Social Media Misinformation and Administration in the 2020 General Election

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Abstract:

Following the conclusion of the 2020 general election, the perception of fairness in American elections became increasingly politically polarized. The attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, was driven in part by high profile political figures promoting unproven claims of widespread election fraud. Many of these claims had originated on or had been spread through viral social media posts created on or shortly after Election Day. This report traces many of the narratives and viral falsehoods that focused on election administration in eight key states, as well as analyzes national patterns in election-related disinformation.

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I. Introduction

Nine days after Election Day 2020, a coalition of organizations representing election officials, election technology vendors, and cybersecurity experts released a joint statement declaring that "[t]he November 3rd election was the most secure in American history." Far from the disaster many experts predicted, the 2020 general election saw relatively few problems, despite incredible headwinds in the form of a global pandemic, funding shortfalls, and unprecedented shifts in how people cast their votes.

In spite of the overall success, trust in the fairness of American elections became increasingly partisan after November 3. A Morning Consult poll released November 1 found that 66% of Republicans polled had "some" or "a lot" of trust in the U.S. election system; but that number plummeted to 34% in a poll released November 9. By contrast, 63% of Democrats responding to the November 1 poll expressed trust in the U.S. election system, which climbed to 78% by November 9.

Many factors may have contributed to this crisis of confidence, but among them are the viral falsehoods that circulated after the election. Experts predicted in advance of the election that such falsehoods would be prevalent. This report traces the narratives that formed on and after Election Day 2020 in key states and the interaction between misinformation and election procedures nationwide. While isolated problems occurred during the November 2020 election throughout much of the country, the states covered in this report were under particular scrutiny for any mistakes because of the importance of their results in the outcome of the presidential race.

The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) distinguishes three kinds of viral malicious information, based on conventions set in a 2017 Council of Europe paper: "disinformation," "misinformation," and "malinformation." "Disinformation" applies when the distributor of bad information knows the information is false and intentionally spreads it. "Misinformation" is a more general term for misleading or incorrect information. "Malinformation" refers to true information framed in misleading ways. The United Kingdom Government Civil Service further distinguishes disinformation as falsehoods that are intentionally weaponized for certain financial, political, or other self-interested goals.

There are increasing efforts to distinguish between specific pieces of misinformation and the malicious narratives based on such misinformation. These narratives are built on foundations of untrue claims, but the narratives themselves can be presented without mentioning any specific false claims. This report addresses the larger narratives of misinformation as they

relate to parts of the 2020 election process that were either already considered contentious or more vulnerable to misinterpretation. Thus, this report is not a comprehensive overview of every specific piece of false information that arose online about the 2020 election. While recognizing the possibility that some of these narratives might have been weaponized purposefully and thus fall under the classification of "disinformation," this report does not attribute intent.

II.   Misinformation Narratives By State

A. Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania's election administration received considerable attention and scrutiny during the 2020 election. In addition to Pennsylvania's importance as a battleground state, significant changes in its election procedures made in recent years by the legislature, and many subsequent legal actions filed prior to the election added to this heightened level of attention. Misinformation surrounding Pennsylvania often touched on issues that were already the subject of fierce legal battles prior to Election Day: complaints about election observer access, concerns around safeguards for preventing mail-ballot fraud, and disputes over counting mail-ballots received up to three days after November 3. Pennsylvania was also one of the few states whose rules prohibited the counting of mail ballots until Election Day (and in some counties, not until after Election Day). As a result, news outlets were not able to report the apparent winner of the presidential election in the state until days after the election. During that time, as the presidential vote count was updated incrementally, misinformation surrounding the election was at times used as fuel for legal battles in Pennsylvania, adding an air of legitimacy to the original false narratives.

In-Person Voting

Much of the misinformation about in-person Election Day voting in Pennsylvania used something innocuous to support a false narrative—a picture or video taken out-of-context, polling place rules misread, or exaggerations of isolated errors or mechanical problems amplified to an extreme level. In one case, for instance, a video was taken of a polling place where non-functioning voting machines were causing a delay. But the video was posted two and a half hours *after* the machines had already been fixed, and the post made no mention of that detail. Another viral video, which received "over 300 million impressions" on Twitter, showed a poll worker denying a certified poll watcher entry to a polling place.. But the post omitted important context: that the poll worker explained to the certified poll watcher that his

"poll watcher certification" was to a different precinct than the one he was attempting to enter. A city official later explained that the poll worker was probably unaware of a recent rule change that allowed certified poll watchers to be allowed to enter *any* polling location, and the poll watcher was later allowed to enter a different location. The incident and video were later used to challenge the results of the election. The Trump campaign argued in a post-election lawsuit that, because poll watchers lacked "meaningful access to observe" the processing of ballots, 600,000 ballots from Allegheny and Philadelphia counties should be designated ineligible for certification. Other examples of misinformation that cast doubt on the integrity of the in-person voting process included "claims that voters in Philadelphia [were] being split into lines based on their support for specific parties... electioneering in the form of Democrat signage outside polling centers... [and] claims voters in Trump gear [were] being expelled from polling stations as a consequence of their attire" (EIP). These pieces of misinformation were used together to form a narrative that polling places were being compromised by Democrats.

