Combating Misinformation and Building Trust in Elections: Assessing Election Official Communications During the 2022 Election Cycle

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1 Abstract

In this project, we identify the dominant trust-building campaigns used by state and local election officials, with an emphasis on combating misinformation, during the 2022 election cycle. In partnership with the Algorithmic Transparency Institute (ATI.io), we analyzed 50,000 organic posts from over 118 state election officials' and 1,000 local election officials' accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter between September 10 and November 15, 2022. We produced a one-of-a-kind repository of these communications, organized using a comprehensive taxonomy of election-related labels. This database is used to identify best trust-building communication practices, and evaluate the effectiveness of these practices on voter attitudes.

2   Accomplishments

Our project began with three major goals: ***One***: document variation across states and localities in how information about elections is disseminated on social media, focusing primarily on how trust-building messages are incorporated into these voter education campaigns; ***two***: assess how the election information ecosystem as cultivated by EOs shapes voter attitudes towards the electoral system, specifically attitudes about vote counting and accuracy; ***three***: engage with election officials (EOs) and stakeholders in the election community by sharing our top line findings with the aim of helping them build their capacity for effective messaging strategies in future election cycles.

We present our accomplishments and key findings by project phase, with some phases overlapping due to adjustments in work flow, data collection, and research priorities. We take a deep description approach to showcase the breadth of efforts put forth by election officials across the United States; we note the common patterns in how trust-building strategies are implemented across and within the states, but also highlight the various approaches election officials take to connect with their voters and build trust in their communities. Finally, we summarize our empirical findings and produce a list of best practices and recommendations for election officials' communications online and offline.

2.1   Phase I: Refining coding taxonomy for data collection and coding

Our core work involved tracking and coding content shared by state and local election officials who operated an official social media account on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, between September 10, 2022 and November 15, 2022. Our study population includes the 48 states with an official Facebook page, 25 with an official Instagram page, and 45 with an official Twitter page. At the local level, 1,124 local EOs operated an official Facebook page, with 76 local election Instagram accounts, and 268 Twitter accounts.[1]

To facilitate the data collection and coding process, we partnered with the Algorithmic Trans-

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[1]For the most comprehensive visualization of the presence of local election officials on these platforms, see our contribution on The Conversation: Thessalia Merivaki and Mara Suttmann-Lea. "Local election offices often are missing on social media – and the information they do post often gets ignored." Published: August 31, 2022. Available at: https://theconversation.com/local-election-offices-often-are-missing-on-social-media-and-the-information-they-do-post-often-gets-ignored-184359

parency Institute (ATI.io) of the National Conference of Citizenship (NCoC) and used their proprietary platform "Junkipedia."[2] The "Junkipedia" platform allowed us to import our database of all EO social media accounts (Suttmann-Lea 2022), and track and code content shared on our three target platforms in real time. Our taxonomy was developed deductively based on previous hand-coded content shared by local election officials on Facebook during the 2020 presidential election cycle (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki Forthcoming). We refined the codebook deductively and inductively through pre-testing with randomly selected posts from select time periods in September of 2022 through four rounds of coder training.

We present our taxonomy in Table 1. We developed seven thematic categories, each one of which includes nested categories with thematically-relevant labels. **_Type_** captures the purpose of a message shared by election officials: news coverage about the election official, their jurisdiction, or about upcoming elections; information about election deadlines as specified in election code; information on how to navigate specific election processes, such as registering to vote online or in-person by mail or on Election Day, requesting/returning/tracking a mail ballot, reporting misinformation or voter intimidation; and any information that makes voters aware of how election officials and election workers prepare for elections.

In this category, we also code for outreach efforts and information sharing aimed towards specific groups of voters, such as elderly communities, first-time voters, K-12 and high school students, language minority voters, racial and ethnic minority voters, as well as any public event that EOs or representatives from their office participate in, such as media interviews, in-person voter registration drives, visits to other election offices, or any other public events and visits. Finally, we track cross-platform message types, such as sharing other people's posts on Facebook and Twitter, or posting a thread on Twitter.

In the **_Visuals_** category, we code for the presence of images and videos in social media posts. We distinguish between images and videos that contain text or visuals of inanimate objects and/or animals - _non-human imagery_ - and images that feature EOs, election workers, and/or voters - _human imagery._ We also code images and videos for the presence of graphics such as office logos, and other visuals such as flags, I Voted stickers, and maps, among others.

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[2]The Algorithmic Transparency Institute: https://ncoc.org/staff/cameron-hickey-project-director-algorithmic-transparency-institute/.

Table 1: Coding Taxonomy

Thematic Category	Top-tier labels
Type	In the News
	Election Deadline
	How to
	Voter Outreach
	Reply / Thread
	Post share / retweet
Visuals	Human imagery
	Non-human imagery
	Video
Access	Multilingual
	Links (clickable vs. unclickable)
Trust-Building	#TrustedInfo2022
Alert	Misinformation
Signaling	Keywords
	Hashtag/s
Theme	Ongoing election procedures
	Pre-election procedures
	Post-election procedures
	Voter registration
	Voting methods
	Election ready
	Motivational / GOTV

In the **Access** category, we document whether information shared on any of the target platforms is accessible, focusing narrowly on languages other than English, and sharing links that are clickable. Regarding links, we specifically track whether links provided in images or in text are clickable or not, and whether they direct voters to official election websites, or external websites from federal, national, state or local partners, as well as news organizations.[3]

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[3]Many states and localities incorporated QR codes into their visuals, which we do not consider "clickable."

