Trending in the Wrong Direction:
Social Media Platforms' Declining Enforcement of Voting Disinformation

September 2, 2021

Common Cause
Education Fund

Acknowledgments

The Common Cause Education Fund is the research and public education affiliate of Common Cause, founded by John Gardner in 1970. We work to create open, honest, and accountable government that serves the public interest; promote equal rights, opportunity, and representation for all; and empower all people to make their voices heard in the political process.

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INTRODUCTION

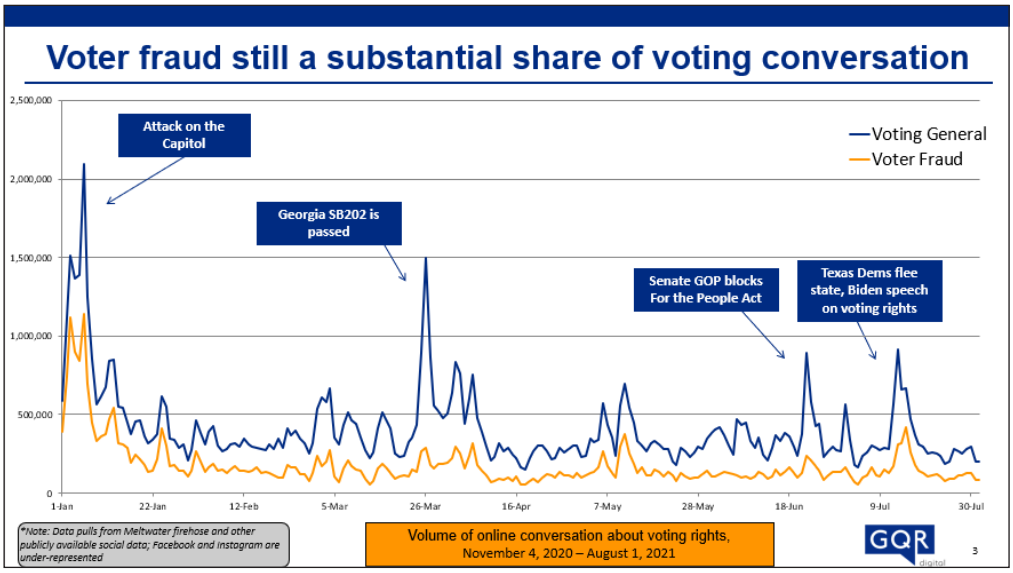
American democracy is at a critical juncture, with roughly 1 in 3 Americans—and nearly two-thirds of Republicans—still wrongfully believing the 2020 election was "rigged and stolen from Trump" more than seven months after President Biden was inaugurated. These lies, which began and proliferated during 2020 across social media and were pushed along by former President Donald Trump and his supporters, are still alive and widely shared across popular social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.

Social media platforms have long struggled to remove election disinformation from their channels, but they now appear to be relaxing their efforts entirely—while at the same time cutting off a well-respected research team hours after they informed Facebook they would be studying the spread of disinformation on the platform about the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol.

While media coverage and social media platform statements have focused on battling COVID-19 disinformation, it is critical to remember that election disinformation similarly has a significant real-world impact. Researchers like the Atlantic Council's DFRLab have shown that the January 6 insurrection was fueled by election disinformation. Defendants being prosecuted over their role in the January 6 insurrection are attempting to use election disinformation as a legal defense.

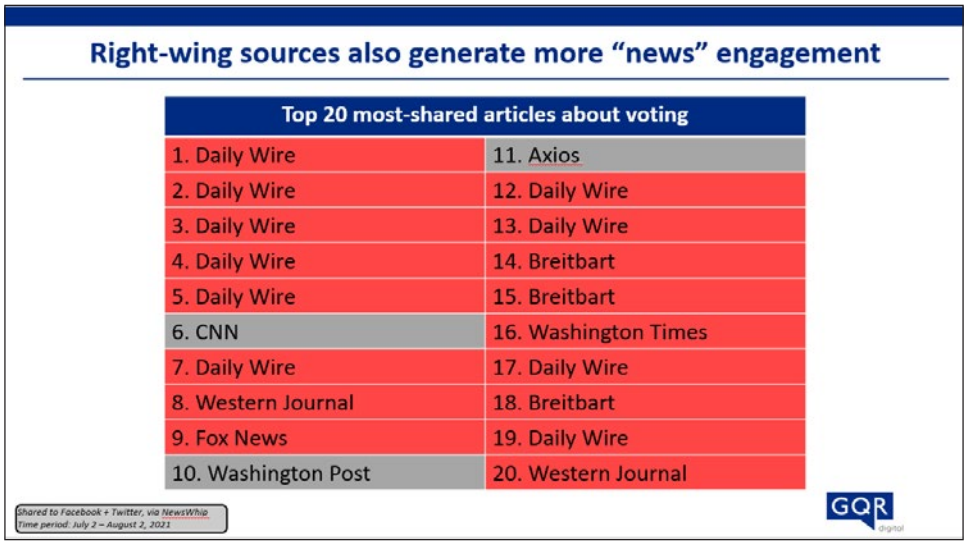
The contemporary impact of voting disinformation on social media is still acute. False claims of fraud not only undermine President Joe Biden's legitimacy but are actively used to justify suppressing citizens' voting power. More than 400 bills have been introduced in 49 state legislatures in 2021 that would restrict voting access—and at least 18 states have already enacted 30 such laws.

