

# *Heritage Foundation Spreads Deceptive Videos About Noncitizen Voters*

The right-wing think tank has been pushing misinformation about voting into social media feeds. The Georgia secretary of state's office called one video "a stunt."



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In July, two men went door to door at a sprawling apartment complex in Norcross, Ga., an Atlanta suburb that is a hub for the region's fast-growing Latino population, asking residents if they were U.S. citizens and whether they were registered to vote.

Speaking in Spanish, often peeking from behind half-closed doors, seven people told the men that they were not citizens but that they were registered to vote.

Although the two men claimed to represent a company helping Latinos navigate the election system, they were actually working with the Heritage Foundation and carrying a hidden camera. Days later, the conservative think tank posted a video on the social media platform X containing some of the footage the men had

captured, calling it “staggering” evidence that 14 percent of noncitizens in Georgia — which Heritage said extrapolated to more than 47,000 people — were registered to vote.

“Based on our findings,” the video concluded, “the integrity of the 2024 election is in great jeopardy.”

The video was reposted by Elon Musk, X’s owner, who called it “extremely disturbing.” It quickly went viral.

But under scrutiny, those claims do not hold up. Three of the seven people Heritage filmed later said they had misspoken. State investigators found no evidence that any of the seven people on the tape had ever registered to vote. A spokesman for Georgia’s secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger, a Republican, called the video “a stunt.”

It was one of several misleading videos that the Heritage Foundation has pumped into social media feeds this year. While the once-staid think tank has received attention recently for Project 2025, the right-wing blueprint for a future Trump administration that the group funded, it has also made its mark with an aggressive effort to shape public opinion, seeding falsehoods about the integrity of the 2024 election across social media and conservative news outlets.

At the center of that effort is the Oversight Project, an arm of Heritage that conducts what it describes as investigations into immigration policy, among other topics. Borrowing from covert tactics used by the group Project Veritas, the Oversight Project has published videos about the supposed threat of migrant voting in shelters on the Texas border, in New York City and in North Carolina.

The project says it is preparing to release investigations of other states, including what its executive director, Mike Howell, recently described in a livestream on X as “a pretty big thing” targeting voter registration at the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles.

“We view our role in this cause as breaking the bombshell news,” said Mr. Howell. The recording of the livestream appears to have been deleted after The New York Times contacted Heritage for this article, and the Oversight Project has so far not posted any videos about alleged noncitizen voting in Virginia.



An Atlanta polling location in March. There is no evidence to support Heritage’s findings in Georgia, a critical swing state with a large immigrant population. Christian Monterrosa for The New York Times

Few groups have done more to propel the false, but snowballing, theory that noncitizens are preparing to vote in droves in November, threatening the integrity of the election.

Heritage’s most recent effort, the Georgia video, tallied more than 56 million views, according to X’s statistics, and has become fodder for discussion on dozens of right-wing talk shows and podcasts, as well as on Fox News. The day after it was posted, both Mr. Raffensperger and Georgia’s attorney general, Christopher Carr, released statements, apparently in response to the video, pledging to investigate “specific” claims of voter fraud.

But there is no evidence to support Heritage’s findings in Georgia, a critical swing state with a large immigrant population, or, for that matter, anywhere else in the country.

Voting by noncitizens is illegal in almost all jurisdictions except for a few scattered municipalities that allow residents who are not citizens to vote in local elections. Any noncitizen convicted of trying to vote in a federal election faces stiff fines, prison time and potential deportation.

A study by the Brennan Center for Justice, a policy group that focuses on voting and criminal justice issues, found that one ten-thousandth of 1 percent of votes in the 2016 election were cast by noncitizens. The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, has said that “noncitizens don’t illegally vote in detectable numbers.” The Heritage Foundation’s own analysis found just 23 documented cases of noncitizen voting across the country between 2003 and 2023.

Regardless of the evidence, critics say efforts like the Heritage investigation in Georgia could be used by former President Donald J. Trump and his allies to try to discredit the election results if he loses.

“The immigrant becomes the boogeyman,” said Richard L. Hasen, an expert on elections law at U.C.L.A. law school. “It provides a means of delegitimizing Democratic victories and creates a path for challenging them.”

