

About Common Cause Education Fund

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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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The worst fears for American democracy were narrowly averted in 2020, but the election protection community has reason for serious concern as we look to the 2024 election. Not only does [election disinformation pose a continued threat](#) to trust in elections, but social media platforms have [backed off from enforcing their own civic integrity policies](#) and have laid off key moderation and policy staff. The information environment for voters will be rife with disinformers seeking to mislead voters and suppress their votes in order to prevent democratic outcomes they find undesirable. Election officials and local news outlets are [under increasing pressure](#), facing intimidation and harassment simply for doing their jobs to ensure representative democracy. Disinformation will remain an issue as long as the strategic gains of engaging in it, promoting it, and profiting from it outweigh consequences for spreading it.

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In this report, we've outlined some of the threats we anticipate will persist and others that may emerge as we head through the primary season toward the general election, and what voters, advocates, and officials alike can expect. We'll specify the terms we're using, detail the work we have done to disrupt disinformation, review new trends in election disinformation, and outline perennial narratives we expect to be used in 2024. Much of the background for this can be found in [our latest report, Under the Microscope: Election Disinformation in 2022 and What We Learned for 2024](#).

At this point, the election denialism and political disinformation playbook is well-known, and educating the election protection community and our allies on what will be used is vital preparation for the next election. Bad actors target those [without the means or ability to find accurate information](#), and providing this information as a resource can only help bridge existing information gaps. For this purpose, examples of disinformation from the 2020 and 2022 elections will be used to illustrate the narratives discussed.

While the disinformation narratives presented here are all in English, it must also be noted that the disinformation problem is [exacerbated for non-English audiences](#). Social media platforms [dedicate fewer resources](#) to providing accurate information, fact checks, and moderation for non-English languages. As a result, we often see English-language narratives translated for new audiences – with the same viral result but no fact-checking or moderation at all. Disinformers also aim at specific cultural currents to appeal to the communities they are targeting, and work these complex issues into their content.

Disinformation:

Disinformation is [false rhetoric used to mislead](#).

In elections, it's used to dampen turnout among some voters, mobilize others based on lies, or call into question the results if an opponent wins in an attempt to either overturn the election or benefit from the chaos. Disinformation can alter voter participation, potentially causing voters to miss their opportunity to vote if they are confused about the voting process (the time, place and manner of the election) or choose to stay home (“self-suppress”)

due to worries about intimidation, violence or other consequences. Election disinformation also alters public perceptions about elections and their trustworthiness, thereby impacting legislation and democratic norms in the long-run.

Online disinformation:

Election disinformation (and voter intimidation, disinformation’s close cousin) is a tactic that has been used for many years to suppress voters, particularly voters of color, students, and perceived political opponents.

This has taken the form of offline disinformation (billboards, flyers, posters, phone calls, etc.) as well as online disinformation. As usage of social media for news and information [becomes increasingly popular](#), so too will the potential for voters to be misled by bad actors relying on the low-cost and effective spread of disinformation on the Internet. While disinformation is not a new problem, and neither is election disinformation, social media supercharges the tactic and makes it increasingly prevalent and effective.



NEW TRENDS IN ELECTION DISINFORMATION

Manipulated Media

Computer Generated Content:

Artificial intelligence and the increasing quality of “deep-fakes” represent a new vector of potential disinformation. While some individuals have for years had access to computer models and significant processing power, only recently has the general public had access to tools like Chat-GPT, DALL-E, Midjourney and AI-generated videos. Of these, deepfakes (specifically realistic-looking videos with user-generated text spoken in the appearance and/or voice of the subject) may present a new wrinkle. It doesn’t take much of a leap to imagine a video faking a candidate’s concession or spreading disinformation about the time, place, and manner of voting. There is also the risk of voters relying on ChatGPT or other AI sources for information about voting, which means they may receive inaccurate information from AI [due to its “hallucinations.”](#)

AI-generated material, while often time consuming to refine, is increasingly realistic, and may mislead voters looking for information or consuming political news trying to make a decision.

