Misinformation and Factual Corrections: The Case of the 2020 U.S. Election

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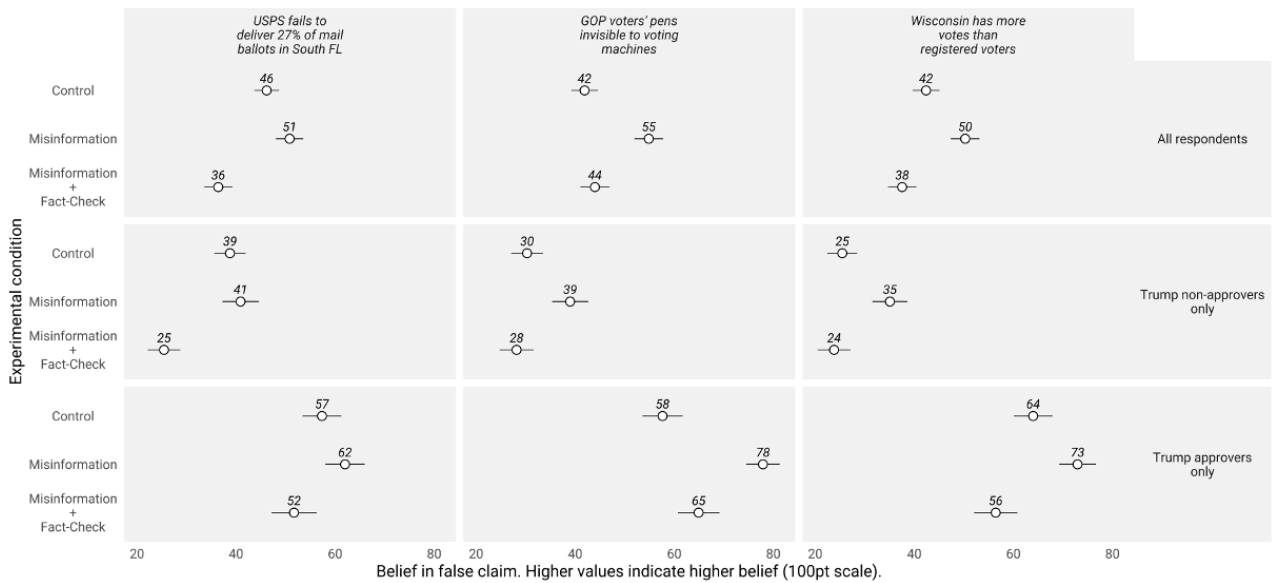Ethan Porter
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Beginning in September 2020 and concluding at the end of November, we conducted eight panel experiments to measure the effects of election-related misinformation and factual corrections. In total, we evaluated twenty-one highly-trafficked pieces of misinformation, as well as corresponding fact-checks. Three of the false items we tested advanced fraudulent claims about the election and were widely circulated on social media after election day. This document describes our findings related to these three pieces of election-related misinformation and corresponding fact checks.

All experiments proceeded as follows. After providing background information, including their approval of President Trump, individuals participated in three independently-randomized experiments, each relating to a separate topic of misinformation. For each topic, respondents were assigned to one of three conditions: pure control, misinformation only, or misinformation followed by a fact-check. Participants were then asked about their belief in the false claim. We estimate the effects of our treatments by comparing group averages.

The three specific fraudulent election claims we tested shortly after the election included a tweet claiming that Wisconsin had more votes cast than people who were registered to vote; a video claiming eyewitness evidence that voters in Maricopa County Arizona were forced to vote using sharpie pens that could not be read by the voting machines (we included a transcript of the video); and a post claiming that the U.S. Postal Service failed to deliver 27% of mail in ballots in South Florida. We provided respondents with misinformation in as close as possible a form to the original form that circulated on social media, while our fact-checks come from PolitiFact, the non-partisan fact-checking organization. The specific misinformation items and corresponding fact-checks can be found in the Appendix.

In Figure 1, we depict the effects of misinformation and factual corrections concerning these three false claims about the election. Effects are reported on 100-point scales, with higher values indicating more agreement with the false claim. The figure shows that exposure to misinformation decreases factual accuracy and that exposure to fact-checks consistently increases factual accuracy. For example, in the third column of the figure, we see that people exposed to a social media post alleging that "Wisconsin had more votes than registered voters" were more likely to believe such a claim, compared to control subjects who saw no such post. However, those who saw misinformation about voting in Wisconsin and then saw a factual correction were more accurate than those who saw misinformation only. Similar patterns play out for those who approved and did not approve of President Trump.

