AT THE EPICENTER

Electoral Propaganda in Targeted Communities of Color

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SUMMARY

This paper lays the groundwork for a larger qualitative study forthcoming in 2022. Here, we lay out the threats posed to communities of color by online propaganda, with a focus on disinformation campaigns. After presenting a breakdown of relevant types of harmful content and the manner in which it spreads, we provide an overview of the ways that communities of color have been targeted with disinformation and propaganda by racist and antidemocratic actors during recent U.S. elections. We find that a wide-ranging and multi-platform propaganda ecosystem has developed since 2016, which poses real threats to these targeted communities and the electoral process. As the study will focus on three representative battleground states—Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin—we then assess the political influence of communities of color in each state and the distinct information threats they face. Finally, we review the current state of counter-propaganda efforts, which until now have largely been undertaken by social media platforms but are beginning to be addressed by lawmakers and regulators as well. Our study will center on interviews with community leaders, activists, and other prominent members of communities of color in the three states, focusing on the effect of propaganda on these communities and which counter-disinformation strategies community leaders have found to be successful. We then will be able to collaborate with these groups to create resources for responding to disinformation that are tailored for their specific needs.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2020, people across the United States faced a barrage of deceptive and divisive information related to that year's highly contentious election cycle. Social media platforms were plagued by false content about various candidates for office, patently untrue information about electoral processes, systematic efforts to amplify bogus claims about voter fraud, and coercive political messaging tied to COVID-19 conspiracy theories. A great deal of this content targeted marginalized communities and, in particular, communities of color (Facebook: From Election to Insurrection, 2021), (Austin et al., 2021), (Thakur & Hankerson, 2021). In Georgia, African Americans and Hispanic Americans were on the receiving end of sophisticated microtargeting efforts erroneously claiming that then-Senate candidate Raphael Warnock "celebrated" Fidel Castro (Kertscher, 2020). In Arizona, Hispanic American and Native American communities faced a cascade of untrue digital messaging over Twitter about the voting process (Ramachandran, 2021), (Quaranta, 2020). In Wisconsin, multiple communities of color from Madison to Milwaukee were targeted with lies about mail-in ballot fraud and ballot dumping (Heim & Litke, 2020), (Witynski & Christoffer, 2020). Several of these coordinated efforts to undermine voting and the democratic process have continued into 2021 with partisan-motivated, overwhelmingly fruitless audits of election results. There is no indication that these problems will abate during the 2022 election cycle.

While voter suppression and election disinformation efforts targeted at communities of color are not new, technological advances have supercharged the power and reach of those efforts. Such informational offensives are part of a new and innovative wave of highly potent, often anonymous and automated propaganda. Propaganda—systematic efforts to mold society and public opinion via coercive media tools and communication strategies—is now often computational in form and networked in spread (Woolley & Howard, 2018), (Benkler et al., 2018). Today's influence campaigns are driven by a complex hybrid of political and commercial motivations. They are defined by sophisticated attempts to manipulate media frameworks and reporting practices, launder partisan information, and stoke political apathy and anger. Astroturf or "inorganic" operations are often purposefully seeded amongst the public in social media groups or via peer-to-peer text messages in efforts to get highly biased information to spread in a fashion that has the illusion of being grassroots or organic. Unsurprisingly, the origins of such endeavors are very difficult to trace. Many are defined by disinformation: the purposeful spread

of false content. This, in turn, can quickly become misinformation: false content that is accidentally or unknowingly spread at a viral level.

In partnership with Protect Democracy, we are initiating an original research study that will explore the effects of online propaganda and disinformation upon marginalized groups during recent election cycles and in the lead-up to what looks to be a highly contentious 2022 election. Targeted propaganda has been and remains a key mechanism through which racist and antidemocratic actors seek to selectively disenfranchise voters. During the 2020 U.S. election, these actors actively targeted communities of color with digital disinformation for the purposes of political propaganda, voter intimidation, and voter suppression. These malicious efforts, layered on top of longstanding structural barriers these communities face in exercising their right to vote, can have outsized effects.

Our upcoming study—to be published in Spring 2022—will be grounded in data from interviews with community leaders who have faced and responded to social media manipulation campaigns and policy makers looking for solutions. It will seek to uncover the local and specific harms caused by this focused form of digital propaganda. The study will also provide recommendations and resources to help marginalized communities cope, centering their voices, experiences, and expertise across these solutions. We will then partner with these groups to create more tailored resources for responding to disinformation that address the unique needs of individual communities in different regions of the country. In order to get the on-the-ground perspective necessary, we will be focusing on three battleground states—Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin—which will allow us to provide a nuanced picture of the situation across the United States without losing focus on the particular realities in individual communities.

This white paper is a primer for the forthcoming empirical study. It lays out the background and the conceptual foundation that our forthcoming research project will build on. Here, we explain the context of the wider disinformation ecosystem that surrounds elections, discuss how that ecosystem of disinformation has manifested in the three exemplar states in recent elections, and present our research agenda for each of the states covered.