In the 2024 New Hampshire Democratic Primary, voters reported receiving [a deepfaked audio call alleging to be President Biden](#), encouraging them to stay home from the polls and save their vote for November. While the call was quickly debunked by major media outlets, it was the first high-profile appearance of misleading AI-generated material in the election cycle.

AI-generated material, while often time consuming to refine, is increasingly realistic, and may mislead voters looking for information or consuming political news trying to make a decision. That said, the threat of AI or computer-generated disinformation images and text relies on the same media literacy challenges that other disinformation exploits. While deepfake videos are a [new threat to elections](#), disinformers will prefer to use whatever method is the fastest, cheapest, and most effective, such as repurposing context-less images. Additionally, regardless of the level of sophistication of the media used to spread disinformation, its potency is often determined by how salacious and scandalous it is in nature.

Existing Images:

A prominent source of election disinformation is the repurposing of images from their original context to spread false narratives about the security and integrity of the voting process. One viral narrative in 2020 was that of [allegedly discarded](#) or destroyed mail ballots. Users connected statistically insignificant real-life incidences of [lost mail or thrown-out mail](#) with the belief of widespread fraud. Disinfo-friendly outlets then amplified minor incidents, creating fodder for fake incidents. While the pictures used were all real, they were from years before and had nothing to do with the election – and almost no pictures actually contained ballots.



One famous example, spread by a high-follower account and receiving millions of views, showed a worker climbing into a truck and showing [“trashed Trump ballots.”](#) The “trashed ballots” were in fact [discarded remainders of Trump mailers](#). This was just one viral example of how disinformers capitalized on voter confusion over official ballot applications, mailers reminding people of the election, and actual ballots to create the illusion that any discarded political mail was a thrown-away vote for Donald Trump.



Few instances of election disinformation in images are as blatant as white nationalist Douglass Mackey’s [images telling voters to text their votes](#) for Hillary Clinton in 2016. But recent uses of image-based disinformation have been just as effective. Images from protests and marches have been used to deter voters, claiming that they are a depiction of the line outside a polling place. Images of “rallies” to [“demand” mail-in voting](#) have been posted by bad actors. Images of absentee ballot request forms have also been posted with the claim that they represent duplicate ballots.



In 2024, we can expect similar videos and images to receive viral amplification. Despite the popularity of voting by mail ([33% of votes in 2022](#)), many people remain confused about what their ballot should look like – and others will fall prey to narratives that prime them to remain confused.



ELECTION SABOTAGE AND SUBVERSION

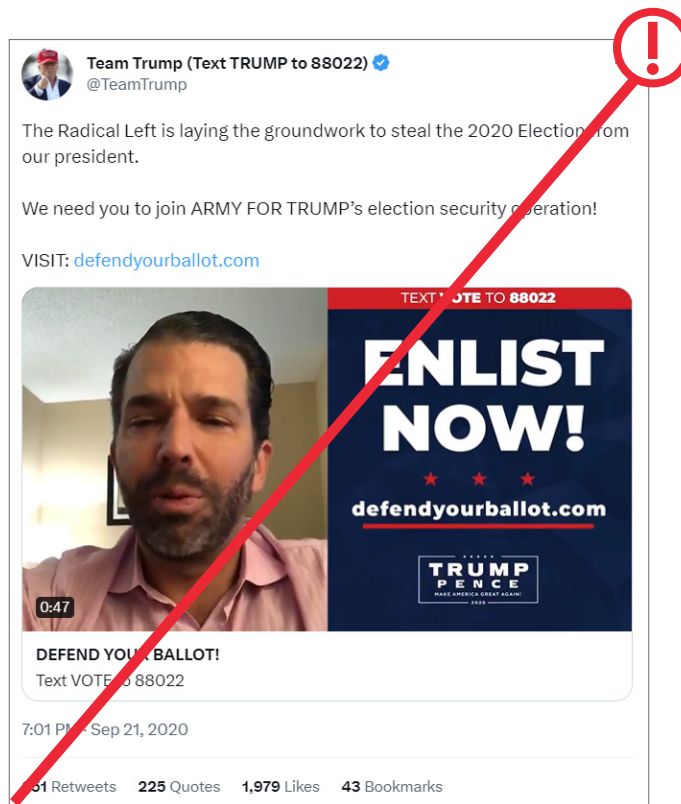
Our election system is staffed by nonpartisan and bipartisan officials, workers, and volunteers, but like any system it is vulnerable to those who seek to sabotage it from within. Although our system is robust and secure, that has not stopped those who want to undermine trust in elections from [accessing software systems](#) and [sharing these sensitive data and systems](#) with [malicious outside actors](#).

