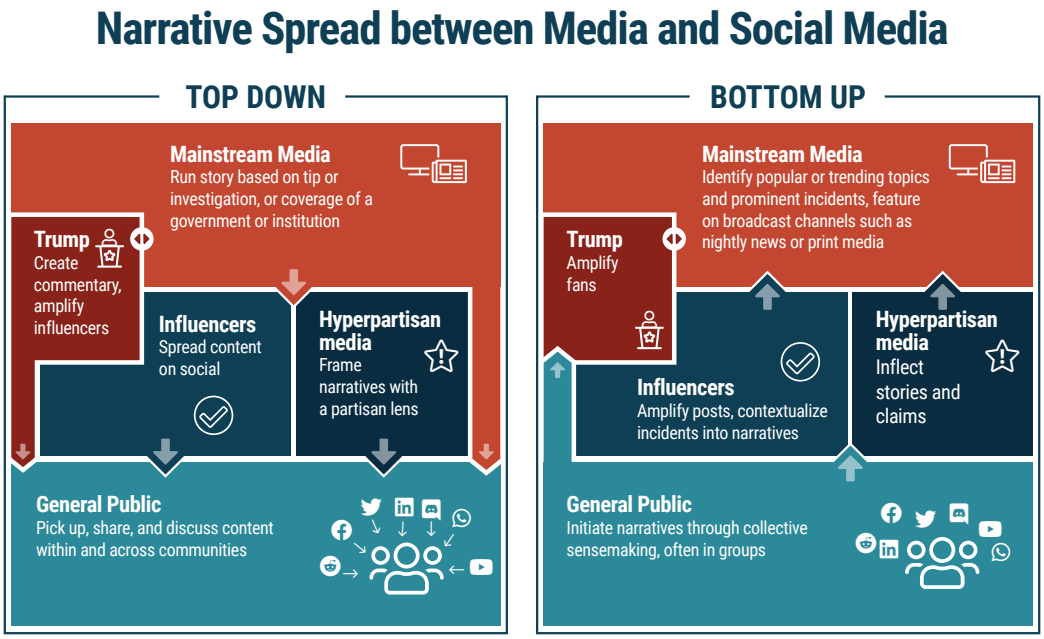


Figure 3.2: Pathways of top-down and bottom-up narratives.

- **Falsely assigning intent:** Acts that are not political are framed as political. For example, a local mail-dumping event is falsely framed as specifically targeting voters on one side of the political spectrum or a mail carrier is identified as "Democratic" or "Republican" to suggest malicious intent. Other times, too much significance is given to the demographics of the locality in which an event occurs. Though these cases may at times contain added falsehoods, often they will rely more on implication than assertion—and are therefore hard to refute with fact-checking.
- **Exaggerating impact:** Real-life incidents are highlighted, selectively edited, or otherwise exaggerated to give a false appearance of substantial impact on election results or to suggest a widespread pattern of misbehavior.
- **Falsely framing the date:** Old events are reframed as new occurrences, such as the recirculation of a 2014 video of a mail carrier dumping mail accompanied by allegations that this was happening in the final weeks of the 2020 election.
- **Altering locale:** Those disseminating the misinformation alter the locale of an event to make it seem more relevant to an audience. For example, photos from a Glendale, California, incident are reframed as having happened in a different local community.

- **Strategic amplification:** In addition to false framing, the usual amplification concerns apply, with the potential for honest or not-so-honest mistakes about intent, actors, times, and locales to be amplified by domestic networks of politically motivated accounts and possibly even foreign actors.

Allegations of deliberately destroyed ballots took various forms, including claims of ballot boxes being lit on fire, mail-in votes being shredded, and foreign actors stealing mailboxes. Occasionally there were legitimate claims, such as accurate reports of attempted arson (one example was in Baldwin Park, California). However, most were easily disproved falsehoods: for example, claims of shredded ballots for President Trump in Pennsylvania in reality were unaddressed applications for mail-in ballots.[10]

The earliest ballot-related story that the EIP collected and analyzed took place within days of launching our monitoring effort in early September. The incident, which occurred in Glendale, California, and involved improperly discarded mail, was incorporated into a broader narrative focused on undermining trust in the USPS and exaggerating the potential impact on the election of this and similar events in California, Wisconsin, and other states. Throughout the election, similar incidents of discarded mail (with and without ballots) were repeatedly framed as fraud, particularly by hyperpartisan online media, and the specific claims of individual stories were amplified and woven into other narratives meant to cast doubt on the integrity of the election.

Glendale, California

In early September, a salon worker in Glendale, California, found multiple bags of unopened mail in a dumpster and took video footage with her cellphone.[11] There is no evidence that any ballots were among the discarded mail; the American Postal Workers Union stated the recovered mail would go through a verification process and be delivered.[12] However, politically motivated actors began using the above techniques of falsely assigning intent, exaggerating impact, and strategic amplification to falsely frame this situation in such a way as to undermine trust in mail-in voting.

The incident was picked up by conservative influencers, including Charlie Kirk and Adam Paul Laxalt. The image below shows a map of popular accounts tweeting about the Glendale mail-dumping incident. The graph reveals an imbalance between left- and right-leaning amplification: the conservative side of the network had more posts than the liberal side and nearly three times as many retweets. Conservative tweets claimed that this mail-dumping incident proved that mail-in voting was not secure because of either incompetence or deliberate sabotage by the USPS and thus should not be allowed. On the liberal

side, influencers promoted a different narrative—that President Trump was deliberately sabotaging the USPS to reduce the number of Democratic votes—and stressed the importance of preserving mail-in voting. As people lost faith in the mail system, some on the left also used the narrative to push people to vote in person or via drop boxes. This bottom-up misinformation, coming first from concerned citizens and then amplified by influencers to, in turn, target average platform users, is a tactic that the EIP would continue to see throughout the election cycle. Overall, the story impacted the perception of the security of voting by mail for both liberals and conservatives.

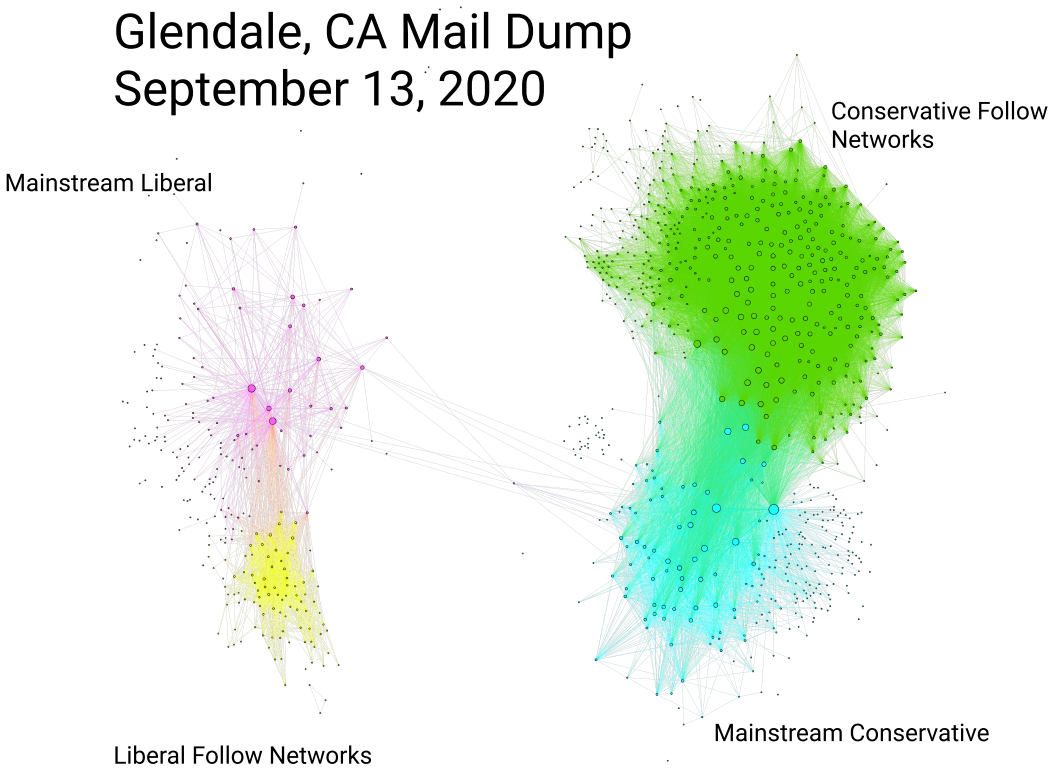


Figure 3.3: The network of influential left- and right-leaning tweets and retweets about the Glendale mail-dumping incident, where the conservative side of the network had nearly three times as many retweets. An animated version of this graph can be found in the EIP's blog post, "Emerging Narratives Around 'Mail Dumping' and Election Integrity."[13]

Figure 3.4: Tweets by conservative influencers Matt Oswalt (left) and Charlie Kirk (right) amplifying the false mail-dumping incident.

Greenville, Wisconsin

In late September, another incident of discarded mail—this one in Greenville, Wisconsin—was used to sow doubt in mail-in voting and, in some cases, to claim voter fraud. Local reporting at the time suggested that, in this case, the discarded mail did include several ballots.[14] (The Wisconsin Election Commission later said the mail did not include any Wisconsin ballots;[15] more recent reporting suggests there was at least one ballot from Minnesota among the mail.[16]) However, as in Glendale, California, strategic partisan actors distorted the significance of this event, through selective amplification, exagggerating impact, and falsely assigning deliberate intent to purported Biden-supporting USPS workers.[17] This second story appeared within weeks of the first in Glendale. While there were no absentee ballots in the mail-dumping case in Glendale, the seed had been planted that voting by mail was not safe and secure. With this second case, when several absentee ballots were actually found, pundits were able to point to both cases as support for their claims around voting by mail and, eventually, a rigged election. Throughout its monitoring period, the EIP saw many isolated incidents that seeded narratives and that were later drawn upon as "evidence" to clarify, refine, and reinforce larger narratives—a tactic that seemed to be used frequently among right-wing influencers and networks.

This narrative spread almost exclusively through conservative networks, pushed by influencers such as Charlie Kirk, The Gateway Pundit, and Breitbart News. The graph below reveals how the claim cascaded through the Twittersphere over time.

Alarmingly, this narrative made it all the way to the White House, when press secretary Kayleigh McEnany stated "Mass mail-out voting... could damage

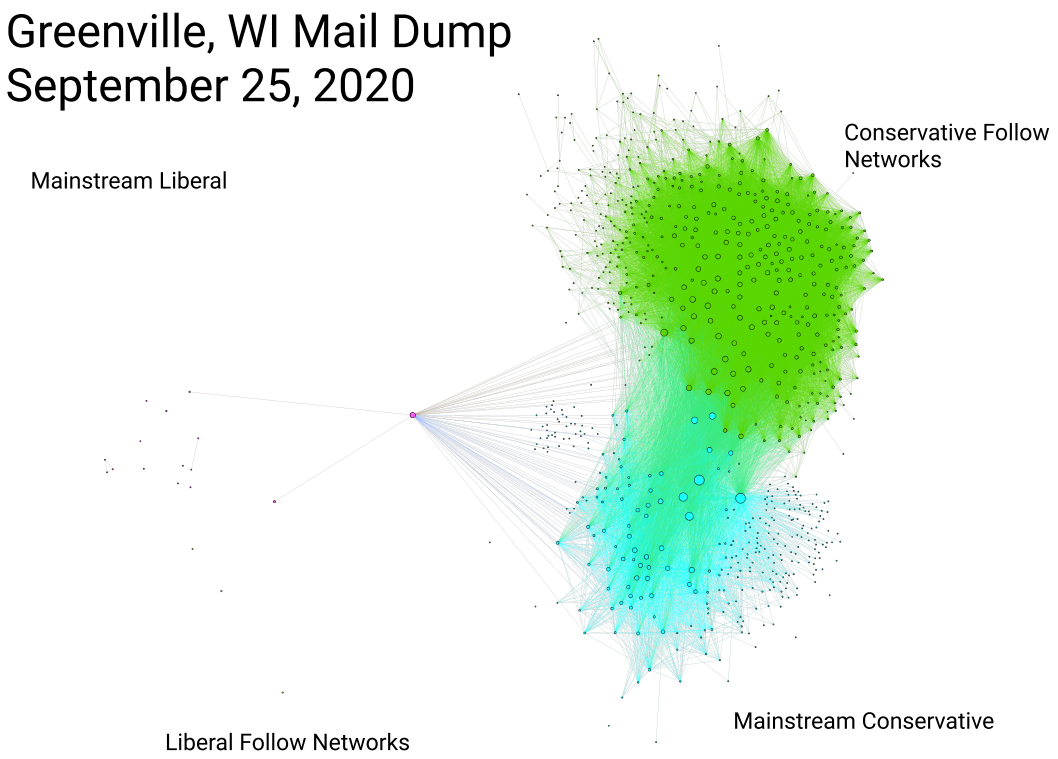


Figure 3.5: Network graph showing how narratives about the Greenville, WI, mail-dumping event spread primarily through politically conservative and pro-Trump accounts. An animated version of this graph can be found in the EIP's blog post, "Emerging Narratives Around 'Mail Dumping' and Election Integrity."[18]

either candidate's chances because it's a system that's subject to fraud. In fact, in the last 24 hours, police in Greenville, Wisconsin, found mail in a ditch, and it included absentee ballots."[20] The amplification techniques were effective in sowing distrust in mail-in voting and the USPS at large, despite neither event posing a real risk to the election results.

Sonoma, California

On September 25, a tweet that over 1,000 ballots had been discovered in a dumpster in Sonoma, California, further added to the narrative sowing distrust in mail-in voting. Elijah Schaffer, a conservative influencer and verified Twitter user, allegedly received photos of the mail-dumping incident. He posted the photos on Twitter, and other influencers ensured its rapid spread across conservative social media—including on Gab, Reddit, and Parler.

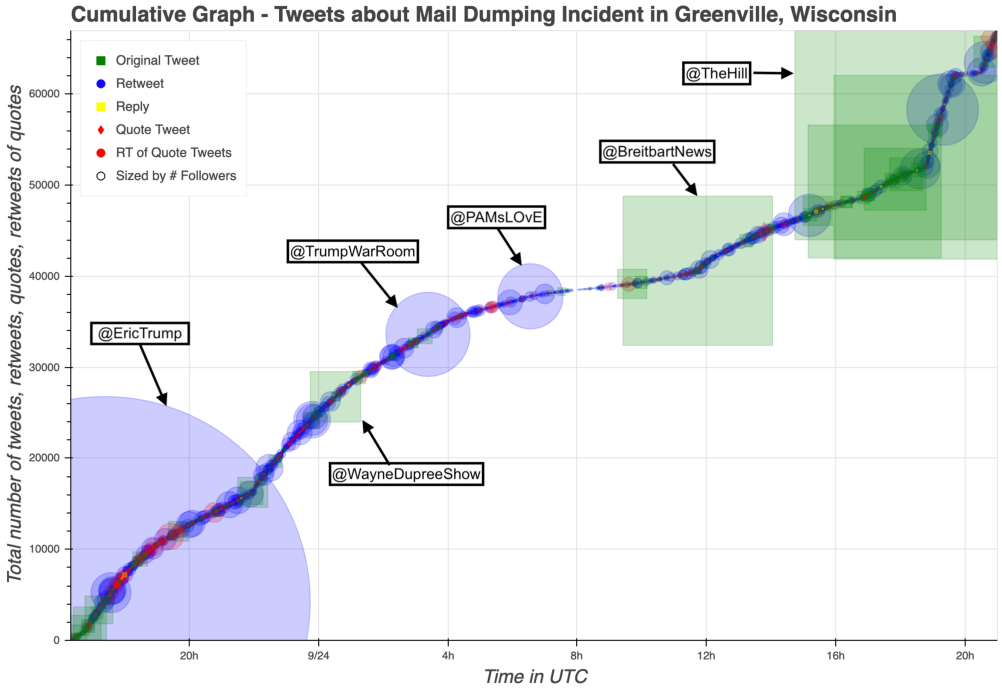


Figure 3.6: A cumulative graph of tweets about mail dumping in Greenville, Wisconsin. As shown in the graph, early propagation of the tweet was driven by pro-Trump and MAGA-branded accounts. Original tweets are green squares; retweets are blue circles. Further tweet content and author information can be found within a large interactive version on the website in the endnotes.[19]

The photo used in Schaffer's tweet was framed as evidence of potential fraud in the 2020 election. However, the image was of empty envelopes—not ballots—from 2018 that had been legally discarded.[21] Influencers including The Gateway Pundit, Tim Pool, and Donald Trump Jr. retweeted and quote tweeted Schaffer, spreading the false narrative that this was an intentional dumping of ballots with implications on the 2020 election, and reinforcing the larger narrative that mail-in voting was not secure.

In this case, the misinformation was followed by a prompt fact-check from Sonoma County on Twitter (see Figure 3.8 on page 60). On September 25, the same day as Schaffer's tweet, Sonoma County tweeted in English and Spanish that the picture had been taken out of context to promote a false narrative and properly identified the photo as containing empty envelopes from the 2018 election. This timely identification and correction serves as a model for state and local officials. However, it also demonstrates the challenge in debunking

Figure 3.7: Left, earliest tweet on the Sonoma, CA, alleged mail-dumping incident; right, example of an influencer sharing the tweet with a conspiratorial and adversarial framing.

information that has already gone viral, as the original misinformation had significantly larger engagement than the subsequent fact-check.

In each of these cases of "mail dumping," a real-world event was falsely framed to reinforce a broader narrative that undermined faith in the USPS and mail-in voting. The graph in Figure 3.9 on page 61, showing spikes in Google searches for "mail dumping" during these periods, suggests the effective amplification of the narratives.

Misinformation from the Top: Ballot Harvesting Conspiracies

In the previous section, we described ballot incidents in which misleading information or misinformation based on real-world events emerged, bottom-up, from ordinary users and was subsequently picked up by influencers and political elites. In this section, we focus on ballot conspiracy theories—ballot incidents that were framed as deliberately manipulative, with responsibility ascribed to a powerful figure. These were often first introduced by elites or influencers, many of whom had large numbers of followers on social media. Top-down, elite-driven

Figure 3.8: The County of Sonoma's tweet fact-checking the false claim that ballots were illegally dumped.

mis- and disinformation was a prominent feature of the 2020 election cycle; we will discuss the specific mechanics of "blue-check" (verified) accounts spreading claims across platforms in Chapter 4.

Ballot harvesting is the practice of a third party delivering an absentee or vote-by-mail ballot on behalf of another voter; rules governing ballot harvesting vary by state, and in most cases harvesting is not inconsistent with state law.[22] Yet it is both contentious and politicized. Its proponents argue that it increases access for those who would otherwise have difficulty voting. Its opponents contend that it increases the potential for fraud and point to historic cases of wrongdoing.

The contention over ballot harvesting generally splits along party lines with Democrats supporting the practice and Republicans opposing it. This was evident in the run-up to the 2020 election as Republican leaders publicly claimed it was rife with fraud. For example, in April 2020, President Trump tweeted

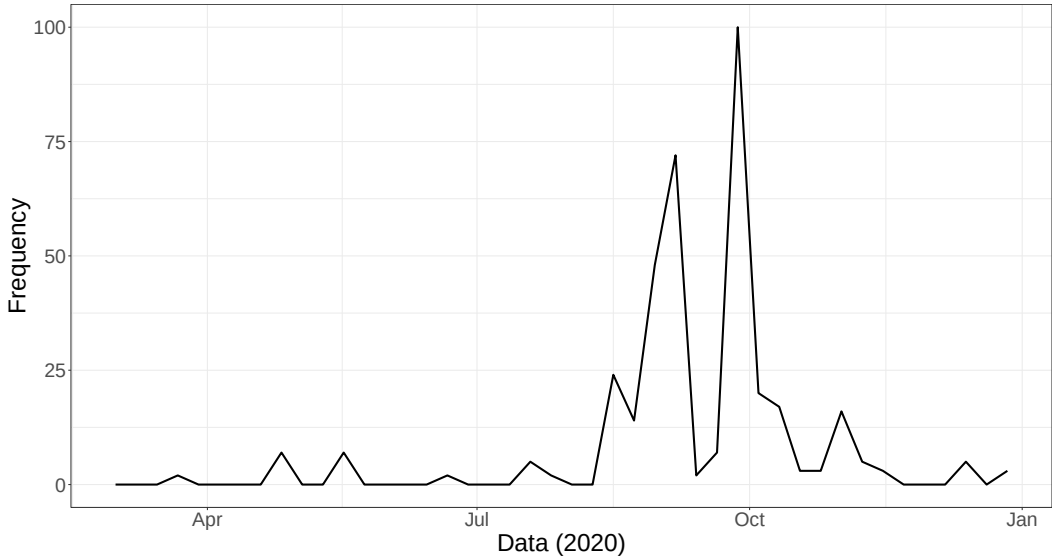


Figure 3.9: Data from Google Trends of "mail dumping" from January 2020 - January 2021.The two spikes in Google searches for "mail dumping" align with the events described above. The first spike occurs the week of September 6-12, overlapping with the Glendale, CA, mail-dumping story. The second spike occurs September 27-October 3, following both the Greenville, WI, and Sonoma, CA, stories.

that ballot harvesting is "rampant with fraud," garnering more than 250,000 likes.[23] At the Republican National Convention in August 2020, President Trump told a cautionary tale about the 2018 voter fraud case in North Carolina's 9th Congressional District—in which multiple people said a Republican political operative paid them to collect absentee ballots from voters and falsely witness a ballot.[24] And when the New York Post shared its story referenced above, conservative influencers shared it on social media.

Additionally, in August 2020, the New York Post published an article in which an unnamed Democratic operative described committing a range of alleged electoral fraud practices that could impact an election.[25] The EIP saw multiple tickets, for example, alleging "granny farming," in which workers who are sent to nursing homes to help residents fill out ballots inappropriately guide the older person's vote or assign a vote without their input.

While there have been isolated incidents of actors abusing ballot harvesting, there is no evidence to suggest it contributes to widespread voter fraud. Nonetheless, confusion around the practice enabled the ballot harvesting trope to flourish.[26]

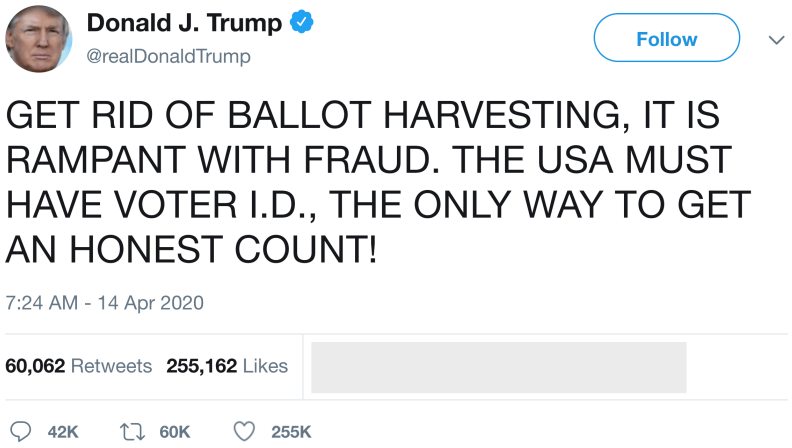


Figure 3.10: President Trump's April 2020 tweet alleging ballot harvesting is "rampant with fraud."

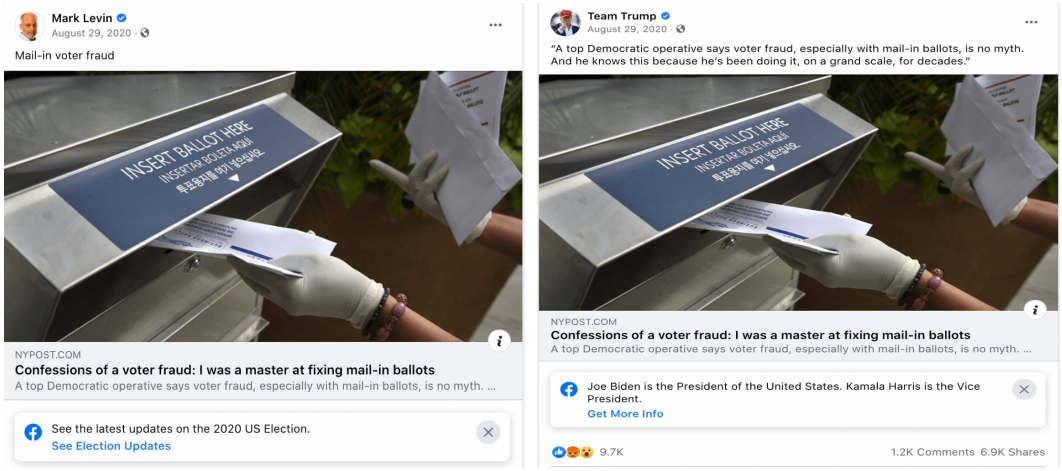


Figure 3.11: Retweets by conservative blue-check accounts of the New York Post article alleging mail-in ballot fraud. These images were saved after the election, which is why the Facebook labels appear at the bottom of the posts.

Ballot Conspiracies: Project Veritas and Beyond

One example that illustrates how elite-driven mis- or disinformation can quickly trend or garner engagement before platforms can react was a narrative that revolved around a Project Veritas video released on September 27, 2020, claiming that Representative Ilhan Omar was connected to wide-scale voter fraud in Minnesota.[27] Project Veritas, founded and led by conservative activist and provocateur James O'Keefe, describes itself as an activist group that produces investigative journalism seeking to expose corruption. It primarily targets left-leaning organizations and political figures it believes to be anti-conservative. The group is well-known for their unorthodox journalistic tactics and style, including infiltrating organizations, and surreptitiously filming. They have faced legal challenges and backlash for producing deceptively edited videos and employing unethical tactics while filming undercover. On February 11, 2021, Twitter permanently suspended Project Veritas' official Twitter account and temporarily blocked James O'Keefe's.[28]

Project Veritas was what the EIP observed to be a repeat spreader of false and misleading narratives about the 2020 election (a designation discussed in more detail in Chapter 5), generating a number of videos that were surfaced by EIP monitoring and external partners throughout the course of the 2020 campaign and flagged as false or misleading by third-party fact-checkers.[29] In this specific case, O'Keefe released a 17-minute video along with a message that began "Breaking: @IlhanMN connected to cash-for-ballots harvesting scheme." The video begins with an individual claiming that "money is everything." He then says his car is full of absentee ballots—showing what appear to be ballots on his dashboard. As we describe below, these claims were found to be misleading by independent fact-checkers.

Despite the unreliability of the Project Veritas video, it quickly gained ground. The video went viral on multiple social media platforms, driven by right-wing influencers. On Twitter, within the first 15 minutes after O'Keefe's posting, at least eight conservative influencers—including Ryan Fournier, Representative Paul Gosar, Michelle Malkin, and Cassandra Fairbanks—shared the video. Project Veritas was soon trending. Notably, Donald Trump Jr. appeared to separately upload the same O'Keefe video within seven minutes of the original post, as it was posted without a "From James O'Keefe" label. As the EIP described in a blog post about the Project Veritas video, this suggested that the Trump campaign may have had access to the video before the general public, raising questions of coordination.[30]

The release of the video also seems to have fueled an increase in the use of #ballotharvesting on Twitter, spiking after the video was shared on September 27. The hashtag primarily appeared in tweets in pro-Trump networks: more than 8,000 times, compared to 30 times in left-leaning and anti-Trump networks.

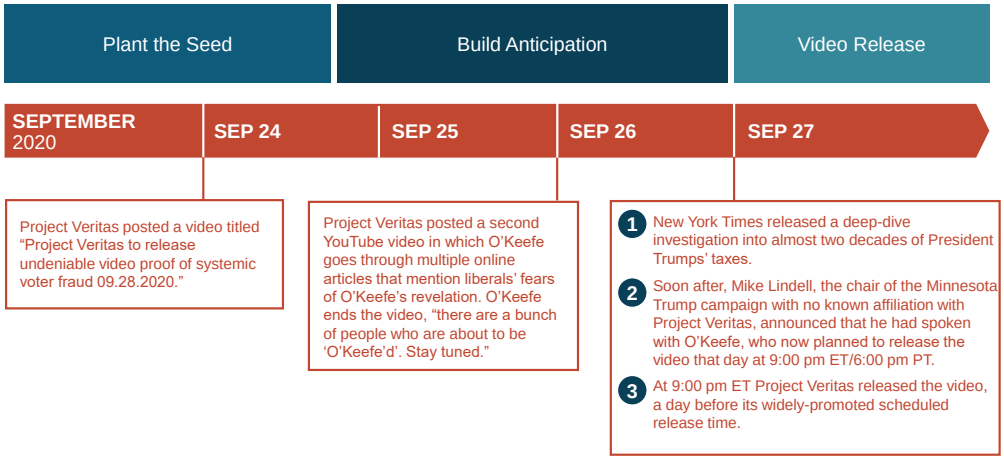


Figure 3.12: Timeline of the release of Project Veritas's video about ballot harvesting.

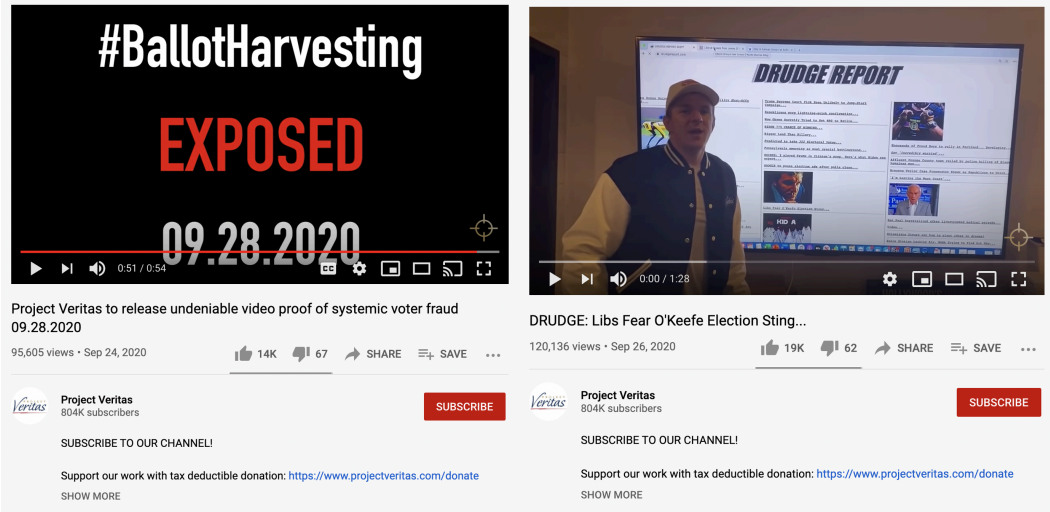


Figure 3.13: Project Veritas videos announcing the release of their video alleging voter fraud.

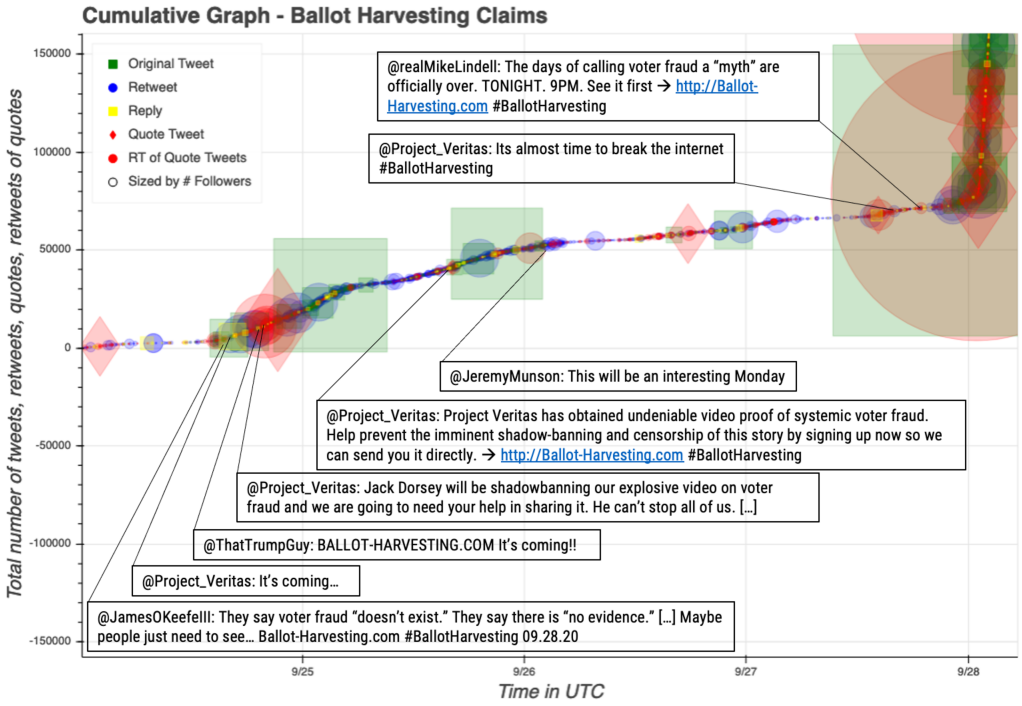


Figure 3.14: A visualization of the promotion of Project Veritas's Ballot Harvesting video campaign on Twitter. Original tweets are green squares; retweets are blue circles; quote tweets are orange diamonds; replies are yellow circles; and retweets of quote tweets are red circles.

Figure 3.15: James O'Keefe's Project Veritas video was quickly spread by right-wing influencers, including Donald Trump Jr. and Ryan Fournier, on Twitter.

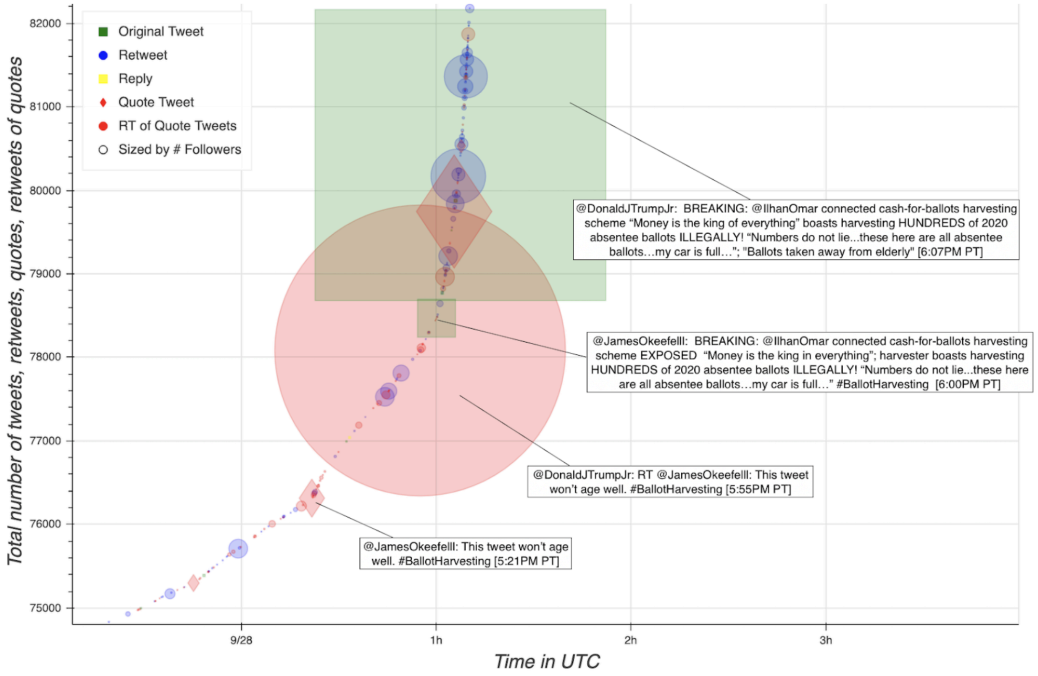


Figure 3.16: A cumulative graph of tweets after the release of Project Veritas's video about ballot harvesting. Growth of the narrative increased substantially after Donald Trump Jr.'s retweet (large red circle) and subsequent original tweet (green square).

Meanwhile, on Facebook, according to data gathered using CrowdTangle, posts with the term "Project Veritas" garnered 2.42 million interactions between September 27—the date the video was shared—and October 3, 2020. The most popular of such posts was President Trump's, in which he shared Breitbart's report of the release and said that he hopes the US Attorney in Minnesota has this under serious review.

The video's ballot harvesting claim was not well supported. As Maggie Astor of the *New York Times* described several days later, the video "claimed through unidentified sources and with no verifiable evidence that Representative Ilhan Omar's campaign had collected ballots illegally."[31] Minnesota's FOX 9 reported that the central source in the video claimed that Project Veritas offered him $10,000 and used two separate Snapchat videos to "make it appear as if he was illegally picking up ballots and offering money for votes."[32] Likewise, USA *Today* wrote that "[t]here is no actual proof of fraud or any relationship between individuals in the video and Omar or her campaign."[33] But the quick virality of

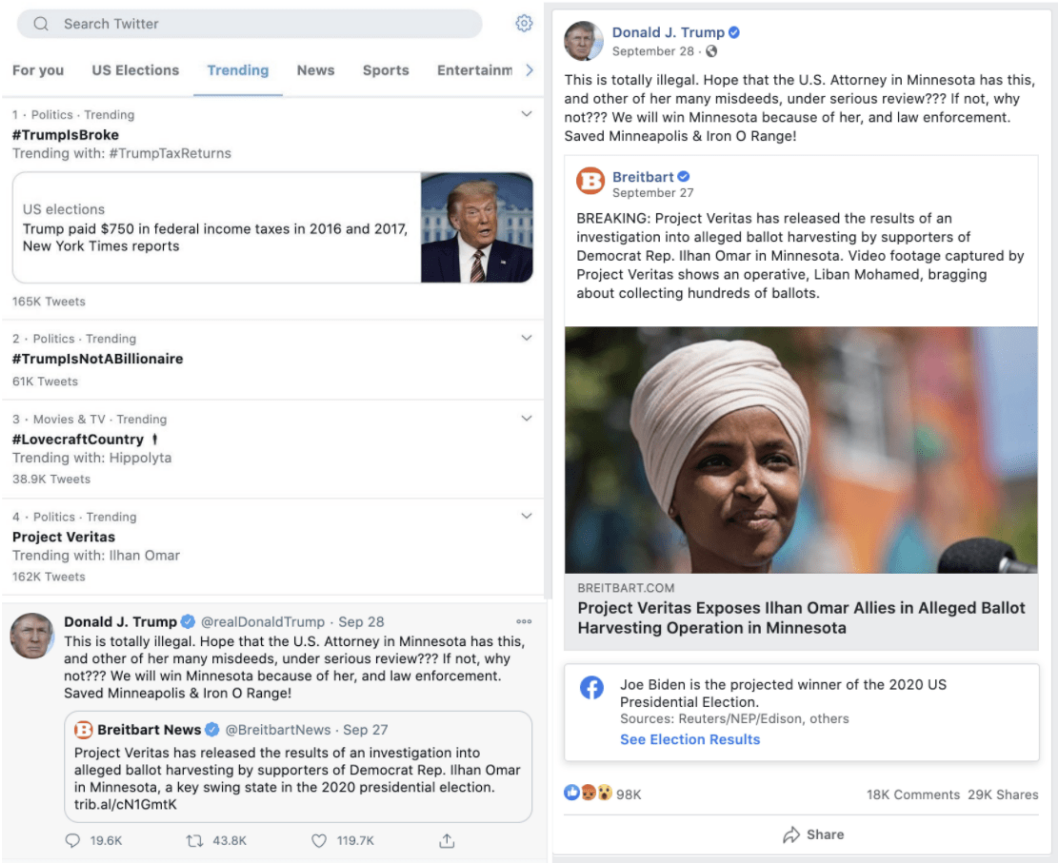


Figure 3.17: Left, President Trump's tweet about the Project Veritas video (bottom) in the trending list; right, President Trump's Facebook post. These images were saved after the election, which is why the Facebook "projected winner" label appears at the bottom of the post.

the claim allowed it to take root as a persistent narrative.

The Project Veritas video is notable for two reasons. First, it shows how politically motivated misinformants can capitalize on confusion; Americans were broadly unaware of the details of third-party ballot collectors, allowing O'Keefe and right-wing influencers to fill the gap with misleading and unverified information.

Second, it is an example of false or misleading information that was driven top-down by verified accounts with large amplification capabilities. The video was both created by right-wing influencers (O'Keefe and Project Veritas) and initially disseminated by a network of right-wing social media users with large followings. Top-down mis- and disinformation is dangerous because of the speed at which it can spread; if a social media influencer with millions of followers shares a narrative, it can garner hundreds of thousands of engagements and shares before a social media platform or fact-checker has time to review its content.

The Impact of Ballot-Related Narratives

Mail dumping and ballot harvesting appeared frequently in the days leading up to the 2020 election. Exaggerating the effect of found, discarded, and destroyed ballots in the pre-election period may have laid the foundation for widespread receptivity to allegations of similar fraud on election night. It can be difficult to make empirical assessments of how online content affects real-world opinions; there is usually little more than engagement data such as likes, shares, and reactions to go on, and those may signal more about pre-existing beliefs than an audience being persuaded by the evidence presented. However, a Pew survey from November 2020 indicated widespread concern about mail-in voting:[34]

- Of the 54% of respondents who voted in person, approximately half had cited concerns about voting by mail as a major reason why they did.
- Only 59% of respondents answered that they were "very confident" that their vote was accurately counted, as opposed to 71% in 2016, 68% in 2012, 73% in 2008, and 68% in 2004. This is the lowest response for a presidential or midterm election in 16 years.
- Only 30% of respondents were "very confident" that absentee or mail-in ballots were counted as intended.

While it is unclear what specific information source or pre-existing beliefs shaped public opinion on this issue, what is clear is that a large percentage of the electorate was open to the claim that mail-in ballots were a potentially significant source of fraud or irregularities. Vocal holders of these beliefs were pivotal in shaping the conversation about the legitimacy of the election both on and after Election Day, as we will explore throughout this chapter.

Election-Theft Narratives

In addition to ballot-specific misinformation, the pre-election period was marked by narratives that laid the broad groundwork for claims of a stolen election. This took the form of repeated and baseless allegations that voting wouldn't matter at all—that the election result was already decided or would be decided by political elites looking to undermine democracy. Claims of an impending "steal" were prominent in both left-leaning and right-leaning networks prior to the election; one side claimed that Trump would steal the election, the other that Biden would do the same.[36] Some of these claims were spread, top down, through the same network of online influencers as the ballot misinformation. Viewed retroactively, these were harbingers of the Stop The Steal campaign that would grow into a significant movement after the election, before ultimately erupting into violence.

Figure 3.18: A tweet from right-wing influencer Candace Owens after the election, supporting claims of a rigged election and broad allegations of election fraud.[35]

The EIP tickets tracked three distinct narrative threads within the "stolen election" meta-narrative prior to the election:

- The Red Mirage/Blue Wave: A weaponization of expert predictions that election results would shift dramatically over time due to the timing of counts for mail-in ballots; both the right and left leveraged the expert predictions to claim the election would be "stolen" by the other side.
- Army for Trump: A real movement by the Trump campaign to solicit evidence of election fraud from Trump's supporters, based on the premise that the Democrats were attempting mass voter fraud; this sparked a reaction from the left, which alleged that the Trump campaign was trying to lay the groundwork to steal the election away from Biden.
- The "Color Revolution": An idea pushed by far-right activists that began with the claim that America was experiencing a Deep State-backed color revolution to undermine the Presidential victory of Trump via a coup.

The overall meta-narrative of an impending stolen election, and the repetition with which it was deployed, provided a frame that could be used to process future events: any new protest, or newly discovered discarded ballot, could be processed as additional proof that a "steal" was indeed underway, that there

was a vast conspiracy to steal the election from President Trump, and that the election results would be illegitimate.

The Red Mirage and the Blue Wave

Changes to voting procedures due to COVID-19 led to expert predictions that more mail-in voting would take place in 2020 than ever before—and that mail-in voting would skew heavily Democrat. Many election analysts predicted that this would lead to an initial "red mirage" followed by a "blue wave" in some states: the Democratic share (or proportion) of the vote would increase substantially between early counts from day-of voting and final ballot totals, as mail-in ballots were processed.[37] In the weeks leading up to the election, analysts hypothesized about which states would see a large blue shift, which would see minimal shifts, and which might even go in reverse.[38]

Some right-leaning influencers and communities attempted to frame these predicted shifts as preemptive evidence of a "stolen election" in two ways. First, they pushed a false but largely non-conspiratorial narrative that mass aggregate mail-in ballot fraud by individuals would be responsible for any shift. Second, some offered a set of false, conspiratorial claims that there would be "ballot-stuffing" on Election Day, asserting that there would be a systematic, coordinated effort by local authorities to alter the election night vote via the addition of forged ballots or the swapping of "real" ballots for fake ones. More conspiratorial communities, such as QAnon adherents, argued that attempts by the press and electoral experts to educate voters to anticipate voting shifts were in fact evidence that elites were strategically planning to steal the election and were attempting to inoculate voters to that reality (see Figure 3.19 on the next page).

The "red mirage" and "blue wave" narrative of election night shifts did ultimately come to pass largely as experts predicted, with Biden taking the lead as mail-in ballots were counted. It has become one of the most enduring narratives underpinning claims of a "stolen election," weaponized by conservative influencers as evidence that the Democrats supposedly delivered boxes of ballots to polling places. In the weeks following the election, prior conspiratorial claims to expect theft evolved into specific allegations of voting machine fraud and "found ballots" in swing states that President Trump lost. Many of the influencers argued that the "red mirage" had in fact been a "red tsunami" interrupted by Democratic manipulation. Further, statistical misinformation (discussed in Chapter 4) began to appear as influencers alleged that the "blue wave" occurred not because of the predicted voting behavior and ballot-processing procedures, but rather due to Democratic interference to steal the election, alleging that it had been an illegitimate election from the outset.

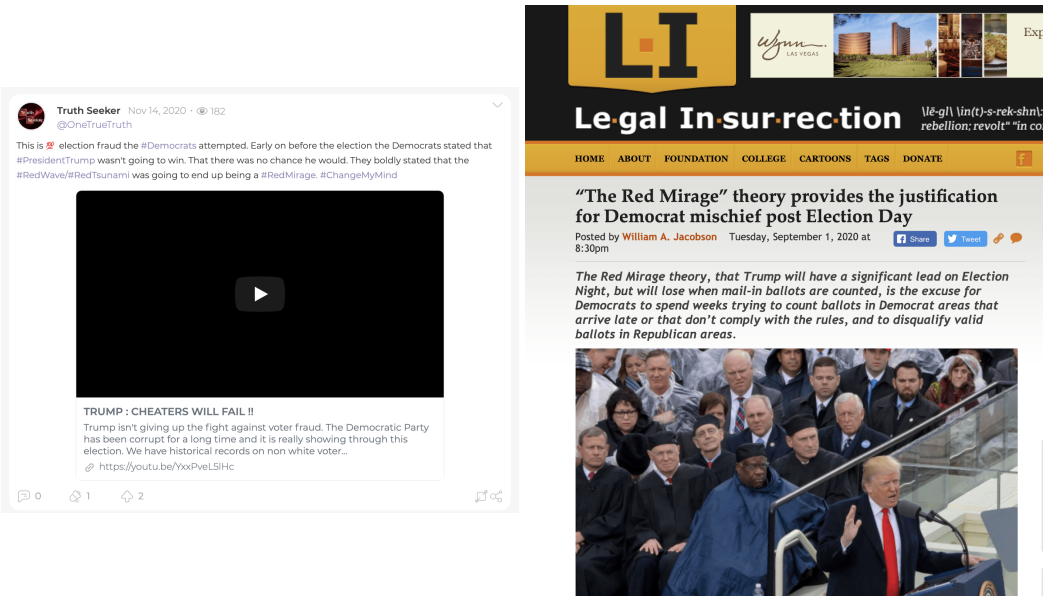


Figure 3.19: Left, a QAnon-aligned post on Parler alleging that the "red mirage" was part of the Democratic plans to steal the election; right, an article from conservative blog "Legal Insurrection" arguing the same.

