

Written Testimony of
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Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on House Administration Election Security
Subcommittee
“A Growing Threat: How Disinformation Damages American Democracy”

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Thank you to the Committee on House Administration for giving me the opportunity to submit testimony on the danger of disinformation in American elections, and the damage being done by conspiracy theories and those who promote them.

I am a journalist who has concentrated on researching and writing about conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and disinformation for the last decade. I am the author of two books, with a third in progress: “The World’s Worst Conspiracies,” “The Storm is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything,” and the forthcoming “Jewish Space Lasers,” on the 200-year history of conspiracy theories about the Rothschild banking family. As part of my work, I have given interviews or been featured by dozens of news outlets, including the Washington Post, CNN, the New York Times, NBC News, Vice, the Guardian, MSNBC, the New Yorker, Rolling Stone, the Daily Beast, the Financial Times, Politico, Bloomberg, Forbes, and many others. I have also given written testimony to the January 6th Select Committee on the role QAnon and its followers played in the leadup to that day.

As an expert in conspiracy theories and the effect of disinformation, I am honored to speak on the proliferation of these false claims, the damage they are doing to America’s faith in free elections, and the emergence of a new class of political candidates who have openly spoken of refusing to certify future elections.

Introduction

Human brains are hardwired to seek patterns in random chance, and order in chaos. We want explanations for why things are the way they are, why bad things happen to us, who’s responsible, and what we can do about them. By nature, this means we are susceptible to being given incorrect or intentionally misleading answers – particularly if the questions we’re asking don’t have a satisfying answer. And sometimes, if we don’t like the answer, we decide it’s not true – giving rise to conspiracy theories. Over the past few years, these incorrect or misleading answers have been branded with the term “disinformation.”

Conspiracy theories and disinformation, therefore, are not an invention of the internet age, didn’t emerge from a Russian trolling lab, and aren’t restricted to Americans of any political persuasion. Disinformation has been used by governments, rulers, and corporations for centuries to mislead people, cover up misdeeds, or in times of war to throw enemies off the track. And everyone is vulnerable to the right piece of false information or wishful thinking, if it hits them at the right time in the right way.

American elections have been subject to disinformation campaigns since pen was put to paper on a presidential ballot. They exploit conspiracy theories, biases, and rumors to send voters toward one camp and away from the other. Rumors swirled that Thomas Jefferson was elected thanks to the machinations of the Bavarian Illuminati, while the 1800’s routinely saw accusations of vote stealing, hysteria over potential coups, panics against Freemasons and Catholics and Jews, and countless other perceived plots – all “backed up” by pamphlets, books, and magazine articles spreading disinformation and fantasy.¹

But none of these historical moments saw the durability, mainstream acceptance, and lucrative industry all linked to what’s become known as “the big lie” – the false claim that the 2020 election was

¹ Mark R. Cheatham, “Conspiracy Theories Abounded in 19th-Century American Politics,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/conspiracy-theories-abounded-19th-century-american-politics-180971940/>

fraudulently decided for Joe Biden based on outright manipulation of mail-in and electronic votes. The groundwork for “the big lie” was laid well before the election, by the posts of the anonymous “intelligence operative” Q, pro-Trump social media trolls, and the president’s own proclamations that the Democrats would commit massive fraud to stop him from winning a second term.

Before Election Day, it took the form of a series of attempts to dissuade voters either from selecting Joe Biden, or from voting at all. Those attempts failed, with turnout for 2020 setting records on both sides. But that didn’t stop the disinformation machine, it only refocused it. Once the election was over, the disinformation swirling around it transformed into a swirl of lies that Trump had actually won, with mountains of “evidence” to prove it – all provided by a multi-million dollar industry of promoters, lawyers, gurus, pundits, politicians, and social media trolls.

Moreover, electoral opponents, voting machine companies, and opposition media are seen as enemy combatants. Some believers have committed outright violence against poll workers and election officials – in particular, members of extremist groups like the Proud Boys and conspiracy cults like QAnon. Election administrators now openly speak of being deluged with death threats, harassment, physical attacks, and intimidation. Executives at voting machine companies have gone into hiding due to threats, while state legislatures consider a wide array of new laws that will do nothing but make it harder to vote, and easier for citizens to jam the wheels of democracy with bogus lawsuits and audits.

More Americans simply do not trust that future elections will be fair, believe that their vote either won’t be counted or will be “flipped” to favor the other candidate, and will not think that election winners are correctly decided. Some are running for office explicitly on the platform of “fixing” future elections by putting themselves in charge of the political machinery that certifies local, state, and federal elections – and vowing not to certify future elections if they decide fraud played a role in their outcome. In particular, well over 100 candidates for Congress and local offices have endorsed the QAnon conspiracy theory, one of the major drivers of election conspiracy theories and violence on January 6th.