When refining our taxonomy, we prioritized social media campaigns whose mission is to build trust in elections by communicating that **election officials are trusted sources of information**. For that reason, we use the NASS #TrustedInfo2022 campaign as a baseline because it represents a highly publicized and coordinated campaign by a professional association of EOs with an explicit purpose to build trust in elections and combat misinformation. In early 2022, NASS re-launched the#TrustedInfo2022 campaign, as "*a public education effort to promote election officials as the trusted sources of election information.*" The goal of this communication strategy is to direct voters to use EOs' websites and social media pages so they receive accurate information, establishing that EOs are credible, verified sources for election information, and also as a mechanism to combat misinformation.[4]

We coded posts for the presence of this hashtag in state and local EOs' social media posts, both in text form and/or in visuals, using the **Trust-building** label. We additionally coded content for the presence of words that are explicitly associated with trust and integrity, such as "elections are **safe** and **secure**," "visit [here] for **accurate** election results," "your election officials is your **trusted** source for election information," among others. We labeled this thematic category **Signaling**, because often these terms were incorporated into posts that included information about how to navigate an election process like registering to vote, or an upcoming deadline.

Figure 1 provides an example of incorporating the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag into communication shared on Facebook about post-election security measures, with explicit references to election integrity and security. This post would be coded for addressing misinformation -**Alert**. According to the NASS #TrustedInfo2022 toolkit, a robust way for states to debunk misinformation is by creating a dedicated "facts and fiction" web page. On social media, the most common visual format used by states and localities to share myths and facts about elections was the one displayed in Figure 1.

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Figure 1: Facebook post shared by Maryland State Board of Elections Official Account, September 13, 2022

Iowa Secretary of State Paul Pate ✔
@IowaSOS

In the last #MythBustinMonday prior to #ElectionDay, I want Iowans to know that with robust security measures, pre- and post-election audits, and countless other measures that their vote will be counted accurately tomorrow. #TrustedInfo2022

Bad actors can skew the results in favor of one candidate on Election Day.

THAT'S A MYTH

With robust security measures, public pre-election testing of tabulators, paper ballots, bipartisan teams of poll workers, and post-election hand count audits following each election, voters can be assured that their vote will be counted accurately on Election Day.

FACTS

ALT

10:01 AM · Nov 7, 2022

Figure 2 is another example of how election officials incorporated the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag into messages encouraging prospective voters to register to vote, with an clear emphasis on outreach to voters with disabilities. This post also includes the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) National Voter Registration Week logo (REVUP!)[5], clickable links, and signaling words and messages that are associated with trust and integrity, like "access," and "your vote matters."

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Figure 2: Facebook post shared by Maryland State Board of Elections Official Account, September 13, 2022

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[5]https://aapd.kindful.com/register/national-disability-voter-registration-week-toolkit

Our final thematic category ***Theme*** includes eight nested labels to code posts with voter-centric information about the election process: voter registration, voting in-person early or absentee, voting by mail, and finding a polling place or a sample ballot. We categorize these processes based on whether they take place before the November election (*pre-election*), after polls close (*post-election),* or on an ongoing basis. For example, information about voter list maintenance, registration drive trainings, and cybersecurity trainings would be coded as "ongoing." Recruiting and training poll workers, conducting Logic and Accuracy tests, signature verification of ballot initiatives or write-in candidate petitions, poll watcher trainings and candidate trainings would be coded as "pre-election." And sharing unofficial election results, information about audits and recounts, curing mail ballots, and election certification would be coded as "post-election."

Based on this taxonomy, we produced a hierarchical, nested codebook of 93 variables. Our coding team, which consisted of three graduate students, two undergraduate students, and the lead researchers, with ongoing training support from Junkipedia, received a randomly sorted subsample of the research set where each post could be reviewed and coded using the codebok as shown on Table 1 in its simplified version.[6] We conducted five rounds of reviews to ensure high intercoder reliability (.70 and up) across all thematic categories and resolving issues with categories receiving agreement scores below that threshold. The practice sessions involved a subsample which all coders would independently label, and the lead researchers would export to run the reliability checks. After every round, we reviewed discrepancies with the coders and made adjustments to our codebook's structure, rather than content, to ensure more effective labeling flow.[7]

2.2   Phase II: The #TrustedInfo2022 Campaign

We are particularly interested in evaluating whether interventions such as #TrustedInfo2022 are effective in shaping voter attitudes towards the electoral process. Our first step was to document states' commitment to integrate the campaign into their online communications through their websites and social media. In coordination with NASS, we obtained the NASS media toolkit, which

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[6]See Appendix Figure 1 for an example of the codebook format on Junkipedia.

[7]The full methodology, codebook, and coding process are available in our forthcoming paper "The TrustedInfo2022 Dataset: States' trust-building social media campaigns during the 2022 election cycle" in State Politics & Policy Quarterly.

was made available to all NASS member states, and identified metrics to track the implementation of the #TrustedInfo2022 campaign. According to the toolkit, states were encouraged to take the #TrustedInfo2022 pledge, by issuing a press-release - NASS provides a template in the toolkit - or sharing a video on social media. The toolkit also encouraged members to include the hashtag in their social media bios. Our first two metrics, therefore, are whether a state officially pledged to incorporate the #TrustedInfo2022 campaign and whether they included the hashtag in their social media bios. As outlined in Phase I, we also track for the usage of the hashtag in social media communications by both state and local EOs on any of the target platforms (our third metric). Insofar as how local election officials integrated the campaign into their communications, we are interested in exploring the extent of coordination between state and local election trust-building messaging campaigns.