In line with previous work (Porter and Wood 2019; Nyhan, Porter, Reifler and Wood 2019), we demonstrate that misinformation causes increases in false beliefs. This effect holds for people who support President Trump and for those who do not. At the same time, exposure to factual corrections reduces false beliefs, including among those expected to be more resistant to correction. This signals the importance of fact-checking in the face of misinformation.

USPS fails to
deliver 27% of mail
ballots in South FL

GOP voters' pens
invisible to voting
machines

Wisconsin has more
votes than
registered voters

Experimental condition

Control
Misinformation
Misinformation + Fact-Check

All respondents

46 / 51 / 36 | 42 / 55 / 44 | 42 / 50 / 38

Trump non-approvers only

39 / 41 / 25 | 30 / 39 / 28 | 25 / 35 / 24

Trump approvers only

57 / 62 / 52 | 58 / 78 / 65 | 64 / 73 / 56

Belief in false claim. Higher values indicate higher belief (100pt scale).

We note two important aspects of our research design. First, because we conducted randomized experiments, we are able to isolate the effects of misinformation and factual corrections. Our results do not reflect associations or correlations between misinformation, factual corrections and beliefs. Rather, they are estimates of the average causal effects of our treatments on beliefs. Second, for all our experiments, participants were U.S. adults, recruited over Amazon's Mechanical Turk and Lucid. Both offer convenience samples that have performed well when compared to more representative samples (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012; Coppock and McClellan 2019). For the experiments described above, participants were recruited via Lucid. We emphatically do not generalize the baseline levels of false belief from our convenience sample to the general public. We are more comfortable generalizing the estimates of the effects of misinformation and fact-checks to the general public on the basis of prior methodological work and the similarity of effects across types of people within our study.

About the authors

Alexander Coppock is an assistant professor at Yale University. Kimberly Gross is an associate professor at George Washington University. Ethan Porter is an assistant professor at George Washington University. Emily Thorson is an assistant professor at Syracuse University. Thomas J. Wood is an assistant professor at Ohio State University.

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Appendix

Study Design

We administered eight panel experiments measuring the effects of election related misinformation between September and November of 2020. Four panels were fielded on Mechanical Turk and four were fielded on Lucid. The first wave of every panel was structured identically. Before the experimental portion, we asked extensive questions about the participant. Subjects then participated in three independently-randomized experiments, each relating to a separate piece of misinformation. For each experiment, respondents were assigned to one of three conditions: pure control, misinformation only, or misinformation followed by a fact-check. Participants saw the misinformation and fact-checks in as close to their original form as possible, including transcripts, Facebook posts, tweets, video, and fake news" articles in order to maximize the realism of our experiments. The fact-checks were a version of the PolitiFact fact-check of that specific piece of misinformation.

After treatment, all respondents, including those in control conditions, answered questions about their belief in each piece of misinformation, measured via two questions. The first asked how accurate they thought the misinformation statement was, and the second how confident they were in their answer. These two questions are combined to form the 100-point scale representing confidence in belief in the false claim. To assess effects on attitudes, participants were presented with feeling thermometers for the groups and people prominently featured in the misinformation and fact-checks.

At the close of the first wave, we debriefed subjects in the misinformation conditions to inform them that the misinformation was false by showing them the corresponding fact checks. Because we could not be certain that all participants would return for subsequent surveys, we believed it unethical to expose them to uncorrected misinformation. To measure over-time effects, we recontacted participants at least once, with a minimum of seven days separating waves. Six of our eight panels were comprised of two waves; the remaining two featured a third wave. Post-treatment waves included the same set of outcome measures as in the first wave. We only measure the over-time effect of misinformation, misinformation plus fact-check, relative to control. Evaluating the over-time effect of misinformation on beliefs allows us to directly address the pressing real-world question of whether the effects of fact-checks in the presence of misinformation endure beyond immediate exposure.

How did we choose misinformation to study?

Each week throughout the study period, PolitiFact shared internal data with us about the popularity of their fact-checks (measured via web traffic). These data informed the selection of the fact-checks used in the experiments. The topics were chosen based on the following criteria. First, each received relatively high traffic on the PolitiFact website. Second, each panel included one false claim that we anticipated would be congenial to Republicans, one false claim expected

to be congenial to Democrats, and a third chosen to tap into unfolding events, regardless of expectations about differential partisan response. The full eight panels featured 21 distinct pieces of misinformation.