Electoral subversion poses a new threat in the refusal to certify election results. In 2022, several counties [declared their refusal to certify election results](#). Although the mechanisms existed to [enforce county compliance with state law](#) and [remove officials who refused to certify](#), and the results were certified, the initial refusal allowed disinformation to proliferate and [remains a point of contention](#) today. Delay in certification created an opportunity for deniers to organize. Informing Democracy, an [advocacy organization](#) that seeks to inform audiences about the process of election administration and certification, [counts several](#)

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[officials](#) who were involved in denying certification in election administration roles today, and the potential to refuse certification remains. Stalling tactics like refusing to certify also gives election deniers more time to spread disinformation about the results of the election.

[Vote suppressor organizations and individuals](#) have also invested in [training poll watchers to be aggressive](#) and overly zealous in their observance of voting. In 2020, Trump’s campaign [posted a video](#) calling for an “army” for Trump at the polls to prevent “the Left from [adding] millions of fraudulent ballots that can cancel your vote and overturn the election,” and attempting to “enlist” Trump supporters to work in their “election security operation.” The militarized and violent rhetoric around this created the potential for intimidation, and was openly designed to do so.



LEGISLATIVE INTERFERENCE

Sham election reviews and partisan oversight:

Another trend we can expect to see in 2024 is the initiation of sham election reviews. After the 2020 election, [several states launched partisan “investigations”](#) of the election that conflated the [normal practice of post-election audits](#) with the prosecution of electoral grievances. These sham reviews were commissioned by state-level Republican lawmakers [or sheriffs](#), who [engaged highly-partisan and inexperienced](#) election denial industry “experts,” and spent [millions of dollars of taxpayer money](#) to conduct sham election reviews. The election deniers were able to dominate mainstream media with their inaccurate claims and false narratives, exploiting journalists’ need to cover the political controversies of the day. The net result was an increase in airtime and ink spent on covering sham election reviews— sometimes mislabeled by mainstream press as “audits” —amplification of false narratives, and a significant [decrease in voters’ confidence in our elections](#).

Another risk in 2024 is the shifting of oversight in elections from election officials to state legislatures, something that election protection groups have tracked for years. In the 2021 legislative sessions, [Voting Rights Lab counted over 180 bills](#) that “shifted election authority” in a variety of forms ranging from expanding powers of poll watchers to allowing state legislatures the power to discard election results. In 2022, States United Democracy Center counted [over 400 bills introduced since 2020](#) that “increased the risk” of election subversion.

Attempts at shifting election oversight continue to be made, and the risk of sham audits and continued interference with the powers of election officials will be present in 2024.

Voting restrictions:

There is no off year for elections. Every year has numerous contests that require not only administrative preparation, but also outreach to voters and continuing education about the changing landscape of voting access. There’s also no off year for election denial, which continues to be advanced in various spheres of legislation, activism, and administration.

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Recent research on the 2022 elections shows a wide disparity between states in access to the vote, which creates wide disparity in youth turnout rates and other traditionally disenfranchised groups. This trend has continued, as some states introduce new legislation to restrict access to mail voting and [access to dropboxes](#). Voting Rights Lab [counts hundreds of bills](#) introduced in 2023 that reduce access to the vote and criminalize actions of election administrators. The Brennan Center for Justice counted at least 325 [restrictive voting bills](#) introduced in 2023, ranging from bills that restrict vote-by-mail to bills that add new Voter ID requirements. [In 14 states, 17 laws restricting the vote passed in 2023](#). In 2022, [8 states enacted 11 restrictive voting laws](#), and in 2021, [at least 19 states passed 34 laws restricting access to voting](#). This shows a consistent trend towards suppressive legislation, even as other states move towards greater access.