Throughout 2020 and leading up to the January 6 Capitol attack, the majority of social media conversation about voting was focused specifically on the topic of voter fraud. This trend has continued in 2021, where a substantial share of the overall conversation continues to focus on fraud.



Particularly on Facebook, right-leaning accounts with a history of peddling election disinformation continue to drive the conversation about voting. In July 2021, 17 of the 20 most-shared links on Facebook about voting came from right-wing outlets that frequently spread false narratives and disinformation on voting and elections, as did 11 of the 20 highest-engagement Facebook posts. The Daily Wire by itself was responsible for all of the top-five, most-shared links, and 10 of those top 20, with articles focused on legitimizing Arizona's sham ballot

review, promoting voting restrictions, such as voter ID, and called for arresting Texas House members who fled the state to stop a voter suppression law.



This strongly imbalanced perspective on social media continues to pose a clear and present threat to American voting and democracy. In the following sections, we assess the way social media platforms continue to treat this content and allow it to spread unchallenged to millions of American users.

A Note on Examples of Disinformation

This report was compiled by volunteers and staff disinformation analysts, and as such contains examples of disinformation that should not be amplified. Where necessary, we have obfuscated the account names of active users in order to not provide free exposure. More details and examples are available upon request. While all examples in this document are disinformation and should not be amplified, we have left unaltered the examples where platforms added labels in order to make the labeling clear to the reader.

Overview of Research

Ahead of the 2020 presidential election, mainstream social media platforms expanded their policies and enforcement against election-related disinformation, removing or labeling many dangerous false claims of widespread voter fraud. These efforts further expanded following the January 6 Capitol attack when platforms took more serious enforcement action against President Trump and many of his allies whose false claims laid the groundwork for the insurrection.

Seven months after inauguration day, despite ongoing and widespread proliferation of false election claims, social media platforms appear to be backing off from enforcing voting and election disinformation. Claims that undermine the results and Biden's legitimate election are still circulating online and seeing high volume and engagement.

Although no one outside of the social media platforms themselves has access to enough data to say for certain how much effort platforms put into enforcement, there are many examples of social media posts generating high engagement on provably false claims that are similar to posts that were labeled or removed months ago. And this is not just a failure of automated moderation: These posts have been reported to the platforms as disinformation, but no action has been taken.

Platforms did not put any sort of public timeline on their election disinformation policies and have not given a public explanation for why disinformation posts such as those referenced in the following sections are allowed to remain active.

TWITTER

Moderation Surrounding the 2020 Election

In September 2020, Twitter expanded its policies on election-related disinformation, with the intent to "label or remove false or misleading information intended to undermine public confidence in an election or other civic process." This expressly includes "misleading claims about the results or outcome of a civic process."

