

DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

Elon Musk's misleading election claims reach millions and alarm election officials

The X billionaire's false posts about noncitizen voting spur officials to fact-check him, lead to requests to purge voter rolls, and add to worries about threats, election officials say.

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The chairman of the board of elections in Montgomery County, Pa., was well acquainted with the regular attendees at his monthly meetings who peddled old, debunked voting conspiracy theories.

But something changed after April 4, the chairman, Neil Makhija, explained in an interview. That was the day Elon Musk retweeted a false claim that as many as 2 million noncitizens had been registered to vote in Texas, Arizona and Pennsylvania.

Suddenly, the same people were coming to the meetings with a new, unsubstantiated theory of voter fraud that appeared to align with Musk's latest post: They were convinced that droves of noncitizens were voting illegally in their suburban Philadelphia county of nearly a million people.

For Makhija, a Democrat who is also a member of the county board of commissioners, it was a lesson in the influence of Musk, the South Africa-born billionaire CEO of Tesla and SpaceX. In the two years since he bought Twitter, now X, Musk has transformed it into a primary source of false election rumors, both by spreading them on his own account, which has 197 million followers, and lowering some of the site's guardrails around misinformation.

"You have one of the richest men in the world putting out this idea that the elections are fraudulent and the results are questionable," Makhija said. "X has obviously become a platform for misinformation and disinformation. Because we know it's not true."

Musk's online utterances don't stay online. His false and misleading election posts add to the deluge of inaccurate information plaguing voting officials across the country. Election officials say his posts about supposed voter fraud often coincide with an increase in baseless requests to purge voter rolls and heighten their worry over violent threats. Experts say Musk is uniquely dangerous as a purveyor of misinformation because his digital following stretches well beyond the political realm and into the technology and investment sectors, where his business achievements have earned him credibility.

After Musk bought Twitter, he made deep cuts in staff responsible for maintaining standards on the site, courted major conservative figures, and reoriented the platform to boost the reach of his account, which frequently spreads false statements without being subject to the kinds of fact checks that previously existed on the site. He reinstated accounts previously banned for violating the platform's rules, including Donald Trump's, and promised to usher in a less restrictive era.

Musk long described his politics as libertarian, but in recent years, he has become an increasingly outspoken supporter of conservative causes. He has said he supported Democrats for president between 2008 and 2020, but after the assassination attempt on Trump in July, Musk posted a photo of the Republican presidential candidate, face bloodied, with his fist in the air, and endorsed him for 2024 and welcomed him back to X with a live-streamed conversation between the two. Last week, Trump said that if elected, he would put Musk in charge of a government efficiency commission.

This article is based on interviews with more than two dozen election officials and experts, some of whom spoke to The Washington Post on the condition of anonymity to protect themselves and their organizations in a polarized election season. Most of them said it's difficult to prove that Musk has caused the inundation of demands from misinformed voters but that it's clear to them the two have coincided and are related.

Musk, who bought Twitter in November 2022, has repeatedly claimed without evidence that Democrats are "importing" undocumented people to vote in the coming election, a popular 2024 iteration of the Great Replacement Theory, which holds that a global elite is replacing European-descended populations with non-White people. He has falsely asserted that electronic voting machines are unreliable and that the country should return to hand-counting ballots. And he has promoted deepfakes and other deceptive images aimed at undermining politicians he doesn't support.

Between his purchase of Twitter and Thursday, Musk's 52 posts or reposts about noncitizen voting — one of the main topics of false or misleading election claims he made in that time period — drew almost 700 million views, according to a Post analysis.

A separate analysis found that 50 of Musk's false or misleading claims about the U.S. election between Jan. 1 and July 31 were debunked by independent fact-checkers and still generated almost 1.2 billion views, according to a recent study from the Center for Countering Digital Hate. None displayed community notes, X's term for user-generated fact checks that Musk has promised serve as an "immediate way to refute anything false" that is posted on the platform.

X did not respond to a detailed list of questions for Musk.