THE PROPAGANDA ECOSYSTEM AND ELECTIONS

No piece of propaganda, conspiracy theory, or hate campaign exists in isolation. Social media platforms from Instagram to YouTube play host to a networked collection of harmful, misleading, and Machiavellian content that appears in various forms on a continuum from massaged truths to outright lies. Coordinated attempts to illicitly manipulate public opinion originate and seamlessly spread across multiple spaces online and across traditional texts and innovative apps on mobile devices. This section describes the main types of online propaganda as they relate to election issues and the targeting of marginalized communities. We pay particular attention to disinformation, because it is purposefully spread and fictitious. With today's electoral process increasingly defined by bad-faith actors taking advantage of socio-political division and confusion about the technical aspects of voting, disinformation has become a particularly important tool for influencing perception and behavior. Election-related disinformation cannot be fully disentangled from related efforts to systematically seed manipulative information during both major events and everyday life. That said, disinformation seems to spike during security crises, natural disasters, and major international events.

Because all forms of harmful digital content reinforce one another, actions that affect one platform or community may have untold effects downstream on other groups as well as on other information spaces, including traditional media. The harms caused by those who leverage and spread these types of content differ, but so do the ways in which research may be able to discern worrisome behavioral outcomes and propose solutions. For example, because COVID-19 and election conspiracy theories develop in similar spaces, attempts to improve the information ecosystem by targeting health misinformation may also be helpful in the fight against election disinformation. Understanding the interrelated nature of propaganda and its forms, particularly disinformation, is necessary to capture and respond to the problem fully and to avoid unintended harm.

The damage caused by propaganda and disinformation can manifest differently depending on the target and the space in which it is spreading at a given moment. Propaganda can be purely commercial or political, but it is most often a combination of efforts to both make money through clicks, views, and ads and simultaneously advantage ideological allies. For instance, attempts to mislead minors on youth-oriented platforms like TikTok might result in an uptick in underage e-cigarette use or stoke anti-Black Lives Matter sentiment while also driving users

to follow particular influencers or access junk news websites. Meanwhile, "seeded" lies in Facebook groups popular with retirees might increase polarization while promoting phishing campaigns. As such, it is important to take a full-spectrum, multi-platform approach to understanding digital propaganda, while remembering the variety of methods these campaigns employ.

FORMS OF ELECTION-RELATED DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

- **Fabricated News:** Some disinformation is spread by websites or groups that claim to be legitimate news outlets but in fact fabricate stories due to ideological or profit-driven motives. While social media companies have taken some steps to remove or fact-check these websites, engagement with "unreliable" news sites on social media quadrupled in 2020 compared to 2019 (Fischer, 2020). Once created, fabricated news may be spread by politicians and their allies in their advertising material and speeches or inadvertently shared by unsuspecting viewers. For instance, three months after the 2020 election, businessman and far-right influencer Mike Lindell created a widely shared film claiming that the Biden campaign used a supercomputer to hack electronic voting systems—a claim that originated on a fabricated news website, The American Report (Spencer & Fichera, 2021).

- **Conspiracy Theories:** A lot of disinformation occurs in the form of conspiracy theories, which may be focused on a given issue (such as anti-vaccine conspiracy theories) or have a more general scope (for example, alleging pedophile networks in government and entertainment). A conspiracy theory is a claim that political events are manipulated by powerful groups without public knowledge, usually in a way the conspiracy theorist considers hostile. These generally differ from fabricated news because, rather than masquerading as coming from a trusted source, conspiracy theories spread organically through user-generated content in networks such as "QAnon" groups. Ordinary citizens serve as generators of false information, and their false narratives take on lives of their own on social media. In an election context, conspiracy theories may allege that the election will be rigged by powerful groups. Donald Trump and his allies, for instance, claimed after the 2020 election that Dominion Voting Systems had deleted or "flipped" millions of Trump votes in collusion with a list of possible conspirators from Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi to late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez (Swenson & Seitz, 2021).

- **Voting Disinformation:** One of the most dangerous types of disinformation (and one of the very few that can be tried as a criminal offense), voting disinformation is false information designed for the purpose of voter suppression. It includes false information about voting times, polling places, methods of voting, or eligibility to vote. For example, a variety of groups—foreign and domestic—maliciously spread claims that votes can be cast by text message among prospective Clinton voters during the 2016 election (Hawkins, 2016). Hate groups are the largest perpetrators of voting disinformation, and they directly target minority voters as part of their centuries-long efforts to suppress the votes of Americans of color. While this is a relatively uncommon form of disinformation, election integrity and U.S. law demand that it be identified and removed with diligence. Unsuspecting viewers of voting disinformation who share it with their networks with the best of intentions help its viral spread. Similarly, researchers have noticed that when well-meaning voters share state-specific voting information on social media, it can sow confusion and become misinformation when it is viewed out of context by members of their social networks in other states (Gursky et al., 2021).

- **False Political Advertising:** Political advertisements, commonly purchased by campaigns and political action committees ("PACs" and "Super PACs") are pervasive in battleground states during significant election cycles. However, these advertisements may contain deceptive information designed to manipulate voters' opinions of candidates. In 2020, pro-Trump advertisements microtargeted Wisconsin voters with false claims about then-presidential candidate Joe Biden's economic policy (Hardee, 2020). While political advertising on social media is subject to disclosure rules enforced by the Federal Election Commission (FEC), which Facebook implemented with its policy on political advertising disclaimers (Facebook, 2019), and in some cases to fact-checking policies, these may be insufficiently enforced. Moreover, user-generated content, including repeating these false claims, is not subject to these policies. Deceptive advertising may also be camouflaged as organic content or "astroturfed" via paid influencers and computational propaganda.