Processing Mail Ballots

Pennsylvania also experienced misinformation concerning mail ballots. Many of the individual instances of misinformation included tropes seen nationwide: claims that ballots were thrown out, that only Democratic candidate Joe Biden's name appeared on some ballots, that dead voters' ballots were being counted on a large-scale, that voters voting only in the presidential election and not down ballot races was unusual and evidence of fraud, and others. Additionally, Pennsylvania saw some misinformation spread about provisional ballots. Provisional ballots were used at a record high level in 2020, often by voters who had requested a mail ballot but later opted to vote in-person without returning their mail ballot. They were also used by voters who requested an absentee ballot but never received it, as happened to some voters in Butler County. Out of these, one stand-out narrative unique to Pennsylvania focused on the new rule that mail ballots received up to three days after Election Day could be counted, so long as they were mailed by Election Day. Mail-ballots without a postmark received within three days of Election Day would be assumed to have been sent on time. The reason cited by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court was that individual voters should not be disenfranchised by the "USPS processing system, which is undeniably outside the control of the individual voter."

There were multiple instances of viral misinformation circulating that focused on the new ballot receipt deadline. One viral tweet claimed the new deadline was meant to help Democrats manufacture votes after Election Day. Another viral video, tweeted by Trump's director of Election Day operations, claimed to show ballots sent after Election Day being counted, though the video was filmed outdoors in almost complete darkness. (The Republican Party filed a motion for an injunction to require that mail-ballots received after the three-day deadline be kept separate—something that was already required per a state-wide guidance and for which

there was no evidence of violations.) The three-day rule became the subject of prominent pieces of misinformation when a U.S. Postal Service worker claimed to have seen postal workers changing the postmarks on ballot return envelopes after Election Day to November 3. The worker later recanted his statement, saying that much of his original claim was attributable to the influence of a right-wing group promoting a video about the claim. (The postal worker's original affidavit was cited by U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham in a letter to the U.S. Department of Justice. A DOJ probe into the alleged fraud uncovered no evidence of widespread election fraud.)

Tabulating the Vote

Between November 3 (Election Day) and November 7 (when the Associated Press and other national media organizations called Pennsylvania for Biden), misinformation surrounding vote tabulation emerged, specifically promoting the message that an uptick in votes for Biden was mathematical proof of voter fraud. In Pennsylvania, Trump's vote count had been higher than Biden's on election night, when results reflected mostly in-person Election Day voting. But three out of four mail ballots in the state were cast for Biden, and most of those were counted after in-person votes. Thus, the leader in the state swung from Trump to Biden in a relatively short period of time. For instance, from November 4 to the morning of November 5, Trump's lead shrank from 8% to 2.5%. It was a dynamic many had anticipated but, as Biden's vote count increased, pseudo-scientific "math" narratives emerged. One false allegation claimed that, between November 3 and 4, a million ballots had been "dumped" into vote counts for Biden. (In fact, both Trump and Biden's vote counts increased by around one million votes that night.) Another misinformation narrative claimed that it was mathematically impossible for Biden to have closed Trump's initial lead and that his victory could be attributed only to illegal means, such as votes manufactured in Philadelphia or fraudulent overnight vote counting. A viral tweet compared mail ballot figures from the primary to the number of mail ballots cast in the general election and made a false claim of a discrepancy, demonstrating that screen grabs and figures can give misinformation an appearance of legitimacy.

Reporting the Vote

Many threads of misinformation appeared to be the product of misunderstanding the processes used by various media outlets for "calling" a state for a candidate. One viral Facebook post falsely claimed that counting any ballots after Election Night constituted fraud; a right-wing website known for promoting false news, the Gateway Pundit, insinuated that the failure of some states to call the election on Election Night was itself evidence of a "steal." Still others misconstrued the *pause* on reporting overnight to mean that the count itself had stopped and viewed its resumption as evidence of a steal. Days after Associated Press and other major news

organizations called Pennsylvania for Biden, a false narrative emerged that Pennsylvania had been "uncalled" by RealClearPolitics. In reality, the political news website had simply not yet called Pennsylvania for either candidate. While some of these specific pieces of misinformation contradicted one another, they supported a unified false narrative that there was something inherently untrustworthy with how media organizations called elections.

Counter-messaging by state actors

Some state officials in Pennsylvania directly countered misinformation claims as they emerged. The Philadelphia District Attorney's Office refuted a claim on Twitter about out-of-order voting machines. Kathy Boockvar, Pennsylvania Secretary of the Commonwealth, used Twitter and other media to urge voters to "ignore hype & disinformation." On Election Day and for a few days after, various officials, including Boockvar and Governor Tom Wolf, addressed the state of the election and counting process on PACast, a state website. Pennsylvania voters could also consult a "Frequently Asked Questions and Myths About Pennsylvania Elections" page and a Voter Education Toolkit on the Pennsylvania Department of State website.