His frequent amplification of election untruths has spurred typically low-profile election officials to publicly fact-check him. His immense reach far outstrips theirs, so they say they attempt to blunt the damage of his false posts by piggybacking on them with truthful fact checks of their own.

But in their effort to spread accurate election information, they are up against a formidable adversary. “The great risk in a privatized public sphere,” said Sophia Rosenfeld, a history professor at the University of Pennsylvania and author of “Democracy and Truth: A Short History,” is that the owner, in this case, Musk, “can control both the flow of information and the content of that information to suit their own needs, whether financial, ideological, or both.”

Musk’s control of X and his large following mean a single post from him can effectively take fringe election-denial falsehoods mainstream, experts say.

In Michigan, Democratic Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson said her office tracked a direct correlation between Musk’s inaccurate tweets about elections and subsequent waves of harassment of local and state election administrators.

“Every time he has put something out falsely questioning the integrity of our elections, there is a dramatic uptick in threats and vitriol made to us on social media,” Benson said. “Sometimes that translates into offline threats that my security team needs to then be made aware of.”

In Arizona, Maricopa County recorder Stephen Richer said he sees a link between Musk’s misinformation and the scores of requests he and other election administrators have received, mostly unfounded, to remove noncitizens from voter rolls. “He’s by no means unique,” Richer said. “He just happens to have a very, very large microphone.”

Musk has more followers than any other account on X. He has designed the platform to boost his posts more than those of other accounts. He ignores the well-established election safeguards in this country, election officials say.

On Aug. 13, Musk posted about U.S. voting machines’ potential vulnerability to hacking. “Let’s use paper ballots!” Musk wrote, in a post that received nearly 22 million views. The next day, Jen Easterly, the director of the federal Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), responded with a seven-part fact-check thread: “Great to see your focus on the security of our nation’s elections. Definitely agree on paper ballots,” Easterly wrote, tagging Musk. “Good news is that some 95% of registered voters now live in jurisdictions that have voter verified paper records.” Her most popular response to Musk received 53,900 views.

Musk’s first tweet that The Post identified as explicitly referencing noncitizen voting came on Dec. 21, 2023.

“A member of Congress told me that this is a deliberate means of importing future left-wing voters. Viewed through that lens, this administration’s facilitation of massive illegal immigration precisely matches their goal,” Musk, who didn’t identify the lawmaker, wrote in reply to a tweet by Republican donor and tech investor Joe Lonsdale about an undocumented immigrant allegedly involved in a hit-and-run.

From that first mention, Musk went on to post about alleged voting by noncitizens dozens of times in the following months, replying to agree with dozens more posts by others promoting spurious theories about noncitizen voting, which experts say is extremely rare.

Musk accused Democrats of “importing” or having “imported” voters on two dozen separate occasions, echoing his first post on the topic. And he often replied to or retweeted users who mock diversity initiatives and other liberal causes.

In Montgomery County, Pa., one result of Musk’s tweet, according to Makhija, has been a regular stream of questions about noncitizen voting at public meetings. A sign of how difficult it is for election officials to correct Musk’s false claims: One public commenter at the election board’s June 27 meeting said the absence of evidence of noncitizen voting was a failure of the county board to find it. Another commenter demanded that signs be posted at every polling location declaring that noncitizens may not vote.

“It’s a commonsense way to guarantee that U.S. citizens are not disenfranchised,” that woman said.

Musk’s claims about noncitizen voting dovetail with a major Republican legislative effort: the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility Act, or SAVE Act, a proposal Republicans have prioritized as an election-year talking point even as research shows noncitizens illegally registering and casting ballots in federal elections is an exceptionally infrequent occurrence.

Musk has said that he wants the elections this year to be under a “microscope,” according to a prominent Republican who has spoken to him. He has sometimes peppered Trump’s advisers with questions about what they’re doing to protect the election, according to the Republican and other people familiar with the conversations who spoke on the condition of anonymity to share private discussions. He asked the Republican National Committee for a briefing on their election integrity efforts in early 2024, people familiar with the matter said.