Methods of Spread

- **Computational Propaganda:** Computational propaganda is the use of automation, algorithms, and big data on social media in attempts to manipulate public opinion. Most notoriously, networks of bots—automated accounts posing as human users—can

disseminate false or harmful content. Computational propaganda has become a major information threat to U.S. elections, as automation allows bad actors to amplify the effects of disinformation by spreading it through social networks. The role of computational propaganda changed between the 2016 and 2020 elections; platforms removed some bot networks, but adversaries also developed more sophisticated techniques. It remains a persistent problem, with one large-dataset study finding over 100,000 likely bots on Twitter sharing election-related content in 2020 (Chang et al., 2021). Computational propaganda poses a new and evolving threat, and existing institutions designed to spot traditional information threats to elections, such as the FEC, are not sufficiently equipped to handle automated actors on social media.

- **Microtargeting:** Microtargeting, the practice of using social media data to reach finely defined groups or individuals, is a powerful tool at the heart of both commercial and political digital advertising strategies. Microtargeted campaign claims are targeted at those most likely to spread them further, and effectively targeted false or misleading claims become organic misinformation, which is more trusted by those in the network of targeted users. The Trump presidential campaigns employed microtargeting to maximize their digital strategies' effectiveness, including the notorious use of Cambridge Analytica's psychological profiling to target voters in 2016 (Andrews, 2018). Trump's 2020 campaign included many figures from the now-defunct firm and microtargeted voters to a far greater extent than the Biden campaign (Leon & Sharp, 2020). The campaign and pro-Trump super PACs used data collected for microtargeting to target millions of people with advertisements that contained false or misleading claims—one super PAC known for failing fact-checks (Fung, 2020) spent $5.5 million on ads, including social media advertising, in the Milwaukee area in the weeks leading up to Election Day (Treene, 2020).

- **Encrypted Disinformation:** While often spreading like other forms of propaganda, disinformation on encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram adds another dimension to the problem. These apps cannot be easily monitored or studied, because, by design, no third party (including the platform itself) can see what messages or images are being sent. As a result, they are fertile ground both for propaganda to infiltrate voters' trusted networks and for disinformation actors to coordinate attacks on public platforms. This is particularly relevant for diaspora communities such as Hispanic Americans and Indian Americans, who are far more likely to use WhatsApp and other

encrypted messaging apps than non-Hispanic white and Black Americans (Gursky et al., 2021).

- **Narrowcast Disinformation:** Narrowcast disinformation refers to disinformation shared in smaller groups that are already predisposed to believe it, as opposed to a wider audience that may be more skeptical. This is enabled by precision targeting and allows disinformation actors to create echo chambers in which their content is uncritically received by vulnerable people. Narrowcast disinformation is "2-3 [times] as prevalent as viral misinformation," according to internal Facebook documents, and represents a dangerous weaponization of social media's power to create community (Anonymous, 2020). Furthermore, as marginalized groups are not homogenous political blocs, narrowcast disinformation risks fracturing and dividing existing communities. While it may be microtargeted, narrowcast disinformation is different from microtargeting in that it refers to the nature of the group receiving disinformation, not the way the disinformation is delivered. For instance, a non-microtargeted piece of disinformation may be broadcast in a public forum subject to critical scrutiny and narrowcast to small groups predisposed to believe it.

- **Influencers:** In this age of social fragmentation online, many users turn to influencers—high-activity accounts with large followings—for trusted information and political judgements. However, influencers exist as part of the same information ecosystem and may not be as independent as they appear. Not only do many political influencers repeat misinformation or act as creators of disinformation, but they also are now often coordinated behind the scenes because of their tremendous political and commercial potential. Specialized firms such as Wolf Global curate networks or "pods" of influencers who are paid or encouraged to spread a coordinated message in a manner not subject to public scrutiny (Goodwin et al., 2020). This is particularly important for micro-influencers, who previously may have been too small for political campaigns to use directly but now can be recruited en masse through coordinated off-platform networks. Because the coordinated nature of this process is hidden and smaller influencers will be trusted by their tight-knit followings, this is a particularly dangerous form of propaganda when aimed at marginalized groups.

OTHER TYPES OF HARMFUL ELECTION-RELATED CONTENT

- **Inflammatory information:** Some content that is not necessarily untrue can still be harmful. Inflammatory information is content that is manipulated and presented to stoke tensions and create divisions in a way that affects Americans' ability to properly participate in the electoral process. Such information spreads rapidly on social media thanks to algorithms designed to maximize engagement and can cause people to support extremist candidates, attack the legitimacy of elections, and even engage in violence. When dealing with inflammatory information, it is important to distinguish genuine activism from attempts to create anger to attack elections, such as the Russian-linked deceptive "Blacktivist" campaign (Byers, 2017), but it is still possible to uncover deceptive or manipulative uses of such information without harming activists.