Army For Trump

Prior to the election, the Trump campaign proliferated the idea that the election was going to be stolen by the Democrats, using ballot-fraud claims and other procedural misinformation as well as the weaponization of the red mirage/blue wave prediction, to spark outcry among supporters.

On September 21, 2020, Donald Trump Jr. posted a video on Facebook calling on supporters to join an "election security operation" the campaign called "Army for Trump." Citing concerns that the "Radical Left" was laying the groundwork to steal the 2020 election, Trump Jr. asked supporters to sign up to join the Trump campaign's Election Day team through a site called "DefendYourBallot." The website recruited volunteers for general get-out-the-vote activities but also asked if they had legal expertise and included a form where supporters could report alleged election incidents directly to the campaign (see Figure 3.20).

This call to action was repeated by President Trump on Twitter and in the first presidential debate in which he urged supporters to "go into the polls and watch very carefully" for fraud.[39] He also shared the link on his Facebook Page, urging supporters to "Fight for President Trump"; the post was engaged with over 200,000 times on Twitter (see Figure 3.21 on the following page). Appealing to volunteers to act as unofficial poll watchers was intended to motivate Trump's base, providing additional pathways to participation in the election. It also set

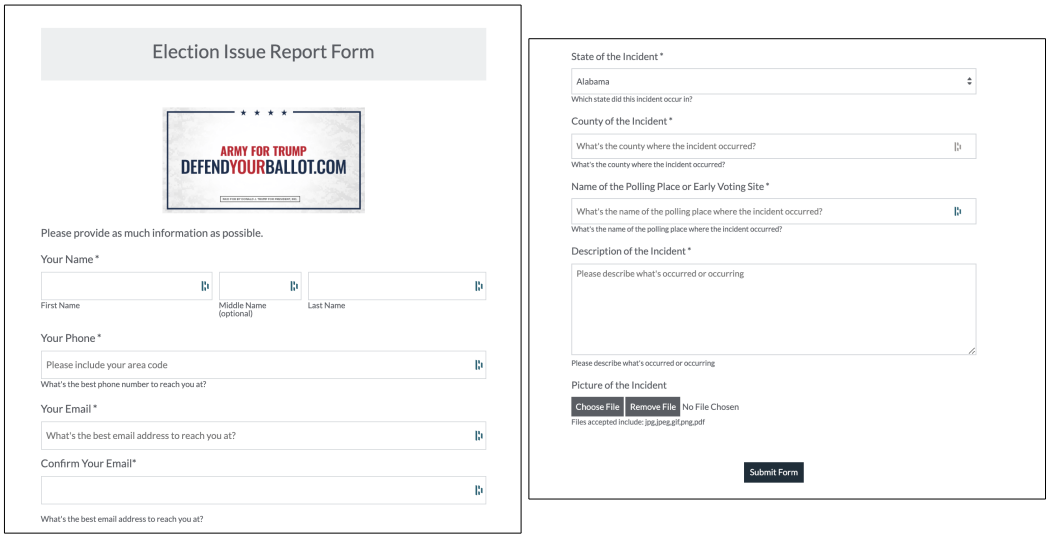


Figure 3.20: The Election Issue Report Form on the "Army for Trump" website.

the stage for untrained volunteers to amass "evidence" to support the type of narratives discussed in the prior section of this report, in which misleading claims were leveraged to allege systematic ballot fraud. Although we cannot tell if the people who shared videos on Election Day and the weeks following were officially part of the "Army for Trump," there were multiple incidents in the EIP ticket database that included video footage of supposed fraud that actually documented innocuous events (e.g., video and photographic claims of ballot theft that was in fact reporters moving camera equipment).[40]

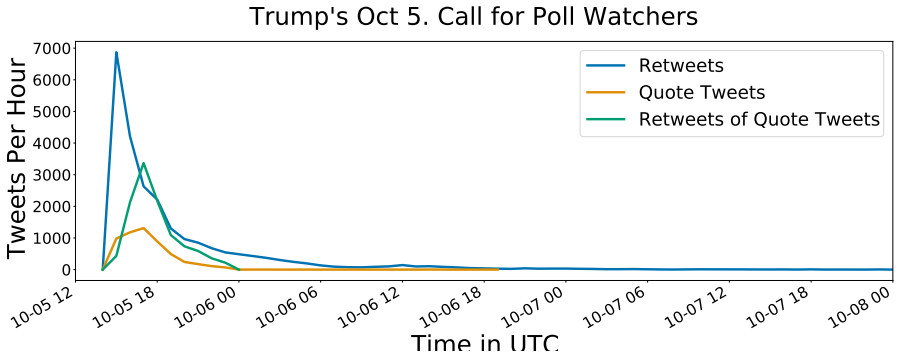


Figure 3.21: A graph showing Twitter engagement with Trump's initial "Army for Trump" tweet, reproduced below. Retweets in blue; Quote Tweets in orange; Retweets of Quote Tweets in green.

The "Army for Trump" initiative assisted in creating a vast trove of images, videos, and stories of purported incidents that could be selectively chosen, falsely framed, and fed into "voter fraud" narratives. It had one other additional impact: it sparked fear and outrage on the left. Left-leaning influencers claimed

that the "Trump Army" itself was an attempt by the campaign to steal the election. They framed Trump's calls to action as having the potential to incite violence at the polls, concern about which might result in voter suppression. An analysis of 100 randomly selected tweets reacting to Trump's call to be a "Trump Election Poll Watcher" revealed significant concerns about the movement—with only four out of 100 quote tweets expressing support for the call. Forty-nine out of 100 tweets believed that Trump's call had the potential to incite violence at the polls on Election Day (such as the quote tweets below).

> **Original Trump tweet:** *Volunteer to be a Trump Election Poll Watcher. Sign up today! #MakeAmericaGreatAgain*[41]

> **Quote tweet 1 (Oct 5, 2020):** *@jack @Twitter This tweet is encouraging election violence. "Fight" and "Army" — those are bugle calls, not dog whistles. Twitter, take down this tweet.*[42]

> **Quote tweet 2 (Oct 5, 2020):** *To be clear, the president who has repeatedly encouraged political violence, said "stand by" to heavily-armed extremist groups, and repeatedly spread lies about voting procedures, is now calling on his supporters to raise an "Army for Trump" at the polls. Just so dangerous.*[43]

Left-leaning conversation therefore framed the "Army for Trump" as an attempt to steal the election through the propagation of fear; this fear was heavily reflected in mainstream media coverage (see Figure 3.22).

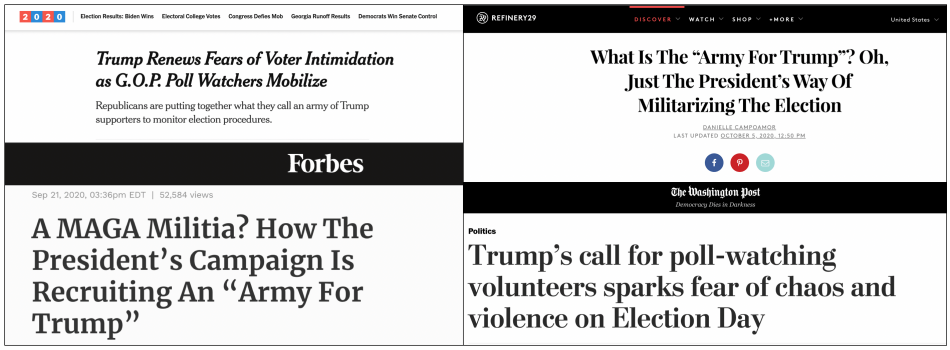


Figure 3.22: Media coverage of "Army for Trump." Clockwise from top left: *New York Times*, Refinery29, *Washington Post*, and Forbes.

Calls to join the "Army for Trump" thus fed into both left and right-leaning narratives. Right-leaning social media accounts pushed the idea that the election would be stolen, to justify the need for the Army. Left-leaning accounts reframed

these public calls to watch as incitements to violence, and as an intimidation tactic with the potential for voter suppression.

Color Revolution

The narratives that the integrity of the election was being strategically and intentionally undermined moved into the conspiracy realm with claims that a Deep State was orchestrating a coup in a "color revolution." The term was coined in the late twentieth century to describe revolutions in which repressive regimes tried to hold on to power after losing an election, spurring widespread domestic protests for democratic change. But in 2005, autocrats in China and Russia began to redefine the term away from its popular-activism origins, using it instead to imply externally imposed regime change—in particular, regime change designed to look like a popular uprising despite being furtively orchestrated by intelligence services from Western democracies.[44] Occasionally, Russian state media, such as RT, ran op-eds insinuating that domestic protest movements in the United States were in fact color revolution regime-change tactics. However, during the 2020 election, the term was applied to American politics in a somewhat unexpected way: prominent American conservative influencers suggesting that the US was experiencing a Deep State-backed color revolution intended to steal the election from President Trump.[45] The first major push to introduce mainstream audiences to the narrative came from former Trump speechwriter and prominent conservative commentator Darren Beattie, who wrote about the theory and discussed it in podcasts in conversation with Steve Bannon, Michelle Malkin, and Adam Townsend. Right-wing newsite Revolver.News produced a detailed series laying out his claims. On September 15, Beattie appeared on Tucker Carlson Tonight, giving the narrative mainstream attention on a program with an audience of millions.

The propagation of the color revolution narrative occurred over several months, waxing and waning in popularity, but gradually gaining adoption as a frame to explain grass-roots Black Lives Matter protests and voting irregularities as part of an elaborate plan by Democratic operatives to steal the election.

After Election Day, use of the term "color revolution" spiked a few more times, driven mostly by videos and posts that echoed the pre-election narrative, alleging that the "coup" had happened. Two of these spikes of activity, November 29-30 and December 11-14, seemed to revolve around tweets and posts by Lin Wood, a defender of President Trump who prominently promoted various conspiracies to explain Trump's loss.[46]

Wood's tweets expanded the narrative of the color revolution to include possible foreign interference from China, and went so far as to link COVID-19 to the broader theme. The claims were shared to Facebook, Parler, and other social media platforms.

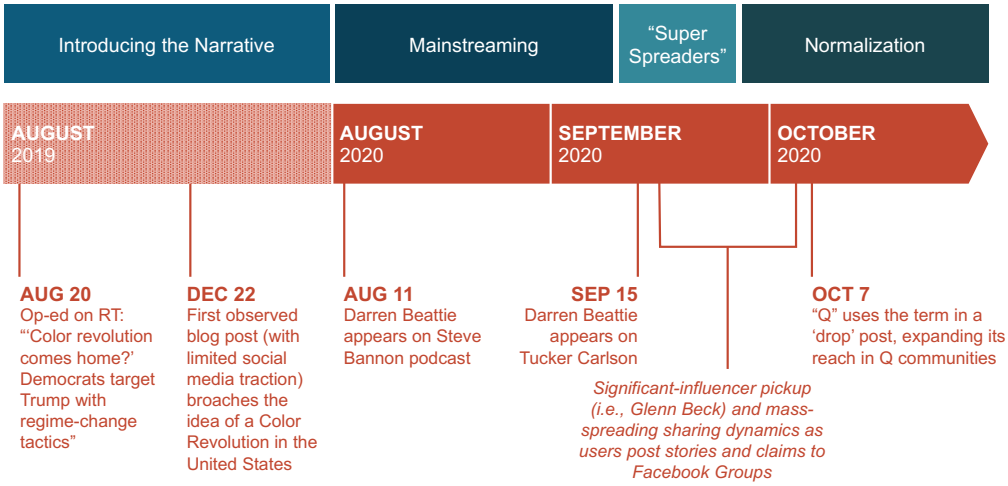


Figure 3.23: Timeline of notable events related to the color revolution leading up to Election Day.

Figure 3.24: Interactions on posts involving the term "color revolution" post-Election Day, using CrowdTangle data.

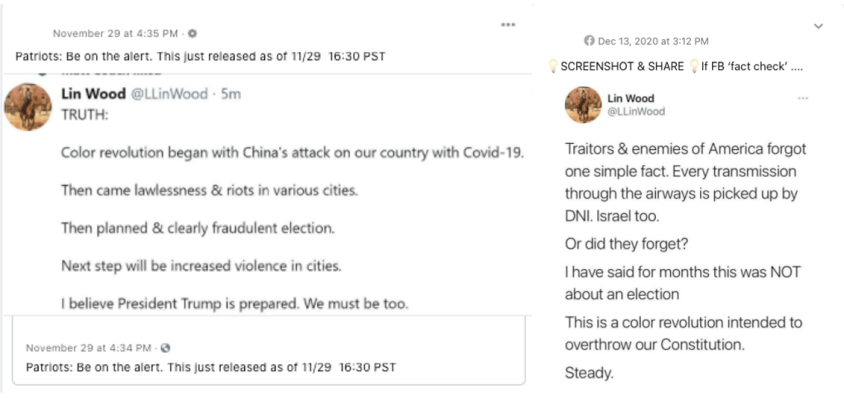


Figure 3.25: Tweets by Lin Wood that were shared on Facebook at the end of November and mid-December about a "color revolution."

The broad claim that a color revolution was underway, with nefarious actors purportedly funding protests and destroying ballots, provided a convenient way for those seeking to delegitimize the election to connect unconnected events and to create a compelling villain while doing so. True to top-down narrative dynamics, social media users who found the story appealing moved the narrative into a variety of Facebook Groups and Pages through shares.

By promoting this narrative, right-leaning influencers appeared to be priming their audience to read future events surrounding ballots and protests as potentially part of that revolution. Accordingly, in the unsettled period between Election Day and when the race was called by national media outlets for Biden (and, it would turn out, even beyond that), believers of the color revolution narrative were primed to accept challenges to the integrity of the election. As we will see as we progress through this chapter, this would eventually manifest into legal challenges that relied on affidavits from individuals primed to believe election fraud narratives with little to no knowledge of the ins and outs of election procedures. Even on election night itself, the conviction that the election would be stolen seems to have motivated the voters of Arizona to latch on to one specific claim—felt-tip pens had led to the mass disqualification of the ballots of Trump voters—that would give rise to an online movement and a real-world protest.

Case Study 1: #Sharpiegate

At 5:01 am PT on Election Day 2020, a conservative Chicago radio broadcaster sent a tweet noting that felt-tip pens were bleeding through ballots.[47] A few hours later, at 12:16 pm PT, an anonymous Twitter account sent a tweet addressing James O'Keefe of Project Veritas: "Sharpie pen issues on Chicago paper ballots," it began, and alleged that scanners couldn't read the ballots because the markers were bleeding through.

These were the first tweets the EIP observed alleging that the black felt-tip, Sharpie-brand markers some poll workers were handing out were rendering ballots unreadable. The concern that ballots marked with Sharpie markers would not be counted began to make its way around conservative communities on social media. While the Chicago tweet did not gain much traction, the narrative quickly spread to Parler and Facebook.

Local news in Chicago picked up the story and attempted to correct the record: by 5:48 pm PT, CBS 2 had written an article reassuring voters that Sharpies were just fine.[48] The story faded in Chicago, but concerns about Sharpies at polling places began to migrate across the country, popping up in tweets associated with geographic locales that had become the focus of the vote count as the evening progressed.

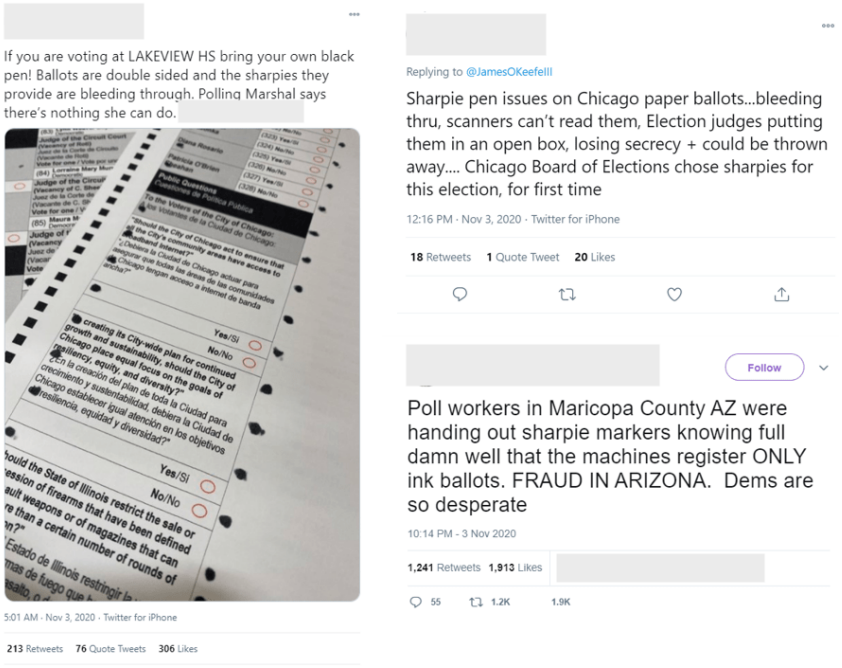


Figure 3.26: Left and top right, tweets about Sharpie pens on ballots in Chicago; bottom right, a tweet about the same concern in Arizona.

One of these locales was Arizona. A video that originally appeared on Facebook went viral: an off-camera videographer (the account name on the video suggests the videographer is right-wing activist Marko Trickovic)[49] is broadcasting his conversation with a pair of women who are describing voting machines not reading Sharpie-marked ballots. In the video, the women claimed that Maricopa, Arizona, poll workers were trying to force voters to use Sharpies despite the presence of pens. The man recording the video can be heard on camera stating, "so they're invalidating votes, is what they're doing." As the evening progressed, and into the next morning, the video was reposted by numerous accounts and appeared on YouTube, Twitter, Rumble, TikTok, Parler, and Reddit.

After West Coast polls closed and it became apparent that certain swing states—particularly Arizona—were closer than polls had predicted, the controversy about Sharpies was offered as an explanation. It became a hashtag, #Sharpiegate, and various pieces of content alleged that poll workers were handing out the markers deliberately to Trump supporters to prevent their votes from being counted. "FRAUD IN ARIZONA. Dems are so desperate," read one tweet from 10:14 pm PT on Election Day that had over 3,000 likes and retweets. The Maricopa County Facebook Page seemingly tried to assuage concerns very early on; even as the debate about Sharpies was largely still a Chicago concern, it posted a PSA noting that Sharpies worked just fine on Maricopa's machines.[51] Despite

Figure 3.27: The video of a woman stating that voting machines were not reading ballots marked with Sharpie pens was shared on Twitter, YouTube, and Rumble.[50] The Rumble video text reads "Maricopa County votes need to be counted by hand! People were given Sharpies instead of ballpoint pens when Arizona voting machines can't read felt-tip marker. So ballots were entered into a slot but never counted."

the attempts to debunk the developing controversy, however, concerned and angry posts continued to appear within pro-Trump communities and channels on Reddit, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, Parler, and others.

Fox News called Arizona for Joe Biden at 11:20 pm on election night, but overall the day ended without a clear winner, as many election experts had predicted.[52] President Trump gave a speech in which he noted that the races in Pennsylvania and Michigan were still in play, suggested that Arizona was too, and then declared:

> "We did win this election. So our goal now is to ensure the integrity for the good of this nation, this is a very big moment. This is a major fraud on our nation. We want the law to be used in the proper manner. So we will be going to the U.S. Supreme Court. We want all voting to stop. We don't want them to find any ballots at 4 o'clock in the morning and add them to the list. OK? It's a very sad, it's a very sad

> moment. To me, this is a very sad moment, and we will win this, and as far as I'm concerned, we already have won it."[53]

The Sharpiegate narrative continued to accelerate the next day, beginning early in the morning on November 4. Content appeared on Facebook, Twitter, and Parler alleging that Trump voters specifically had been given Sharpies to invalidate their ballots. As the day progressed, conservative influencers such as Charlie Kirk, Dinesh D'Souza, and Steven Crowder asked questions about the controversy and retweeted claims made by users alleging fraud.

Local media and election officials in other swing states in which Sharpie markers had been used, including Pennsylvania and Michigan, posted articles addressing the use of Sharpies in their own jurisdictions, attempting to fact-check what appeared to be turning into a widely disseminated conspiracy theory. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) posted its own update to its Rumor Control webpage.[54] Election officials reported inquiries to the Election Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center (EI-ISAC), noting that they were seeing posts alleging that voters who used Sharpies would not have their votes counted. The Michigan Attorney General posted a tweet asking members of the public to stop making threatening and harassing phone calls to her staff suggesting they shove Sharpies into inappropriate places.[55]

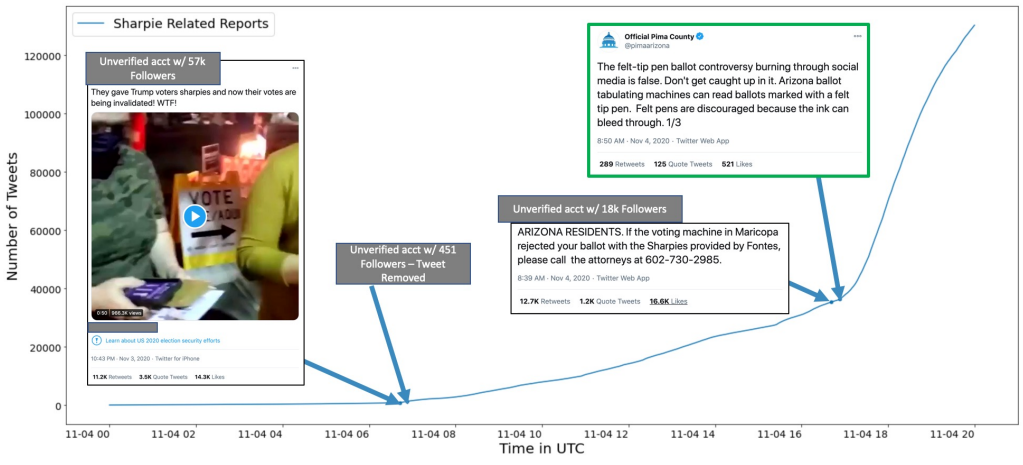


Figure 3.28: Graph showing the spread of Sharpiegate tweets (cumulative) before and after Pima County's fact-check tweet.

By early evening on November 4, however, the Sharpiegate theory left the realm of internet chatter and became a live-action rallying cry for Trump supporters

who felt the election had been stolen. Protestors, some open-carrying long guns, gathered at the Maricopa County Recorder's Office building, carrying signs, waving Sharpies, and chanting about election theft. A local pro-Trump Facebook Page, AZ Patriots, livestreamed the protests for several hours.[56]

Protesters returned on the evening of November 5 as well. This time, well-known conspiracy theorist Alex Jones of Infowars showed up, climbed atop a car, and gave a speech about "meth-head Antifa scum," George Soros, and stolen elections, occasionally chanting "1776."[57]

Figure 3.29: Alex Jones at a Sharpiegate protest outside the Maricopa County Recorder's Office on November 5.[58] (AP Photo/Matt York)

Throughout the three-day period in which Sharpiegate was a significant focus, the social platforms responded primarily by labeling and taking down content. The AZ Patriots livestreaming Page, which had been embroiled in controversy over leader Jennifer Harrison livestreaming harassment on several occasions (generating Facebook strikes), was taken down.[59] Other livestreamers, however, such as Steven Crowder on YouTube, discussed Sharpiegate or ran the footage from the protests, and did not receive any labeling contextualization until well after the fact; as we will discuss in Chapter 4, this is one of the unique challenges of moderating a livestream compared to a text article.[60]

Sharpiegate provides a detailed look at how a misunderstood incident about ballots compounded into a narrative among voters primed to believe that the election would be stolen. As the ballot counts continued in the days following Election Day, the predicted blue wave indeed began to materialize, and allegations of fraud and demands for recounts began to increase. Sharpiegate became one narrative among many that fed into a meta-narrative, the slogan for which

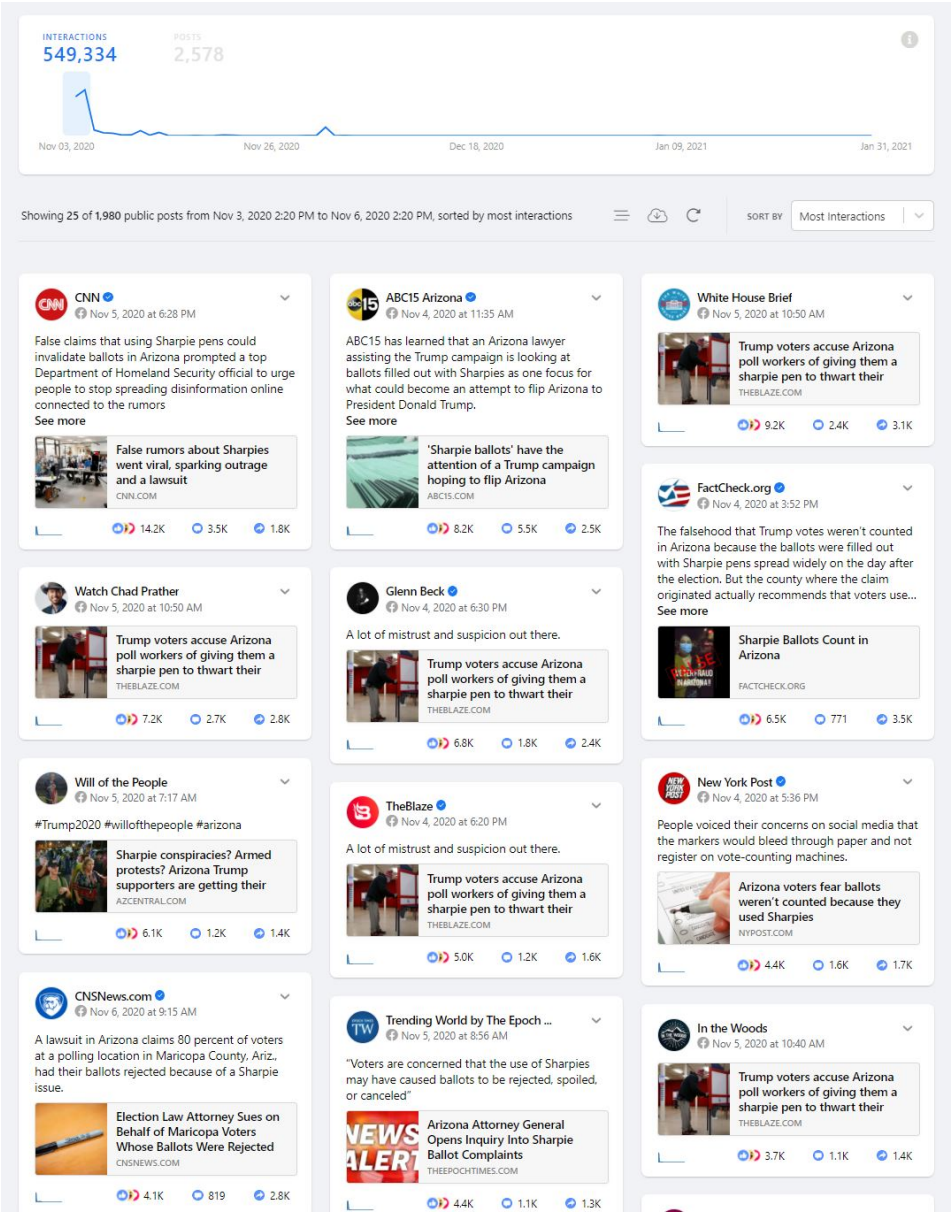


Figure 3.30: A CrowdTangle dashboard showing results sorted by most interactions for "arizona sharpie" in public Pages, verified Pages, and public Groups, beginning on November 3, 2020.

would come to define the 2020 election for many Trump voters: "Stop The Steal."[61]

Case Study 2: #StopTheSteal

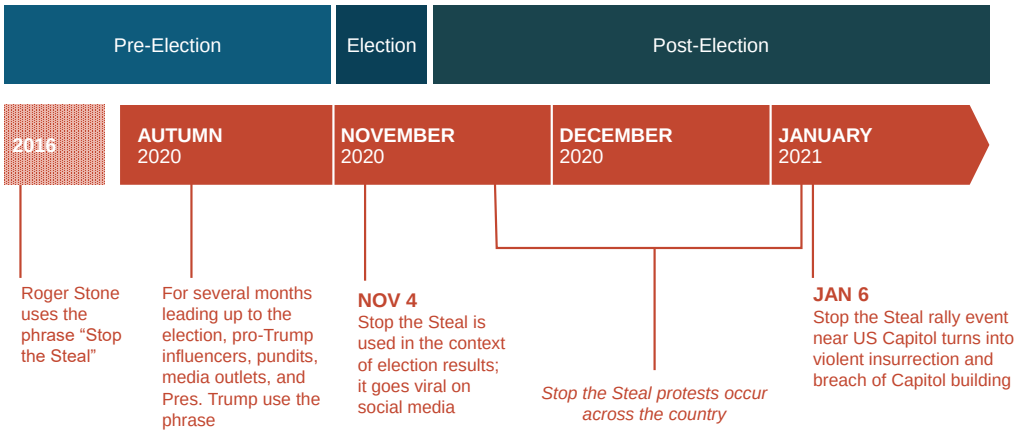


Figure 3.31: Timeline of the Stop the Steal narrative.

In the days after the election, "Stop the Steal" grew to encompass not only the events related to Sharpiegate, but the broader overall theme that the election had been decided by fraud. This rallying cry was aimed at motivating Republicans and Trump supporters to halt purported Democratic electoral malfeasance. It became a hashtag across multiple platforms, an encompassing and enduring phrase. In the weeks following the election, the narrative took a distinctly conspiratorial turn.

At its core, #StopTheSteal falsely postulates that Trump actually won the presidential election, that Democrats stole the election, and that it is up to Republican "patriots" to reverse this—i.e., to stop the Democrats' theft. In the days following the November 2020 election, the call was repeated by prominent conservative influencers (including President Trump),[62] and grew into a broad Stop the Steal movement that attracted a significant presence offline as well. The phrase appeared in real-world protest organizing materials and in signs at protest events. In mid-December, over a month after Election Day, Stop the Steal rallies were still occurring in the US; in January 2021, a protest with that slogan erupted into a violent insurrection at the US Capitol.

The "Stop the Steal" phrase itself was seeded far ahead of the 2020 presidential election. Conservative political strategist Roger Stone launched a "Stop the Steal" movement in 2016, according to a CNN article; his Stop the Steal "voter protection" project was sued in federal court for attempting to intimidate minority voters.[63] However, in a November 2020 blog post on his personal website, Stone took pains to clarify that he was not "a participant in any of the organizations that adopted my phrase in this year's election."[64] He repudiated the CNN article that referenced him in another blog post, though he shared an image advertising an Atlanta #StopTheSteal rally supported by StopTheSteal.us (at that point the forefront of "Stop the Steal" in 2020).[65]

Figure 3.32: The Stop the Steal rally advertisement posted on Roger Stone's website.

#StopTheSteal was used sporadically leading up to Election Day: for example, after some states (Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and North Carolina) extended the date by which they would accept mail-in ballots, right-wing Twitter accounts used the hashtag while denouncing the changes and calling for action. Notably, Ali Alexander—a right-wing personality who would later help organize the Stop the Steal movement and amplify numerous sub-themes and conspiracies—was one of the actors who tweeted about the four states' mail-in ballot extensions using #StopTheSteal on September 22.[66] In a retweet of another pro-Trump account, Alexander and the original poster framed the states' move as "favoring Democrats": "They're stealing this election in broad daylight. Extending mail-in deadlines, harvesting... We need massive #StopTheSteal protests all across the country!"[67]

Right-wing media ecosystems were also early adopters of this hashtag. Multiple September articles on The Gateway Pundit mentioned "Stop the Steal"; one article included a poll asking readers, "Do you think Democrats are trying to steal the election?" and another used the hashtag #StopTheSteal in reporting

Figure 3.33: Tweets using #StoptheSteal on September 22.[68]

on Trump supporters allegedly being blocked from observing Philadelphia early voting locations.

Members of the Trump family on Twitter, and President Trump himself, also pushed the concept of a "steal" early in the election season.[70] While these tweets did not all mention #StopTheSteal explicitly, they nonetheless helped foster the cohesion of several disjointed narratives into one conceptual framework of election theft.

Prior to the election, early uses of #StopTheSteal were used to discuss a range of themes described in this chapter: ballot harvesting, mail-in voting, Trump winning but Democrats stealing the race, Army for Trump, the need for poll watchers, a rigged election, and more. The repeated priming of Trump-supporting audiences to believe that the election had been stolen likely helped to bolster the Stop the Steal movement as it further bloomed after the election.

On Election Day, as results did not break in the President's favor, prominent conservative influencers quickly took up Stop The Steal. By the evening of November 3 and November 4, verified Twitter users, including recently elected officials and

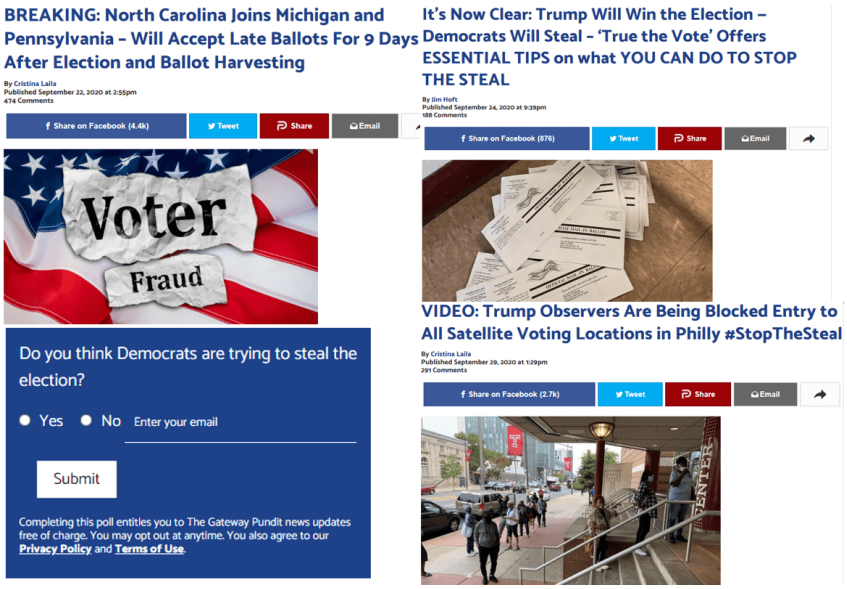


Figure 3.34: The Gateway Pundit articles mentioning "Stop the Steal" in September. Left, a September 22 article and poll. Top right, an article from September 24. Bottom right, an article from September 29.[69]

right-wing media outlets, were repeatedly pushing the Stop The Steal narrative online. Some of these narratives were accompanied by more specific claims about individual state irregularities (such as alleging they were not counting ballots), while others were more general statements that the Democrats could not have won the election fairly.

Besides conservative pundits, a handful of conservative politicians began to amplify #StopTheSteal immediately after the election. One was Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Republican Congressional candidate in Georgia who won her race in the House of Representatives. Greene leveraged multiple social media platforms simultaneously to spread Stop the Steal messages and promote herself. She posted a Stop the Steal petition on both Facebook and Twitter that, once completed, redirected to a donation page. The petition spread in various Facebook Groups, including an anti-Whitmer Michigan Group.

Stop the Steal Groups on Facebook were created at least as early as November 4, 2020. One Group, STOP THE STEAL, quickly swelled to hundreds of thousands of members. In addition to providing a place where users shared election-related conspiracy theories, the Group served as a hub to find various Stop the Steal rally Facebook events across the country, some hosted by other entities. This primary Group was shut down by Facebook on November 5 at 2:00 pm ET, with media reports suggesting it was due to content inciting violence;[71] data from an EIP CrowdTangle archive shows that it had at least 7,000 posts with slightly

Figure 3.35: A collage of some of the top conservative pundits using #StopTheSteal on November 3 and 4. On TikTok, a user filmed a live video of Charlie Kirk using the hashtag #StopTheSteal, indicative of the cross-platform nature of this content.

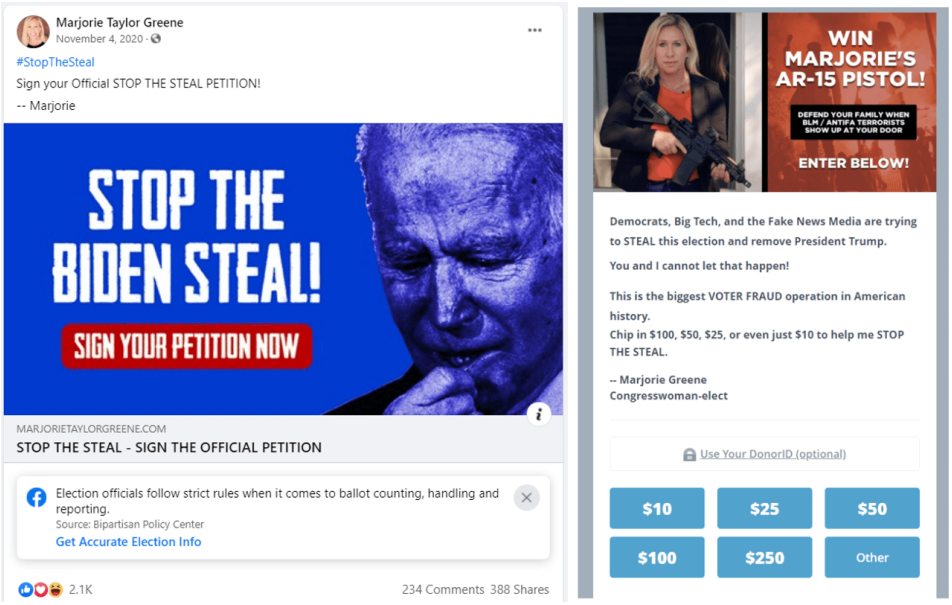


Figure 3.36: Left, a post from Representative Majorie Taylor Greene, who heavily promoted #StopTheSteal. In one of her posts, the petition led to her donation site, right.

over 800,000 interactions.

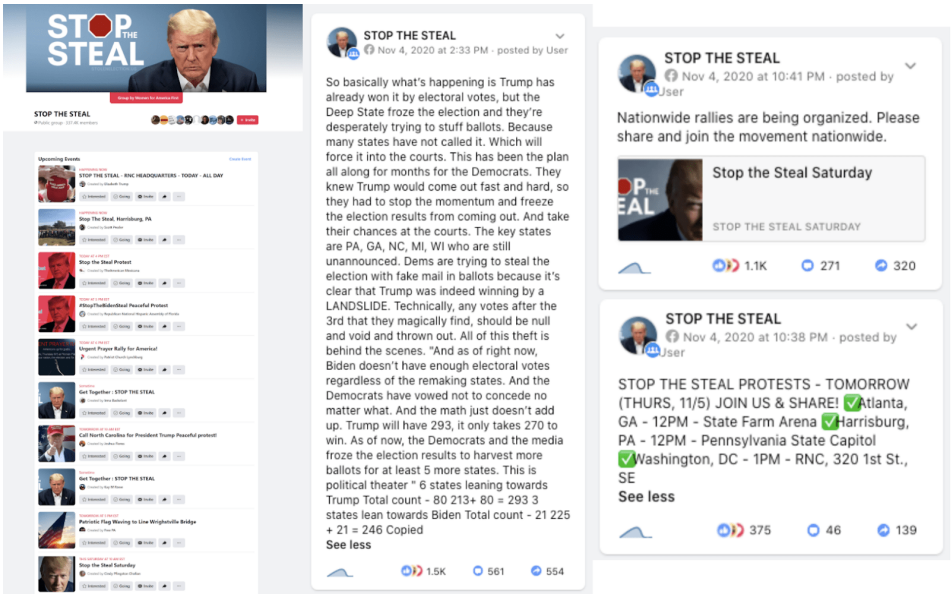


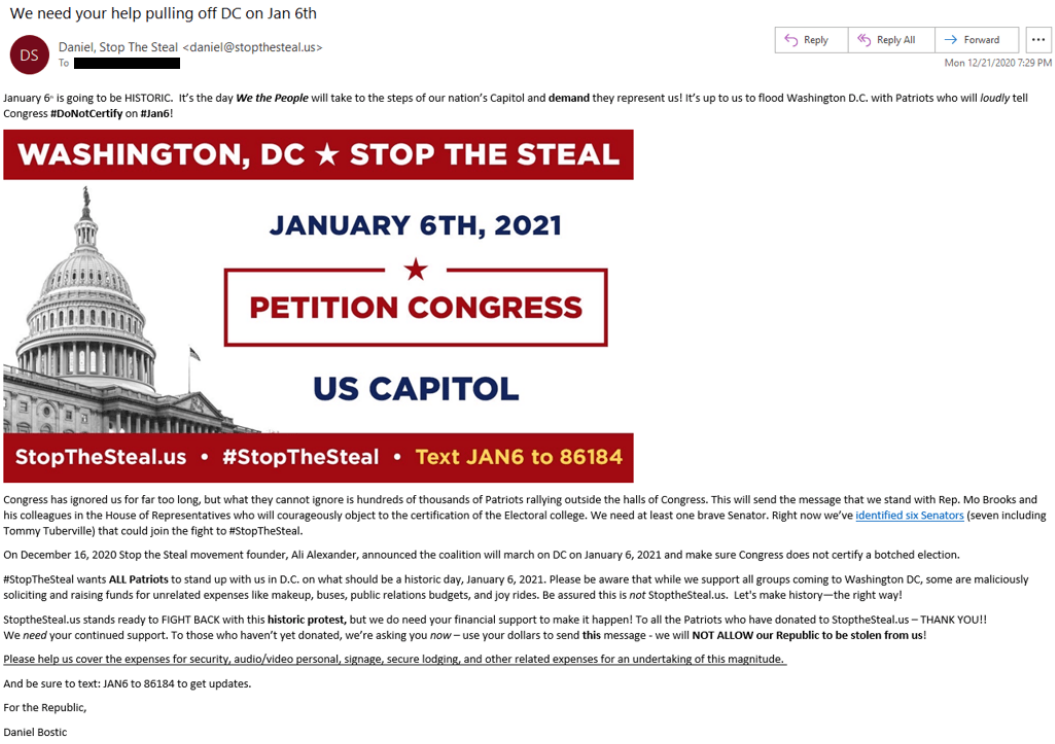
Figure 3.37: Image of several posts in the STOP THE STEAL Group on Facebook. The event page of the Group listed upcoming events in different locations hosted by various entities.

Facebook Groups like STOP THE STEAL helped solidify the Stop the Steal movement's offline component. For example, on November 5, Facebook events were scheduled for locations including California; Virginia; Washington, DC; Pennsylvania; and Florida. StopTheSteal.us—a website created by Ali Alexander—and its newsletter also helped to rally people to different locations around the country. Inflammatory rhetoric was common; for example, in a since-removed tweet on December 7, Alexander tweeted that he was "willing to give my life for this fight." The Arizona Republican Party retweeted, adding, "He is. Are you?"[72]

Coverage of Stop the Steal in conservative media outlets varied. In the first two weeks after the election, Fox News had two article headlines mentioning Stop the Steal in the context of news items (Facebook's STOP THE STEAL Group takedown and an incident at a rally).[73] In contrast, more niche right-leaning fringe outlets covered it uncritically, and at times seemingly supportively; for example, on One America News Network (OANN), coverage of Stop the Steal included a since-removed article outlining how voters were holding Stop the Steal rallies in multiple states because of alleged election irregularities.[74] The outlet had steady coverage of the movement, telling viewers how to rally and broadcasting an exclusive interview with organizers declaring that they will "Fight on."[75]

Stop the Steal rallies at times morphed into broader pro-Trump post-election protests—for example, the Million MAGA March in DC on November 14 was heav-

ily promoted by Stop the Steal influencers, and the insurrection on January 6 was promoted by StopTheSteal.us. In an email on December 21 from StopTheSteal.us, the January 6 protest was heavily advertised, stating, "#StopTheSteal wants **ALL Patriots** to stand up with us in D.C. on what should be a historic day, January 6, 2021...StoptheSteal.us stands ready to FIGHT BACK with this **historic protest...we will NOT ALLOW our Republic to be stolen from us!**" (bolding theirs).


We need your help pulling off DC on Jan 6th

DS Daniel, Stop The Steal <daniel@stopthesteal.us>
To [redacted]

Reply | Reply All | Forward | ...
Mon 12/21/2020 7:29 PM

January 6th is going to be HISTORIC. It's the day ***We the People*** will take to the steps of our nation's Capitol and **demand** they represent us! It's up to us to flood Washington D.C. with Patriots who will *loudly* tell Congress **#DoNotCertify** on **#Jan6**!

Congress has ignored us for far too long, but what they cannot ignore is hundreds of thousands of Patriots rallying outside the halls of Congress. This will send the message that we stand with Rep. Mo Brooks and his colleagues in the House of Representatives who will courageously object to the certification of the Electoral college. We need at least one brave Senator. Right now we've identified six Senators (seven including Tommy Tuberville) that could join the fight to #StopTheSteal.

On December 16, 2020 Stop the Steal movement founder, Ali Alexander, announced the coalition will march on DC on January 6, 2021 and make sure Congress does not certify a botched election.

#StopTheSteal wants **ALL Patriots** to stand up with us in D.C. on what should be a historic day, January 6, 2021. Please be aware that while we support all groups coming to Washington DC, some are maliciously soliciting and raising funds for unrelated expenses like makeup, buses, public relations budgets, and joy rides. Be assured this is *not* StoptheSteal.us. Let's make history—the right way!

StoptheSteal.us stands ready to FIGHT BACK with this **historic protest,** but we do need your financial support to make it happen! To all the Patriots who have donated to StoptheSteal.us – THANK YOU!! We *need* your continued support. To those who haven't yet donated, we're asking you *now* – use your dollars to send **this** message - we will **NOT ALLOW our Republic to be stolen from us**!

Please help us cover the expenses for security, audio/video personal, signage, secure lodging, and other related expenses for an undertaking of this magnitude.

And be sure to text: JAN6 to 86184 to get updates.

For the Republic,

Daniel Bostic

Figure 3.38: Image of a December 21 email from the StopTheSteal.us newsletter.

