ELECTORAL CONFUSION

Contending with Structural Disinformation in Communities of Color

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Disinformation poses a complex and corrosive threat to American democracy, particularly in communities of color. While many others have studied the threat posed by digital disinformation as a technological problem with technological solutions, our qualitative research in these communities underscores the fact that both disinformation and propaganda are social and cultural problems first. Today's efforts to manipulate public opinion are amplified by new media, but they are rooted in a history in which powerful groups have exerted continuous control over both the political franchise and the communication ecosystem (Kuo and Marwick, 2021).

In this study, we analyze interviews with community leaders, activists, journalists, and researchers who work with communities of color at the local or state level in Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin to explore how they experience and counteract digital propaganda and other forms of misleading political information. Nearly all these experts identify as members of the Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Native American communities. The majority work for grassroots organizations seeking to address issues that impact communities of color. They provide informed perspectives and actionable recommendations for voting rights groups and other actors to apply during the 2022 midterm elections season and beyond.

We set out to use qualitative interviews to uncover disinformation narratives circulating in these communities, but our interviewees taught us that the greatest problem lies in what we term "structural disinformation": systemic issues related to the broader information environment, born out of long-term efforts to control minority groups' access to and understandings of the country's electoral and media systems. Many interviewees said that individual disinformation narratives have difficulty gaining traction in their communities, but that structural disinformation creates a generalized atmosphere of distrust and disengagement.

The specific concerns outlined by our interviewees about elections in 2022 and beyond include:

- Critical voting information, including registration requirements, basic electoral processes, and poll locations, is often unavailable, and the information that is available is sometimes deliberately false, misleading, or incomplete.
- The lack of quality, accessible voting information and resources in languages other than English leaves immigrant and diaspora communities especially vulnerable to dis- and misinformation.
- When disinformation actors target communities of color, they use both online and traditional media to spread falsehoods and sow uncertainty.
- Voters across all communities studied are demoralized both by general concerns about U.S. politics and specifically by structural barriers to participation.
- Poll workers, voting rights organizations, and individual voters of color face vicious and dangerous disinformation-inspired harassment online and offline.

Our interviewees' core insights about how to counteract these challenges include:

- Civic information outreach campaigns that work to spread voting information are crucial to develop trusted relationships and to increase civic participation.
- These outreach efforts are most effective when they take an integrated cross-platform approach designed to engage community members where they are.
- Diaspora communities and communities that primarily speak languages other than English need tailored outreach that leverages existing grassroots networks.
- Empowering messaging may help to avoid "friendly fire" that can inadvertently discourage or mislead voters when advocating against harmful policies.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Two years after the 2020 election cycle spawned the Big Lie, community leaders and voting rights activists are still contending with the fallout from that effort to undermine trust in the American electoral system by deliberately scapegoating non-white voters and election workers.[1] More than 37 percent of Americans still believe the 2020 presidential election was fraudulently stolen from former President Donald Trump because anti-democratic actors engaged in a deliberate campaign of lies to overturn the election (Politico, 2021). Spreading rapidly through a complex and decentralized information environment, across both social media and partisan news outlets, their false claims targeted left-leaning urban areas with large non-white populations and often included racist dog whistles. Even though these falsehoods have been thoroughly and repeatedly debunked, they continue to inspire new voter suppression laws and harassment of communities of color, perpetuating longstanding structural inequalities in access to information and the ballot. The damage done by these claims to the perceived fairness of American elections persists into 2022, with 56 percent of respondents to one poll claiming they have “little or no confidence” that elections are free and fair (CNN, 2022), a deeply destabilizing development ahead of this year’s midterm elections.

We conducted a study based on interviews of local- and state-level activists serving communities of color about their experiences with disinformation to better understand its effects at the community level. In this paper, we first attempt to understand the effects of disinformation and misinformation in these communities.[2] Second, we report the strategies our interviewees have found most effective in combating those harms.

To prioritize the experiences of specific communities while still providing generalizable insights, we conducted research among diverse groups in three states: Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin. These three states have distinct demographic profiles, politics, and histories. Our interviewees represent Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Native American communities and

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[1] The “Big Lie” refers to the false claim, propagated by former President Donald Trump and his supporters, that the 2020 presidential election was somehow rigged or “stolen.”

[2] In this paper, we define “disinformation” as false information spread intentionally to deceive its recipients and “misinformation” as false information spread unintentionally by people who believe it to be true.

organizations that work on issues that disproportionately affect those communities.[3] This qualitative study prioritizes the valuable experiences of organizers, journalists, activists, and other community leaders in their dealings with election disinformation. We center our interviewees' own evaluations of contemporary informational problems in the communities they serve and document their strategies and ideas for how to respond. We do not assess the veracity of our interviewees' narrated experiences; rather we consider them to be experts in their own experiences. This study follows a prior companion report published in November 2021, which describes the current state of research on disinformation among American communities of color and the motivations for this project (Woolley & Kumleben, 2021).

The findings of this study complicate common narratives around disinformation and communities of color, demonstrating how structural racism—the laws, policies, institutional practices, and norms that enforce racism (Braveman et al, 2022)—creates structural disinformation, which we define as the deceptive or misinformation-generating effects of laws, policies, institutional practices, and political norms. Structural disinformation, particularly structural disinformation related to the right to vote, has a disproportionate impact on communities of color and other historically marginalized communities. It can occur, for instance, when poor provision of official voting information means that a community is not properly educated about how changes in voting procedures affect them, which creates openings for both targeted disinformation and innocent misunderstandings which will keep members of that community from exercising their rights. Structural disinformation creates information gaps that harm these groups directly and, further, are filled by false narratives. When those narratives are spread by community members who believe them to be true, structural disinformation can generate a vicious cycle of distrust and demoralization. Structural disinformation is a phenomenon of systemic neglect, where inequalities in access to resources such as civic education and local news lead directly to a disinformation-poisoned information ecosystem. While structural racism leads to many forms of structural disinformation, such as structural health disinformation, this paper will cover issues around voting, both as a critical field of disinformation and as a strategy to empower communities of color.

[3] There are mixed views within Hispanic or Latino communities about which umbrella term (if any) is preferred. Because we rely on census data to explain the demographic differences between the three states, we have followed the Census Bureau's lead in mostly using Hispanic here (Lopez et al., 2021).

We began this study by searching for disinformation narratives derived from the most well-studied forms of political disinformation in the U.S.: electoral falsehoods primarily aimed at white, conservative voters (Benkler et al., 2018; Johnson, 2018). Such frameworks often posit that the themes of this type of propaganda, which include stoking nationalism, populism, and fears of fraudulent voting and socialism, are also pervasive among online disinformation campaigns directed at communities of color.

Research into ethnically targeted disinformation has historically followed this model, often defined by arguments that disinformation originates online as part of a propaganda strategy to mislead and radicalize its recipients. For instance, investigations into propaganda efforts aimed at Cuban Americans in Florida during the 2020 election cycle found that political actors intentionally spread falsehoods linking then-candidates Joe Biden and Kamala Harris to socialism to deceive and radicalize voters (Mazzei, 2020). These purposefully spread falsehoods are then shared organically—as misinformation—at scale by those who believe them. In this scenario, rather than misinformation arising from structural flaws in the information environment, there is a clear dynamic of threat actors who explicitly originate disinformation, and radicalized recipients who repeat their claims. However, as a result, researchers may miss harmful aspects of the information environment which stem from structural inequalities rather than specific threat actors.

Contrary to the disinformation-and-radicalization model, the experts we spoke to said that this targeted "online first" model of polarizing techno-propaganda is much less relevant in their communities than previous literature suggests. Our interviewees focused less on problems arising from specific, deliberately manipulative disinformation narratives than they did on how disinformation, misinformation, and structural information inequalities compound to corrode the various information environments in which racial and ethnic minority communities in the U.S. commonly reside (Austin et al., 2021). Their concerns lay with electoral misinformation—accidentally spread falsehoods about elections and voting procedures—because of the structural barriers to political participation and information access that communities of color face in the United States, including a lack of consistent access to reliable information, frequent changes to voting procedures and regulations, and long-sowed misconceptions around the electoral process.

While targeted digital propaganda seeking to confuse, radicalize, and anger recipients of color has been a problem in recent years, our interviewees reported that it has more often been found in the context of COVID-19 than electoral issues. To the extent that their communities did experience disinformation purposefully designed to deceive voters of color, our interviewees told us it circulates mostly through offline channels—via deceptive mailers and misleading campaign advertising in print news and on TV, radio, and even billboards. When individual disinformation narratives do crop up around local issues and in relation to specific events, they rarely gain large-scale traction across their communities. However, our interviewees said that the general atmosphere of unreliable information creates a pervasive sense of confusion and distrust in government institutions and reputable media outlets, which are seen as distant and disconnected from their communities. This uncertainty and skepticism cause many of their community members to disengage from civic life. Almost none of our interviewees saw disinformation-inspired radicalization as a significant threat facing their communities. Rather, they view it primarily as a mechanism that inspires external actors to create legal threats against the rights of minority communities or personal threats against specific community members.