- **Voter Deterrence:** The use of political advertising and other campaigning tools to deter voters from choosing an opposing candidate is an endemic feature of modern political campaigning. It can be as simple as negative TV spots aimed at depressing turnout by attacking a candidate, but modern social media adds a dangerous aspect to this practice. When groups of voters are micro-targeted based on their propensity to support a political party, there will inevitably be a disparate impact on segments of the population—defined by race, age, or religion—that are strongly disposed toward one party. Those dynamics, combined with the legacy of historical suppression of the Black vote and ongoing racism, meant that Black Americans were disproportionately targeted by deterrence advertising in 2016 (Channel 4 News Investigations, 2020) and 2020 (Ryan-Mosley, 2020). Though social media companies have removed some targeting features, sophisticated methods of voter deterrence that do not explicitly use race nonetheless disproportionately affect certain marginalized groups. For example, residential segregation means that ZIP code-level targeting can be extremely effective at targeting communities of color. Although deterrence campaigning usually does not consist of disinformation or harassment directly, official campaigning may both include disinformation and inspire it. Hate groups and disinformation actors, too, are aware of the potential of voter deterrence in achieving their electoral objectives.

- **Targeted Harassment:** In addition to disinformation, coordinated hate can also affect participation in political discourse and the electoral process. Harassment campaigns targeted at political candidates, journalists, and activists harm their ability and willingness

to participate in the political processes. They can result in a "spiral of silence," when the intimidation of high-profile figures makes it more difficult for other members of a community to speak publicly (Hampton et al., 2014). Even beyond the human costs of harassment, the chilling effect it creates has additional negative effects on the political conversation. Because women and communities of color are disproportionately targeted by harassment campaigns (Vogels, 2021), this problem has particular relevance to the political participation of marginalized groups.

- **Hateful Content:** While not always directly targeted at vulnerable groups, the presence of hateful content on social media creates a hostile environment that may affect their ability or willingness to participate in political life. Online hate thus has an indirect effect on the electoral process that parallels the United States' long and ongoing history of voter intimidation campaigns, which may be part of the motivation for spreading such hate.

DISINFORMATION IN RECENT U.S. ELECTIONS

A wide range of malicious actors including foreign governments and domestic political groups leverage digital propaganda and disinformation in order to undermine U.S. elections and further marginalize communities of color and other vulnerable groups that are integral to the success of American democracy. In order to unpack the scope of the issue, this section provides details on related efforts and cases between 2016 and today. The 2022 elections will undoubtedly be rife with similar information threats aimed at various segments of the public. With this in mind, we must understand the ways in which people in our country—particularly people of color—have experienced propaganda and disinformation in recent years.

2016 – 2018

While the 2016 election cycle brought computational propaganda— which allows individuals and groups to massively amplify disinformation and micro-target vulnerable voters—into the spotlight, many of its techniques were developed outside of the United States. Such tactics were already in use in the Spanish-language Internet, where "Peñabots" had been active since 2012 in support of then-President of Mexico Enrique Peña Nieto (Daniel, 2016), and in Russia, where the government continues to hone sophisticated and systematic transnational disinformation techniques that have been used in "active measures" campaigns dating back to the early Soviet era (Galeotti, 2019).

The 2016 election saw foreign disinformation break through as a major issue on social media. Russian disinformation, beyond supporting Donald Trump's presidential candidacy, targeted Black voters to discourage them from voting for then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton ("Russian trolls' chief target was 'black US voters' in 2016," 2019). In addition to the Russian campaign, which focused on undermining the legitimacy of America's democracy, for-profit disinformation came from diverse and unexpected sources. One small town in North Macedonia produced over 100 pro-Trump fabricated news websites in a profitable cottage industry (Silverman & Alexander, 2016). The polarized nature of the election, where the often-dubious claims of pro-Trump media caused supporters to seek out confirmatory news, created a market for false, partisan stories, and these actors responded to that economic incentive.

Americans, too, joined in the feeding frenzy. Conspiracy theories directly aimed at figures within the Clinton campaign, such as "Pizzagate," spread rapidly in partisan spaces with the help of bot networks (Bleakley, 2021). Worse still, formerly fringe hate groups, emboldened by Donald Trump's candidacy, poisoned social media websites with harassment campaigns and extremist material. While efforts have been made since 2016 to address some of these problems, at that time the United States and social media companies were simply unprepared for the scope and novelty of the information threats they faced.

In the 2018 midterm elections, as bad actors' ability to target harmful content improved, other racial and religious minorities became the targets of tailored attacks. Researchers were able to discern specific tactics used by political trolls against marginalized groups, such as the use of Spanish-language disinformation aimed at Hispanic voters searching for information on candidates (Flores-Saviga & Savage, 2019). Social media companies struggled to deal with the more local nature of propaganda targeted at state elections. In addition to targeted disinformation, targeted harassment campaigns attempted to dissuade members of marginalized groups from political participation in 2018.