Treatments used to assess fraudulent election claims

The specific fraudulent election claims (the misinformation and attendant fact checks) discussed here were circulated on social media after Election Day. We tested them in a panel fielded on Lucid just over a week after the election. The results presented are from the first wave of that panel. The specific misinformation treatments and attendant fact-checks used in the study reproduced below.

Outcome items

To the best of your knowledge, how accurate is this statement?
 "Wisconsin has more votes than people who are registered to vote."
[Not at all accurate/Not very accurate/Somewhat accurate accurate/Very accurate]

To the best of your knowledge, how accurate is this statement?
 "Voters in Maricopa County, Arizona, were forced to vote using Sharpie pens that aren't read by voting machines."
[Not at all accurate/Not very accurate/Somewhat accurate accurate/Very accurate]

To the best of your knowledge, how accurate is this statement?
 "USPS failed to deliver 27% of mail-in ballots in South Florida."
[Not at all accurate/Not very accurate/Somewhat accurate accurate/Very accurate]

False Claim: Wisconsin has more votes than people who are registered to vote.

Misinformation Treatment and Correction

Please read the following tweet.
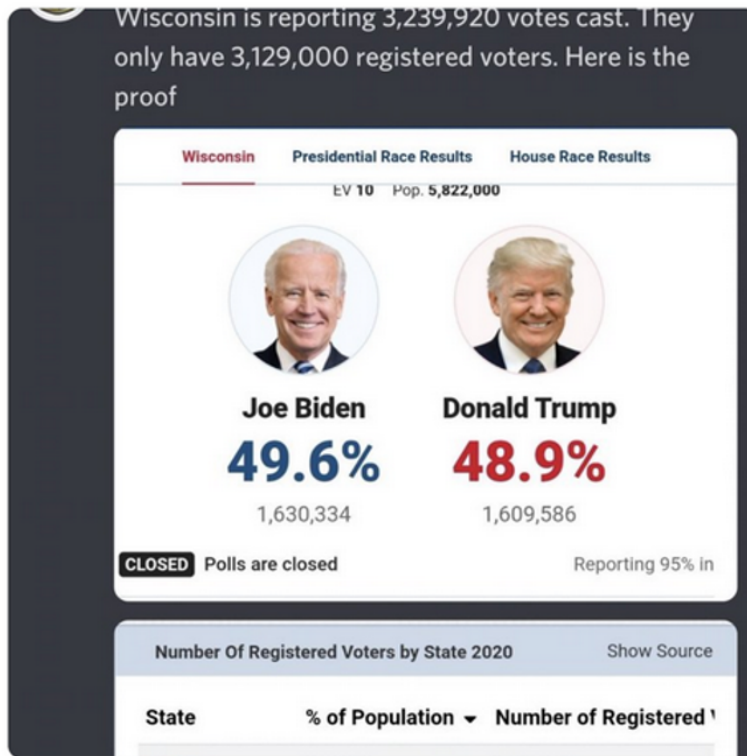

Mike Coudrey ✓
@MichaelCoudrey

Follow ˅

BREAKING: Wisconsin has more votes than people who are registered to vote.

Total number of registered voters: 3,129,000

Total number of votes cast:
3,239,920

This is direct evidence of fraud.

Wisconsin is reporting 3,239,920 votes cast. They only have 3,129,000 registered voters. Here is the proof

Wisconsin	Presidential Race Results	House Race Results

EV 10   Pop. 5,822,000

Joe Biden
49.6%
1,630,334

Donald Trump
48.9%
1,609,586

CLOSED Polls are closed   Reporting 95% in

Number Of Registered Voters by State 2020	Show Source
State	% of Population ▾ Number of Registered ˅

7:59 AM - 4 Nov 2020

"Wisconsin has more votes than people who are registered to vote. … This is direct evidence of fraud."

No, Wisconsin doesn't have more ballots cast than registered voters

by Ciara O'Rourke, November 4, 2020

IF YOUR TIME IS SHORT:

As of midday on Nov. 4, the number of votes cast in the presidential election was less than the number of registered voters in Wisconsin on Nov. 1.

Because Wisconsin allows people to register to vote on Election Day, the total number of registered voters in the 2020 election could change.

A winner had yet to be declared in the presidential race in Wisconsin when, on Nov. 4, a tweet wrongly alleging voter fraud started to spread online.

"BREAKING: Wisconsin has more votes than people who are registered to vote," tweeted Mike Coudrey, who describes himself as an activist, entrepreneur and investor. "Total number of registered voters: 3,129,000. Total number of votes cast: 3,239,920. This is direct evidence of voter fraud."

