ONLINE
VOTER
SUPPRESSION

HOW TO SPOT IT & HOW TO COUNTER IT.

A GUIDE FOR ELECTIONS OFFICIALS BY
THE CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY & TECHNOLOGY

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ONLINE VOTER SUPPRESSION:
HOW TO SPOT IT

FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS ARE A CORNERSTONE OF OUR DEMOCRACY.

One of the most pernicious forms of interference with elections is voter suppression: efforts to discourage or prevent people from exercising their right to vote. Mis- and disinformation that suppresses voter participation can be deployed through a variety of media, online and off; this short guide focuses on how to spot content on social media that can suppress voter participation.

Voter Suppression Content

Voter suppression content is a subset of the mal-, mis-, and disinformation that can be found online.

> **Misinformation** - *Inaccurate information created or shared without an intent to mislead or cause harm; can include genuine mistakes of fact*
>
> **Disinformation** - *Inaccurate information created or shared with the intent to mislead and cause harm; can include individual posts and coordinated campaigns*
>
> **Malinformation** - *Accurate information presented in a misleading context*

Voter suppression content is information that could discourage or prevent people from casting their ballot. This can include everything from inaccurate information about the date of an election, to inaccurate reports of long lines, to efforts to persuade people that an election is "rigged" and their vote wouldn't matter. This latter kind of content, which questions the legitimacy of electoral processes or the security of voting systems, can also be disinformation intended to lay the groundwork for disputing election results.

Much voter suppression activity is motivated by partisan interests, and targets demographic groups that are presumed to be planning to vote for the opposition. Rather than attempt to persuade these voters, the strategy is instead to stop them from voting at all.

However, it can be extremely difficult to discern the intent behind a post on social media, and a malicious intent is not always necessary for a post to have a voter-suppressive effect. For example, someone who unknowingly shares incorrect information about the deadline for requesting a mail-in ballot may still confuse other voters and prevent them from casting a ballot.

Ultimately, all types of voter suppression content can undermine our democracy by threatening voters' ability to freely cast their ballots. Voters need access to accurate information about where and how to vote, and about the integrity of our election systems. Elections officials need to know what kind of misinformation is circulating online in order to counter it effectively and ensure robust voter participation.
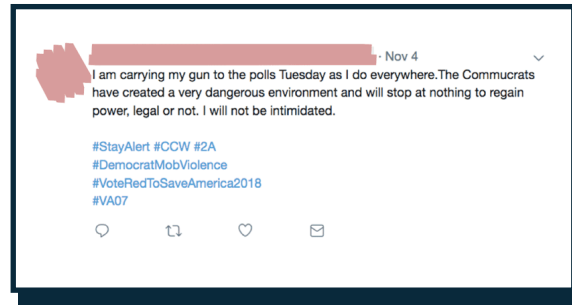
Types of voter suppression content

Voter suppression content can fit roughly into two broad categories: *intimidation* and *deception*.

INTIMIDATION

Voter intimidation content is designed to discourage voters from going to polling places or otherwise casting their ballots.
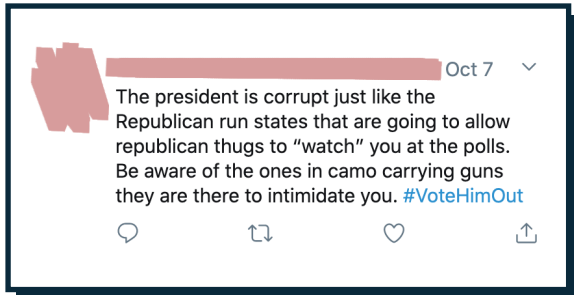
Source: Twitter, last accessed Wednesday, October 14, 2020 @ 5:08 PM ET

Source: Brennan Center for Justice report, Voter Suppression Has Gone Digital, Nov. 2018

Threats of violence at polling places and ballot drop-off locations can include direct threats aimed at voters. They may also be framed as individuals being prepared to respond or retaliate against potential violence. Posts framed as advocacy for "self defense" can nevertheless convey to voters that they should expect violence at polling locations. Posts about ballot-watchers or private citizens maintaining "vigilance" at the polls can also carry implied threats of violence.

Reports of law enforcement action can include true or false information about the presence of police, Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials, or other law enforcement at polling places or ballot drop-off locations. These reports can communicate threats of violence or the risk of arrest to vulnerable populations, including racial minorities, immigrants, or people with undocumented family members. Especially for the 2020 U.S. general election, occurring in a context in which millions have gathered in protest against police violence toward Black Americans, the invocation of law enforcement presence at polling places could have an especially suppressive effect against Black voters.