2020

Many of these same pernicious patterns recurred in 2020, and disinformation was a major theme of the election. National-level disinformation spread through a network of high-profile actors, who were often inspired by the Trump campaign but took far-right messaging beyond even what the campaign officially endorsed. Network analysis has shown that, since 2016, far-right media outlets have become more distinct from the American mainstream, often spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories (Benkler et al., 2018). Microtargeted propaganda was aimed directly at many vulnerable groups, often bound up with issues such as health disinformation. Black voters were besieged by quantifiably higher levels of hate and disinformation on social media during the Black Lives Matter protests occurring throughout the summer than before the protests (Kumleben et al., 2020), and they then were targeted again with voter disinformation and deterrence campaigning in the run-up to Election Day. Tailored, culturally specific propaganda targeted Hispanic voters too, particularly in Florida where claims that Joe Biden was a socialist or Communist were designed to exploit Cuban American voters' sensitivity on these issues. Religiously oriented disinformation also spread to manipulate Hispanic Catholics, both about hot-button issues like abortion and more baroque claims, such as alleging that then–vice presidential candidate Kamala Harris practices witchcraft (Mazzei &

Medina, 2020). The 2020 election represented a hitherto unparalleled level of election disinformation in the United States, particularly microtargeted disinformation aimed at vulnerable groups, and it is critical that this high-water mark is not reached again.

The context of the 2020 election during the COVID-19 pandemic also provided a windfall opportunity for conspiracy theorists, disinformation influencers, and political extremists to manipulate public opinion. Communities of color have been particularly vulnerable to some kinds of targeted health disinformation, in part because of their justified skepticism of the U.S. healthcare establishment based on its ongoing history of unfair and unethical treatment of people of color (Serchen et al., 2020). Beyond the deadly threat of COVID-19 disinformation itself, confusion and fear about the pandemic created an opportunity to attack the legitimacy of democratic elections. Uncertainty about public health measures responsive to the pandemic added fuel to disinformation about voting procedures, mail-in voting, ballot security, and many other aspects of the electoral process. Furthermore, people confused by or distrustful of the scientific narrative around COVID-19 who searched for alternative perspectives probably encountered other conspiracy theories along the way. COVID-19 thus provided bad actors a chance both to sow distrust in the electoral process and to convert distrust of science into political radicalization.

Immediately after the 2020 election, then-President Trump followed through with his threats to contest the legitimacy of the vote, and a maelstrom of disinformation descended upon battleground states. In Georgia, election officials received death threats, racist messages, and in-person harassment as a result of conspiracy theories about the election (So, 2021). In Wisconsin, a conspiracy theory that a misplaced USB drive was used to steal votes spread widely in Milwaukee after it was published by far-right news website The Gateway Pundit (Litke, 2020). Even more elaborate theories appeared in Arizona, where disinformation actors first claimed that ballots filled out with Sharpie markers were invalid (Sadeghi, 2020), then that false ballots made with bamboo fibers were flown in from China (Levine, 2021). These false claims and many more intertwined in the disinformation ecosystem into a concerted and coordinated attempt to delegitimize the election of President Joe Biden. Unfortunately, though these claims have not survived legal or journalistic scrutiny, they have persisted among Republicans as a group, 60 percent of whom continue to believe the Big Lie that Joe Biden's victory is the result of widespread election fraud, and, and to a lesser extent, in communities of color, with one recent poll finding 42 percent of Hispanic and 20 percent of Black respondents believed that the 2020 election should definitely or probably be overturned (National Tracking Poll, 2021). In the

run-up to 2022, it is critical that all stakeholders come together to affirm the legitimacy and security of American elections.

DIGGING DEEPER: THREE CASE STUDIES OF TARGETED DISINFORMATION

In order to focus on the human and electoral impacts of targeted propaganda, our study will cover three key battleground states: Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin. The voters who live in these states are especially attractive targets for propaganda, because their voting behavior may decide the course of an election. Each of these states voted for Donald Trump in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020, so understanding their dynamics may help us determine how these factors are electorally relevant. Furthermore, they are each representative of a wider electorally important region—the Southwest, the Southeast, and the Midwest, respectively. Finally, because they are demographically distinct, these case studies will allow us to keep a consistent focus on targeted groups and address the specific but different dangers targeting Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans.

ARIZONA: HISPANIC VOTERS AS TARGETS

The Hispanic community is the fastest-growing voting demographic in the country, and Hispanic voters are increasingly politically influential in many states, particularly in the Southwest. However, they face unique disinformation challenges that require additional research in order to tailor appropriate responses to propaganda and to ensure that disinformation does not prevent Hispanic voters from participating in elections. In Arizona, Hispanic Americans form a demographic plurality at 42.4 percent of the population, with 20.8 percent of Arizonans speaking Spanish as their primary language. Currently, 23.6 percent of eligible voters in the state are Hispanic, though the Hispanic vote will increase in importance as more Hispanic Arizonans receive citizenship or reach voting age (Pew Research, 2020). Hispanic voters face structural barriers to accessing accurate voting information that some other groups may not—including, among other things, language barriers and justified mistrust of government agencies due to concerns about immigration policies and enforcement—that make them more vulnerable to voting disinformation.

