Election 2020

Disinformation and Voter Intimidation
What They Are, What to Watch Out For, and What You Can Do

How COVID-19 Impacts the 2020 Election

The United States has held elections during public health crises before, but the COVID-19 pandemic presents many new challenges.Vote-by-mail/drop-box voting is expanding across states as the safest way to vote while protecting our health, but some states have a lot more experience with processing mail ballots than do others.

That means we can expect it will take longer before we know the election results and we will see a patchwork process among the states of getting, submitting, and recording our ballots. Facing this reality, now is the time to have a voting plan in place and be vigilant in following your ballot, to share the facts and tools for your county's voting process, and to advocate for the resources and transparency needed for people to safely, fairly vote.

What Are Disinformation and Voter Intimidation?

DISINFORMATION

False or misleading information that is spread deliberately to deceive. Disinformation presents a complicated challenge to this year's local, state, and federal elections. Bad actors who spread disinformation online have different motivations—for example, to suppress the vote in marginalized communities (especially in Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities) or to sow distrust in democratic institutions and processes. However, they have a common goal: to see their disruptive narratives reach the mainstream media. This is why it is so important that voting rights advocates are strategic when responding to specific disinformation incidents. Often, the most strategic option is to not engage.

VOTER INTIMIDATION

A more direct attack, comprising threats and harassment from bad actors to make voters feel unsafe and discourage them from voting at all. This can include the spread of false claims or threats around the process of voting that attempt to prevent people from being able to vote in a safe, secure, and convenient manner.ing that attempt to prevent people from being able to vote in a safe, secure, and convenient manner.

What Should You Watch Out For?

- **Claims about voter "fraud":** Social media posts claiming that official mail ballots are being sent to unregistered voters, that multiple official ballots are going to individuals, that the United States Postal Service is destroying, collecting, or otherwise manipulating absentee ballots, etc. Voting by mail is safe and secure.

- **Claims that voters should vote twice to ensure their vote is counted:** Voters must choose one way to vote. States have rigorous processes to ensure that each eligible voter casts only one ballot. Any additional efforts to cast a ballot will not be counted and will create unnecessary burdens on election officials.

- **Racist robocalls:** These are intended to deter Black, Indigenous, and Latinx voters from voting by mail, especially in swing states, by falsely claiming that voting by mail will result in the government sharing information with credit card companies and debt collectors. Voting by mail is safe and secure, and it does not require you to share any more personal information than you did when you registered to vote. Click here to learn what information is kept confidential in your state.

- **Unsafe or restricted access to polling places:** There are credible accounts that partisan groups are organizing retired military or law enforcement personnel to patrol polling places in Black and Latinx neighborhoods in an attempt to instill fear and suppress voter participation in communities that have been historically disenfranchised.

Keep reading to learn what you can do to help.

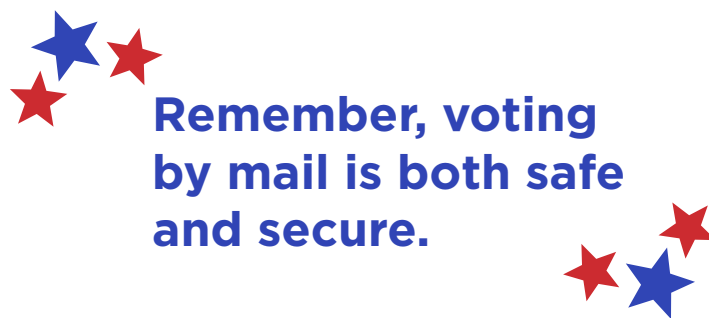## What Can You Do?

Here are some tips on fighting **disinformation** from Protect Democracy, a partner of the Union of Concerned Scientists in our voting rights efforts:

- **Avoid amplification:** Social media algorithms feed on engagement, whether negative or positive. Even reacting negatively to a Facebook post boosts it and creates the possibility for more people to see the piece of disinformation. Comment on disinformation only if it is a high-level threat and only to debunk false information.

- **Report:** If you encounter a piece of disinformation, flag it for removal from the social network or submit to the hotline below for further evaluation.

- **Avoid cross-pollination:** If you see a disinformation post on Facebook, avoid posting on Twitter about it, even to remark that it is incorrect. This cross-posting only helps the disinformation spread and makes it more likely that it will become viral on other platforms.

- **Inoculate:** Prime your audience to distrust disinformation when they see it by naming bad actors' motivations and sharing factual information from trusted sources that encourages people to make a plan for voting.

If you hear about or encounter **voter intimidation**, there are actions you can take to fight that too:

- **Encourage voting:** Get out ahead of efforts to intimidate by using your local media and social media proactively to encourage people to vote, inform them of their rights, and share the resources people will need to cast and follow their ballots.

- **Report:** When you see an act of intimidation happen, call it out and report it for what it is—a dangerous threat to suppress people's right to vote.

- **Amplify:** Use your social media platforms and networks to amplify local voting justice organizations' work to break down inequitable barriers to voting.

Remember, voting by mail is both safe and secure.

To report a problem or for general elections/ voting questions, contact the Election Protection Hotline:

866ourvote.org
866-OUR-VOTE (866-687-8683)

If you see something online that could mislead or suppress voters—to say something! Report it to the Disinformation Tip Line:

https://reportdisinfo.org/

For more information about what you can do to protect your and others' vote this election, go to:

act.ucsusa.org/CountdownSignup

To access this guide and learn more about science for a safe, fair democracy, visit:

act.ucsusa.org/ScienceforHealthyDemocracy

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