Concerns about COVID-19 may well be leveraged for a new type of voter intimidation in 2020. While many voters are expected to vote by mail during this election due to concerns about coronavirus, many still plan to vote in person at polling places during early voting or on Election Day. Misinformation about the risk of contracting coronavirus while voting, or about a lack of hygienic procedures or available PPE at a polling place, could be used to discourage voter turnout. This type of misinformation poses a particular threat of voter suppression after the deadlines for requesting an absentee/mail-in ballot have passed, as voters will not have an alternative way of voting at that time.

DECEPTION

Deceptive content is false, misleading, or decontextualized content. Misleading information can include things that are framed as leading or rhetorical questions rather than affirmative false statements. This can interfere with a person's ability to vote by confusing them about the mechanics of voting and by undermining their confidence in the integrity of the voting system.

Deceptive content about voter registration or ballot-casting procedure is some of the most obvious voter suppression content. It can include inaccurate information about, for example:

- *the date of the election;*
- *deadlines for registering to vote;*
- *procedures for requesting, completing, and returning an absentee ballot, including deadlines, signature, postage, and secrecy-envelope requirements;*
- *ballot drop-box locations and mail processing speeds at the local post office;*
- *polling locations and their operating status on Election Day or during early voting;*
- *ID requirements for in-person voting;*
- *procedures for casting a provisional ballot at a polling place on Election Day; and*
- *coronavirus mitigation measures required for in-person voting.*

The effect of this type of voter suppression content is to mislead voters about the actual procedures and requirements for voting and to decrease the likelihood that they effectively cast

a ballot. It may be particularly important to identify and respond to this type of information on Election Day. For example, during the 2020 primary elections, this post describing unexpected polling closures on election day gained traction on social media on the day of the elections.

This photo was real, but decontextualized: although the polling station in question was closed, after seeing the post

Source: Center for Tech and Civic Life/Center for Democracy & Technology online training course, Combating Election Misinformation, July 2020

the county clerk sent polling workers and the site was open within forty minutes, and stayed open an extra hour. Without context (or the quick response by the clerk), this viral post about a polling site closure could deter voters in that precinct from showing up to vote.

Deceptive information about procedures that follow ballot casting, including verification, tabulation, and reporting can also be used to undermine confidence in the integrity of the vote. Especially given the high proportion of mail-in ballots expected for the 2020 U.S. general election, voters may be targeted with inaccurate information about, for example:

- *how ballots are collected through the mail or from ballot drop-boxes;*
- *when or why ballots are rejected;*
- *whether there is an opportunity to cure a defective ballot;*
- *when counting of mail-in ballots may begin; and*
- *when vote counts may be released to the public.*

Most voters are likely unaware of existing laws around when ballots may be counted and reported to the public, making those topics fertile ground for misleading information (e.g., posts claiming that a lack of updates on ballot counts in the days after Election Day is evidence of manipulation of the vote count—rather than a requirement of state law).

Deceptive information about the security of voting systems can also undermine elections. In advance of the election, it may discourage people from voting (because their votes "don't matter anyway"). It may also be intended to—either pro-actively or retro-actively—undermine the result by labeling it the outcome of a "rigged" process.

This form of voter suppression content can include inaccurate information about:

- *technical security measures for ballot casting and ballot tabulation machines;*
- *cybersecurity threats against voting infrastructure;*
- *security of ballot drop-boxes and procedures for retrieving mail-in ballots from the postal system; and*
- *the process of collecting vote tallies and provisional ballots from polling places on Election Day.*

False claims of vote suppression may also suppress voters. For example, in the 2020 US presidential primary, a woman who was denied the ability to vote in the Republican primary in Lafayette Parish, Louisiana, posted a video about her experience that went viral. The registrar of voters clarified that the woman had been registered as a Democrat for several years and had recently changed her address with the Board of Elections *without changing her party affiliation*. In other words, the woman was wrong about the facts, but her frustration over not being able to vote was very real, and may have spoken to others' fears about voter suppression and the integrity of the election.

These concerns are especially prominent in 2020 given the high-profile national discussion of election interference since 2016, general concerns over the security and integrity of our voting systems, the many novel procedures that have been introduced for the 2020 U.S. general election, and the fact that many voters will be voting in a different way than they are accustomed to this year. All of these factors combine to create an environment of legitimate uncertainty for many voters, underscored by fears of election manipulation.

Inaccurate information may appear to come from a trusted source. Voter suppression content may be posted by accounts that impersonate election officials or other trustworthy individuals, in a bid to increase the perceived legitimacy of the post. People disseminating this content may also use bots to amplify the spread of the misinformation and to boost its apparent validity.