B. Georgia

Georgia was the focal point of a significant amount of misinformation aimed at discrediting its election processes. Misinformation in the state was driven in part by the close margin of votes between the top two presidential contenders and Georgia's shift from a solidly Republican state in statewide elections to a battleground state. Georgia began processing, but not counting, its absentee ballots 15 days before Election Day, which helped prevent long delays in releasing results. Yet Georgia's margin of victory was so narrow that it was the last state called by the Associated Press, which contributed to an extended period during which misinformation could spread. Georgia also conducted a hand audit (mandated by state law) and a candidate-requested recount, which heightened the national scrutiny before the state certified its results. And Americans had an additional reason to focus attention on Georgia *after* the general election: In both U.S. Senate races in Georgia, no candidate garnered more than 50 percent of the vote; thus requiring that both races—and partisan control of the U.S. Senate—to be decided by runoff elections on January 5, 2021.

In-Person Voting

A pervasive false narrative that emerged in Georgia concerned electronic voting machines and poll books used to sign-in voters. On Election Day, voting had been delayed in two counties— Morgan and Spalding— because of outages with electronic poll books. The issue prompted

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election officials to extend voting hours in those two counties (closing polls at 9 p.m. instead of 7 p.m.). The electronic pollbook issue was benign and quickly resolved, but conspiracy theories surfaced alleging that the Dominion Voting Systems software (which was used for voting machines but not electronic poll books in the counties) had intentionally caused the "glitch" to aid Biden by altering the vote total. While these poll book errors had no connection to vote tallying, articles in partisan media outlets, such as the Gateway Pundit and Breitbart, claimed the glitches in Georgia were tied to an allegedly similar incident in Antrim County, Michigan, noting that both involved Dominion software. Candidate Trump shared the Breitbart article on Twitter, saying the election was a "total mess."

Processing Mail Ballots

Several false claims challenging the integrity of how mail ballots were processed gained significant attention in Georgia. One viral tweet that is no longer available on the platform claimed that military ballots for Trump had been found in a dumpster, a claim that was amplified by Donald Trump on Twitter. These claims were false; the Spalding County sheriff's office released a statement detailing how the contents of the dumpster had been secured, culled through, and documented, and confirmed that only administrative documents—not ballots—had been found in the dumpster.

Another viral piece of misinformation claimed that Georgia's absentee ballot rejection rate had "plummeted" from 3.5% in 2018 to 0.3% in 2020. The Georgia Republican Party and the Trump Campaign used these figures in a letter to Brad Raffensperger, Georgia's secretary of state. Similar claims appeared in a tweet by Donald Trump, alleging unusual rejection rates. These claims were also false; a Reuters fact check showed that the comparisons in the tweet were inaccurate.

Reporting the Vote

Narratives attempting to discredit the vote tabulation process in Georgia persisted well past the election, fueled by misinformation about the statewide audit and a litany of unsubstantiated lawsuits. As Georgia conducted a full audit of its presidential vote count, false claims arose that the audit had revealed a 9,000-vote error in favor of Biden. As explained by the Georgia secretary of state's office, the discrepancy in the original unofficial tally was due to human error and was caught before the result was entered into the state's official tally. Additionally, in a string of lawsuits that followed the election, conservative outlets covered claims made by Sidney Powell (an attorney who sometimes worked with the Trump legal team) that over 136,000 ballots were illegally counted because of Dominion software.

Counter-messaging

The secretary of state's office provided counter-messaging and fact-checking through several channels. Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger frequently posted fact checks on [his Facebook page](#) throughout the election and for several weeks after. He also issued numerous press releases on the secretary of state's [website](#) and reached out to the public through a [widely-shared op-ed in USA Today](#), reaffirming the integrity of Georgia's election results. Gabriel Sterling, the voting systems implementation manager for Georgia, held frequent press conferences directly to debunk false claims being made about the election. Those press conferences were covered on national news channels and helped to push back against emerging false narratives.

C. Wisconsin

Misinformation surrounding Wisconsin's election administration included narratives similar to those in other swing states. Because of extended mail ballot processing times, major media outlets did not call the election in Wisconsin until November 5, two days after the close of polls. In that time, several false and misleading claims went viral, and a few were picked up by mainstream accounts and news sources.

Processing Mail Ballots

A variety of misleading and false claims in Wisconsin were based on content taken out of context. These pieces of misinformation discredited the mail-ballot process by casting doubt on the security of ballot collection and gained thousands of shares on social media. Many of these narratives arose before the election and laid the ground for skepticism.

An [early](#) misleading claim emerged when a Twitter user retweeted a picture in August of hundreds of decommissioned mailboxes piled up at an unidentified lot, writing, "Corruption on the part of the postmaster. A lazy postman. Or just an anomaly." The photograph first appeared on Reddit with the caption, "Whole thing looks terrible." A repost of the photo citing the location of the photo as Hartford, Wisconsin, was quickly shared among left-leaning social media circles. One user posted the photo on Twitter with the following comment: "They are sabotaging USPS to sabotage vote by mail. This is massive voter suppression and part of their plan to steal the election." The post was retweeted [81,500 times](#), including by accounts with millions of followers, such as left-leaning actor and political activist John Cusack, and it was shared widely on both Facebook and Instagram. In actuality, the mailboxes were stacked outside a powder-painting

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company based in Hartford, Wisconsin, that contracts with the United States Postal Service to refinish or destroy old mailboxes. This misinformation incident fed into widespread concern surrounding potential ballot delivery delays and USPS's cost-cutting measures.