Hispanic Arizonans are targeted by campaign strategists of both parties to affect their turnout and sway their choice of candidate. Many Hispanic voters' views do not neatly align with either major political party's platform; while many prefer the Democratic Party's approach to immigration and economic policy, those same voters often also support the Republican Party's

policies on social issues such as abortion for religious reasons. In addition, because the U.S. Hispanic population has roots in many different countries, different Hispanic sub-communities have distinct vulnerabilities to disinformation campaigns targeting people from those countries with tailored, culturally specific messaging. These factors create an opportunity for both Democratic and Republican candidates to appeal to Hispanic voters, but they also create a chance for propaganda to manipulate Hispanic voters over deeply held beliefs that may not be obvious to non-Hispanic researchers or strategists. Furthermore, hostile and racist English-language disinformation attacking Hispanic people in the U.S., such as claims that "millions" of undocumented immigrants commit voter fraud ("Trump claims millions voted illegally in presidential poll", 2016) and the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory (Charlton, 2019), may dissuade political participation by Hispanic voters by stoking fear and making them feel unwelcome.

Hispanic Americans face additional challenges with overt propaganda and political disinformation in Spanish. Translations of English content sometimes can be misinformation themselves. In one case in 2020, the difference between the connotations of the English "Progressive" and the Spanish "Progresista" meant that a video of Joe Biden was shared as "proof" that he identified as a socialist, turning a literal translation into organic misinformation (Gursky et al., 2021). The bulk of existing fact-checking infrastructure also focuses on English-language media rather than media in other languages, providing fewer resources for Spanish speakers to debunk voter disinformation spread in that language. These patterns have played out across the Hispanic community, though the targeting of Cuban and Venezuelan Americans in Florida has received the most media coverage (Mazzei, 2020).

Hispanic Americans are almost seven times more likely to use encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp to discuss politics than non-Hispanic whites (Gursky et al., 2021). WhatsApp is dangerously conducive to the community spread of disinformation due to the app's features; its encrypted design means Facebook is unable to analyze disinformation networks on WhatsApp in the way it does for unencrypted platforms, and users' ability to mass-forward messages allows false and misleading information to proliferate quickly. Despite the difficulty of verifying the authenticity of information on the app, WhatsApp groups often act as a trusted news source for users. The opacity of these apps makes qualitative research such as this project particularly important for the Hispanic community.

The most immediately pressing challenge facing Hispanic voters is politically and racially motivated voter suppression, including through disinformation. Many community activist groups focused on getting out the vote are doing excellent work to combat this threat, but more research is necessary to determine the specific nature of suppressive disinformation aimed at Hispanic voters. In our research, we will discuss these issues with Arizona voting rights activists and community leaders, both to assess the impact of online propaganda on the Hispanic community and learn about and amplify successful strategies for combating this threat.

Native Americans in Arizona

Native Americans represent a significant share of Arizona voters, and more than 10 percent of the country's Native population lives in Arizona. Historically, Native Americans did not fully receive the right to vote until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and they have continued to face significant structural barriers to exercising that right. These include lack of access in remote tribal areas to post offices, telephone service, and the Internet, as well as the lack of addresses in rural communities such as the Navajo Nation (Vasilogambros, 2019). As a result, Native voters' turnout rates have been lower than those of other racial groups, but rates are improving with help from voting advocacy groups. While disinformation about COVID-19 in Native communities has received more media attention, these groups also face misinformation about technical aspects of the voting process, which often includes additional complications in Native communities that risk suppressing voters and delegitimizing elections (Native American Resource Fund, 2020). However, because Native issues rarely receive adequate attention outside of their communities, our research will emphasize hearing directly from Native advocacy groups about the solutions they have found effective for overcoming disinformation.

Georgia: Black Americans and the Ballot Box

Voter suppression, driven by racism and enforced by violence, disenfranchised Georgia's large Black population until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Now, Black Georgians play a central role in state politics, representing 33 percent of eligible voters in Georgia and 48 percent of the increase in the voting population since 2000 (Budiman & Noe-Bustamente, 2020). Voting rights continue to be a contentious issue in Georgia, where current voting laws have a suppressive effect. Modern voter suppression, the dark legacy of Georgia's history, also has in part moved online, where it takes place through techniques similar to other forms of disinformation and harassment. The COVID-19 pandemic's effect on voting procedures,

Georgia's abrupt adoption of an electronic voting system, and extremist responses to Black Lives Matter protests also caused problems in 2020.

Voter disinformation designed to suppress Black votes is the central concern of our study of Georgia, as it is with much media coverage of disinformation issues in the state. Outright voter intimidation online was not unheard of in 2020, with attacks on election integrity serving as supposed justifications for false claims of "securing" polling places and other such veiled threats to voters (Fessler, 2020). Explicit threats by far-right extremists to Black Georgians went even further in an effort to suppress voters, though these threats were not carried out (Joyner, 2020). Moreover, confusion about COVID-19 voting procedures and mail-in voting laws created problems for Black voters, particularly elderly voters. Changes in voting procedures were complicated by the introduction of electronic in-person voting machines. Legitimate concerns have been raised about the speed with which Georgia transitioned to electronic voting, and reputable experts dispute the security of electronic voting in comparison to paper ballots (Niesse & Wickert, 2019). However, propaganda networks seized on these claims to spread unfounded conspiracy theories about Georgia's voting machines. Voters were told that private companies could rig elections and that their votes might not be counted, and disinformation actors sowed confusion about the technical aspects of voting.