Some politicians even fund [specifically-designed law enforcement units](#) to find “voter fraud,” creating a vicious cycle of headlines about arrests for election crimes — despite the fact that most individuals prosecuted were in fact [given wrong information](#) by state employees. The goal of these voter intimidation squads is to depress the vote, especially in communities of color, and to keep narratives of “voter fraud” alive in the press. And the idea is catching on in [other states](#) that have proposed similar units.

Election denier politicians are still [coordinating to introduce vote-suppressive and anti-administrative legislation](#) across the states. To do so, they resurface old rhetoric about voter fraud and election rigging to push photo ID laws, cut reforms that facilitate voting, and criminalize elections officials’ work. In Nebraska, a legislator who [introduced a voter suppression bill](#) didn’t endorse a belief in widespread fraud, but said “the perception is — there is... And perception is reality.” Election disinformation, even when acknowledged by its proponents as false, is used to fuel legislative voter suppression under the guise of protecting elections.



WEAPONIZATION OF MISTAKES AND MACHINE MALFUNCTIONS

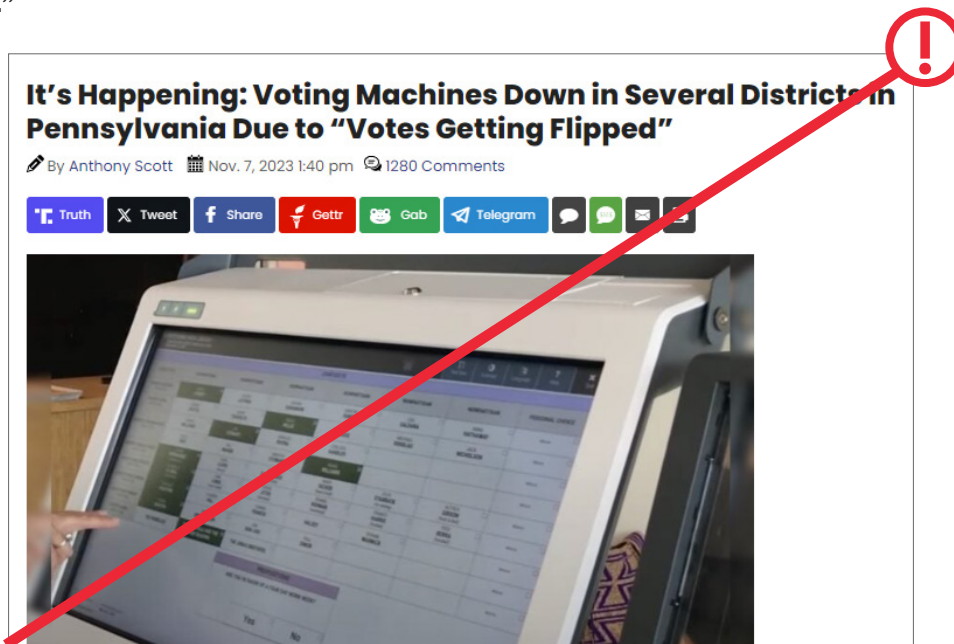
In the ordinary course of events, elections administrators make mistakes and voting machines fail. In the current hyper-vigilant environment, such instances can be weaponized to drive disinformation about our elections.

Social media disinformation also builds on itself and becomes iterative. In 2020, viral conspiracies about Sharpie branded markers bleeding through paper and ruining the votes of Trump supporters [caused Maricopa County, AZ](#) to switch to heavier paper to prevent bleeds in 2022.