Our interviewees overwhelmingly felt that educational outreach through door-knocking, mailers, community events, radio ads, and social media posts, among other methods, are essential to counteract the confusion and political demoralization in their communities caused by disinformation. Unfortunately, direct outreach is resource-intensive to implement at scale, and most groups' educational efforts are inconsistent because funding structures are predominantly tied to election cycles.

Given these findings, we argue that researchers, civil society groups, policy makers, journalists, and others hoping to understand and combat politically motivated disinformation campaigns targeting communities of color must take a more holistic approach to first understand and address the structural problems that these communities face as they navigate their information ecosystems, as has been explored by researchers in contexts such as health disinformation (Volpe et al., 2021). With this framing, we can then discuss the harms associated with certain types of propaganda during specific events.

Our interviews made clear that cross-platform and cross-medium analyses grounded in socio-cultural critical frameworks are the best way to understand mediated influence campaigns among communities of color—and more broadly across the U.S. and around the world. When exploring the effects of digital propaganda in communities of color in the states discussed here, our interviews and other research suggest some platforms are more important for information consumption among certain communities—for instance, Twitter for segments of the Black community, WhatsApp for Hispanic and diaspora communities, and TikTok for young voters. However, we must integrate research on propaganda and disinformation to focus more comprehensively on the social media ecosystem as well as offline information sources such as mailers, campaign advertising on TV and radio, and word of mouth and consider how culture is correspondingly leveraged as an engine for power. With this, we can provide a general framework of election-related information harms, which, when applied to the specific challenges facing particular communities, aids in identifying the counter-disinformation responses that are most likely to succeed in that context.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Origins of Concerns About Digital Propaganda

> **There's always been a lot of disinformation in communities of color, and it's actually not a new phenomenon to use disinformation to suppress turnout, to incite fear, to have disillusionment. You can go back decades and centuries in the way that false information was used to suppress the vote for Black communities in this country, indigenous communities, Latinos, immigrants, Asian Americans.**
>
> *– Organizer with experience working in communities of color across Arizona and with aligned groups nationwide.*

As discussed in the previous companion paper in this series (Woolley & Kumleben, 2021), people across the U.S. have been targeted with digital propaganda and disinformation by a wide range of political actors in election cycles since at least the 2010 midterm elections. Research has often found that marginalized communities—groups that experience discrimination and exclusion (social, political, and economic) because of longstanding unequal power relationships across intersecting dimensions—have historically been among the targets of pernicious online influence campaigns (Howard et al., 2018, Freelon et al., 2020). Ultimately, these attempts to manipulate the public opinion of marginalized communities harm their ability to participate in democracy.

According to contemporary research these techniques are often developed and refined outside of the U.S.—for instance, on the Spanish-language Internet (Daniel, 2016). They are sometimes powered by automated, political bot-driven propaganda networks. These techniques are often applied in ways that transcend state borders. For example, both the Venezuelan government and its opponents have spread Spanish- and English-language disinformation within U.S.-based networks on social media, including both COVID-19 disinformation and Big Lie conspiracy theories boosted by "MAGAzuelans" both in Venezuela and the U.S. (Grantham, 2020; Rico, 2020).[4]

[4] "MAGAzuelans," according to Rico, are Venezuelan supporters of former President Trump who believe disinformation-inspired conspiracy theories about the 2020 general election.

After the contentious 2016 presidential election, information threats to marginalized communities continued, including the use of Spanish-language disinformation (Flores-Saviga & Savage, 2019) and disinformation-inspired harassment campaigns aimed at political candidates and journalists (Joseff & Woolley, 2018). By 2020, a distinct network of mostly far-right propagandist groups had developed that existed outside mainstream discourse but were still capable of introducing disinformation into it (Benkler et al., 2018). This included disinformation sowed about the Black Lives Matter protests (Kumleben et al., 2020) and highly targeted propaganda aimed at subgroups of Hispanic voters seen as vulnerable to far-right disinformation, such as practicing Catholics who may have socially conservative views on topics such as abortion (Mazzei & Medina, 2020).

Disinformation and conspiracy theories attacking the legitimacy of the electoral process originated in large part because of then-President Trump's false allegations about the validity of mail-in voting and exploded with his decision to baselessly dispute the result of the 2020 presidential election. Our interviewees flagged several of these falsehoods as prevalent in the communities they serve, including claims that a misplaced USB drive was used to steal votes in Milwaukee (Litke, 2020) and that individual Atlanta election workers counted fraudulent ballots. These lies led to a surge in harassment and violent threats against their targets (So, 2021). In Georgia, similar false claims spread about the Senate runoff elections in January 2021, although some analysts believe this strategy backfired by demoralizing believers of right-wing conspiracy theories and depressing their turnout (Hagen, 2020). These conspiracy theories have persisted into 2022, and they continue to inspire both laws restricting the right to vote and violent threats to voters of color (Department of Homeland Security, 2022).

B. Why Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin?

We chose to focus on the states of Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin because, as electoral battleground states, they are attractive targets for manipulation by propagandists; however, communities and organizations in these states have also developed countermeasures to these threats (Howard et al., 2018). Communities of color have been directly targeted in each of these states in different ways, meaning that listening to each of these communities will create a more systemic picture of the harms of racially targeted disinformation. We believe

our study of states from different regions contributes to the applicability of our findings across the country, as they can be generalized regionally where appropriate. The diverse demographic makeup of these states and of our interviewee pool allows us to investigate different on-the-ground experts' perspectives about the lived experiences of their community members, as well as what they believe to be the most salient information problems on the local level and more broadly.

1. Arizona

While Hispanic Americans form a demographic plurality in Arizona, at 42.4 percent of the population, according to 2020 census data, they represent less than a quarter of registered Arizona voters because of the population's low median age and mixed immigration status (Pew Research, 2020). With one in five Arizonans speaking Spanish as a primary language, many Hispanic voters experience significant language barriers to their political participation, including serious errors or mistranslations on voter registration cards (Payne & Martinez, 2012) and ballots (Pitzl, 2016). Disinformation concerning immigration and the border, such as campaigns relating to "migrant caravans," has originated from anti-immigrant propagandists both in the U.S. and Mexico and spread freely between the two countries (Cobian, 2016). Hispanic Americans are almost seven times more likely than non-Hispanic whites to use encrypted messaging apps to discuss politics, with WhatsApp being particularly popular (Gursky et al., 2021). These encrypted platforms facilitate the spread of dis- and misinformation within Hispanic and other diaspora communities in a way that is difficult to track and counteract. Finally, hate speech and hostile propaganda, such as false claims of widespread voter fraud in Hispanic communities, stoke fear within those communities and increase the danger of attacks on the community by other groups (Peoples & Woodward, 2016).

Native Americans in Arizona continue to experience significant barriers to their full political participation that perpetuate the long history of suppressing the Native vote in the United States and reflect the deep poverty and lack of infrastructure that persists on tribal land. Many of Arizona's rural Native communities, particularly in the 27,413-square mile Navajo Nation, lack reliable Internet connection, phone service, and even U.S. Postal Service mail coverage. This is problematic both for accessing voting information and for voting itself, with some Native voters facing drives of over 100 miles to access mail and polling sites

(Native American Resource Fund, 2020). Language barriers can be severe for speakers of Native languages, with some jurisdictions in Arizona failing to provide adequate translated materials even when required to by law (Native American Resource Fund, 2020). As a result of these structural barriers, Native communities have historically recorded comparatively low turnout, although this trend improved significantly among some communities during the 2020 election (Fonseca & Kastanis, 2020).

2. Georgia

Of the states in this study, Georgia has by far the largest and most electorally significant Black population at a third of the state's population, according to 2020 census data. Black voters make up nearly half of the increase in Georgia's voting population since 2000 (Budiman & Noe-Bustamante, 2020), in part because of internal migration and enhanced voter registration efforts in the state. However, Georgia's long history of voter suppression continues to the present day. In 2020, Georgia voters faced dangerous propaganda that included veiled threats to voters in the name of "securing" polling places and even direct threats (Fessler, 2020).

Georgia became an epicenter of propaganda aimed at undermining the legitimacy of its electoral process, including claims that electronic voting machines were compromised, ballots were stolen or fabricated, and that 2018 gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams had attempted to manipulate the election (Durkee, 2020). Disinformation outlets and former President Trump attacked Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger for certifying Biden's win in the state (Gardner, 2020). These disinformation-fueled claims of voter fraud inspired Georgia's controversial Election Integrity Act of 2021 (Niesse, 2020). As such, Black Georgia voters face a complex and evolving set of threats to their rights, both from direct harassment and from changes in election procedures that our interviewees saw as inspired by racially charged disinformation. Georgia also has rapidly growing Asian American and Hispanic communities. As in the other states we studied, these groups have been targeted by propaganda—including racially divisive disinformation—in non-English languages on encrypted messaging platforms (Nguyễn et al., 2022).

