

Voting Perceptions and the Impact of Misinformation

Jada Riley, Vanessa Gregorio

Dr. Natalie M. Scala, Dr. Josh Dehlinger

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Motivation

- Misinformation: False or inaccurate information
- Disinformation: False information intended to mislead, deliberate
- Breadth and scope evolving, in the U.S. national discourse
- False narratives during 2020 U.S. Presidential Election
 - Mail ballots lost, dumped, stolen
 - Printed by foreign countries
 - Voting machines deleting, losing, changing votes
- Substantial evidence from FBI, DHS, DOJ, CISA that the 2020 election was secure, no compromise of votes

Motivation

- Damage already done
- Voters confused about safety and security of voting methods
- Erosion of confidence in the legitimacy of election systems and processes
- Lots of literature on modeling the spread of misinformation
 - Graph theory, social network analysis, game theory, deep learning
- But what about *belief* in misinformation?
- And, specifically, how belief impacts perceptions related to voting and U.S. elections?
 - Consider news headlines and social media posts circulated before the 2020 General Election

Investigation Questions

- Research in belief is nascent, U.S. population at least aware of “fake news”
 - Could have beliefs impacted voting methods in 2022 Midterms?
1. Trends in voter belief in statements related to the 2020 U.S. General Election
 2. Willingness to share information based on belief of truth in the statement
 3. Voters’ frequency in fact-checking information and methods used when voters fact-check information
 4. Voters’ confidence in U.S. elections integrity and processes

Survey

- Level of agreement and willingness to share statements related to the 2020 U.S. General Election
- Voting plans for the 2022 Midterm Election
- Fact-checking habits
- Level of concern with threats to U.S. elections
- Open-ended comments

- Time period: October 2022
 - Note: *Before* the Dominion vs. Fox decision + shift in tone of media reporting
- Listservs, Facebook, online forums, Amazon MTurk

Survey Statements

Statement 1: False	“The United States cannot have all Mail In Ballots. It will be the greatest Rigged Election in history. People grab them from mailboxes, print thousands of forgeries and ‘force’ people to sign. Also, forge names. Some absentee OK, when necessary. Trying to use Covid for this Scam!” (Twitter @realDonaldTrump)
Statement 2: True	“Mail in voting fraud is nearly impossible to commit” (<i>CNET Online Media</i>)
Statement 3: True	“No, 20,000 Dead People in Pennsylvania Did Not Vote” (<i>The New York Times News Article</i>)
Statement 4: False	“HUGE! Attorney CONFIRMS Dominion Voting Machines in Michigan County CHANGED VOTES from Trump to Biden – IT WAS NOT HUMAN ERROR!” (<i>The Gateway Pundit Far-right Media</i>)
Statement 5: False	“Intelligence Expert Says 2020 Election was ‘Sophisticated Sting Operation’ Catching Dems Redhanded” (<i>Daily Headlines News Aggregator</i>)

Survey Statements

Statement 6: True	“Vote in person if you’re young and healthy – it’s relatively safe, and your vote is more likely to count” (<i>Business Insider Online Media</i>)
Statement 7: False	“So now the Democrats are using Mail Drop Boxes, which are a voter security disaster. Among other things, they make it possible for a person to vote multiple times. Also, who controls them, are they placed in Republican or Democrat areas? They are not Covid sanitized. A big fraud!” (Twitter @realDonaldTrump)
Statement 8: False	“HUGE: CISA Releases Much-Anticipated Report on Dominion Voting Machines – Reveals Software is Exploitable and Attackers are Able to Insert Malicious Code to Alter Results” (<i>The Gateway Pundit Far-right Media</i>)
Statement 9: True	“Drop Boxes, Mail-In Voting Are Not Threats to Election Integrity” (<i>Real Clear Politics Op-ed</i>)
Statement 10: False	“Mail-in voting supporters trying to use coronavirus outbreak for ‘scam’” (<i>The Hill News Article</i>)

Survey Demographics

Demographic	Response	Count	Percentage
Gender	Man	166	48.8
	Woman	172	50.6
	Transgender	0	0.0
	Non-Binary	2	0.6
	Other	0	0.0
	Choose not to disclose	0	0.0
Race	Black/African American	46	12.9
	American	33	9.2
	Asian/Asian American	1	0.3
	Pacific Islander	20	5.6
	Latinx/Hispanic	3	0.8
	White/Caucasian	249	69.7
	Native American	5	1.4
Age in Years	18 to 24	74	21.8
	25 to 34	92	27.1
	35 to 44	87	25.6
	45 to 54	36	10.6
	55 to 64	24	7.1
	65 to 74	23	6.8
	75+	3	0.9
	Choose not to disclose	1	0.3