First, we present the variation in how the NASS member states incorporated the #TrustedInfo2022 campaign based on our three metrics. In Table 1, we show the states that check the boxes on all three, and states that check at least one of the three. We exclude states that took none of these actions. The most prominent finding is that a pledge did not seem to be a significant action state EOs took prior to using the hashtag in their social media communications. Only a handful of states, as Table 1 shows, shared a press release announcing that their state joined the NASS initiative, and very few added the hashtag on their Twitter bios. Comparing the hashtag usage on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, we found that about twenty state EO accounts added the #TrustedInfo2022 into their posts, with some only posting on one platform due to lack of presence in others, or selective use of the hashtag across platforms. The Louisiana state election official, for instance, operates a Facebook and an Instagram account, but not a Twitter account. The hashtag was used on Instagram, but not on Facebook.

What is missing from Table 1 is a breakdown of how consistently the hashtag was incorporated into these state EOs' communications on social media. Our analysis identified notable variation in the #TrustedInfo2022 usage by state, with Arizona, Delaware, and New Jersey being the most consistent users across all platforms.

Table 2: #TrustedInfo2022 Pledge and Usage by state EOs

State	Pledge	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter
Arizona	Y	34	31	44
Delaware	N	34	No Instagram Page	5
Idaho	Y	0	No Instagram Page	5
Iowa	Y	34	0	38
Kansas	Y	5	No Instagram Page	11
Louisiana	Y	0	1	No Twitter Page
Maine	N	1	No Instagram Page	4
Maryland	N	78	No Instagram Page	49
Mississippi	Y	0	No Instagram Page	1
Montana	Y	0	No Instagram Page	0
New Hampshire	N	4	No Instagram Page	No Twitter Page
New Jersey	Y	1	No Instagram Page	24
New Mexico	N	0	0	7
North Carolina[8]	N	1	No Instagram Page	0
Oklahoma	N	6	No Instagram Page	4
Oregon	N	23	No Instagram Page	36
Rhode Island	Y	0	0	0
Tennessee	N	1	1	1
Texas	N	1	0	0
Vermont	N	1	No Instagram Page	1
Washington	N	11	5	9

Figures 3 and 4 show the flow of the hashtag usage between September 10 and November 15, 2022 by state and local election officials respectively. We find similar patterns in terms of when the hashtag was used during the last three months of the election cycle, with usage increasing the last two weeks before the November 8, 2022 election. It is important to note these graphs plot

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[8]North Carolina State Board of Elections (NCSBE) shared posts on Twitter and Facebook sharing the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag in March, June and July, 2022. The last time the hashtag was used was on July 2, 2022.

a small subset of all the communications shared by state and local election officials in that time frame. State EOs shared 574 total posts across the three platforms using the hashtag, and local EOs shared 575 total posts using the hashtag. These make up about 8% of all state EO and 2% of all local EO election-related communications.

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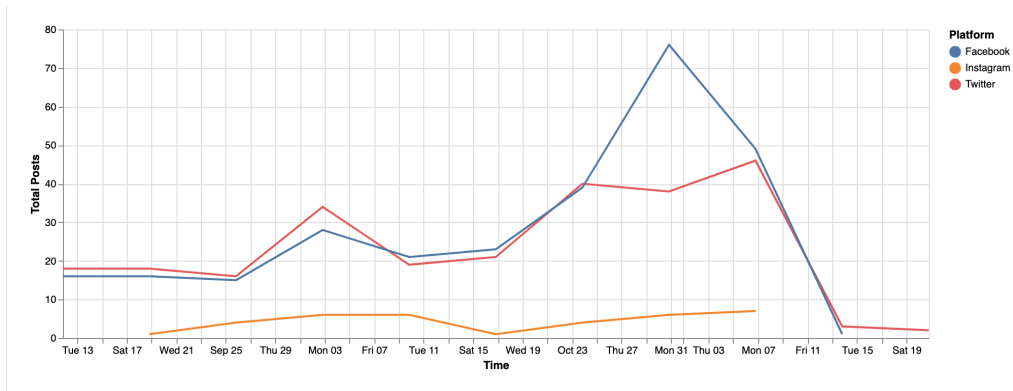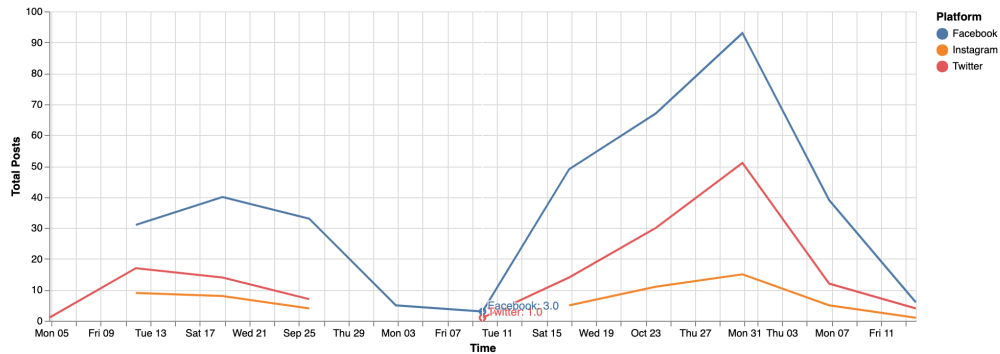Figure 3: State EO Usage of #TrustedInfo2022 Over Time, By Platform

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Figure 4: Local EO Usage of #TrustedInfo2022 Over Time, By Platform

Given the spotty usage of #TrustedInfo2022 by state EOs both in terms of announcing support for the initiative and consistently using the hashtag in social media communications, it is reasonable to expect some activity by local EOs within the states that used the hashtag. We find very limited overlap among LEOs who run elections in states where the state EO account used he hashtag (Iowa, Maryland, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon). We also find LEOs across the nation adopted the hashtag regardless of whether their state's CEO used it. As shown on Table 3, a small number of local election officials used #TrustedInfo2022, but not in all content shared on social media. Florida's county Supervisors of Elections were the most active in promoting the hashtag, followed by Colorado and Iowa LEOs.