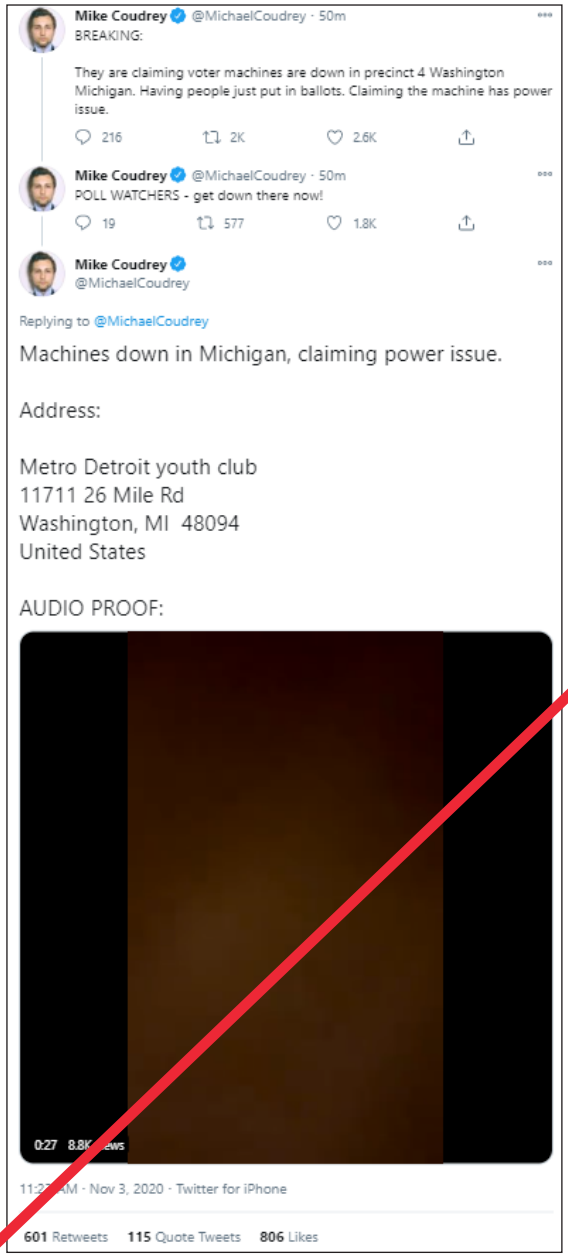
Ahead of and immediately following the election, Twitter labeled or removed a number of tweets from President Trump and his staff that falsely claimed there was widespread election fraud or that Trump won.

On February 1, 2021, Twitter permanently banned MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell's account after he continued to falsely claim that Trump won the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

Other examples of disinformation around the election/inauguration that Twitter removed include the following:

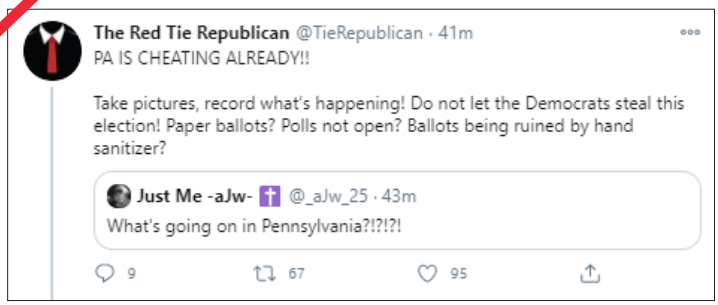
(Account suspended)

(Account suspended)



(Account suspended)