Disinformation disenfranchises voters, imperils election officials, and creates chaos among the electorate. Many of the most fervent believers in election conspiracy theories don’t see these contests as offering different visions of the economy or foreign policy, but as pitched battles between good and evil, with nothing less than the fate of the world and its children at stake. At its worst, disinformation was a principal factor in the attack on the Capitol on January 6th. Many rioters went to DC because disinformation told them that Trump had won, Biden had lost, and Mike Pence had the power to deliver Trump’s final victory. None of this was true.

Based on both polling and empirical evidence, the American electoral infrastructure is at a crisis point because of the endless lies, conspiracy theories, and bizarre claims voters are being fed. With “big lie” believers now routinely running for office, the potential harm to America’s democratic system is enormous. It’s not a flight of fancy to imagine the 2024 election sent to the brink of chaos by rogue secretaries of state or voting commissions who have decided that the outcome chosen by the people isn’t the outcome they have personally chosen, and refusing to certify the actual winner.

The Damage Done to Our Faith in Elections by Disinformation

The false claim that Joe Biden won the 2020 election thanks to fraud takes the form of an uncountable number of conspiracy theories that seem to emerge on a daily basis, full of fake and unconfirmable

details, lurid plots, and distinctly lacking in evidence. They began well before the election, with a series of “drops” by the Q figure which claimed, entirely without evidence, that the deep state would unleash millions of fraudulent mail-in ballots, would engage in mass electronic flipping of Trump votes to Biden, had COVID-19 created to sabotage the Trump campaign, would unleash paid antifa arsonists and false flag attacks on voting centers, and countless other bizarre conspiracy theories. Trump’s inner circle amplified at least some of these, while the president himself retweeted QAnon believers over 300 times before his account was suspended.²

The conspiracy theories only increased after the election. A survey of ways that “big lie” believers think Biden “won” the election includes, but isn’t limited to: fraudulent mail-in votes sent in or counted well after election day, suitcases and cargo trucks full of illegal ballots, “mules” dropping large numbers of illegal or fake ballots in drop boxes, the development of COVID-19 to hamper the Trump campaign’s massive rallies and encourage mail-in voting, Trump voters in Arizona given Sharpie pens that automatically invalidated their votes, false flag attacks by “antifa” on polling places, destruction of Trump votes by the US Postal Service, mass electronic vote switching by Dominion Voting Systems machines, foreign satellites or intelligence services changing Trump votes, rumors of cities with more votes cast than eligible voters, secret CIA plots to get Trump out of office, or some combination of these conspiracy theories working together.

Despite being debunked, fact-checked, disproved, and often completely illogical, these theories have proven both extremely durable and lucrative to their biggest promoters. They were spread in massive numbers almost immediately after Election Day, pushed by “super-spreader” accounts on social media that included major conservative pundits, Republican leaders, and the president and members of his family. All told, nearly 45 million tweets pushing hundreds of different conspiracy theories and hoaxes were sent just in the last four months of 2020 – with Twitter making little effort to crack down on the spread of election disinformation until after the January 6th attack.³

Among some stolen election adherents, the idea that Trump will be “reinstated” to office thanks to Electoral College votes being “decertified” or forensic audits revealing large-scale fraud is equally resistant to disconfirmation. Every lawsuit filed by Trump’s legal team was thrown out, the slew of post-inauguration audits and recounts revealed nothing, there has never been compelling evidence of fraud, and “reinstatement” doesn’t exist in US law.

But stolen election believers are not walking away from the mythology, nor can its impact be measured solely in numbers of social media impressions. It’s quite likely that some will never trust American elections again. Many will assume that any electoral contest where their preferred candidate doesn’t win was stolen and fraudulent. And they’ll act accordingly, making baseless accusations and demanding audits and recounts – at minimum.

² Alex Kaplan, “Trump has repeatedly amplified QAnon Twitter accounts. The FBI has linked the conspiracy theory to domestic terror,” Media Matters, 1/11/21, <https://www.mediamatters.org/twitter/fbi-calls-qanon-domestic-terror-threat-trump-has-amplified-qanon-supporters-twitter-more-20>

³ Justin Hendrix, Researchers Release Comprehensive Twitter Dataset of False Claims About The 2020 Election,” Just Security, June 15, 2022, <https://www.justsecurity.org/81913/researchers-release-comprehensive-twitter-dataset-of-false-claims-about-the-2020-election/>

While polling conspiracy theorist beliefs is notoriously difficult, it's clear that at least a sizable number of Americans – and a majority of Republicans – believe Biden's win was fraudulent, despite all evidence to the contrary. One poll, conducted by Axios in January, found that 40% of Americans have doubts about the legitimacy of Biden's win⁴, while multiple polls conducted by the Washington Post over 2021 and early 2022 found that as many as 80% of Republicans believe that Biden won due to fraud, and might not be the legitimate president.⁵

Moreover, these polling numbers have remained stable over the last year. This indicates that the people prone to thinking that President Biden stole the election were already primed to do so, and that their opinions on the legitimacy of the election were cemented by both pre and post-election comments by Trump and his inner circle.⁶ This tracks with my own observations about conspiracy theories and cultic groups like QAnon – the people most apt to be pulled in by them are already believers in other conspiracy theories, and simply see new theories as new rungs on a ladder of falsehood.