The Stop the Steal movement's enduring power likely stems from several factors. The phrase is all-encompassing of various other false claims and narratives pushed about the election, providing an opportunity for many constituencies to gather both virtually, and in real life, under one banner. Stop the Steal content spread not only on Facebook, but also on Twitter, Parler, and Telegram. Because of the many figures pushing the narrative across social media and on websites, the movement was robust enough to survive individual takedowns of misleading electoral content and targeted deplatforming.

#Maidengate

Many narratives co-occurred with Stop The Steal, alleging a variety of forms of voter fraud. Some of them rehashed allegations made in elections past;

for example, the hashtag #DeadVoters claimed that dead people had voted in the election via mail-in ballots (this peaked on November 11, 2020). Another hashtag in this vein was #Maidengate,[76] which began on November 9, 2020, via hashtagged tweets from an account alleging that a Michigan mother's vote had been stolen by an impersonator using her maiden name. The poster claimed to know several people who had discovered that a ballot in their name had been cast in another state. She described this as intentional fraud, and called on voters to check if they had been registered in multiple states due to past addresses or name changes.

The claim of mass manipulation via maiden names, absent any evidence besides anecdotal hearsay, was subsequently promoted on Twitter by Ali Alexander, who created a website dedicated to the hashtag to try to collect evidence of voter fraud. He promoted the Maidengate conspiracy on Periscope, gathering 41,000 viewers. #Maidengate chatter and content from the original tweeter's website appeared on Reddit and Facebook[77] and the hashtag appeared approximately 1,800 times on Parler. By November 12, the Twitter account was suspended.

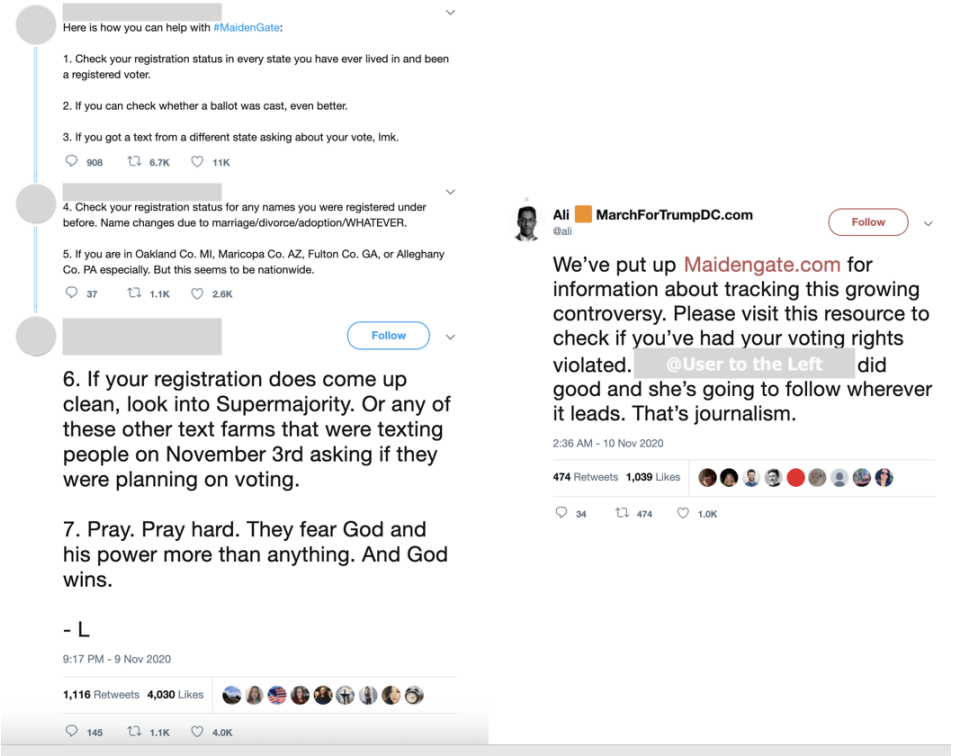


Figure 3.39: Left, tweets that precipitated #Maidengate; right, Ali Alexander's tweet promoting the Maidengate conspiracy.

#Maidengate went sufficiently viral that it generated attention from major media outlets focused on debunking election misinformation, including the *New York*

Times. As the *Times* noted,

> "Soon, the claim that unauthorized people had cast votes under the maiden names of real voters started trending online. From Monday to Wednesday morning, more than 75,000 posts pushing #MaidenGate appeared on Twitter, peaking at 2,000 between 2:10 and 2:15 a.m. on Tuesday, according to Dataminr, a tool for analyzing social media interactions. Beyond Twitter, the #MaidenGate rumors spread to Facebook, YouTube and groups associated with Stop the Steal, which have promoted the false narrative that Democrats stole the election from President Trump. But no evidence was offered to support the #MaidenGate claim in the original tweet. The tweet included no details on the maiden name that supposedly had been stolen, so there was no way to verify the claim."[78]

We will discuss the specific mechanics of how these types of bottom-up "friend-of-a-friend" narratives spread further in Chapter 4. We include it here as an example of the way in which many sub-components of the Stop the Steal narrative were often based on unverifiable claims recast as facts.

The claims based on alleged voter irregularities, however, were at least rooted in the realm of the plausible. There was another collection of narratives, repurposed to explain how the "steal" took place, that were far afield of mainstream reality, yet were still amplified on national television by some of President Trump's closest advisors: outlandish election conspiracies in which powerful dark forces purportedly conspired to steal the election using secret "Deep State" technologies to change votes.

Outlandish Claims: Attempts to Explain the "Steal"

Conspiracy theories have increased in visibility in online social spaces over the last five years; prominent among them is the cultlike conspiracy theory known as QAnon, which alleges that President Donald Trump spent much of his presidency battling a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophile elites. Believers of this conspiracy are estimated to number in the low millions and many are supporters of President Trump.[79] In this section, we discuss two specific conspiratorial narratives that attracted significant attention in the weeks and months following the election: the first, which we will call "Hammer and Scorecard," began years prior to the 2020 election. The second, which we will call "Dominion" after the election technology company that figures prominently in the narrative, rose to prominence alongside allegations of irregularities in voting machines. However, it merged with the Hammer and Scorecard theory to create a hybrid conspiracy that spread throughout pro-Trump social media spaces. After Election Day,

these conspiracies were deployed within the stolen election meta-narrative to "expose" the machinations behind the purported theft.

Hammer and Scorecard

In 2017, little-known conservative blog TheAmericanReport.org published a story claiming that a government supercomputer called "The Hammer" was created in 2009 by the CIA under President Obama.[80] The article claimed that the supercomputer was designed for spying on, and gathering data from, the American public and conservative politicians, including Donald Trump. This machine supposedly included an application called "Scorecard," which was capable of manipulating election systems by switching votes to preferred candidates. The claims underlying the story were made starting in 2013 by Dennis Montgomery, described as a "CIA contractor-turned-whistleblower" who claimed to have built the system. Various election results worldwide, and in the United States, were attributed to the work of Hammer and Scorecard. As the conspiracy re-emerged, updated for the events of 2020, fact-checking organizations and CISA repudiated them; some pointed out Montgomery's "history of deception."[81]

Dominion

Early coverage of Dominion Voting Systems occurred within the general discussion of electoral integrity, though mentions of the company appear to have taken off in earnest after two actual software glitches on Election Day in Georgia counties were tied to Dominion software.[82]

In Morgan County and Spalding County, Georgia, outages in electronic poll books temporarily prevented voters from using voting machines on Election Day, resulting in extended voting hours.[83] While the electronic poll books (the lists of eligible voters in a precinct) were manufactured by Knowink, a subcontractor of Dominion, the usage of Dominion Voting machines in these counties would later lead to accusations of widespread faults in Dominion's software.

The next day, a series of reports emerged alleging voting irregularities in Antrim County, Michigan, again tied to Dominion: as votes were being reported, several thousand votes in the county were incorrectly reported for Joe Biden rather than Donald Trump.[84] This error was quickly noticed and resolved. While it would later be attributed by the Michigan Secretary of State to human error,[85] narratives soon emerged that Dominion's software, which was used to tabulate these results, was responsible for the glitch. Prominent verified influencers on social media began explicitly linking this incident to a broader conspiratorial narrative saying Dominion voting systems were manipulating vote counts all over the country.[86]

As the Dominion issues were occurring, a since-deleted video grew popular, featuring retired General Tom McInerney claiming the "Scorecard" application had been used by the Obama-Biden campaign in 2012 to steal votes in Florida, and was now being deployed by the Biden-Harris campaign in Florida, Georgia, Texas, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, Nevada, and Arizona. Other YouTube channels such as SGTreport and CDMedia made similar claims, alleging a conspiracy to use technology to steal votes.[87] The videos spread to Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Parler, and were republished on alternative video platforms such as Rumble and BitChute. At this point, though, the two narratives were still largely on separate tracks.

On November 6, GOP Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel alleged that there had been fraud large enough to overturn Michigan's election results, citing the Antrim County reporting error and suggesting that 47 other counties in Michigan using the same software may have been affected.[88] Disputing McDaniel's claims, the Michigan Secretary of State released another statement reiterating that the reporting incident was human error that had been caught by the county's processes and quickly resolved, and that no other counties were affected.[89] Concurrently, however, conservative media outlets and influencers began noting that Dominion software was used in 30 states, including all swing states, to imply nationwide malfeasance on behalf of Dominion. Articles in the The Gateway Pundit and Breitbart began connecting the Michigan and Georgia incidents to suggest that the two cases were related.[90] The Breitbart article received upwards of 300,000 interactions on Facebook alone, and was posted by President Trump.[91] Similar claims of widespread flaws were shared by influential right-wing individuals and groups such as The Western Journal and Mike Huckabee, and in Spanish by Mexican author Alfredo Jalife-Rahme.[92]

Intersection of the Narratives

The Dominion narrative merged with the Hammer and Scorecard theory after Trump campaign attorney Sidney Powell went on Fox News with Lou Dobbs on November 6 and spread a now disproven theory claiming that the software glitch that caused erroneous vote counts in Michigan was in fact the deliberate work of the "Hammer and Scorecard" program.[94] Powell, who was later disavowed by the Trump campaign after a series of scathing legal rulings in cases she helped litigate, gained credence in the Trump orbit for her willingness to promote unsubstantiated fraud theories.[95] Powell claimed that the purported CIA technology altered 3% of the vote total in pre-election voting ballots that were collected digitally.

The converging narratives were amplified by conservative website The Gateway Pundit, which quoted Powell at length.[96] Similar claims appeared on Trump-supporting media channels such as OANN. While the Dominion and Hammer

Figure 3.40: Tweets pushing the Dominion conspiracy, including one from President Trump.[93]

and Scorecard narratives initially were amplified together, after November 6 mentions focusing on the Dominion narrative subsumed Hammer and Scorecard (see Figure 3.41 on the following page); mentions of the latter dropped off precipitously, while the former remained significant.

Once the Dominion narrative subsumed the Hammer and Scorecard narrative, Donald Trump and his campaign quickly became the most prolific spreaders. President Trump first tweeted about Dominion on November 12, and tweeted dozens more times in the days following. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "REPORT: DOMINION DELETED 2.7 MILLION TRUMP VOTES NATIONWIDE." Rudy Giuliani repeated similar claims on November 11 and the days after.[97]

For weeks after the election, the Dominion narrative persisted and was adapted into ongoing narratives around electoral fraud by a variety of communities. One video (on YouTube, Rumble, and Reddit) purporting to feature a "smoking gun"

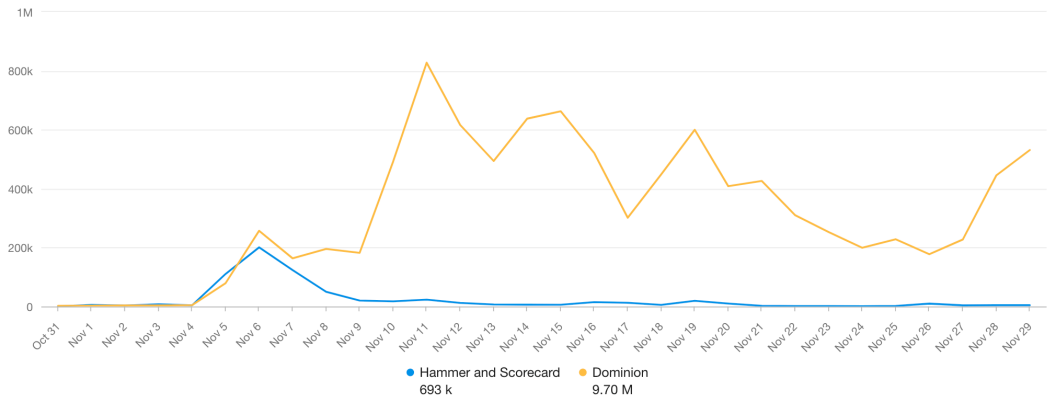


Figure 3.41: Mentions of Hammer and Scorecard (blue) were initially linked to mentions of Dominion (yellow), but were eventually consumed by the Dominion narrative. (Source: Meltwater Social)

regarding Dominion Voting Systems machines in Pennsylvania was widely shared by high-profile accounts in Trump- and QAnon-supporting communities nearly four weeks after the election.[98] Another theory suggests Smartmatic, another technology company, was orchestrating Dominion's supposed interference.[99] Yet another suggests several USB memory cards containing the cryptographic key to access Dominion Voting Systems were stolen in Philadelphia.[100] These theories, which have been amplified using #StolenUSBs and #Mitattack, were published by various outlets, including Russian state media outlet Sputnik International (which credulously reported the claims of 8kun administrator and QAnon aficionado Ron Watkins, calling him a "US cyber-security expert"), and were repeatedly amplified by the President on Twitter.[101]

The claims became increasingly outlandish. Allegations appeared claiming Dominion had ties to individuals frequently scapegoated by conservatives including Bill Gates, George Soros, and even members of the Venezuelan government.[103] Others alleged Dominion had links to China, posting URLs to the US Patents and Trademark Office website featuring a licensing agreement between the company and Chinese bank HSBC.[104] The same day that news broke of Russia-attributed cyberattacks on US government infrastructure using vulnerabilities in SolarWind software, The Gateway Pundit published a piece claiming Dominion used the same software, a claim that was quickly denied by Dominion representatives.[105] Both Dominion and Hammer and Scorecard have also been used as key pieces of evidence for the "Kraken" narrative in which Sidney Powell would "release the Kraken" by dropping indisputable evidence of voter fraud in lawsuits led by the President's legal team, and by the general Stop The Steal movement.[106]

The Dominion-meets-Hammer and Scorecard narrative has been adopted into

Figure 3.42: A tweet claiming a link between Dominion voting machines and Smartmatic.[102]

the broader belief systems of various right-wing communities, including the Proud Boys, the far-right militia group Three Percenters, and the Daily Stormer, a Neo-Nazi publication.[107] #Dominion was used in 1 of every 7 tweets from QAnon accounts.[108] QAnon groups used the hashtag #LordMarkMallochBrown to demonstrate supposed ties between Dominion software systems and George Soros. Lord Mark Malloch-Brown is a board member of SGO, the parent company of Smartmatic, and is also on the board of Soros-founded organization Open Society.

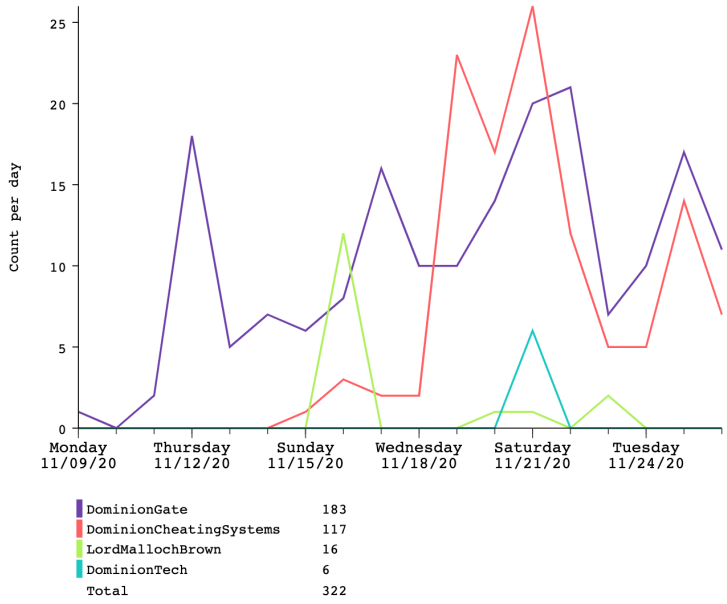


Figure 3.43: Hashtag use on Twitter for hashtags related to Dominion Voting System fraud narratives.

The Dominion and Hammer and Scorecard narratives take on additional significance for their link to ongoing incidents of real-world harm. Since the election, Dominion employees have been doxxed, harassed, and threatened by right-wing influencers and members of the general public.[109] In early December a now-offline website, EnemiesOfThePeople[.]us, was created (later attributed to Iran, and discussed in our report's "Foreign State-Backed Actors" section), featuring personal information about multiple Dominion employees with crosshairs shown over the faces of each targeted individual.[110] Most recently, Dominion has begun to file defamation lawsuits against prominent figures involved in the perpetuation of the conspiracies we have described, including Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell.[111] As of the writing of this report, several of the publications that aired the claims, such as American Thinker, have retracted them.[112]

The Hammer and Scorecard and Dominion conspiracies reinforced the Stop The Steal movement, which ultimately led to violence. The hashtag appeared on the banner of one of the first websites to announce the January 6 rally in Washington, DC: "#DONOTCERTIFY #JAN6 #STOPTHESTEAL #WILDPROTEST."[113] And as the violent insurrectionists breached the Capitol on that day, #StopTheSteal signs could be seen across the crowd. In the next section, we trace threats of violence during the 2020 election, leading up to that tragic day.

3.4 Election-Related Violence

The 2020 election season brought with it high tensions, and concerns about violence were prevalent leading up to, during, and after the election. The EIP team monitored channels across the political spectrum to identify and report specific threats of violence. While this violence did not materialize on Election Day, that relative calm was eclipsed by violent riots on January 6 at the US Capitol.

The violence at the Capitol can be traced to violent rhetoric curated and iterated on throughout the pre-election period, on Election Day, and after. Before the election, both speculation and true threats of violence centered on tensions between existing groups. For example, while the left theorized about the next steps of the Proud Boys and similar groups, the right created narratives about "antifa" and Black Lives Matter (BLM) groups organizing massive violent insurrections.

This dynamic shifted distinctly on Election Day, especially among right-wing audiences. Content with specific pieces of alleged "evidence" of electoral fraud was weaponized to support the organization of real-world violence. Additionally, rather than attacking other political groups, the ideology behind consolidated movements such as #StopTheSteal spurred violence specifically toward election officials and vendors, instead of simply toward "traditional" enemies such as the Democrats and associated organizations like BLM. This growing distrust of officials and institutions, regardless of political party affiliation, for their role in the purportedly "stolen" election culminated in an organized, violent insurrection on January 6.

Pre-Election Concerns

Prior to the election, the vast majority of violence-related content online was users predicting unrest on Election Day and calling on other users to not vote in person. This content circulated among both left-leaning and right-leaning users, with users differing on who was considered responsible, and who would be targeted.

Left-leaning social media users circulated false warnings about far-right groups and militias. One post about concerns that Proud Boys were planning to shoot BLM protesters received over 278,000 likes (see Figure 3.44). Meanwhile, right-leaning accounts also posted concerns that left-leaning groups such as antifa, BLM, and the Sunrise Movement were planning to commit mass violent acts on Election Day or the days following. For example, in September, right-leaning accounts spread concern about an image that called for "Antifa comrades" to dress up as "patriots/Trump supporters" to confuse the police at riots. This image spread to Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, garnering high engagement: on Facebook, there were over 10,000 reactions, 15,000 shares, and 1,000 comments. The image was subsequently fact-checked by Snopes and Medium and found to be an internet joke from 2017 that had a second wave of popularity in 2020. [114]Heading into Election Day, pro-Trump accounts asked their followers how they would respond to violence or voter intimidation from the left. Audience responses indicate that threats of violence and anger were directed at the left and leftist groups specifically.

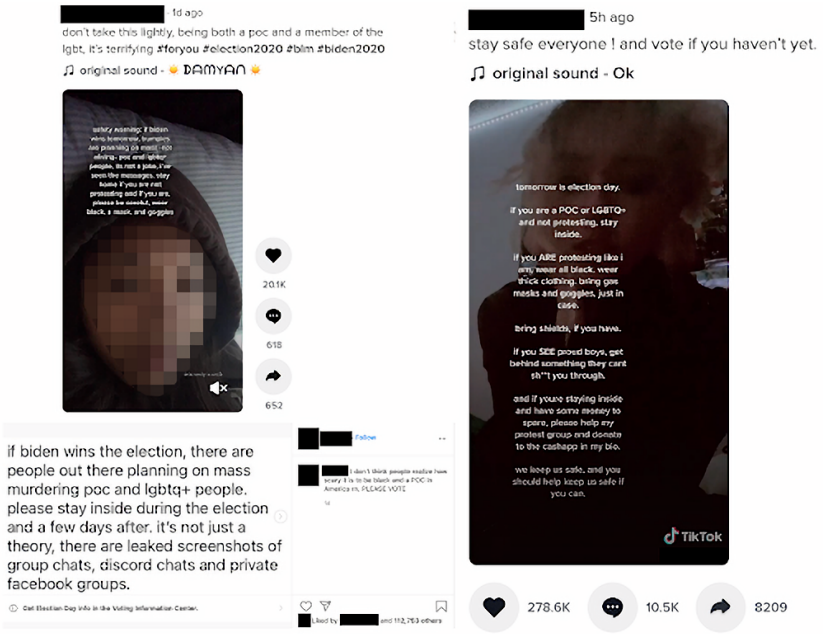


Figure 3.44: Posts showing concerns about violence from left-leaning social media users.

Despite the reach and engagement of posts that raised fears about the potential for violence, the EIP did not uncover any evidence of violent plans, such as from right-wing Discord channels or Facebook Groups. Given the vague nature of the claims and the absence of any specific evidence from those who posted concerns of violence, these posts were non-falsifiable and unsubstantiated. Most of the spreaders of this type of content appeared to be well-intentioned individuals,

including members of purportedly targeted communities who wanted to warn their communities of an impending danger.[115] They encouraged their audiences to engage with and share their content; the resulting "copypasta" reposts of the text and images spread the misinformation further and created viral panic among some online communities.

Figure 3.45: Posts showing concerns about violence from right-leaning social media users.

During and Post-Election

Posts using violent rhetoric or inciting violence after the election significantly differed from pre-election posts as they turned from fearing violence to coordinating and organizing violence. In addition, posts were linked through larger narratives, especially election theft, and threats turned their focus to institutions such as voting systems and the government, instead of partisan groups like antifa or the Proud Boys.

From right-leaning accounts, many violence-related posts became increasingly tied to claims of election theft or rigging and at times were part of increasing rhetoric that more generally referenced the idea of preparation for civil war. Usage of the specific hashtag "#civilwar" on Twitter grew significantly between November 1 and November 5, and posts calling for civil war increased as results that favored Biden were announced. One Twitter user posted "Let's just fast forward to #CivilWar and get it over with and take out the filthy Cancerous #DemocRats and remove them from our society."

In the weeks that followed, the EIP additionally tracked calls for violence against specific individuals and groups. As discussed in the previous section, employees of Dominion Voting Systems received targeted harassment including death threats and doxxing of personal information. Online threats became so common that Dominion Voting employee Eric Coomer went into hiding.[116]

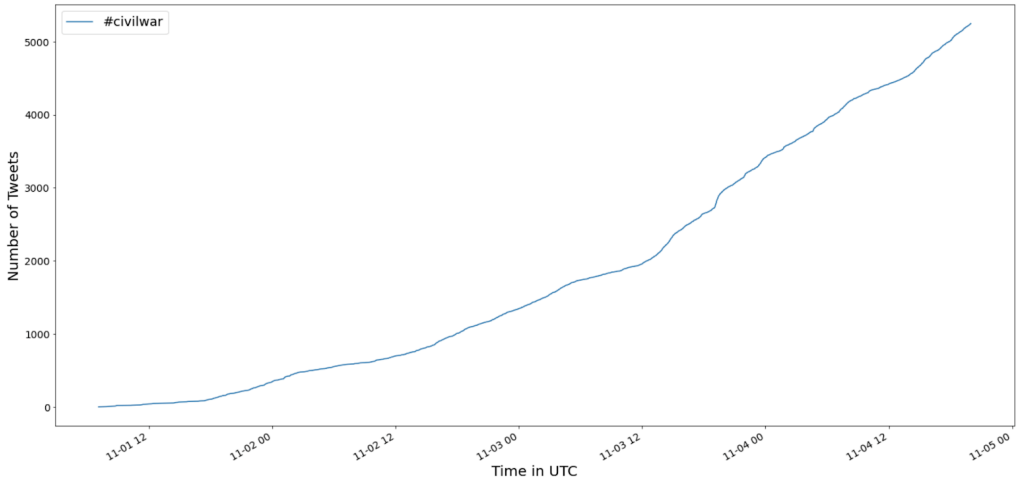


Figure 3.46: Cumulative instances of the hashtag #civilwar between November 1 and November 5, 2020.

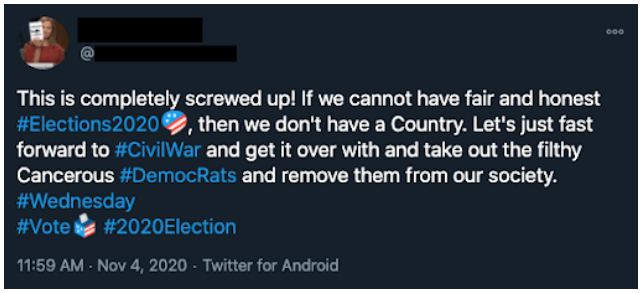


Figure 3.47: A right-leaning Twitter user calls for civil war against Democrats in response to alleged electoral fraud.

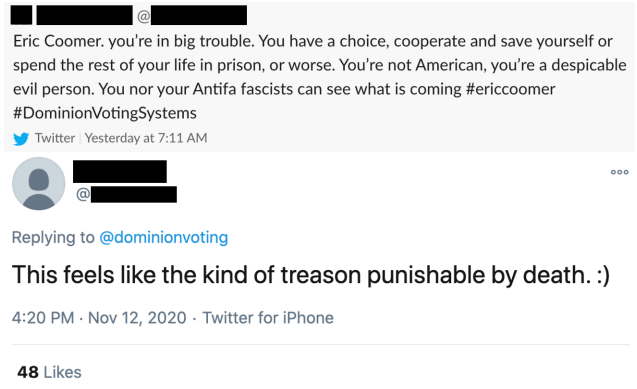


Figure 3.48: Twitter users call for death or violence against Dominion Voting employees.

Events Surrounding January 6, 2021

On the morning of January 6, 2021, President Trump spoke to his supporters outside the White House and stated multiple lies about how the election was stolen from him. In his speech, Trump referred to Democrats as having attempted "the most brazen and outrageous election theft," and said, "We will not take it anymore...We will stop the steal." He encouraged his followers to march to the Capitol and "try and give them [Republicans] the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country."[117] A pro-Trump mob then forcibly entered the Capitol building and forced Congress to take cover and evacuate. Five people died as a result of the Capitol breach.[118]

The violent insurrection against the United States Capitol on January 6 demonstrated the real-world impact of mis- and disinformation narratives such as Stop the Steal, and the effect that social media echo chambers can have on organized violence. While earlier concerns about violence did not materialize, angry rhetoric was frequent. That anger made its way to the offline world, as social media users used platforms to coordinate, recruit, and organize real-world violence. Far-right users used "alt" social media sites, like Gab and Parler, to openly organize and recruit others to join them, give directions on what streets to avoid, and post about bringing weapons into the Capitol.[119]

As the violent mob launched an insurrection against the US Capitol on January 6, angry comments by pro-Trump protestors filmed in the building, signs carried by those outside, and calls for violence against elected officials certifying the vote referenced narratives that we have discussed in this chapter.

In response to mainstream platforms continuing to crack down in the aftermath of that violence, users moved off of Facebook and Twitter and onto smaller sites with less regulation, such as Parler, Gab, and Telegram. To what extent these communities will continue to operate in closed social media networks—the same networks that consistently proliferated the notion that the election was stolen from President Trump—remains to be seen.[120] Regardless, the attack on the US Capitol will forever stand as testament to the violence that echo chambers, online rhetoric, and sustained misinformation can unleash on the world.

3.5 Narrative Crossover and Fabrication in Non-English Media

To this point, we have traced English-language incidents, narratives, and conspiracies that shaped the 2020 election. However, although the majority of the EIP tickets collected and analyzed election-related misinformation taking place in English-speaking communities, there are many American communities that participate in political conversations in languages other than English, and on

apps and chat platforms popular with diaspora communities. In this section we briefly discuss examples of election-related mis- and disinformation in Chinese- and Spanish-speaking communities. In both cases, EIP analysts found that a majority of the observed content were translations of the same narratives that appeared in English—including those featured in prior sections of this chapter. However, there were also uniquely inflected narratives, outlets, and actors targeting these distinct communities.

Chinese-Language Misinformation

EIP analysts identified three types of Chinese-language misinformation: (1) misinformation translated directly from English-language media, (2) misinformation that originates from English-language media but is substantially altered during the adaptation to Chinese-language audiences, and (3) misinformation that originates from Chinese-language media and users.

Additionally, the EIP identified two actors that were prominent in spreading mis- and disinformation in the Chinese-language media sphere, with more complex motives and sophisticated distribution apparatuses: Falun Gong (法輪功), which owns and operates the Epoch Times, and Guo Wengui (also known as Miles Guo) and his associated media enterprises, including Himalaya Global and the GTV/GNews media group.

The more influential of the two is Falun Gong, an exiled, virulently anti-CCP Chinese religious movement.[121] Its media empire consists of the Shen Yun dance troupe, US and overseas newspapers including the Epoch Times, television networks such as New Tang Dynasty TV, and the Sound of Hope Radio Network; the entire media complex has more than 12 million followers. The group's ideological commitments are fluid, save for a long-standing adversarial relationship with the CCP government, but in recent years have trended in a right-wing direction. Beginning in 2016, Falun Gong also grew more assertive in domestic politics in the US, embracing Trump administration rhetoric while pairing its habitual denunciations of the CCP with accusations that Democrats were colluding with them.[122] In 2020 it published extensively on Hunter Biden's alleged ties to the Chinese government.[123]

The other two entities—Himalaya Global and the GTV/GNews media group—maintain close connections to exiled billionaire real estate developer-turned-media tycoon Guo Wengui. Both have forged close connections with domestic US politics and politicians, and in particular former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon. Himalaya Global rarely produces information on its own. Instead, its primary focus is on translating information from English-speaking conservative news sources, including Fox News and Steve Bannon's War Room. It also features a channel of Guo's criticism of the CCP, which is a mixture of

purported whistle-blower statements and conspiracy theories, and reiteration of his support of Donald Trump.[124] The GTV/Gnews media group, by contrast, was founded directly by Guo Wengui, with the goal of "taking down the CCP."[125] GTV/Gnews also reposted many of Bannon's War Room podcasts. During the 2020 election in the US, these two media entities actively reposted mis- and disinformation on both electoral processes and unverified stories about the Democratic candidate and his family, particularly on conservative alt-platform Parler. CCP state-backed media's contribution to mis- and disinformation is discussed in the box on 119.

Narratives Originating from English-Speaking Sources

Most of the election misinformation that gained widespread reach in the Chinese-American community stemmed from English conservative media sources, and content closely resembled that source material. Before the election, popular narratives from English-speaking media that made their way into Chinese-speaking online communities included accusations of Democrats manipulating the election, conspiracies surrounding mail-in-ballots, and theories about the Deep State.[126]

Typically, Chinese-language content was published soon after its English version. On November 6, 2020, James O'Keefe of Project Veritas tweeted a video of USPS workers alleging that the USPS Postmaster in Pennsylvania ordered workers to fraudulently backdate ballots.[127] One day later, the Epoch Times published a Chinese-language article titled "Penn postal worker allegations: postmaster falsifies ballot dates."[128] The article summarized the videos posted by James O'Keefe without providing any new information. Similarly, the English-language right-wing news site Distributed News published a story on the "Scorecard" conspiracy described above. Soon after, the story was picked up and word-for-word republished by Sound of Hope, another media outlet owned and operated by Falun Gong and with a large online following.[129]

Occasionally, Chinese-language users altered the message en route to a new audience. For example, in late October, English-language Twitter user @ThePubliusUSA posted a video purporting to be shot in a mailroom in Florida's Biden-leaning Miami-Dade County, depicting mounds of undelivered ballots alongside speculation that USPS failures were harming Biden's chances in the county.[130] The video went viral on Twitter before eventually spreading to Weibo, a Beijing-based Chinese-language social media platform, where a US-based Weibo user, Xiyatu Zhixia 西雅图夏至 (Seattle Summer Time), translated the description and shared it with her 119,180 followers. Notably, her interpretation was more circumspect than the original video's: "If this story proves true, if these are ballots, if the same situation is occurring at other post offices, the consequences will be serious.[131]"

Figure 3.49: Top, English-language speakers post a video purported to be filmed in a Miami mailroom; bottom, a Weibo user reposts the video, speculating that it might hurt the Democratic Party.

Narratives Unique to Chinese-Speaking Communities

Chinese-language media did originate its own misinformation, although less frequently. These narratives often added an angle alleging a covert relationship between the Democratic candidate (or Party) and the CCP, therefore accusing both the CCP government and the Democratic Party of corrupting the US election.

For example, a Facebook post from November 6, 2020, by Chen Junjun 陳君君 (Gentleman Chen), captioned as "South Park told the truth eight years ago; the CCP is behind the Democrat's mail-in-ballots voter fraud," featured a 2012 clip from South Park joking that Obama colluded with the Chinese to win the election.[132] The video's final frames claimed "Joe Biden is stealing the election" before exhorting viewers to "Support Trump fight back." A "Himalayan global" icon in the final frame suggests the user may have lifted the video from Miles Guo's media network.

Figure 3.50: A Twitter post accusing China of sending mail-in ballots to the US.[133]

Very occasionally, Chinese-originated misinformation made new claims about

the US election without a CCP link. On November 6, Epoch Times posted an article in which Gary Yang, a member of the Michigan Chinese Conservatives Alliance and a poll watcher at the TCF Center in Detroit, claimed that while he and another Republican observed that an estimated 7,000 to 10,000 ballots were counted on election night, ballot counters reported 50,000. He also claimed the staff were deliberately slowing down the counting process.[134] Although fact-checking information has not been offered to debunk this specific piece, there has been no convincing evidence of large-scale voter fraud in Michigan.

Spanish-Language Misinformation

Narratives Originating from English-Speaking Sources

Similarly to Chinese-language community misinformation, many of the misinformation narratives in the Spanish-language community did not originate from within the community. Most were translated from English and circulated via prominent platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as in closed group chat platforms like WhatsApp, and efforts often appeared coordinated across platforms.[135] Also similarly to Chinese misinformation dynamics, the most prominent narratives and those shared were either closely aligned with or completely repurposed from right-wing media outlets. Both grassroots users initiating bottom-up narratives and verified or large-audience influencers had key roles to play in the Spanish-language misinformation ecosystem.

Non-verified, grassroots users were an important source of the Spanish-language misinformation compilations surfaced by the EIP. Q-adherent users organically "bootstrapped" off English-language theories to present conspiratorial threads as intricate as those of their English counterparts. In a single thread, one such user linked together several false narratives: James O'Keefe's Michigan USPS whistleblower story and the Hammer software narrative, both discussed above, and a generic QAnon rallying cry.[136] Twitter placed a label on the original tweet for the Hammer software claim within this longer thread; however, the label on this tweet does not automatically translate to Spanish, even if that is set as the default account language. This follows a broader trend observed throughout the election season, in which non-English language policy enforcement fell distinctly behind even when the narratives themselves were the same across languages.[137]

The Spanish-language mis- and disinformation sphere also boasted several large-scale influencers who paralleled English-language repeat spreaders in disseminating the top narratives to large audiences. One example is Aliesky Rodriguez, a Cuban-American Trump supporter living in Florida, who hosts a livestreamed talk show that has peddled almost every one of the aforementioned narratives to his nearly 100,000 subscribers. Rodriguez's videos often received between

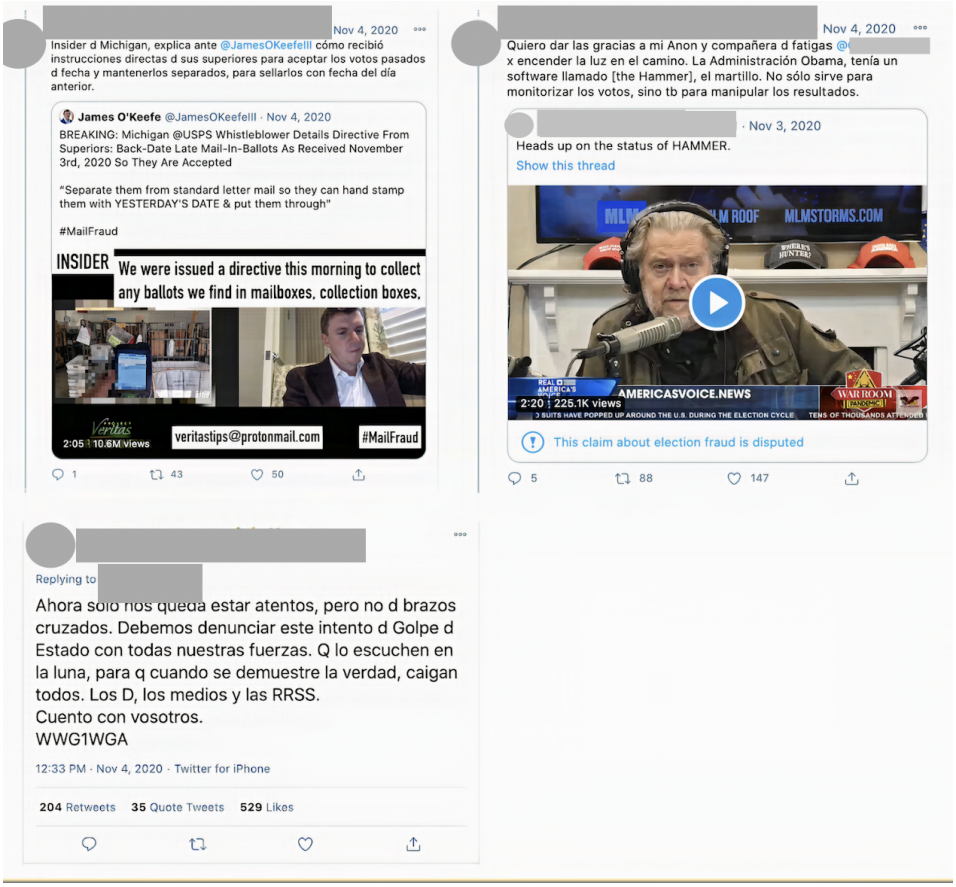


Figure 3.51: A QAnon-adherent Twitter user, now suspended, was extremely active during the election period, collating several English-language misinformation threads into long-form "educational" posts.

50,000 and 110,000 views. For comparison, prominent Spanish-language outlet Univision Noticias, with more than five million subscribers, often receives between 5,000 and 30,000 views per video.

Rodriguez's channel often involves screen sharing and live-translating English-language content while editorializing. On November 5, Rodriguez was joined by co-host Amelia Doval for a "live demo" of the dead voter narrative, one of the theories peddled by English-language repeat spreaders directly after the elections (see Figure 3.52 on the following page). Rodriguez and Doval exaggerated the impact of dead people voting to their Spanish-speaking audience. In subsequent shows, they covered topics such as Sydney Powell's "release the Kraken" statements (described in the Dominion section above), the Supreme Court rulings on contested election results, and the lead-up to the January 6 insurrection.

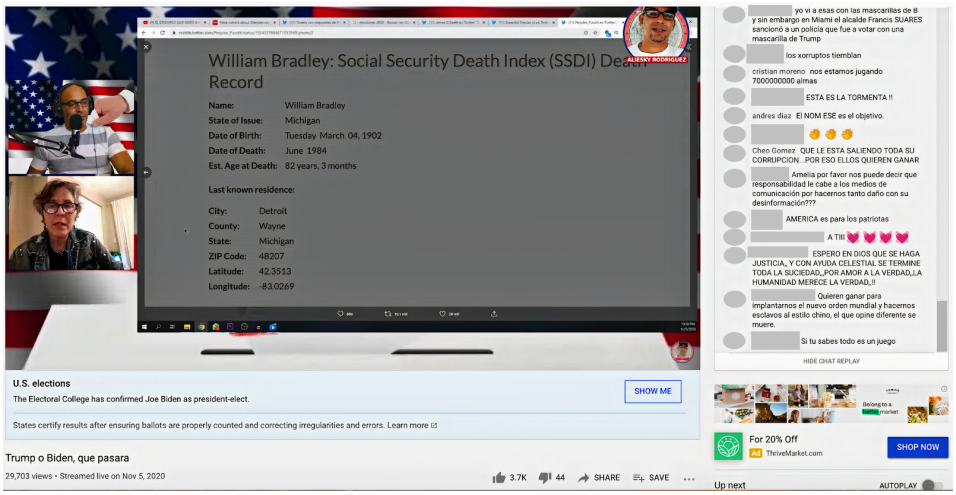


Figure 3.52: Aliesky Rodriguez and Amelia Doval push the dead voters narrative. Rodriguez's audience often comments on the "deep seeded corruption," uses proud statements that "AMERICA is for the patriots," or pivots into religious supplications for "CELESTIAL AID."

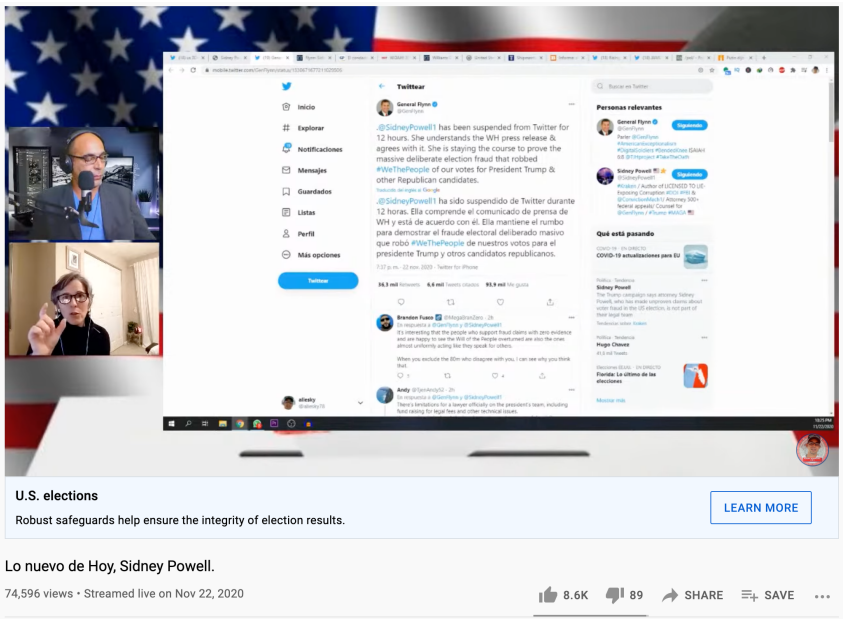


Figure 3.53: During a November 22 livestream, Rodriguez answered live viewer questions on the role of Sidney Powell in "dismantling the electoral fraud" against Donald Trump. A key facet of Rodriguez's videos is screen sharing and breaking down English-language tweets for his Spanish-language audience.

These efforts often appeared to be coordinated across channels. For example, a November 6 video by Rodriguez migrated within moments from his channel to Mr. Capacho Tv's channel, one of the most popular sources for Spanish conspiracy theories.

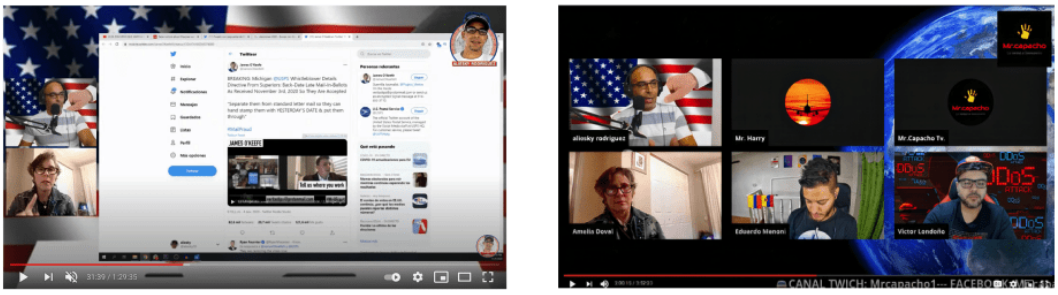


Figure 3.54: Aliesky Rodriguez's November 6, 2020, video on his YouTube channel appeared moments later on Mr. Capacho's channel.

Rodriguez's channel was neither the only example nor necessarily the most prominent in the entire Spanish-language misinformation landscape. However, this example illustrates the larger strategy used by many of his peers in serving English-originating misinformation narratives to a Spanish-speaking audience.

Narratives Unique to Spanish-Speaking Sources

Several outlets have reported on the different politically motivated disinformation narratives and QAnon conspiracy theories that spread within the Spanish-language communities leading into the election.[138] The most prominent such narrative connected Biden to socialism, which may have been intended to discourage Latino voters who fled the socialist regimes in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua from voting Democratic. However, since this content was not related to the election processes themselves, it was deemed out of scope of our overall EIP investigations.

Non-English Language Misinformation Impact

In both the Spanish- and Chinese-language communities the EIP monitored, the content that got the most engagement were those that translated claims of fraud and delegitimization from English into the audience's native language. While some original content was certainly present in each community, these narratives were secondary to those based on the "evidence" gathered from prominent English-language influencers and viral posts. Thus, although it is not a comprehensive solution, slowing the spread of English-language misinformation could still have a significant downstream impact on its virality in non-English language

communities. Platforms can be more proactive at detecting this translation pipeline, and subsequently labeling this content in the appropriate language.

Culturally significant messages were sometimes added to the misinformation, complicating the fact-checking process. For Spanish-language users, this content usually took the form of religious commentary denouncing socialism and the left, which appeals to Latino audience members who come from religious, often Catholic, backgrounds and/or who fled a socialist regime in their birth country. For Chinese-language users, this took the form of alleged collusion with the Chinese government or the Communist Party. Effective fact-checks were notably lacking for both of these communities: improvements to this process should not merely translate the fact-checking content into the correct language, but also take these cultural aspects into account.

Foreign State-Backed Actors in the 2020 Election

It's difficult to rigorously compare foreign interference campaigns in the 2016 and 2020 US election cycles, given the enormous differences in awareness and preparedness between both electoral cycles.