It is noteworthy that for many states in Table 3, usage of #TrustedInfo2022 was concentrated in only one jurisdiction, as in the case of Missouri, New Mexico, Virginia, Kansas, North Carolina and Utah. Comparatively, the St. Louis County, Missouri, LEO social media accounts used the hashtag most consistently even though these posts accounted for about 12% of all posts shared on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Taking into account the #TrustedInfo2022 communication strategy by state and local EOs, these patterns show low coordination and consistency if the intention as communicated by NASS was to attach the hashtag in all social media communications.

Table 3: #TrustedInfo2022 usage by Local LEOs

State	# Accounts	State EO Pledge	All Posts	#TrustedInfo2022	LEOs Posting
Florida	87	N	6632	304	Clay, Collier Leon, Marion Hernando Hillsborough Indian River Okaloosa, Orange Seminole, St. Johns
Missouri	44	N	1214	143	St. Louis
Maryland	36	Y	3779	73	Frederick, Howard
California	83	N	6458	72	Humboldt Contra Costa Marin
Colorado	38	N	833	37	Adams, Boulder El Paso, Summit
Oregon	6	Y	239	29	Clatsop, Multnomah
New Mexico	12	Y	249	24	Los Alamos
Virginia	28	N	2704	23	City of Alexandria
Iowa	39	Y	915	17	Benton Lee, Mills Page, Ringgold
Arkansas	33	N	1094	9	Carroll, Greene
Kansas	22	N	529	5	Wyandotte
Oklahoma	22	Y	490	2	Logan, Okmulgee
North Carolina	55	N	4286	2	Brunswick
Utah	13	N	2231	1	Box Elder

2.3 Phase III: Trust-building Campaigns

Drawing from the NASS campaign, we prioritized two trust-building messages: those that instruct voters to seek information from their election officials, because they are ***trusted sources of information***, and those that reassure voters that their votes will count accurately/there is no room for voter fraud, because ***election processes are safe and secure***. During our data collection and coding efforts, we also uncovered an important message that strongly contributes to building trust in the overall election system, namely that the people who help run elections, particularly election workers, are part of voters' communities - their ***friends and neighbors*** - and should be thanked for their service.

Our key objective was to identify and document variation in responses to misinformation in-real time, and understand which strategies state and local EOs use to ***inoculate voters against false narratives***, as well as to ***contain the spread of emerging narratives*** by alerting voters and debunking them. Misinformation can infect every part of the election system, sowing distrust about the integrity of election officials and poll workers, but also the security of all election processes regardless on when they take place in the election cycle.

As we track trust-building messages across the three dimensions we outlined above, we treat misinformation combating efforts an integral part of EOs' trust-building campaigns, but not the only one. Election officials spend significant amount of time and resources to ***educate*** voters about how to access elections, such as how/when to register to vote, how to request a mail ballot, what to expect on Election Day, how to check the status of their ballot, as well as how to spot misinformation, and what to do about it. These efforts build community, enhance transparency, and increase access, all of which result in higher trust.

2.3.1 Trust the Source

We start with the message that election officials are trusted messengers. According to the NASS #TrustedInfo campaign, election officials and supporters of the election system should signal in their communications to voters that EOs are trusted sources of information and they should seek to them for accurate and reliable election information. Aside from using the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag, we tracked the presence of trust-building terms in all state and local EOs' communications, such as

"trusted," "reliable," and "accurate," especially when used in combination with the terms "source," "information," and/or "communications."

Figures 5 and 6 plot the volume of all communications using these terms by state and local election officials across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (N=1,040 and N=4,070). For messages shared by state EOs, we find a consistent weekly flow in all platforms, with Facebook and Twitter being more commonly used by state EO accounts. Sharing these messages on Twitter peaked between November 8 and November 11, 2022, reflecting an increase in communications from state election officials about election night reporting and unofficial election results, reminding voters to look to the state election website for accurate information. For messages shared by local EOs, we find that Facebook is by far more popular than Twitter, with identical peaks in sharing these messages a week prior to November 8, 2022.