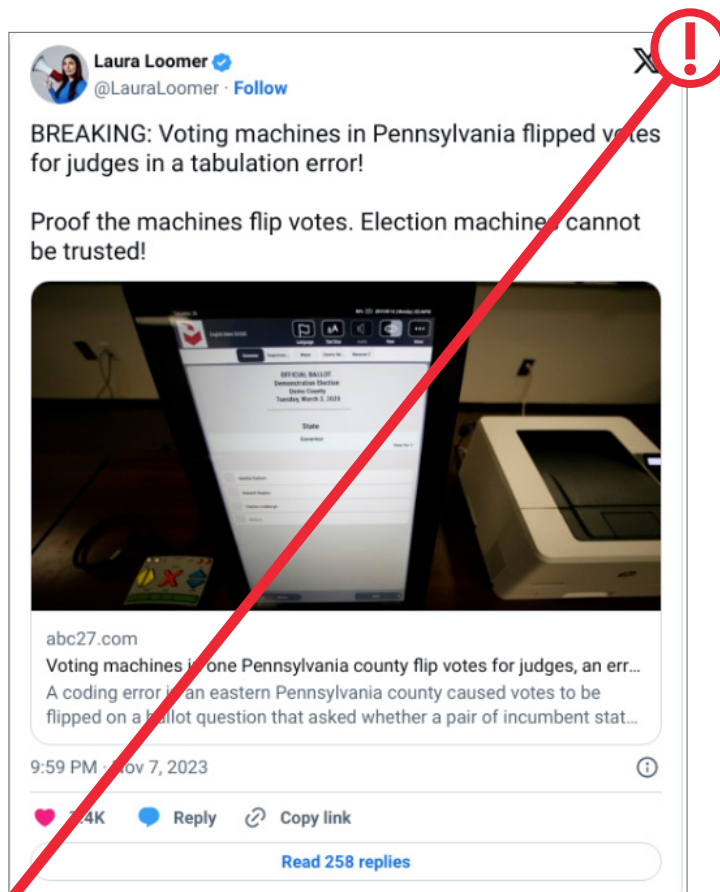


The 2022 cycle saw nationwide disinformation campaigns alleging that [Maricopa County's](#) elections were rigged, after a printer quality problem meant that ballots could not be scanned at the polling place but had to be counted on more-sensitive tabulators at a central location.

[Harris County, Texas](#), also spawned nationwide disinformation campaigns when some locations ran out of printer paper. And in 2023's elections, a [machine issue in Northampton, PA](#) fueled ample disinformation about "switched votes."



Further into 2024, we should expect a sharp increase in the number and types of election administrator mistakes that such campaigns can be built upon. [About one-in-five election officials](#) will be [relatively new to their jobs in 2024](#) — and inexperienced administrators are more likely to make mistakes. [Candidates' names can be accidentally left off](#) of ballots. [Candidates' places of residence](#) can be accidentally omitted. Ballots can be printed [without the ovals](#) to fill in. [Materials substituted by vendors](#) can cause controversy. Votes may be tabulated correctly on the back end but mislabeled on the front end, [causing votes to appear "switched"](#) on the screen. Any such mistake can become the foundation of a disinformation campaign alleging an attempt to "rig the election."



As they age, voting machines can become more susceptible to malfunctions. [Almost half of states](#) rely on voting equipment that is at risk. Resiliency measures like emergency ballot bins can quickly raise concerns among voters — the majority of voting machine-related calls to the Election Protection hotline were concerns about ballot storage after polling place tabulators failed — and such concerns could easily be weaponized in 2024.

Any election day mishap, whether a [staffing shortage of one party](#) at the polls, or a ballot printer issue, or even poll books going offline, can be amplified in a matter of minutes to an audience of millions, and sow immediate doubt in the results.



POLITICAL VIOLENCE

For purposes of this report, we focus primarily on election related political violence, or violence, threats, or harassment intended to influence election processes or outcomes. While election related violence has regained prominence in recent years, marginalized communities, especially Black communities, have faced [election related political violence](#) since before Black men were given the right to vote by the ratification of the 15th Amendment on February 3, 1870. Election related political violence, along with other types of political violence, also include a strong element of identity based violence. This means that we are more likely to see election related political violence perpetrated against [non-white, non-Christian, and LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities](#).

Perpetrators of election violence are likely to continue to target election workers in 2023 and 2024. In 2020, [protesters at Detroit's TCF center](#) attempted to “stop the steal” by disrupting the counting process. Election

workers who were targeted on social media as supposedly complicit in “stealing” the election faced years-long [campaigns of harassment and intimidation](#) that [continue today](#). In New Mexico, a failed candidate and election denier even [allegedly orchestrated shootings](#) at the homes of [election officials](#) and politicians he claimed had a part in “stealing” his election. More recently, dozens of elections officials have resigned or indicated that they do not plan to run for reelection, and have cited threats, harassment, and violence as their reasoning. Election offices across the nation have [also received threatening letters](#) containing traces of opioids, raising further alarms and security concerns.