Our faith in the electoral process was already low – a poll in April and May 2019 by Gallup revealed that 59% of Americans didn't have confidence in the honesty of elections.⁷ But post 2020, particularly among Republicans, that faith in the legitimacy of elections is at almost rock bottom: two-thirds of Republicans do not trust that American elections are fair, and will not trust the results of the 2024 election if the Republican candidate doesn't win; according to an NPR poll conducted in late 2021.⁸

It should be noted that the number of Republican poll respondents who believe that state or local elections will be fairly conducted is considerably higher. This might be one reason why the 2022 GOP primaries have, thus far, been relatively (but not entirely) free of conspiracy theories by primary losers, and why 2020 deniers who have won subsequent elections have made no such fraud claims about their own victories.⁹ Even so, many Republican candidates, from those for US Senate to local school boards and city councils, freely talk about how the 2020 election was stolen and Biden isn't a legitimate president. And some are running for future office based not on "fixing 2020" but on preventing supposed fraud in 2024 – even if there was nothing about 2020 to "fix."

Republican Doug Mastriano won the GOP gubernatorial primary in Pennsylvania partially on the strength of his claims that he would refuse to certify any Democrat who won his state's electoral votes

⁴ Maya Yang, "More than 40% in US do not believe Biden legitimately won election – poll," The Guardian, January 5, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/05/america-biden-election-2020-poll-victory>

⁵ Lane Cuthbert, "Do Republicans really believe Trump won the 2020 election? Our research suggests that they do," *Washington Post*, January 7, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/01/07/republicans-big-lie-trump/>

⁶ Steve Benen, "A year later, GOP support for the Big Lie is 'remarkably stable'," January 4, 2022, <https://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/maddowblog/year-later-gop-support-big-lie-remarkably-stable-n1286939>

⁷ Alexa Lardieri, "Majority of Americans Don't Trust Elections, Poll Finds," US News, February 13, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/elections/articles/2020-02-13/majority-of-americans-dont-trust-elections-poll>

⁸ Domenico Montinaro, "Most Americans trust elections are fair, but sharp divides exist, a new poll finds," *All Things*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/01/1050291610/most-americans-trust-elections-are-fair-but-sharp-divides-exist-a-new-poll-finds>

⁹ Reid J. Epstein and Nick Corasaniti, "They Insisted the 2020 Election Was Tainted. Their 2022 Primary Wins? Not So Much," *New York Times*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/us/politics/republicans-voter-fraud-claims-2022.html>

in 2024.¹⁰ Other gubernatorial and state level Republican candidates have made the same proclamation. Nevada Secretary of State primary winner Jim Marchant, has gone a step further and said he would not have certified Joe Biden's 2020 win in that state.¹¹ One group of candidates, called the America First Secretary of State Coalition, is running for office specifically to gain control of elections in those states, and is being backed by a prominent influencer in the QAnon movement who goes by the name "Juan O. Savin." Many of these candidates have openly spoken of throwing out election results if they don't believe they were conducted fairly, and several have been endorsed by Donald Trump.¹²

These candidates could oversee a mass refusal to certify a Democratic win, imperiling the very idea of free and fair elections. Indeed, one such crisis has already taken place, albeit on a smaller scale: Otero County, New Mexico's all Republican three-member voting commission (which includes one convicted January 6th rioter) refused to certify the county's 2022 primary results due to baseless conspiracy theories about Dominion Voting Systems machines changing votes, to the point where the New Mexico Secretary of State asked the state's supreme court to order the commission to do so, which it finally did, a week later.¹³

Belief in the 2020 election being stolen hasn't just proven to be durable, it's proven to be remarkably lucrative. Numerous conservative media pundits and conspiracy influencers have made an enormous amount of money off the campaign to "fix 2020." Chief among them was the former president himself, who, according to findings by the January 6th Select Committee, raised as much as \$250 million for a non-existent "Official Election Defense Fund" purported to help Trump pay for election-related litigation, which funneled the vast majority of its gains straight to the president.¹⁴

Groups and companies that have provided dubious services in the service of these audits and conspiracy theories have raised millions of dollars via crowdfunding and other avenues. Disinformation influencers routinely monetize their livestreams and podcasts, sell Substack subscriptions, and offer t-shirts and other merchandise for fellow travelers to buy. And numerous "stolen election" films and books have found audiences ready to back up their conspiratorial beliefs with their money. Conservative commentator Dinesh D'Souza's discredited film "2,000 Mules" grossed over \$10 million in its first two weeks of release¹⁵, and was cited by former President Trump nearly a dozen times in his 12-page letter rebutting the findings of the January 6th Committee. More such films are in the offing, such as Mike