Figure 5: **_Trust the Source_** Messages by State EOs
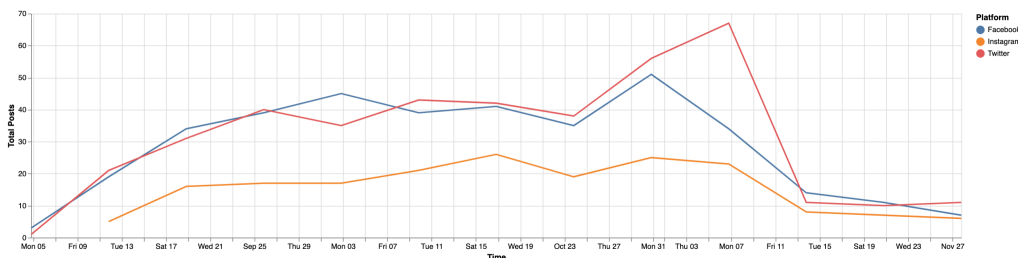
Figure 6: **_Trust the Source_** Messages by Local EOs
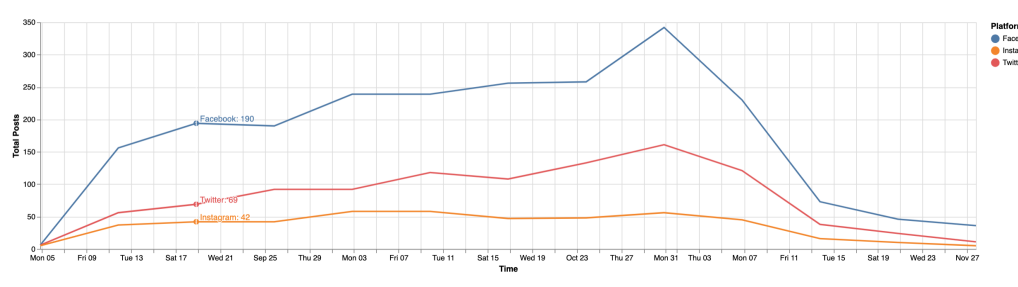
Figures 7 and 8 serve as examples of "trust the source" messages shared by state and local election officials. The standard post structure is similar to the message shared by the West Virginia

Secretary of State's office (Figure 7): explicit reference to the EO office as a trusted source, followed with a link to the state election website. In this case, the message directs voters to sign up for the state's e-newsletter. The post from Marion County, California is also a useful example of using different terminology to share the same message; "accurate election information" was heavily used in California compared to other states, where the "trusted sources" message was used verbatim.

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Figure 7: Example of **_Trust the Source_** Message, State-level

Figure 8: Example of *Trust the Source* Message, Local-level

2.3.2 Trust the System

In our analysis, we identify significant overlap of trust-building terms across all core messaging themes. For instance, the term "accurate" can be immediately associated with the accuracy of election results. We included this term in our "trust the source" category because in some states, like California, the term is used to communicate to voters that their election official is the source of accurate information. In regards to communications about the election system, the terms "safety," "security," "integrity," and "accuracy" of specific processes or procedures are the most commonly used terms state and local EOs used to reassure and educate voters about the integrity of the election process.

We find great deviations in message volume and timing between state and local election officials when it comes to sharing messages about election integrity. One difference we identify when comparing messages by state and local election officials involves the thematic area emphasized: state EOs were fairly balanced in their communications about voting methods - especially mail voting, and the security of post-election processes, whereas local EOs heavily emphasized the security of mail voting, with limited reference to post-election procedures, like audits and recounts. Among local election officials, "trust the system" messages peaked in October, when several states' mail voting became available, and started declining during the last week of voting. Among state election

officials, communications about election security were fairly stable between the end of October and November 8. Another interesting difference is the notable increase in messages shared on Instagram by state election officials at the end of October 2022. Compared to Facebook and Twitter, Instagram seems to be a platform that may require additional efforts to maintain a consistent presence.

In Figures 9 and 10, we plot the volume of "trust the system" messages shared between October 15 and November 15, 2022. We narrow our timeline to focus on the period between October 15 and November 15, 2022, and the universe of thematic posts by method of voting - mail voting - and post-election procedures - audits, recounts, reporting unofficial election results, curing of ballots, canvassing, and certification. This snapshot helps illustrate the variation in which processes election officials emphasize at the state and local levels.

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Figure 9: Example of ***Trust the System*** Message, Oct. 15-Nov. 15.; Mail Voting & Post-Election processes by State EOs

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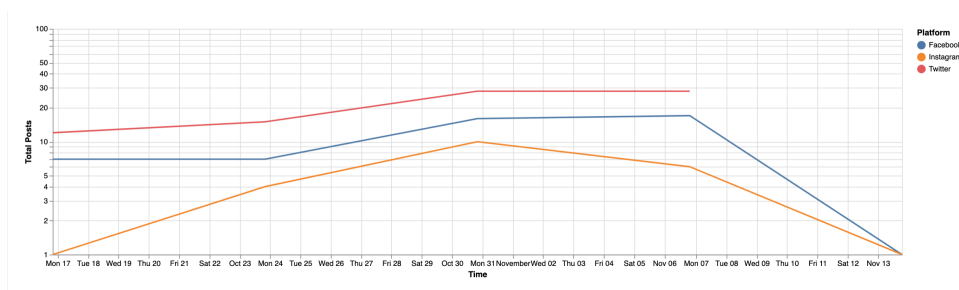
Figure 10: Example of ***Trust the System*** Message, Oct. 15-Nov. 15.; Mail Voting & Post-Election processes by Local EOs
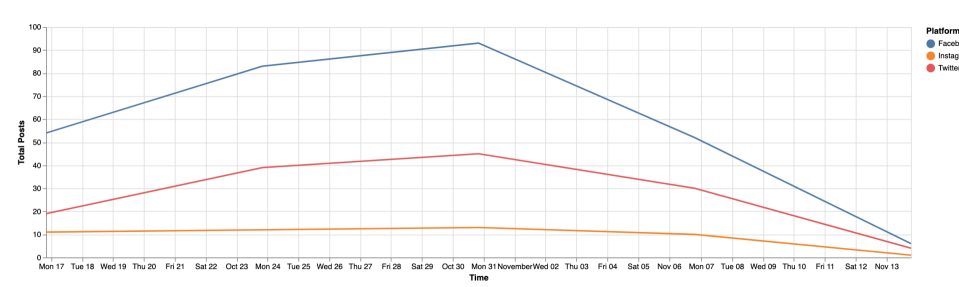
In Figures 11 and 12, we present two different examples of "trust the system" posts shared by the Connecticut and Illinois state election officials. The Connecticut Secretary of State's office post shared on October 30, 2022 references pre- and post-election audits, directing voters to visit the state election website for more information. The post also includes terms that fall into our **_Signaling_** category, namely "rigorous." In terms of visuals, the inclusion of the lock and check mark serve as additional signals to reinforce the message that "Your Vote is Safe in CT."