Other false narratives around mail ballot-processing, primarily that mail ballots were being disposed of, were picked up by partisan media outlets, thus reaching a wider audience. One claim alleged that trays of mail ballots had been discovered in a ditch in Greenville, Wisconsin. President Trump repeated the narrative during the campaign, while discrediting the vote-by-mail system. Later news reports indicated the trays did not contain any Wisconsin ballots.

Other narratives sought to discredit city and county clerks as untrustworthy partisan actors. During the primary election, a Milwaukee-based radio host referred to election officials as "hardcore partisans." A WISN radio host tweeted an allegation of "ballot harvesting" during a "Democracy in the Park" event in Madison, where voters could turn-in completed absentee ballots directly to election workers. The radio host implied the poll workers were illegitimate and the ballots "unsecured," but the event was sponsored by the office of Madison City Clerk Maribeth Witzel-Behlls and adhered to state election law.

Tabulating the Vote

After the election, much of the scrutiny and misinformation in Wisconsin centered on the ongoing vote count. Misinformation around vote tabulation in Wisconsin formed a narrative similar to that in Pennsylvania and claimed the increase in Biden votes was fraudulent. Like in Pennsylvania, Biden's vote total increased in Wisconsin as mail ballots were counted and, on November 4, Biden took an early morning lead over President Trump. That same morning, a pro-Trump Twitter account falsely claimed that Trump had lost Wisconsin after "they dumped a trove of mails from Milwaukee." A fringe news source attempted to corroborate the supposed "ballot dump" by posting graphs of a dramatic increase in Democratic votes. Both the original post, as well as the fringe news source's post, were liked thousands of times. Biden's vote count increased as more mail ballots, which appeared to be the favored option of Democratic voters, were counted.

Later on November 4, Michael Coudrey, a conservative commentator, incorrectly claimed on Twitter to have "direct evidence of fraud," stating that Wisconsin's vote total exceeded the number of registered voters in the state. Coudrey claimed there were 3,129,000 registered voters and 3,239,920 votes cast in Wisconsin. Despite offering no supporting evidence for his claim, Coudrey's post was retweeted over 16,000 times in less than 45 minutes and migrated to other social media platforms like Facebook, where it was posted in the Wisconsinites Against

Excessive Quarantine Facebook group, which had over 100,000 members. But according to the Wisconsin Election Commission, there were 3,684,726 active registered voters on November 1.

Reporting the Vote

One right-wing media website, Gateway Pundit, spread several false narratives around the vote-tabulation process in Wisconsin. In the days following the election, a Gateway Pundit article claimed it had "identified approximately 10,000 votes that were moved from President Trump to Biden in just one Wisconsin county." The article included two screenshots from Fox News' election results. The first, at 11:43 p.m. CST on November 3, showed Trump with 46,649 votes in Rock County and Biden with 37,133. The second screenshot, 14 minutes later, showed the numbers had switched, with Biden having 46,649 and Trump having 37,133. The discrepancy was due to a media reporting error: The vote tallies had been correctly reported by the Rock County Clerk's Office website, reflecting the 46,649 votes for Biden and 37,133 for Trump, but the Associated Press had accidentally transposed the numbers when sending out its update at 11:45 p.m. The mistake was corrected minutes later, but the Gateway Pundit article was nevertheless tweeted by the president's son, Eric Trump, which was subsequently retweeted 31,000 times and liked nearly 83,000 times.

Eric Trump also cited a false figure that listed voter turnout at 89 percent in Wisconsin, a significant increase from previous years. He captioned the figure with "Looks like fraud!" The Wisconsin Elections Commission reported that turnout was 72 percent.

Counter-messaging

Under state law, Wisconsin election officials could not begin processing mail ballots until Election Day and could not begin counting those votes until the polls closed at 8 p.m. CST. Election officials worked diligently throughout the night to process ballots and count votes to ensure swift reporting of the results. However, overnight counting prompted some people to make false claims that thousands of ballots were secretly dumped into ballot counting machines in the early morning hours. Election officials in Milwaukee opted to livestream their vote-counting process to mitigate allegations of voter fraud. The Wisconsin Elections Commission also released a post-election memo debunking misinformation that questioned the integrity of Wisconsin's election results.

D. Michigan

Like other swing states, Michigan received considerable scrutiny throughout 2020 for all matters related to election administration. Michigan also saw a high volume of misinformation centered around its election administration, particularly around false claims of "ballot dumping" and other impropriety during vote tabulation in Detroit.