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Candidates who promote election denial, whether out of true belief or strategically, may also amplify the risk of political violence by engaging in violent and incendiary rhetoric themselves. They may tell their voters to aggressively confront poll workers who they believe to be acting improperly. They may tell their voters that the other side seeks to silence their vote and steal their civic voice. They may use, as the Trump campaign did in 2020, militarized rhetoric about the civic process to create the potential for intimidation. They will be aided in this by the ease of social media amplification of charged, polarizing, and potentially violent rhetoric.

Other sources of potential election violence are issues such as reproductive health, LGBTQIA+ acceptance, the teaching of accurate American history in schools, banned books, etc. In recent months, these issues have served as gathering places and flashpoints for anti-democratic actors, including groups such as the Proud Boys, White Lives Matter, and others. In Ohio and Florida, reproductive health ballot initiatives will be voted on in November 2023, which may result in an increase in threats, harassment and other types of election violence.

Preventing and responding to election violence requires advance preparation. State coalitions should have an understanding of the landscape in their state and draft a plan to respond to the most likely and/or most impactful potential incidents. The [Election Protection coalition](#), along with many other national and state-based organizations, have resources and expertise that can assist in this planning process.



PERENNIAL NARRATIVES

After several cycles of experience, we have a clear picture of many of the tactics and narratives election deniers and disinformers will utilize. These are based on perennially-popular viral narratives that have now become part of the election denier toolkit – and will recur in 2024.

False narrative: A wait for results means fraud

Election deniers took advantage of the wait for election results in 2020 to spread disinformation about the outcome and undermine trust in the electoral process. It takes time for many states to count mail ballots, especially since in several states, mail ballots cannot be counted until after Election Day. While some states are now seeking to address this, it is likely that claims of “ballot dumps,” “ballot injections,” and more will persist [due to these “shifts.”](#) One popular tactic is [utilizing screenshots of tabulated votes](#) on Election Night, and claiming that votes that come in later than Election Night are fraudulent. This narrative is so consistently present that we have worked with partners at Leadership Conference for Civil and Human Rights, Spitfire Strategies, and IntoAction Labs to create “prebunking” and inoculation content emphasizing the importance of waiting for every vote to be counted.

 **Nachman Mostofsky**
@Mostofsky

I've done hand ballot recounts in NY.

Those vertical lines in Michigan & Wisconsin are not statistically improbable, they're outright impossible.

This is outright voter fraud & the @FBI must immediately investigate this.



The state of the race in Wisconsin
Total presidential votes for each party so far, with 89 percent of Wisconsin's expected vote counted as of 6:23 a.m on Nov. 4

The state of the race in Michigan
Total presidential votes for each party so far, with 88 percent of Michigan's expected vote counted as of 2:27 a.m. on Nov. 4

2:33 AM · Nov 4, 2020

10.8K 6.2K people are Tweeting about this

Election deniers repeatedly call for instant results and take advantage of the time before certification to sow doubt in the official results. They also take advantage of popular confusion over projected results versus certified, official results to prematurely declare victory. Any delay in a count is also amplified as “cheating.”

 **Team Trump (Text VOTE to 88022)**
@TeamTrump

President @realDonaldTrump wins #Pennsylvania!