¹⁰ Ed Kilgore, "How Mastriano's Primary Victory Threatens the 2024 Election," *New York Magazine*, May 22, 2022, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/05/how-mastrianos-primary-victory-threatens-the-2024-election.html>

¹¹ Fredreka Schouten, "Nevada race for secretary of state looms large over the 2024 election," CNN, June 15, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/14/politics/nevada-secretary-of-state-primary-ctzn/index.html>

¹² Bill McCarthy and Amy Sherman, "A coalition of 'stop the steal' Republicans aims to take control of US elections. QAnon is helping," PolitiFact, June 7, 2022, <https://www.politifact.com/article/2022/jun/07/coalition-stop-steal-republicans-aims-take-control/>

¹³ Associated Press, "GOP commission refuses to certify New Mexico primary vote," June 15, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/06/15/gop-commission-refuses-to-certify-new-mexico-primary-vote-00039771>

¹⁴ Barbara Sprunt, "The Jan. 6 panel says the Trump campaign misled donors using election lies," National Public Radio, June 13, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/13/1104648634/january-6-panel-trump-campaign-fundraise-misled-donors-election-lies>

¹⁵ Business Wire press release, May 12, 2022, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20220511006114/en/2000-Mules-Becomes-the-Most-Successful-Political-Documentary-in-a-Decade-Seen-by-1-Million>

Lindell’s “Selection Code,” to go alongside established fraud narratives like Lindell’s “Absolute Proof” and Patrick Byrne’s “The Deep Rig.”

Finally, these theories are merging with other conspiracy theories in the fields of health, politics, and culture to create a perfect storm of disinformation. Stolen election disinformation is a constant fixture on conspiracy theorist media outlets which then effortlessly pivot to medical misinformation and quack treatments. In particular, the ReAwaken America conference series, launched by new media entrepreneur Clay Clark and former National Security Advisor Mike Flynn, blends COVID-19 conspiracy theories, fake medical treatments, “cancel culture” paranoia, and calls for the violent overthrow of the Biden administration – all powered by the false claim that Biden stole the election. These conferences and others like it are remarkably lucrative for their creators, and take place on an almost weekly basis, with tens of thousands of attendees.¹⁶

At these events, one call goes out to the audience more than any other: somebody has to do something to safeguard our elections – by any means necessary.

Threats to Election Officials

The media of the stolen election industry is replete with violent ideation, fantasies about coups or uprisings, mass arrests of Democratic officials, and calls for executions. While many, if not most of the people who believe in the stolen election conspiracy theory are non-violent and don’t take these ideas past wishful thinking, there has been a growing list of actual threats and attacks against electoral officials, poll workers, supposed “ballot mules” who did nothing other than drop an envelope in a box, and employees of companies administering elections. The end result of this violent ideation isn’t a worst-case scenario, it’s reality. And it has a body count.

The intensity of the 2016 election led to isolated threats against election officials, and death threats against at least one Republican Electoral College voter.¹⁷ But when President Trump declared on Election Night that he had won the election, despite the vote tallies clearly going against him, he opened a door that many of his followers were only too happy to walk through. Many believed that if Trump truly was robbed of the election, then they had a patriotic duty to either steal it back or inflict the maximum amount of punishment possible on the treasonous cabal who did it – death by hanging.

In the weeks after the election, officials and staffers responsible for administering elections were deluged with threats and abusive trolling over email, social media, the telephone, and even written letters. Election administrators in both battleground states and solidly partisan areas spoke of getting dozens of images of nooses or people being hanged – the punishment they believed was appropriate for traitors. One poll-worker in Georgia was sent a noose through the mail, prompting Georgia election official Gabriel Sterling – a lifelong Republican – to speak out against the abuse. This led to a slew of threats against Sterling himself.¹⁸

¹⁶ Laura Jedeed, “The ReAwaken America Tour Is the Start of QAnon 2.0,” *New York Magazine*, May 18, 2022, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/05/the-reawaken-america-tour-is-the-start-of-qanon-2-0.html>

¹⁷ Alexandra King, “Electoral College voter: I’m getting death threats,” CNN, November 30, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/30/politics/banerian-death-threats-cnntv/index.html>

¹⁸ Stephen Fowler, ‘Someone’s Going To Get Killed’: Ga. Official Blasts GOP Silence On Election Threats,” *NPR Morning Edition*, December 1, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/biden-transition-updates/2020/12/01/940961602/someones-going-to-get-killed-ga-official-blasts-gop-silence-on-election-threats>