3. Wisconsin

Although Wisconsin is predominantly white, the state is home to diverse and growing minority communities. Black and Hispanic Wisconsinites each constitute about seven percent of the state's population, and Asian Americans make up three percent of the population, according to 2020 census data. Particularly notable are the Black community in Milwaukee, which has the third highest proportion of Black residents in the Midwest, and Wisconsin's Hmong community, which is the second largest in the U.S. after that of neighboring Minnesota. Suppressive campaigning designed to depress turnout among likely Democratic voters in urban areas disproportionately impacted communities of color; internal documents from the Trump campaign show that it specifically targeted predominantly Black communities with voting deterrence messaging in 2016 ("Revealed: Trump campaign strategy to deter millions of Black Americans from voting in 2016," 2020). This demographic targeting continued in 2020, when deterrence campaigns again targeted Milwaukee's Black neighborhoods (Campbell & Schultz, 2020). Online disinformation actors and political campaigns promoted unfounded attacks on the security of mail-in voting and ballot counting procedures (Redman et al., 2020).

After the election, disinformation narratives circulated targeting Milwaukee's ballot counting processes, including a persistent claim that a USB drive containing votes was tampered with (Litke, 2020). Governor Tony Evers has resisted calls to restrict voting based on claims that Wisconsin's procedures in 2020 were not secure (Conniff, 2022), but the state has experienced legal battles over redistricting, ballot drop boxes, and other election-related issues since 2020 (Baik, 2022). The state remains a high-risk area for extremist militia activity, according to experts in crisis monitoring (ACLED, 2020), fueled in part by ongoing disinformation efforts to undermine faith in state institutions.

III. METHODOLOGY: CENTERING THE KNOWLEDGE OF COMMUNITY EXPERTS

This is a qualitative study informed by semi-structured, in-depth interviews with activists, community leaders, and journalists who work on understanding and countering political dis- and misinformation targeting communities of color. Most represent one or more of the communities discussed here. This expert-based, community centric approach to scholarship is valuable when discussing burgeoning socio-political issues (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963). Our experience as propaganda and disinformation researchers has led us to see the crucial need to center the insights of the community experts and people who regularly contend with problematic, misleading political information in efforts to address these challenges. This research practice facilitates clearer understanding of embattled communities' core concerns and focuses on the perspectives of those affected—rather than, say, counting false political messages online and attempting to extrapolate their effects. In other words, we seek to understand the human impact of propaganda and disinformation as told by the people who understand this impact best.

Interview participants were identified through non-probability, purposive sampling (Bryman, 2016). Specifically, we recruited interviewees through the collection and analysis of news articles and LinkedIn data, leveraging introductions from previous interviewees (known as snowball sampling), relationships built through our research, and connections with existing partners of Protect Democracy (Handcock & Gile, 2011). In total, we conducted interviews with 27 experts involved in analyzing and countering racially and ethnically targeted political dis- and misinformation, geographically categorized as follows: Arizona (8), Georgia (9), Wisconsin (8), and national (2). We spoke with Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Native American interviewees, with an emphasis on diversity among our cohort, and also spoke with white interviewees with relevant expertise. The majority of our interviewees (19) worked for nonprofits, and their expertise provides first-hand accounts of community experiences and groups' most useful countermeasures. A handful of our interviewees work as researchers (4) and journalists (4). We found this latter group, including nonprofit workers with research and journalism experience, was particularly focused on assessing systems-level patterns in communication environments.

Interviews ranged between 45 minutes to an hour, and were conducted via video software (i.e., Zoom) or by phone. All interviews were consensually recorded and carried out under the condition of anonymity. Interviewees were offered compensation for their time, in the form of a $50 gift card, though many declined. By speaking to individuals with first-hand experience detecting and responding to racially targeted political propaganda, we were able to garner insights that observational and quantitative content-based research methods cannot (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Interviewers created thematic memos, which collate data from across several interviews to highlight emerging themes in the qualitative data (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Our study originally included an in-person component, which we suspended due to safety concerns around the Omicron variant of COVID-19. As COVID-19 risks decline and restrictions relax, in-person ethnographic research will become more feasible to researchers, and we encourage future studies to include this method.

By prioritizing local knowledge of problems and individual stories, we can present experts' and community leaders' perceptions of propaganda issues in various communities across our chosen states. By bringing together multiple, demographically diverse interviewees, we can uncover larger themes among their experiences of the contemporary information environment. These transcend concerns about a singular social media platform, communication channel, or topic. The multi-layered viewpoint herein facilitates understanding current counter-propaganda strategies in communities of color, which our interviewees report are often developed through grassroots experience and spread through networks of activists.

IV. INTERVIEWEES’ CORE CONCERNS ABOUT THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Our interviewees collectively illustrated a clear story of structural dis- and misinformation and how it harms voters of color: (A) communities of color disproportionately experience a lack of reliable and accessible information about all stages of the voting process, (B) this information gap stems from structural inequalities and poor communication by current leaders, (C) it demoralizes and dissuades voters from these marginalized communities from participating in the political process, and (D) disinformation narratives about people of color drive harassment of these communities.

A. Information Deserts in Communities of Color

A lack of trustworthy and accurate information about the mechanics of registering to vote and casting ballots was our interviewees’ top concern about the information environment in the communities they serve. While this is not a new problem or one unique to the Internet age, our increasingly complex information ecosystem exacerbates longstanding racial inequalities to manifest as structural disinformation. Many voters of color in the U.S. face what one Georgian activist working with Black communities termed “information deserts”: places that lack regular, accurate, trusted, and locally focused media outlets (Lee & Butler, 2018;, Barnidge & Xenos, 2021). While the loss of quality local media has caused harm across the country, systemic economic and information inequality means that impacts have fallen disproportionately on communities of color. These deserts create opportunities for misinformation that disincentivizes voting and disinformation aimed at disenfranchisement to flourish, particularly as online information ecosystems allow information (and, in particular, false or sensational content) to go viral in minutes (Venturini, 2019).

1. Voter Registration Depressed

These information gaps begin at the voter registration phase. Communities of color in all three states examined experience significant barriers to registering to vote, including a lack of access to accurate information on how to do so, though the specifics differ because of procedural differences across states. Missing, inaccurate, and misleading information about registration deadlines is a serious problem worsened by changes in voting laws that have not

been sufficiently communicated by election authorities to marginalized communities. One Georgia activist who works with Black communities to research issues around ballot access said that changes of absentee ballot deadlines were "not posted on the Secretary of State's website, not made comprehensively available to anybody." Some interviewees did note, however, that certain local governments have significantly improved their efforts to provide voting information. A Georgia activist experienced in countering election disinformation singled out justthefacts.vote, a website where Arizona's Maricopa County provides election information and fact-checking in a clear format to the public, as a major improvement since the 2020 election; an Arizona journalism expert suggested that connecting voters to such resources should be a priority for journalists.

Even simple eligibility to vote is confusing for certain vulnerable groups disproportionately represented among communities of color. Voters living with felony convictions often do not know if they are eligible even once their parole has ended, and a Wisconsin activist who works to inform people with convictions about their political rights told us that "the judge tells you that from this moment on, you have lost your right to vote […] but when you finish your supervision, you don't go through the same thing [to be told your rights are restored]." The lack of clear guidance from local officials is compounded by major differences in felony disenfranchisement laws across states.

More generally, poor communication from government officials about the documentation needed to vote, particularly as some states implement new voter ID laws, has led to the disproportionate disenfranchisement of voters of color. Even in Wisconsin, which has same-day voter registration and where voter ID requirements have remained unchanged for several election cycles, a local journalist who has covered these laws since their introduction said, "Folks were not aware when laws changed around voter IDs—what they need, what they had to do, and people were disenfranchised." A researcher at an organization that works to register Black voters in Georgia said, "We kept hearing this weird rumor that you needed a vehicle registration in order to vote," which deterred some urban Black Georgians without cars from attempting to register.

Moreover, the absence of tailored government outreach to address the unique circumstances experienced by some of their constituents to ensure their ability to participate in elections reinforces the marginalization of these groups. A Native activist working with rural

communities in Arizona pointed out that many rural Native voters do not live on roads with U.S. Postal Service addresses and are unsure how to provide proof of address. The failure to provide clear guidance to all eligible voters can easily discourage voters from registering or cause them to miss deadlines.

2. Voters Kept from the Polls

Structural disinformation does not end at the point of registration. Former expats returning to the U.S., people who are the first member of their family to be eligible to vote, and new citizens who are voting for the first time, for example, face information barriers throughout the process of voting in the United States. These challenges are particularly salient in border states like Arizona, which have more new and returning voters than most states. A local journalist providing Spanish-language information to Mexican Americans said, "There are people who are born in the U.S. and live in Mexico, and suddenly they come back and live in the U.S. and they have no idea how the electoral process works. [...] Since they don't know how the system works, they're a target of misinformation." She also noted that they may "compare everything to [their previous] countries." Mail-in voting, for example, is unavailable in most of Latin America and can create confusion and mistrust when voters first encounter it in their new home country.