Demographic	Response	Count	Percentage
Highest Level of Education	Middle school	0	0.0
	High school	63	18.5
	Associate's degree	50	14.7
	Bachelor's degree	155	45.6
	Master's degree	43	12.6
	Doctoral degree	27	7.9
	Choose not to disclose	2	0.6
Political Affiliation	Republican	74	21.8
	Democrat	182	53.5
	Independent	52	15.3
	Unaffiliated	19	5.6
	Choose not to disclose	8	2.4
	Other	5	1.5

- Diverse sample
- Skewed young, Democrat, educated, women
- $n = 340$ (collected = 449)

Question 1: Trends in Voter Belief

- False news spreads at a faster and wider pace than true stories (Pennycook & Rand, 2019)
 - Single exposure to fake news can enhance perceptions of accuracy
- Fluency: Less brain effort with familiar than novel information (Hassan & Barber, 2021)
 - Repetition leads to higher sense of truthfulness
- Dogmatic and religious fundamentalists more likely to believe false narratives (Bronstein, et al., 2019)
- Partisanship strongly associated with belief (Neyazi & Muhtadi, 2021)
 - Especially if target is opposing vs. preferred candidate
 - Trump 2016 supporters believed misinformation more when it was directly attributable to him vs. no attribution (Swire, et al., 2017)

Question 1: Trends in Voter Belief

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	<i>p</i>
1*	10%	30%	11.5%	11.5%	37.1%	0.000
2	16.5%	32.1%	12.6%	21.8%	17.1%	0.000
3	35%	21.8%	28.8%	6.5%	7.9%	0.000
4*	5.3%	20.3%	22.4%	9.4%	42.6%	0.000
5*	4.7%	21.8%	21.5%	8.5%	43.5%	0.000
6	16.5%	34.7%	21.2%	14.1%	13.5%	0.000
7*	7.9%	21.5%	19.1%	9.7%	41.8%	0.000
8*	7.6%	23.5%	25.3%	9.7%	33.8%	0.000
9	36.2%	27.9%	17.1%	9.7%	9.1%	0.000
10*	7.4%	21.5%	19.1%	8.5%	43.5%	0.000

- General belief in true statements
- General disbelief in untrue statements
- Notable portion of sample (11.5% to 28.8%) lacked certainty about level of agreement

Question 1: Trends in Voter Belief

- Lack of certainty driven by partisanship
- Overwhelm of passionate, ideological narratives
- Disappointment in political actors
 - Care about own interests vs. security gaps
- *"I think it is sad that legitimate concerns about protecting elections are now advanced via partisan angles as opposed to public policy ones in general. Fair elections really shouldn't be partisan, it is a very sad commentary on our public intellect."*
- *"It all seems kind of redundant and just another show in order to choose a figurehead."*
- *"It appears to me Reps or Dems really don't care about the concerns of the average American. Both parties are one in the same."*
- *"Federal elections in US are inherently farcical theater. Explicit fraud, whether or not it exists to one degree or another, is a pointless distraction."*

Question 2: Willingness to Share

- Dependability forms cornerstone of knowledge (Hardwig, 1991)
 - When share, rely on trust in credibility and reliability of source
- Belief influenced by credibility (Swire, et al., 2017)
 - Political figures are heuristic when evaluating truth
- Emotion increases belief in misinformation
 - But not real news when compared to using reason (Martel, et al., 2020)
- People may share what they know is false
 - Inattention or purposeful dissemination (Pennycook & Rand, 2021)

Question 2: Willingness to Share

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	<i>p</i>
1*	15.3%	20.9%	17.9%	7.1%	38.8%	0.000
2	21.5%	32.9%	23.5%	8.8%	13.2%	0.000
3	20.6%	24.4%	30.9%	8.2%	15.9%	0.000
4*	12.9%	15.9%	26.8%	5.6%	38.8%	0.000
5*	11.5%	18.2%	27.4%	4.4%	38.5%	0.000
6	16.8%	28.2%	28.2%	9.4%	17.4%	0.000
7*	10.6%	19.1%	24.7%	7.1%	38.5%	0.000
8*	10.9%	16.8%	30%	6.5%	35.9%	0.000
9	25.3%	31.2%	25.9%	5%	12.6%	0.000
10*	11.2%	20.3%	23.5%	6.5%	38.5%	0.000