At least some election officials were physically assaulted, others subjected to threats of sexual assault or anti-Semitic abuse. Some poll workers were “doxed” – had their personal information released online. Secretaries of State, regardless of political party, were particularly singled out for threats, due to their pivotal role in many states of certifying electoral college results. Much of the abuse came from people at the very top of the Republican machine, such as Michael Flynn’s endorsement of a “Minimar-style coup” [sic] to overthrow the government, or a Trump lawyer demanding that cybersecurity official Chris Krebs be shot by a firing squad. ¹⁹

The disinformation-fueled cascade of threats and abuse against poll workers has had a significant impact on the infrastructure of future elections. The Brennan Center polled 600 election workers in March 2022, and found that more than half of the respondents said they’re concerned about the safety of their colleagues, hundreds have quit or were thinking of quitting due to the endless threats, and that for more than half of the respondents who faced threats, they took the form of physical harassment and abuse. And presaging what’s likely to be the most conspiracy theory-fueled election in American history, one in five surveyed poll workers believed they’d face pressure to rig future results in favor of certain candidates or parties. ²⁰

The threats related to the Big Lie extend to employees of election administrators. Because it’s been the center of a storm of unevidenced conspiracy theories, Dominion Voting System and its employees have been particularly subject to threats and conspiracy theories that its employees were engaged in mass flipping of Trump votes to Biden – allegations which haven’t stood up to outside scrutiny.

In particular, one former senior executive at Dominion, Dr. Eric Coomer, was subject to so many threats and attacks that he went into hiding – all fueled by an initial report by a conservative podcaster who claimed he heard an “antifa conference call” where a man who identified himself as “Eric from Dominion” claimed he would ensure Trump would lose the election. Powered by breathless reporting by the conservative media, and retweeted by President Trump himself, the theory proved so durable that it continues to drive threats and harassment against Coomer and Dominion. There is no evidence that Coomer was ever on any such call, and he has repeatedly denied having any power to singlehandedly ensure Trump’s defeat. ²¹

Attacks on election officials and workers go hand-in-hand with conspiracy theory movements, particularly QAnon. The influence of Q-driven disinformation was so great that the nonprofit Advance Democracy calculated that 1 in 7 tweets about “#Dominion” since November 5, 2020, originated from QAnon accounts. Tweets featuring the #Dominion hashtag rose from about 75 to over 35,700 each day shortly after the election. ²² Only banning many of these accounts stemmed the flow of disinformation.

¹⁹ Michael Wines, “Here Are the Threats Terrorizing Election Workers,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/us/election-officials-threats-trump.html>

²⁰ Michael Waldman, “Attacks Against Election Officials Are Taking a Toll,” Brennan Center, March 15, 2022, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/attacks-against-election-officials-are-taking-toll>

²¹ Bente Berkland and Miles Parks, “The Toll Of Conspiracy Theories: A Voting Security Expert Lives In Hiding,” *NPR Morning Edition*, December 23, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/23/948828692/the-toll-of-conspiracy-theories-a-voting-security-expert-lives-in-hiding>

²² Ben Collins, “QAnon’s Dominion voter fraud conspiracy theory reaches the president,” *NBC News*, Nov. 13, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/q-fades-qanon-s-dominion-voter-fraud-conspiracy-theory-reaches-n1247780>

Other attacks on the election infrastructure in the days and weeks after the election were linked to QAnon as well. As votes were still being counted in Philadelphia, two armed men in a van with a Q sticker on its back window were arrested in a possible plot to storm the Philadelphia Convention Center and stop the counting of votes.²³ And a few days after the election, a noose was left at the front door of a 20-year-old Dominion contractor in Georgia – the same one defended by Republican official Gabriel Sterling – after prominent QAnon influencers tweeted video of him “harvesting ballots.” In reality, the video showed only the worker inserting a thumb drive into a laptop and saving a file on it.²⁴

The cumulative effect of the stolen election movement’s embrace of violence and harassment presents a profound threat to future elections. Many Americans who never would have dreamed of taking up arms against the government or local officials now readily talk of it. In one poll taken a year after the January 6th attacks, one-third of respondents said that violence against the government can be justified when they believe elected officials no longer represent their interests. Notably, the reasons for this violence differ among races and political persuasions. But at least some justified it through their embrace of conspiracy theories that Trump was the real winner of the election.²⁵

Election Disinformation Targeted at Communities of Color

From a demographic and historical standpoint, communities of color overwhelmingly (though not entirely) support Democratic candidates. As such, marginalized groups who might not fully understand English or have the ability or time to run down falsehoods on the internet have been particular targets of election-related disinformation. Demographically, these are not communities prone to conspiracy theories like QAnon, but they do harbor conspiratorial beliefs – fueled in at least some part by well-earned distrust of the government, authorities, and inherent power structures. Disinformation peddlers ruthlessly exploit these tendencies.