Our interviewees consistently flagged that recent changes—and proposed changes—to voting procedures in their states further confuse the information environment on top of the clear structural barriers they impose on voting. The director of a Georgia-based community organizing group bluntly described the national wave of new voting restrictions driven by false claims of fraud in the 2020 presidential election, such as Georgia's Election Integrity Act of 2021, as a "source of constant misinformation and disinformation." An organizing director with extensive experience at polling places in both Atlanta and rural counties told us that sometimes even polling supervisors do not have a clear understanding of requirements and impose excessive restrictions on organizers and observers with a "better safe than sorry" mindset, creating barriers at individual polling places that cannot be retroactively redressed.

Closures of polling places or removals of ballot drop boxes make the problem worse, by eliminating known venues where voters understood the electoral process. One Georgia activist and researcher said that the number of ballot drop boxes has declined precipitously

and those that remain are purposefully difficult to find. Another interviewee, who directly supervises community organizing teams in Black neighborhoods, said that the broadscale closure of polling places has disproportionately been aimed at Black communities. They said that "a lack of local government funding" is often used as an excuse, both for closing polling places and failing to provide updated information on closures. An organizer from the same Georgia-based group, whose team works with voters to find their polling places, confirmed that this was also a problem in his on-the-ground work. Some experts described shrouded efforts to sow incorrect information about polling place locations and hours among their communities. A Wisconsin-based activist who aids recently enfranchised voters in understanding the voting process said that "this comes up all the time: what time do the polls open, what time do the polls close, is there a ballot box over here or a drop box there. We had people get directions to empty parking lots where they were supposed to be able to go to register or get in line, or early voting—it's an empty parking lot."

B. Communication Gaps Drive Uncertainty

The uncertainty about election procedures disproportionately experienced by communities of color stems from poor communication of reliable information at all levels of the information ecosystem. While it intersects with different structural inequalities faced by each group, the cumulative effect is to paralyze would-be voters with an inability to find and trust authentic information. Our interviewees did believe, however, that culturally sensitive outreach efforts informed by knowledge of a particular community can empower people to know and exercise their rights.

1. Trusted Information Sources Are Failing Voters

While our interviewees said that structural dis- and misinformation about voting procedures stems from many sources—from people sharing innocent misunderstandings of rules and regulations with friends and family all the way to malicious disinformation spread by political parties and extremist groups—the government's contribution to the problem is particularly disappointing. Eligibility and registration documents, multiple interviewees argued, should be made clear to voters on official websites and in official mailings. Yet many election authorities do not provide information proactively to voters, and our interviewees warned some even give their constituents inaccurate information about their eligibility to

vote. An organizer who works one-on-one helping predominantly Black Georgia voters access official information said that he personally encounters inaccurate official information, "not every day, not every month, but it does happen," and his teammates report the same. This confuses would-be voters, complicates the work of organizers, and contributes to a wider trust deficit.

These official information shortcomings are even more profound for those who speak languages other than English. This problem is particularly acute among Native voters and those from smaller immigrant communities, especially among older members of those communities. One activist who assists non-English speakers in Native communities in Arizona pointed out that some languages, such as Navajo, are usually spoken rather than written languages, meaning that radio spots and other forms of audio outreach are critical to reaching their speakers. Overcoming language barriers is key to helping older members of marginalized groups participate, and supporting older voters will help stimulate inter-generational engagement because members of these communities often vote "as a family," according to an Arizona organizer who uses her deep cultural knowledge to provide Spanish-language support to Hispanic voters. She also noted that machine translation was not sufficient to keep voting information accurate, and human translators are required despite the burden that places on organizations.

While our interviewees were reluctant to name specific architects of what they see as systematic civic disinformation, they often argued that political actors are actively withholding information from voters for the purposes of voter suppression. A Georgia organizer whose team regularly attends meetings of election boards has grappled with "disinformation to try and limit public opposition and limit public voice around things that committees want to do. It happens [with local election boards] and it also happens in legislative situations. [...] They'll put up wrong [meeting] dates, or put them up at night, while people are asleep." He also deals directly with government institutions and claimed that disinformation is "coming from the Secretary of State's office themselves, on some level." As with other interviewees from his organization, he believes that official failure to provide clear and timely information about polling locations or hours can be a deliberate tactic to avoid transparency over barriers to voting such as poll closures.

When official sources prove inaccurate, community access to reliable information about local candidates and issues depends on its trust in available media sources. A community journalist in Atlanta focused on local news noted, "When we're asking about very micro-level community issues [...] usually we don't hear [...] misinformation that is Donald Trump-centered or things like that, because we're not really asking about national issues." Instead, she said, in her organization's work with low-income immigrant communities, "We'll hear things about a particular business, misinformation around some practices of a particular business. [...] The things I'm describing are really specific, micro-level rumors. The bigger, systemic things I see related to information and its accuracy are just trust of what I might call legitimate media sources, because those communities have been reflected in a way that is really deficit-centered." In other words, the media only covers negative stories about their communities, which she told us breeds resentment and distrust: "a lot of residents felt that they didn't appreciate, like, or even trust some local news sources because they only came to [the neighborhood] when crime was being covered."

2. Offline and Online Propaganda Targets Communities of Color

Many interviewees saw online dis- and misinformation as amplifying the effects of cross-media disinformation campaigns that begin in offline media. A Georgia activist who analyzes election disinformation cited a group that uses Black radio stations to introduce disinformation into predominantly Black nursing homes to highlight the importance of monitoring traditional media for disinformation. Mailers containing false information about voting, which face little accountability and can be targeted based on existing mailing lists, were the most common concern raised in Georgia and Milwaukee—particularly those targeting Black voters. Some of the groups sending these mailers took care to make them look like official voting materials, which our interviewees assessed was a deliberate attempt to trick the recipients into wasting their votes, being confused into inaction, or wrongly believing they had already registered. Groups trying to suppress voting in communities of color also used billboards; an activist for formerly incarcerated voters said that billboards that incorrectly stated that Wisconsinites with felony convictions would be committing felonies by voting were placed in areas with many formerly incarcerated people. Both mailers and billboards can be and are geographically targeted in ways disproportionately impact urban communities of color. Our interviewees with organizing experience, including an organizing director whose teams cover both urban and rural Georgia counties, did point

out, however, that urban communities are also logistically easier to reach for the one-to-one outreach work they considered effective in rebutting voter disinformation.

Other politically motivated actors also contribute to the problem of dis- and misinformation around local issues that affects how communities vote. A highly experienced environmental activist in Native areas of Arizona, for instance, found that local energy interests were systematically misleading Navajo voters about the policy changes their tribal council votes would cause, spreading false information about revenue and jobs numbers to scare voters into supporting their agendas. This example highlights how the resource gaps between powerful interest groups and historically marginalized communities are exploited using disinformation to perpetuate structural inequality and racism.

Where our interviewees did see online-specific propaganda as a direct threat to communities of color, they were consistent in their assessments of specific platforms as propaganda vectors. Those interviewees who dealt with diaspora communities, particularly Hispanic and Asian American groups, consistently highlighted WhatsApp as a major source of dis- and misinformation, both because its encrypted design makes it difficult to detect propaganda and because its use for communal information-sharing allows false information to propagate among trusted networks. Our interviewees from a national organization advocating for Asian Americans saw disinformation narratives spreading on WhatsApp around "Black-on-Asian crime" incidents—in which Black people are blamed for hate crimes against Asian Americans—placed alongside pro-gun and other anti-Black propaganda also intended for political effect. This form of disinformation is difficult to track because organizations need personnel with language skills and a familiarity with the social norms of a given diaspora community to properly understand how that community is using WhatsApp.

Facebook was less commonly mentioned by our interviewees, but those who did bring it up saw it as a serious source of propaganda. Facebook was generally seen as a particularly important platform for older users of social media; two Georgia organizers experienced in working with older voters in the Black community observed that older users may have less digital media literacy but also are less likely to be absorbed fully into disinformation-based online communities. Notably, our interviewees who brought up Facebook saw it as the closest platform to a more traditional model of online propaganda for these communities of

color. One Atlanta-based interviewee who builds voter protection programs noted that, when she does see Black Georgians buying into right-wing propaganda online, it is often because of deceptive Facebook pages that purport to post about innocent topics (often as "white soccer moms […] who say 'I'm just like you'") but then transition into spreading disinformation or racism. A Wisconsin journalist whose work tracks deceptive campaigning argued that the platform is a critical link in bringing offline propaganda—particularly from right-wing talk radio—to social media. Official pages and unofficial fan groups for these offline purveyors of disinformation spread their propaganda on Facebook, and it flows from there onto other platforms.