Coudrey, who on Election Day tweeted two other inaccurate claims that we debunked, has since deleted the tweet. But not before it was shared widely on Twitter and Facebook, where one account wrote: "Proof voter fraud in Wisconsin materializes."

His claim drew the attention of *New York Times* reporter Sheera Frenkel, who quickly called it out as misinformation.

"There are more than 3.6 million registered voters in Wisconsin. Look for yourself," she tweeted, sharing a link to the Wisconsin Elections Commission.

According to the commission, as of Nov. 1, the state had more than 3.6 million active registered voters.

The commission's verified Twitter account also tweeted that statistic on Nov. 4, seemingly in response to Coudrey's tweet. Wisconsin also allows voters to register on Election Day, the commission said, which means that the voter registration numbers that some counties report in their unofficial results may not be a true indicator of how many people are registered to vote.

Even so, the total number of votes cast and counted in the presidential election in Wisconsin was 3,297,199 as of about 1 p.m. Eastern time on Nov. 4 — fewer than the number of registered voters in the state as of Nov. 1.

"There are never more ballots than registered voters," the commission tweeted.

We rate the claim that Wisconsin had more votes than registered voters Pants on Fire!

False Claim: Voters in Maricopa County, Arizona, were forced to vote using Sharpie pens that aren't read by voting machines.

Misinformation Treatment and Correction

Please watch the following video and/or read the transcript. The video was filmed at an Arizona polling place on Election Day, 2020.

TRANSCRIPT

Man: So, explain one more time.

Woman: So the people who were in front of me, there were two people in front of me, who used the Sharpie that was given to them by the poll workers. It did not read their ballot.

Man: Okay.

Woman: And they slid it in there twice. I used a pen. Took their Sharpie and threw it away.

Man: And it read your ballot?

Woman: And it read my ballot.

Man: So what they're doing is they're telling people to use the Sharpies, that way those votes aren't counted.

Woman: Yes.

Man: That's exactly what's happening. So there was other people that were in there voting with their pens, and they literally went around and they were yanking pens out of their hands.

Woman: Yes. They tried to do that to me, and I took their Sharpie, and I hid it, because then they said "Look for all the Sharpies that are not being used, and take the Sharpies back." They had a bowl of pens behind them that they were not giving the people, and only giving Sharpies out.

Man: There we go.

Man: So, the ones with the Sharpies are not being read at all.

Woman: No.

Man: None of those ballots are being read.

Woman: Of course not.

Man: And so they're doing it because they're trying to skew all of the votes in there. That's exactly what's going on.

Woman: And they didn't even try to slide it more than one time, they immediately took it and slid it in the front, not even trying a second time, they just waved it through int he front and I was like --

Man: That's what they did with yours?

Woman 2: Yup. And I just went with a Sharpie, voted for Trump, and, uh, she just slid it in, and that was it. And I --

Man: But they're not counting. They're not counting the ones with the Sharpies. And so they're forcing people to use the Sharpies and those votes aren't being counted.

Woman 2: Right.

Man: That's what's going on.

Woman: And then I posted it on my Facebook group chat on my neighborhood, they said it's at the King Creek Library, they did it at ASU Polytech earlier, that like four different polling places were doing Sharpies, all between Pin Creek and the Edgedale neighborhood.

Man: Yep. And those ones are not being counted.

Woman: Yup.

Man: They're invalid.

Woman: Yes.

Man: So they're invalidating votes, is what they are doing.

Woman 1 and Woman 2: Yes.

Woman: And there was a guy that directly came out and yelled at me. Three times. They both came out.

Man: Oh no, they called the sheriff's, and told us to stop handing out the ballpoint pens, in which case, those are the only ones that are actually being counted and validated.

Woman: I used your pen and I gave it back to you.

Man: Yes. Yes. And so, we know that, and we're going to tell on them, you need to use a ballpoint pen, not the Sharpie, and now those are getting invalidated. So people are coming here to vote for Donald Trump, and those votes are all getting invalidated. That's what's going on. There you go. That's all we need. Perfect. Welcome to the new America, people, that's what's going on.

Voters in Maricopa County, Ariz., were forced to vote using Sharpie pens that aren't read by voting machines.

Sharpiegate, voter fraud claim in Arizona is False

by Tom Kertscher, November 4, 2020

IF YOUR TIME IS SHORT:

Voters could use ink pens to fill out their ballots, but the county gave Sharpie markers to voters because ballots filled in with Sharpie pens are processed more precisely by voting machines.