8:47 PM · Nov 4, 2020

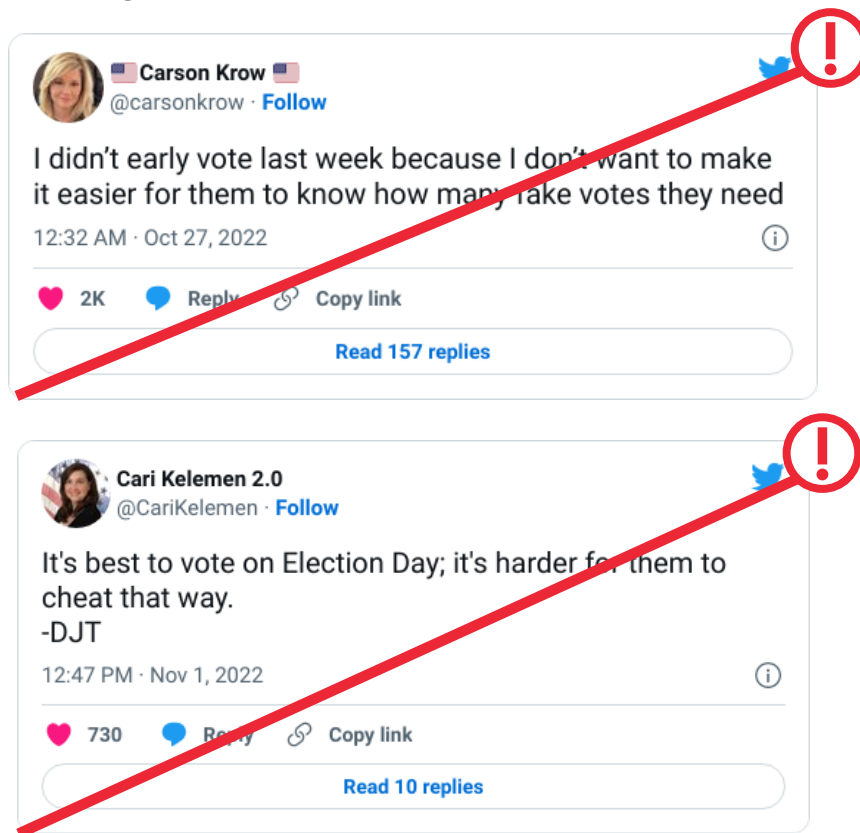
4K 1.3K people are Tweeting about this



NARRATIVE: VOTE ON ELECTION DAY ONLY

In 2020, [mail ballots and early voting were demonized](#) by Republican candidates seeking to invalidate the perceived legitimacy of an election conducted during a deadly pandemic. As a result, bad actors informed their audiences and created messaging to the effect that the best method to vote was on Election Day itself. This obviously narrows the range of voting to a single day and makes it much more likely someone will have an issue or obstacle voting that can't be resolved before polls close (car breaks down, administrative issues, etc).

In 2022, certain candidates and election deniers took it further and created messaging and graphics encouraging people to only vote on Election Day. While this appears to have had limited uptake, it is a narrative that continues to circulate amongst election deniers, and one that will likely appear again in 2024, in conjunction with attacks on the legitimacy of early voting.



FALSE NARRATIVE: PRIVATE FUNDING IS PROBLEMATIC

We will see continued attacks on the role of private funding in election office outreach and funding of equipment. In a system where election offices often lack funding for necessary infrastructure, organizations like the Center for Tech and Civic Life (CTCL) received funding from Mark Zuckerberg's foundation to help fill in the gaps with grants for elections officials and voter education. This funding has been folded into conspiracy theories about 2020, and remain a [popular target of legislation](#) outlawing private funding. Ideally, the federal government would provide the resources that election officials need to conduct elections, which would also eliminate the salience

of conspiracy theories like this. With extremely high-profile figures like Elon Musk and Tucker Carlson [discussing these grants](#) (and adding a hefty dose of disinformation) as recently as April 2023, it's clear that any CTCL activity or private funding will remain a focus for disinformation about the 2024 election.



DISINFORMER TACTIC: ACCUSE AND INTIMIDATE ELECTION WORKERS

The narrative that election workers are perpetuating fraud will undoubtedly persist. This will take many forms, from what pens election workers hand out to claims of poll workers [marking ballots themselves](#); and even [using out-of-context stills](#) from counting livestreams to claim that election workers were committing criminal acts. The harassment of election workers, spurred on by Donald Trump, led to [lengthy campaigns of intimidation](#), some of which persist to this day. In a [recent survey](#) of local election officials, almost 1 in 3 reported having been [“harassed, abused, or threatened.”](#)

The release of the disinformation film *2000 Mules* in 2022, which claimed a vast conspiracy of thousands of “ballot mules” who “stuffed” ballot dropboxes in collusion with election workers and nonprofits, created a [template that still exists today for claiming fraud](#). Our social media monitors [found numerous instances](#) of “wanted posters” claiming that election workers were “mules” and needed to face justice.