Some interviewees noted the growth of online influencers as a rising concern. Influencers may have more reach and even more resources than organizations or activists and can be powerful amplifiers of both propaganda and valid outreach. Because influencers are embedded within a given community (whether an identity or interest group), their content is more trusted by their audience and likely to be spread. They are particularly prominent on emerging platforms popular with younger audiences, such as TikTok, and thus are very relevant to engaging young and first-time voters. Fortunately, our interviewees did not see many disinformation-based influencers within communities of color, but they were still attentive to both the danger posed by misinformed influencers and the potential upside of cooperating with or creating community influencers. Interviewees in all three states expressed a desire for their organizations to establish a presence on TikTok. Two interviewees from an Asian American and Pacific Islanders advocacy group who are actively recruiting influencers as ambassadors on channels used by younger voters find that influencers use lifestyle channels to engage their audiences on political topics.

C. Voters of Color are Demoralized and Dissuaded from Political Participation

> **There's discouraging information about feelings around democracy and elections, particularly among younger people in the United States—a sort of sense that democracy doesn't work, so why bother.**
>
> ***– Atlanta-based expert on American and international democratic integrity.***

One of the more pernicious missions of propaganda is not recruiting for a cause nor misleading the unwary but demoralizing its targets and dissuading them from action—as a democracy expert with experience in both international and Georgia elections put it, creating "narratives aimed at making people think their votes won't count." This and similar sentiments were echoed by our interviewees across states and communities, with an Arizona activist working to prevent demoralization among young people of color saying that many young people believe "my vote doesn't matter." This simple expression hides many explanations, stemming both from active propaganda and structural disinformation.

Our interviewees expressed divergent views about the extent to which false voter fraud narratives affected their communities and voting behaviors. A Georgia voting rights activist working to combat election disinformation and its consequences noted, "African-Americans were particularly susceptible to specific fraud narratives: fake ballots being found." In the most extreme cases, targets of this disinformation reach a point of what she called "disinformation saturation," where they are so convinced by false narratives that they cannot easily be brought out of the disinformation-based communities that are now part of their political identity. However, the same activist also argued that, compared to white voters, Black voters are less likely to reach disinformation saturation, because they "have not been given that same new community in those spaces."

More relevant for communities of color, therefore, is the wider effect of election integrity disinformation on those who don't reach that point of saturation—who may not believe in any given attack on election integrity, but whose willingness to participate in democracy is nevertheless corroded by an atmosphere of uncertainty around their vote. Furthermore, the process goes both ways, as demoralized voters are more susceptible to false claims of fraud. As a voting rights expert who has organized Hispanic communities in Arizona and worked to coordinate pro-voting groups on a national level put it, "there's a misunderstanding in the progressive movement on the left generally about how deeply that fraud narrative has proliferated in communities of color, and also how easy it was for communities of color to receive that, because it plays on all the things we already feel. We feel like we've been left out of the process, we feel like it's rigged, we feel like it's not working, we feel like we're not represented, we feel like our votes don't count in the first place." This interviewee concurred with the Georgia interviewee about people of color being excluded from broader

communities and information ecosystems but sees that exclusion as a major driver of demoralization, arguing, "It's very easy when folks are not connected to institutions or systems or have a community, and don't know where to get trusted information, that they can pick up on these narratives and start to really internalize them."

Other interviewees disagreed with parts of these assessments, downplaying the effects of pernicious political narratives spread by propagandists—–conspiracy theories about political figures and foreign attempts to disrupt U.S. political discourse—and stressing that these narratives have difficulty finding purchase in communities of color. These interviewees saw COVID-19 disinformation as a more pervasive phenomenon in Black and Brown communities than election disinformation; the research director at an organization advocating for Black voters discovered intense racialized disinformation around COVID-19, both around vaccine efficacy and alternative medicine, spreading through channels that could also be used for election disinformation. However, we found uniform concern over disinformation aimed at directly suppressing votes by confusing or deceiving voters about the electoral process.

Without proper communication about the relationship between electoral politics and community issues, propagandists can sever the link between civic engagement and the often highly local issues community members care about. Beliefs that voting will not affect local issues important to voters are exacerbated by structural inequalities that reflect historic inattention to the needs and rights of communities of color; today, these inequalities manifest as a lack of will to overcome these problems. Interviewees discussing the political marginalization of communities of color often highlighted the effects of gerrymandering. As a Wisconsin journalist reporting on the state's contest over electoral maps pointed out, partisan districting in Wisconsin means that some voters (particularly urban Black voters) may understandably feel that "people's votes just don't matter—the outcome's already been decided."

Several interviewees noted that young people may be particularly vulnerable to demoralization from a lack of faith in the value of their vote. A Phoenix-based activist whose organization specializes in advocating for young Hispanic Arizonans said that a lack of policy change leads people he meets to think that "voting is bullshit." This is particularly common among first-time voters, who face additional steps in the voting process and do not

have previous experience to draw confidence from. A Georgia expert on issue research and voting mobilization argued that young voters are particularly vulnerable to misinformation because of the time they spend on fast-paced apps such as TikTok, which exposes them to high volumes of information often regardless of its accuracy, though this interviewee suggested they may be swayed by emphasizing the importance of voting to affect issues important to them, such as student loan debt. Discouraging young voters compounds the harm of demoralizing propaganda, since more work will be required to re-engage them as they develop distance from previous civic education.

When addressing the issue of demoralization, it is important to take a holistic view of the other factors that put people of color at increased risk. Several interviewees who work with low-income communities across states noted the hurdles faced by hourly workers and those in irregular employment, who face time constraints on their ability to learn about and participate in elections. Our interviewees cited both urban Black voters in Atlanta and Milwaukee who rely on public transit and Hispanic or Native voters in Arizona who live far from government services as vulnerable. They added that voters with felony convictions and new or returning citizens may be unsure of their ability to vote and fear legal consequences for mistakes. In the absence of procedural changes to make voting more accessible, supporting these groups' electoral participation requires not only educational outreach but also social and emotional support to build confidence in their right to vote. An activist for formerly incarcerated voters in Wisconsin shared that when she cast a provisional ballot for the first time after finishing parole and regaining her eligibility to vote, she was told by poll workers it would be disputed by the District Attorney. Were it not for her ability to call other organizers for support, she believes she would have chosen to avoid the risk of further contact with law enforcement.

While some demoralizing messages are spread intentionally through hostile campaigning intended to reduce turnout, our interviewees identified a greater risk of "friendly fire" from pro-voting organizations. Accidentally discouraging messaging can come from well-intentioned rhetoric highlighting barriers to voting, as one democracy researcher in Atlanta argued when discussing Georgia's Election Integrity Act of 2021. She warned, "You want everyone to feel that there's this heightened sense of risk […] but it can go too far the other way." She specifically highlighted that the rhetoric necessary for opposing suppressive bills may be unhelpful when communicating to voters—calling a bill "Jim Crow 2.0," for

example, is rhetorically powerful but scares voters and may lead them to overestimate the hurdles they will face to vote. A Wisconsin activist for voters with felony convictions pointed out that, while campaigning for the rights of people on parole is necessary, it is also important to ensure that messaging does not accidentally dissuade those who have completed their parole and are now eligible to vote. She gave the example of a radio advertisement from a pro-voting-rights candidate that, in emphasizing that many with convictions were disenfranchised, wrongly implied that nobody with felony convictions could vote. If messaging about suppression is not paired with positive messages about voter power and accurate information on the voting process, it may unintentionally intimidate vulnerable voters.

D. Harassment Intimidates Voters, Poll Workers, and Activists

> **I'm not sure the broader apparatus was prepared for the number of death threats that would be sent to election workers, to campaign staff, to poll workers, the number of doxing incidents that we saw.**
>
> *– Leader of a disinformation research and rapid response team in Georgia.*

Our interviewees saw the emergence of disinformation-inspired harassment aimed at election workers as one of the most threatening consequences of disinformation. Fueled by false claims about failures of election integrity, particularly the "Big Lie" impugning the 2020 presidential election, radicalized individuals and groups have threatened election workers in ways that harm the election process and even their personal safety. Georgia-based interviewees from multiple organizations targeted by "Big Lie" disinformation described election workers being doxed, threatened online, and even followed in person by extremists. Election workers face heightened risk of having their personal information exposed and exploited because their identities are matters of public record, which enables what one Georgia activist who briefed legislators on doxing threats called "doxing by committee"—a tactic where harassers coordinate online to share pieces of information with each other that add up to reveal a target's identity. People of color are disproportionately targeted by these conspiracy theories and harassment campaigns because of racist beliefs that Black and Brown voting precincts are centers of electoral corruption. As

an organizer who worked with a Hispanic advocacy group in areas of Arizona targeted by Big Lie disinformation put it, "It was always the big cities, like Milwaukee, Philly, Phoenix, Miami [...] and that's why it's all race-based, it's just the newest form of race-based fearmongering, because all these communities have super-high diverse populations."