In 2016, information operations on social media were a true blind spot for entities charged with protecting the integrity of the election, from Silicon Valley to Washington. The full scope of the Russian campaigns targeting the 2016 election only came to light in 2017-2018. By November 2020, a professional field had emerged that focused on ensuring these operations would be detected and exposed faster. Between December 2019 and Election Day, 12 foreign information operations focused on the US 2020 elections were detected, attributed, and exposed by platforms, government entities, and researchers. It is worth noting that this section only covers the operations that the Partnership investigated during the height of the electoral period, excluding the handful of foreign information operations targeting the US 2020 election that had been detected and deactivated months prior to the height of the electoral season.

A range of foreign actors were assessed to have a vested interest in the outcome of the elections, both in terms of the actual result and its reception by the American public. The Election Integrity Partnership prioritized monitoring actors based in China, Iran, and Russia during the election period. Using a combination of investigative methods and ongoing monitoring, the Partnership was able to track the covert and overt efforts made by foreign actors to influence the US 2020 election.

On the covert side, this notably involved monitoring new or continued activity from networks that have been previously attributed to Russia,

China, and Iran and were involved in targeting Americans via grey propaganda and social media engagement. In terms of covert operations, actors originating in these three countries appeared to take different approaches to the 2020 US elections. Assets linked to the former Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) consistently amplified narratives about electoral fraud throughout the election and post-election period, primarily through their presence on alternative tech platforms like Parler and Gab.

On the overt side, a number of different approaches were taken. Live network maps provided by Graphika revealed that official state outlets affiliated with Russia, Iran, and China were publishing and commenting on the subject of the US elections throughout the campaign period. Russian state media and the social media presences of state officials and institutions were heavily engaged with the topic of the US elections. However, Chinese and Iranian state outlets were less consistent in their coverage. Both states adhered to the line that the elections were unimportant for their countries and would not affect their perspective on the relationship between themselves and the US. Instead, China and Iran concentrated on portraying the US as a lawless, "failed state."

Covert Operations

A variety of operations from state actors and organizations indicated that there were adversaries interested in targeting the 2020 election. There were disparate and somewhat unsuccessful attempts to lay the groundwork for information operations during the 2020 election cycle using techniques like faux news rooms, false personas, AI-generated faces, and manipulation of unwitting freelancers for reporting.

Russia

Russian efforts to target the US 2020 election can be traced back to earlier operations exposed in late 2019.[139] This section will focus on a small set of campaigns active around and throughout the height of the electoral season rather than provide a comprehensive survey of foreign information operations having targeted the US 2020 election.

On September 1, 2020, Facebook and Twitter announced that they had received investigative tips from the FBI regarding an IRA-linked website, "PeaceData," which recruited US-based freelancers to populate articles for a faux newsroom espousing left-wing political perspectives. Several platforms removed accounts associated with the operation.[140]

In early October 2020, Graphika first reported on a set of Pages, profiles,

and a website known as NAEBC, which is attributed to individuals associated with past IRA activity. This particular effort revolved around a fake far-right "newsroom" website, NAEBC, which stands for the "Newsroom for American and European Based Citizens."[141] This operation appeared to be the right-wing counterpart to the previously discussed "PeaceData" endeavor. This front media site had associated accounts operating on Parler and Gab, which functioned as an amplification network posing as conservative individuals who repeatedly shared its articles. Some of these personas authored content on the website. However, after the operation was exposed, the network stopped writing its own articles and instead focused on sharing content written by genuine, recruited right-wing individuals as well as content copied from known far-right websites. By the time of the US election, NAEBC-related assets had been removed from Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. However, the amplifier accounts on Parler, Gab, and alternative platforms remained active throughout the duration of the election, and engaged in discussing the upcoming vote.

NAEBC contributed to many of the narratives discussed in this paper. During election week, articles posted on the operation's website included a report on "massive voter fraud in Wisconsin," coverage of Republican poll watchers being "blocked" in Philadelphia, and an article that portrayed Trump as a sacrificial demigod. These assets also shared a number of articles and commentary on civil unrest, including an editorial (copied from a US blog) that claimed, "Our dirty, dangerous, and diseased cities are now being destroyed by dirty, dangerous, and diseased animals." After the election, the NAEBC accounts focused on Dominion voting software, particularly by claiming the company is tied to antifa. Despite building up their Parler and Gab presence in an attempt to generate interaction with memes and photomontages, and increasing their rate of posting throughout the electoral cycle, Russia-linked covert accounts did not achieve any significant traction with the targeted communities.

China

Similarly to Russia, networks of political spam accounts pertaining to a China-linked coordinated influence operation attempted to engage with American communities during the 2020 election—and were similarly unsuccessful. The Spamouflage network, which emerged as a Mandarin-language cluster of accounts that debuted English content in the summer of 2020, avoided mentioning the election directly, instead continuing to propagate content that portrays the US in a negative light.[142]

The prolific Spamouflage network, which includes a large number of assets

with shallow or non-existent personas reposting and recycling a large volume of content, has been hit by a series of rolling takedowns since its exposure on YouTube (its primary platform), Facebook, and Twitter, forcing it to stand up dozens of new accounts each time. This cycle of suspensions led to a surge in Spamouflage videos being posted on new channels in September and October 2020, with up to 15 videos emerging per day, some of them shared by previous assets; they have not achieved any significant engagement.

On November 6, after the election had been called, a Spamouflage video referenced election-related protests in New York the previous day, without mentioning the vote. From November 10 onwards, Spamouflage videos commented on the election outcome as a further sign of the "impending collapse of America." Some videos were particularly hostile toward Trump, but most were bipartisan in tone and focused on criticizing the entire structure of US politics. Throughout the election period, Spamouflage English-language videos contrasted the US response to COVID-19 with China's response.

In addition to Spamouflage campaigns, Facebook unveiled a separate network of China-based inauthentic assets, which contained a very small number of assets supporting President Donald Trump or Joe Biden and a short-lived Group supporting former presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg. None of these had much traction by the time the platform took enforcement action.[143]

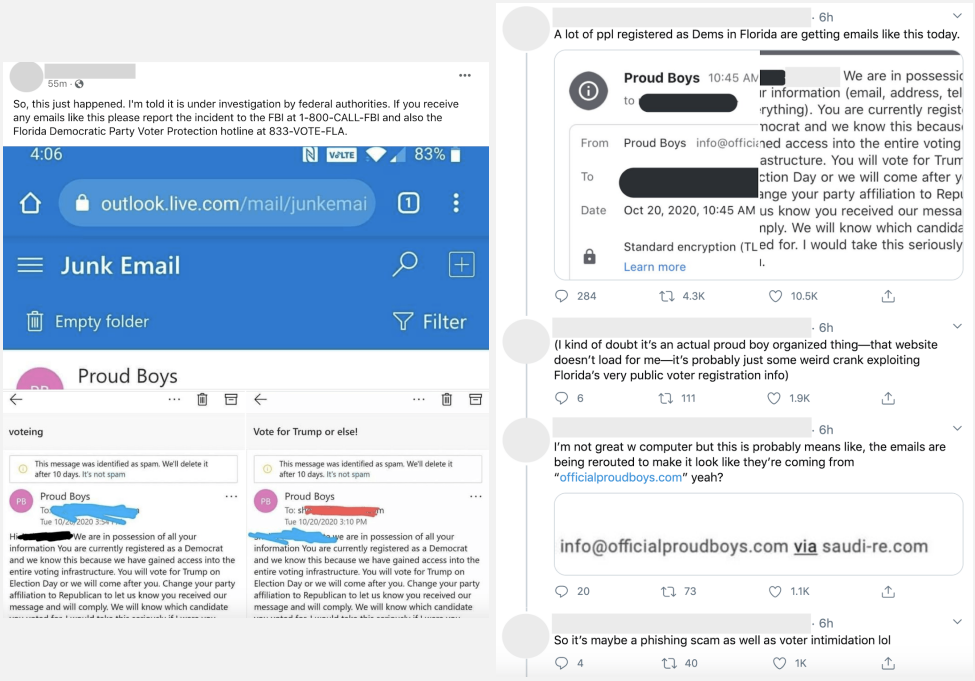
In spite of this core difference in approach, Russian and Chinese covert operations both focused on the notion that the US is a "lawless state" facing an "inevitable civil war." This theme was also noted by the EIP in its monitoring of the narratives circulated by official state outlets, and raises concerns about how covert operations from foreign actors can leverage the rallying calls of domestic extremist movements—in this case, accelerationism.

Iran

Iran similarly has a track record of information operations targeting US communities.[144] Note, for instance, a handful of websites and affiliated accounts referring to themselves as the "IUVM network" (standing for "International Union of Virtual Media"), which has created persistent information operations and triggered multiple waves of enforcement across platforms. In October, these Iranian operations saw a significant part of the domain names used to spread disinformation seized by the US Department of Justice.[145] However, other Iran-linked campaigns persist: less

than a month before the US election, the Stanford Internet Observatory documented and analyzed a Twitter campaign attributed to Iranian actors in which actors compromised authentic accounts and created fake ones to disseminate content supporting Black Lives Matter.[146]

On October 19 and 20, 2020, voters in multiple states including Alaska and Florida received emails purporting to be from the far-right group the Proud Boys, instructing them to vote for Donald Trump or face retaliation. Some of the emails included personal details of the voters in question. These emails appeared to come from "info@officialproudboys[.]com," though it was later determined that this address had been spoofed and the emails had been sent from servers in Estonia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In some versions of the email, a video link was also included; this video purported to show someone accessing voter information and claiming to demonstrate a method of casting fake ballots.[147] The EIP obtained several of these emails, including from our partners at the NAACP.[148]

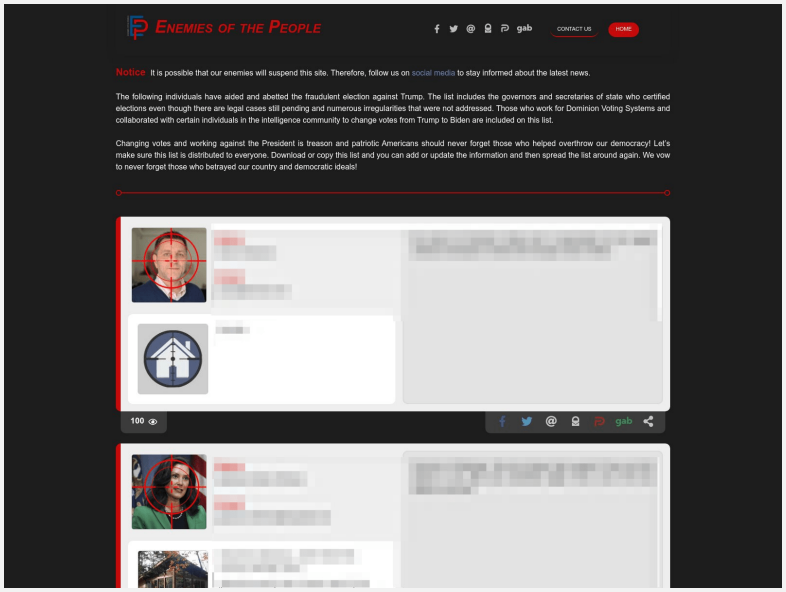


Texts sharing screenshots of emails purporting to be from the Proud Boys.

In a remarkably fast public attribution process, on October 22 the Department of Justice held a press conference attributing this activity to

Iran, though few details were provided.[149] During the conference, it was stated that both Russia and Iran had accessed US voter data; however, the information contained in the "Proud Boys" emails appeared to have been gathered from states that have publicly available voter registration information, meaning this campaign could have been carried out without needing to acquire any private data. The DOJ did not provide any additional evidence to support this attribution.

A series of websites created in early December showed an "Enemies of the People" list, showing the personal information of a number of elected officials and government employees who were countering claims of voter fraud in the 2020 election; the site also listed employees of election software manufacturer Dominion, reflecting the allegations promoted by the Trump legal team and right-wing media. This effort saw the operators including platforms such as Parler and Gab in their social media campaign. This activity was attributed to Iran by the FBI, as reported in the *Washington Post* on December 22.[150]



Doxxing on the Enemies of the People website.

Overt/Openly Affiliated State Outlets

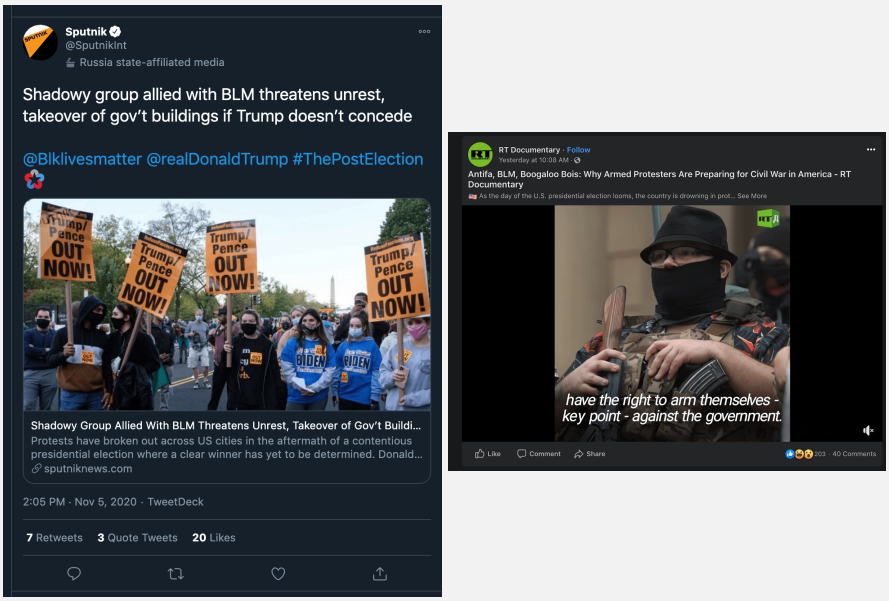
While covert information operations were scarce, state media propaganda activities continued to varying degrees. Russian state outlets, including Kremlin-affiliated media entities, diplomats, and other state representa-

tives, were actively engaged in amplifying some of the most divisive stories described previously in this chapter, focusing predominantly on promoting Donald Trump and casting doubt on the integrity of the electoral system. China was relatively quiet for much of this period. Iran, similarly to China, did not spend much time on the election itself; it focused on portraying the US as a declining power with an electoral outcome of little consequence. 2.1 Russia Throughout the election period, Russian state-affiliated outlets (including state representatives) engaged heavily on the topic of voter fraud.[151] In the lead-up to the election, there was a focus on the issue of mail-in ballots and amplifying allegations of interference from USPS workers, alongside accusations of Big Tech "interference" and "censorship." As the election approached, a number of the principal Kremlin-affiliated media outlets amplified domestic disinformation narratives about Joe Biden and his family. For example, in the month prior to the vote (October 3–November 3), RT (formerly Russia Today) published 52 articles and pieces of video content about Hunter Biden or the Biden family more broadly. This tranche of content includes op-eds with headlines like "Blaming Russia for Hunter's problems was a big misstep, Joe, and it may prove to be your downfall." Notably, many of the more aggressive articles published during this period were opinion pieces posted on the RT and Sputnik websites rather than directly authored by the outlets.

The EIP, among others (including the Department of Homeland Security), also documented the concerted effort by Russian state outlets to amplify disinformation about mail-in voting in the run-up to the election.[152] The Partnership processed over 35 tickets related to Russian outlets spreading election disinformation over the course of the monitoring period. There was one incident in which accusations of Russian activity required de-escalation. This incident culminated with the announcement made by National Intelligence Director John Ratcliffe on October 22 in which, alongside attributing the spoofed Proud Boys emails to Iran, he claimed that Russia had also obtained voter information that could be used to endanger the election.[153] Previous claims on social media, particularly on Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit, had alleged that registration data for 15 million voters in Florida had been hacked and posted on a Russian forum. However, the data of concern appeared to be standard public information made available by the State of Florida and not discernable evidence of a hack.[154] Ratcliffe's announcement appears to have referenced a different incident where private voter information was obtained.

Following election day, the focus of Russian state outlets appeared to shift to delegitimizing the results and alleging fraud on behalf of the Democrats

on a broader, more systemic level. English-speaking followers of these outlets doubled down on the false Dominion narrative, "whistleblower" accounts from poll workers in swing states, and claims that the outcome had been pre-determined by a group of "shadowy elites." A number of these narratives continued well into the post-election period. Additionally, Russian state media spread claims of civil unrest and violent protests. On Twitter and Facebook, Sputnik claimed that a Black Lives Matter-allied group threatened violence if Trump did not concede, and RT posted a documentary-style video pushing a "civil war" narrative. Russian state media also leveraged livestreamed video of protests and in-the-street actions from its entity Ruptly, which it aired on RT as well as lesser-known entities such as Redfish and In The Now.



Left, a tweet by Russian state-backed media property Sputnik claiming Black Lives Matter groups had threatened violence; right, an RT tweet of a video predicting civil war in America.

China

Chinese state media and official accounts appeared to be taking a relatively direct stance toward the topic of the US elections in the months prior to the vote, but as Election Day drew closer, Chinese state officials and media agencies grew quiet. After NCSC Director William Evanina's statement alleging electoral interference by China, Russia, and Iran (in that order),[155] election-related activity from state media and CCP spokespeople declined

significantly. Reporters at state-backed outlets have said that they were told to ensure coverage was "calm" and "neutral," and were advised not to focus on the election.[156]

In one interview, Fu Cong, Director-General of Arms Control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated "Well, we know that the US general election is coming very soon. And I don't want to make any comments that may be interpreted by the US as interfering in their internal affairs or in their general election."[157] Following this guidance, the limited coverage that did exist was even in tone, with the exception of some editorials in state outlets that argued the election would make little difference to US-China relations, given what they described as bipartisan hostility toward China.

After the election, state representatives followed Xi Jinping's lead and did not acknowledge the results until three weeks after the vote. State media covered the election results with a cautiously optimistic tone, but continued disparaging the US overall. In terms of reception, Chinese citizens tended to celebrate Joe Biden and mock Donald Trump, while Chinese Americans typically had mixed responses that leaned pro-Biden.

Notably, both Chinese state media and CCP representatives were willing to forcefully criticize the Trump administration, particularly Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, but they rarely attacked Trump himself and did not express any explicit candidate preference. Even during the week of the election, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying harshly criticized the US while avoiding the election itself.[158] Throughout the election period, Hua appeared to shape the narratives and tone that CCP representatives then echoed. While she has significantly fewer followers than state media outlets, she is consistently the most-mentioned account among followers of Chinese outlets and CCP representatives.

Iran

Iranian state-backed outlets frequently used coverage of the US to diminish the country and cast Iran in a favorable light, but rarely engaged in what can be classified as the widespread propagation of disinformation. On occasion, Iranian outlets did publish content designed to attack the legitimacy of the American electoral process—saying it fell short of its democratic ideals and was likely to be marred by violence. This at times involved questioning American democracy altogether—in some cases using the voice of American academics, "analysts," activists, or media outlets to do so.

During election week, Iranian officials sought to undermine the efficacy of the US system of government, with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei releasing a

speech in which he described the election as a "spectacle" showing the "ugly face of liberal democracy in the US" where the only certain outcome is "the political, civil, & moral decline of the US regime," and furthered the narrative that the US was facing an existential crisis.[159] Broader Iranian coverage focused on domestic issues like racial disparities and social divisions, the treatment of protesters and minorities by the police, and growing fears of civil unrest within the US.

In a similar vein, Tehran-based Mehr News Agency used an October report from the Department of Homeland Security warning about foreign election interference to suggest that such warnings were "old ways" of "creating panic" among the American public and were designed to induce participation in the electoral process—and presumably to lend the election a stronger legitimacy.[160] In at least one instance, Iranian outlets used a report from The Hill about concerns over the absentee voting system in Texas to heighten fears of voter suppression in the US.[161]

Through quotes from official and op-ed pieces, Mehr, Fars, Tasnim, and other Iranian state-backed outlets frequently promoted the notion that Trump and Biden were roughly equivalent in terms of their antagonism toward the interests of the Regime and the Iranian people, and so the outcome of the election was largely irrelevant to Iranian interests. However, at times these outlets showed a slight preference for a Biden administration if only because of President Trump's open hostility toward the country. This narrative stayed fairly consistent even in the days following the election, with only minor adjustments.

3.6 Fact-Checking Claims and Narratives

In some cases, the direction and life cycle of a narrative can be diverted, or even stopped, by way of authoritative fact-checking. As narratives containing misinformation and conspiracy theories about the election emerged and spread on social media, fact-checking by news sites, professional organizations, and election officials often followed—but their efforts were not uniformly received. Some high-profile narratives were fact-checked and easily debunked by journalists, government officials, and mainstream media, including EIP partners. Other false narratives escaped the notice of the fact-checking community for weeks, or were never fact-checked at all.

In the following section, we examine examples of the fact-checking response to two of our prominent misinformation case studies from earlier in the chapter: Sharpiegate and Dominion Voting Systems.

Case Study 1: Fact-Checking Sharpiegate

As the Sharpiegate narrative grew on Election Day and the days immediately following, government offices and news media began to fact-check the claims. This was particularly true in Arizona. On November 3, 2020, at 12:09 pm PT, before polls had even closed, the Maricopa County Elections Department posted a video that debunked these claims to their Facebook account.[162] Many commenters remained unconvinced: some of the most popular comments on the video claimed that their ballots were canceled, and attributed this to using a Sharpie. Despite this initial attempt at debunking, posts on social platforms continued to propagate the misinformation narrative of election fraud based on the breadth of Sharpie use and the "massive bleed through" they cause.

The next morning, November 4 at 8:50 am PT, Pima County released a tweet thread citing the Arizona Election Manual, clarifying that all ballots would be counted regardless of the type of writing implement used.[163] Again, many of the commenters who replied were skeptical at best: comments mostly questioned why officials would allow the usage of felt-tip or Sharpie markers if there was the chance of bleeding through the ballot. Other comments pushed back on the officials' claims, asked follow-up questions, and continued to allege that the officials were guilty of fraud because of the "suspicious" nature of the clarification. The Maricopa County Board of Supervisors posted an open letter to Maricopa County voters, articulating that accurate vote counting was a bipartisan commitment, and took on Sharpiegate directly: "sharpies do not invalidate ballots. We did extensive testing on multiple different types of ink with our new vote tabulation equipment. Sharpies are recommended by the manufacturer because they provide the fastest-drying ink. The offset columns on ballots ensure that any bleed-through will not impact your vote."[164]

More fact-checks appeared that same day. Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs released a Twitter thread debunking Sharpiegate, with a marginally more positive effect (and over 12,000 engagements), and AZ Family News published a fact-check linking to Hobbs's tweet thread and the Maricopa County video.[165] But the misleading narrative continued to spread.

Despite these early fact-checks by government officials, the platforms' responses to the claims were neither timely nor standardized. On Twitter, some Sharpiegate content came down, other tweets were labeled, and still others were left untouched. Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok had similar responses: labeling and removing some, but not all, of the Sharpiegate content. The YouTube videos related to the Sharpiegate narrative were labeled, but none were taken down.

Despite the many efforts made by news outlets and state officials to fact-check these claims, the narrative spread quickly, and the same misleading content appeared across multiple platforms. The Sharpiegate narrative reached thou-

sands of individuals and inspired some of them to organize and participate in real-world protests.[166] Despite the prompt attempted debunking of these claims, belief in Sharpiegate persisted, and it was ultimately incorporated into the broader subsequent Stop the Steal narrative.

Case Study 2: Fact-Checking the Dominion Narrative

As the allegations against Dominion Voting Systems moved from Georgia to Michigan to states across the country, fact-checkers tried to keep up. On November 6, the Michigan Department of State issued a statement on its website refuting allegations that Dominion Voting Systems was responsible for voter fraud in Antrim County.[167] The statement was subsequently shared by the Michigan Department of State's Twitter account, with responses in the comments varying from gratitude for the clarification to outright denial of the Department's refutation.[168]

Similarly, on November 12, CISA released a statement certifying that there was "no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes, or was in any way compromised."[169] CISA's findings were subsequently corroborated by the US Department of Justice when Attorney General Bill Barr confirmed that there was no evidence of widespread voter fraud.[170]

The narrative also centered on the swing states of Arizona, Georgia, and Pennsylvania; in each state, fact-checkers debunked the claims. In Arizona, the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors refuted claims of voter fraud by Dominion Voting Systems in a public statement.[171] The Georgia Secretary of State released a statement confirming that "the original machine count accurately portrayed the winner of the election."[172] In Pennsylvania, the state validated the accuracy of the voting machines and their official tallies, further highlighting that Dominion Voting machines had not been used in counties such as Allegheny and Philadelphia—counties that Trump falsely claimed were responsible for rigging the election.

Dominion Voting Systems released its own statement debunking claims that its systems were used to switch votes or to fraudulently cast votes. The statement cited evidence to refute claims of vote manipulation in the same four states: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.[173]

Though false allegations of voter fraud due to Dominion Voting machines were repeatedly debunked, propagation of misinformation relating to vote tabulation and voting interference nonetheless appears to have had a significant impact on how the 2020 election was perceived—social media commentary alleging malfeasance was extensive and widespread. Nearly a month after the election, election officials and public officials in Georgia were still continuing to hold press conferences to debunk the misinformation.[174] Even beyond that, members

of the Trump administration as well as Trump's supporters continued to pursue allegations of fraud related to the Dominion voting machines (discussed further in Chapter 4), which repeatedly reinforced claims of a rigged election among supporters. This case was an example of the balancing act that must take place when fact-checking: because fact-checking can draw further attention to misinformation or conspiracy, individuals or organizations debunking stories must take care to not unintentionally amplify narratives that could cause real world harm, fear, or suppression.[175]

3.7 Final Observations

Tickets processed by the Election Integrity Partnership and external organizations were diverse—focused on different real or purported incidents, in different states, over the course of months. The Partnership's breadth of exposure to election-related narratives provides unique insight into how misinformation evolved and the themes that cut across these discrete time periods. We conclude with five reflections on election-related misinformation narratives:

1. Researchers can predict, but not necessarily prevent, these dynamics.

On October 26, 2020, during the pre-election stage, a team of EIP researchers published a piece, "Uncertainty and Misinformation: What to Expect on Election Night and Days After."[176] This blog post presented a set of expectations, including that the winner of the election would not be known on election night, that red/blue or blue/red shifts would create opportunity for political actors and conspiracy theorists to delegitimize the election, that voting process failures would be strategically framed and overemphasized to fit misleading narratives, and that "bad statistics" would be selectively highlighted.

The EIP post demonstrates the extent to which election-related misinformation was predictable. As described throughout this chapter, many of these predictions were realized. However, ease of prediction does not necessarily correlate with ease of prevention. Although the EIP and others published advice for journalists covering the election and many journalists followed best practices, the predictable misinformation narratives still played out during and after election night. Further research should explore the effectiveness of prebunk/inoculation strategies, clear journalistic coverage, and fact-checking in the 2020 election. The post also suggests the need for more ambitious models to counter predictable election-related misinformation, and the difficulty credible journalists will face in trying to prevent election-related misinformation altogether. Platforms also, to our knowledge, did not adequately systemize the predictability of certain narratives to create preventative policies.

2. Non-falsifiable misinformation provides challenges for platforms.

The election information ecosphere was replete with non-falsifiable claims. For example, when Project Veritas relies on anonymous whistleblowers, it is difficult for independent news outlets to determine the veracity of the whisteblowers' claims. Likewise, when social media users post that a "friend of a friend" experienced or witnessed a particular event, researchers can't reliably prove that the claim of an unnamed "friend" is false.

Non-falsifiable narratives erode the information ecosphere; the clarity of fact and the power of credible voices is muddled by non-falsifiable noise. In the 2020 election, the EIP witnessed numerous non-falsifiable tickets—some labeled by platforms, others not—which contributed to broader narratives that the election was unreliable or rigged. And when clearly falsifiable narratives were fact-checked, they still became part of the conspiratorial discourse about election fraud. Non-falsifiable information created for political gain will continue to be a challenge for platforms moving forward. But so will clearly falsifiable information, if platforms do not adequately and consistently take action against false claims.

3. Frames, not just facts, set the course.

Much of the misinformation the EIP observed in the 2020 election—including non-falsifiable content—relied on framing. As we will describe in Chapter 4, "frames highlight some bits of information about an item that is the subject of a communication, thereby elevating them in salience."[177] Whether a mail-dumping incident is seen as a one-off mistake by a postal service agent or as Democrats stealing the election, or whether a red mirage/blue wave is evidence of mail-in ballots arriving after Election Day or a conspiracy at work, depends on how the event is framed.

Misinformation in the 2020 election cycle shows that how information is packaged largely determines the effect of that information. In Chapter 4, we'll describe how different actors use framing techniques to channel information to align with their priors and their favored outcomes.

4. From online to off—election-related misinformation can have real-world effects.

One of the biggest challenges in the misinformation research community is how to measure effects. The baseline is often to use engagement statistics—how many people like, comment, or share a post, for example. Throughout this report, we often refer to such engagement statistics. However, there is a gap between engagement on social media and change in attitudes or behaviors. Just because someone "likes" a piece of misinformation does not necessarily mean that they believe it or that it changed their view.

In this election cycle, EIP partners observed misinformation on social media form the basis of real-world actions—including the formation of activist groups and protests, and ultimately a violent insurrection at the Capitol. Misinformation in

the pre-election stage undermined confidence in mail-in voting, delegitimizing the election process and setting the stage for post-election claims that the election was stolen. For months, right-wing social media users had been fed online "evidence" of a rigged election, coalescing into a movement to #StoptheSteal. Right-wing social media personalities—including individuals who have repeatedly been tied to spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories—created a website and email discussion list for #StoptheSteal supporters to mobilize.[178] Over a month after the election, #StoptheSteal events continued to take place nationwide—some with kinetic effects including stabbings and other violence.[179]

On January 6, the real-world effects of election-related misinformation reached fever pitch. Ali Alexander and other right-wing influencers had encouraged Trump supporters throughout the country to converge on Washington, DC, to protest in person. That morning, the President told a crowd of supporters that "this election was stolen from you, from me, from the country" and encouraged his supporters to march on the Capitol. A group of these protestors—including white supremacists and QAnon believers—violently broke into the Capitol, killing Capitol Police officer Brian Sicknick; four others died during the riot. The series of events shows that online misinformation can engender real-life radicalization with deathly consequences. Even as some social media platforms removed content from the day, the stain on American democracy remains.

Notes

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Chapter 4

Cross-platform and Participatory Misinformation: Structure and Dynamics

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we attempt to understand how false and misleading narratives about the 2020 election, highlighted in Chapter 3, took shape and spread across a multiplatform information ecosystem. During the 2020 election, misinformation was shared across a range of social media—from broadly popular platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, to niche sites like Reddit, to up-and-coming sites like Periscope and TikTok, to "alt-platforms" such as Parler, and to message boards such as the chans or thedonald.win. These diverse platforms were leveraged in distinct and often complementary ways by those spreading false and misleading information about the election. Additionally, algorithmic curation systems shape the dynamics of social networks, and behaviors that manifest across them, as engagement begets algorithmic amplification, complicating the story of how content is created, disseminated, and reaches end users. Here we examine the underlying structure of this ecosystem—the different platforms involved, and the way information moves between them. We consider the affordances of their features, which enable communities to form, and enable individuals to activate those communities.

Much of the misinformation narratives that we articulated in Chapter 3 involved the active participation of ordinary people. But rank-and-file accounts and influencers alike strive to capture the attention of larger and larger audiences, in a bid, ultimately, to gain the power that such attention confers.[1] For each social platform, we consider the "work" that is done to create and spread narratives—

what we might infer as tactics as well as other dynamics—to describe how these false narratives developed, and to highlight the techniques used to produce them, spread them, and sustain them over time.

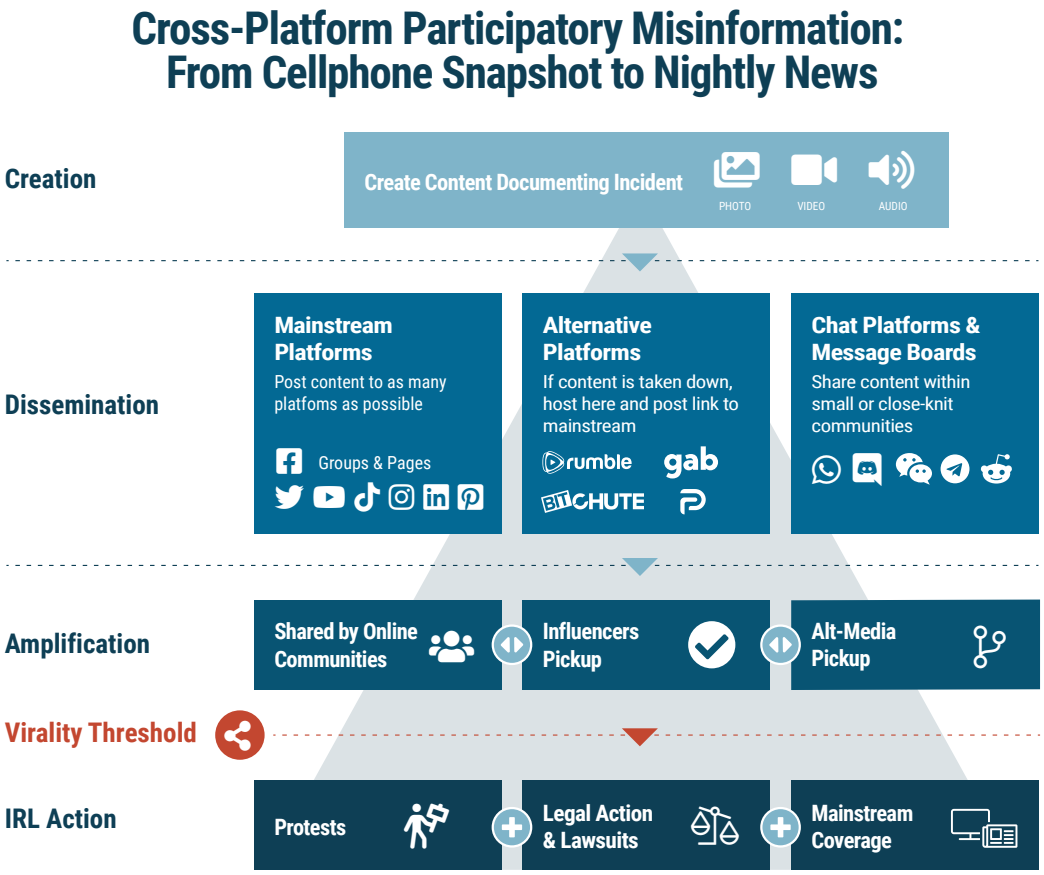
4.2 Cross-Platform Information Sharing

Each platform enables different kinds of social and information interactions; for example, TikTok's user base has a large youth component, and Parler has positioned itself as a destination for conservative users who have experienced—or have perceived they have experienced—censorship on other platforms.[2] Many of these platforms allow content sharing from other platforms, and from the broader information space that includes countless websites, from established news media outlets to conspiracy theory blogs. And though journalists and researchers sometimes draw a distinction between social media and mass media, in a broader view, there are myriad connections between them, as, for example, cable news pundits craft their evening shows based on content that went "viral" that day on social media.[3]

In addition, internet usage statistics suggest that most online information participants—or "users"—are not siloed in a single platform, but turn to different platforms for different reasons.[4] Political activists and others who wish to shape public opinion also employ multiplatform strategies, leveraging different platforms for different parts of their information strategies, and often intentionally moving content from one platform to another.

To facilitate our study of cross-platform misinformation, we grouped tickets created during our monitoring period into incidents: the information cascades that relate to a specific information event or claim, as described in Chapter 3 and discussed more fully in Chapter 5. We used a mixed-method approach to analysis, combining real-time forensic documentation of individual tickets with follow-up qualitative and quantitative analyses of specific incidents and narratives.

We observed that interactions between platforms created emergent cross-platform dynamics. For example, while Facebook was a place to reach large audiences and organize action, Twitter was a place to mobilize and "eventize" longer-form content stored elsewhere. Platform policies shaped some of these dynamics: moderation could lead to inter- and intraplatform spread, as users shared screenshots of deleted content or posted it to platforms with less stringent policies. Below we describe the roles that each platform plays in the election-related mis- and disinformation ecosystem.



Facebook's Role: Public Posts to Reach Large Audiences; Groups for Organizing Protests

Facebook remains a widely popular social media platform, averaging around 2.7 billion active users across the globe.[5] For media outlets, information operators, and even ordinary people, Facebook represents an opportunity to reach large audiences. Public Pages can attract millions of followers, turning their creators into influencers with reach potential on par with some mass media outlets. Groups can be places where people congregate—in public and "private"— around a range of affinities. Through sharing functionality, content can move freely and rapidly between Groups, Pages, and personal accounts and their socially connected networks. Though our view into Facebook was limited to public content, we were still able to document the platform's role in the spread of several false and misleading narratives.

Facebook Pages as a Place to Reach Massive Audiences

A number of partisan media and other right-wing influencers who appeared in our data collection used their Facebook Pages to spread false and misleading information about the election. Often, this was part of a multiplatform media strategy. On Facebook, this content received significant engagement, including tens of thousands of reshares for some posts and moving from public Pages to personal Facebook feeds.

Facebook Groups as a Place to Share Rumors and Organize

Facebook Groups, both public and private, served as virtual places to come together and share stories of perceived election fraud and to organize a collective response. Perhaps the most successful was the STOP THE STEAL Facebook Group (discussed in detail in Chapter 3). The public Group started as a place to share stories, both first- and secondhand, about a potential "stolen election"—stories that were subsequently reshared through Facebook and cross-posted to other platforms. It grew rapidly, reaching 320,000 users in less than a day, assisted by cross-posted advertisements from right-wing influencers on Twitter.[6] It, along with other Facebook Groups, quickly evolved into a place to organize protests; as some of the rhetoric grew violent and election workers were threatened, Facebook removed STOP THE STEAL less than a day after launch. Nevertheless, similar groups, albeit at smaller scales, continued to emerge after this takedown, as people looked for places to gather and ways to coordinate protest. In one case, a group of individuals organized a peaceful protest using a private Facebook Group.[7] But their call-to-action was spread publicly and lost contextualizing information along the way, which led to a more chaotic protest.

Twitter's Role: Mobilizing Content from Other Platforms; Connecting to Media Outlets and other Influencers; Networked Framing

Mobilizing Content from Other Platforms

In the cross-platform spread of misinformation about the election, the Twitter platform served several diverse roles. A primary role was to provide a place to draw attention to content such as news articles, videos, and livestreams hosted elsewhere in the media ecosystem. The real-time nature of the platform provided an opportunity to connect existing content to the current news cycle, while platform affordances like short-form messaging and hashtag referencing enabled seemingly disparate narratives to be cross-referenced and integrated

from other sources. In particular, cross-posting from YouTube to Twitter was salient in our election integrity incidents, as shown in Figure 4.1.

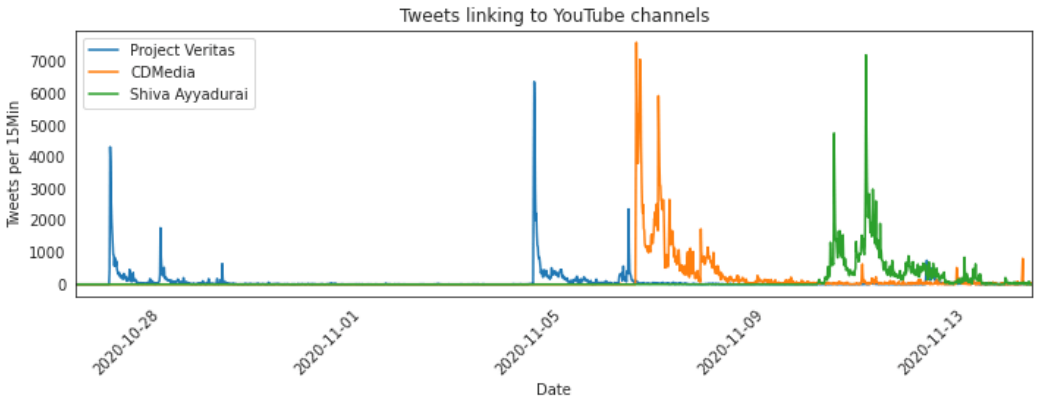


Figure 4.1: Temporal graph of tweets and retweets linking to prominent YouTube channels over time, in tweets per 15 minutes, for three prominent repeat spreaders (described in Chapter 5).

By cross-posting their videos to Twitter, repeat spreaders worked to popularize videos alleging election fraud. In some cases, the Twitter spikes align closely with the release of a new video. The tweets linking to Project Veritas, a right-leaning activist media group, follow this pattern—each burst is related to a different video. In other cases, e.g., tweets linking to compilation videos produced by right-leaning CDMedia and Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai (a coronavirus and election-related conspiracy theorist and anti-vaccine activist, also known as Dr. Shiva), the same video is mobilized (re-introduced and widely spread) multiple times. Information cascades related to content from Project Veritas and Ayyadurai are described in Chapter 5.

YouTube was not the only platform to serve as host for long-form videos subsequently linked to Twitter to reach a larger audience. For example, Ayyadurai's statistics-based content was regularly hosted on Periscope but cross-posted on Twitter to expand viewership and connect with other incidents using hashtags and tagging influential users.

Connecting to Influencers

Twitter also allowed prominent spreaders of election-related mis- and disinformation to direct the attention of their own large audiences, as well as other influencers, to a specific piece of content; the content was then amplified across platforms by this audience of influential users, journalists, and politicians, including President Trump, his campaign team, and his family.

The cross-platform nature of this amplification draws attention to the dynamics of "networked framing" (see box on page 166). Twitter often served as the focal

point for these collective narratives. In addition to the size of its audience, the platform's mobile connectivity enabled disconnected fraud narratives to be drawn together and assembled into specific frames (i.e., widespread election fraud) using content from other websites and social media platforms.

For example, the Hammer and Scorecard/Dominion narratives described in Chapter 3 began with claims of poll glitches in online conversations on websites and Twitter, then spread through YouTube videos and the use of hashtags related to the incident on Twitter and other platforms, such as Parler and Reddit. From there, high-profile accounts drew further attention to the incidents, as did hyperpartisan news websites like The Gateway Pundit, which used Twitter to promote its article discussing the incident.[8] This collective Dominion narrative spread has since grown, having been subsequently promoted by the Proud Boys, The Western Journal, and Mike Huckabee across a number of platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, Parler, and Gab.[9] On each platform, these narratives remain tethered together by relying on the Twitter hashtags #dominionvotingsystems and #dominionsoftware. By bouncing unreliable evidence back and forth from Twitter to other social media platforms, what were initially unremarkable incidents confined to local counties became a national story, much like the Stop The Steal and Sharpiegate narratives.

Megathreads

An additional technique unique to Twitter, due to its specific affordances around threading and content temporality, was the use of "megathreads"—dozens or even hundreds of tweets connected through reply-chains—to connect a mix of real incidents as well as false and misleading claims into a long narrative alleging fraud and attempting to delegitimize the election. One such thread featured detailed allegations of fraud, state-by-state, through over 100 author-appended replies to a single tweet, linking to a number of external website sources and content on other social media platforms. These types of threads leverage platform-specific design affordances: the list-based nature of megathreads allows them to be recycled in terms of their visibility and engagement each time a new item is added to the list.

Cross-Platform Sharing to Evade Moderation on Twitter

For both Twitter megathreads and single posts spreading misinformation, the cross-platform nature of these narratives also limited the efficacy of the platform's response. We saw numerous cases in which misinformation first shared on Twitter continued to spread on other platforms even after it was removed—in some cases, a simple screenshot of the since-removed tweet was shared elsewhere —as illustrated in Figure 4.2 on the facing page.

Figure 4.2: Screenshots of cross-posting on Facebook (left) and Reddit (right).

On the left, we see a Facebook user posting a screenshot of his own reply on Twitter to perpetuate a disproven narrative even after it was removed on Twitter. On the right we find a similar instance on Reddit, where a tweet by political consultant Harlan Hill alleging a stolen election was hidden behind a label on Twitter but is presented in full on Reddit.

In these ways and others, Twitter served to perpetuate and amplify misinformation narratives despite efforts to limit its involvement.

YouTube's Role: A Resource for Livestreams, Compilations, and Mobilizations

Most major platforms now have the capacity for sharing video; however, YouTube exists as a uniquely popular platform for videos that are long-format and can be monetized. While search and recommendation functions exist within YouTube, traffic is often driven from other platforms. During the 2020 election, YouTube provided a space for video-format misinformation that could be shared easily across platforms. The platform functioned both to provide official and familiar-looking "evidence" for misleading narratives and to consolidate otherwise disparate narratives as part of a broader picture.

Compilation and Long-Form Videos

One effective form of YouTube content—in terms of spreading misleading narratives about the election—were compilations, or videos that synthesized content across different events and narratives.[10] Though these longer videos may not have the potential for mass virality, they exist as touchstones for other misinformation superspreaders to continuously refer back to—from other locations in the information ecosystem—as supportive evidence of the veracity of their narratives.

These YouTube videos presented challenges to media literacy. They were typically produced by partisan news outlets or users and organizations with a large presence on other platforms. These groups harnessed high production quality and verified accounts to create videos that either misled the public through deceptive editing or compiled multiple false and misleading narratives. Mainstream, cable, and hyperpartisan news outlets alike host content on YouTube, and much of it has a similar format, look, and feel. For example, Project Veritas's videos often begin with host James O'Keefe sitting in what appears to be a well-established newsroom, and Shiva Ayyadurai's videos present him as an expert source on a television news show.

Another consequence of the long-form, multinarrative nature of YouTube videos is that misinformation—and even more so, disinformation—can be difficult for the general public to discern. A video containing several distinct narratives would require substantial time on the part of a scrupulous viewer to evaluate. This long-winded approach to misinforming can overwhelm, creating the impression of election fraud without the viewer critically evaluating, or even remembering, the slate of "evidence."

Livestreams

YouTube is also used to build an audience for a unique type of content producer—the livestreamer.[11] Several of the top accounts in our YouTube analyses are

conservative influencers who have used YouTube Live to build their following and subsequently spread mis- and disinformation. These include right-wing pundit Stephen Crowder, who hosts a daily livestreamed commentary show, and Dr. Ayyadurai. The YouTube Live feature (and its counterparts on other platforms, such as Facebook Live) create complex moderation challenges for platforms wishing to minimize misinformation, as the streams are often boosted in the moment by platform algorithms, though there is little opportunity to address claims in real time. Videos often persist on the platform permanently, where they continue to rack up views. However, in their permanent state they may be labeled. The top-viewed video in our data sample, for instance, is a livestream by Stephen Crowder titled "Live Updates: Democrats Try to Steal Election!?" that aired on November 4 and has subsequently gained over 5 million views. It was eventually labeled: "Robust safeguards help ensure the integrity of election results."

Long-Tail Platforms for Unique Formats and Niche Communities

As mainstream platforms tend to exhibit some content moderation, these actions feed into narratives of "censorship," leading some users to seek alternative forums. These range from smaller platforms like TikTok, to almost entirely unmoderated spaces like 8Kun and Discord, to places where moderation is minimal, like Parler[12] and some subreddits. The entirely unregulated spaces function as a breeding ground for more extreme narratives involving the Deep State, QAnon, and encouragement of political violence. However, these platforms' relatively small user base necessitates misinformation leaking or being ported into more mainstream sites in order for it to have impact.