In an Election Night Facebook post labeled "Tonight's voting shenanigans," a woman in Maricopa County, Ariz., where Phoenix is the county seat, appears to be being interviewed. But it's not clear by whom.

The woman claims she witnessed inside her polling place election workers forcing some voters to use Sharpie permanent markers to mark their ballots — and that those ballots were not being read by the voting machines.

The suggestion from the man questioning the woman was that this was an effort to block the votes of people supporting President Donald Trump — since people voting in person on Election Day have been considered more likely to support Trump over Joe Biden.

It turns out the Maricopa County Elections Department was prescient about what some are calling Sharpie-gate.

On Oct. 24, the elections department posted on YouTube a video labeled: "Can I use a Sharpie on my Ballot? Maricopa County Voters can use a Sharpie to Mark their Ballot." By Nov. 4, it had more than 1,000 views.

An animated figure named Phil the Ballot introduces the video. The narrator says:

"Did you know you can use a black or blue pen or Sharpie to fill out your ballot in Maricopa County? The new tabulation equipment only reads the oval, so bleed-throughs are not a problem....

"At the vote center, you may notice fine-tip Sharpies are used. That's because it's the fastest-drying ink and works best on the tabulation equipment. If you're filling out your ballot at home, you can use blue or black ink with ball-point pen or Sharpie. Just don't use red ink. The tabulation equipment cannot read red."

In other words, the Sharpie is actually the preferred pen for filling out ballots in Maricopa County.

This claim is inaccurate. We rate it False.

False Claim: USPS failed to deliver 27% of mail-in ballots in South Florida.

Misinformation Treatment and Correction

Please read the following tweet.

Raw Story ✓
@RawStory

USPS failed to deliver 27 percent of mail-in ballots in South Florida: report

USPS failed to deliver 27 percent of mail-in ballots in South Florida: report
rawstory.com

7:40 AM · 11/4/20 · Hootsuite Inc.

Bloggers

stated on November 4, 2020 in a Facebook post:

"USPS failed to deliver 27% of mail-in ballots in South Florida"

Claim that postal service failed to deliver 27% of mail-in ballots in South Florida is 100% wrong

by Jon Greenberg, November 5, 2020

IF YOUR TIME IS SHORT:

The 27% figure is based on a misreading of U.S. Postal Service data.

The USPS said it skipped some steps in order to get ballots to election offices faster.

Before, and in one case, on Election Day, officials from the two largest counties in South Florida went to postal facilities to guarantee they got every ballot.

The claim that the U.S. Postal service failed to deliver 27% of mail-in ballots in South Florida has popped up on Facebook and Twitter. There's no truth to that, but it is interesting to see how one outfit raised suspicions.

The website Raw Story posted a story about newly released data on ballot delivery.

"One of the worst failures occurred in South Florida, where 27% of mail-in votes may have never been received," the Nov. 4 article said. "But those statistics might not be telling the entire story. Vice News reported Tuesday that ballots were not being scanned for delivery in an effort to speed up the process."

Let's unpack what's going on.

The 27% figure was derived based on a tweet from Hill reporter (and former PolitiFact reporter) John Kruzel. The tweet showed USPS data, and for the South Florida delivery area, the processing score for ballots was 74.43%.

A few people took that and, with a bit of sloppy math, came up with 27% undelivered.

But anyone reading the thread in the tweet would see that in order to speed up the delivery of ballots to election offices, the postal service had said that it didn't bother to scan ballots on their way out from the mail processing center.

"Many facilities have arranged for local turnaround," lawyers for the postal service affirmed wrote in a Nov. 3 filing.

"It's not that they weren't delivered," said National Association of Letter Carriers chief of staff Jim Sauber. "They were pulled out directly from the rest of the mail and delivered the same day."

We contacted the election supervisor offices of two of the largest South Florida counties, Broward and Miami-Dade. The spokesman for Broward Steve Vancore said there were zero undelivered ballots.

"We went to all 42 post offices, the main postal collection center in Oakland Park and the regional center in Opa Locka in the days leading up to and on Election Day and retrieved all the ballots that were at those sites," Vancore said. "We were at both the Aldridge and Opa Locka sites at 7:00 pm to get every last ballot."

Miami-Dade processed 510,830 mail-in ballots. In the days right before Election Day, they found 24 ballots at a postal facility that were on their way to voters and hadn't been delivered. They made sure that they were. They also found six completed ballots. Those came to the election office and were processed.

Our ruling: There is nothing to this claim. We rate it Pants on Fire.