

# DEFENDING AGAINST ELECTION DISINFORMATION

DOMINION VOTING

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*With thanks to election officials across the U.S. for contributing to the contents of this report.*

## Introduction

The spread of mis/disinformation surrounding the 2020 presidential election remains a major challenge for election professionals and their private industry support partners, despite a smooth Election Day [with few incidents or anomalies](#).

Amid the rapid, online proliferation of conspiracy theories and a deep-rooted rumor web regarding the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, many election officials and nonpartisan governmental organizations tried fervently to [quell false information](#).

Thousands of hand recounts and post-election audits across the U.S. confirmed the security and accuracy of the machines used for election tallies. For example, the [state of Georgia](#) conducted a statewide audit and paper ballot hand count, confirming the integrity of the 2020 election results. A [second machine count](#) of ballots in Georgia followed, reconfirming the integrity and accuracy of the counts. MITRE's National Election Security Lab conducted an independent [data analysis](#), reviewing information from eight battleground states and concluding that "evidence of compromise or fraud was not found." Former Attorney General William Barr also confirmed there was [no evidence of widespread fraud](#).

Allegations of foreign interference in the election were also unfounded. A declassified [intelligence report](#) released by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence found "no indications that any foreign actor attempted to alter any technical aspect of the voting process." Furthermore, the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security

[released a report](#) stating there is "no evidence" that foreign governments or other actors interfered with the election, and claims about foreign governments manipulating or owning election infrastructure used in the 2020 elections are "not credible."

Despite all attempts to fight dis/misinformation, [MIT Research](#) suggests false news spreads more quickly than the facts. According to the research, false news stories on Twitter are 70% more likely to be retweeted than true stories, and it takes true stories about six times as long to reach 1,500 people compared to false stories.

In fact, false and misleading claims about the 2020 presidential election have resulted in devastating, real-world impacts. According to a June 2021 joint [report](#) by the Brennan Center and the Bipartisan Policy Center, a recent survey revealed that "one in three election officials feels unsafe because of their job, and nearly one in five listed threats to their lives as a job-related concern." The U.S. Department of Justice has launched a [new task force](#) with a tip line for reporting such threats.

Some election vendors have been targeted, leading to defamation lawsuits against individuals and media platforms that spread lies about the company and its voting systems.

What are the implications? Election professionals and their industry support partners need to be able to respond quickly and decisively in the face of increased mis/disinformation to help Americans

discern the facts.

[Recent studies](#) show disinformation attacks are growing around the world as purveyors of disinformation increasingly use online technologies to undermine the perceived integrity of the electoral process. Nation state actors have [attempted](#) to disrupt U.S. elections for years. Ongoing public-private collaborations are essential to prevent, deter, and respond to such attacks against future elections.

**The key principles below are essential steps in combating election mis/disinformation:**

## 1 Just The Facts

According to the [Aspen Institute Commission on Information Disorder](#), proactive and preemptive messaging on the election process is essential to combating the spread of mis/disinformation online. Studies have demonstrated the value of “[prebunking](#),” or warning people they may possibly be exposed to misinformation, combined with training people in advance on how to counter-argue against it.

Websites and social media accounts from trustworthy institutions are also important features of fact checking. For example, Maricopa County, Arizona has created an extensive “[Just The Facts](#)” webpage, with updates in real-time as needed. Along with the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency’s (CISA) Rumor Control [site](#), the Michigan Secretary of State’s office has developed a comprehensive, online fact-checking [page](#). Election vendors also continue to update their websites with “Setting the Record Straight” [information](#).

Election officials and industry providers can also join the [SQUINT](#) program, designed to help rapidly combat the spread of election mis/disinformation online.

It’s important to counter mis/disinformation without repeating false claims. One way to avoid amplification, especially for “incidents with low traction,” as Stanford’s Election Integrity Partnership (EIP) [recommends](#), is to “decide on the thresholds

for response early, taking into account both the spread and potential risk of the content.” It is also important not to directly reshare election-related misinformation when debunking it, as this can inadvertently amplify it. Stanford’s EIP advises, “[if] you must include the false claim in your response, use a screenshot instead [of linking or reposting the article], crossed with a red line or watermarked as ‘MISLEADING.’”

## 2 Elections 101 Education

Much of the collective efforts between public-private partners to correct mis/disinformation about the 2020 election have focused on explaining and demystifying the election process. Some election officials hold open houses for the public, or conduct election education outreach to the media before voting starts. In Georgia, the Secretary of State’s office held daily [press conferences](#) to combat false claims and disinformation about the 2020 election.

For election vendors and their customers, stakeholder outreach and education efforts have included sharing information on how voting systems are designed, tested, certified, and secured by election authorities. Voters can benefit by going into every election well-informed on how their voting systems are tested and secured before, during, and after the election.

**Useful voter education topics include:**

- U.S. Election Assistance Commission and state [certification processes](#), including the use of Voluntary Voting System Guidelines (VMSG) and the federal government’s accreditation process for Voting System Test Labs (VSTLs).
- Pre-election Logic and Accuracy (L&A) tests of voting systems.
- Resilience of machine counts with paper ballots or voter verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) records for every vote cast.
- State and local election processes to ensure election integrity, including chain of custody

policies for election systems/equipment, steps election officials take after the polls are closed to confirm the accuracy of vote totals, and post-election canvassing/auditing.