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Figure 11: Example of **_Trust the System_** Message, Connecticut Secretary of State

In Figure 12, the Illinois SBE shared a flier, as displayed on their post from November 4, 2022, describing all *procedures* followed during voting hours that safeguard the integrity of the election process in the state. It is clear the goal of the post is to assuage voter concerns about voter impersonation, double voting, and voting technology tampering. The post also includes the *#safeandsecureelections* hashtag to signal boost the message.[9] Local election officials from Illinois also shared the flier, as well as posted it on their social media accounts. .

Figure 12: Example of **Trust the System** Message, Illinois State Board of Elections

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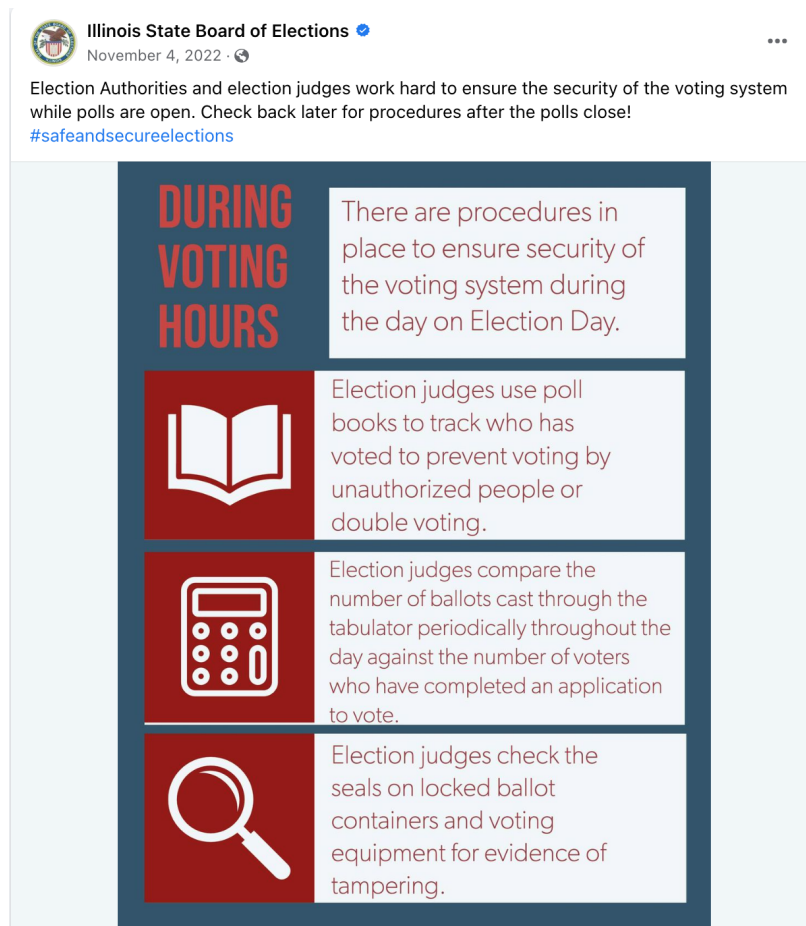
[9]The hashtag was incorporated in all "trust the system" communications shared by the Illinois SBE on social media.

At the local-level, we identified a robust effort to communicate to voters that mail voting is secure, which is not surprising given that the process of voting by mail, and processing a mail ballot has been the target of misinformation since the 2020 election. In Hernando County, Florida, the Supervisor of Elections informed voters that those who cast a vote by mail and show up in person will not be able to vote twice because their record will show they have already voted (Figure 13). The post includes a link to the SoE's election website, and includes the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag. Hernando County, as we showed in Table 3, was among the local-level users of the hashtag.

In Weber County, Utah (Figure 14), communication efforts relied heavily on "myths and facts about voting" videos as the one displayed in Figure 14, with detailed information about how voter lists are maintained to ensure that dead voters are removed, and therefore the risk of having "dead voters voting" is zero. This video was posted on Weber County's Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts multiple times during the election cycle, which adds another dimension to the study of trust-building campaigns; repetition and message consistency. Weber County also used the #trustedinfo hashtag, even though it is not spelled out exactly as instructed (#TrustedInfo2022). We are agnostic as to whether these spelling differences matter for voters, but variation in how the hashtag is spelled may create challenges in making the connection that the hashtag is part of a a national trust-building effort in which multiple states partake.