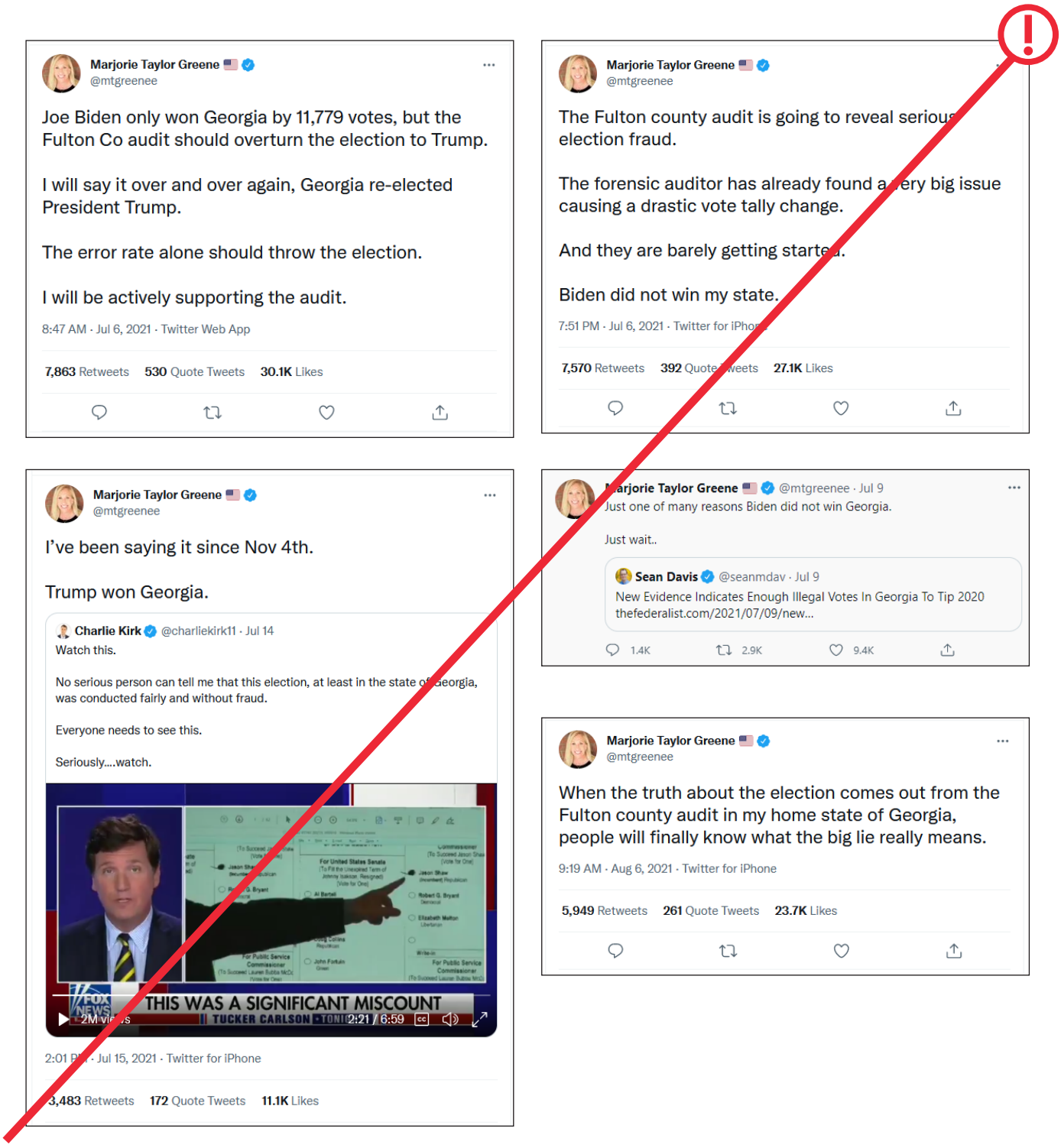
(Account no longer exists)



(Account suspended)

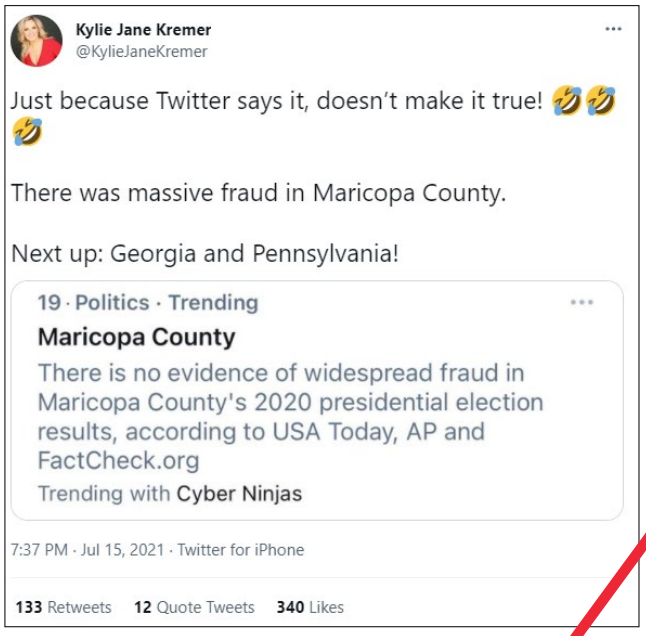
Current Moderation Efforts

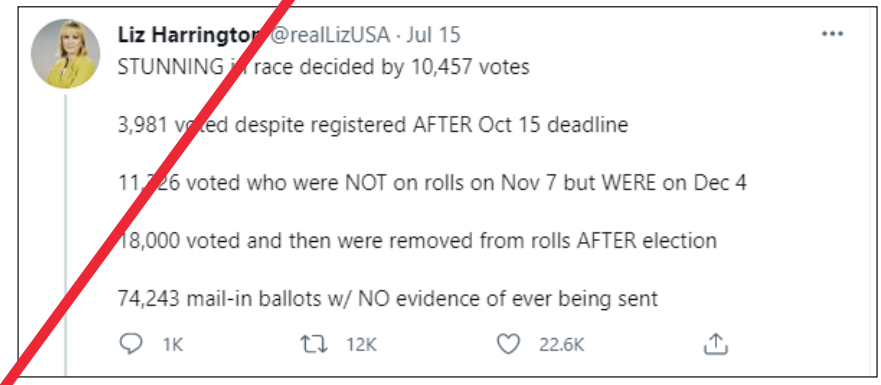
In recent weeks, however, Twitter has allowed many posts to remain live that make provably false claims about the outcome of the election. While in January 2021 Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene received a 12-hour suspension based on spreading false election conspiracy theories, she has not been sanctioned for her recent similar claims (see examples below). There have been penalties applied to Rep. Green recently, but regarding COVID-19 related disinformation. On August 10, 2021 Rep. Greene's account was suspended account for a week after she posted disinformation regarding the FDA and COVID-19.