Notably, the 2020 election wasn’t the first time that the “firehose of falsehood” was turned on communities of color. Both the 2016 and 2018 elections saw organized Russian disinformation attacks directed against Black, Latino, Native American, LGBTQ, and Muslim voters on social media in an effort to create chaos and undermine democratic institutions. Internet Research Agency-created memes, Facebook groups, and Instagram posts racked up millions of impressions by encouraging these traditionally Democratic-voting groups to “walk away” from the Democratic Party, to dive into conspiracy theory and extremist rabbit holes, and to put their support behind Donald Trump – the candidate who would actually address their specific concerns.²⁶

²³ Tom Winter, Ben Collins, Daniel Arkin and Brandy Zadrozny, “2 men arrested near Philadelphia vote center had QAnon paraphernalia, AR-15 in car,” NBC News, November 6, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/2-men-detained-after-police-learn-possible-threat-philadelphia-vote-n1246774>

²⁴ Rachel E. Greenspan, “A QAnon harassment campaign led to a noose being left at the home of a young Dominion contractor, according to a Georgia official,” Insider, Dec. 3, 2020, <https://www.insider.com/dominion-voting-qanon-harassment-campaign-noose-georgia-fraud-2020-12>

²⁵ Meryl Kornfield and Mariana Alfaro, “1 in 3 Americans say violence against government can be justified, citing fears of political schism, pandemic,” *The Washington Post*, January 1, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/01/01/1-3-americans-say-violence-against-government-can-be-justified-citing-fears-political-schism-pandemic>

²⁶ Suzanne Spaulding, Devi Nair, Arthur Nelson, “Why Putin Targets Minorities,” Center for International & Strategic Studies, December 21, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-putin-targets-minorities>

The goal of these attacks was to stoke confusion, cast doubt on whether the electoral process had the best interests of communities of color in mind, and potentially drive voters away from the Democratic Party. While the effectiveness of these attacks is hard to quantify, they contributed to the relentless churn of rumor and conspiracy theory that marked the final days of the 2016 election. They also resulted in several in-person rallies that were also attended by armed counter-protestors, though no violent incidents resulted.²⁷

While disinformation is thought of by many as a strictly online phenomenon, it's important to keep in mind that for centuries, conspiracy theories and falsehoods were spread through much more "traditional" means – books, pamphlets, newspaper and magazine articles, false rumors, cartoons, and political ads. The purveyors of 2020 election disinformation, as well as the current wave of disinformation for the upcoming midterm election, employ a wide range of digital and print methods to spread their false claims – ensuring that no matter where a potential voter gets their information, they'll get hit with some kind of hoax or false claim.

The Trump campaign specifically targeted Black and Latino voters with both Facebook ads and robocalls meant to discourage them from voting by mail, along with racially-motivated attacks on Vice Presidential candidate Kamala Harris, and attempts by fake Twitter accounts to represent higher Black support for Trump than he actually had.²⁸ TV ads, billboards, and mailers were deployed in battleground states to mislead, intimidate, and disenfranchise voters of color. And many of these theories were wrapped up with disinformation about COVID-19 or immigration roundups – part of the concerted effort by conspiracy theory and disinformation influencers to wrap multiple theories together in order to suppress turnout and sow confusion among marginalized groups.²⁹

The widespread use of mail-in voting due to the pandemic was a particular focus of the Trump campaign's disinformation efforts. Trump-supporting provocateurs and trolls unleashed tens of thousands of robocalls falsely claiming that voting by mail would give police departments and creditors ways to track people down – a claim that later led to felony charges against the creators of the scheme. Other disinformation included fake texts hinting that Democrats and Republicans voted on different days, fake voting guides, spam that voters could vote via text message, and fake websites with fraudulent information about polling places.³⁰ Trump himself made outlandish claims about mail-in voting being untrustworthy or a scam, and hinted that Republican ballots were being wholesale destroyed or left in ditches. The president even encouraged his supporters in North Carolina to commit

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Shannon Bond, "Black And Latino Voters Flooded With Disinformation In Election's Final Days," *National Public Radio Morning Edition*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/30/929248146/black-and-latino-voters-flooded-with-disinformation-in-elections-final-days>

²⁹ Steven Lee Meyers, Deceptive Mailings, False Billboards: Voting Disinformation Is Not Just Online," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/14/business/voting-disinformation-billboards.html>

³⁰ Pam Fessler, "Robocalls, Rumors And Emails: Last-Minute Election Disinformation Floods Voters," *National Public Radio Morning Edition*, October 24, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/24/927300432/robocalls-rumors-and-emails-last-minute-election-disinformation-floods-voters>

fraud and vote twice – one by mail and once in person – to test whether their mail in ballot had been counted.³¹