- Willingness to share generally aligns with truth
- Notable portion of sample (17.9% to 30.9%) lacked certainty about willingness to share

Belief vs. Willingness to Share

- Spearman's rank correlation
- False statements: Correlation moderate
- True statements: Correlation weak to moderate
- Belief and willingness to share may not always be aligned
 - News media reason for sharing (ratings)
- More willing to share information strongly agree with, but less willing to share if actually true
- *"I feel like the possibility of exploitation is always there, so it can be easy for people to try and use this possibility to claim fraud. However, I feel like there truly was voting fraud then 3rd party consultants would truly be able to find it, and not just click-bait headlines."*
- *"I am concerned about FOX "fake news" propaganda. Their viewers believe FOX lies, and repeat it to others."*

Question 3: Fact-checking

- Fact-checking helps discredit false information and align perceptions with reality (York, et al., 2020; Porter & Wood, 2021)
 - But doesn't work as well when political ideology is strong
- Corrective measures have moderate influence on belief (Walter & Murphy, 2018)
- Misinformation still has lasting impact on reason (Ecker, et al., 2022)
- Literature is mixed
- Previous exposure still shapes attitudes, creating incentives for political figures to spread misinformation to shape public opinion (Thorson, 2016)

Question 3: Fact-checking

	Always	Most of the Time	Half of the Time	Sometimes	Never	<i>p</i>
Frequency	14.4%	30%	17.4%	32.9%	5.3%	0.000

	Confirm Credentials	Confirm Currency	Checking for Bias	Checking URL	Ensuring Consistent	Reading Story	Other	<i>p</i>
Methods	18.8%	18.2%	16.6%	14.5%	15.3%	15.3%	1.2%	0.000
	216	209	190	167	176	176	14	

- Voters less inclined to fact-check
- Various approaches used when it does occur (*n* = 1148)

Question 3: Fact-checking

- What individuals know influences effectiveness of the check (Li & Wagner, 2020)
 - Aligns with partisanship and ideology
 - Balanced coverage may even feel hostile
- *"People are going to take what they want from anything they read. To be educated is to be unbiased."*
- *"If the Democrats win again, it's rigged no matter, mail in vote in or in person; How can people stand for how the country is being run? You need to watch 2000 mules."*

Question 4: Voter Confidence

- Exposure to misinformation increases false belief in stolen elections (Dahlke & Hancock, 2022)
 - Moderated by motivated reasoning, stronger amongst conservatives
- Fact-checks can increase confidence in 2020 election (Bailard, et al., 2022)
 - Moderated by partisanship, skewed to Democrats and Independents
- Losers more likely to believe in improper counts (Sances & Stewart, 2015)
 - Sentiment has grown in U.S. over time
- Claims of fraud reduce confidence
 - Effects concentrated to Republicans and supporters of Mr. Trump
- Research all focuses on 2020
 - Broad work related to elections is minimal

Question 4: Voter Confidence

	Major	Some	Neutral	Little	No	<i>p</i>
Foreign Interference	15.3%	39.7%	13.8%	24.4%	6.8%	0.000
Domestic Interference	19.7%	36.2%	18.2%	17.6%	8.2%	0.000
Mail Ballot Fraud	16.8%	28.2%	12.6%	22.1%	20.3%	0.000
Mail Ballot Rejection	18.5%	34.4%	15.9%	15.3%	15.9%	0.000
Inaccurate Vote Counts	17.9%	30.6%	14.4%	19.7%	17.4%	0.000

- General agreement of concern with cyber, physical, insider threats to elections (65%)
- Level of concern vs. party affiliation significant ($p = 0.000$)
- Lowest major concern: Foreign interference
- Highest major concern: Domestic interference
 - Threats within borders more ominous than foreign actors

Question 4: Voter Confidence

- Preferred voting methods for 2022 vs. threats
- Mail-in ballot fraud $p = 0.0048$
 - Concerned? Vote in person
 - Not concerned? Vote absentee or by mail
- Mail-in ballot rejection $p = 0.0109$
 - Vote in person plans
 - Concerned? Higher
 - Not concerned? Lower
- Not significant
 - Foreign interference
 - Domestic interference
 - Inaccurate vote counts