In-Person Voting

In-person Election Day voting saw its fair share of misinformation, though this aspect of the state's election administration was not the main target of viral falsehoods. On November 4, unsubstantiated allegations of pay-for-vote schemes surfaced in Macomb County and Pontiac, Michigan. Additionally, a video purporting to show "ballot stuffing" in Flint, Michigan, went viral around Election Day. On Election Day itself, Flint City Council member Maurice Davis posted a video in which he claimed he was told that split-ticket voting would result in a spoiled ballot. Finally, a viral video was released after the election, alleging that poll workers were trained by local officials to intentionally disenfranchise Michigan voters. According to the Detroit City Clerk, the video misconstrued snippets of audio to support an unsubstantiated conclusion.

Tabulating the Vote

Following the close of polls, misinformation arose surrounding the tabulation process in Michigan, particularly in Detroit at its convention center, the TCF Center. On November 4, confrontations between poll observers and election administrators devolved into a chaotic scene at TCF Center. Election workers inside reported feeling intimidated; officials later blocked windows at the center, spurring conspiracy theories that election workers were hiding nefarious activity. However, both Republican and Democratic observers were inside the counting rooms for the entire process; other observers were turned away because the counting facility was at capacity.

Additionally, false claims alleged "ballot dumps"—instances of election workers fraudulently adding votes to the totals—in the days following November 3. Example narratives included poll workers allegedly double-counting some votes and ballots being "found" after the close of polls. Each of these false claims pushed a narrative that the vote tabulation process in Michigan cities was inherently suspect and part of a broader widespread fraud scheme. But under state law, mail ballot processing could not begin until the day before Election Day. Thus, large counties were processing tens of thousands of mail votes throughout election night and in the days

following, leading to large changes in vote tallies overnight. Fact checkers noted that ballots reported in these alleged "dump" periods contained votes for Trump as well as Biden.

Reporting the Vote

During the vote count, false narratives targeted the unofficial results uploaded by Michigan counties. Most notably, a conspiracy theory about Dominion Voting Systems emerged from a reporting error in Antrim County. The clerk there did not properly configure the voting software, which resulted in an erroneous vote count on the county website. The error was quickly noted and corrected, and it would have been caught during the canvassing process, according to county officials. Nevertheless, the incident was used as part of a now-debunked "forensics report" claiming the election equipment in Antrim County was designed to propagate "systemic fraud and influence election results." A similar clerical error in Oakland County did not receive the same level of attention.

Additionally, Decision Desk HQ, an election data reporting service, explained in a Twitter thread that a zero had been appended to an update on Biden's vote count in Shiawassee County, an error that was quickly corrected but led to a perception of a sudden "jump" in Biden votes in Michigan. The graph showing this jump quickly became a meme that spread misinformation well after the correction was issued.

Counter-messaging

Michigan election officials took steps at the local and state level to combat misinformation. The secretary of state office conducted a full hand recount of the Antrim County ballots to affirm the previous machine count and show the results were accurate despite a previous county reporting error. Additionally, the secretary of state office maintained a fact check page on its website to quickly debunk some of the viral claims circulating on the internet. This page featured prominent authoritative voices to back up counter-messages. For example, a section of the page was devoted to providing a detailed explanation of the Antrim County error and subsequent hand recount and linked to statements by election officials and Dominion Voting Systems. Finally, the Michigan Department of State used social media as a method of rapidly publishing statements to debunk viral falsehoods. For example, the official account tweeted a statement explaining the measures Michigan employed to prevent the casting of ballots in the name of deceased voters. A few counties also live streamed the vote count process for transparency, including at Detroit's TCF Center.

E. Arizona

Arizona faced national scrutiny during its tabulation and reporting process. Online misinformation created public confusion about the tabulation and reporting processes, which fueled in-person protests outside vote-counting facilities

In-Person Voting

Arizona was the origin of #Sharpiegate, a misinformation claim that said election officials were handing out Sharpie brand markers to deliberately void ballots. The narrative claimed the markers could not be read by voting machines. Just hours after polls closed in Arizona, posts circulated showing videos of voters discussing that they used Sharpies and struggled to scan their ballots. Election officials quickly clarified that voting machines could read Sharpies, but these local claims spread nationally to fuel the narrative that officials were manipulating election results. Unverifiable "friend of a friend" posts targeted conservative voters, claiming that Republican voters were the ones receiving Sharpies and suggesting that their votes had not been counted.

Tabulating the Vote

Concerns that Sharpies were handed out only to Republicans and that Sharpie-marked ballots could not be counted, along with claims that Republicans were not included among workers who were counting the votes sparked protests outside vote counting centers. Pro-Trump groups pushed claims and fueled a false narrative that the tabulation process was conducted by Biden supporters. These claims, along with the #Sharpiegate narrative, led to hundreds of protestors gathering in Maricopa County for "Count the Legal Vote Rallies," with protestors chanting "Let us in" and "Count the votes," implying that Democrats were stealing the election.

Election Night Reporting

Arizona's unofficial tallies faced scrutiny in the days after the election, as the state's presidential race had not yet been called by many national media organizations. During the reporting process, domestic actors used small errors in the election night reporting (ENR) system as alleged "evidence" of wrongdoing on the part of election officials and Democrats. In one instance, a viral tweet claimed that 6,000 "fake" Biden ballots had been counted. The tweet was based on an error in which unofficial results had been displayed "incorrectly" after an ENR uploading error mistakenly uploaded one county's results several times, according to the secretary of state.