Misinformation Narratives Reappearing on TikTok

One phenomenon we observed was content that originated on other platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, then reappeared on TikTok. A common tactic was the use of TikTok's "green screen" feature, where users create a video with an uploaded image, screen capture, or video as the background. For example, as displayed in Figure 4.3 on the next page, tweets that shared misleading graphs aimed to delegitimize the election results in Michigan and Wisconsin were reshared as backgrounds on TikTok, where users discussed the conspiracies.

Sometimes, content was actioned by one platform while it persisted unactioned on another. Figure 4.4 on page 159 below shows how one user, when TikTok took down a debunked video, used the platform's green screen function to direct

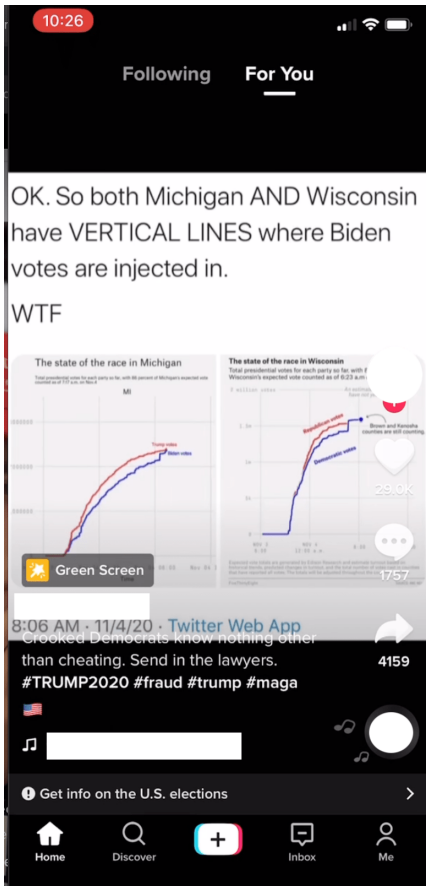


Figure 4.3: A TikTok user reshares a tweet displaying misleading graphs to support the false narrative that the results in Michigan and Wisconsin have been rigged. The video received 29,000 views, 1,751 comments, and 4,159 shares before being taken down.

his followers to the same video on Instagram. TikTok and Instagram have since removed both videos.

Instagramming Screenshots of Posts on Other Platforms

Similar to TikTok, misleading content about the election on other platforms appeared later on Instagram. For example, several of the highly engaged-with Instagram posts from repeat spreaders consisted of screenshots of tweets—often tweets authored by other people. Many of these images included additional visual effects, such as added or crossed-out text, to reinforce, refine, or counter the meaning or framing in the original content. Some of the most influential repeat spreaders used Instagram as part of a multiplatform strategy, adapting their content to Instagram's image-based format.

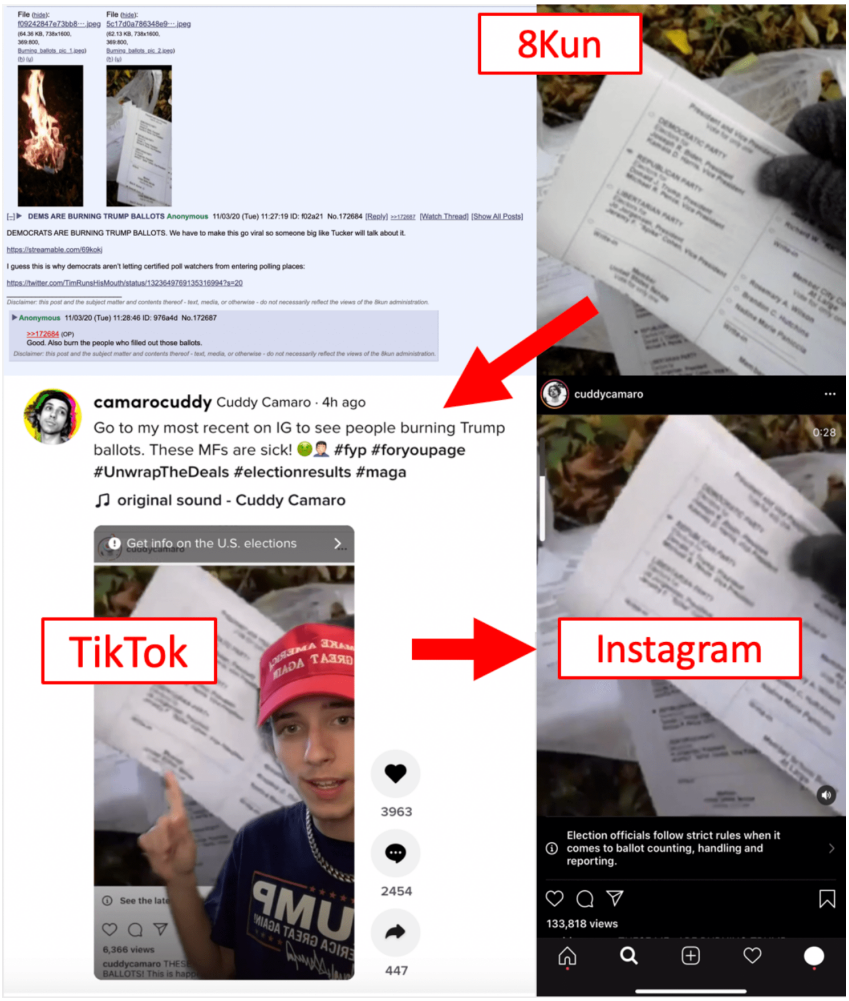


Figure 4.4: Cross-platform spread of a now-debunked video. Top left, a video allegedly showing burning ballots is posted to 8Kun on November 3, 2020, 11:27 am PT. Top right, a screen capture of the video that was posted to 8Kun. Bottom left, the next day at 2:00 pm PT, TikTok user Cuddy Camaro (@camarocuddy) posted a video using the 8kun video as his green screen. In the video, Camaro states that TikTok won't let him upload the video, so he directs people to his Instagram account (@cuddycamaro), where he has posted the video. Bottom right, on Instagram, his post with the video received over 133,000 views by November 4, 2020, 5:00 pm PT, before it was taken down a few hours later.

Parler as an Emerging Meeting Place for Right Wing Influencers and Audiences

Parler was another smaller, emergent platform that came to play a significant role in the 2020 election as a community for pro-Trump activism and perpetuation of pro-Trump conspiracy theories post-election.[13] Unlike other platforms involved in the active, participatory cross-platform information flows described in this section, Parler largely served as something of an echo chamber set apart from the major platforms. While content from websites, Twitter, and YouTube were shared to Parler, the reverse was infrequent.

Parler was established in 2018 as a "censorship-resistant" platform catering to right-leaning users and funded by conservative donors, including Rebekah Mercer. Its founders and early adopters—such as part-owner and prominent pro-Trump policital commentator Dan Bongino—recruited its userbase from right-leaning audiences who had come to feel that mainstream platforms were censoring them. Several of Parler's earliest prominent accounts were individuals who had, in fact, been deplatformed on mainstream social media for specific rules violations, such as Alex Jones and Roger Stone.[14] Users joined in bursts that were often tied to a particular allegation of censorship; in late June 2020, for example, when Twitter's application of a fact-check label to President Trump's tweets outraged his fan base, and again, in October 2020, when mainstream platforms chose to down-rank or not host private adult content from Hunter Biden's laptop. On Parler, such content was easy to find. Parler's commitment to "free speech" (and to not fact-checking information)[15] meant that some of the wilder conspiracy theories and rhetoric about stolen elections— particularly rhetoric with violent undertones—were contextualized, throttled, or taken down by major platforms but moved freely within the Parler community. Members of communities on larger platforms, such as Facebook Groups, recognized this; we observed users within Groups that focused on election rumors and misinformation encouraging other members to create Parler accounts so that they could talk about the claims there.

Parler's user base saw significant growth in the days after the election.[16] Many of its users joined because of their belief in conspiratorial narratives such as Hammer and Scorecard, which remained popular on Parler nearly two months after the election. However, Parler lacked certain features, such as Groups and the ability to sort by top posts, that have made its larger competitors more effective as places to convene for online activism. After its decision not to moderate violent content in the days leading up to the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol, it also struggled to retain hosting: Amazon, Apple, and Google each took action to remove it from their infrastructure, and it was only back online, with a new hosting service, as of February 16, 2021.

Messaging Tools

Beyond platforms, false and misleading claims also proliferated via messaging tools. For example, multiple Miami residents received texts claiming that antifa and BLM protestors planned to terrorize the Miami area following the election. This example highlights how misinformation can be highly localized and originate from sources other than social or broadcast media.

Figure 4.5: A text sent to some Miami residents falsely warning about antifa and BLM protesters.

Cross-Platform Migration as a Demand-Side Issue

Not only did content move across platforms—users themselves moved as well. Researchers often focus on the supply-side of mis- and disinformation— such as how misinformation spreads and its prominence during election cycles.[17] In the 2020 election, the response of social media users to content moderation policies—namely, migrating to alternative platforms such as Parler— foregrounded the demand side of misinformation as well.

In line with their content moderation policies, and as described in Chapters 2 and 6, Twitter and Facebook used labeling and content removal to limit election-related misinformation on their websites. A subset of social media users responded to such moderation with claims of liberal censorship, and migrated to platforms with weaker content moderation policies, like Parler. Parler CEO John Matze said that more than 4.5 million new people signed up for the platform in about a week. While it's yet to be seen whether Parler's newfound popularity

will continue (some evidence suggests Parler has seen a drop in usage from its pre-election days, and the platform has only recently regained a hosting service after the major ones dropped it), the migration suggests that content moderation by the major platforms won't solve the misinformation crisis entirely.

4.3 Dynamics of 2020 Election Misinformation

The Timeline

Misleading information about the 2020 election followed interesting temporal dynamics. In Chapter 3 we trace the evolution of the narratives—stories created by misinformation echoed past stories and gave momentum to the next wave; here, we follow how those stories traveled across the election misinformation landscape over time. During the pre-election period, efforts to preemptively delegitimize the election often appeared to be top-down, spreading through right-wing media and accounts of political figures.[18] But they were also, in many cases, decentralized, with one-off incidents bubbling up through social media before reaching influencers and their large audiences. Together, these dynamics worked to foment a general distrust in the election.

Election Day served as a day of data collection for partisan actors, who would later leverage individual tweets and stories as evidence for broader claims. Motivated by growing fears of a "rigged" election, a large number of people went to the polls looking for evidence of voting fraud. Many documented and used social media to share their experiences of perceived and real issues with the voting process, sharing videos, images, and personal accounts. Politically motivated individuals watching from home on social media contributed by amplifying content that aligned with their views or goals.

In the week after Election Day, pro-Trump political operatives, right-wing media outlets, and other content creators—primarily though not exclusively on the political right—assembled evidence from Election Day into larger narratives attempting to delegitimize the results. Armchair statisticians combed available vote tallies looking for anomalies that could be framed as potential fraud. YouTube opportunists made long-form videos connecting different incidents to the "electoral fraud" meta-narrative. Though initially chaotic, the information space began to concentrate on smaller incidents that were swept into larger narratives or growing conspiracy theories.

Post election, false claims and misleading narratives began to coalesce around allegations of fraud in swing-state cities that favored Biden. Subsequent court cases seeking to throw out votes in these areas based on the allegations shed light on the motivation for this refocusing. A common tactic involved linking statistical evidence with unfounded claims of vote-tabulation fraud. Diffuse pre-

and post-election narratives were blended and presented as walls of evidence. Donald Trump and members of his legal team were instrumental in pushing these narratives, strategically employing them in an effort to overturn the results of the election through legal proceedings. Now, we can see some storylines have taken root, developing into more hardened conspiracy theories that may linger for years to come.

One remarkable phenomenon is the persistence of certain narratives—e.g., that the election would be "rigged"—from the start of our data collection through the end. These narratives were already prevalent when we began our work in August, and as we write this report, participation in the narratives challenging the integrity of the 2020 election is ongoing, with new "evidence" still being added to the conversation, even as the discourse has converged around a few specific conspiracy theories. Research suggests that the conspiracy-theory type of misinformation will have the most staying power—as opposed to more ephemeral rumors that were quickly determined to be false.[19] In particular, claims that are difficult to verify and theories that are impossible to falsify—for example, theories that software on voting machines switches votes without leaving a trace—will likely continue to spread for years to come. These conspiracy theories can become the tools of future disinformation campaigns, and they risk long-term effects such as the continued delegitimization of democratic institutions.

Participatory Mis- and Disinformation

Our analysis demonstrates that the production and spread of misinformation and disinformation about Election 2020—including false narratives of a "stolen election"—was participatory. In other words, these dynamics were not simply top-down from elites to their audiences, but were bottom-up as well, with members of the "crowd" contributing in diverse ways—from posting raw content, to providing frames for that content, to amplifying aligned messages from both everyday members of the crowd and media (including social media) elites.

Repeatedly, our data reveal politically motivated people sincerely introducing content they mistakenly believed demonstrated real issues with election integrity: from the user who claimed back in early September that a ballot in their name had been sent to their parent's home in another state (weeks before ballots had actually been mailed out); to the man who thought that old ballots (from 2018) in a dumpster were evidence of 2020 mail-in ballot fraud; to the person who thought they were capturing video evidence of a poll worker illegally moving ballots on Election Day (it was a photographer moving his gear); to people who were given Sharpies to complete their ballots and mistakenly believed their votes therefore would not be counted.

Well-meaning, though often politically motivated, individuals repeatedly introduced this content into the broader information sphere, often via social media. In each of these incidents, the person originally reporting the issue (and many of those who passed it along) may have sincerely thought they had found evidence of voter fraud. However, it is also likely—especially considering what we know about confirmation bias[20]—that political views and prevailing narratives about potential election fraud both contributed to these individuals' misinterpretation of what they were experiencing and motivated them to share the content.

Networked Framing: How Right-Wing Media and Social Media Influencers Helped to Frame "Evidence" of Ballot and Voting Issues as "Election Fraud"

In Chapter 3, we noted the role of "framing," or providing scaffolding for selected information to shape how people interpret the world, in helping to create and sustain the false "stolen election" narrative. Traditional notions of framing often place the power of creating and communicating frames within the domain of media elites.[21] With the rise of participatory media and disruption of the historical role of "gatekeepers," researchers have documented the phenomenon of "networked framing," where diverse members of online communities—including political and media elites, social media influencers, and to some extent anyone with a social media account—collaborate to create and propagate certain frames.[22]

In our analyses, we repeatedly saw this kind of networked framing in action. Diverse social media users—from anonymous accounts with small followings, to blue-check social media influencers, to accounts associated with hyperpartisan media outlets—were consistently helping to do the work of "framing" by assigning intent to, or exaggerating, real-world events in their posts, in such a way as to fit the narrative of election fraud. Though networked framing practices could be seen, to some extent, on "both sides" of the political spectrum, our data show that right-wing networks were far more active and influential (in terms of dissemination) in discourse that threatened election integrity (see Chapter 5, Figure 5.1 on page 186).

One example of this networked framing activity occurred in late September 2020, when a batch of mail—originally reported to have absentee ballots—was discovered in a ditch in Greenville, Wisconsin.[23]

There was not, nor has there been discovered since, any evidence that this mail-dumping incident was politically motivated. Despite the lack of any evidence, this event was quickly picked up and positioned within the voter fraud frame—and the story eventually propagated widely within that frame, reinforcing the false perception of mail-in voting contributing to widespread election fraud.

The story of ballots in a ditch first appears (in significant numbers) in our data through an article on The Gateway Pundit,[24] which often works by selecting content from other sources and positioning that content within their highly political frames. In this case, The Gateway Pundit repurposed an article from a local (FOX11) news outlet.[25] In addition to embedding the content of that borrowed article in its text, The Gateway Pundit article added four sentences of original content.

Its first sentence, which appeared above the borrowed content, made the framing clear. Without any evidence connecting the incident to anyone with a political motive, The Gateway Pundit's article began with: "Democrats are stealing the 2020 election." Next were two sentences making factual claims borrowed from the FOX11 article—that two trays of mail had been found and that they included absentee ballots. And finally the article attempted to make a connection between that mail and Democrats by stating that "The USPS unions support Joe Biden."

Those four sentences and the borrowed content are the entire article. Without evidence, it frames the improperly discarded mail as election "stealing" by Democrats. That article—and therefore that frame—spread widely on Twitter. It was tweeted/retweeted nearly 25,000 times. In total, we collected 60,000 tweets that referenced the incident.

The early propagation of the narrative was assisted by @Rasmussen_Poll (through an original tweet linking to The Gateway Pundit's article) and @EricTrump (through a retweet). Other online accounts picked up and advanced that voter fraud frame, calling it "LEFTIST VOTER FRAUD" and stating through a hashtag that "#DemocratsAreCheaters."

A few prominent social media accounts picked up the story with a slightly more subtle framing. For example, the tweet below, posted by another verified repeat spreader account, does not explicitly claim voter fraud, but shapes the interpretive frame toward "voter fraud" — or at the very least toward doubting the integrity of mail-in voting—by highlighting that the mail was "FOUND IN DITCH" and that it included "ABSENTEE ballots."

Tweet from Chuck Callesto framing a mail-dumping issue as an election integrity concern.

This event—and its framing as a "voter fraud" issue—eventually made it into a public statement by Kayleigh McEnany, White House press secretary.[26]

This example demonstrates how hyperpartisan media and other prominent social media users on the political right reframed events in misleading ways to feed false narratives of widespread election fraud by Democrats. It also reveals another dynamic that we saw repeatedly across these incidents, where local media coverage was opportunistically appropriated and often recontextualized to fit election fraud narratives.

Similarly, the Sharpiegate narrative (described in detail in Chapter 3.3 on page 49) took shape through networked framing. Early tweets—from voters in various locations on Election Day—highlighted somewhat open-ended concerns about Sharpies bleeding through ballots. Tweets and retweets framing the concerns as potential voter fraud were often generated by less prominent accounts, including voters describing perceived issues with their own ballots and "grassroots" political activists relaying and occasionally reframing those concerns. Often, accounts with smaller follower numbers would add @mentions of more prominent accounts to try to gain their attention and potentially gain traction for their content through a high-profile retweet or quote tweet. Those influencers and political media elites then used the claims to bolster the "rigged election" narrative.

Together, these examples show how networked framing—including selecting certain pieces of evidence and placing it within the voter fraud frame—was not the exclusive terrain of high-profile accounts, but also incorporated the work of voters motivated to share their experiences and politically active social media users helping to identify and amplify potential cases of voter fraud.

For example, President Trump's many statements (including tweets) about the election being "rigged" may have sufficiently primed his supporters to be on the lookout for evidence of election fraud by the time the Trump campaign's "Army for Trump" called for them to perform as formal and informal poll observers. The primary objective of these militarized calls to action was to motivate and organize the mass collection of purported "evidence" of election fraud. The social media data we collected reveal a large number of people searching for, and often mistakenly "finding," evidence of the election fraud they believed was occurring—and then, in a case of participatory disinformation, actively sharing and resharing this kind of content.

Once introduced onto social media, these cases of false witnesses of "election fraud" were frequently picked up and amplified by influencers and rank-and-file accounts alike. Often, the person who introduced the content or another active social media user would try to call the attention of more prominent influencers to potentially relevant content by reposting with tags and/or mentions of more large-audience accounts. Those more influential accounts—often accounts of hyperpartisan media, conservative political figures, and other elite right-wing influencers—played the role of assembling this content to fit the larger narratives (e.g., a "rigged election") and of spreading it to increasingly large audiences.

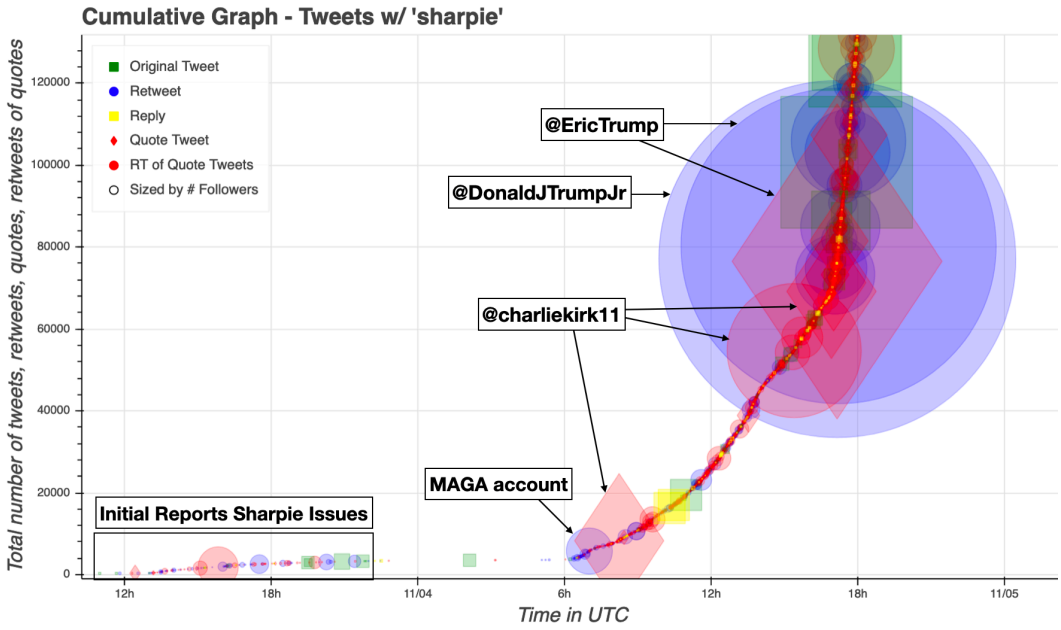


Figure 4.6: Cumulative graph of Sharpie tweets on November 3 (Election Day) and November 4. Individual tweets are plotted at the time they were shared and sized by the number of followers of the account posting them. Color and shape represent tweet type: original tweets in green squares, reply tweets in yellow squares, retweets in blue circles, quote tweets in red diamonds, and retweets of quote tweets in red circles.

Figure 4.6, the cumulative graph of the early spread of "Sharpiegate" rumors, shows the process of participatory disinformation. The conversation started relatively small—with many small-follower accounts often tweeting their own experiences—and then began to gain traction through quote tweets and retweets by accounts with increasingly large audiences, eventually taking off with the help of President Trump's two adult sons.

In dozens of election-integrity incidents, these false or misleading narratives eventually reached the inner echelons of the Trump campaign. In a few notable cases, we saw the narratives move beyond social media into large television audiences through President Trump's debate performances.

Friend-of-a-Friend Narratives

One type of participatory misinformation we saw was the "friend-of-a-friend" story.[27] These pieces of evidence, which were often wrapped into larger narratives about disenfranchisement or election fraud, reference a story that the person "heard" from someone else, and the content can extend to increasing degrees of separation—the "friend-of-a-friend." One story asserted that a person's friend had voted for Biden and the machine changed her vote to Trump (see Figure 4.7).

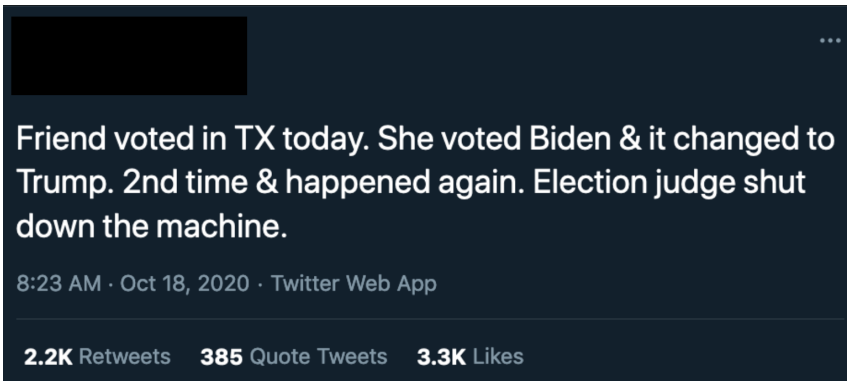


Figure 4.7: A tweet claiming that a voting machine changed their friend's vote from Trump to Biden.

This story spread on Facebook and Twitter, and likely appeared elsewhere as well. We saw a similar dynamic, though to a smaller extent in terms of spread, around claims that a Trump supporter had been redirected to the wrong polling location (see Figure 4.8).

Figure 4.8: A tweet claiming that a friend was sent to the wrong voting location.

The spread of these stories has a couple of common drivers. First, "friend" can

take on new meaning in online spaces, where an otherwise stranger posting to a Facebook Group can be considered a "friend" whose message is worth spreading. This can result in often well-meaning (or at least not ill-intentioned) people passing along content ("sharing is caring") that people think will be informative or otherwise helpful to others. Second, friend-of-a-friend rumors can be intentionally copied and pasted, sometimes with small changes to minor details—referred to as copypasta—to give the sense that a large number of people have experienced a rare event. The Sharpiegate story also spread through friend-of-a-friend posts; we collected hundreds of tweets mentioning a friend whose ballot was cancelled due to the use of Sharpies.

Figure 4.9: A tweet claiming that use of a Sharpie canceled their vote.

In actuality, the online database provided the status of voters' mail-in ballots, which were canceled when they chose to vote in person.

The Use of Bad Statistics to Sow Doubt in Election Results

Elections produce vast quantities of data, from national Electoral College totals to fine-grained, precinct-level results. The sociological processes that underlie voting patterns are complex and varied, and are impacted by both structural features (i.e., the shape and size of precincts), voting process (i.e., access and eligibility), and the political landscape (i.e., candidates and issues). Each of these factors, and more, introduce patterns and benign irregularities into voting data that can be difficult or impossible to tease apart.

In the wake of the 2020 election, the scale and irregular nature of voting data was weaponized to create statistical disinformation in order to undermine confidence in the result. One of the more common tactics was to analyze precinct-level vote totals using Benford's law. In brief, Benford's law makes predictions about the frequency of first and/or second digits in a dataset. Violations of these predictions have been used to some success as a tool for detecting financial fraud, and have gained traction in recent years as a potential mechanism for determining electoral fraud, despite well-documented theoretical and practical limitations.[28]

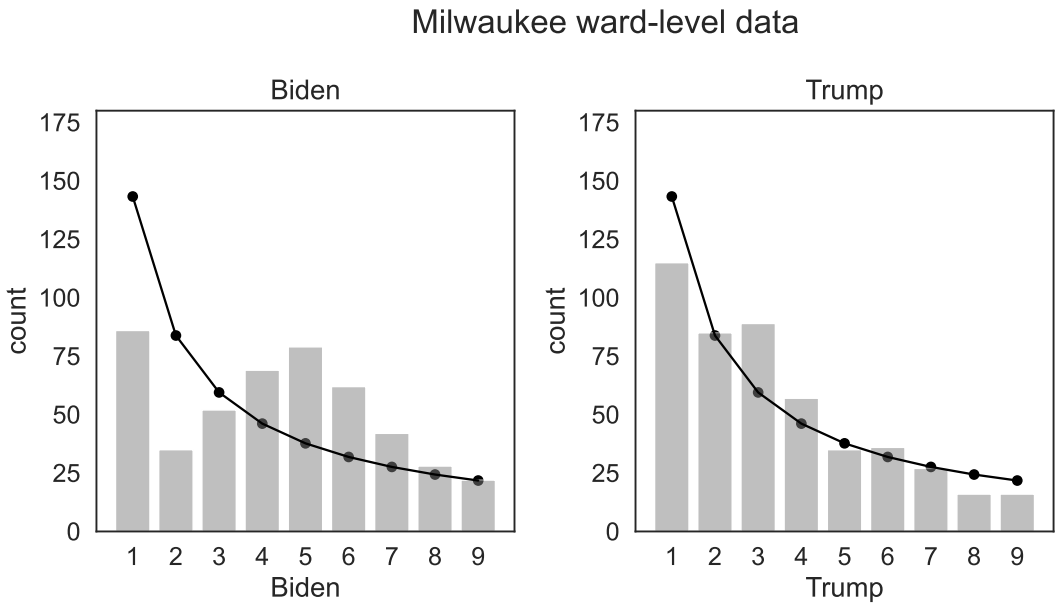


Figure 4.10: Ward-level analysis of first digits of vote totals in Milwaukee in the 2020 election, redrawn from original data but similar to observed misinformation. The line indicates Benford's law, whereas the bars indicate the observed frequencies of first digits from 1 to 9.

One prominent example of disinformation invoking Benford's law involved the vote totals for wards in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, as seen in Figure 4.10. While Trump's vote totals approximated Benford's law, Biden's had a surplus of digits 4 through 6, and a dearth of digits 1 and 2. This was promoted as definitive evidence of election fraud on both far-right websites and social media platforms like Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter. However, the true cause was much more benign. The excess digits are a signal of Biden's lead and average precinct size, and not indicative of fraud.[29] More generally, Benford's law is not expected to be followed when data do not span several orders of magnitude or for voting processes in general.[30]

The misinformation surrounding Benford's law follows a familiar pattern. A statistical model sets up an (often flawed) expectation of how voting data should appear. Violations of this expectation occur, either due to chance (i.e., checking many locations), a mismatch between the data and model's assumptions, or an inappropriate application of the statistical model. Ethical, well-meaning statisticians discovering an irregularity would then get to work understanding whether it arose as a problem with the model (i.e., failing to account for demographics), the data (i.e., a rounding/processing error), an honest mistake, or in rare cases, fraud. In cases of misinformation, irregularities are taken as prima facie proof of fraud.

In another example, Shiva Ayyadurai posted a fraught analysis, choosing variables

that artificially created the impression that Trump did more poorly than expected in more Republican areas to suggest voting machines were changing votes to Joe Biden.[31] He further used the imposed negative slope to estimate purported switched votes, which fed into misleading narratives about Dominion voting software (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3).

These are two of many ways in which election data was weaponized to promote false narratives of widespread electoral fraud. This tactic is particularly challenging, as it simultaneously creates the impression of widespread fraud while leveraging statistical analyses that average citizens cannot reasonably be expected to critique, leading them to accept claims of technical meddling at face value. Debunking can be challenging even for statistically proficient academics, as no affordable academic-facing API exists to gather election data in real time. We observed that when data is available, it can require unique solutions to access and clean into a usable format (i.e., scraping PDFs or websites). In many cases, data were simply unavailable, were of low quality (e.g., just percentages), or would require ethically or legally questionable scraping. Freed from legal and data-quality constraints, purveyors of statistical disinformation remain at an advantage.

Organized Outrage: Online Misinformation's Offline Impact

The spread and impact of misinformation is not merely confined to the online world. Indeed, many of the narratives we explored explicitly called for, and resulted in, offline actions. Pre-election, this was seen most clearly in the #ArmyforTrump hashtag, in which the Trump campaign and right-leaning influencers directed supporters to sign up to become poll watchers for the campaign and to submit purported evidence of electoral fraud to the campaign team. Trump's legal campaign in the weeks post-election repeatedly relied upon questionable public testimonies of fraudulent behaviors in legal challenges to courts across the country. These affidavits and public testimonies are the consequence of the public priming of fraud pushed by the #ArmyforTrump campaign (along with the many other election fraud narratives discussed in this paper), and a weaponization of the information elicited through the digital disinformation campaign.

Similarly, misinformation narratives that arose on Election Day itself led to in-person organized outrage, as seen most notably around the #Sharpiegate conspiracy. Despite swift debunking from election officials in Arizona, the #Sharpiegate theory gained traction across local Facebook Groups and on Twitter. This culminated in protestors gathering outside the vote counting center in Maricopa County shouting about the conspiracy and chanting to "stop the count."

Similar protests in swing states across the country were coordinated by social media misinformation campaigns like #Sharpiegate and the more national Stop The Steal campaign. The protests not only targeted key election sites but were organized more generally in larger cities across the US, including large-scale demonstrations in Washington, DC. These in-person events gave new life to election misinformation, cementing its believability by affording them physical presence and further weakening the ability of fact-checkers to counter their spread. The organized outrage facilitated by blue-check influencers thus leveraged misinformation to organize mass protests that further delegitimized the electoral process and its results.

From Manipulating the Information System to Leveraging the Legal System

Mis- and disinformation that originated and spread online eventually gained an offline presence in the courts. Buried in the litany of lawsuits filed by the Trump campaign in the post-election period were the same participatory mis- and disinformation cascades traceable to online right-wing networks. Many of the same false claims and misleading narratives we covered in our real-time analysis fed the Trump administration's meta-narrative of widespread election fraud. Right-wing groups friendly to the President's cause filed lawsuits that built on these narratives as purported evidence of the illegitimacy of the election.

One prominent example of this behavior is exemplified in the false—now recanted —affidavit provided by an Erie, Pennsylvania, post office worker and publicized by Project Veritas.[32]

Initially, the sworn affidavit contained allegations that the USPS had repeatedly backdated ballots—claiming that as evidence of widespread fraud. Later, the worker went on record with the House Oversight Committee to recant his allegation (though Project Veritas denies the veracity of his recantation).[33] Despite the fallout, the air of legitimacy attached to a legal document may benefit proponents of online disinformation campaigns and reinforce the "truth" of a particular narrative.[34]

In another case, also in Pennsylvania, Republican representative Mike Kelly filed a state lawsuit that challenged the constitutionality of the state's 2019 mail-in voting statute. In its statement of facts, the original complaint discussed a number of unsupported claims that had circulated throughout online communities, including, for example, claims about "unsolicited ballots" (¶56–57) and an attempt by the 2019 Pennsylvania legislature to subvert the legitimacy of future elections by setting in motion a plan to shift to universal mail-in voting (¶82–84).[35] The Pennsylvania Commonwealth rejected his claims; on appeal before the Supreme Court, Kelly's action doubly failed.[36] Had Kelly succeeded in

his quest to invalidate the statute, over two million Pennsylvania ballots would have been thrown out.

Finally, a handful of legal actions also incorporated bad statistics common among online proponents of disinformation. One particularly visible example of this phenomenon comes by way of a complaint filed by Sidney Powell,[37] a vocal Trump supporter,[38] in the US District Court for the Northern District of Georgia. Powell filed similar complaints in other key battleground states; all have since been dismissed.[39] In these complaints, Powell's team relied on the misinterpretations and/or misrepresentations of deviations from Benford's Law discussed above.[40] Although experts agree that these deviations are not evidence of electoral fraud,[41] the online misinformation transformed into "IRL" disinformation through Powell's multiple, failed legal actions.

In sum, popular narratives that emerged from these participatory mis- and disinformation dynamics were repeatedly mobilized as "evidence" in the courts. Although the actions brought were often dismissed as baseless, this phenomenon is unlikely to disappear in years to come.

4.4 Summary

The work of producing and spreading misleading narratives about the 2020 election was cross-platform, leveraging diverse platforms in complementary ways to seed, amplify, and mobilize content while adapting around efforts by the platforms to address misinformation. The work was both top-down, with President Trump and right-wing media establishing the initial frames of "voter fraud" and "election rigging," and bottom-up, with armies of volunteers providing content and analysis to develop specific narratives to fit those frames. With his many "RIGGED!" tweets, starting long before the election, and his Army for Trump advertisements, President Trump didn't just prime his audience to be receptive to false narratives of election fraud—he inspired them to produce those narratives and then echoed those false claims back to them. Everyday people, likely motivated by their political views, went online to share content highlighting what they believed to be voting irregularities. Hyperpartisan news and social media influencers played a role in selection, amplification, and framing, assembling the "evidence" of the crowd to fit their narratives and then mobilizing that content across platforms. Those narratives led to real-world efforts in the form of protests and legal action, both of which set the course toward the events at the US Capitol on January 6.

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Chapter 5

Actors and Networks: Repeat Spreaders of Election Misinformation

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we look systematically across EIP tickets to trace content across platforms to identify "repeat spreaders"—i.e., individuals and organizations who were repeatedly influential in spreading false and misleading narratives about the 2020 election. We address the following questions:

- Which Twitter accounts, Facebook Pages/Groups, and YouTube channels were most influential in the spread of these narratives?
- What domains were used to host content that was then mobilized through social media in the spread of those narratives?
- Considering the structure of the online discourse, in which communities (networks of accounts) were these repeat spreaders located?

5.2 Methods for Identifying Repeat Spreaders of False and Misleading Narratives

To identify the repeat spreaders, we draw from three complementary views: one from our ticketing and analysis process (described in Chapters 1 and 2); a second through Twitter data EIP partners collected contemporaneously; and a

third through CrowdTangle and Facebook search functionality, collected after the EIP's real-time analyses ended.

These complementary views allow us to:

- Identify some of the most influential accounts and most widely shared domains on two of the most widely used platforms (Facebook and Twitter).
- Explore, through tracing links in our Facebook and Twitter data, how other widely used social media platforms (like YouTube) fit into these incidents.
- Observe cross-platform connections and sharing practices.

Delineating Election-Integrity Incidents

Through our live ticketing process, analysts identified social media posts and other web-based content related to each ticket, capturing original URLs (as well as screenshots and URLs to archived content). In total, the EIP processed 639 unique tickets and recorded 4,784 unique original URLs.

After our real-time analysis phase ended on November 30, 2020, we grouped tickets into incidents and narratives. We define an incident as an information cascade related to a specific information event. Often, one incident is equivalent to one ticket, but in some cases a small number of tickets mapped to the same information cascade, and we collapsed them. As described in Chapter 3, incidents were then mapped to narratives—the stories that develop around these incidents—where some narratives might include several different incidents.

For tractability, we limited our analysis in this chapter to 181 tickets mapped onto 153 incidents related to the narratives in Chapter 3 and that we determined to either (1) have relatively large spread (>1000 tweets) on Twitter, or (2) be of "high priority" as determined by analysts during our real-time research.

Next, through an iterative process, we identified a keyword-based search string and a time window for each incident that would allow us to capture a comprehensive, low-noise dataset from Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. We also collected data for each incident from YouTube using links to that platform from Twitter.

Collecting Data for Each Incident

Twitter Data Collection

We collected data from Twitter in real time from August 15 through December 12, 2020.[1] Using the Twitter Streaming API,[2] we tracked a variety of election-related terms (e.g., vote, voting, voter, election, election2020, ballots), terms related

to voter fraud claims (e.g., fraud, voterfraud), location terms for battleground states and potentially newsworthy areas (e.g., Detroit, Maricopa), and emergent hashtags (e.g., #stopthesteal, #sharpiegate). The collection resulted in 859 million total tweets.

From this database, we created a subset of tweets associated with each incident, using three methods: (1) tweets recorded in our ticketing process, (2) URLs recorded in our ticketing process, and (3) search strings.

Relying upon our Tier 1 Analysis process (described in Chapter 1), we began with tweets that were directly referenced in a ticket associated with an incident. We also identified (from within our Twitter collection) and included any retweets, quote tweets, and replies to these tweets. Next, we identified tweets in our collection that contained a URL that had been recorded during Tier 1 Analysis as associated with a ticket related to this incident. Finally, we used the search string and time window developed for each incident to identify tweets from within our larger collection that were associated with each election integrity incident.

In total, our incident-related tweet data included 5,888,771 tweets and retweets from ticket status IDs directly, 1,094,115 tweets and retweets collected first from ticket URLs, and 14,914,478 from keyword searches, for a total of 21,897,364 tweets.

Facebook and Instagram Data Collection

To understand how the information ecosystem looks from the perspective of Facebook and Instagram, we collected public posts through the CrowdTangle API from Facebook Groups, Facebook Pages, Facebook verified profiles and public Instagram accounts. We used the same set of incidents, and adapted the search strings to capture comprehensive, low-noise samples for each incident from these platforms. We had to adjust the search strings, often adding additional search criteria (voting- and election-related terms) to bring the results into alignment with our Twitter data, which was already constrained to voting-related data.

5.3 Most Engaged Incidents

The 153 incidents examined varied dramatically in spread, ranging from under 1,000 tweets to over 7 million tweets in a single incident. Overall, the majority of these incidents focused on topics related to delegitimization (110 of the incidents), although several were associated with participation interference (25 incidents) and procedural interference (23 incidents).[3] Table 5.1 enumerates the

ten most prominent incidents (by Twitter spread) with a short description of each.

5.4 Political Alignment of Influential Twitter Accounts

To understand the social structure of Twitter accounts that posted about the United States election, we created a network map[10] of influential accounts and the engaged audiences they share, using retweets as a rough measure of influence. We included two accounts as nodes in our network if at least seven users in our election-related Twitter streams retweeted both accounts at least 20 times each between September 1 and December 1, 2020. In practice, this means that accounts are connected to each other if they share a similar audience of accounts retweeting them. We then identified community clusters within this network,[11] excluding small or unrelated communities.

As displayed in Figure 5.1 on page 186, this pruning left us with two communities broadly aligned with the US political right and left. The right-leaning community was composed of two heavily intertwined communities: (1) prominent right-wing (pro-Trump) influencers in politics, media, and social media; and (2) a community of largely anonymous accounts who were active and vocal supporters of Trump, QAnon, and other right-wing groups. The left-leaning community was focused around left-leaning politicians, pundits, and mainstream news outlets, with satellite communities consisting of users with more socialist politics, and a small group of high-volume, activist users behaviorally similar to the much larger right-wing activist community.

First, we looked at the incident-sharing behavior of the accounts represented in this network, using the community structure to draw meaningful differences. We found that influential accounts associated with the US right shared more incidents than the left both by absolute number (151 vs. 119 tickets) and by the total number of times they were retweeted in these incidents (17.8 million vs. 1.9 million retweets). The majority of incidents were primarily spread by the right-wing communities: right-leaning accounts were retweeted more than left-leaning accounts in 129 incidents, while left-leaning accounts were retweeted more in 23.

Many incident-related tweets from left-leaning accounts were attempting to fact-check, rather than uncritically spread, the false and misleading narratives. In one of the most extreme examples, a false claim made by Michelle Bachman that ballots pre-filled in China were being smuggled into the United States received more spread on the left than the right, solely due to fact-checking behavior. Sometimes, the left-leaning accounts' propensity to fact-check appeared

Incident Title	# of Related Tweets	Description
Dominion Voting Systems: Swing States	7,157,398	This incident accused Dominion Voting Systems software of switching votes in favor of Joe Biden, particularly in swing states like Georgia; as of January 2021, Dominion has filed defamation lawsuits against prominent individuals and media that perpetuated this claim, and some have retracted their stories.[4]
Stop The Steal	2,888,209	This broadly defined incident was based on tweets from verified users broadly supporting the #StopTheSteal narrative, which alleged that certain states were not properly counting votes for President Trump.
Sharpiegate	822,477	This incident falsely claimed that in-person voters in Arizona (believed to be predominantly supporters of President Trump) were given Sharpies to vote with, which the machines would be unable to read, thus causing their votes to be excluded.
Pennsylvania Poll Watcher	618,168	This incident centered on narratives that a GOP-affiliated poll watcher was wrongfully denied entry to a Pennsylvania polling station. This content was then reframed to falsely claim that this was evidence of illegal actions taking place in the polling station. While the video does show a poll watcher being denied, it lacked broader context as to the reason for denial, which was not politically motivated.[5]
Pennsylvania Postal Whistleblower	591,838	This incident centered on footage from Project Veritas showing a postal worker claiming that the post office had ordered him to backdate ballots that arrived after the voting deadline in Pennsylvania. The whistleblower, after being questioned by investigators, later recanted these statements.[6]
Michigan Poll Watcher Whistleblowers	498,366	This incident focused on several whistleblowers from Michigan, some who were poll watchers in Wayne County (home to Detroit), alleging, in a video, various illegal actions by poll workers.
Michigan Dead Voters	486,096	This incident focused on false claims, based on misinterpretations of information on a Michigan government-affiliated website, that dead and implausibly old people had voted in the 2020 election.[7]
Sunrise Zoom Calls	475,581	This incident centered on misleadingly edited video footage that claimed to show federal employees conspiring with the left-leaning environmental activist organization Sunrise Movement to organize a coup, leak information, and shut down Washington, DC.[8]
Nevada Whistleblower	415,614	This incident claimed that a whistleblower who worked for the Clark County Elections Department (which encompasses portions of Las Vegas) had come forward with a list of various "nefarious behaviors." These included falsely claiming that illegitimate ballots were being processed and that people were filling out ballots that were not their own near a Biden/Harris campaign van.
Minnesota Ballot Harvesting	415,570	This incident, seeded by a Project Veritas video, surfaced otherwise unsupported claims of ballot harvesting in Minnesota and attempted to connect those claims to US Representative Ilhan Omar (see discussion in Chapter 3).[9]

Table 5.1: Top 10 most-tweeted incidents in our data.

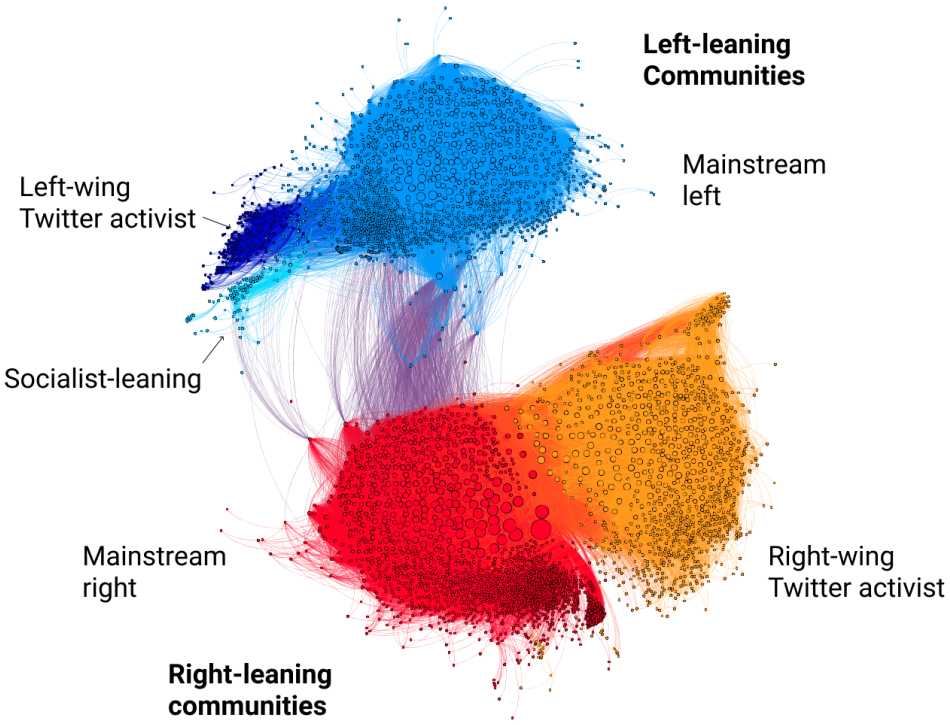

Figure 5.1: A network visualization of influential Twitter accounts from our dataset of election-related tweets collected from September 1 to December 1, 2020.[12] Each node is one Twitter account, and two nodes are linked together if they are retweeted by the same accounts. Two nodes are pulled closer together if they share more accounts, and larger nodes are connected to more accounts. Node colors correspond to automatically determined clusters of users, which broadly split into right- and left-wing communities. Subcommunities include activist accounts on both the left and right, and a socialist-leaning cluster on the left.

to stall the spread of some misleading incidents, such as when the spread of a false claim about ballots being unlawfully rejected in Georgia was significantly slowed after a series of corrective fact-checks. In other incidents, these fact-checks came too late; a check for a similar false claim about undelivered ballots in Florida came more than 24 hours after initial spread, and had no discernible impact on subsequent sharing. There were also instances of misinformation originating and spreading almost solely via left-leaning accounts, such as a video of an overflowing ballot room in Miami-Dade implying that Postmaster General DeJoy was hiding ballots for Biden in the critical county, as well as some incidents in which both the right and left participated, such as the mail-dumping incident in Glendale, California, described in Chapter 3.[13]

Influential accounts on the political right, by contrast, rarely engaged in fact-checking behavior, and were responsible for the most widely spread incidents

of false or misleading information in our dataset. Right-leaning accounts also more frequently augmented their misinformation posts with narrative-related hashtags, such as #StopTheSteal and #DeadVoters, which persisted across multiple incidents and were shared millions of times in our dataset.[14] Most unique about right-leaning accounts, however, was their frequent involvement in many tickets. Whereas almost all of the most influential left-leaning accounts were involved in only one or two incidents of false or misleading information, many right-leaning accounts with large audiences were involved with upwards of 10, and were often responsible for seeding or catalyzing an incident's spread through the conservative, right-wing, and pro-Trump Twitter networks.