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Figure 13: Example of **_Trust the System_** Message, Hernando County Supervisor of Elections, Florida
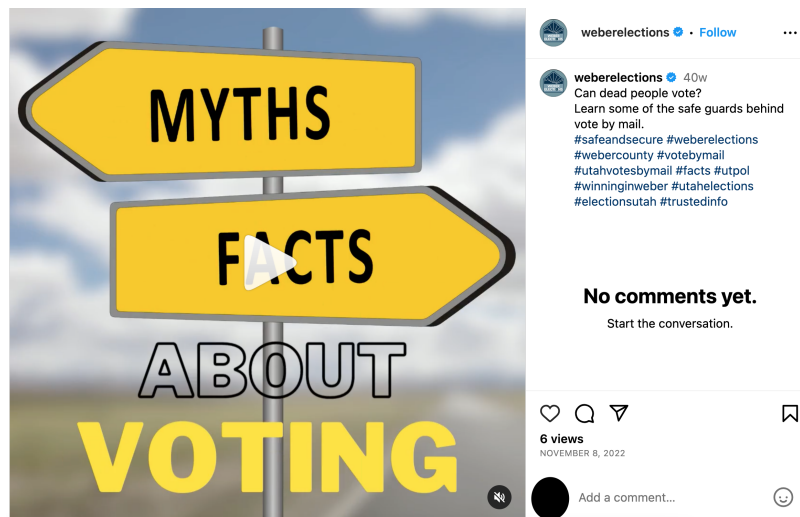

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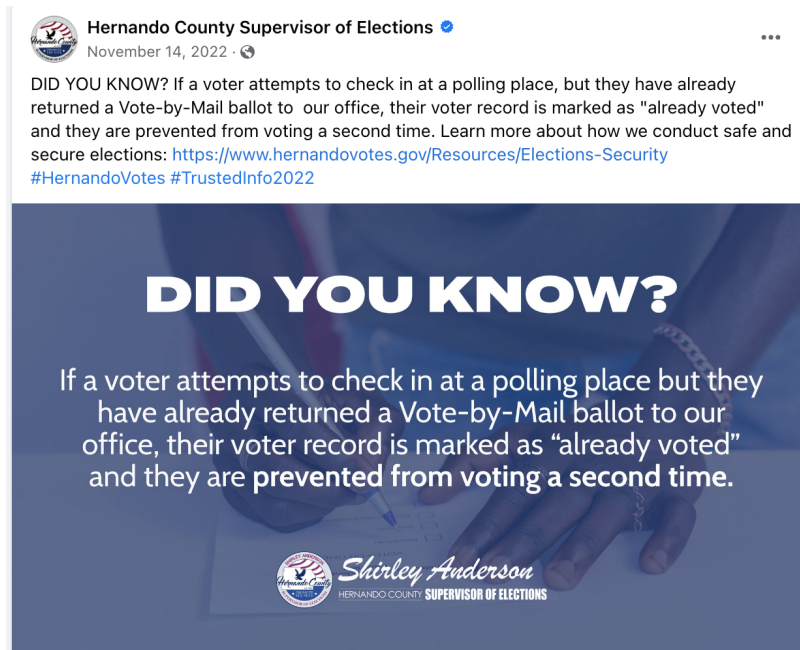
Figure 14: Example of **_Trust the System_** Message, Weber County Elections, Utah

2.3.3 Trust the People

Since the 2020 U.S. Presidential election, state and local election officials, and election workers have experienced harassment and intimidation by individuals who have fell for mis/disinformation about the integrity of the electoral process. This has not only negatively affected the morale of election officials and workers, but it has also resulted in a mass exodus of election officials from the profession, as well as lack of willingness of poll workers to serve. In response, the election community has made concerted efforts to build public trust by showcasing that election officials and workers are part of the voters' community - their *friends and neighbors*. In their communications with voters and the media, election officials are encouraged to be more personal and authentic, by *"telling their story"* in a manner that is accessible and transparent, but also easy for voters to follow.[10]

The "friends and neighbors" message is part of the Election Hero Day campaign, which dedicates the day prior to Election Day (November 7, 2022) to "recognize the immense importance and work of election administration teams, poll workers, and more across the nation."[11]Similar to the #TrustedInfo2022 campaign, the organization launched the *#thankyouelectionheroes* hashtag, and distributed a media toolkit for election officials and other partners in the election system to use.[12] Materials from the toolkit were used by state election officials from Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and West Virginia, to thank election workers for their service on November 7, 2022 (Figure 15). Other states created their own visuals to send the same message, as in the case of Iowa, New Hampshire, and Vermont (Figure 16), including non-human images of figures wearing superhero capes.

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[10]Pam Fessler, The Elections Group, "Telling our story: An elections communication guide." Available at "https://www.electionsgroup.com/telling-our-story-guide.

[11]Election Hero Day: https://electionheroday.org/.

[12]The 2023 toolkit is available here: https://electionheroday.org/toolkits/Election-Hero-Day-Partner-Toolkit.pdf.

Figure 15: Example of **Trust the People** Message, Louisiana Secretary of State

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Figure 16: Example of **Trust the People** Message, Iowa, New Hampshire, Vermont

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the "friends and neighbors"/"Election Hero" message was used more by local election officials, both by integrating the Election Hero Day campaign materials into their social media communications, but also by sharing more personalized messages, particularly to encourage voters to be kind to poll workers. We identified that in some cases, local EOs used ***Signaling*** words to further reinforce their messages. The Nevada County official in California, for instance, included the term *nonpartisan* in their post highlighting that "Elections are run by communities." The Arapahoe County Clerk and Recorder in Colorado emphasized that election judges work in *bipartisan* teams in a post shared in celebration of Election Hero Day. Both these messages serve as illustrative examples of how trust-building themes often overlap. The post by the Arapahoe County Clerk and Recorder includes all three: trust the source - "your local, trusted source for election information, trust the system - facts about election judges, and trust the people - friends and neighbors/election heroes.