Counter-messaging

In an effort to increase transparency, Maricopa County officials live streamed their tabulation process. The county also directly addressed "Count the Legal Vote" rallies—the protests outside vote counting centers. The county placed large QR codes at the rallies with links to the official live stream of counting in the hopes of dispelling misinformation. These steps were aimed at allaying concerns that election administration was partisan and dispelling claims of vote tampering by showing as much transparency as possible in the tabulation process.

F. Florida

Surprisingly little misinformation emerged around Florida's election results. The race was called on election night, in large part because of laws allowing election officials to process ballots ahead of Election Day. While Florida's election code allows election officials to begin canvassing mail ballots 15 days prior to polls closing, the governor issued an executive order extending this to 22 days, giving officials adequate time to adapt to an increase in mail ballots. The state also had used mail voting for the previous 20 years, with 30% of ballots in the 2016 election cycle cast by mail. Nevertheless, some misinformation emerged from Florida about how slowly the U.S. Postal Service processed mail ballots and unclear numbers about voter turnout.

Ballot Processing

In the days immediately following the election, misinformation circulated that the USPS did not process 27% of the ballots in South Florida. The number originated from a table of data about national USPS ballot delivery that a journalist tweeted on November 4. A larger narrative—that USPS intentionally did not process some ballot mail—served to delegitimize Florida's results, in which Trump prevailed, by attacking the credibility of the mail ballot processing system. Social media posts aimed at liberal users used this "27%" claim as evidence that President Trump had intentionally shut down the post office to disenfranchise mail voters. The USPS quickly clarified that, in an effort to speed up Election Day efforts, it had not scanned ballots out from the mail processing center before delivering them. County election supervisors confirmed that all of the ballots had actually been delivered.

Election Night Reporting

Misinformation also spread concerning the county turnout rate. A few counties appeared to have above a 100% turnout rate in the 2020 election. These discrepancies appeared to involve already registered voters who changed their address, and thus their voting precinct, after voter

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registration for the new precinct had closed. But posts on social media claimed that these statistics indicated fraud. The turnout discrepancy narrative played into a larger misinformation story that Democrats were manufacturing fake ballots to steal the election. Florida was not the only state to experience misinformation around claimed discrepancies in voter turnout rates, and this content was often grouped with figures questioning the results nationally rather than in Florida specifically.

Counter-messaging

Overall, Florida, which Trump won, saw relatively little online activity questioning the integrity of its results, and its reporting was mostly finished on election night. Election officials had over a month to process mail ballots, allowing counties to post results soon after the polls closed, giving misinformation narratives little time to go viral before the state was called.

G. North Carolina

North Carolina was the subject of little post-election misinformation, despite the fact that news outlets were not able to declare a winner there until days after the election. North Carolina, like Pennsylvania, had recently extended the date by which mail-ballots had to be received and counted, and it saw that extension (from three days to nine in North Carolina's case) affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court. Nevertheless, the state was targeted by robocalls spreading misinformation on Election Day, as well as other small instances of misinformation during the 2020 election cycle.

In-Person Voting

On Election Day, robocalls, currently of unknown origin, targeted North Carolinians, urging people to "stay safe and stay home" on Election Day, potentially dissuading them from voting in-person. The North Carolina Department of State sent out a public service announcement that same day, warning voters to disregard the calls. The Attorney General of North Carolina tweeted a warning about the calls from his personal account and official account, saying, "Someone is making illegal robocalls into NC spreading misinformation about Election Day. DO NOT LISTEN to these robocall voicemails! They want to steal your vote. Don't let them. Today is your last chance to vote. We have 3 hours left – let's #vote NC!" The message was retweeted over 1,300 times by November 15, 2020.

Tabulating the Vote

While North Carolina's results were being tabulated, some absentee voters raised concerns that their votes had not shown up in BallotTrax, a vote-tracking system newly implemented in North Carolina. The "voter history" tab in the tool, which is meant to let voters look up details about when their ballot was counted, did not update for "a few weeks," leading some absentee voters to worry that their 2020 ballots had not been counted. The North Carolina State Board of Elections Twitter account replied directly to individual voters who raised this concern on Twitter. Additionally, one candidate who ran for the U.S. House of Representatives in North Carolina and lost falsely tweeted in December that North Carolina used Dominion voting machines, which were under heavy criticism in other states. The North Carolina State Board of Elections directly refuted this claim, noting that no county in the state used machines operated by Dominion.

Counter-messaging

Two official North Carolina Twitter accounts—the North Carolina State Board of Elections account and the Attorney General account—directly refuted specific pieces of misinformation or confusion as they arose. In addition, North Carolina State Board of Elections press releases regularly addressed issues of misinformation and issues of voter trust through easy-to-read list-based articles. (Examples: "How to Know Your Vote Counted in North Carolina," published November 5; "4 Facts About the Vote-Counting Process in NC," published November 11; and "5 Facts About the Recount Process in North Carolina" published November 19.) North Carolina also introduced BallotTrax in 2020, a vote-tracking system that allowed individuals to look up the status of their ballots to provide additional transparency on USPS delivery.