Election officials continue to maintain a persistent focus on election mis/disinformation from 2020, a vitally important task. Reassuring the public that votes are counted locally by poll worker volunteers who are from their community is important, as is explaining the process for keeping paper ballots and other election artifacts secure.

### 3 Prepare Your Network

In a memo written for the election administration community, [Stanford's EIP](#) emphasized that "other actors will take advantage of information vacuums for malicious ends." They recommend that offices "brief early, brief often, brief consistently until everything is done." Visibility is key.

So, too, is recognizing that bad information often resurfaces with new twists online. Stanford's EIP [recommends](#) that election professionals review previously encountered misinformation narratives to help staff prepare for any future issues, advising, "[i]f your office has previously issued public service announcements about election-related misinformation, ensure that communications staff are familiar with these announcements and can rapidly re-issue them. You are likely to see previously discredited storylines reappear on or after Election Day. Save time by preparing to debunk them again."

This practice has the added benefit of keeping public messaging clear and consistent. As election vendors have dealt with a high volume of rapidly recycled false claims, messaging that pivots towards a "big picture" focus has been a key strategy in responding. No entity can or should respond to everything posted online during a disinformation attack. In this case, the priority focus is demonstrated evidence of the accuracy, reliability, and security of the 2020 election, including the prevalence of paper ballots and

legitimate audits around the country. Monitoring the key sources where viral rumors or false claims are emerging is also useful.

Communicating about local election processes can be difficult because of the diversity of election processes from one jurisdiction to the next. Due to this variation, the most effective sources on these issues are often state or local validators. For example, [the Michigan Senate Oversight Committee](#) issued an extensive review of claims about the 2020 election and offered a detailed fact check for each one.

Best practice is to keep an updated database of experts, while keeping them apprised of any new updates or developments. As a starting point, there are agencies and associations that can help connect election professionals, including [DHS \(CISA\)](#), [NASS](#), [NASED](#), [the Election Center](#), and the [EAC](#).

Through the DHS Sector Coordinating Council, Dominion is also working with its industry counterparts and government participants on the Government Coordinating Council to strengthen collective responses to election mis/disinformation attacks and create new resources for the future.

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#### **ABOUT Dominion Voting Systems**

Dominion Voting Systems is a leading supplier of election technology and a proud U.S. company headquartered in Denver, Colorado.

Learn more: [www.dominionvoting.com](http://www.dominionvoting.com).

## Additional Resources

- Aspen Institute, [Commission on Information Disorder](#) and [Interim Report](#)
- Avaaz, [Analyzing the Digital Traces of Political Manipulation: The 2016 Russian Interference](#)
- Brennan Center, [Keeping Election Officials Safe](#)
- Michigan Senate Oversight Committee, [Report On The 2020 Election In Michigan](#)
- MITRE, [Data Analytics to Enhance Election Transparency](#)
- Stanford Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, [Free, Fair and Healthy Elections in 2020](#)
- The Elections Group, [Running Elections Without Fear Ensuring Physical Safety for Election Personnel](#)

## Endnotes

- Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, ["Joint Statement from Elections Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council & the Election Infrastructure Sector Coordinating Executive Committees"](#) (November 12, 2020)
- Michigan Senate Oversight Committee, ["Report on the November 2020 Election in Michigan"](#) (June 23, 2021)
- MITRE, ["Data Analytics to Enhance Election Transparency"](#) (February 2021)
- Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security, ["Foreign Interference Targeting Election Infrastructure or Political Organization, Campaign, or Candidate Infrastructure Related to the 2020 US Federal Elections"](#) (March 2021)
- MIT News, ["Study: On Twitter, false news travels faster than true stories"](#) (March 8, 2018)
- Brennan Center for Justice, ["Election Officials Under Attack: How to Protect Administrators and Safeguard Democracy"](#) (June 16, 2021)
- Dominion Voting Systems, ["Legal Updates"](#)
- Kofi Annan Foundation, ["Protecting Electoral Integrity in the Digital Age"](#) (January 2020)
- United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, ["Russian Active Measures Campaigns Interference in the 2016 US Election"](#) (July 25, 2019)
- Aspen Institute, ["Commission on Information Disorder Interim Report"](#) (July 2021)
- Society for Personality and Social Psychology, ["Don't Just Debunk, Prebunk: Inoculate Yourself Against Digital Misinformation"](#) (February 10, 2021)
- Maricopa County Elections Department, ["Just the Facts"](#)
- Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, ["Election Security Rumor vs. Reality"](#)
- Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, ["Election Security in Michigan"](#)
- Dominion Voting Systems, ["Home Page"](#)
- MITRE, ["SQUINT Sharpens Officials' Perspective to Combat Election Distortion"](#) (February 2020)
- Election Integrity Partnership, ["Election Official Handbook: Preparing for Election Day Misinformation"](#) (October 30, 2020)
- WJBF Newschannel, ["Georgia Secretary of State Holds Monday Press Conference"](#) (January 4, 2021)
- US Election Assistance Commission, ["System Certification Process"](#)
- Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, ["Election Infrastructure Security"](#)
- National Association of Secretaries of State, ["Securing Elections"](#)
- National Association of State Election Directors, ["Home Page"](#)
- US Election Assistance Commission, ["Best Practices: Chain of Custody"](#) (July 13, 2021)