Examples of election disinformation recently posted by Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene on Twitter that were not removed, labeled, or otherwise actioned by Twitter (as of 8/17/21).

In July 2021 Twitter did take action against several accounts promoting sham ballot reviews (including in Arizona), but the company cited spam and coordinated activity as reasons for actions, rather than violations of its elections or civic integrity policy. The following are several examples of content that has remained active and unlabeled:





FACEBOOK

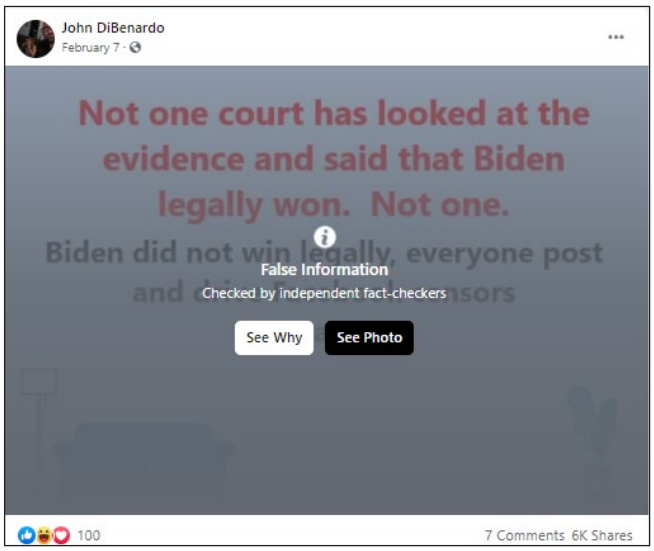
Moderation Surrounding the 2020 Election

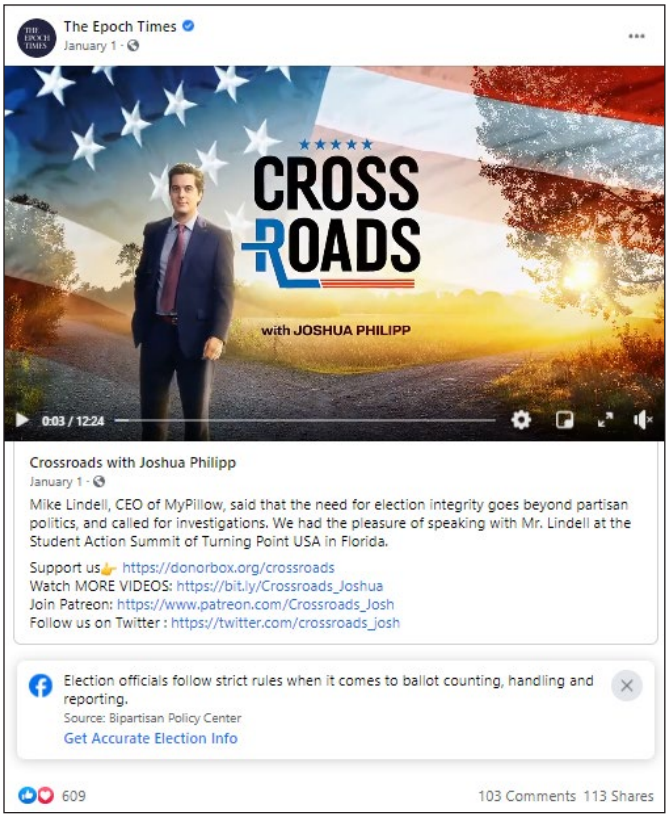
In September 2020, Facebook announced it would not accept new political ads in the week ahead of election day and publicized new rules to label misinformation about the election and voting—including content saying certain types of voting would lead to fraud or early claims of victory from candidates.