Harassment creates tremendous morale problems among election workers. According to one interviewee who dealt with harassment of predominantly Black Atlanta poll workers, "they signed up to be public servants, not targets." When experienced poll workers are forced out by harassment or fear of harassment, this exacerbates the confusing and suppressive impact of legal changes to election laws and changes in polling place locations, directly harming community members' ability to vote. An Arizona activist who helps Native voters at polling stations pointed out that it is often difficult to find experienced and well-trained poll workers for Native communities and said that she has experienced untrained workers "running out of ballots" and not requesting replacements, contrary to legal requirements. Poll workers in some states, particularly Georgia, also find themselves targeted by increasing legal threats because of new laws, with a hostile information environment causing some poll workers to fear frivolous investigations and potential legal penalties for helping voters. A Georgia activist whose work covers "microthreats," or subtle but cumulative attacks on elections, said that many poll workers are afraid to speak up, either publicly or directly to would-be voters, because of the possibility of reprisals from above.

The likelihood of organizational security threats appears to closely track the extent to which an organization is the subject of hostile online propaganda, with those who have been targeted by "Big Lie" conspiracy theorists facing particularly severe harassment. Threats stemming from the "Big Lie" have led organizations to structure themselves to ensure personal and organizational safety, often at significant cost. A high-profile Georgia organization whose executive was targeted chose to not publicly share the identities of employees and to hire private security for high-profile figures—an approach their organizing director considered extremely successful for protecting rank-and-file organizers. However, this level of security would represent a significant expense for less-resourced groups, and the reality of budget constraints means their staff remain vulnerable. Disinformation-inspired harassment can even be reinforced by elected officials and candidates for office, with one Georgia activist who organizes in Black communities claiming that attacks by political

figures amounted to "a declaration of war" on groups like his after the 2020 election, and that they fear politically motivated investigation as a result.

Facebook was consistently mentioned as the platform where organizations were most likely to receive harassing or untrue comments on organizations' public posts. An Arizona-based activist who organizes communities of color in Phoenix against issues of racism and police violence said that, when his organization attempted to run Facebook ads, even with specific targeting, many respondents accused them of misinformation and made false accusations that the group was connected to Biden's presidential campaign. Although our interviewees did not report experiencing direct personal harassment coming through Facebook, comments on the platform were more likely to include offensive or false responses.

Some interviewees believed that the threat of doxing and online harassment affected the ability of their organization to function safely on a day-to-day basis. Groups with experience in combating political harassment, such as those with experience organizing protests or protecting elections internationally, felt the need to repurpose experience to help U.S. victims of online harassment. One interviewee, whose organization provides digital safety training for activists outside the U.S., said of her colleagues in Georgia that "we definitely foresee a time where we'll need to use these materials ourselves."

Voter intimidation is a genuine and intensifying problem even though online harassment of individual voters is not currently seen as a major threat and voters' personal data is subject to greater privacy protections than public information on poll workers, making it more difficult for harassment groups to target individuals. Voter intimidation as a suppression tactic revives fears dating back to the days of Jim Crow and organized anti-Black violence. Many interviewees expressed serious concern that threatening and even armed groups may menace polling places during the 2022 midterms. Advocates for voters with felony convictions believed that poll workers and parole officers were intimidating eligible voters with a lack of clarity around their rights. As a rapidly emerging and extremely serious threat, further research is an urgent necessity to discover the origins and dissemination channels of calls for voter intimidation. Worryingly, our interviewees were aware of these threats, but believed we currently lack sufficient knowledge of specific threatening groups and locations of potential harassment.

V. COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES FOR COUNTERING PROPAGANDA

Our interviewees uniformly stressed the importance of direct, proactive outreach and engagement to counter disinformation and build resilience in their communities. The minor disagreements about approaches between our interviewees that surfaced during our conversations were largely limited to questions of implementation.

A. Engaging Communities Where They Are

> **Let the community have difficult conversations in that very respectful and safe place. […] Stop what you're doing and start listening.**
>
> *– Arizona Spanish-language journalist whose platform has become a center of community dialogue and voter engagement.*

Building engagement and relationships with the public is critical for organizations seeking to reach marginalized communities. Our interviewees mentioned approaches including door-to-door outreach, public events in community spaces such as barber shops or family homes, and collaborations with trusted community groups; some communities, such as older urban Black voters, are more likely to respond to turnout efforts organized in partnership with churches, for example. However, as many noted, all of these were disrupted by COVID-19, and the digital space has become increasingly important for building engagement. First, organizations must meet communities where they are. This may be on large social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, but also includes messaging apps such as WhatsApp groups, emerging platforms like TikTok, text hotlines to reach those with limited smartphone access, and even, according to a Native activist working in remote regions of Arizona, radio for rural and Native communities.

Thoughtful interventions in community spaces have found a receptive audience. Our interviewees whose organizations take a more proactive approach to WhatsApp—distributing accurate information through their own groups or hosting digital events through WhatsApp—reported success in reaching new recipients and creating trusted

networks. One interviewee, a journalist-turned-organizer working with Spanish-speaking communities in Arizona, started a temporary program for fact-checking COVID-19 disinformation that rapidly found community traction; now a team of volunteers provides Spanish-language election information and hosts digital community events, even branching out from WhatsApp into other forms of outreach. The design factors that allow propaganda to spread via WhatsApp may also be conducive to disseminating facts in a way that may not be framed as traditional fact-checking but serves a potent role in combating disinformation. Two advocates for Asian American voters, whose national organization has done extensive hands-on research on encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp and WeChat, noted disinformation spreads across trusted channels in closed networks, and have pushed back by recruiting and training volunteers to spot disinformation in private spaces, including by searching for channels likely to contain disinformation based on keywords.

Our interviewees considered choosing the correct channel of messaging to be very important. They emphasized the need to provide forums not simply to provide information and fact-checking false stories but to enable discussion and questions from members. For instance, a journalist, whose Spanish-language platform provides content from COVID-19 and voting fact-checks to interviews with Spanish-speaking therapists, found that, while "journalists used to have a sort of privilege" in speaking to the public, where they could act as trusted information sources without necessarily integrating their work into local concerns, they would find more success today by listening to the community and responding to their questions in a supportive but public group. Multi-channel engagement and integration with live events was even more successful, according to our interviewees. Most important, though, was the opportunity to speak with and listen to community members to understand their concerns and resolve individual situations. This builds much-needed trust and allows networks of civic engagement to spread among underserved communities, particularly when organizations can engage highly socially active individuals—a journalist recruiting community reporters in urban Black communities recommended engaging "Block Moms," older women known and trusted in their local area.

Community engagement is a two-way street and should be viewed as a highly valuable learning opportunity for organizations. In reaching communities of color, it is necessary to be highly attentive to their individual needs and cultures. Mobilizing the community requires attention both to the issues that drive their engagement and to the specific barriers

to political participation they face. A journalist in Atlanta noted that Black communities' lack of trust in established media organizations because of "deficit-centered" reporting focused on crime ("if we think of trust as a bank, that bank was empty") limits the effectiveness of traditional fact-checking. However, she found that distrust could be overcome by building deep relationships and providing educated volunteers as community resources. This requires a process of attentive listening, collecting information, and synthesizing the results into targeted, action-oriented messaging that will get people engaged and voting. Generally, our interviewees found that the listening process was itself a form of outreach that generated trust and enthusiasm by allowing underserved communities to feel heard and respected. As such, rather than being seen as a necessary but burdensome step, tailoring engagement to the concerns of a community is itself a valuable part of fostering participation and driving voter turnout.

B. Ensuring Information Consistency and Accuracy

> **We have basically gone back to teaching Government 101.**
>
> *– Wisconsin advocate for people with felony convictions.*

Proactively providing accurate information to voters, according to our interviewees, is a highly effective method for improving the information environment for marginalized communities. This includes providing accurate information on local political issues, guiding communities through the voting process, and drawing attention to issues of suppression or disenfranchisement. Providing correct voting information is essential to combating false information that would otherwise disenfranchise members of marginalized communities. This must be done proactively, both to encourage turnout and because the channels by which false information is delivered to these communities are not suited to reactive fact-checking. For instance, interviewees actively monitoring deceptive campaigning in both Georgia and Wisconsin preemptively warned about mailers with misleading voting information, which their organizations cannot directly rebut in the same way as online disinformation.

However, our interviewees sounded some notes of caution about the limits of civic information outreach. Relationships of trust are crucial, and activists should guard against the deliberate and unintended confusion of the information environment. A representative of a large Georgia voting rights organization that mails information to voters pointed out that when many different organizations send mailers, voters may become confused and wary of the profusion of sources—particularly if they contain apparently contradictory messaging or arrive alongside hostile disinformation. Organizations should coordinate and potentially consolidate information outreach to ensure they present a united front. Just as disinformation actors and deterrence campaigns now precisely target their attacks, so must supportive organizations take advantage of modern tools and traditional campaigning techniques to ensure the needs of marginalized communities are met.

