Evaluating the most effective approaches to correcting voter fraud misperceptions
John Carey, Brian Fogarty, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler

In this project, we exploit panel surveys with connected web history data to answer descriptive and causal questions about the prevalence of voter fraud beliefs, exposure to and consumption of voter fraud claims from online sources, and the effectiveness of different approaches to address misperceptions about voter and election fraud and to increase confidence in election administration. This project uses survey data (both cross-sectional and panel), web traffic data, and survey experiments. We focus on the survey experimental results below, which are the most developed at this stage in our research.

In a prior NSF-funded study, we measured voter and election fraud perceptions in two survey waves conducted with the YouGov sample from December 17, 2020-January 5, 2021 (after the Electoral College outcome was decided; n=4312) and January 13-19, 2021 (just prior to the inauguration; n=3847). Participants in the second wave were randomized to either see an article that debunks five myths about voter and election fraud during the 2020 elections or not. We found that exposure to this information reduced belief in false claims about the election and increased belief in true claims about the elections as well as discernment between them. The positive effects of exposure to these claims were greatest among non-Democrats, Trump approvers, and people who were previously least able to distinguish between true and false election claims. The treatment also increased confidence in the 2020 election results.

With MEDSL support, we are conducting a three-wave survey experiment focused on the 2022 midterm elections. The first wave was fielded before the election by YouGov from October 18-November 7, 2022. To examine how fraud beliefs change over time and across electoral contexts, we sought to maximize retention of participants from the 2020 panel. In total, 3772 respondents were recruited, including 2643 who participated in the 2020 study.

Participants in the first 2022 wave were randomized to either read a series of articles that attempt to "inoculate" (or "pre-bunk") against voter fraud claims about the 2022 election, a series of articles that seek to debunk myths about voter and election fraud during the 2020 election, or a series of placebo articles. The inoculation treatment consisted of four articles pre-bunking potential fraud claims about the 2022 elections adapted from the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). The CISA articles are designed to "[address] election security rumors by describing common and generally applicable protective processes, security measures, and legal requirements designed to deter, detect, and protect against significant security threats." The correction treatment instead consisted of four articles affirming the legitimacy of the 2020 election citing Republican judges and officials who were expected to be surprising and credible to skeptics (one was adapted from the "Lost, Not Stolen" report, two were adapted from media articles, and one was constructed using quotes from leading GOP officials).

Results from the first 2022 wave indicate that both treatments increased retrospective confidence in the results of the 2020 election and the perceived prevalence of voter and election

fraud in 2020. The inoculation treatment increased prospective confidence in the 2022 election results, while the correction decreased the perceived number of seats that participants expected to be won in 2022 due to fraud. However, the effects of the treatments were not distinguishable.

We readministered these outcome measures at the beginning of our second 2022 survey wave, which was conducted after the election from December 7-20 among 2896 participants from the first wave. Our results indicate that prior exposure to the inoculation treatment significantly reduces the perceived prevalence of fraud in 2020 and the perceived number of seats won due to fraud in 2020 and 2022. No such effects are found for the correction treatment. Moreover, we can directly reject the null of no difference in effects for fraud prevalence in 2020 (but not the seats won measures).

After administering these outcome measures in the second 2022 wave, respondents were independently randomized in a separate survey experiment. We specifically tested the effect of an intervention targeting the prominent fraud or election malfeasance claim from the 2022 midterm elections — the claims that were being made about ballot printing errors in Maricopa County, Arizona by Republican gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake and her allies, who falsely claimed that votes in conservative areas of Arizona's most populous county were not being counted. We examined whether a correction treatment targeting these false claims would reduce belief in Lake's claim and belief that her opponent, Katie Hobbs, was not the rightful winner. We also tested if debunking a specific, prominent myth would affect Americans' overall confidence in the 2022 election results. Our results indicate that exposure to the fact-check reduced false beliefs about election administration in Maricopa County and the rightful winner of the race. However, it had no measurable effects on perceptions of the 2022 (or 2020) election elections.

With data in hand from four survey waves conducted around the 2020 and 2022 elections, we offer the following tentative conclusions. First, each of the correction approaches we evaluated were effective at reducing misperceptions and increasing confidence in election results at least in part and showed no indication of backfire effects — indeed, correction effects were sometimes stronger among more resistant subgroups. However, a prebunking approach that emphasized procedural protections against fraud in our first 2022 study was more effective at durably reducing fraud misperceptions than a source-oriented corrections approach. In our second 2022 study, an intervention targeting a specific myth was effective only at reducing misperceptions directly related to that myth and did not increase confidence in election administration nationally. We conclude that a process-oriented prebunking approach may be most effective and therefore plan to seek to replicate our findings from the first wave of 2022 in the final wave of our 2022 survey, which will be conducted in January 2023. We also plan to evaluate descriptive changes in the prevalence of beliefs in voter fraud over time and to examine online information exposure among participants who provide anonymized web browsing data.