2020 disinformation was especially targeted at Spanish speaking communities in Texas, Florida, and Arizona – much of it explicitly racist in nature. Republican-leaning voters in Florida’s Cuban expatriate community were hammered with messages that Joe Biden was Marxist socialist, Spanish language newspapers were stuffed with inserts claiming that Biden would unleash a “dictatorship led by Jews and Blacks,” and Spanish billboards sprung up in Texas claiming that voting by mail was actually illegal. Latino voters were also falsely told that immigration authorities would be patrolling voting centers, and given false deadlines to turn in mail-in ballots. These disinformation attacks came over the radio, via social media, in newspapers, and were spread by closely-knit family groups, often without malice, because people genuinely believed them.³²

As with disinformation attacks during the 2016 election, it’s hard to tell what effect the targeting of communities of color with disinformation had on voter turnout. It may have had little effect overall, as turnout was up among all racial and ethnic groups across the board, and both Republicans and Democrats saw a surge in new voters.³³ But what’s clear is that the relentless attacks on mail-in voting and electronic voting machines as unsafe and inherently fraudulent have had multiple, more long-lasting effect on American elections. One, as previously stated, is the emergence of “the big lie” as a powerful force in politics and commerce, one that’s had much more impact than any mailer or billboard telling people that voting by mail was illegal. But another, just as troubling result of 2020 disinformation is a slew of new restrictions and laws against voting in any other way than in person and on election day, along with a new push to “investigate” future elections, with an eye toward possibly invalidating them.

New Voter Suppression Fueled by Disinformation

Many of the most prominent figures in the industry that’s emerged around “the big lie” have promoted the idea that our elections depend on faulty machines and easily exploited laws that allow for massive fraud and dumps of illegal ballots sent in by mail. But the process of mailing ballots in has existed in America in some form since the Civil War. Research has shown that neither party has an advantage from mail-in voting, nor is it inherently more susceptible to fraud.³⁴ Many states have allowed or even required mail-in voting for decades, without problems or conspiracy theories that the process was rigged or fraudulent. But with the pandemic came a nationwide expansion of mail-in voting, and with that expansion came conspiracy theories that it would be exploited by one party against the other. There is no compelling evidence this is true.

³¹ Maggie Haberman and Stephanie Saul, “Trump Encourages People in North Carolina to Vote Twice, Which Is Illegal,” *The New York Times*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/02/us/politics/trump-people-vote-twice.html>

³² Amy Yee, “Latinos the targets of election disinformation – but activists are fighting back,” *The Guardian*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/22/latinos-targets-election-disinformation>

³³ William H. Frey, “Turnout in 2020 election spiked among both Democratic and Republican voting groups, new census data shows,” The Brookings Institution, May 5, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/turnout-in-2020-spiked-among-both-democratic-and-republican-voting-groups-new-census-data-shows/>

³⁴ Darrell M. West, “How does vote-by-mail work and does it increase election fraud?,” Brookings Institution, June 22, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/votervital/how-does-vote-by-mail-work-and-does-it-increase-election-fraud/>

Working under the mistaken impression that making it easier to vote makes it easier to steal your vote, legislatures around the country have introduced or sponsored hundreds of bills that would curtail the expansion of voting options, drastically restrict access to mail-in or absentee ballots, reduce early voting, and introduce odious voter ID requirements. These laws are based on the false notion that massive, systemic fraud plagued the 2020 election. All of these restrictions would disproportionately impose burdens on Black and Latino voters, as well as making it more difficult for disabled Americans to vote – and all done as a response to fraud that didn't happen, and abuse of mail-in voting that didn't occur. ³⁵

Of even more concern are the slew of new proposed laws that would expand on the numerous failed efforts to overturn 2020 election, carry out dubious audits, and file lawsuits to attempt to get votes thrown out. Many of these bills would explicitly undermine the electoral process through “citizen audits” with no oversight or standards, randomly drawn “election integrity committees,” and harsh legal punishments against election officials who make genuine mistakes with vote tabulation. Many states have also considered creating commissions or agencies tasked with overseeing elections, where members could be appointed by partisan legislators and be given wide latitude on conducting audits or recounts – imperiling legitimate election results in the process. ³⁶

These laws and restrictions are a solution in search of a problem. Overwhelming evidence shows that only a statistically insignificant number of fraudulent votes are cast in each election, far too few to have any effect. While one could argue that even one fraudulent vote is too many, it is clearly not a problem in need of oppressive restrictions, undue burdens on vulnerable voters, and codified mechanisms to routinely question the integrity of elections.

Conclusion

A problem as wide-ranging and lucrative as election disinformation requires an equally creative solution. Unfortunately, because each believer's journey into disinformation is different, there is no scalable answer to the problem of how to stop false claims and conspiracy theories from influencing voters.

The ingrained nature of human thought patterns means that people will believe things because they want them to be true, and because they align with things they already believe. Election disinformation easily fits in this sphere – if you've been told that a shadowy cabal is manipulating elections to put their preferred candidate in office, and you already believe in the existence of such a cabal, then you'll have no problem believing that they'll do anything to protect their power. What makes election disinformation so insidious is that it plays on the inherent distrust many people have for power structures, giving them even more reasons not to trust what “they” are doing. Too many people already think their vote doesn't matter – election conspiracy theories tell them that not only does it not matter, it won't even be counted. So why bother voting?