Many organizations whose employees we interviewed conduct explicit programs of civic education to teach knowledge about the political process, candidates, and voting rights. Some interviewees, including those working directly with efficacy evaluation, considered it difficult to judge the success of these campaigns, partially because of one of their great strengths—that they inform recipients who can then spread information in their community by word of mouth or on social media. However, those organizations that conducted longer-term training, such as a community journalism group in Atlanta, believed that this was an effective way to leverage existing community networks to spread accurate voting information. An expert who worked to directly counter disinformation-inspired extremists in Georgia argued that this could even work for the most "disinformation-saturated" radicals, saying that for some of those volunteering as election workers, "they may have a lot of stuff demystified, and a lot of [disinformation-based] stuff proven untrue, in a way which is unique" (although, dangerously, that cannot be expected to work for all believers in election conspiracy theories).

Civic education in digital media literacy has been shown to increase resilience to dis- and misinformation (Lim & Tan, 2020). One expert with experience in international democracy education suggested that materials designed for civic education abroad could be repurposed for outreach in the U.S. Our interviewees noted, however, that communities of color may benefit from some changes in focus due to the different nature of the information threats they face, with education focused on boosting civic engagement and accessing accurate official information being more important than countering individual disinformation

narratives. Representatives of some communities, particularly Native and Spanish-speaking groups, also noted that civic education is especially important in a family context, and that overcoming language barriers to educate multi-generational households will increase engagement among all their members.

C. Solving "Friendly Fire"

While "friendly fire," used here to mean communications from pro-voting organizations that accidentally discourage voters, is far from the greatest danger in the information environment, some interviewees raised it as an issue that is comparatively easy to fix. Friendly fire can occur when organizations produce excessively negative messaging, and when their information is not sufficiently internally fact-checked before distribution. When negative messaging about voting rights issues is directed to marginalized communities—whether concerning suppressive laws, attacks on election integrity, or disenfranchised groups—it should be accompanied with positive messages emphasizing community power and the opportunity to defeat voter suppression. An interviewee involved in counter-disinformation research and polling also argued that her organization sees more success with positive, values-based messaging, such as appeals to shared civic values or religious beliefs, which could be packaged with issues-based messaging around suppression.

Collaboration to arrive at consistent messaging is also helpful. A Georgia interviewee who worked on messaging around electoral changes made by Georgia's Election Integrity Act said, in relation to the case of multiple organizations sending corrective mailers to voters, "People have to figure out whether they can trust them," as even if the information is not contradictory, contrasting branding and presentation can confuse recipients. An interviewee who worked in an Arizona-wide alliance of voting rights groups stressed the need for "more centralization of knowledge. A huge part of my job was coordinating what felt like a million and a half organizations and trying to get folks to be vaguely on the same page and use vaguely the same messaging. There's a lot of folks doing very good work and often it's being duplicated because there isn't a good clearinghouse for information."

Others, including activists in Georgia and a journalist in Wisconsin who fact-checks other reporters, also mentioned that friendly organizations can sometimes report inaccurately on each other, harming community trust, but stressed that this can be averted by collaboration

and information-sharing. For instance, one Georgia organizing director, whose team was targeted with false allegations of being a "shill" for Stacey Abrams, pointed out that reporting may innocently but inaccurately connect non-partisan organizations to political campaigns in a way that appears to confirm hostile conspiracy theories. He claimed that "it's not hard to find stories that are just wrong about us on the Internet [...] even the ones that are supposed to be positive." In general, we should expect that pro-voting organizations take time to adapt to the complex and rapidly changing information environment, but that empowering messaging and external collaborations can expedite that process.

D. The Need for One-On-One Outreach

> **If I'm a funder looking at ROI, and I'm thinking of funding an organizer to do this work over three years instead of dumping in a bunch of money into TV ads that nobody's going to remember after three seconds [...] that's a pretty good investment.**
>
> *– Arizona activist who organized with Hispanic communities across the state and now works to coordinate voting rights groups nationally.*

In addition to generalized outreach programs using large events, mass communications, and social media communities, our interviewees saw speaking with individual voters and dedicating one-on-one time as worth the investment. Organizers working with first-time or formerly disenfranchised voters expressed that individual outreach was necessary to overcome barriers to voting, and this was consistent across all three states. Young voters, voters new to a state, or voters recently made eligible to vote due to finishing parole or acquiring citizenship are all likely to have personal reservations around the voting process and need support, particularly where official information is lacking. For these voters, our interviewees described personal outreach as not just informative but also supportive, giving voters confidence in their right to vote amid a hostile information environment. Changes in voting laws, such as Georgia's Election Integrity Act of 2021 or Wisconsin's 2015 voter ID law, make personal outreach to clear up confusion even more urgent.

The main concern expressed about direct outreach was the resources involved. Rural voters (as a leader of organizing teams in rural counties mentioned with respect to Black Georgians outside Atlanta) and non-English-speakers (particularly those in smaller language communities such as Native Americans and Asian Americans) in particular require additional logistical support to be reached. Our interviewees said that this approach was more effective when sustained as a process of relationship-building rather than purely as pre-election canvassing, and several said that resources to allow organizations to continue outreach outside election seasons would be welcome. Our interviewees viewed social media, including WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and automated text hotlines, as a useful tool to complement in-person outreach and maintain open communication with their communities, particularly in counteracting misinformation spreading via the same channels.

Not all interviewees worked directly on get-out-the-vote operations, but those who did reported that—with the major exception of disruptions caused by COVID-19—their tried-and-true methods of boosting turnout remained reliable. However, our interviewees also learned from the pandemic restrictions and adapted, including by expanding their digital capacity. They found success with a cross-media approach, using both digital and non-digital advertising alongside active social media pages, and said improving turnout relies on adapting to the modern information environment. They also reported that spreading their efforts out over time instead of focusing only on Election Day helped achieve gains in early and mail-in voting.

Because state and local governments are responsive to legal challenges, some activists interviewed noted that their organizations also seek to collect information from individual voters in the event litigation arises—for example, the organizing director of a Georgia voting rights group working extensively with Black voters, which also brings legal challenges to suppressive practices, told us that his team tells voters in cases of incorrect official information that "we're going to document this for our records, for storytelling purposes. If there needs to be litigation later on then we have this story if you're willing to share it. [...] If it is a matter of public education, things that are incorrect on [government] websites or whatever, we want to document that, send it to our lawyers, and, obviously, get things changed."

E. Integrate Language Accessibility at Every Level

Outreach in languages other than English can be a crucial component of meeting communities of color where they are and on their own terms. An organizer who worked for one of Arizona's largest Hispanic advocacy groups cautioned that "language accessibility is not something to think about later. It has to be integrated into all of our programs; whether it's mail, digital, speeches, materials, it has to be in our language. It cannot be coming from Google Translate—you need to be hiring local translation firms, you need to be hiring people from the community to build relationships." Our interviewees consistently mentioned language barriers as an obstacle, not only when translation was unavailable but also when done poorly, as they believed happened in official government information including on ballots. Translation services for voting information are particularly helpful, but an Arizona-based interviewee, whose organization provides Spanish-language information, was clear that the most effective option is to have personnel who speak the community's language and can talk with them directly, whether at in-person events or over social media apps such as WhatsApp.

The popularity of WhatsApp among immigrant and diaspora communities was considered a double-edged sword. It is difficult to study propaganda in encrypted conversations, but the app's features that allow false information to spread are also useful for counterpropaganda, allowing organizers to create groups that act as a safe space for immigrant communities to learn about the electoral process and discuss their issues. Interviewees from an Asian American and Pacific Islander voting rights group, which tracks disinformation spaces both nationally and locally, have successfully recruited local partners and volunteers within online spaces for Asian Americans who can directly counter disinformation on issues such as anti-Asian violence with authoritative content in the languages spoken in those spaces. Interviewees who built services in non-English languages on platforms with which immigrant communities are familiar have seen substantial uptake.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our analysis of the interview findings surfaced a consistent set of recommendations for stakeholders, particularly for fellow activists and for funders. We saw a consistent narrative about the value of accurate voting information and community outreach, all founded on continuous processes of trust-building. We also share interviewees' notes of caution as to potential pitfalls in implementing recommended approaches.

A. Recommendations for Community Organizations

- **Be attentive to local communities' concerns and integrate them into organizing work.**
- **Identify which messaging strategies lead to voter empowerment and participation in each community, then tailor them to empower recipients.**
- **Invest in methods to reach especially vulnerable subgroups of marginalized communities.**
- **Coordinate messaging with other organizations.**

Framing counterpropaganda work around community trust-building is essential to its success in communities of color. State and local organizations working with specific communities are best positioned to understand the individual needs of the communities they serve, but national organizations can add valuable expertise and resources. Our interviewees stressed the importance of listening to voters and would-be voters while developing plans for their empowerment. This enables organizations to build relationships of trust while their messages develop organic spread in a community, particularly if an organization works with local leaders and respected figures. The learning and trust-building process can create a self-reinforcing positive cycle where an organization's messaging becomes more relevant as they create networks to increase their reach. This is particularly important for marginalized communities underserved by official information services and major news outlets.