H. Nevada

Misinformation in Nevada mirrored a variety of narratives common to other swing states, including generic claims of mail voting fraud and allegations of Dominion machines interfering with results. Nevada's relatively long tabulation process, which counted mail ballots received up to seven days after the election if postmarked by Election Day, allowed time for misinformation claims to spread before the results were available.

Processing Mail Ballots

The Nevada Republican Party decried the state's expanded mail voting system on the basis of claims of multiple "instances of potential fraud." These included claims of "irresponsibly low"

standards for signature verification, finding a [ballot in a dumpster](#) that anyone could retrieve and mail in, and [out-of-date voter rolls](#).

The signature verification narrative related to an October 23 [lawsuit](#) in which the Trump campaign claimed that Clark County had intentionally set the sensitivity thresholds on its signature verification machines "below manufacturer standards." A spokesperson for Clark County's elections office [confirmed](#) that the county's threshold was chosen after determining it "would accept all the signatures that are obvious matches" and forward failing signatures for manual verification. As PolitiFact [stated](#), the lawsuit did not provide evidence that this threshold was lower than any manufacturer standard, nor did it provide evidence that the chosen threshold was flawed. It compared Clark County's rejection rate to that of Churchill County, which had the highest signature-based rejection rate in Nevada.

Officials also debunked the claim that a ballot found in a dumpster indicated fraud. According to the Nevada Secretary of State's office, every ballot is subject to signature verification, and it is extremely unlikely for the signature of a fraudster to match the signature of the legitimate voter. This signature mismatch would then prevent such an illicit ballot from being counted.

Voter rolls are also [updated](#) at varying intervals, and Nevada law [provides](#) for the removal of voters upon a number of conditions. It is possible that, in the time between voter-roll updates, some ballots may have been inadvertently mailed to deceased or otherwise ineligible voters. However, mail voting [safeguards](#), like signature verification, are designed to prevent individuals from voting ballots that are not theirs.

Another claim of fraud centered around voters violating Nevada residency requirements. For example, Richard Grenell, a Trump appointee and campaign operative, [reported](#) finding over 3,000 "people who violated residency requirements in Nevada." However, "hundreds" of the addresses in question were [actually](#) from out-of-state military voters, and the Nevada secretary of state's office [reported](#) that, as of December 2020, it had "not been presented with evidence of non-citizens voting."

Even so, in a [letter](#) from the Trump campaign to the Clark County District Attorney, these allegations were repeated to "call into question the legitimacy and integrity of the entire Nevada… election." Likewise, political activist James O'Keefe [shared](#) a viral video claiming that a Nevada postal carrier was willing to provide a Project Veritas volunteer with a "handful" of ballots. But neither the volunteer nor the individual who appears to be a mail carrier ever say what the "handful" actually contained. (The video inserts the word "ballots" in its captioning, but the word is never spoken.) Despite this, the video garnered 2.3 million views as of January 27, illustrating the salience of election integrity fears.

Tabulating and Reporting the Vote

Similar claims affected the vote tabulation and reporting processes. For example, the right-wing media website Breitbart reported that a purported whistleblower with the Clark County Elections Department, in a sworn affidavit, listed various claims of malfeasance, from potential Democratic electioneering to ballot stuffing. A poster on the pro-Trump website TheDonald.win (later changed to America.win) also alleged that an unusually high number of provisional ballots was evidence of poll workers suppressing Trump votes by forcing pro-Trump voters to cast provisional ballots. It was later reported that the overwhelming majority of these ballots were accepted, countering such narratives of voter suppression. Trump, meanwhile, blamed his loss in Nevada on Dominion Voting Systems; the Tweet received over 300,000 likes.

Finally, a Nevada GOP Twitter post claimed that "the usb drives used in the election" could provide evidence of vote tampering. Trump took a Tweet chain out of context, alleging a "large scale voter discrepancy" that affected one county race was evidence that the presidential election was compromised. The Twitter post he was referring to, however, reported only 139 discrepancies, which affected a Clark County Commission (not presidential) race that was won by a 10-vote margin of victory. According to Clark County Registrar Joe Gloria, this was the only Clark County race that presented concerns regarding its outcome. The Nevada Supreme Court unanimously decided to strike down a Trump campaign lawsuit that repeated many of the above claims, from signature verification issues to votes cast twice. A district court found "no credible or reliable evidence that the… Election in Nevada was affected by fraud," and the Nevada Supreme Court affirmed this determination.

Counter-messaging

Nevada officials consistently addressed pre- and post-election points of concern. They prepared a "Facts vs. Myths" page on the secretary of state's website and FAQ, to address post-election questions. There were also Twitter posts from Clark County and Nevada's Election Integrity Task Force to provide direct responses to common concerns and misinformation.