In our study of Georgia, we will focus on interviewing voter advocacy and civil rights groups who fight suppressive disinformation. Georgia has a long tradition of civil rights activism, and these groups have seen information threats evolve over decades into the Internet age. We will also focus on those threats encountered by Black civil society groups that engage in get-out-the-vote activities, such as churches that host "Souls to the Polls" events. Understanding the local impact of voting disinformation is critical to building upon these organizations' strategies to keep citizens voting in the face of disinformation and technological changes to the voting process. We will also investigate the impact of hate speech and inflammatory information on Georgia voters, including from threats to polling places by white supremacists and propaganda designed to stoke racial fears such as the Russian impersonation of Black Lives Matter activists (Byers, 2017), and the extent to which such activity affects decisions to vote. Keeping a tight focus on propaganda in Georgia's Black community and the tactics with which the community has responded in this case study will allow us to promote strategies that can help this community and similar communities combat disinformation in 2022.

Wisconsin: The Dark Side of "Business as Usual"

Wisconsin as a case study provides a useful opportunity to perform qualitative research based on quantitative work and data journalism. Although Wisconsin's population is predominantly white, the state is home to diverse communities of color, with no one group as a dominant racial or ethnic minority. According to census data, Wisconsin's population is 6.7 percent Black or African American, 7.1 percent Hispanic or Latino, and 3 percent Asian, including a relatively large Hmong community. Wisconsin also includes the only county in the eastern half of the U.S. with a majority Native American population. Residential segregation persists in Wisconsin, and communities of color are concentrated in its urban areas. The Milwaukee area has the third highest proportion of African American residents in the Midwest, behind Detroit and Cleveland. It is also an important case study as one of several critical battleground states in the Midwest that voted for Donald Trump in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020. Studying how online propaganda targeted marginalized groups in Wisconsin thus gives us a greater opportunity for comparative analysis than in other states, where our study takes a more specific focus on individual groups. Wisconsin's location in the Midwest also provides a test case for counter-propaganda efforts across several battleground states with similar cultures and demographics. Wisconsin has become increasingly diverse in recent years but has also seen increasing state-level political polarization for longer than some comparable states—according to many locals, since the bitter gubernatorial recall campaign of 2012 (Gilbert, 2014).

Heavy campaigning in Wisconsin in 2020 saw communities of color targeted both by traditional campaigning methods and the microtargeting of their members, either through geographic targeting based on residential segregation or through other targeting methods that functioned as a proxy for race. The combination of deterrence campaigning and microtargeting creates a persistent, systemic threat to these communities' participation in the electoral process, particularly because of the inherently suppressive nature of turnout-based campaigning common in states such as Wisconsin. In both 2016 and 2020, the Trump campaign engaged in highly sophisticated targeting of deterrence campaigns that disproportionately targeted minority groups. According to Wisconsin Watch, the campaign "used demographic data to systematically dissuade voters in Milwaukee's primarily Black neighborhoods from participating in the election" (Campbell & Schultz, 2020). A statistical analysis by Channel 4, which uncovered this phenomenon, clearly shows disproportionate targeting of minority voters in 2020, and internal campaign documents show attempts to target African American voters specifically in 2016 ("Revealed: Trump campaign strategy to deter millions of Black Americans from voting in

2016," 2020). Local Republicans in Wisconsin also repeated misleading claims from the Trump campaign about the security of mail-in ballots in an attempt to deter voting by mail (Redman et al., 2020). Further investigation is necessary to assess the extent to which targeted groups were actually deterred from voting and how anti-democratic actors used social media to spread deterrence disinformation.

In our qualitative research, we will build on this analysis of suppressive deterrence campaigning in Wisconsin in order to discern the human impact and social effect of these practices, focusing on the community spread of political misinformation. By interviewing those victimized by and those fighting against microtargeted deterrence and suppressive propaganda, we will illuminate how Wisconsin voters of color experience the threat of political disinformation and how communities have responded. In addition to Black voters in and around Milwaukee, we will investigate the impact on Hispanic voters and the Hmong community. In this way, we will produce a snapshot of how propaganda harms marginalized voters in Wisconsin that may also provide insight for responding to disinformation issues in analogous communities across the region and the nation.

CURRENT EFFORTS TO COMBAT DISINFORMATION

Both before and after the 2020 election, deplatforming malicious actors by removing their access to public social media accounts has proven somewhat successful in combating online propaganda insofar as it takes away these actors' public communication channels and access to large audiences (Jhaver et al., 2021), (Rogers, 2020). Researchers found that online misinformation about election fraud decreased by 73 percent after social media sites suspended Donald Trump and several allies (Dwoskin & Timberg, 2021). Deplatforming users who coordinate inauthentic behavior or who act as originators of propaganda has been particularly praised because it disrupts the entire disinformation ecosystem across platforms (Rogers, 2020). Facebook currently defines Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB) as "coordinated efforts to manipulate public debate for a strategic goal where fake accounts are central to the operation" (Facebook, 2021). CIB is the clearest use case for deplatforming, and social media companies have used quantitative analytics to remove entire coordinated networks at once. Deplatforming is more technically complex when dealing with other harmful behavior where a clear definition may be difficult to write and apply.