5.5 Repeat Spreaders

In this analysis, we attempt to identify entities—e.g., Twitter accounts, Facebook Pages, and YouTube channels—that played a significant role in the spread of multiple election integrity incidents, such as the ones identified above in Section 5.3 on page 183. Expanding upon our pre-election analysis of influential Twitter accounts, we refer to these entities as "repeat spreaders."[15]

Repeat Spreader Twitter Accounts

First, we look at the most influential Twitter accounts across election integrity incidents in terms of shaping the flow of information. We identify accounts that produced highly retweeted original tweets (retweeted more than 1,000 times) across multiple incidents. Table 5.2 on the next page lists the accounts that appeared across the most incidents (>=10) along with relevant details for each account.

The 21 most prominent repeat spreaders on Twitter—accounts that played a significant role in disseminating multiple false or misleading narratives that threatened election integrity—include political figures and organizations, partisan media outlets, and social media all-stars. Perhaps a reflection on both the nature of information threats to election integrity and our process for identifying them (see Chapter 2 for a note on the limitations of our approach), all 21 of the repeat spreaders were associated with conservative or right-wing political views and support of President Trump, and all featured in the politically "right" cluster in our network graph in Figure 5.1 on the facing page. Notably, 15 of the top spreaders of election misinformation were verified, blue-check accounts.

President Trump and his two older sons figure prominently in the Twitter dataset. In addition, several GOP political figures, along with leaders of conservative political organizations, repeatedly spread misleading narratives on Twitter. Charlie Kirk of Turning Point USA, for example, posted three tweets at

Rank	Account	Verified	Incidents	Tweets w/ >1000 Retweets	Followers	Retweets in Incidents	Left or Right
1	RealJamesWoods	True	27	36	2,738,431	403,950	Right
2	gatewaypundit	True	25	45	424,431	200,782	Right
3	DonaldJTrumpJr	True	24	27	6,392,929	460,044	Right
4	realDonaldTrump	True	21	43	88,965,710	1,939,362	Right
4	TomFitton	True	21	29	1,328,746	193,794	Right
6	JackPosobiec	True	20	41	1,211,549	188,244	Right
7	catturd2	False	17	20	436,601	66,039	Right
8	EricTrump	True	16	25	4,580,170	484,425	Right
9	ChuckCallesto	True	15	17	311,517	117,281	Right
10	charliekirk11	True	13	18	1,915,729	232,967	Right
11	marklevinshow	True	12	10	2,790,699	90,157	Right
11	cjtruth	False	12	27	256,201	66,698	Right
11	JamesOKeefeIII	False	12	64	1,021,505	625,272	Right
11	prayingmedic	False	12	26	437,976	57,165	Right
15	RichardGrenell	True	11	12	691,441	143,363	Right
15	pnjaban	True	11	14	208,484	58,417	Right
17	BreitbartNews	True	10	11	1,647,070	38,405	Right
17	TheRightMelissa	False	10	31	497,635	73,932	Right
17	mikeroman	False	10	10	29,610	128,726	Right
17	robbystarbuck	True	10	15	204,355	65,651	Right
17	seanhannity	True	10	22	5,599,939	96,641	Right

Table 5.2: Repeat Spreaders: Twitter accounts that were highly retweeted across multiple incidents. Twitter has since suspended the accounts of realDonaldTrump (January 6), The Gateway Pundit (February 6), cjtruth, and prayingmedic (January 8).[16] Account verification status as of 11/10/2020.

critical times that helped to catalyze the spread of Sharpiegate (see Chapter 3, and Chapter 4 Figure 4.6 on page 167). James O'Keefe, founder of Project Veritas, is also a significant repeat spreader. We discuss in more detail the activities of President Trump and his sons, as well as James O'Keefe and Project Veritas, below in Section 5.6.

Far-right hyperpartisan media outlets also participated in a wide range of incidents, including The Gateway Pundit, which ranked #2 in the dataset; Breitbart News; and two Fox News hosts. The Gateway Pundit (Twitter suspended this account on February 6, 2021) and Breitbart News are examined fully in Section 5.6 on page 195. The remainder of the repeat spreader accounts include a range of right-wing social media influencers—James Woods, conservative celebrity and actor, tops the list.

Many of these accounts follow others in this group, and their networks of followers overlap as well. They also actively promote and spread each others' content. Once content from misleading narratives entered this right-wing Twitter network, it often spread quickly across influential accounts and out to

their overlapping audiences, making it very difficult to slow down or correct.

Domains Cited in Incidents (in the Twitter Data)

Next, using the same tweet data, we identified the most prominent domains across election integrity incidents. We identified domains that were highly tweeted (linked to by more than 500 tweets or retweets) in multiple incidents. Table 5.3 lists the domains that appeared across the most incidents (>=7) along with relevant details for each account. Domains within this list may be cited for different reasons—some (the *Washington Post*, for example) appear in this table for articles that debunked false claims and narratives.

Rank	Domain	Incidents	# Original Tweets	Total Retweets	≈% Left Spread	≈% Right Spread
1	www.thegatewaypundit.com	46	29,207	840,740	0.08%	99.92%
2	www.breitbart.com	26	8,569	394,689	0.94%	99.06%
3	www.youtube.com	21	14,040	269,996	2.51%	97.49%
4	www.washingtonpost.com	18	1,986	74,360	84.76%	15.23%
5	www.foxnews.com	14	1,330	34,143	0.91%	99.09%
6	www.theepochtimes.com	12	2,167	86,325	0.00%	100.00%
7	nypost.com	11	4,513	178,176	2.27%	97.73%
8	www.zerohedge.com	10	1,043	27,687	0.52%	99.48%
8	www.cnn.com	10	1,269	100,642	89.28%	10.71%
10	apnews.com	9	432	13,067	33.84%	66.14%
10	justthenews.com	9	1,035	61,305	0.00%	100.00%
10	www.nytimes.com	9	776	50,021	63.88%	36.11%
10	thedcpatriot.com	9	572	26,417	0.00%	99.99%
14	gellerreport.com	8	516	15,075	0.00%	99.99%
14	thenationalpulse.com	8	770	39,160	0.00%	99.99%
14	nationalfile.com	8	4,443	195,489	0.51%	99.48%
17	www.washingtontimes.com	7	280	11,445	1.45%	98.54%
17	www.pscp.tv	7	2,067	83,269	0.47%	99.53%
17	saraacarter.com	7	531	81,172	1.39%	98.60%
17	www.washingtonexaminer.com	7	1,518	75,939	0.98%	99.02%

Table 5.3: Domains, extracted from tweets, that were highly tweeted (>500) across multiple incidents. Shortened URLs were followed when possible to extract original domains. The incident count includes the number of incidents for which the domain was linked to in over 500 tweets or retweets in our incident-related Twitter data. The original tweets are the count of non-retweets (including quote tweets and replies) that mentioned the domain within those incidents, while the total retweets column is a count of the retweets, both from within our incident-linked Twitter data. Finally, the estimated right/left spread is the proportion of original tweets made by influential users classified on the ideological spectrum based on our network analysis, above. Users not included in that network analysis are excluded from the estimate.

The top 20 domains involved in spreading or discussing false or misleading information included both partisan and mainstream media outlets—which played

markedly different roles in the information incidents (primarily spreading vs. primarily correcting). The two most significant domains in our incident-related data belonged to partisan outlets: The Gateway Pundit (www.thegatewaypundit.com) and Breitbart (www.breitbart.com). Fox News again appears on the list; other notable partisan news outlets are described in Appendix C on page 251.

A number of "mainstream" media sites also appear in our list of frequent domains—often picked up within the left-leaning clusters in our network map. Though this may suggest a somewhat equal share of participation in misinformation on the political left and right, the majority of stories cited on "the left" were referenced as fact-checks on the associated incidents or narratives. For instance, a story from CNN that challenges the Trump campaign's claims of deceased voters is representative of the corrective role these sites played within the spread of these misleading narratives.[17]

A couple of incidents of false or misleading information did run through the left, including a story about unauthorized voting boxes being set up by Republicans—a true story, but one that falsely framed the motive and exaggerated the impact of such actions. The story was covered by "mainstream" media sites including AP News, the *New York Times*, CNN, and the *Washington Post*, all included in our list of frequent domains. A discarded-mail incident was framed by the left as the Trump administration's effort to harm the mail-in voting process. CNN, in particular, was cited in that USPS ballot-dumping narrative—though for content that did not explicitly invoke the election integrity frame.

The presence of both YouTube (youtube.com) and Periscope (pscp.tv) in the highly tweeted domain list illustrates the cross-platform nature of misleading election-related narratives.

YouTube data is further discussed below. Interestingly, in our election-integrity related data, both YouTube and Periscope were primarily tweeted by accounts on the political right or pro-Trump side of the network (see Figure 5.1 on page 186).

In summary, though a few false or misleading narratives about the integrity of the 2020 election did run through the left, when we look at the domains that repeatedly helped to spread—as opposed to correct—election-related misinformation, we find an array of predominantly right-wing and pro-Trump partisan media outlets.

Repeat Spreaders: YouTube Channels in the Twitter Data

YouTube played a prominent role in the spread of false and misleading information across the election integrity incidents we analyzed, ranking third among most linked-to domains overall. In at least 44 distinct incidents, YouTube videos were tweeted more than 10 times.

From our corpus of data, we identified the YouTube channels that were repeat spreaders within the Twitter discourse—i.e., those that repeatedly used YouTube to disseminate multiple false and/or misleading narratives. To do this we first extracted all of the YouTube links from our incident data and used the YouTube API to determine what channels posted the videos. We then identified channels that were highly tweeted—linked to more than ten times in an incident—for multiple election integrity incidents. This provided a corpus of 665 videos from 411 unique YouTube channels.[18] Table 5.4 lists the top 12 repeat spreader channels (>4 incidents) that arose from this analysis.

Rank	Channel	Incidents	Total Tweets	Videos	YouTube Views
1	Project Veritas	7	128,734	26	9,613,437
1	CDMedia	7	258,314	1	691,395
3	Donald J Trump	6	4,338	10	10,849,373
3	One America News Network	6	207,544	15	4,034,274
3	GOP War Room	6	186,106	8	1,732,847
3	Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai	6	196,292	1	1,052,429
7	Gateway Pundit	5	10,015	13	4,085,657
8	NewsNOW from FOX	4	406	7	9,450,514
8	StevenCrowder	4	15,490	3	8,159,462
8	BlazeTV	4	314	6	3,900,083
8	Judicial Watch	4	1,333	7	511,568
8	MR. OBVIOUS	4	283	5	401,481

Table 5.4: Repeat Spreaders: YouTube channels that were highly tweeted (>=10 times/incident) across multiple (>=4) incidents.

The channels found to be repeat spreaders of false and misleading narratives through YouTube look similar to the repeat spreaders on Twitter—right-wing influencers, hyperpartisan media outlets such as One America News Network (OANN) and The Gateway Pundit, political groups supportive of President Trump such as Project Veritas, and President Trump himself. These channels attracted millions of views for content related to known incidents of misinformation surrounding the 2020 election.

Two channels, compilation video creators Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai and CDMedia, were remarkable in that they appeared in our top repeat spreader list for being cited in multiple incidents, but for only a single video. Dr. Ayyadurai is discussed as a prominent repeat spreader in Section 5.6 on page 195.

Repeat Spreaders: Facebook Pages & Groups and Instagram

For our Facebook and Instagram analysis, we identified accounts (public Pages and Groups for Facebook, public accounts for Instagram) that were highly engaged with across multiple incidents. Aligning with the threshold used for

accounts in our Twitter analysis, a post had to receive at least 1,000 likes or favorites to be counted as part of an incident. In this way, we were looking for accounts that were influential across incidents. The total engagement column for Facebook is the sum of likes (and other emotive reactions), comments, and shares. For Instagram, the total engagements are the sum of favorites and comments. Tables 5.5 and 5.6 on page 194 feature the accounts that appeared across the most incidents.

Rank	Account Name	Facebook Page/Group	# of Incidents	# of Posts	Total Engagement
1	Breitbart	Page	8	20	831,452
1	The Silent Majority	Page	8	7	69,763
3	Heather Cox Richardson	Page	6	8	816,755
3	David J Harris Jr.	Page	6	11	282,652
3	James O'Keefe	Page	6	20	194,596
3	Project Veritas	Page	6	20	165,377
7	NowThis Politics	Page	5	11	244,023
7	Team Trump	Page	5	5	153,118
7	Ryan Fournier	Page	5	6	67,885
7	Wendy Bell Radio	Page	5	6	62,020
7	#WalkAway Campaign	Group	5	12	51,854
7	StandwithMueller	Page	5	7	19,345

Table 5.5: Repeat Spreaders: Facebook Pages and public Groups that were highly engaged with (>=1000 engagements) across multiple (>=5) incidents.

Facebook

Table 5.5 shows the top 12 public Facebook Pages and Groups that repeatedly shared content about the incidents in our dataset. From this data, we see that public Facebook Pages (and not public Facebook Groups) tended to appear more frequently as repeat spreaders. Only one Facebook Group appeared as a repeat spreader. This may not be surprising, as many Groups that played a role in the spread of election-related misinformation are either private (so would not be accessible via CrowdTangle) or have been removed from Facebook.[19] Facebook's longer format provided an opportunity for Pages to host long, detailed posts that contain false claims and misleading narratives that spanned multiple incidents.

Among the repeat spreaders in the Facebook data, we see several familiar names, including Breitbart, James O'Keefe, and Project Veritas. Short-form videos were popular on the official Facebook account of Team Trump, which does not appear to be officially associated with the Trump campaign.

Most of the repeat spreaders in the Facebook list are, similar to what we see in the Twitter and YouTube data, right-leaning and/or Trump-supporting entities.

However, we do see three left-leaning Pages among the group—NowThis Politics, StandwithMueller, and historian Heather Cox Richardson. The inclusion of all three is primarily the result of their Pages attempting to fact-check or otherwise counter false or misleading information about the election. For example, the NowThis Politics post below attempts to correct post-election misinformation, quoting the Trump campaign in its text.

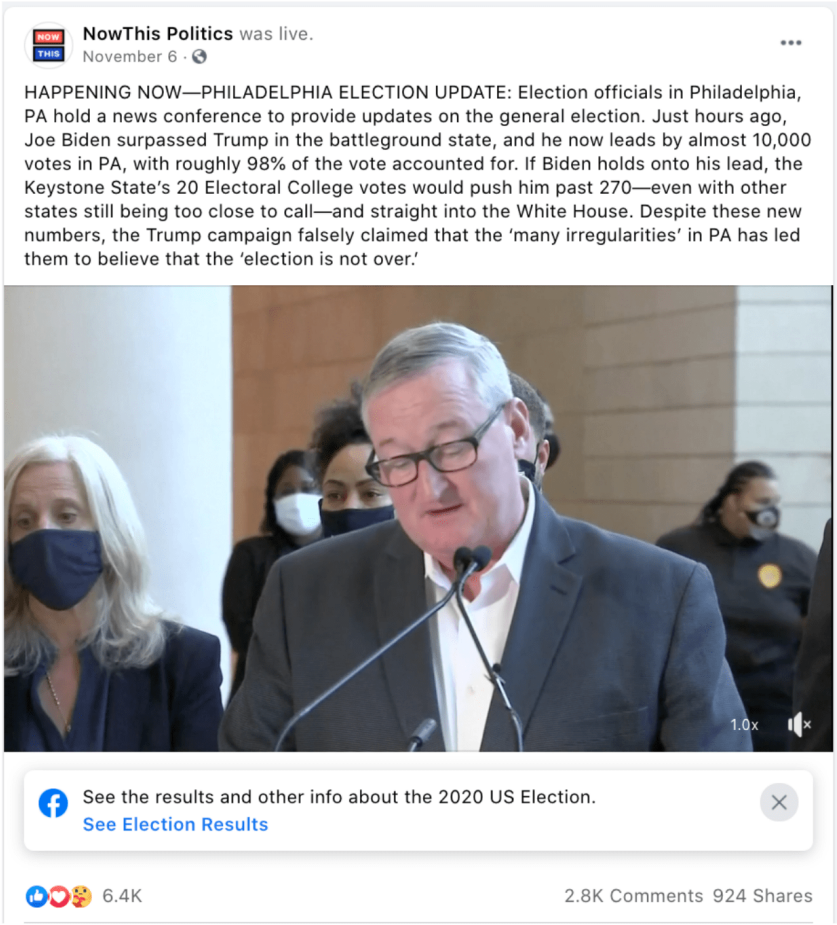

Figure 5.2: An example of a NowThis Politics Facebook post discussing Trump campaign claims included in the data.

Instagram

The Instagram repeat spreaders list (see Table 5.6 on the next page) looks somewhat similar to our Twitter list, containing accounts of partisan media organizations (e.g., The Gateway Pundit, Breitbart), and public individuals (e.g., James O'Keefe).

Rank	Account Name	Verified	# of Incidents	# of Posts	Total Engagement
1	KAGBABE 2.O	Not verified	12	33	80,484
2	Breitbart	Verified	10	14	670,577
2	The Gateway Pundit	Not verified	10	20	132,440
4	James O'Keefe	Verified	6	20	410,335
4	Baller Alert	Verified	6	7	102,837
6	Michael Hennessey	Not verified	5	82	169,623
6	Occupy Democrats	Not verified	5	5	51,289
6	Latinos With Trump	Not verified	5	14	47,167
6	Ben & Hannah🦅	Not verified	5	11	19,529
6	#HisNameWasSethRich 🐼🇺🇸	Not verified	5	7	18,814

Table 5.6: Repeat Spreaders: Facebook Pages and public Groups that were highly engaged with (>=1000 engagements) across multiple (>=5) incidents.

Unlike our Twitter list, most of the other accounts on the Instagram list are not verified. We see a few new names that we do not see anywhere else, like KAGBABE 2.O—an anonymous account that showed up in the most incidents—Baller Alert, Michael Hennessey/Snowflake News, Latinos with Trump, Ben & Hannah, and HisNameWasSethRich.

An account we see among the Instagram repeat spreaders is the left-leaning group "Occupy Democrats." Their Facebook Page also appeared in a few incidents (though not enough to make the list of top spreaders in Table 5-5). In at least two cases, Occupy Democrats was picked up in our data for trying to correct misinformation related to an incident. In others, they spread information that functioned to fan fears of voter disenfranchisement and intimidation.

For example, a tweet went viral on October 20, 2020, depicting an officer wearing a Trump mask at a polling station in Miami.[20] Within an hour, the Miami Police Department publicly condemned the actions of the officer.[21] Despite the official condemnation, Occupy Democrats reposted the image through both its Instagram and Facebook accounts. Its posts urged people to report the officer to the non-emergency police line. Both posts created a lot of engagement. There is no evidence to support the claim that this was part of an organized police-led voter intimidation campaign, which appears in the embedded meme in the Occupy Democrats Facebook post in Figure 5.3 on the facing page. That framing was both false and, while it likely functioned to rile Occupy Democrats followers on the left, also carried a risk of suppressing voter turnout by fomenting fears around voter intimidation at the polls (a concept covered in Chapter 3 with the "Army for Trump" example).[22]

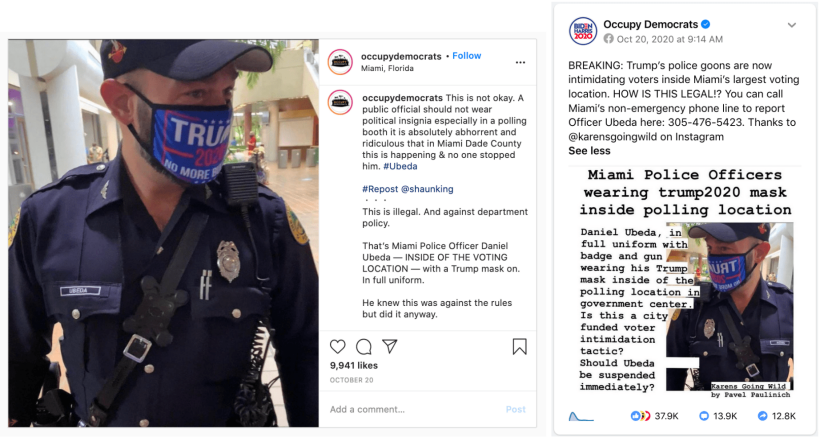

Figure 5.3: Screenshots of posts by Occupy Democrats about the incident, with specific instructions in the Facebook post (right) to call Miami's non-emergency line to report the officer, both after Miami PD's official response.

5.6 An Integrated Look at Repeat Spreaders Across Platforms

In this section, we provide an integrated view, looking at how some of the most active and prominent repeat spreaders pushed false and misleading narratives about the election across platforms.

President Trump, His Family, and the Trump Campaign

Though the specific claims and narratives often originated elsewhere, the Trump family and the Trump campaign regularly amplified incidents of false and misleading information—especially false claims of election fraud—across multiple platforms. President Trump's official Twitter account (@realDonaldTrump) participated in 21 distinct incidents and was the most highly retweeted in all of our incident-related data (Twitter permanently suspended his account on January 8, 2021).[23] His YouTube channel put out videos that linked to six distinct incidents, making him tied for third, and that were viewed more than any other repeat spreader's videos. And his Facebook official account was the most engaged-with account in all of our Facebook data.

President Trump's adult sons Donald Jr. and Eric were involved in 24 and 16 incidents respectively; Donald Jr. was the third most prominent Twitter user in the incident-related data. Between them, the president, Donald Jr., and Eric Trump spread and reinforced narratives questioning the security of the mail-in voting process, ballot harvesting claims, several different narratives about poll

watchers being denied access and other questionable "whistleblower" claims, and the Dominion conspiracy theory.

These cases capture solely when Donald Trump or his campaign produced content (posts, videos, tweets) related to an incident. In addition to content production, the Trump team regularly used retweets to amplify content by hyperpartisan media outlets and other accounts. Leading up to the election, we described one incident in which Donald Trump Jr. amplified a ballot harvesting narrative produced by Project Veritas (see Figure 3.16 on page 66 in Chapter 3).[24] Similar amplification events occurred involving Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai, The Gateway Pundit, Breitbart, and other hyperpartisan outlets. Owing to their large following, members of the Trump family—and a broader array of accounts associated with their campaign—were able to catalyze the spread of election fraud narratives. Their role in the spread of misinformation was therefore multidimensional—through both content production and content amplification.

Their activity also extended beyond social media. Claims of electoral fraud were pushed by members of the Trump family, the Trump campaign, and other surrogates on cable news, through press briefings, and eventually within numerous court cases. Perhaps the most important role the Trump inner circle played was to seed and perpetuate the prevailing narrative—the general notion of a "rigged election."

The Gateway Pundit

The Gateway Pundit was among the most active spreaders of election-related misinformation in our analyses. The outlet used a cross-platform strategy, hosting content on its website and using other channels to promote both its own and others' content. It appeared as a top repeat spreader through its website, its Twitter account, its YouTube channel, and its Instagram account. (Twitter suspended the account on February 6, 2021).[25]

Figure 5.4 on the facing page shows the relative engagement with The Gateway Pundit's content over time and across platforms within our incident-related data.

Unlike some of the other entities featured here, The Gateway Pundit was highly active throughout the election lifecycle, including during the weeks leading up to the election, when it repeatedly spread content—in distinct information incidents—that sought to undermine trust in mail-in voting specifically and the eventual election results more generally. It participated in seeding and spreading misleading information about ballots being harvested, chased, dumped, stolen, and miscounted. It spread false narratives of election fraud built upon

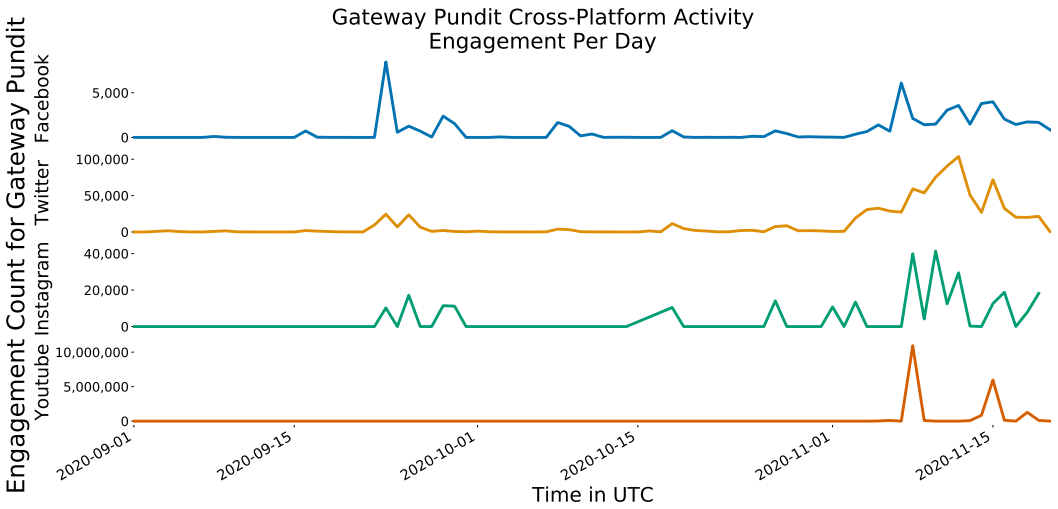

Figure 5.4: Engagements per day for The Gateway Pundit. Facebook engagements are in blue, Twitter retweets in orange, and Instagram likes in green.

misinterpretations of statistics and was active in spreading the false Dominion conspiracy theory.

On Twitter, The Gateway Pundit's account was highly retweeted across 26 different incidents (#2 among repeat spreaders). Evidence from our data suggest that its prominence was due both to production of its own material and to amplification (via original and quote tweets) of other partisan content. It repeatedly interacted with content and accounts of other repeat spreaders and influencers, including Project Veritas, as shown in Figure 5.5.

Figure 5.5: Quote tweet by @JamesOKeefeIII (the founder of Project Veritas) of a tweet by Jim Hoft (the operator of @gatewaypundit). Hoft's tweet links to an article on thegatewaypundit.com, which promotes a video released by Project Veritas.

Of all the domains linked to in our Twitter data, The Gateway Pundit's website was connected to the largest number of incidents (46) while also garnering the

most related original tweets (29,207) and retweets (840,750). Their YouTube channel appeared in five incidents, and their 13 incident-related videos had more than 4 million views on YouTube.

The Gateway Pundit was not as visible in the Facebook data we collected, but its Instagram account was tied for #2 among repeat spreaders, appearing in 10 incidents for 20 posts that received more than 132,000 engagements.

Breitbart News

Breitbart News, a right-wing, online media outlet, was also a cross-platform repeat spreader—pushing false and misleading narratives about the election through their website, Twitter account, Facebook Page, and Instagram account. In terms of number of different false or misleading information incidents that they helped to spread, they were #1 on Facebook (8 incidents), #2 on Instagram (10 incidents), and #2 among linked-to websites in the Twitter data (26 incidents). On Facebook and Instagram, they had the highest engagement among repeat spreaders.

Breitbart participated in a wide range of ballot-related incidents, such as mail-dumping and ballot harvesting, voting machine issues, and now-debunked claims that statistical anomalies suggest widespread election fraud. It both produced its own content and propagated stories that initially rose to prominence on other domains. Often, it picked up content found elsewhere online and reframed that content within its own articles. However, Breitbart tended to be more careful than The Gateway Pundit and others in how it framed events to subtly connect them to potential issues of voter fraud without explicitly making those claims.

Newsmax Media

Newsmax Media (formerly NewsMax) is a conservative media outlet that produces content through its website, cable news channel, and various social media accounts—including Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. Especially active in the aftermath of the election, Newsmax repeatedly posted videos—across their many media channels—where they hosted guests that made unsupported and in many cases outright false claims about election fraud. The outlet appears in several incidents in our data, from Stop The Steal and Sharpiegate to the Dominion and Hammer and Scorecard conspiracy theories.

The Newsmax website is most visible in our data for seeding a misinformation incident through a video interview (available on their website) claiming that the head of the Federal Election Commission, Trey Trainor, believed that voter fraud was occurring in states still counting ballots. Newsmax also hosted a pundit who claimed that the Democrats were attempting a “coup” and ran several segments

containing false accusations about companies involved in the manufacture and software development for voting machines.

Perhaps more interesting than the specific incidents that Newsmax was involved in spreading is how the media outlet vastly increased its visibility in this discourse immediately following the election. Figure 5.6 shows engagement (likes and comments) across platforms with Newsmax content related to incidents of false or misleading information about the election. Prior to November 3, Newsmax was not a significant part of these conversations. But after the election, the media outlet began to gain attention—quite rapidly—for its coverage of election fraud claims.

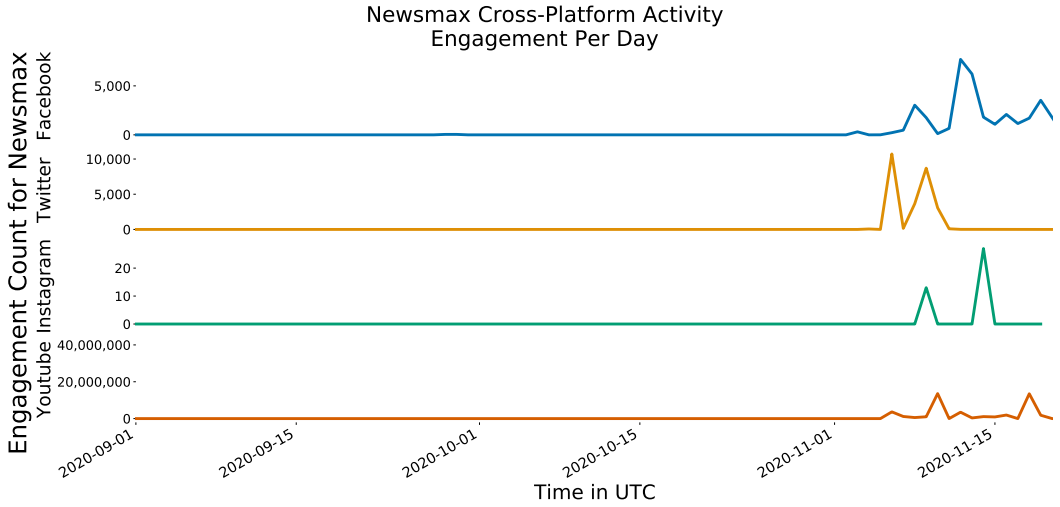

Figure 5.6: Engagements per day for Newsmax in incident-related data. Facebook is in blue, Twitter retweets in orange, Instagram in green, and YouTube in red.

Gains in engagements on Newsmax's content were accompanied by gains in followers for their accounts on various social media platforms—translating to a potentially long-term visibility increase for the outlet. Figure 5.7 on the next page shows followers over time for Newsmax's Twitter and Instagram accounts. Both demonstrate a sharp increase in early November. The Twitter graph (which we can generate at a much higher granularity) indicates that the first sharp increase occurs at about 4:00 am UTC on November 3 (11:00 pm EST on election night). Much of that may be attributable to their election night projections, including a tweet erroneously announcing that President Trump had won the state of Georgia. The @newsmax Twitter account would continue to gain followers over the course of the post-election period—growing by nearly 300% in two weeks (from 232,000 on November 2 to 668,000 on November 15)—as their content began to coalesce around false claims of election fraud. Their Instagram account saw an even more remarkable gain, from 47,400 followers on October

31 to 318,500 followers on November 14 (an increase of more than 600%).

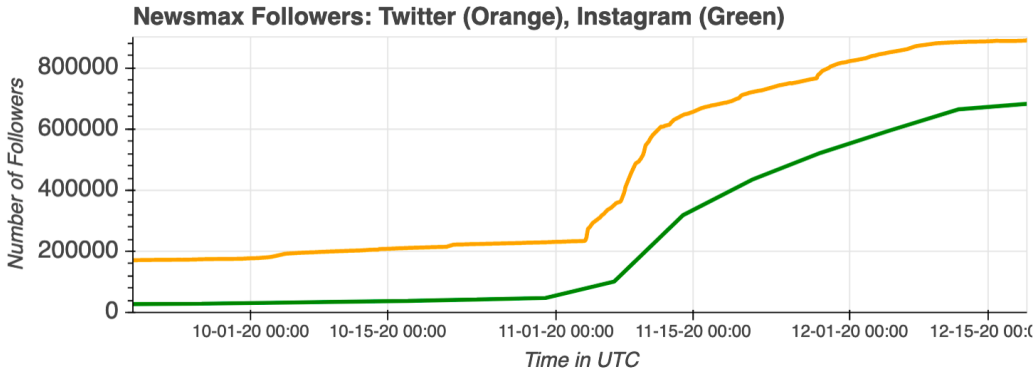

Figure 5.7: Newsmax followers growth on Twitter (orange) and Instagram (green).

During the post-election period (November 3 to November 15), Newsmax also began to promote themselves as a pro-Trump alternative to Fox News, which was being criticized for, among other things, calling Arizona for Biden. Reflecting what appears to be a strategy of staking claim to the right-wing and pro-Trump media market, on November 8 Newsmax bragged that they were the "only major news network to not call the election."

Later, Newsmax would be legally pressured to post "clarifications" to many of the false accusations that they aired.[26] But it's likely that their reputational boost—in terms of followers on their social media accounts—from posting the original false claims was not significantly diminished by the later corrections.

Project Veritas

The data show that Project Veritas was a prominent repeat spreader of false and misleading information about the 2020 election across multiple platforms, through both the organization's accounts and the personal accounts of its founder, James O'Keefe. (Twitter permanently suspended Project Veritas's official account and temporarily locked James O'Keefe's on February 11, 2021.) They produced several videos in the form of "investigative reports" that they hosted on YouTube and their official website. They used their other social media channels—where they were connected to a network of other large-audience, blue-check conservative and pro-Trump accounts—to advertise and disseminate their videos.

As a montage view of their YouTube videos shows, Project Veritas produced videos that repeatedly challenged the integrity of electoral procedures, election and postal service officials, and ultimately the results of the election (see Figure 5.8 on the facing page).

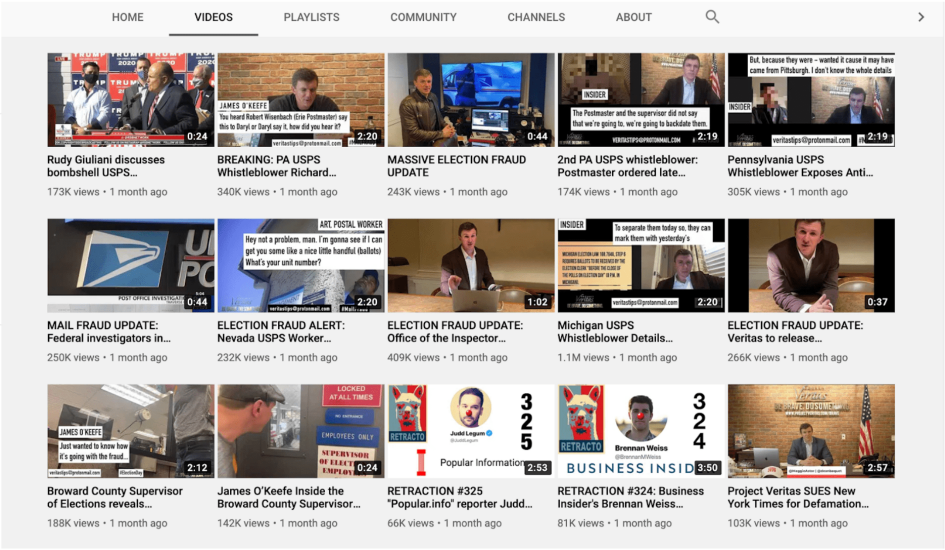

Figure 5.8: Project Veritas's YouTube Page containing a number of their investigative reports on election fraud.

Project Veritas videos maintain a consistent, signature style: they begin with founder James O'Keefe describing the alleged fraud their video exposes before moving on to undercover videos or anonymized interviews that are presented as "proof" of their claims. The videos are highly edited, with often incomplete narratives. Notably, the subjects of some of the videos Project Veritas released were found to be unreliable sources—for example, the political operative whistleblowing about alleged ballot-harvesting by the Ilhan Omar campaign later revealed he was offered a $10,000 bribe to make up the story.[27]

Though Project Veritas claimed to face deplatforming efforts on Twitter during the 2020 election cycle (ostensibly for violating Twitter's civic integrity policies), they were highly successful at disseminating their content throughout the 2020 election.[28] In addition to their engagement on YouTube, the group gained 5.8 million views on videos they uploaded to their Facebook Page in 2020 and over 12 million views on their Instagram videos. Their success, in part, can be attributed to James O'Keefe, who uses his personal platform and connections with other conservative influencers to direct attention to their video content, hosted across multiple platforms. O'Keefe's personal Twitter account (@JamesOKeefeIII) appeared in 12 of our election integrity incidents and garnered over 625,000 retweets, primarily for posts promoting Project Veritas's content.

O'Keefe's Facebook Pages were often used nearly identically to his Twitter account, complete with the use of hashtags, short-form statements on particular incidents, and linked videos, as seen in Figure 5.9 on the next page.

Figure 5.9: Identical posts by James O'Keefe on both Facebook (left) and Twitter (right).

In the lead-up to the election, Project Veritas focused their efforts on sowing doubt in the integrity of mail-in voting by pushing narratives around ballot harvesting and what they term "ballot chasing." They released several videos on their YouTube channel that claimed various campaigns (of primarily down-ballot races) were engaging in illegal ballot harvesting and facilitating mail-in voter fraud, including one accusing Representative Ilhan Omar. Project Veritas promoted the drop of the video on Twitter prior to releasing it on YouTube (see Figure 3.14 on page 65 in Chapter 3). Following its release, the video was linked to by multiple prominent partisan media news sites such as The National Pulse, whose stories were further amplified by retweets by Donald Trump Jr. The cross-platform attention drew users to the video on YouTube, resulting in nearly 1.2 million views. O'Keefe capitalized on the attention garnered by the video to release multiple subsequent undercover reports on alleged election fraud. Subsequent videos failed to gain as much traction, but still consistently garnered at least 100,000 views on YouTube.

After the election, Project Veritas began producing videos of "whistleblowers" alleging fraudulent behaviors in swing states—this included a video testimonial from a Pennsylvania postal worker claiming that late ballots were backdated. O'Keefe tweeted the video (embedded within Twitter, as well as posted to the YouTube channel) to his one million followers. After the worker recanted his testimony in an affidavit a few days later, O'Keefe posted a follow-up tweet/video combination claiming that the whistleblower had been retaliated against by the USPS.[29] Both tweets (see Figure 5.10 on the next page) gained significant traction, receiving thousands of retweets and likes.

Notably, Twitter did take action on some of the misleading content propagated by Project Veritas and O'Keefe, occasionally adding labels saying the content was

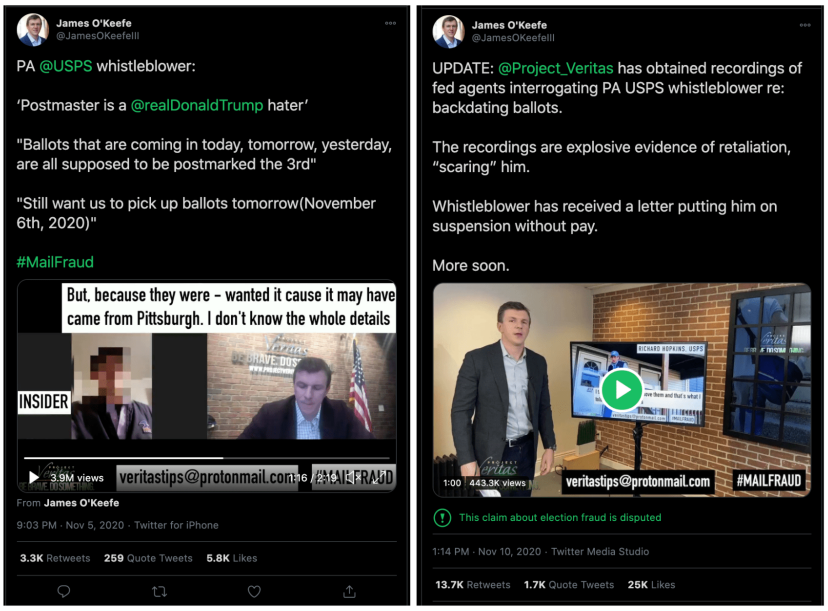

Figure 5.10: Tweets from James O'Keefe, founder of Project Veritas, claiming mail-in voting fraud in Pennsylvania.

disputed and eventually suspending the @Project_Veritas account. Yet a lack of uniformity in policies across platforms, and the group's significant presence on multiple social media platforms, mean that most of Project Veritas's misleading content remains online in some format.

Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai

Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai played a unique role in promoting electoral misinformation—in that it began after election day and featured almost exclusively content that misinterpreted and/or misrepresented statistics. He is also an example of overlap between producers of coronavirus and electoral misinformation. Ayyadurai's platform grew remarkably in 2020, after a video claiming Dr. Anthony Fauci was part of a Deep State conspiracy to spread coronavirus garnered more than six million views in a week.[30] After the 2020 election, he successfully leveraged YouTube's livestreaming feature to produce lengthy videos that proliferated multiple false narratives alongside dubious statistical "evidence." His videos were similarly livestreamed and viewed on Periscope and Facebook.

After a failed primary campaign for the US Senate in September 2020, Ayyadurai began promoting a conspiracy theory that computer tabulation systems systematically switched votes in favor of his opponent. After November 3, he extended this claim—based on fraught statistical analysis[31]—to asserting fraud in the US presidential election. His argument took several forms, broadly and erroneously

claiming that Trump's under-performance in areas with more straight-ticket Republican votes was evidence of a "weighted feature" of tabulation software favoring Joe Biden. When his arguments were debunked by statisticians, he altered or changed expectations or presented a new and equally fraught statistical argument.

His most popular video has gained over 1 million views since he livestreamed it on November 10. His popularity can, in part, be attributed to sharing of his content by other misinformation superspreaders, including QAnon-affiliated lawyer Sidney Powell, who not only tweeted it to her one million-plus followers but also used Ayyadurai's arguments as evidence in her so-called "Kraken" lawsuit attempting to overturn the election results in Georgia, a key swing state (see Figure 5.11).[32]

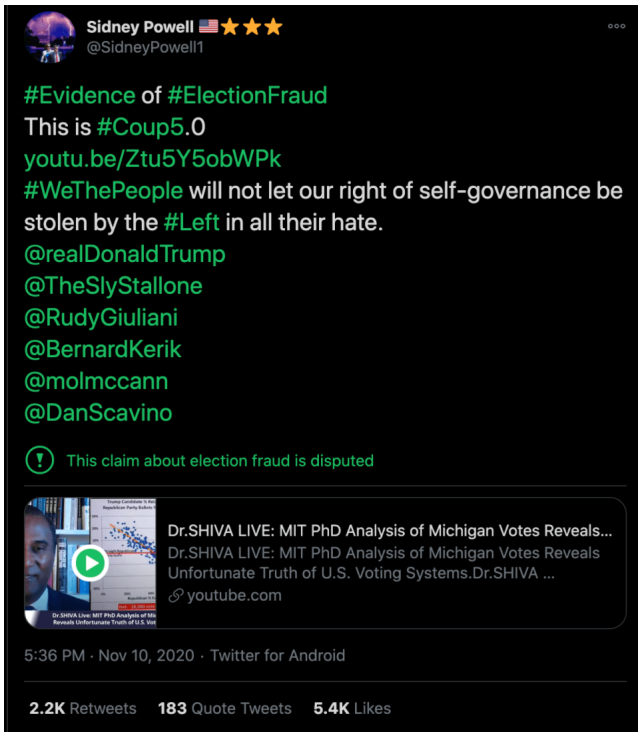

Figure 5.11: Trump legal affiliate Sydney Powell tweets a link to Ayyadurai's most popular YouTube video.

5.7 Summary

Our analysis suggests that the primary "influencers" in the online production and dissemination of false and misleading narratives about the 2020 election were verified, blue-check accounts belonging to partisan media outlets, social

media influencers, and political figures. Though false narratives occasionally gained traction on the political left, almost all of the most prominent repeat spreaders—i.e., the accounts that seeded and disseminated multiple false claims and narratives—belonged to conservative and/or pro-Trump individuals and organizations. Members of the Trump campaign, including President Trump and his adult sons, played a significant role in the spread of these narratives, which converged around false and misleading claims of voter fraud and sought to undermine trust in the results of the election. These narratives persisted throughout our analysis, from August through December, and spread through and across diverse social media platforms—and through the broader information ecosystem, including cable news.

Notes

1. (page 182) We continued to track the spread of incidents through December 12, 2020, approximately two weeks after our real-time analysis concluded.

2. (page 182) We ran several collections in parallel, balancing terms across collections to reduce the impact of rate limits.

3. (page 183) It was possible for one incident to be related to multiple themes that the EIP defined, which is why these sum to more than 153.