III.   Nationwide Misinformation Patterns

Many states saw similar types of election misinformation in 2020, especially in high-stakes states with the potential to swing the presidential rates. Counting delays and litigation provided space and opportunity for certain forms of misinformation to gain traction during the 2020

election; however, election administrators also created new efforts to provide counter-messaging, transparency, and voter education.

A. Counting Delays

In many states, large quantities of mail ballots significantly increased ballot processing times and delayed the announcement of presidential race results. Misinformation and conspiracy theories ran rampant in battleground states during the intervening days before the race was called, fueled in part by those delayed results. These theories took strong hold in states where mail-ballots turned the tide of the state results from Trump to Biden.

Delays in major swing states, such as Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, were largely due to legislation that prevented election officials from processing mail ballots before Election Day. State legislatures in both states refused to pass legislation that would have enabled election officials to process ballots before November 3, despite pleas from election officials to start the process earlier. Media outlets did not call Pennsylvania until four days after polls closed. The delay in election results may have provided the opportunity for misinformation to erode trust in the electoral process. Some political observers expect that, in the future, more voters will cast ballots by mail, which could lengthen future ballot processing times if not addressed by state legislatures.

B. Litigation

In some states, litigation provided fodder for misinformation or gave a veneer of credibility to existing misinformation. In Pennsylvania, many common misinformation tropes had already appeared in previous lawsuits (for instance, objections to the rule that expanded by three days the deadline for receipt of a mail ballot, complaints about inadequate election observers, and challenges to the integrity of mail-ballots). Some pieces of misinformation later appeared in lawsuits challenging the legitimacy of the election (lawsuits that were ultimately dismissed due to lack of evidence).

C. Voter Education and Counter Messaging

Election officials in key states responded to misinformation in their states through counter messaging and proactive voter education. Counter messaging entailed a direct response to misinformation claims, while other education measures indirectly combated misinformation by proactively debunking common tropes. These measures bolstered voter confidence in election integrity and provided transparency into the electoral process.

Election officials in 2020 increased usage of counter-messaging to respond directly to misinformation spreading online. For example, election officials in Georgia, including the chief operating officer for Georgia's secretary of state, directly debunked misconceptions online and in broadcast media. Additionally, official Twitter accounts for secretaries of state regularly fact-checked falsehoods in their states.

D. Resurfacing Past Misinformation

The majority of misinformation narratives that surfaced in the 2020 election were not new but rather variants of existing narratives that had appeared in previous election cycles. For example, allegations of double voting in 2020 also occurred in both the 2016 and 2018 elections: A 2016 study alleged finding over 8,000 "highly likely duplicate votes," while an unsubstantiated 2018 Facebook post by the conspiracy website Infowars alleged double voting by Democrats in Maryland. Allegations of "dead people voting" have also recurred since 2016 and before, despite safeguards to prevent this form of fraud. In 2016, President Trump incorrectly insinuated dead people were voting en masse and predicted the election would be "rigged." In 2018, a popular narrative falsely claimed 53,000 dead people were on Florida's voter rolls, citing a Fox News article from 2012. This overarching narrative was resurrected in 2020.

Another narrative resurrected in 2020 alleged that voting machines were manipulated or 'backdoored.' News sources like the New York Times and USA Today had previously raised concerns about potential vulnerabilities and glitches in voting machines. In 2016, some conservative websites accused 16 states of using voting machines from Smartmatic and purportedly allowing billionaire philanthropist George Soros to rig the election in favor of Hillary Clinton. There were also reports of machines flipping votes in 2016 and 2018, inciting claims that the machines were deliberately compromised. In 2020, despite the presence of safeguards to ensure voting machine integrity, these narratives mutated to target Dominion Voting Systems and Smartmatic.

Robust voter education on common narratives, voting processes, and associated safeguards before elections may be needed to reduce the public's susceptibility to misinformation. Potential pre-election education components could include, for instance, primers on the certification process of voting machines—a process which ensures that machines meet usability, security, and functionality requirements. Other education topics could include explanations of safeguards in voting processes, such as mail voting processes and signature verification. Additionally, post-election processes can serve to bolster voter confidence. Experts have found that audits conducted on paper ballots with paper trails—including risk-limiting

audits—may increase voter confidence in election results. Many states in 2020 also initiated or improved their mail ballot tracking software, which can be a useful tool to increase voter confidence in their ballot being counted.

IV.   Conclusion

Despite a widely successful election administration effort for the 2020 general election, misinformation targeted the integrity of elections in states across the country. Misinformation was most prevalent in high-stakes states whose results were key to the presidential race outcome, and most misinformation fit the overarching narrative that a widespread conspiracy had swung the election for Biden, though there were notable left-wing misinformation campaigns as well. Predictably, mail ballot integrity was a large focus of these misinformation campaigns, most often targeting batches of mail ballots that favored Biden and tabulation centers in counties with a high number of Democrats. Misinformation about in-person voting mainly focused on logistical hiccups or errors in routine voting procedures to characterize as evidence that election processes were intentionally defrauding one political side. In general, almost every piece of election misinformation widely circulated during the 2020 election cycle was demonstrably false.