At a February meeting of billionaires and top political strategists at the Palm Beach, Fla., mansion of GOP megadonor and investor Nelson Peltz, Musk said that he feared immigrants coming into the country would vote, making it harder for Republicans to win elections, according to attendees.

In April, Musk retweeted a post from the account @EndWokeness alleging, without evidence, that large numbers of voters were registering in the United States without identification. Musk added the comment: “extremely concerning.” His post received 59 million views.

The original post asserted that “the number of voters without a photo ID is SKYROCKETING in 3 key swing states: Arizona, Texas, and Pennsylvania.” The account incorrectly referenced data from the Social Security Administration, which verifies information any time a state registers a new voter without a photo ID. Anyone who registers to vote with only a name, date of birth and a Social Security number is referred to the Social Security Administration for verification. The post conflated those figures with the number of people who had been verified automatically and alleged that those three states allowed over 2 million undocumented people to register to vote.

Following that false post, election officials in Texas and Arizona publicly fact-checked the claim.

Jane Nelson, the Republican Texas secretary of state who was appointed last year by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, issued a statement calling the information Musk shared “totally inaccurate.” The post received 206,000 views. Nelson did not respond to a request for comment.

In North Carolina, the State Board of Elections has seen an “uptick in questions, concerns and complaints about how much election officials do to ensure noncitizens cannot vote in North Carolina,” which coincides with the spike in posts on noncitizen voting from Musk, according to Patrick Gannon, the board’s spokesman.

“He’s one of the most influential people in the world, with like a gagillion followers,” Richer, the Maricopa County recorder, said. “My goal [in responding to him] was just piggybacking on the topic to offer accurate information to anyone who would care to learn more about the subject and are willing to go into the comments.”

Richer reposted Musk’s message with an eight-part response debunking the original post. “Only 39,653 new voters have registered in Maricopa County in 2024 in total. For Arizona, that number is about 60,000,” Richer wrote on X. His initial post received 2.5 million views, orders of magnitude fewer than Musk’s.

He added that “there is zero validity to the suggestion in the original post that 220,731 illegal immigrants have registered in Arizona in 2024.”

Richer, who lost his bid for reelection in the Republican primary in July, said that “certainly we see a correlative link” between Musk’s misinformation and the requests to remove noncitizens from voter rolls, “especially when he started asking about noncitizen voting happening in elections.”

Musk appears undeterred. On Wednesday, America First Legal, run by former Trump administration officials, posted a copy of its lawsuit on X that it was suing “ALL 15 counties in Arizona for refusing to remove illegals from their voter rolls.” Musk replied in a post that garnered 38 million views: “Arizona is refusing to remove illegals from voter rolls?”

Richer responded to Musk, explaining that lawsuits can make unproven allegations and can also be used as a way to generate headlines and not necessarily legal victories. Richer wrote that the suit “will lose. Just like every lawsuit (50+) that has been filed against my office since I took office.”

Richer concluded by repeating an offer to explain to Musk how Arizona elections work. Musk did not respond.

“Musk puts out this malarkey and he says nonsense, uneducated things and he gets corrected,” said Tom Irvine, who for 15 years was the primary outside counsel for elections in Maricopa and defended the county against election challenges following the 2020 presidential election. “And then he says it again and again and again.”

Musk’s frequent posts about voter fraud have made him useful to election conspiracy theory groups such as Cleta Mitchell’s Election Integrity Network. “Michigan Fair Elections” is the group’s Michigan arm, and it runs an active blog that cites Musk regularly.

Musk has been lauded several times by the right-wing conspiracy site the Gateway Pundit, which recently praised Musk with headlines such as: “HE GETS IT! Elon Musk Steps Up Election Integrity Crusade.”

The falsehoods spreading on X have not just transformed a single platform. Musk’s purchase of Twitter and his immediate retreat from moderating messages “created a permission structure for other platforms to also retreat from content moderation,” said Ishan Mehta, director of the media and democracy program at Common Cause, a nonprofit that advocates for voting rights and other democracy-related issues. “Every other major platform can now point to X and say, ‘At least we’re not as bad as they are.’”

Josh Dawsey contributed to this report.