Generally, our interviewees emphasized the importance of positive messaging around voting. This avoids the possibility of accidentally preventing political participation by misleading or demoralizing potential voters. It is still vital to draw attention to threats to democracy, but including empowering messaging with those communications helps recruit

people to defend their rights. Even when facing structural barriers to participation, organizations can help people remember the value of their vote. While this is not generally considered an effective way to reach people who are fully within disinformation-saturated online communities, it was seen as a chance to prevent people from reaching that point of saturation, particularly for people of color, who are less likely to be fully embedded in disinformation-based groups. Our interviewees considered positive, values-based messaging effective where they had evaluated it separately from issues-based messaging. They pointed out, though, that each community responds to certain messaging tailored to them—while one interviewee in Arizona with extensive experience in culturally-grounded communication found that family-oriented messaging was helpful with Mexican American voters, a polling and research expert in Georgia found that ads containing Mr. Rogers resonated with Black voters like no other subject.[5]

Trust-building emerges when listening to communities is combined with communicating empowering messages. Historically marginalized communities should feel heard and valued if they are to trust friendly organizations and the wider political process. This is a critical step to improving the information environment, particularly when organizations need to make up for deficits in official information. Working with a community directly allows organizations to synthesize learning and education, build voter confidence, and recruit potential volunteers. These processes can be adopted on a best-practices model by engaging with other organizations working in the same area and sharing promising approaches between collaborators.

B. Recommendations for Journalists

- **Partner with community journalism to build trust.**
- **Emphasize and link to official information.**
- **Draw on educational resources from voting rights groups.**
- **Continue to follow fact-checking best practices.**

[5] Mr. Rogers was the beloved host of a PBS educational children's show, Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. He was known for his approachable and comforting style.

For journalists' fact-checking work to be effective, they need to pay particular attention to narratives circulating in communities of color. Journalists we interviewed spoke highly of initiatives to partner with local news outlets and community journalists serving communities of color, as this is likely to increase confidence in legitimate journalism, which may have been eroded in those communities. They said English and non-English-language media outlets partnering together can be particularly effective. In the current media environment, journalists may be more willing to work together to combat voter suppression; one Wisconsin journalist covering disinformation issues spoke of a "spirit of togetherness" in his profession during the 2020 elections. This may be built upon to improve the information infrastructure for marginalized communities and ensure that they get true, trusted news.

In their coverage, journalists should proactively provide links to official voting information. As a journalism expert who works with journalists across Arizona told us, "Official sources like [county election websites] should be repeated often. The repetition of key facts from official sources is critical to people's general understanding, to hear things over and over again. [...] If everyone's trying to do their own thing, I get concerned that the variation between the approaches might degrade that repetition." Voting information from the government is both more compatible with journalistic norms and less likely to provoke disinformation-inspired harassment than information from civil society groups. Where appropriate, though, journalists can draw on resources provided by voting rights organizations to inform marginalized communities of their rights. Journalists should be careful when covering these organizations to follow fact-checking best practices to avoid unintentionally tying non-partisan organizations to political candidates in a way that might accidentally resonate with disinformation narratives.

C. Recommendations for Funders

- **Identify and scale proven approaches.**
- **Support alliances between local groups.**
- **Promote community organizations and community journalism.**
- **Distribute funding continuously rather than maximizing campaign-season spending.**
- **Consider the security needs of organizations targeted by harassment.**

Funding for community and voting rights organizations is essential to scale proven approaches and maintain counterpropaganda efforts. To maximize the impact of funding, focus on successful approaches is important, and some interviewees mentioned a lack of funding for evaluating their programs, whether through internal polling or through maintaining those programs long enough to identify success. Funding alliances of groups to cooperate on counterpropaganda programs was also mentioned as a potential avenue to enable scaling of successful strategies across organizations.

Funding voting information and civic education was considered vital to reaching marginalized communities, both through media approaches and on-the-ground personnel. On the media front, journalists interviewed emphasized the importance of funding local and community journalism, which is trusted by communities of color and recruits community members to spread information organically. Some interviewees from specialized organizations asked funders to keep in mind the importance of engaging particularly vulnerable groups that are disproportionately represented in marginalized communities, such as new citizens, the formerly incarcerated, young voters, and people without access to government IDs or addresses. On the personnel front, our interviewees flagged the ability to hire as a constant pinch for nonprofit organizations. As one voting rights activist, who organized Hispanic communities in Arizona and has also conducted large national surveys of similar groups, put it,

> We just need to organize, we need more organizers that come from the community, that are being supported, that are being paid fairly so we don't lose folks all the time and have to rebuild our base. […] We keep asking, 'why isn't the narrative changing after this big TV buy,' or 'why isn't the narrative changing after this big speech from the President,' because nobody listens to that! They're busy working two or three jobs, taking care of their kids and families, and we're the only ones who know how to reach them where they are and talk to them like real people, not transactional votes.

However, another interviewee, who works with community groups and journalists in Arizona, cautioned that this may require a lot of resources to implement, saying, "probably

the more personally effective or one-to-one effective approach would be [community-based outreach]—recognizing, though, that this doesn't scale, and so it's difficult to reach a large number of people unless you have hundreds of these types of operations."

Another common frustration voiced by our interviewees was the timing of funding. The cyclical nature of funding, ramping up in election seasons and decreasing outside them, impedes organizations' ability to continue programs and retain personnel. An interviewee who worked for a temporary alliance of Arizona voting rights groups during the 2020 election argued that funders must not "make this a cyclical thing. [...] I fought really hard to keep us intact so that we could retain the institutional knowledge and continue to do the election protection work between elections, continue to do voter protection and outreach, and continue to train our volunteers so it isn't such a mad dash every cycle." Prioritizing this work even during the electoral offseason would allow for sustained community engagement, trust-building, and continuity of infrastructure.

Interviewees whose organizations had been targeted by harassment also discussed the importance of funding for security and legal costs. An Arizona activist fighting police violence said that being "serious" about security would require a dedicated hire, costing his group $60,000 to $70,000 per year. Funders should consider deploying security funding to provide rapid support to targeted organizations in response to the emergence of harassment campaigns. Although mostly discussed in the context of challenges to suppressive laws, funding for legal resources was also mentioned by a Georgia organizer who collects testimony from voters affected by voting misinformation for use in his organization's lawsuits; he suggested that funders could help to hold state and local governments accountable to their commitments to provide election information.

D. Recommendations for Researchers

- **Engage in longitudinal or mixed-methods research.**
- **Partner with organizations to identify disinformation and help fact-check.**
- **Use research tools to discover potential threat actors and warn their targets.**
- **Consider the impact of structural disinformation on marginalized communities.**
- **Recruit researchers from underrepresented groups.**

Researchers working on issues of propaganda and structural disinformation facing marginalized communities can learn from both this study's findings and its limitations. Our design found limited success in tracking individual disinformation narratives within communities of color, perhaps because these narratives are too specific to individual communities or because the concerns of the study were too general. Disinformation in non-English languages was particularly difficult to track, although interviewees who worked directly in diaspora communities' languages reported success with methods such as keyword tracking and volunteer reporting. Either longitudinal or mixed-methods research may be helpful in cross-referencing our interviewees' identification of disinformation narratives with either the changing information environment or social media data. We did not discuss COVID-19 with all interviewees, but based on the COVID-19 conversations that did occur, the study design used here may be more successful at identifying health disinformation in communities of color, which appears to follow more consistent patterns and is more visible to researchers. Researchers could also partner with disinformation trackers or fact-checkers to create a consistent dataset of false narratives which could be identified in interviews.

In terms of the research needs identified by our interviewees, research as information-sharing was considered a useful goal, allowing organizations to prioritize resources and implement counter-propaganda best practices. Researchers can also provide direct support to organizations creating informational material such as voter toolkits, reducing the burden on activists. This may allow for more in-depth research into particular communities, helping researchers to understand disinformation narratives and local concerns on the ground. Recruiting more researchers from these communities would help academics build trust, center their voices, and raise community concerns into the broader discourse.

One of the most critical areas of research necessary was in tracking and prioritizing disinformation-fueled threats to elections, particularly threats of voter intimidation. Many interviewees, particularly in Georgia and Wisconsin, considered this a major emerging danger, but the diffuse and hidden nature of the extremist groups in question meant that it was not possible to uncover or evaluate specific threats. It may be possible for further research to identify these threats and warn of them ahead of elections by employing techniques developed by hate researchers.

Generally, our interviewees' emphasis on a multi-media disinformation environment suggests the need for a more multifaceted threat model. Previous research on disinformation has often focused on online radicalization and the rise of a far right emboldened by extremist social media content, which spreads via social networks into mainstream political discourse. However, according to our interviewees, communities of color are rarely directly targeted by this process with respect to election disinformation, though COVID-19 disinformation does hew closer to the online-first model. Instead, online election disinformation and trolling aimed at these communities are extensions of historical structural harms recapitulated and reinforced in the online information environment. Existing tactics of disenfranchisement through dis- and misinformation originate offline, then spread through social media to magnify their impact. To understand how online propaganda harms communities of color, we must take a holistic view of the information ecosystem which fully appreciates the importance of harmful traditional media and of structural disinformation.

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