4. (page 185) Nick Corasaniti, "Rudy Giuliani Sued by Dominion Voting Systems Over False Election Claims," *New York Times*, January 25, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/25/us/politics/rudy-giuliani-dominion-trump.html

5. (page 185) Saranac Hale Spencer, "Overblown Claims of 'Bad Things' at Philly Polls," FactCheck.org, November 3, 2020, https://www.factcheck.org/2020/11/overblown-claims-of-bad-things-at-philly-polls/

6. (page 185) Saranac Hale Spencer, "Pennsylvania Postal Worker Waffles on Election Fraud Claim," FactCheck.org, November 12, 2020, https://www.factcheck.org/2020/11/pennsylvania-postal-worker-waffles-on-election-fraud-claim/

7. (page 185) Jonathan Oosting, "Meet Michigan's 'dead' voters. They're quite alive despite false fraud claims," November 10, 2020, BridgeMichigan, https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-government/meet-michigans-dead-voters-theyre-quite-alive-despite-false-fraud-claims

8. (page 185) Samantha Putterman, "Video makes it look like left-leaning groups plotted post-election coup. That's not the whole story," PolitiFact, November 5, 2020, https://www.politifact.com/article/2020/nov/05/video-makes-it-look-left-leaning-groups-plotted-po/

9. (page 185) Bethania Palma, "Viral Video Spreads Unfounded Claims about Rep. Ilhan Omar and Voter Fraud," Snopes, updated October 19, 2020, https://www.snopes.com/news/2020/09/29/project-veritas-ilhan-omar/

10. (page 184) The network was generated from our larger Twitter data collection—the 859 million tweets we collected about the election and voting. This creates a stable network structure onto which we later mapped specific incidents.

11. (page 184) We used the Louvain method for identifying communities in the network graph; see Wikipedia, s.v. "Louvain method," last modified February 9, 2021, 12:45 pm, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louvain_method

12. (page 186) We used a slightly abbreviated time window for this part of the analysis (than for calculating spread of the incidents), but due to the high thresholds for inclusion of nodes and edges, the structure is fairly stable and it is unlikely that influential nodes would shift from one community to another if more data was included.

13. (page 186) Ian Kennedy, et al., "Emerging Narratives Around 'Mail Dumping' and Election Integrity," Election Integrity Partnership, September 29, 2020, https://www.eipartnership.net/rapid-response/mail-dumping

14. (page 187) As we note in the section on Participatory Mis- and Disinformation in Chapter 4, many of the rank-and-file accounts on the political right viewed their participation in these false and misleading narratives as helping to expose wrongdoing, not as spreading misinformation.

15. (page 187) Election Integrity Partnership Team, "Repeat Offenders: Voting Misinformation on Twitter in the 2020 United States Election," Election Integrity Partnership, October 29, 2020, https://www.eipartnership.net/rapid-response/repeat-offenders

16. (page 188) "Permanent Suspension of @realDonaldTrump," Twitter blog, January 8, 2021, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.html; AJ Dellinger, "Twitter suspends 'Gateway Pundit' Jim Hoft," *Forbes*, February 6, 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/ajdellinger/2021/02/06/twitter-suspends-gateway-pundit-jim-hoft/; @cjtruth, Twitter profile, https://twitter.com/cjtruth; Chris Mills Rodrigo, "Twitter permanently suspends Michael Flynn, Sidney Powell and others," *The Hill*, January 8, 2021, https://thehill.com/policy/technology/533424-twitter-permanently-suspends-michael-flynn-sidney-powell-and-others

17. (page 190) Holmes Lybrand and Tara Subramaniam, "Fact check: Evidence undermines Trump campaign's claims of dead people voting in Georgia," CNN,

updated November 13, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/12/politics/trump-campaign-georgia-dead-voters-fact-check/index.html

18. (page 191) One limitation of this approach is that it provides a view of YouTube activity filtered by content shared on Twitter (with at least one retweet). Videos that were not cross-posted to Twitter are not included.

19. (page 192) Sheera Frenkel, "The Rise and Fall of the 'Stop the Steal' Facebook Group," *New York Times*, November 5, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/05/technology/stop-the-steal-facebook-group.html

20. (page 194) Davey Alba, "Riled Up: Misinformation Stokes Calls for Violence on Election Day," *New York Times*, updated January 20, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/technology/viral-misinformation-violence-election.html

21. (page 194) Miami Police Department (@MiamiPD), "We are aware of the photograph being circulated of a Miami Police officer wearing a political mask in uniform. This behavior is unacceptable, a violation of departmental policy, and is being addressed immediately," Twitter, October 20, 2020, https://twitter.com/MiamiPD/status/1318579324723789825

22. (page 194) Rachel Moran, et al., "Left-Leaning Influencers, 'Mainstream' Media Play Big Role in Amplifying 'Army for Trump' Fears," Election Integrity Partnership, October 12, 2020, https://www.eipartnership.net/rapid-response/army-of-trump

23. (page 195) Twitter, "Permanent Suspension of @realDonaldTrump."

24. (page 196) Isabella Garcia-Camargo, et al., "Project Veritas #BallotHarvesting Amplification," Election Integrity Partnership, September 29, 2020, https://www.eipartnership.net/rapid-response/project-veritas-ballotharvesting

25. (page 196) Dellinger, "Twitter suspends 'Gateway Pundit' Jim Hoft."

26. (page 200) Jeremy Barr, "Newsmax issues sweeping 'clarification' debunking its own coverage of election misinformation," *Washington Post*, December 21, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2020/12/21/newsmax-clarification-smartmatic/

27. (page 201) Liban Osman, interview by Tom Lyden, Fox 9 Minneapolis-St. Paul, on "Subject of Project Veritas voter fraud story says he was offered bribe," YouTube, October 6, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzFGVEEB0Yw

28. (page 201) Project Veritas (@Project_Veritas), "Twitter is censoring this video hard," Twitter, November 12, 2020, 2:11 pm, https://twitter.com/project_veritas/status/1327011272605528064; "Civic integrity policy," Twitter Help, January 2021, https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/election-integrity-policy

29. (page 202) Shawn Boburg and Jacob Bogage, "Postal worker recanted allegations of ballot tampering, officials say," *Washington Post*, November 10, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/postal-worker-fabricated-ballot-pennsylvania/2020/11/10/99269a7c-2364-11eb-8599-406466ad1b8e_story.html

30. (page 203) Ryan Broderick, "A YouTube Video Accusing Dr. Anthony Fauci of Being Part of the Deep State Has Been Viewed Over 6 Million Times in a Week," BuzzFeed News, April 15, 2020, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanhatesthis/youtube-anthony-fauci-deep-state-coronavirus

31. (page 203) Naim Kabir, "Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai and the Danger of Data Charlatans," Medium, https://kabir-naim.medium.com/dr-shiva-ayyadurai-the-danger-of-data-charlatans-4f675ffe793c

32. (page 204) Aaron Keller, "Sidney Powell's 'Kraken' Lawsuit Argues Improbability of 'High Republican, Low Trump' Voting Patterns," Law & Crime, November 30, 2020,
https://lawandcrime.com/2020-election/sidney-powells-kraken-lawsuit-argues-improbability-of-high-republican-low-trump-voting-patterns/

Chapter 6

Policy

6.1 Introduction

Platform policies establish the rules of participation in social media communities. Recognizing the heightened rhetoric and the use of mis- and disinformation during the 2020 election, all of the major platforms made significant changes to election integrity policies, both as the campaigns kicked off and through the weeks after Election Day—policies that attempted to slow the spread of specific narratives and tactics that could potentially mislead or deceive the public, though the efforts were not always successful.

Throughout the election period, a team of EIP analysts evaluated platform policies within three contexts:

- **Actors' Content and Behavior:** The content and behavior that platforms identify fall in or out of behavior that violates their policies.
- **Platform Actions:** What moderation strategies are proportionate to deal with the actors' content and behaviors.
- **Overall Communication of Platform Policies:** How policies are communicated to the public clearly and transparently.

This chapter begins by briefly reviewing and comparing platform policy iterations before and during the 2020 election. We then describe the primary platform interventions, their strengths and weaknesses, and how they were applied to the repeat spreaders in our dataset. From there we discuss misinformation problems that have no clear-cut policy solutions, and conclude with a forward-looking assessment of areas for policy improvement.

6.2 Social Media Platform Policy Evolution

Major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, and TikTok introduced changes to their community standards in the months leading up to the election and in the aftermath. The timeline below shows the four phases that correspond with larger policy trends across multiple platforms:[1]

- **Phase 0: April 2019–August 2020.** Some platforms introduced or updated their policies on election misinformation. However, the majority of platforms still had sparse, non-specific, or non-existent policies around election-related content.
- **Phase 1: September 2020.** A number of platforms announced the first updates to election-specific policies: making large additions; adding more clarity and specificity; or stating clearly that they will label or remove content that delegitimizes the integrity of the election.
- **Phase 2: Early October 2020.** A month before the election, platforms specified the media organizations they would rely on for determining when races are declared and emphasized removing content that intimidates voters or incites violence. However, they did not distinguish between general and specific calls to action.
- **Phase 3: Late October 2020.** In the days leading up to the election, platforms previewed their Election Day plans. This included providing concrete examples of what labels on content discussing election results will look like.
- **Phase 4: Early November 2020 (post-election).** Platforms released information about the content and behavior they saw and their moderation efforts on and after Election Day; some policies were updated to address post-election claims of election fraud.

Early in the EIP's research, we identified specific categories of potential election misinformation (see Chapter 1) and ranked policy comprehensiveness in each category.[2] Table 6.1 on page 214 and 6.2 on page 215 illustrate the evolution of platforms' policies: the first shows coverage in August 2020; the second shows where the policies stood as of October 28, 2020, right before the election. (Our methodology for platform evaluations—which focused on formal or publicly stated policies for addressing election misinformation—can be found in Appendix F on page 265.)

There are two key findings from this analysis. First, platforms that already had election-related policies strengthened them, while platforms that went into the

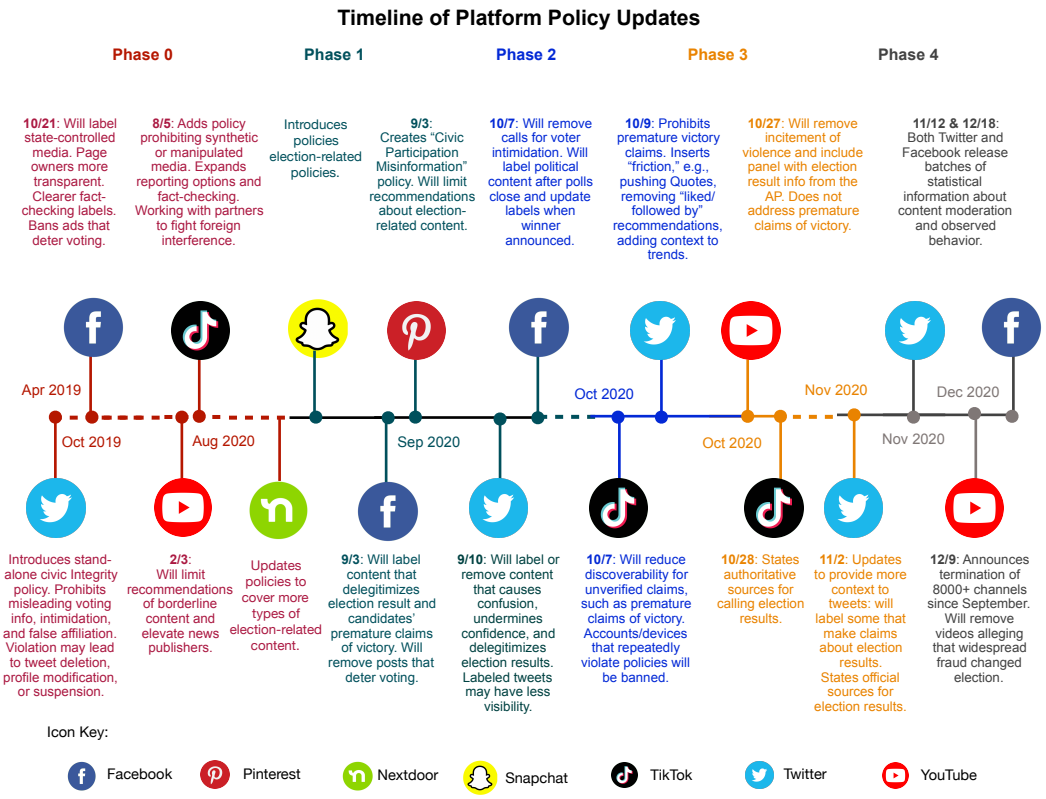

Figure 6.1: A timeline of the four phases of election policy introduced by the platforms in the lead-up to and after the 2020 election.

election without any policies remained without them through the election, with the exception of Snapchat.[3]

Second, many platform policy updates related to the 2020 election cycle focused far more on explicit topical content restrictions than on user behavior. After the discovery of Russian interference in the 2016 election, platforms focused on behavior, such as coordinated inauthentic behavior, rather than content.[4] Even in 2020, Facebook's first election policy announcement focused on its efforts to combat this behavior and "fight foreign interference."[5] Yet much of the misinformation in the 2020 election was pushed by authentic, domestic actors, and platforms shifted their focus to address downstream harms related to the content itself. As a result, most subsequent updates introduced policies related to specific content categories, such as claims of premature victory or posts that promote violence at the polls. The iterative nature of platform policies during the election season also indicates that, despite having seen certain narratives in previous elections that were predicted to appear again in 2020, many platforms did not proactively adapt policies to combat these narratives.

	Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
Facebook	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
Twitter	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
YouTube	Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
Pinterest	None	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
Nextdoor	Comprehensive	None	Non-Comprehensive	None
TikTok	Non-Comprehensive	None	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
Snapchat	*No election-related policies			
Parler	*No election-related policies			
Gab	*No election-related policies			
Discord	*No election-related policies			
WhatsApp	*No election-related policies			
Telegram	*No election-related policies			
Reddit	*No election-related policies			
Twitch	*No election-related policies			

Table 6.1: The EIP's evaluation of platform policies as they stood in August 2020. A rating of "No election-related policies" means the platform has no explicit policy or stance on the issue; although the platform may have existing policies that address misleading content, we were unable to evaluate how they might apply in an election-related context. We grouped the 15th platform, Instagram, with Facebook, however it is not entirely clear to our team if every election-related policy update made by Facebook also applied to Instagram.

6.3 Platform Interventions: Policy Approaches and Application Outcomes

In addition to tracking the evolution of content-based policy changes, the EIP examined the benefits and drawbacks of the tactics that platforms used to enforce their new policies: remove, reduce, and inform. These interventions encompass a spectrum of actions, from removing content and suspending users, to creating friction, to contextualizing with content labels.

Ultimately, we find that platform intervention and users' responses are part of a feedback loop: platforms' observations of actions reveal the need for policies, and policies impact subsequent actions. From July to November, we watched policy shape users' tactics, and users' tactics impact policy. While this reciprocity can make it difficult to stop the spread of misinformation, it can also force platforms to fortify or adapt their policies.

	Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
Facebook	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive
Twitter	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Comprehensive
YouTube	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
Pinterest	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive
Nextdoor	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
TikTok	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Comprehensive
Snapchat	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
Parler	*No election-related policies			
Gab	*No election-related policies			
Discord	*No election-related policies			
WhatsApp	*No election-related policies			
Telegram	*No election-related policies			
Reddit	*No election-related policies			
Twitch	*No election-related policies			

Table 6.2: After multiple iterations of policy updates, the EIP's final evaluation of platform policies as of October 28, 2020. Listings in red indicate a change in policy from the start of our monitoring period. We grouped the 15th platform, Instagram, with Facebook, however it is not entirely clear to our team if every election-related policy update made by Facebook also applied to Instagram.

Platform Moderation Approach: Remove

The most punitive moderation tools at a platform's disposal are content removal and account suspensions. "Remove" can be applied to actors for several reasons: accounts can be suspended for inauthentic identities, coordinated inauthentic behavior, or repeatedly violating the community guidelines—such as the repeat spreaders discussed in Chapter 5.

The intention behind this type of moderation is to prune false or misleading information at its source. It is often used to address content that can have the greatest real-world harm, and platforms were committed to removing calls for interference in the election process that may lead to violence. In our dataset of tickets, incitement to violence had the highest rate of content or account removal.

Despite what appeared to be clear policy to penalize or remove repeat spreaders and high-profile disinformation actors, platforms appeared to shy away from using this particular intervention. In some cases, this was a result of a variety of "newsworthiness" exceptions, which allowed some high-profile repeat spreaders, including politicians, to evade bans.[6] Yet many of the repeat spreaders we saw were not politicians.

Platform Moderation Approach: Reduce

The second moderation intervention is to "reduce" the distribution of policy-violating content so that fewer users see it—to insert "friction." This type of intervention may include methods such as downranking content so that it appears lower in a user's feed or preventing sharing capabilities to reduce the spread of certain content.

Several platforms employed friction leading up to the election. Twitter introduced a series of changes, including turning off the ability to reply, retweet, or like a tweet that violated the policy.[7] Similarly, TikTok redirected search results and hashtags, such as #RiggedElection and #SharpieGate, that violated its community guidelines, preventing users from finding others who use the terms.[8] Facebook supplied additional context to content-sharing features by warning people when they share old content links, a common pattern seen in misinformation. This Facebook product feature demonstrates how friction can also go hand in hand with informing users, discussed more below.[9]

Policies introducing friction can be particularly helpful around networked framing, where platforms face not one piece of content but rather the conglomeration of often countless instances of misinformation or hard-to-verify information. If looked at like a narrative puzzle, individual pieces are less consequential than the whole image—platforms must have the insight to see the puzzle before it is formed. By expanding friction policies to address narratives rather than individual pieces of content, platforms stand a better chance at reducing the negative impact of networked framing.

Although the EIP does not have insight into how well these friction-inducing policies reduced the spread of misinformation, Twitter stated that from October 27, 2020, to November 11, 2020, they saw an estimated 29% decrease in quote tweets of labeled tweets, perhaps due in part to a prompt that warned people prior to sharing.[10]

Platform Moderation Approach: Inform

Content labels were the most commonly used policy intervention by Facebook during the 2020 election and were used by Twitter on approximately 300,000 pieces of content.[11] Though labels permit policy-violating content to stay on a platform, they may reduce distribution and alter how users interact with content.

The EIP observed four distinct issues related to labeling practices during the 2020 election. First, some platforms struggled to apply labels uniformly: content identical in substance was labeled in some instances but not others. Labels signal that something may be false or misleading. If some content is unla-

beled, it may give the impression that it might be true—an "implied truth effect"—unintentionally giving credence to misleading content.[12]

Lack of uniform labeling leads to another challenge: mislabeling. Some platforms use automated systems—AI—to detect and label content. However, AI sometimes fails to distinguish between content that violates policies and content that does not. For example, Facebook used AI to automatically label most election-related content with a generic label: "Visit the Voting Information Center for voting resources and official election updates." While the AI did label some content as false, the generic auto-label was applied more frequently. In fact, content that would more appropriately be labeled as "false" was instead tagged with the "Voting Information Center" label. The AI's inability to distinguish false or misleading content from general election-related commentary may have diminished the value of Facebook's labeling policy entirely. On balance, AI-driven labeling is another flaw in platforms' policy approach to identifying misinformation.[13]

Second, inconsistent label language and placement impedes platforms' attempts to reduce the spread of misinformation. Varied language can inspire confusion and speculation about platforms' intent, while problematic placement and design may obscure labels from view.

Inconsistent label language can be particularly problematic, especially against the backdrop of an ongoing, hyperpartisan battle over content moderation. For example, in May 2019, Twitter marked a handful of President Trump's tweets with a relatively neutral label: "Get the facts about mail-in ballots." But in October, when President Trump tweeted similar content, Twitter changed the labels: in contrast to the previous passive language, Twitter applied a label that read, "Learn how voting by mail is safe and secure," complete with an embedded link to voting resources.[14]

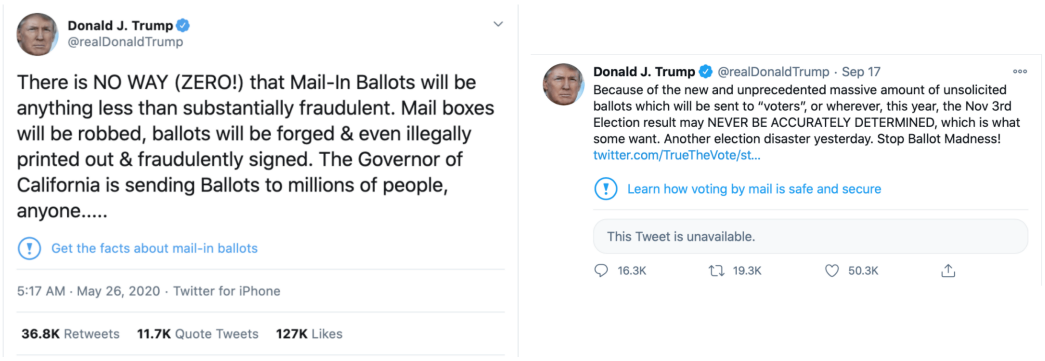

Figure 6.2: President Trump's tweets, both violative of Twitter's civic integrity policy, labeled with different language.

However, the shift occurred without explanation from Twitter, and repeat

spreaders speculated about Twitter's purported political agenda in its wake. While changes in label language are appropriate responses to misinformation, lack of context and documentation of these changes, or confusing rollouts, may trigger distrust, leading users and media outlets to speculate about a platform's motives rather than consider the veracity of the content.[15] Notably, subsequent updates to Twitter's label language, such as those responding to official election results, came with official statements that previewed what these labels would look like.[16]

Similarly, label location is a notable design weakness: because location is not mandated by policy, aesthetics seems to be the primary concern. Thus, some platforms put labels below the flagged content instead of directly above it. Because users have varied hardware and personalized software (e.g., text size, speech-to-text), labels placed on the bottom may appear off-screen—or content could be screen-captured without its bottom label and shared as if it had not received a label at all. Further, users may click away from the post before even seeing a label at the bottom. Although we cannot say with certainty whether labels are effective measures of deterring users' belief in misinformation, placing labels at the bottom of misleading posts risks the foreclosure of any possibility of deterrence.

Third, the EIP additionally observed that when platforms were slow to label, misinformation spread quickly, achieving wide distribution before a platform took action. Difficulty with fact-checking and verification, among other issues, often gave repeat spreaders with large followings the space to quickly circulate false narratives as platforms deliberated the appropriate response. For example, Twitter permitted a number of Trump's misinformation-riddled tweets to go unlabeled for several hours after they appeared on his timeline. Between the time of posting and the label's application, Trump's tweets were retweeted, quote tweeted, and shared tens of thousands of times.[17]

Finally, the EIP observed inconsistency of label implementation between platforms, even when they shared similar content-labeling policies. This is one component of the cross-platform dynamic identified in previous chapters. Ultimately, discrepancy in labeling across platforms creates an opportunity for misinformation to thrive. People are users on multiple platforms, and are thus forced to determine what the presence or absence of a label on one platform versus another means about the truth of election-related content.

Platform Interventions vs. Repeat Spreaders and Influencers

As Chapter 4 and 5 lay out, the structure of mis- and disinformation includes both top-down prominent accounts as well as bottom-up participation. In the 2020 election, repeat spreaders played a key role in both elevating crowd-sourced

stories and providing a frame to interpret them. This section highlights how platform policies set the rules for engagement, and how gaps in policies can be exploited by repeat spreaders.

Repeat spreaders sometimes face consequences for their violations, such as content labels or removal, after platforms take the user's history and the severity of infringement into account. However, in the dataset of repeat spreaders introduced in Chapter 5 we saw that very few Twitter accounts were actually removed—only four including President Trump's as of February 2021—and that many of them are still active on other platforms. Additionally, the proliferation of misleading and false narratives suggests that the policy interventions outlined above were not successful.

Central to this issue is that repeat spreader policies are not clear in two key ways. First, the majority of platforms do not publicly communicate the number of offenses a user must commit before they will take action on the user's entire account (e.g., suspension), not just on their content (e.g., labeling) . While platforms like Facebook have an internal strike system for offenses, at the time of the election YouTube was the only platform that, in the form of its three-strike rule, publicly placed clear limits.[18] The lack of transparency means that we also do not know the type of action to expect against an account after a certain number of violations. We do not know, for example, when a suspension will be temporary versus permanent.

Second, it is also unclear how public interest exemptions may play into repeat spreader policies. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have policies that exempt certain content from elected and government officials from being removed;[19] however, we do not know if or when a government official account would be suspended if it repeatedly violates platform policy. For example, Twitter labeled half of newly elected Representative Marjorie Taylor Green's tweets after the polls closed on Election Day, without moving to suspend her (see Figure 6.3 on the following page). [20]

After the insurrection of the US Capitol on January 6, one of the most prominent repeat spreaders, President Trump, was suspended from a number of platforms; Twitter permanently suspended his account on January 8.[21] Four days later, Twitter introduced a detailed strike system specifically for the civic integrity policy.[22] It is unclear if Twitter has applied this new policy since its creation, or if they will expand its strike system to other policy areas, such as COVID-19 misinformation. However, this new policy reflects a robust adaptation for responding to repeat spreaders.

Figure 6.3: A sample of tweets by Representative Majorie Taylor Green on November 4, 2020. (Note: these are selected tweets, not an image of her timeline. Some of her tweets in this short time period were not labeled.)

6.4 Mis- and Disinformation Problems Without Clear Policy Solutions

Even with these policies in place, with full and consistent implementation, other obstacles to preventing and containing the spread of mis- and disinformation exist. As platforms, researchers, and official policymakers work to protect the integrity of our elections, it is important to recognize those obstacles for which, at this moment, there may be no clear policy solution. These include cross-platform complexities, the use of non-falsifiable content, backlash against platform interventions ("techlash"), and organized outrage.

Cross-Platform Complexities

Much of what we have discussed up to this point relates to policy challenges faced by each individual platform. However, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, the platforms, combined, form an information ecosystem through which content moves; therefore, the cross-platform spread of misinformation cannot be solved through intervention by one platform alone. Prior to the 2020 election, US government agencies and several platforms met periodically to communicate the standards and observations of internal trust and safety teams, which resulted in a joint statement noting the collaborative work.[23] However, while the group committed to discuss active threats throughout and following the election, it remained the responsibility of each company to enforce measures to mitigate misinformation. Ultimately, platforms do not transparently outline nor allow independent assessment of how they engage in sector-specific, cross-platform information sharing.

Important legal ramifications such as user privacy and antitrust laws make this collaborative environment difficult. Another challenge is that some platforms, such as Parler and Gab, do not have content moderation policies or even intentions to moderate. Lastly, as legal scholar Evelyn Douek outlines in her work "The Rise of Content Cartels," there are drawbacks to private corporations setting the rules of permissible speech across platforms, regardless of how effective they may be.[24]

Use of Non-Falsifiable Content

The election information ecosystem was replete with non-falsifiable claims—such as those from anonymous whistleblowers or a "friend of a friend." These claims can be the most difficult to fact-check, and the current policies in place are insufficient to fully address hard-to-verify content.

Platforms use fact-checking partners to surface and verify false statements, but unfalsifiable information can easily fall through the cracks. Facebook's fact-checking program, for example, identifies and addresses "particularly clear hoaxes that have no basis in fact"—a relatively strict threshold of falsifiability—and "is not meant to interfere with individual expression" on the platform.[25] The problem lies, however, at the intersection of falsehood and personal experience, forcing platforms to either over moderate at the risk of removing personal content that is unfalsifiable, or under moderate and allow this potentially misleading material to proliferate. Some platforms such as TikTok are developing mechanisms to limit the distribution of claims that can't be verified or when fact-checking is rendered inconclusive.[26] These mechanisms are important, but they need to be enforced quickly and at scale. Actors will continue to frame misinformation as personal and unfalsifiable experiences, some for political

gain, as long as the unverified-content gray area exists in platform policies and actions.

Techlash Against Policy Interventions

As fact-checking becomes increasingly important to the information ecosystem, platform interventions have often received a "techlash," and accusations of censorship, mostly from the conservative right.[27] For example, after a slew of Marjorie Taylor Greene's posts were labeled as disputed and possibly misleading, as described above, Greene posted a claim that Twitter had "censored" her; she included a screenshot of the "censored" tweets.[28] In some cases, platform fact-checking labels were weaponized to make the case that platforms allegedly have political agendas, and thus the fact-checks should be considered untrustworthy and disregarded. EIP analysts observed that when some accounts were removed, the account's followers expressed that the mere fact of its removal was proof of a greater conspiracy to "cover up the truth." This appeared to contribute to meta-misinformation about the intentions of the platforms. Continued lack of transparency and perceived inconsistencies behind account takedowns may further entangle platforms with the narratives they hoped to nix.

Figure 6.4: This tweet from Congressman Kevin McCarthy demonstrates the backlash to platform action against one of President Trump's tweets (first reported in the *Washington Post* on June 23, 2020)[29]

In some respects, these continued claims of platform censorship have fuelled the movement of influencers to smaller, obscure, or specialized platforms like Parler, where there is less moderation and far fewer fact-checks.

Organized Outrage

Social media plays a critical role in facilitating legitimate protest. However, features such as Groups, event pages, and hashtags can be used to spread misinformation and stoke outrage to galvanize offline action. In the 2020 election, protesters, motivated by election misinformation and conspiracy theories, swarmed polling locations and chanted hashtags they read online, such as #Sharpiegate and #StoptheSteal.

This organized outrage raises the question of how platforms can proactively identify which hashtags or speech are likely to result in organizing offline action with the potential for violence. While applying a label can create friction before content gains enough attention to incite offline action, platforms may struggle to move beyond the reactive and to have the political and cultural expertise to quickly and effectively contextualize hashtags, Groups, and event pages.

As the insurrection of the US Capitol on January 6 demonstrates, the organizing leading up to the violent acts took place on multiple platforms. Facebook provided a unifying feature in the form of Groups, which, like the other large platforms, contributed to giving the outrage a shape and form even when the Group was taken down. This event underscores the important need for platforms to not only assess the calculus of what is actionable content but also ensure that their policies are implemented.

6.5 Primary Areas for Policy Improvement

In addition to how policies are implemented, platforms' methods of communication and the transparency of their data are incredibly important to election-related policies. This section discusses how issues related to policy clarity and transparency at times undermined platforms' goal of reducing the spread of mis- and disinformation.

Clarity

It is not enough simply to have a policy and a moderation regime in place; the community governed by the rules must understand both in order for them to be most effective. Despite improvements to policy comprehensiveness and a shift toward some proactive policy implementation ahead of the election, platforms struggled with straightforward policy language and centralizing all policy updates. With the exception of a few platforms, such as Twitter and Pinterest, platforms lacked a centralized location for all of their election-related policies. Instead, policies were spread across blog posts, excluded from formal community standards entirely, or disseminated in different sections of platforms' terms of service. Platforms also failed to announce policy updates uniformly.

Some updates were announced through blog posts, some through the personal social media accounts of top executives, and some not at all.[30]

The absence of a central and public mechanism to announce and host policy changes makes it difficult to track changes over time. Without clear documentation, policy changes run the risk of confusing users as to what is and is not permissible election-related speech.

The presence of vague and undefined terms in policy language also poses a clarity problem. For example, in October 2020, TikTok updated its policy to prohibit any "attempts to intimidate voters or suppress voting."[31] Yet outside of general incitements to violence, TikTok did not sufficiently define what voter intimidation or voter suppression looks like on its platform. However, we recognize an encouraging trend: platforms are making more adjustments to improve clarity (at times successful, other times less so) from when they first began updating their policies. Ultimately, a focus on reducing generalized language and streamlining policy availability is a step in the right direction.

Transparency

Although the EIP could trace content, identify policy shifts, and engage with stakeholders, we were left trying to answer one particularly important question: are the intervention methods effective? And how do platforms measure that?

While a number of internet platforms adopted election-related content labeling policies, those labels' effectiveness in combating false narratives is difficult for external researchers to assess. As of December 2020,[32] most major platforms had not released data about the volume and consistency of labeled content. Without information about where labels appeared, who interacted with those labels, and what those interactions could imply, researchers are left to formulate a best guess about the effectiveness of platforms' most substantial intervention effort. One study asserts that the universality of label application is necessary to avoid the "implied truth effect"; however, it is impossible to replicate in the wake of the 2020 election, and restricted access to platform data impedes any further study. Over the past two years, many platforms have continued to limit access to and the functionality of their public application interfaces (APIs),[33] and while their large-scale instructed datasets, or adaptive algorithms, can provide important insights into the online information ecosystem, these datasets are often compiled behind closed doors. This raises concerns about the independence, exhaustiveness, and validity of research and monitoring activities that rely solely on this data.

Increasing transparency in moderation practices will increase public auditability and the subsequent perceived legitimacy of platform decisions. As the presence of mis- and disinformation online is not likely to decrease in the coming years,

transparency is a prerequisite for any platform seeking to effectively intervene in its influence.

6.6 Platform Policy Moving Forward

Policy shapes the propagation of information by impacting what content is permitted, and to what extent it receives widespread distribution. As we have discussed, the major social platforms recognized the risks of election misinformation and adjusted their policies in several key ways to try to prevent misleading narratives from taking hold, or violence from occurring. They moderated by removing misleading or false content, reducing its distribution, and informing and contextualizing content for users. Despite these efforts, accounts with large and loyal audiences repeatedly took advantage of gaps in platform policy: repeat spreaders packaged false claims of voter fraud into hard-to-verify narratives that escaped timely fact-checks, and President Donald Trump himself—covered under a newsworthiness exemption—was a key player in the incitement that ultimately led to violence at the Capitol on January 6, 2021.[34] The consequences for repeatedly violating platform policy did not appear to deter these actors, in part because the consequences themselves were inconsistently applied.

In a remarkable turn of events, Twitter removed the sitting President of the United States from its platform on January 8. After the insurrection at the Capitol, platforms suspended President Trump's account, and thousands of others, for "risk of future incitement of violence."[35] This action has sparked a public conversation about policy and power, including a broader discussion of how to weigh the need to remove accounts spreading misinformation—including, at times, those of democratically elected politicians—against stifling legitimate discourse and free expression.

Ultimately, it is impossible to separate the events at the Capitol on January 6 from the narratives around voter fraud and a rigged election that began much earlier. As online speech turned into offline action, platform policy was the one line of defense, outside of the partisan leadership fuelling the misinformation, that could deter this progression. Given the significant decision to suspend a sitting (albeit outgoing) president's accounts on Instagram and Facebook indefinitely, Facebook has referred its action to the Oversight Board.[36] The decision will most likely not only shape future platform policy decisions concerning politicians in the US but also set a precedent for how to approach the accounts of other global leaders.

There isn't a simple panacea for these policy weaknesses. Content moderation policies will continue to evolve, as they have after the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol. The next election will have its own unique set of misinformation narratives, yet many of the tactics, dynamics, and basic structures of these narra-

tives will likely remain the same. Therefore, platforms must set pre-established, clear, and transparent rules rather than waiting to react to events as they unfold. In the next chapter we discuss specific recommendations for policymakers in light of the narrative, tactical, and policy findings in this report.

Notes

1. (page 212) The platforms evaluated during the EIP's operation include: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Nextdoor, TikTok, Snapchat, Parler, Gab, Discord, WhatsApp, Telegram, Reddit, and Twitch. Twitch was added to our list during our blog post update in October.

2. (page 212) "Evaluating Election-Related Platform Speech Policies," Election Integrity Partnership, October 28, 2020, https://www.eipartnership.net/policy-analysis/platform-policies

3. (page 213) "Community Guidelines," Snap Inc., accessed February 10, 2021, https://www.snap.com/en-US/community-guidelines.

4. (page 213) Nathaniel Gleicher, "Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Explained," Facebook Newsroom, December 6, 2018, https://about.fb.com/news/2018/12/inside-feed-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior/

5. (page 213) Guy Rosen, et al., "Helping to Protect the 2020 US Elections," Facebook News, updated January 27, 2020, https://about.fb.com/news/2019/10/update-on-election-integrity-efforts/

6. (page 215) Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok have a "newsworthiness" policy that allows content otherwise in violation of platforms' community standards to stay up if it is newsworthy and in the public interest. On Facebook and Twitter, this exception is limited to posts made by politicians. On TikTok and YouTube, the scope of this policy is a little more vague, and generally applies to "educational, documentary, scientific, or artistic content, satirical content, content in fictional settings, counterspeech, and content in the public interest that is newsworthy or otherwise enables individual expression on topics of social importance." See "Facebook, Elections and Political Political Speech," Facebook News, September 24, 2019, https://about.fb.com/news/2019/09/elections-and-political-speech/; "About public-interest exceptions on Twitter,"

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7. (page 216) Vijaya Gadde and Kayvon Beykpour, "Additional steps we're taking ahead of the 2020 US election," Twitter blog, updated November 2, 2020, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/2020-election-changes.html

8. (page 216) "Our election integrity efforts," Twitter Safety Center, accessed February 10, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/safety/resources/2020-us-elections; Sarah Perez, "TikTok takes down some hashtags related to election misinformation, leaves others," TechCrunch, November 5, 2020, https://techcrunch.com/2020/11/05/tiktok-takes-down-some-hashtags-related-to-election-misinformation-leaves-others/

9. (page 216) John Hegeman, "Providing People with Additional Context About Content They Share," Facebook Newsroom, June 25, 2020, https://about.fb.com/news/2020/06/more-context-for-news-articles-and-other-content/

10. (page 216) Vijaya Gadde and Kayvon Beykpour, "An update on our work around the 2020 US election," Twitter blog, November 12, 2020, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/2020-election-update.html

11. (page 216) "A Look at Facebook and US 2020 Elections," Facebook, December 2020, https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/US-2020-Elections-Report.pdf; Gadde and Beykpour, "An update on our work around the 2020 US election."

12. (page 217) Gordon Pennycook, et al., "The Implied Truth Effect: Attaching Warnings to a Subset of Fake News Headlines Increases Perceived Accuracy of Headlines Without Warnings," *Management Science* 66, no. 11: 4944–4957, doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2019.3478

13. (page 217) John Villasenor, "How to deal with AI-enabled disinformation," *AI in the Age of Cyber-Disorder: Actors, Trends, and Prospects*, ed. Fabio Rugge, ISPI-Brookings Report (Milan: Ledizioni Ledi Publishing, 2020), https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/ispi_report_ai_in_the_age_of_cyber-disorder_2020.pdf

14. (page 217) Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "There is NO WAY (ZERO!) that Mail-In Ballots will be anything less than substantially fraudulent," Twitter, May 26, 2020, 5:17 am, https://web.archive.org/web/20200526121755/https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1265255835124539392; Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "Because of the new and unprecedented massive amount of unsolicited ballots which will be sent to 'voters,'" Twitter, October 2020.

15. (page 218) Twitter Safety (@TwitterSafety), "Our recently updated Civic Integrity Policy specifically offers guidance on these claims, including that we will label misleading information or disputed claims that could undermine faith in the process itself. More in this policy:" Twitter, September 17, 2020, https://twitter.com/TwitterSafety/status/1306616796976472065

16. (page 218) The Deadline Team, "Twitter Updates Its Warning Labels on Political Tweets to Reflect Biden Certification," Yahoo!News, December 20, 2020, https://news.yahoo.com/twitter-updates-warning-labels-political-223432287.html

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Chapter 7

Responses, Mitigations and Future Work

7.1 Introduction

The Election Integrity Partnership was born out of a collective challenge. The responsibility of mitigating election-related mis- and disinformation is shared, and thus the observations and recommendations in this chapter span government, media, social media platforms, and civil society, and the organizing functions between each.

There isn't any single catch-all policy that will rid elections—much less democracy—of false or misleading information. However, institutions and individuals responsible for election processes, or responsible for portions of the information ecosystem, can each adopt policies (some modest, some transformative), to build more resilience to misinformation.

Doing nothing is not an option. A government by and for the people depends on the people coming together around trustworthy information in order to make informed decisions—including around electing leaders. There is no doubt of the causal impact mis- and disinformation about the 2020 US elections played in the violent insurrection at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021. Not pursuing structural policy change will accelerate our country's slide toward extremism, erode our shared national and inclusive identity, and propel yet more individuals toward radicalization via mis- and disinformation. The problem is larger than elections: it spans politics, self-governance, and critical policy areas, including public health.

In many ways, the Election Integrity Partnership was inspired by past recommendations for addressing election-related vulnerabilities. For example, the

Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's second of a five-volume report on foreign-based disinformation, published in 2019, included a bipartisan recommendation:

> The Committee recommends that social media companies work to facilitate greater information sharing between the public and private sector, and among the social companies themselves about malicious activity and platform vulnerabilities that are exploited to spread disinformation. **Formalized mechanisms for collaboration that facilitate content sharing among the social media platforms in order to defend against foreign disinformation, as occurred with violent extremist content online, should be fostered.** As researchers have concluded: "Many disinformation campaigns and cyber threats do not just manipulate one platform; the information moves across various platforms or a cyber-attack threatens multiple companies' network security and data integrity. There must be greater cooperation within the tech sector and between the tech sector and other stakeholders to address these issues."[1] (Emphasis added.)

The Election Integrity Partnership was designed to do just that: formalize collaboration among organizations to protect against misinformation. The recommendations in this chapter are tailored to the Election Integrity Partnership's scope, specifically, identifying and mitigating misinformation related to US elections. However, many of them have broader potential in building toward a normative approach for elections, social media, and information access in free and open societies.

7.2 Government

While the responsibility for accurate information is spread across society, the responsibility for protecting elections is singularly that of the government. This set of broad recommendations spans a complex system of state and local election systems feeding into the federal system and focuses on dual responsibilities of facilitating and providing information about elections.

The Executive Branch

- Strengthen interagency coordination by elevating election security as a national security priority and reaffirming the critical infrastructure designation for election systems, allowing the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) to further prioritize resources and support to state and local officials.

- Solidify clear interagency leadership roles and responsibilities. CISA should remain the lead on domestic vulnerabilities and coordination with state and local election officials; the Office of the Director of National Intelligence should coordinate intelligence assessments and lead the Intelligence Community on foreign-based threats; the Department of Justice and Federal Bureau of Investigation should maintain investigation and law enforcement leadership for domestic and international threats. The Election Assistance Commission should remain in an amplifying role, pushing best practices and critical information out broadly to the election community.

- Create standards and mechanisms for consistent disclosures of mis- and disinformation from foreign and domestic sources, including via CISA's Rumor Control and joint interagency statements related to foreign-based threats.[2]

- Maintain a threat assessment of the current election mis- and disinformation state of play, informed by collaboration with social media platforms. Update this assessment during federal election cycles and release it to election officials, social media platforms, civil society, and members of the media.

Congress

- Election security should be prioritized over politics. Make best efforts to separate the substantive and critical issue of election security from the electoral politics that every member of Congress is engaged in during each election. For example, Congress should authorize all non-emergency election-related bills one year prior to the next regular election.

- Pass existing bipartisan proposals with increased appropriations marked for federal and state election security, specifically resources for federal agencies directly engaged in election security and more broadly toward providing coordinated election security assistance and support to state and local officials (see next section).

- Codify the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's bipartisan recommendations on depolarization and public official conduct, as noted in Volumes 3 and 5 of the Committee's exhaustive report on foreign influence in the 2016 election.[3]

- Strengthen digital expertise at federal regulators with election-related jurisdictions, including the Federal Elections Commission and Federal Communications Commission, to improve enforcement of existing regulations.

State and Local Officials

Prepare a tiered communications plan that includes:

- A start-to-finish story for each voter's ballot. This should include information about how to register to vote; ensuring one's registration is up to date; where, when, and how to vote; and how votes will be counted and reported, including the timing of that process.
- Processes for reporting misinformation to social media platforms and government partners.
- Establish trusted channels of communication with voters. This should include a .gov website and use of both traditional media and social media. This effort should include:
- A single authoritative source (webpage or social media account) for election information. That source's information should be specific to each election and regularly updated; it should also provide data and evidence regarding the security and integrity of the election.
- Ensure that all votes cast are on auditable paper records. Post-election audits should be conducted after each election.

7.3 Media

Traditional media remains the primary means of information distribution in the United States. As such, newsrooms have an obligation, rooted in traditional journalism ethics and practices, to accurately and ethically cover election topics, including election misinformation. This task has been complicated by a loss of journalism revenue to social media companies and growing competition with hyperpartisan news sources for reader attention. The following recommendations are for journalists and media professionals covering election-related misinformation.

Newsrooms

- Prepare journalists to encounter mis- and disinformation. This training should include accepted definitions, attribution standards, how to avoid inadvertent amplification, and more.
- Coordinate reporting across beats in the newsroom. Election reporting relies on a combination of campaign embeds, White House and congressional

reporters, national security reporters, technology reporters, and others. Organizations should handle misinformation uniformly and professionally.

- Anticipate misinformation ("threatcasting") and establish guidelines for combating it (for example, the *Washington Post*'s guidance on hacked material or Buzzfeed's guidance on QAnon descriptions).[4]

- Formulate proactive communications for instances when genuine reporting is labeled "fake news" or disinformation. Newsrooms should address the issue but not accept the premise of the charge.

- For written media, avoid headlines that mischaracterize or hyperbolize reporting, especially in breaking news events like elections. Include the fact-check in the headline when possible, e.g., "Trump Falsely Declared Victory."

News Studies and Research

- Develop a wider vocabulary for differentiating between traditional news media and hyperpartisan or unreliable news. A new lexicon could help social media sites better label information.

- Develop case studies on misinformation coverage (good and bad) of the 2020 election to educate and inform current and upcoming journalists.

7.4 Social Media Platforms and Technology Companies

In their relatively brief existence, social media platforms have become a critical part of the democratic process, facilitating political organizing, citizen engagement, campaign communications, and overall information access. Mitigating election-related misinformation in this space is particularly challenging given the distributed nature of the social media ecosystem—anyone with internet access can consume content and post their own—and the speed by which unverified or unverifiable information can spread. As it stands, there is a high degree of variance in how social media platforms address misinformation, the resources they devote to combating it, and their technical policy options. Social media platforms won't be able to root out election-related misinformation entirely, but these policy recommendations can help. The following recommendations for platforms are more lengthy and specific than previous sections because this area currently has the fewest normative practices compared to the others.

Accessibility

- Tell users about a platform's misinformation policies. In addition to the policies themselves, platforms should provide both rationales and case studies. Policies specific to an event or topic (e.g., elections, COVID-19) should be grouped in one location.
- Provide proactive information regarding anticipated election misinformation. For example, if researchers expect a narrative will emerge, platforms should explain that narrative's history or provide fact-checks or context related to its prior iterations.

Transparency

- Share platform research on misinformation counter-measures with academics, civil society and the public. Where counter-measures have been effective, reveal that; where they have fallen short, reveal that as well. If efficacy is unknown, take steps to determine it.
- Enable access for external researchers to removed or labeled content, including exhaustive and rapid search capabilities.
- Partner with civil society organizations. Listen to their suggestions and support them when possible.
- Provide greater transparency about why something is removed or censored. Sharing the evidence to support why the content was taken down would be helpful for researchers as well as the public.

Cross-Platform Communications

- Support independent cross-platform coalitions that track cross-platform misinformation. These coalitions can focus on specific topics (such as vaccine disinformation) or regions and can coordinate with government officials and civil society to respond to growing narratives.

Policy on Repeat Spreaders

- Establish clear consequences for accounts that repeatedly violate platform policies. These accounts could be placed on explicit probationary status, or a mixture of monitoring and sanctions.

- Publicize the different thresholds of policy offenses. For example, YouTube and Twitter use a strike system. Any such system should transparently represent to users their current status and should describe what counts as a strike against monetization, or leads to suspension.
- Prioritize quicker action on verified or influential accounts if they have already violated platform policies in the past.
- Consider implementing holding areas for content from high-visibility repeat spreaders, where content can be evaluated against policy before posting.
- Reevaluate policies related to blue-check influencers with significant reach, particularly on issues such as incitement to violence. These accounts should arguably be held more stringently to stated policies than the average user—rather than receiving repeated exemptions—because of the amount of attention they command and action they potentially drive.