Several election experts derided the Oversight Project’s methodology as deeply flawed. The group’s figures suggest it spoke to a total of 50 people — statistically, a tiny sampling — before coming to a determination that one in seven noncitizen residents of Georgia may be illegally registered to vote.

In an email to The Times last week, Mr. Howell stood by the group’s work in Georgia. “I am not surprised that when an individual admits to a crime on camera that they would later retract it when that video is made public,” he said.

Asked about research — including Heritage’s own data — showing how rare noncitizen voting is, he said: “The monumental number of noncitizens that have poured over our borders since 2021 have made any previous ‘study’ of noncitizens’

voting irrelevant.”

In a July interview on Real America’s Voice, a right-wing podcast network, Mr. Howell said that out of 40 people his investigators spoke to at an apartment complex in Charlotte, N.C., four said they were both registered to vote and not citizens. That led the Oversight Project to conclude that 10 percent of noncitizens in that state were most likely registered to vote.

Mr. Howell claimed the Biden administration was planning to “refuse a peaceful transition of power by relying on illegal aliens to vote for them, and that’s clear as day.”

In Georgia, Mr. Raffensperger's investigation into Heritage’s claims is continuing, according to Mike Hassinger, a spokesman for the secretary of state’s office. Mr. Hassinger said investigators had found no records suggesting that the people who appeared in the video had registered or voted, and “no pending or rejected voter applications from 2024” from the apartment complex.

The state investigators went to the apartment complex and spoke to two of those interviewed by the Oversight Project. One said she purposely gave the men at her door a fake name, and told them what she thought they wanted to hear “to get them away.”

Mr. Hassinger described the Heritage effort as “a stunt,” adding, “There’s no better word for it.”

The Times also spoke with a woman interviewed in the video. The woman, an immigrant from Honduras who asked that she be identified only by her first name, Marta, because she feared being deported, confirmed to the Times that she was not registered to vote and had never tried to register in the nine years that she had lived in the United States.

She had been surprised to see two strangers appear at her door and feared that if she told them the truth — that she was not registered to vote — they might try to register her and ask her to sign documents, potentially putting her at risk with immigration authorities.

Marta said that she had no idea she was being filmed until she was shown the video online and that the two men did not ask for her full name or address. “I just wanted them to go away,” she said.

The woman was first identified by Lead Stories, a private fact-checking group hired by social media platforms to verify content. The group also tracked down two other women who were shown in the video. Both denied having registered to vote.

On social media, the Oversight Project said it had tried to locate the seven people on state voter rolls but was “unable to find them,” adding that “non-citizens have shoddy address history records and often use fake documents and names.”

Founded in 1973, Heritage was long known as a policy shop, focused on promoting conservative, pro-business policies in Washington. In recent years, it has taken a sharp turn under the leadership of Kevin Roberts, an academic who said his goal for Heritage was “institutionalizing Trumpism.”

Mr. Roberts started the Oversight Project just a few months after arriving at Heritage, asking it to provide “aggressive oversight” of the Biden administration and “institutional support” to the conservative movement.

The Oversight Project partnered with an outside group, Muckraker, to produce both the Georgia and North Carolina videos. In April, they also teamed up to produce a video about a flier encouraging migrants to vote for President Biden. The groups said the paper was found in a shelter in Matamoros, Mexico, but the founder of the shelter denied being behind it. She said she had received death threats after the video was posted.

In March, the two groups used a hidden camera to film employees of a migrant aid group, La Jornada, that was providing documentation they said could enable noncitizens to register to vote. The executive director of that organization, which is based in Queens, N.Y., later said the document they had provided was not identification that could be used to register to vote.

Anthony Rubin, the founder of Muckraker, in a recent interview on InfoWars, the conspiracy spreading podcast hosted by Alex Jones, said that “anybody who claims this isn’t happening, they’re just burying their head in the sand.”

In March 2022, Mr. Raffensperger announced the results of a statewide audit that determined that 1,634 noncitizens had tried to register to vote among all of Georgia’s registered voters at the time, and had been blocked from doing so by existing state verification procedures. He also noted that none of them had cast ballots.

“So, my fellow Georgians asked me, ‘Are noncitizens voting in Georgia?’” Mr. Raffensperger said in May on NBC’s “Meet the Press.” “I can say, ‘No, they aren’t,’ because we’ve checked it.”

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