Conclusion

The fight against voter suppression content is complex and multifaceted. It requires social media companies and other online services to take action against content that spreads false information about voting rules and processes, and to enable users to easily find accurate information. It needs an active and informed press to help identify themes and trends in voter suppression and to amplify accurate information. It requires individuals to be aware of the risk of misinformation on social media, and to be savvy about what they do and don't share. And it depends on elections officials and other public authorities to consistently provide clear, accurate information about voting procedures and the security and integrity of the elections they oversee.

FIND MORE FROM CDT'S ELECTION SECURITY TEAM AT
cdt.org

More info on how to counter voter suppression on the next page.

ONLINE VOTER SUPPRESSION:
HOW TO COUNTER IT

Elections officials and other public authorities have an essential role to play as sources of accurate, trustworthy information. Below is a short guide to anticipating and countering election misinformation that could suppress voter participation in your jurisdiction.

Prepare:

○ If you don't have them already, establish accounts on the social media platforms used by your constituents.

   ☐ Use best practices for securing your social media accounts and official website (*see CDT's field guides*).

   ☐ Get your social media accounts verified (blue checkmarks).

   ☐ Many social media platforms now operate voter information hubs. Review the information about your jurisdiction to ensure accuracy, and identify the relevant contacts and processes for sending out locally-targeted alerts as needed.

○ Learn how to report misinformation on different social media sites and establish practices for monitoring for misinformation about your jurisdiction.

○ Before the election, establish a steady drum-beat of accurate, informative posts on your accounts so that voters recognize your accounts as a trustworthy source of information.

   ☐ Don't underestimate the importance of having a clearly identified and consistently active presence that people can turn to when needed, even if constituents are not regularly engaging with your content. Being a consistent source of truth is more important than a high number of followers.

○ Anticipate the timing of different kinds of misinformation threats and plan your counter-messaging strategy:

   ☐ Deadlines for registering to vote, requesting an absentee ballot, and getting ballots postmarked are all potential times of confusion for voters. Plan to provide clear reminders to voters in advance of the deadlines and be on the lookout for social media content that includes the wrong dates for your jurisdiction.

   ☐ After the deadline for requesting an absentee ballot has passed, there may be an increase in misinformation aimed at discouraging people from voting in person. This is an important time to provide clear information about options for in-person voting, health and safety precautions at polling places, and any new rules this year about where people can go to vote in person.

   ☐ On Election Day, expect misinformation around the location and operating status of polling places. Be prepared to provide regular updates about problems with polling places and their resolution, including clear information about how long polling places will stay open (for example, reassuring voters that anyone in line at the time the poll closes will be able to cast their vote). A post about a long line at 9am may continue discouraging voters into the afternoon, if voters do not know the problem has been resolved.

   ☐ After Election Day, be prepared for questions about vote tallies and the processing of absentee ballots. If there are limits in state/local law on the ability to provide regular updates on vote tallies, communicate this clearly and directly to voters and the press.

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○ Coordinate your online and offline communications strategies to ensure consistent messaging on your website, social media, interviews with the press, and any other public communications.

○ Establish or strengthen relationships with local media and reporters, who may be important vectors for quickly deploying accurate information and real-time updates to the public on or around Election Day.

Inform:

○ Counter-messaging is most effective when it acknowledges the fears/emotions that inspire people to believe misinformation. Remind voters of shared values around democractic participation and investment in free and fair elections.

○ Provide accurate information and additional context or background to correct falsehoods or misleading posts that are circulating online.

○ Avoid repeating falsehoods, if possible, so as not to repeat and reinforce the false information. If you must reference the false information in order to debunk it, make sure your headline or post leads with the accurate information that you want people to take away.

○ Keep your explanations as simple and straightforward as possible. Where available, cite and link to authoritative sources such as the legal code or official procedures, but keep your explanations in plain language that will be readily understood by voters.

Empower:

○ Provide voters with ways to take action that respond to the specific type of misinformation:
  ☐ About voter registration: link to page where voters can verify their registration.
  ☐ About mail-in ballots: link to page where voters can track their ballot or learn about curing defects, if possible in your jurisdiction.
  ☐ About closures or delays at polling places: link to hotlines voters can call for status updates or provide dated, time-stamped updates.
  ☐ About safety at polling places, including COVID-19 procedures: link to clear information about safety protocols, including any requirements for election volunteers and voters (e.g. wearing masks to polling places).
  ☐ About delays in vote counting: link to local law about when ballots may be counted and when counts may be reported publicly.

For more info and advice on how to counter election interference, check out this Guide to Combating Election Misinformation and Checklist for Elections Officials, from the Center for Tech and Civic Life and CDT.