Like many other historical conspiracy theories and hoaxes, election-related disinformation is extremely resistant to disconfirmation and fact checking. Many of the most popular theories about the 2020 election, such as “late night ballot dumps” or the supposed vulnerabilities of Dominion Voting Systems

³⁵ Will Wilder and Stuart Baum, “5 Egregious Voter Suppression Laws from 2021,” Brennan Center, January 31, 2022, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/5-egregious-voter-suppression-laws-2021>

³⁶ Brennan Center, “Voting Laws Roundup: February 2022”, February 9, 2022, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-february-2022>

machines, have been debunked again and again, by liberal³⁷, conservative³⁸, and non-partisan sources³⁹. Yet they are still believed by millions, with new elements and details being added to them on an on-going basis. Their core base is remarkably wedded to them, even as no new proof emerges and more Trump officials go on the record saying they knew he lost. Not only are they sticking by their beliefs, they are using them as rallying cries for future election interference and voter suppression. And their promoters continue to cash in on these beliefs, with new books, films, and fundraising drives coming on a weekly basis.

Is there anything, then, that can be done to stop election disinformation? And is there any point to fact checking these claims if the people who believe they're true also believe that fact checkers are in on the conspiracy?

Fact checking matters because without challenging conspiracy theories, they grow and spread to new audiences. And while many Americans believe the 2020 election was stolen, many more do not – and when confronted with new claims that it was, they can rely on well-sourced debunking to reassure them. When a person goes searching for “the truth” about the 2020 election, the first thing they should encounter is something that presents the facts in a dispassionate way, not a conspiracy theory that demands their time and money. We now know that older ideas of ignoring disinformation or “not feeding the trolls” don't work, and only give these theories an unchecked opportunity to grow. If they aren't confronted, there's nothing to tell people they aren't true.

More professionals and academics who study disinformation are embracing the idea of “pre-bunking” to inoculate readers against conspiracy theories before they become popular. Some research has shown that pre-bunking can have an effect, particularly regarding medical misinformation, though its long-term effectiveness isn't known, and it certainly hasn't stopped the flow of COVID-19 conspiracy theories. And because election conspiracy theories emerge and spread so quickly, and through so many different vectors, it's not clear if this kind of inoculation is even possible.⁴⁰

Social media crackdowns can also help stop the thread of hoaxes and disinformation, though many major sites have been reluctant to deplatform major conspiracy theory promoters for fear of looking biased against conservatives. Human users can report bots or trolls pushing harmful theories, but the platforms decide whether to remove or retain these posts, and most don't want to be drawn into debates about censorship and “cancelling” conservative posters. Given that it took Facebook and Twitter several years to completely deplatform QAnon and its promoters, it's unlikely that there will be any sort of large scale banning of these theories until long after it would be most effective.

³⁷ Holmes Lybrand and Tara Subramaniam, “‘A constitutional amendment and a time machine’: Fact-checking calls to decertify the 2020 election,” CNN, September 28, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/28/politics/arizona-audit-finchem-decertify-fact-check/index.html>

³⁸ Aaron Blake, “A conservative group debunks Trump's voter-fraud claims (yet again),” *The Washington Post*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/12/09/trumps-voter-fraud-myth-dies-another-death-conservative-group-debunks-it-again/>

³⁹ Saranac Hale Spencer, “Nine Election Fraud Claims, None Credible”, FactCheck.org, December 11, 2020, <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/12/nine-election-fraud-claims-none-credible/>

⁴⁰ Laura Garcia and Tommy Shane, “Prevention, not cure, may be a more effective way to combat misinformation,” First Draft News, June 29, 2021, <https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/a-guide-to-prebunking-a-promising-way-to-inoculate-against-misinformation/>

Ultimately, it's up to trusted figures in the communities targeted by disinformation to reassure people that American elections are free and fair, that mail-in voting is safe, that their vote will count, and that if their candidate loses, it's not because of fraud or a cabal of conspirators. Local influencers can also be useful for reassuring people about the safety of elections, given that they're usually trusted figures in communities and know the particulars of how to reach people in those areas. ⁴¹

The problem of disinformation is a human problem. It taps into the deepest fears that people have – that they're being exploited or used as pawns, that their votes and voices don't matter, and that people at the very top are conspiring against them. Because these narratives are hardwired into our psyches, it's extremely difficult to stop people from being pulled into disinformation. All that can be done is fighting it where it lives, pushing back against it whenever possible, and personally reassuring the people we know that their votes count and our elections are fair.

⁴¹ Evan Halper, "Fighting for 2020 Elections by Combating Disinformation," *Governing.org*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.governing.com/security/fighting-for-2020-elections-by-combatting-disinformation.html>