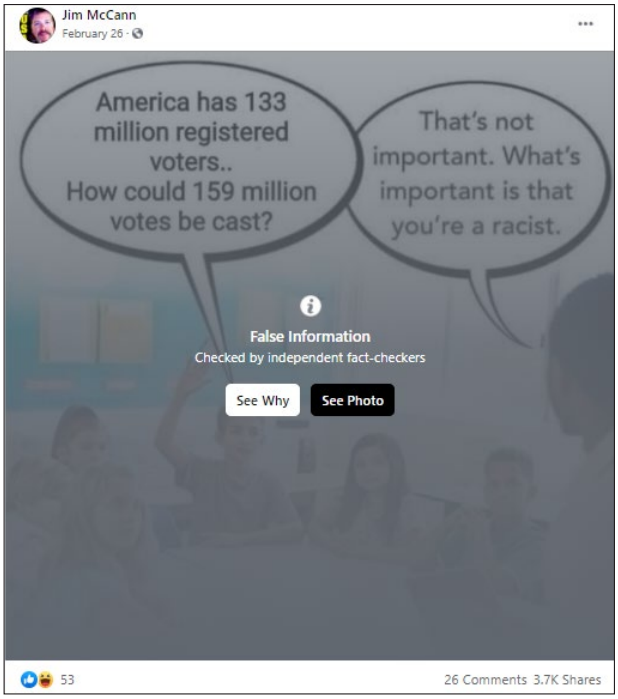
Ahead of and immediately following the election, Facebook's policy was to label posts that claimed voter fraud or a "rigged election" with a link to its voting information center. Examples of labels include the following: *The US has laws, procedures, and established institutions to ensure the integrity of our elections; final results may be different from initial vote counts as ballot counting will continue for days or weeks; and votes are being counted. The winner of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election has not been projected.*

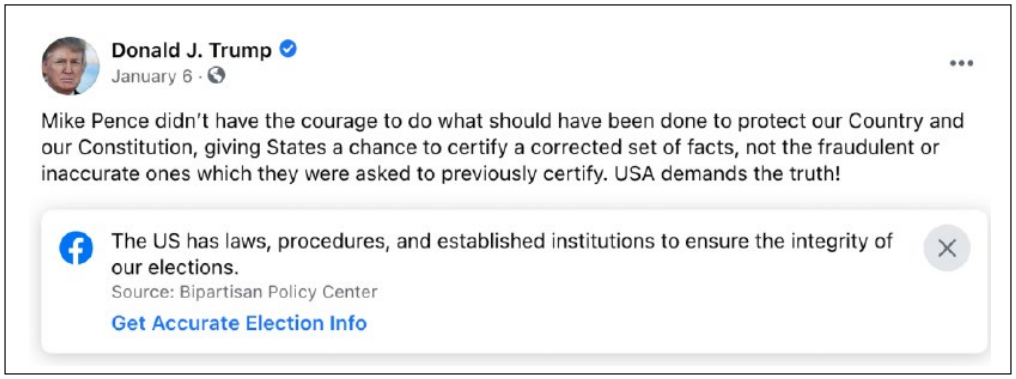
Following the January 6 attack on the Capitol, Facebook took additional actions, including suspending President Trump's account indefinitely, increasing its monitoring for calls to violence and protest, and updating its elections label to *"Joe Biden has been elected President with results that were certified by all 50 states. The US has laws, procedures, and established institutions to ensure the peaceful transfer of power after an election."*

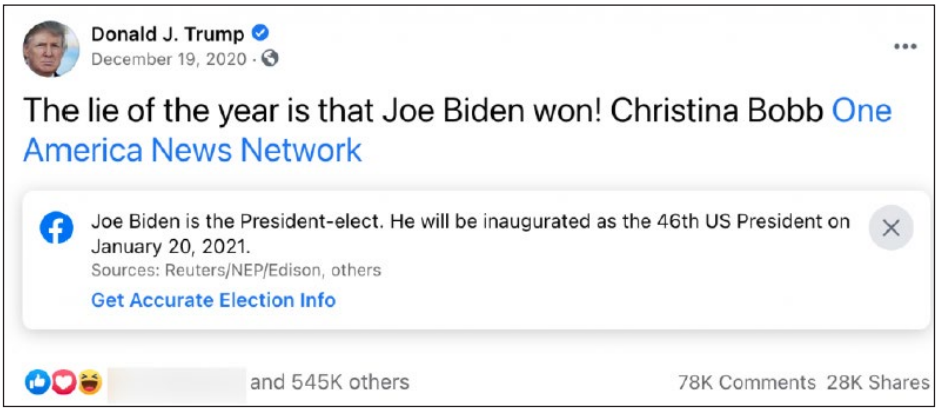
Examples of content regarding the election/inauguration that Facebook labeled are as follows:




The Epoch Times
January 1 ·
CROSS ROADS
with JOSHUA PHILIPP
0:03 / 12:24
Crossroads with Joshua Philipp
January 1 ·
Mike Lindell, CEO of MyPillow, said that the need for election integrity goes beyond partisan politics, and called for investigations. We had the pleasure of speaking with Mr. Lindell at the Student Action Summit of Turning Point USA in Florida.
Support us https://donorbox.org/crossroads
Watch MORE VIDEOS: https://bit.ly/Crossroads_Joshua
Join Patreon: https://www.patreon.com/Crossroads_Josh
Follow us on Twitter : https://twitter.com/crossroads_josh
Election officials follow strict rules when it comes to ballot counting, handling and reporting.
Source: Bipartisan Policy Center
Get Accurate Election Info
609
103 Comments 113 Shares

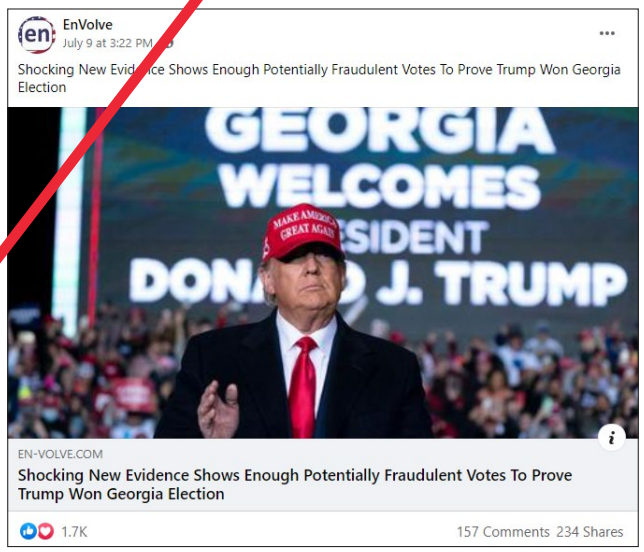

Jim McCann
February 26 ·
America has 133 million registered voters.. How could 159 million votes be cast?
That's not important. What's important is that you're a racist.
False Information
Checked by independent fact-checkers
See Why
See Photo
53
26 Comments 3.7K Shares

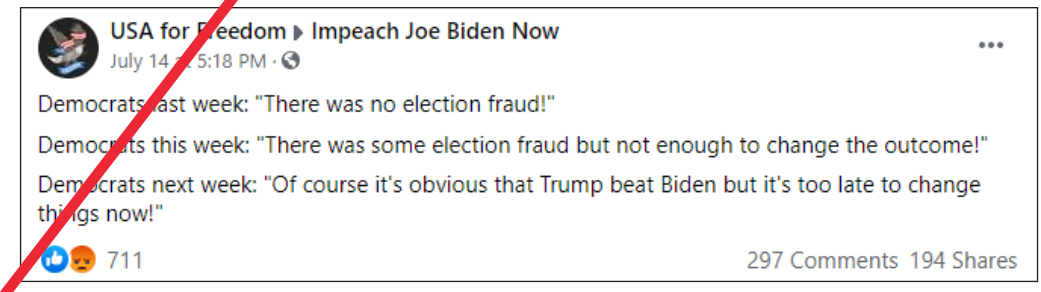

Donald J. Trump
January 6 ·
Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify. USA demands the truth!
The US has laws, procedures, and established institutions to ensure the integrity of our elections.
Source: Bipartisan Policy Center
Get Accurate Election Info