Policy Enforcement

- Ensure platform labels are consistently applied to all product features, including ephemeral content such as stories or livestreams.
- Labels should make clear which policy the content violates.
- Partner with civil society organizations to localize fact-checks and labels , especially in non-English languages or niche communities.
- Apply an interim label to content that is in the queue for fact-checkers, or is tied to an emerging event, noting that it should be approached with caution. For content that recurs, a label can link to a page that discusses previous variations of the claim.
- Anticipate misinformation where possible, particularly surrounding pivotal events such as elections. Revisit applicable policies in advance.

Election-Specific Policies

- Specify election-specific policies' duration and geographic jurisdiction.
- For US elections, anticipate state-level premature claims of victory.
- Prioritize election officials' efforts to educate voters within their jurisdiction and respond to misinformation. This could include the promotion of content from election officials through curation or advertisement credits, especially in the lead-up to Election Day.

7.5 Civil Society

Civil society in the United States plays an essential role in the process and functions of elections, as well as in the accountability of institutions directly responsible for the stewardship of American democracy and the information environment that facilitates it. Civil society includes a wide range of actors from academia, public interest groups, community leaders, faith-based groups, and other non-governmental organizations. Most notably, civil society has led in providing better understanding and best practices regarding election-related misinformation and can continue to play a leading role in building resilience to it in the long term.

Overarching

- Disclose methodology and standards for technical research. Incomplete, misleading, or false findings, even when well intentioned, often exacerbate the problem, especially in fast-moving information environments around elections.
- Similar to the recommendation made to media organizations, increase awareness about misinformation and coordinate among civil society groups with varied expertise on elections.
- Where misinformation is pervasive and touches on many topics, clearly communicate the scope of engagement on the issue. As an example, the Election Integrity Partnership's scope was narrowly focused on misinformation related to the process and results of the 2020 US elections, as opposed to false information in American political discourse more broadly.

7.6 Conclusion

The 2020 election demonstrated that actors—both foreign and domestic—remain committed to weaponizing viral false and misleading narratives to undermine confidence in the US electoral system and Americans' faith in our democracy. Mis- and disinformation warped the country's public discourse both before and after Election Day, spreading through online communities across all social platforms. Influencers and hyperpartisan media cultivated loyal, polarized audiences, forming echo chambers where narratives of massive fraud and a stolen election strengthened at each retelling. These narratives have consequences. On January 6, 2021, President Trump's supporters stormed the Capitol in an attempt to prevent the finalization of the Electoral College results and the peaceful transition of power. A small group of radicalized citizens had been repeatedly

told that the election's results were fraudulent; they mobilized against their own democracy while claiming to protect it. A larger group watched those events and cheered; others concluded, despite MAGA hats and Trump flags, that the insurrection was the work of their political opponents.

State and local election officials throughout the country and across the political spectrum worked hard to counter malign narratives. Tragedies such as the January 6 insurrection suggest that, despite their best efforts, democratic processes remain vulnerable. The events, narratives, and dynamics documented in this report underscore the need for a collective response to the false and misleading narratives that precipitated the attack.

The EIP was formed out of this conviction—that the challenge of misinformation is dynamic, networked, and resilient—and that to address it, we need to act quickly and collectively. While the Partnership was intended to meet an immediate need, the conditions that necessitated its creation have not abated, and in fact may have gotten worse. Academia, platforms, civil society, and all levels of government must be committed, in their own ways, to truth in the service of a free and open society. All stakeholders should focus on predicting and pre-bunking false narratives, detecting mis- and disinformation as it occurs, and countering it when appropriate.

The EIP's collaborative model was tailored toward a specific event—Election 2020—and designed specifically to aid election officials, election security stakeholders, and civil society, but we believe the model could have further utility. As our report reiterates, there are structural dynamics and policy frameworks in the online information ecosystem that have long lent themselves to the viral spread of false and misleading information and to the facilitation of polarized communities; addressing specific content is, in many ways, secondary to addressing these infrastructure challenges. In the meantime, false and misleading narratives proliferate about a wide variety of societally impactful topics. Shifting focus to address specific other topics may require modification to the operation of the Partnership, such as reallocating analytical resources and research cadence; however, EIP's novel structure, enabling rapid-response analysis and a multi-stakeholder reporting infrastructure, could prove effective to many information spaces blighted by pervasive misinformation.

In the end, we hope this report's enduring value lies not just in its exposition of this election story, but in its illumination of this overarching story—of declining trust, weakened gatekeepers, social polarization, and the protean challenge of viral misinformation amidst a skeptical and networked public. Given the enormity of the challenge, we recognize the need for a whole-of-society response. The EIP, in its structure and its operations, offered a first measure in service of that call: it united government, academia, civil society, and industry, analyzing across platforms, to address misinformation in real time. The lessons from EIP

should be both learned and applied. The fight against misinformation is only beginning. The collective effort must continue.

Notes

1. (page 234) Select Committee on Intelligence, Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, S. Rep. No. 116-XX, volume 2, at 78 (2019), https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf

2. (page 235) "#Protect2020 Rumor vs. Reality," Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, accessed December 10, 2020, https://www.cisa.gov/rumorcontrol

3. (page 235) Select Committee on Intelligence, Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, S. Rep. No. 116-XX, volumes 3 and 5 (2019), https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/publications/report-select-committee-intelligence-united-states-senate-russian-active-measures

4. (page 237) Joe Pompeo, "'Connect the Dots': Marty Baron Warns Washington Post Staff About Covering Hacked Materials," *Vanity Fair*, September 23, 2020, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/09/marty-baron-warns-wapo-staff-about-covering-hacked-materials; Drusilla Moorhouse and Emerson Malone, "Here's Why BuzzFeed News is Calling QAnon a 'Collective Delusion' From Now On," BuzzFeed News, September 4, 2020, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/drumoorhouse/qanon-mass-collective-delusion-buzzfeed-news-copy-desk

Appendix **A**

Definitions

Misinformation is information that is false, but not necessarily intentionally false.[1] Misinformation is at times used as an umbrella category for false rumors, disinformation, and other types of false and misleading information.

Disinformation is false or misleading information that is purposefully seeded and/or spread for an objective—e.g., a political or financial objective.[2] Disinformation may mislead through its content, or may work by deceiving its audiences about its origins, purpose, or the identity of those who produced it. It is often built around a true or plausible core, layering factual information with small falsehoods or exaggerations (see Bittman, 1985).[3] It also typically functions as a campaign—a set of information actions, rather than a single piece of content. The key difference between disinformation and other forms of misinformation is intent, in that disinformation is intentionally produced and/or spread. Often as a disinformation campaign progresses, it incorporates unwitting participants in its production and spread; therefore, not every entity that spreads disinformation does so with intent to deceive or knowledge that they are spreading false or misleading content.[4]

Voter Fraud is the act of fraudulently voting. It includes voting on behalf of someone else, voting when someone is ineligible, voting multiple times, etc. The

[1] Caroline Jack, "Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information," *Data & Society Research Institute* (2017): 3, 22, https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_LexiconofLies.pdf.

[2] Jack, "Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information"; Kate Starbird, Ahmer Arif, and Tom Wilson, "Disinformation as collaborative work: Surfacing the participatory nature of strategic information operations," Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction 3, issue CSCW (November 2019): 1-26, doi.org/10.1145/3359229.

[3] Ladislav Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1985).

[4] Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View*; Kate Starbird, et al., "Disinformation as collaborative work."

term is often used—including within examples in this report—as a catchall for other types of election fraud. Research shows that voter fraud is extremely rare in the United States.[5]

Election Fraud suggests a more systematic effort to change the results of an election. It includes orchestrating voter fraud at scale, illegally registering or illegally assisting large numbers of voters, altering vote counts through automatic or manual means, systematically removing or inserting large numbers of ballots to affect an election outcome, etc.

Electoral Fraud is a broad term denoting "illegal interference in the process of voting."[6] Electoral fraud includes ballot stuffing, voter impersonation, vote buying, voter suppression, fraud by election officials, and various other mechanisms of illegally impacting an election. Like "election fraud," electoral fraud suggests efforts at a scale that could impact election results.

Voter Suppression is the process of systematically reducing the ability of a specific group of people to vote. It can work through efforts to make it physically harder to vote (fewer locations, limited time windows), through legal efforts that disenfranchise specific groups (e.g., former felons) and through other mechanisms, including intimidation. In the United States, voter suppression efforts often target Black Americans and other people of color.[7]

Tickets were internal reports within the EIP system. They were submitted via "tips" from external partners in the government and civil society, or created through the EIP internal monitoring process. Once a ticket was submitted, our Tier 1 analysts would go through a systematic process to document the claim, determine if it was "in scope," get a sense of where it was spreading, and attempt to assess the veracity of the underlying claims by locating an external fact-check from election officials, fact-checking organizations, local media, or mainstream outlets. For high priority, in-scope tickets, Tier 2 researchers conducted additional analysis, which included determining the origins of a piece of information, tracking its spread over time, and identifying additional fact-checks as they became available.

A majority of tickets focused on false and/or misleading claims that functioned to diminish trust in election results. These included:

- False claims and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories (e.g., that voting software switches votes without a trace).

[5] "Debunking the Voter Fraud Myth," Brennan Center for Justice, January 31, 2017, https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/debunking-voter-fraud-myth.

[6] Ballotpedia, s.v. "Electoral Fraud," accessed February 10, 2021, https://ballotpedia.org/Electoral_fraud.

[7] ACLU, "Block the Vote: Voter Suppression in 2020," February 3, 2020, https://www.aclu.org/news/civil-liberties/block-the-vote-voter-suppression-in-2020/.

- Factually valid claims taken out of context and framed in misleading ways to suggest massive voter fraud (e.g., that a large number of ballots had been found in a trash can, when in actuality the ballots were from 2018).
- Content that amplified and exaggerated small issues (e.g., ballots stolen from a mailbox, discarded mail that contained a small number of ballots, issues with individual voting machines) to support the broader (false) narrative that results could not be trusted.

Events are salient occurrences in our physical and/or social worlds. Events are typically bounded in time. We use this term to distinguish between the actual event (e.g., Sharpie pens bleeding through ballots) and the information incidents that feature elements of those events—though they may take shape and spread at different times.

(Information) Incidents are distinct information cascades that pertain to a specific event or set of events. We use the term incidents to differentiate between the original event and the subsequent discussion or discussions of that event. Incidents often map to one or more narratives, where the details of an event are mobilized to create or support a specific interpretation—or story about the meaning—of that event.

Narratives are stories that connect a series of related events or experiences. Like any good story, narratives typically have characters, scenes, times, and themes. They provide compelling interpretations that can help people make sense of events and experiences.

Frames are mental schema that shape how people interpret events. Frames select and make salient some aspects of a situation—and obscure others. Robert Entman enumerates four functions of frames: defining a problem, diagnosing a cause, making a moral judgement, and suggesting remedies.[8] Framing is the act of creating, refining, or challenging a frame. Framing can be used as a strategy to shape how others interpret a situation.

The "Big Lie": Over the course of this project, a majority of the tickets we filed and incidents we analyzed were related to a false metanarrative of massive voter fraud (i.e., election fraud). This false metanarrative was introduced prior to our project's launch and continues to this day. It was present in President Trump's summer 2020 tweets claiming that the election would be "rigged" against him and in his January 6, 2021, tweets claiming that the election had been stolen from him. It took shape through a variety of false, misleading, and exaggerated claims that functioned generally to sow distrust in the results—and specifically to

[8] Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," Journal of Communication 43, no. 4 (December 1993): 51-58; doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x.

support the allegation of massive voter fraud functioning to "steal" the election from candidate Trump. Looking across the breadth of the online activity to seed and spread these narratives, our research (and that of others; see Benkler et al.'s 2020 paper[9]) has interpreted the "Big Lie" to be a participatory disinformation campaign that incorporated the efforts of President Trump, his family and close supporters, members of right-wing media, social media influencers, and his followers (many of them unwitting participants in this campaign).

[9]Yochai Benkler et al., "Mail-in Voter Fraud: Anatomy of a Disinformation Campaign," Berkman Center Research Publication No. 2020-6, Berkman Klein Center, October 2, 2020, doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3703701.

Appendix **B**

Inter-coder reliability

B.1 Average Z-scores

Survey Questions (in descending order by z-score)	Z Score
Other Facets: was there anything else notable about this ticket not already covered above?	1.013260305
Why was this ticket created?	0.5973125198
Was there a partisan focus on this ticket?	0.04870033315
Process-based tags: what part of the electoral process is this ticket about?	0.04149633474
Specific Claims or Election-related narratives: is there a specific, recognizable claim that was used in this incident?	0.03772808942
What are the top-level buckets of this incident? Check all that apply.	-0.08453405504
What tactics were used to spread this content?	-0.203993765
What is the estimated number of engagements (cumulative social media shares, retweets, likes, reactions, comments) associated with the ticket?	-0.2505426778
Character-based Tags: who or what is being implicated in this incident?	-0.2664116253
Is this a particularly important ticket that should be included in the final report?	-0.7143693447

Table B.1: The average z-scores for each survey question

B.2 Discordant Z-scores

Survey Question	Choice	Z Score
What tactics were used to spread this content?	This content exaggerates the impact of an issue within the election-process	-2.868919023
Specific Claims or Election-related narratives: is there a specific, recognizable claim that was used in this incident?	None of the above	-2.41007974
Character-based Tags: who or what is being implicated in this incident?	Government Entities	-1.971189991
What are the top-level buckets of this incident? Check all that apply.	Fraud	-1.951240456
Character-based Tags: who or what is being implicated in this incident?	Political affinity group	-1.911341388

Table B.2: From the above questions, choices that experienced the most discord among coders

B.3 Concordant Z-scores

Survey Question	Choice	Z Score
Other Facets: was there anything else notable about this ticket not already covered above?	Foreign interference (Unfounded)	1.240684993
Other Facets: was there anything else notable about this ticket not already covered above?	Foreign interference (Confirmed)	1.220735459
Other Facets: was there anything else notable about this ticket not already covered above?	COVID related	1.200785925
What tactics were used to spread this content?	Use of phishing emails or tests	1.180836391
What are the top-level buckets of this incident? Check all that apply.	Premature Claims of Victory	1.140937323

Table B.3: Questions that experienced the most agreement

Appendix **C**

Repeat Spreaders—Additional Partisan News Outlets in the Twitter Data

The *New York Post*'s coverage served mainly to introduce narratives involving election fraud, including reporting on unfounded allegations that deceased voters in New York had ballots cast on their behalf. Conservative news outlets DC Patriot (9 incidents) and National Pulse (8 incidents) acted similarly in the promotion of stories revolving around misplaced ballots (DC Patriot) and detailing previous instances of fraud both domestic and foreign (National Pulse).

JustTheNews, a news site run by conservative commentator John Solomon, produced stories that applied political commentary to narratives asserting election fraud and was involved in spreading the Nevada Whistleblower narrative.URLs from the *Washington Times* appear in tweets related to three of the top incidents, reflecting their attention to widely followed election conspiracy theories.

Domains associated with political conspiracy theories include ZeroHedge, which appeared in 10 incidents, which was involved in the spread of the Color Revolution narrative. *The Epoch Times* was cited in a range of misleading "voter fraud" narratives such as alleging that large numbers of people were voting twice and that discarded ballots were evidence of intentional fraud. The website also promoted content related to three large incidents—the Dominion conspiracy theory, and the Sharpiegate and Stop The Steal narratives.

The Fox News website, foxnews.com, was cited in a narrative regarding ballots that went missing in the care of USPS and the spread of Biden's miscontextualized statement regarding fraud protections. Articles for which Fox News was cited often presented factual evidence of a real-world event with an

underlying subtext of election insecurity or widespread voter fraud that was picked up and made more explicit in the social media sphere. The spin-off site of Fox contributor Sara Carter (saraacarter.com) was involved in seven similar incidents resulting in over 80,000 retweets. Her content was often more explicit in falsely claiming widespread voter fraud—including a highly speculative article (now removed) that helped to feed the Dominion conspiracy theory.

Appendix **D**

Ticket Analysis Questions

D.1 Tier 1 Analysis Questions

1: *Overall Analyst Description*: What is the content about? Provide a brief description of the narrative being pushed and the tactics used to spread it (platforms, assets, etc.) so that other analysts can understand the content at a glance.

2: ***Platform***: What platform(s) does the content appear on? Include links or links to screenshots, if appropriate. What platforms has the content trended on?

3: *Language*: What language(s) is the content written in?

4: *Content Assets*: What type of media is included in the content?

Examples:

Contains video

Contains image with text

Contains image without text

Template text (copy-paste)

Unique text

5a: *Category*: What EIP-defined categories of election interference does it fall under?

Choose all that apply:

Procedural Interference

Participation Interference

Fraud

Delegitimization*

5b: *If it's delegitimization, what kind is it?

6: *Theme*: What is the primary topic or theme of the content?

Examples: VoteByMail

USPS

7: *Target Community*: What specific communities does the content target (if applicable)?

This refers to the community whose voting ability or trust in the election process the content is designed to affect—not the community propagating the claim. Target communities can include seniors, teenagers, Latinx voters, QAnon, far left, far right, etc.

8: *State Targeted*: What geographical area [state] does the content target (if applicable)?

9: *Account Type or Amplification*: What kind of account is primarily responsible for spreading the content?

Examples:

Politician/candidate for office

Influencer/verified account

Organic account

Seemingly inauthentic account

Anonymous account

10: *Reach*: What is the reach of the content at this time?

How many shares does it have? How many replies or comments? How many likes? Use the following as approximate guidelines:

- *None: 0 engagements*

- *Low*: 1-10 *engagements*
- *Medium*: 10-500 *engagements*
- *High*: 500-1000 *engagements*
- *Viral*: 1000+ *engagements*

11: *Velocity*: What is the velocity of the content?

Is the rate of spread of the content static, growing, or declining? Use the following as approximate guidelines:

- *Static: no change to reach*
- *Growing: reach is growing linearly*
- *Viral: reach is growing exponentially*
- *Decreasing: reach is decreasing*

D.2 Tier 2 Analysis Questions

12: What else do we know about the primary account sharing the content?

Examples:

25,000 followers
Created in 2012

13: What communities are sharing the content?

Examples:

Conspiratorial Instagram pages, Bernie-aligned Facebook groups

14: What was the first account or Page to share the content (if not the account listed above)?

15: Is there any evidence of coordination or inauthentic activity? Unusual tactics?

16: To what extent is counter-messaging already underway? Has it been successful?

16: Any additional notes about the user and related social accounts/websites discussed in the ticket?

Appendix **E**

News Articles Citing the Election Integrity Partnership

News Articles citing the EIP during the active project period, listed in chronological order:

Route Fifty | Aug. 12, 2020: "New Coalition Wants to Help in Fight Against Election Misinformation"

https://www.route-fifty.com/tech-data/2020/08/election-integrity-partnership-misinformation-disinformation/167666/

Stanford News | Sept. 28, 2020: "The 2020 U.S. election, issues and challenges"

https://news.stanford.edu/2020/09/28/2020-u-s-election-issues-challenges/

The New York Times | Sept. 28, 2020: "Editorial: What's the Plan if Trump Tweets That He's Won Re-election?"

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/27/opinion/social-media-trump-election.html

The New York Times | Sept. 29, 2020: "Project Veritas Video Was a 'Coordinated Disinformation Campaign,' Researchers Say"

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/us/politics/project-veritas-ilhan-omar.html

Santa Rosa Press-Democrat | Sept. 30, 2020: "A tall tale about election fraud"

https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/opinion/pd-editorial-a-tall-tale-about-election-fraud/

Bloomberg News | Oct. 5, 2020: "Facebook, Twitter Are Failing to Curb Voting-By-Mail Falsehoods"

https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-05/facebook-twitter-are-failing-to-curb-voting-by-mail-falsehoods

Business Day (South Africa) | Oct. 5, 2020: "Facebook, Twitter have hands full with postal voting misinformation"

https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/world/americas/2020-10-05-facebook-twitter-have-hands-full-with-postal-voting-misinformation/

The Washington Post | Oct. 8, 2020: "Facebook bans marketing firm running 'troll farm' for pro-Trump youth group"

https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/10/08/facebook-bans-media-consultancy-running-troll-farm-pro-trump-youth-group/

The Daily Beast | Oct. 13, 2020: "Far-Right Social Media Sites Packed With Foreign Clickbait"

https://www.thedailybeast.com/1-in-7-parler-users-follows-macedonian-clickbait-site

Bloomberg News | Oct. 13, 2020: "Fake News Hub from 2016 Election Thriving Again, Report Finds"

https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-13/fake-news-hub-from-2016-election-thriving-again-report-finds

Associated Press | Oct. 13, 2020: "Report: Social media influencers push voting misinformation"

https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-donald-trump-politics-media-misinformation-7a60e1e6005c8b3b967c9ad337cb1a6a

NBC News | Oct. 15, 2020: "For Trump's 'rigged' election claims, an online megaphone awaits"

https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/trump-s-rigged-election-claims-online-megaphone-awaits-n1243309

CyberScoop | Oct. 20, 2020: "Why social media disinformation poses such a security threat"

https://www.cyberscoop.com/social-media-disinformation-represents-security-threat/

MIT Technology Review | Oct. 21, 2020: "Efforts to undermine the election are too big for Facebook and Twitter to cope with"

https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/21/1010986/how-to-delegitimize-an-election-rigged-misinformation/

National Public Radio | Oct. 21, 2020: "Voters In Florida And Alaska Receive Emails Warning 'Vote For Trump Or Else!'"

https://www.npr.org/2020/10/21/926139270/voters-in-florida-and-alaska-receive-emails-warning-vote-for-trump-or-else

Fast Company | Oct. 23, 2020: "Facebook is still failing to take down ads that question the election's integrity"

https://www.fastcompany.com/90567642/facebook-is-still-failing-to-take-down-ads-that-question-the-elections-integrity

GeekWire | Oct. 26, 2020: "Scholars tracking social media see efforts to delegitimize election, imperiling democracy"

https://www.geekwire.com/2020/scholars-tracking-social-media-see-efforts-delegitimize-election-imperiling-democracy/

Science | Oct. 26, 2020: "As U.S. election nears, researchers are following the trail of fake news"

https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/10/us-election-nears-researchers-are-following-trail-fake-news

MIT Technology Review | Oct. 26, 2020: "What to expect on election day"

https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/26/1011245/what-to-expect-on-election-day-2020-disinformation-results/

CyberScoop | Oct. 29, 2020: "Don't let election-themed misinformation fool you. Here's what to watch out for."

https://www.cyberscoop.com/election-trump-twitter-winner-misinformation/

KIRO-TV Seattle | Oct. 30, 2020: "UW social media expert: Election misinformation is an 'attack on democracy'"

https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/uw-social-media-expert-election-misinformation-is-an-attack-democracy/

Oklahoma Watch | Oct. 30, 2020: "These Oklahoma Politicians Gave Misinformation a Boost"

https://oklahomawatch.org/2020/10/30/these-oklahoma-politicians-gave-misinformation-a-boost/

National Public Radio | Nov. 1, 2020: "Researchers Prepare For Deluge Of Election Night Misinformation"

https://www.npr.org/2020/11/01/930137085/researchers-prepare-for-deluge-of-election-night-misinformationill-failing-to-take-down-ads-that-question-the-elections-integrity

Stanford News | Nov. 2, 2020: "Disinformation investigators: Stanford students sleuth for false, misleading reports on how to vote"

https://news.stanford.edu/2020/11/02/sleuthing-misinformation-voting/

The Washington Post | Nov. 2, 2020: "The Post's View: Election Day promises to be full of misinformation. Here's how we can all stop its spread."

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/election-day-promises-to-be-full-of-misinformation-heres-how-we-can-all-stop-its-spread/2020/11/02/bd576e22-1d2d-11eb-b532-05c751cd5dc2_story.html

The New York Times | Nov. 3, 2020: "After Twitter Labels Trump's Tweet About Pennsylvania, Its Spread Slows"

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/03/technology/after-twitter-labels-trumps-tweet-about-pennsylvania-its-spread-slows.html

Protocol | Nov. 3, 2020: "Meet the researchers and activists fighting misinformation"

https://www.protocol.com/election-day-2020-misinfomation-disinformation

The Washington Post | Nov. 4, 2020: "Trump's early victory declarations test tech giants' mettle in policing threats to the election"

https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/11/03/misinformation-election-social-text/

The Washington Post | Nov. 4, 2020: "Trump's campaign and family boost bogus conspiracy theories in a bid to undermine vote count"

https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/11/04/election-results-misinformation/

Detroit Free Press | Nov. 8, 2020: "Antrim County figures prominently in election conspiracy theory"

https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/11/08/election-misinformation-michigan-vote-antrim-county/6209693002/

Le Monde | Nov. 8, 2020: "Elections américaines : « La désinformation a pris un rôle de premier plan »"

https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2020/11/10/election-presidentielle-americaine-la-desinformation-a-pris-un-role-de-premier-plan_6059234_4408996.html

Reuters | Nov. 8, 2020: "Fact check: Deviation from Benford's Law does not prove election fraud"

https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-benford-idUSKBN27Q3AI

Bridge Michigan | Nov. 9, 2020: "Human error, Dominion voting equipment fuel false fraud claims in Michigan"

https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-government/human-error-dominion-voting-equipment-fuel-false-fraud-claims-michigan

The Washington Post | Nov. 9, 2020: "Twitter and Facebook warning labels aren't enough to save democracy"

https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/11/09/facebook-twitter-election-misinformation-labels/

The Washington Post | Nov. 10, 2020: "Georgia fight shows how Trump's unfounded election fraud claims are splitting GOP"

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/11/10/cybersecurity-202-georgia-fight-shows-how-trumps-unfounded-election-fraud-claims-are-splitting-gop/

The Washington Post | Nov. 10, 2020: "The Post's View: Trump is the problem when it comes to disinformation. So what now?"

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-is-the-problem-when-it-comes-to-disinformation-so-what-now/2020/11/09/e84b2e62-22c2-11eb-a688-5298ad5d580a_story.html

National Public Radio | Nov. 10, 2020: "From Steve Bannon To Millennial Millie: Facebook, YouTube Struggle With Live Video"

https://www.npr.org/2020/11/10/933235773/from-steve-bannon-to-millennial-millie-facebook-youtube-struggle-with-live-video

CQ Roll Call | Nov. 10, 2020: "Twitter, Facebook face rocky future post-Donald Trump"

https://www.rollcall.com/2020/11/10/twitter-facebook-face-rocky-future-post-donald-trump/

Bloomberg News | Nov. 11, 2020: YouTube Election Loophole Lets Some False Trump-Win Videos Spread"

https://www.bloombergquint.com/onweb/youtube-election-loophole-lets-some-false-trump-win-videos-spread

NBC News | Nov. 11, 2020: "Misinformation by a thousand cuts: Varied rigged election claims circulate"

https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/misinformation-thousand-cuts-varied-rigged-election-claims-circulate-n1247476

The Washington Post | Nov. 12, 2020: "Trump's attacks on election outcome prolong tech's emergency measures'

https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/11/12/facebook-ad-ban-lame-duck/

Newsweek | Nov. 12, 2020: "Fact Check: Did Dominion Voting Systems Cause Widespread Voter Fraud, As Trump Claims?"

https://www.newsweek.com/fact-check-did-dominion-voting-systems-cause-widespread-voter-fraud-trump-claims-1547038

NBC News | Nov. 12, 2020: "Biden picks chief of staff while misinformation wildfire fuels Trump's refusal to concede"

https://www.nbcnews.com/news/morning-briefing/biden-picks-chief-staff-while-misinformation-wildfire-fuels-trump-s-n1247521

Americas Quarterly | Nov. 12, 2020: "Misinformation Is Threatening Brazil's Elections, Too"

https://americasquarterly.org/article/misinformation-is-threatening-brazils-elections-too/

Politico Morning Tech | Nov. 13, 2020: "Where Biden's new chief of staff stands on tech"

https://www.politico.com/newsletters/morning-tech/2020/11/13/where-bidens-new-chief-of-staff-stands-on-tech-791639

Bloomberg News | Nov. 14, 2020: 'Follow me on Parler' is new mantra for users aggrieved by Facebook"

https://www.politico.com/newsletters/morning-tech/2020/11/13/where-bidens-new-chief-of-staff-stands-on-tech-791639

South China Morning Post | Nov. 16, 2020: "Dis-United States: Biden's team faces reality of rule during Trumpism"

https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3109699/dis-united-states-bidens-team-faces-reality-rule-during

Detroit Free Press | Nov, 17, 2020: "Russian ballot-stuffing video goes viral again, and other predictable things about 2020 misinformation"

https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/11/17/election-misinformation-predictable/6281539002/

The Associated Press | Nov. 20, 2020: "Who needs Russia? Loudest attacks on US vote are from Trump"

https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-loudest-attack-us-vote-bc653f799233e76dd60c27c37859d67b

The New York Times | Nov. 20, 2020: "Trump allies are among the frequent purveyors of election misinformation"

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/20/technology/trump-allies-are-among-the-frequent-purveyors-of-election-misinformation.html

The New York Times | Nov. 23, 2020: "How Misinformation 'Superspreaders' Seed False Election Theories"

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/20/technology/trump-allies-are-among-the-frequent-purveyors-of-election-misinformation.html

Voice of America | Nov. 24, 2020: "Russian Influence Peddlers Carving Out New Audiences on Fringes"

https://www.voanews.com/usa/russian-influence-peddlers-carving-out-new-audiences-fringes

The Wall Street Journal | Dec. 11, 2020: "Social Media in 2020: A Year of Misinformation"

https://www.wsj.com/articles/social-media-in-2020-a-year-of-misinformation-and-disinformation-11607712530

MLive | Jan. 4, 2021: "Misinformation and conspiracies took starring role in Michigan's political movements"

https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2021/01/misinformation-and-conspiracies-took-starring-role-in-michigans-political-movements.html

Computer Weekly | Jan. 8, 2021: "Tech sector reacts to Trump social media bans"

https://www.computerweekly.com/news/252494551/Tech-sector-reacts-to-Trump-social-media-bans

The New York Times | Jan. 8, 2021: "Trump Isn't the Only One"

https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/technology/trump-misinformation-superspreaders.html

National Public Radio | Jan. 8, 2021: "Twitter Permanently Suspends Trump, Citing 'Risk Of Further Incitement Of Violence'"

https://www.npr.org/2021/01/08/954760928/twitter-bans-president-trump-citing-risk-of-further-incitement-of-violence

The Missoulian | Jan. 9, 2021: "Riot blame-shifting leaks into Montana social media"

https://missoulian.com/news/state-and-regional/riot-blame-shifting-leaks-into-montana-social-media/article_4bec4ab6-dd2b-5076-8b9e-4a340b04a1e9.html

The Washington Post | Jan. 16, 2021 "Misinformation dropped dramatically the week after Twitter banned Trump and some allies"

https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/16/misinformation-trump-twitter/

CNET | Jan. 16, 2021: "After Twitter banned Trump, misinformation plummeted, says report"

https://www.cnet.com/news/after-twitter-banned-trump-misinformation-plummeted-says-report/

Variety | Jan. 17, 2021: "After Twitter Banned Donald Trump, Election Misinformation Online Plunged Dramatically"

https://variety.com/2021/digital/news/twitter-ban-trump-election-misinformation-research-1234887030/

Mountain View Voice | Jan. 21, 2021: "Can social media giants stop an insurrection before it happens?"

https://mv-voice.com/news/2021/01/28/can-social-media-giants-stop-an-insurrection-before-it-happens

Nature | Feb. 4, 2021: "Tracking QAnon: how Trump turned conspiracy-theory research upside down"

https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00257-y

Appendix F

Methodology for Evaluating Platform Policy

In total, we evaluated 15 different platforms[1] across four categories meant to partition the space of potential problematic content and behavior: the mechanics of the election (Procedural Interference), the voters themselves (Participation Interference), encouragement of fraud (Fraud), and casting doubt on the integrity of the election outcome. (Delegitimization of Election Results). The definitions of these categories are detailed in Chapter 1.

We first determined if the platform stated in its community guidelines whether it would address election-related content on its platform. While the platforms that don't have election-related policies—Parler, Gab, Discord, WhatsApp, Telegram, Reddit, and Twitch— may use existing policies to address content such as the encouragement of fraud, we cannot properly evaluate them in an election-related context. We then rated each platform's policies as either "None," "Non-Comprehensive," or "Comprehensive," depending on how specifically it addresses the content type:

- None: The platform has no explicit policy or stance on the issue.
- Non-Comprehensive: Policy in this category contains indirect language, or uses broad "umbrella" language, such that it is not clear what type of election misinformation and disinformation the policy covers. This is also reserved for policies that give one detailed example such that they cover some, but not all, of a subject.

[1]The platforms we evaluated are: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Nextdoor, TikTok, Snapchat, Parler, Gab, Discord, WhatsApp, Telegram, Reddit, and Twitch. Twitch was added to the list of platforms we evaluated during our blog post update in October.

- Comprehensive: Policy in this category uses direct language and is clear on what type of election misinformation and disinformation the policy covers. It also sufficiently covers the full breadth of the category.

For each of the categories, we defined "Comprehensive" to be:

- Procedural: The policy specifies time, place, or manner (e.g., voting in person and by mail).
- Participation: The policy specifies it will address posts that include intimidation to personal safety or deterrence to participation in the election process, which can be both violent and non-violent.
- Fraud: The policy specifies it will address posts that encourage participating in the election in an illegal way.
- Delegitimization of Election Results: The policy specifies it will address claims that attempt to delegitimize the election.

The tables in this report have slightly different policy ratings under the category of fraud from when we first published our analysis in August 2020. There were many unfounded claims of "election fraud," but we determined that this fell into the larger category of delegitimization of election results. Our fraud category is therefore scoped solely around claims that encourage people to commit fraud—which appeared only a handful of times during our monitoring period. Many platforms, including those without election-related policies, have terms of service policies and community standards that state the promotion of illegal activity is not allowed on its platform. However, only Facebook and Pinterest explicitly state that the encouragement of voter fraud is not allowed on their platforms and therefore received a rating of "Comprehensive."

Over the four months of the EIP's operation, we updated our platform evaluations to account for policy changes made by the platforms. We frequently checked for changes in platforms' community guidelines and followed the platforms' blog posts, which we considered to be policy statements even though some of these updates weren't formally incorporated into the platforms' community guidelines. We did not consider policy changes that were stated to the press, or on social media by executives or employees of the platform. Below is a table of the corresponding policies for each platform. The colors correspond to new policies that were introduced between August 2020 and October 28, 2020.

Facebook

Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle): "Misrepresentation of the dates, locations, and times, and methods for voting or voter registration or census participation." "Misrepresentation of who can vote, qualifications for voting, whether a vote will be counted, and what information and/or materials must be provided in order to vote." "Calls for coordinated interference that would affect an individual's ability to participate in the census or an election." Facebook will remove implicit misrepresentations about voting that may "mislead you about what you need to do to get a ballot." [Sept. 03]	**Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle; policies updated are shown in red):** "Any content containing statements of intent, calls for action, conditional or aspirational statements, or advocating for ~~high- or mid-severity violence~~ due to voting, voter registration, or the administration or outcome of an election." [Sept. 03] "Content stating that census or voting participation may or will result in law enforcement consequences (e.g., arrest, deportation, imprisonment)." "Content claiming that the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is at a voting location." [Sept. 03] "Calls for coordinated interference that would affect an individual's ability to participate in an election."' "Explicit claims that people will be infected by COVID (or another communicable disease) if they participate in the voting process." [Sept. 03] "Statements of intent or advocacy, calls to action, or aspirational or conditional statements to bring weapons to locations, including but not limited to places of worship, educational facilities, ~~or~~ polling places, or locations used to count votes or administer an election* (or encouraging others to do the same)." *"For the following content, we may require more information and/or context in order to enforce: Threats against election officials." [Sept. 03]	**Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):** "Offers to buy or sell votes with cash or gifts." "Statements that advocate, provide instructions or show explicit intent to illegally participate in a voting or census process." Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive): "We will attach an informational label to content that seeks to delegitimize the outcome of the election or discuss the legitimacy of voting methods, for example, by claiming that lawful methods of voting will lead to fraud. This label will provide basic authoritative information about the integrity of the election and voting methods." [Sept. 03] "Importantly, if any candidate or campaign tries to declare victory before the results are in, we'll add a label to their post educating that official results are not yet in and directing people to the official results." [Sept. 03] "Other misrepresentations related to voting in an official election or census participation may be subject to false news standards, as referenced in section 20" (now section 21).	**Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):** "We will attach an informational label to content that seeks to delegitimize the outcome of the election or discuss the legitimacy of voting methods, for example, by claiming that lawful methods of voting will lead to fraud. This label will provide basic authoritative information about the integrity of the election and voting methods." [Sept. 03] "Importantly, if any candidate or campaign tries to declare victory before the results are in, we'll add a label to their post educating that official results are not yet in and directing people to the official results." [Sept. 03] "Other misrepresentations related to voting in an official election or census participation may be subject to false news standards, as referenced in section 20" (now section 21).

Twitter

Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle): "Misleading information about procedures to participate in a civic process (for example, that you can vote by Tweet, text message, email, or phone call in jurisdictions where these are not a possibility)." "Misleading information about requirements for participation, including identification or citizenship requirements" "Misleading statements or information about the official, announced date or time of a civic process." "Misleading claims that polling places are closed, that polling has ended or other misleading information relating to votes not being counted." "Misleading claims about long lines, equipment problems, or other disruptions at voting locations during election periods." "False or misleading information that causes confusion about the laws and regulations of a civic process, or officials and institutions executing those civic processes." [Sept. 10]	**Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):** "Misleading claims about police, or law enforcement activity related to voting in an election, polling places, or collecting census information." "Misleading claims about long lines, equipment problems, or other disruptions at voting locations during election periods." "Misleading claims about process, procedures, or techniques which could dissuade people from participating." "Threats regarding voting locations or other key places or events (note that our violent threats policy may also be relevant for threats not covered by this policy)." Twitter will remove "Tweets that encourage violence or call for people to interfere with election results or smooth operation of polling places." [Oct. 9] "Tweets meant to incite interference with the election process or with the implementation of election results, such as through violent action, will be subject to removal. This covers all Congressional races and the Presidential Election." [Oct. 9]	**Non-Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):** "Illegal or certain regulated goods or services: You may not use our service for any unlawful purpose or in furtherance of illegal activities. This includes selling, buying, or facilitating transactions in illegal goods or services, as well as certain types of regulated goods or services."	**Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):** "Misleading claims that polling places are closed, that polling has ended or other misleading information relating to votes not being counted." "We also consider whether the context in which media are shared could result in confusion or misunderstanding or suggests a deliberate intent to deceive people about the nature or origin of the content, for example by falsely claiming that it depicts reality." "Disputed claims that could undermine faith in the process itself, e.g. unverified information about election rigging, ballot tampering, vote tallying, or certification of election results." [Sept. 10] "Misleading claims about the results or outcome of a civic process which calls for or could lead to interference with the implementation of the results of the process, e.g. claiming victory before election results have been certified, inciting unlawful conduct to prevent a peaceful transfer of power or orderly succession." [Oct. 9] "People on Twitter, including candidates for office, may not claim an election win before it is authoritatively called. To determine the results of an election in the US, we require either an announcement from state election officials, or a public projection from at least two authoritative, national news outlets that make independent election calls. Tweets which include premature claims will be labeled and direct people to our official US election page." [Oct. 9]

YouTube

Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle): "Content aiming to mislead voters about the time, place, means or eligibility requirements for voting, or false claims that could materially discourage voting. "Incitement to interfere with democratic processes: content encouraging others to interfere with democratic processes, such as obstructing or interrupting voting procedures." Examples of content not to post: • "Deliberately telling viewers an incorrect election date." • "Telling viewers they can vote through fake methods like texting their vote to a particular number." • "Giving made up voter eligibility requirements like saying that a particular election is only open to voters over 50 years old." • "we remove content falsely claiming that mail-in ballots have been manipulated to change the results of an election"	**Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):** "Content aiming to mislead voters about the time, place, means or eligibility requirements for voting, or false claims that could materially discourage voting." "Incitement to interfere with democratic processes: content encouraging others to interfere with democratic processes, such as obstructing or interrupting voting procedures." Examples of content not to post: • Telling viewers to create long voting lines with the purpose of making it harder for others to vote • "Claiming that a voter's political party affiliation is visible on a vote-by-mail envelope."	**Non-Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):** "Don't post content on YouTube if it fits any of the descriptions noted below. Instructional theft or cheating: Showing viewers how to steal tangible goods or promoting dishonest behavior"	**Non-Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):** Manipulated Media: "Content that has been technically manipulated or doctored in a way that misleads users (beyond clips taken out of context) and may pose a serious risk of egregious harm." Example: "Misattributing a 10 year old video that depicts stuffing of a ballot box to a recent election." Examples of content not to post: • False claims that non-citizen voting has determined the outcome of past elections. • Telling viewers to hack government websites to delay the release of elections results • Manipulated Media: "Content that has been technically manipulated or doctored in a way that misleads users (beyond clips taken out of context) and may pose a serious risk of egregious harm."

Pinterest

Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
Comprehensive (Rating changed from None): "False or misleading information about the dates, times, locations and procedure for voting or census participation." "Content that misleads voters about how to correctly fill-out and submit a ballot, including a mail-in ballot, or census form." [Sept. 3]	**Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):** "False or misleading content that impedes an election's integrity or an individual's or group's civic participation, including registering to vote, voting, and being counted in a census." "False or misleading information about public safety that is intended to deter people from exercising their right to vote or participate in a census." "False or misleading information about who can vote or participate in the census and what information must be provided to participate." "False or misleading statements about who is collecting information and/or how it will be used." "Threats against voting locations, census or voting personnel, voters or census participants, including intimidation of vulnerable or protected group voters or participants." [Sept. 3]	**Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):** "Content that encourages or instructs voters or participants to misrepresent themselves or illegally participate" [Sept. 3]	**Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):** "Content apparently intended to delegitimize election results on the basis of false or misleading claims." [Sept. 3]

Nextdoor

Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
Non-Comprehensive (Rating changed from Comprehensive): "~~bans any inaccurate content about the time, place, means, or eligibility requirements to vote in any local or national elections in the U.S.~~" "False or misleading information that could prevent or discourage people from voting, cause their votes not to be counted, or interfere with the election process."	**Non-Comprehensive (Rating changed from None):** "False or misleading information that could prevent or discourage people from voting, cause their votes not to be counted, or interfere with the election process."	**Non-Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):** "When offering or seeking goods or services on Nextdoor, make sure that you're complying with local laws and not engaging in illegal transactions."	**Non-Comprehensive (Rating changed from None):** "False or misleading information that could prevent or discourage people from voting, cause their votes not to be counted, or interfere with the election process." "False or misleading claims about the results of an election that could lead to interference with the election process."

TikTok

Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
Non-Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle): "Content that misleads community members about elections or other civic processes." "Claims relating to polling stations on election day that have not yet been verified." "Content that misrepresents the date of an election." [Oct. 7]	**Non-Comprehensive (Rating changed from None):** "Attempts to intimidate voters or suppress voting." TikTok will redirect search results with terms associated with "incitement to violence." TikTok will block future livestreaming from an account whose livestream "seeks to incite violence or promote hateful ideologies, conspiracies, or disinformation." TikTok will add a banner pointing viewers to our election guide content with…"attempts to dissuade people from voting by exploiting COVID-19 as a voter suppression tactic." [Oct. 7]	**Non-Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):** "Content may be removed if it relates to activities or goods that are regulated or illegal in the majority of the region or world, even if the activities or goods in question are legal in the jurisdiction of posting."	**Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):** "False claims that seek to erode trust in public institutions, such as claims of voter fraud resulting from voting by mail or claims that your vote won't count." [Oct. 7] "Content that misleads community members about elections or other civic processes." "Reviewed content that shares unverified claims, such as a premature declaration of victory before results are confirmed." [Oct. 7]

Snapchat

Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
Non-Comprehensive (Rating changed from No election-related policies): "We prohibit spreading false information that causes harm or is malicious, such as denying the existence of tragic events, unsubstantiated medical claims, or undermining the integrity of civic processes."	**None**	**Non-Comprehensive (Rating changed from No election-related policies):** We prohibit the promotion and use of certain regulated goods, as well as the depiction or promotion of criminal activities.	**Non-Comprehensive (Rating changed from No election-related policies):** "We prohibit spreading false information that causes harm or is malicious, such as denying the existence of tragic events, unsubstantiated medical claims, or undermining the integrity of civic processes."

F.1 Assessing our methodology

The purpose of this framework is to provide a clear visualization of civic integrity policies across multiple social media platforms, and to create a single standard upon which all platforms could be evaluated. The community guidelines and terms of service that moderate user content vary widely among platforms, and do not use standardized vocabulary. By directly comparing the language of multiple platforms, the framework provides insight into the policies of each platform. This allowed our analysis to act as an advocate for specific policy recommendations at a platform level by highlighting existing shortfalls. Finally, the framework is intended to be a resource for civil society, academia, and citizens to understand what election-related speech popular platforms moderate.

At the same time, there are limitations to this methodology that are equally important to reflect on. First, the framework doesn't consider that each platform functions differently in the information environment. For example, we didn't explore whether messaging platforms such as WhatsApp should have different policies from a video platform like YouTube when it comes to election-related content.

Second, this framework's rating system was centered on policy language and not how these policies were applied in practice, which may give a misleading impression that one platform is better than another in mitigating misinformation and disinformation. Although many platform policies are accessible to the general public, platforms also have internal guidance specifying more nuances of their externally facing rules, including deciding how to apply these policies. The opacity of platform decision-making serves as another limitation to the accuracy of our framework; for example, some gaps we identified in platform policies could be accounted for by internal mechanisms, or some proficiencies nullified by a company's reluctance to enforce at scale; there may be unknown pitfalls about these policies that we don't see externally.

Lastly, as our categories were created before the election, we didn't know how effective they would be in accurately capturing and describing the content that we came across in our monitoring. As we applied these categories in practice, some of them narrowed while others expanded. For example, the category of Fraud presented a challenge to our original definition because the term "fraud" was used broadly to cast doubt on the election. The scope for our fraud category was limited to a strict definition of content that encouraged people to commit fraud. Thus, the unfounded accusations of fraud fell into the Delegitimization category, which, looking back at our data, encompassed the majority of the incidents we monitored. Therefore, in contrast to the specificity we tried to capture in the other categories, Delegitimization as a category became very expansive.

THE LONG FUSE:

MISINFORMATION AND THE 2020 ELECTION

The Election Integrity Partnership was officially formed on July 26, 2020 — 100 days before the 2020 presidential election — as a coalition of research entities who would focus on supporting real-time information exchange between the research community, election officials, government agencies, civil society organizations, and social media platforms. The Partnership was formed between four of the nation's leading institutions focused on understanding misinformation in the social media landscape: the Stanford Internet Observatory, Graphika, the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, and the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public. This is the final report of their findings.

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