Question 4: Voter Confidence

- Evidence that narratives may be impacting voting choice
- Voter preferences can be dynamic
 - Novelty, habit, history, health, convenience, security
- Partisanship has influence

- *"Republicans will never stop shouting about fraud now, even when there is none. [...] they will never stop peddling lies and conspiracy theories that have no bearing in reality. Is there anything more un-American than that? Hard to say."*
- *"I am concerned about MAGA strongholds and DJT."*
- *"If the Democrats win again, it's rigged no matter, mail in vote in or in person; How can people stand for how the country is being run? [...]"*

So, What Does This Mean?

- Broad inconsistency in voter perceptions and belief, whether true or false
- Belief driven by partisanship
- Belief and willingness to share not aligned
- Confidence in elections, misinformation narratives may not have taken hold in sample
- Concerns about domestic interference higher than foreign

- Support recent literature
- Challenge: Sharing untrue information driven by inattention (Pennycook & Rand, 2021)
- Fact checking insights new to literature
 - Insights into what was believed in 2022

What Do We Do About It?

- Delphi Panel
 - Helmer-Hirschberg (1967); Dalkey and Helmer (1963)
- Generate mitigations and countermeasures for misinformation and belief perceptions
 - Start from initial set of mitigations built from literature
 - Iterate to revise and reach consensus
- Consider viability or relevance of proposed mitigations + open ended feedback
- SMEs
 - Election security
 - U.S. voting processes
 - Social science of misinformation
- April-July 2023, fully online

Delphi Panel Discussion

- Concern about potential First Amendment violations
- Media literacy using politically neutral content
- Anecdotes from varied backgrounds
- Implementation practicality
- Fragmented opinions and trust
- Aspirations vs. concrete strategies
- Lack of transparency / bias

- Four rounds to reach consensus

Question 1: Trends in Voter Belief

- Media platforms should encourage voters to seek information. Modifying recommendation algorithms to expose individuals to a wide range of views on related topics (i.e., elections) will allow them to be able to form their own opinions. Recommendation algorithms should also be publicized.
- Sources that are responsible for providing factual information should have explanations that state why the information is correct. These explanations must be simple and plausible and demonstrate why misinformation on the subject is incorrect. Evidence used should have citations.
- Listening to anecdotes from reputable figures and peers that involve positive election experiences and/or support factual information about election process will help dispel belief in misinformation narratives. It is important that these anecdotes come from a wide range of individuals.

Question 2: Willingness to Share

- Policy should be enacted and/or laws passed to make individuals who intentionally engage in the spread of misinformation and or media platforms that fail to take the necessary measures to prevent the spread of misinformation legally liable.
- Recognizing similarities in groups that one may disagree with would reduce negative perceptions of them. This would then also reduce the likelihood of them not entertaining other opinions. Reconciliation should begin at a localized, non-political level and should prioritize finding common ground on shared concerns.

Question 3: Fact-checking

- Media literacy should be taught to potential and eligible voters so that they are able to differentiate between factual and falsified information. This must be done in both classroom and non-classroom settings.
- Media platforms should not report on factual and falsified information equally. Any news coverage of misinformation narratives should describe why people believe in it and why it is false. Misinformation narratives should be scarcely repeated.

Question 4: Voter Confidence

- The federal government should treat election misinformation as an attack on critical infrastructure and create clear plans to combat this issue. There must be a concerted effort to depoliticize election systems and processes.
- Voters should be able to easily ask questions and access information about elections. Channels of communication between voters and election officials should be made available. Examples include websites, social media, and responsive points of contact through email, phone, and/or text. Election system training materials should also be publicized.

Conclusions

- Examine belief in misinformation related to 2020 election
 - Influence on perception of threats related to and confidence in elections
- Insights on fact-checking
- Potential influence on voting behaviors
- Develop strategies to mitigate belief and lack of faith
- Results can extend to other forms of misinformation
 - Consider belief and not only spread

Questions?

Dr. Natalie M. Scala
nscala@towson.edu
www.drnataliescala.com

Dr. Josh Dehlinger
jdehlinger@towson.edu

Jada Riley
Vanessa Gregorio

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