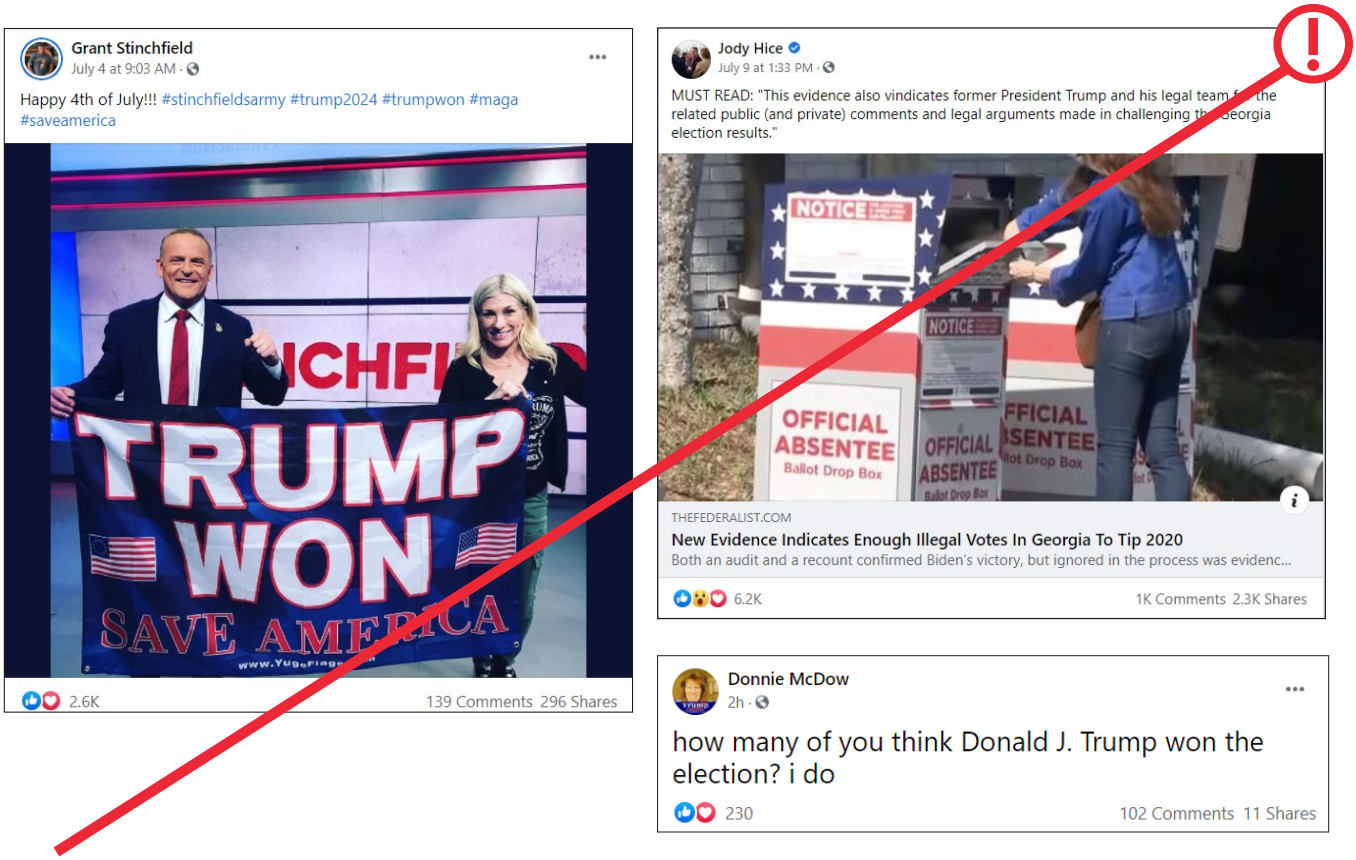

Donald J. Trump
December 19, 2020 ·
The lie of the year is that Joe Biden won! Christina Bobb One America News Network
Joe Biden is the President-elect. He will be inaugurated as the 46th US President on January 20, 2021.
Sources: Reuters/NEP/Edison, others
Get Accurate Election Info
and 545K others
78K Comments 28K Shares

Current Moderation Efforts

Most recently, though, Facebook has allowed posts making similar claims—saying there was widespread voter fraud or that the election was "rigged"—to remain active and unlabeled. The following are several examples:







CONCLUSION

While the platforms have backed off enforcing their rules to combat election and voting disinformation, the threat of political violence remains acute. In an August 11, 2021, interview with NBC News, a Department of Homeland Security spokesperson commented that "DHS has seen an increasing but modest level of individuals calling for violence in response to the unsubstantiated claims of fraud related to the 2020 election fraud and the alleged 'reinstatement' of former President Trump."

Facebook and Twitter have claimed to take strict action about election disinformation. And Facebook and Twitter continue to highlight how they combat COVID disinformation. Yet despite the real-world and long-term impacts of election-related disinformation, social media platforms are more likely to take action on health-related disinformation than democracy disinformation, especially when it comes from elected officials or candidates. It is telling that Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene can continue to spread false claims and conspiracy theories about the election, even though Twitter suspended her in January for violations of its civic integrity policies. Recent action by Twitter points to the company acting far more concerned with her promotion of COVID disinformation than ongoing voting and election disinformation.

With the retrenching of platform enforcement, bad actors have more leeway to spread lies that sow distrust in our electoral system and create the conditions that lead to political violence. Social media platforms must continue to take seriously the dangerous effects of voting and election disinformation.

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