Deplatforming malicious actors from major platforms can, unfortunately, shift them onto more fringe or private platforms such as encrypted messaging apps. For instance, even while in the process of being deplatformed, the conspiracy theorist Laura Loomer posted on her remaining accounts asking followers to join her on the encrypted Telegram app (Sommer, 2019). While antidemocratic actors' reach may be smaller after being deplatformed, they are able to operate more covertly once their activity is hidden. These dark networks coordinate to organize seemingly organic activity—for instance, far-right extremists have used private Twitter rooms to manipulate real networks of Trump supporters into spreading harmful messages on the public side of Twitter (Musgrave, 2017). One technical solution to this issue is shadowbanning: throttling the reach of bad actors by reducing the visibility of their posts. While this does not remove their propaganda entirely, it is effective at limiting social network spread in a way that leaves individual users in the network less likely to go underground because they may be unaware they have been shadowbanned (Ali et al., 2021).

Lawmakers around the country are pursuing various goals related to protecting the rights of social media users. Several bills have been proposed to protect users of social media platforms from algorithmic discrimination, a practice that is particularly harmful to communities of color.

The COPRA (Consumer Online Privacy Rights Act, 2019) and SAFE TECH (SAFE TECH Act, 2021) Acts would both introduce civil rights protections to the governance of social media data, and the Algorithmic Justice and Online Platform Transparency Act would go further by establishing a harm standard by which social media companies would be responsible for discriminatory algorithmic processes (potentially including microtargeting harmful content) (Algorithmic Justice and Online Platform Transparency Act, 2021). Lawmakers have also made moves to provide transparent data access to researchers, such as the Social Media DATA Act (Social Media DATA Act, 2021), which would provide a full archive of paid advertisements and create a working group to inform future policy recommendations. Some states have begun to try to regulate deplatforming. Florida recently attempted to pass a law restricting deplatforming, which a judge quickly found to violate both the First Amendment and Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (Brodkin, 2021). Texas followed suit with a similar law, which is likely to meet a similar fate.

Administrative agencies, too, have looked to extend their oversight of social media. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which has extensive powers to regulate if so directed, has taken an interest in many aspects of tech regulation. Lawmakers are considering expanding its role, with the 21st Century FTC Act empowering the FTC to regulate deceptive practices on social media (21st Century FTC Act, 2021). The Federal Election Commission (FEC), which enforces campaign finance law, has been relatively quiet on this topic other than some rules on the disclosure of paid advertisements (Federal Election Commission, n.d.). While some experts, such as former FEC commissioner Ann Ravel, have called for stronger FEC oversight (Ravel et al., 2019), the FEC is currently still grappling with these issues, having only regained a quorum of commissioners at the end of 2020 (Buble, 2020).

CONCLUSION: FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

Improving the political information ecosystem online for communities of color will, in the long run, require more than simply disrupting harmful activity. In order to solve these problems, we must understand them much better, then communicate that understanding across the industry and the electorate. Researchers and regulators need greater access to data from social media companies in order to quantify propaganda and analyze networks, such as that promised by the Social Media DATA Act. But quantitative research alone is insufficient; both qualitative and quantitative research together are necessary to provide a complete picture.

The two types of research are necessary for different reasons. As propaganda is spread at scale through technological platforms, quantitative research including data science, network analysis, and big data approaches can discover and map out disinformation networks quickly and efficiently. This gives us a big picture viewpoint of the situation on a given platform and provides opportunities to root out stubborn information threats. It is also often more effective than qualitative research at studying specific trends over time and evaluating policies aimed at combating harmful content. Qualitative research, though, is needed to understand the cross-platform nature and social context of propaganda. It is difficult enough to perform quantitative research across multiple open platforms, but bad actors' use of encrypted apps such as Telegram make a fully quantitative account of the ecosystem impossible. Even on non-encrypted platforms, researchers often lack sufficient data to quantify structural inequalities in data use as experienced by communities of color, so qualitative research can be used to guide the data transparency initiatives necessary for understanding the harmful effects of algorithmic injustice. Furthermore, qualitative research such as this project is the only way to focus on the impact of propaganda on its victims, particularly marginalized communities who may be underrepresented in quantitative work. Without qualitative research, we risk perpetuating the same patterns of harm this study seeks to prevent.

Our study will center on interviews with community leaders, activists, and other prominent members of communities of color in the three states. We plan to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews, both in-person and through video software such as Zoom. Following receipt of the consent form, all interviews will be consensually recorded and carried out under the condition of anonymity. A diverse selection of participants will be identified through non-probability purposive sampling, specifically through the collection and analysis of news

articles about the ways in which civil rights groups focused on communities of color are experiencing and countering disinformation, news articles about the ways in which local and federal policymakers are countering disinformation, legal and academic texts, review of LinkedIn, and snowball sampling references and introductions garnered from interviewees (Handcock & Gile, 2011).

After each conversation, interviewers will create memos summarizing the most important themes and takeaways and then triangulate findings between interviewers. In addition, we will create thematic memos, which will "bring together the data from across several sources on an emerging theme" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 250). Through our analyses of the memos, we will be able to identify and substantiate a set of emerging themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) that we will compile into a report. We then will create resources based on the report and feedback from community groups. We will collaborate with those groups to produce public-facing educational materials for voters in the 2022 election cycle.

By centering the voices of historically marginalized communities and synthesizing the wider findings of disinformation researchers with their experiences, this project will help break the cycle of propaganda that perpetuates the disenfranchisement of millions of Americans of color.

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