The hysteria reached such a point in 2022 that [militia-affiliated groups organized](#) on Donald Trump's social network, TruthSocial, called on their followers to monitor dropboxes in various states, which they did, [armed, in Arizona](#) until [prevented by a court order](#). It is likely we will see continued calls to monitor dropboxes and aggressively question those using them – if not outright intimidate voters from using them.

In addition to intimidation at work, election workers also face obstruction in the form of vexatious records requests [organized online by election deniers](#). These requests are often sent via form letter and ask for information that many voting jurisdictions simply do not have. Hunts for obscure records that election deniers request serve

two functions: to keep the myth of a stolen election alive through the quest for “evidence” and to [obstruct the ability of election offices](#) to prepare for future elections. Many reported having to allocate staff members to the fulfillment of these requests, at critical periods in the election cycle. It is likely that we will see these floods of records requests once more as offices prepare for the 2024 election.

Meanwhile, election deniers, [including right-wing activist Cleta Mitchell](#), are pitching a company that [promises to provide tools for detecting voter fraud](#). The program has [previously been touted](#) as a potential alternative to ERIC, the Electronic Registration Information Center. ERIC is an interstate compact that [allows member states to check voter registration rolls](#) across states and prevent duplicates. Not only did 9 Republican-led states depart this compact based on a disinformation campaign, but a new offering from the company purportedly will allow users to look for fraudulent voter registrations themselves – and [has already contracted with one Georgia county](#). The nine departing states are [also encountering new obstacles](#) as they attempt to mitigate the effects of this self-inflicted injury to their ability to check voter roll data.

Election workers fear a deluge of reports from users attempting to seek massive voter challenges – just [six activists generated almost 100,000 challenges in Georgia in 2022](#), for example. The investigative journalism outlet [Documented dug into](#) how Mitchell’s Election Integrity Network is testing and preparing to use the tool while Mitchell herself advises the company, and how EagleAI itself appears to be funded by dark money sources. We’ll likely see voter challenges assisted by this type of software in anticipation of the next election, and disinformation spread by people maliciously interpreting what they find. These mass challenges and onerous records requests can also be seen as a “denial of service” attack, intended to, at minimum, disrupt the everyday functions of an elections office. It is likely that election officials will face the same pressure leading up to the 2024 election and during the most critical parts of certification and the post-election process.



CONCLUSION

The information environment that surrounds prospective voters for 2024 leaves them susceptible to disinformation narratives around elections and voting. Election deniers, who profit and benefit from causing mistrust in elections, will continue to take advantage of social media platform loopholes and lax enforcement to disseminate their lies. While the election protection community has done [ample work since 2020](#) to provide pro-voting inoculation content, the threat persists; and adequate preparation for what lies ahead is necessary to mitigate another Big Lie, the fallout of which still harms election workers today.

We also know that new threats have emerged, such as the introduction of generative AI to elections. 2024 is a volatile year for democracy, with [76 countries holding elections](#). The effects of disinformation, new technologies, and world events will echo from election to election, and we will need to be able to identify emerging narratives and inoculate against disinformation rapidly.

The messaging interventions we have [tested and implemented as a community since 2020](#) do work, but require funding and resources to ensure success. The disinformation threat is both lesser and greater since 2020: we have knowledge of interventions that confer resilience to disinformation, and a better understanding of how it works, but disinformers have also evolved their own tactics, and social media platforms have allowed them to thrive as the tech giants have scaled back their content standards, monitoring and enforcement. We know that inoculation messaging works, that pro-voter messages can be internalized and spread, and that providing voters with accurate information can result in higher participation in our democracy.

Contact: For comments and questions, please contact Ishan Mehta at imehta@commoncause.org.



**Common
Cause**

Education Fund

805 15th Street, NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20005
202.833.1200
commoncause.org