Figure 17: Example of ***Trust the People*** Message, Nevada County, California

Figure 18: Example of *Trust the People* Message, Weber County Elections, Utah
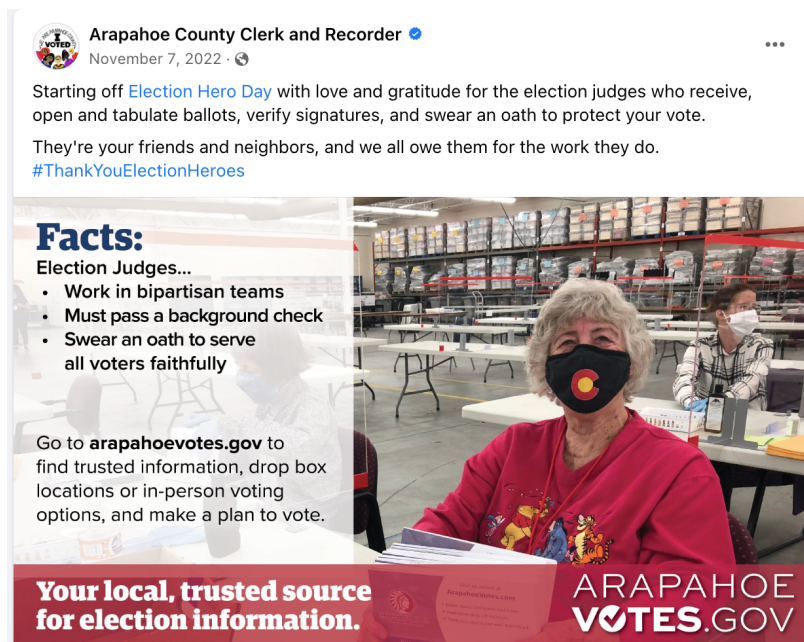
Election officials also used the "election hero" message to recruit poll workers between September and October of 2022. While many adopted this term, a few election officials, used similar terms, like "democracy heroes" or "democracy action heroes," used by boards of elections in Brunswick, Forsyth, Martin, and Ratherford Counties in North Carolina (Brunswick County Board of Elections in North Carolina). The fact that all local EOs using this terminology come from the same state is reflective of the efforts made by the North Carolina State Board of Elections to build a consistent messaging campaign across the state.[13]

Related to, but distinct from the "trust the source" and "trust the system" messages, we identified an important theme in election officials' communications: that they are **professionals**, receive training and certification, and therefore know the rules and procedures required to keep elections safe. Florida stands out in this case. The Florida Secretary of State prioritized communications about conducting in-person visits to all 67 County Supervisor of Elections offices, noting they are professionals and prepared to run the 2022 election. In the context of Florida, this effort was particularly important, as Hurricane Ian disrupted the normal flow of election operations across the

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[13]The Elections Group,"North Carolina's "Help Us Be Successful" (HUBS) Program." Available at: https://www.electionsgroup.com/north-carolina-hubs-program.

state; it was the State EO's responsibility to ensure that local election officials had the resources they need to make adjustments to their election preparedness plans.

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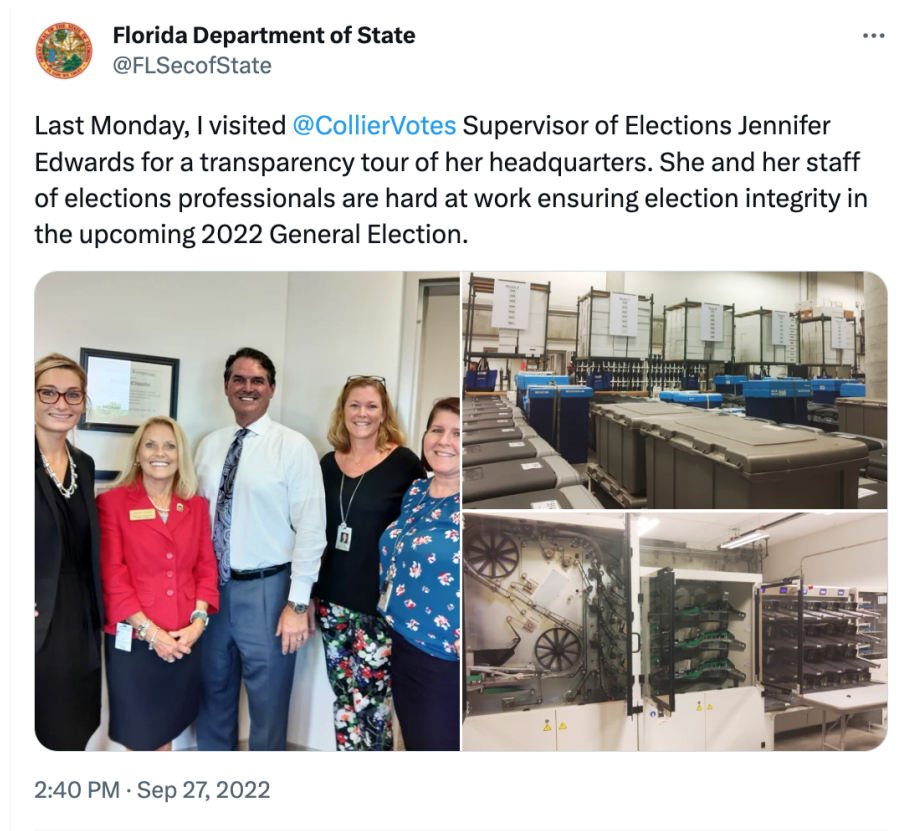Figure 19: Example of *Trust the System* Message, EOs are Professionals

Florida Department of State
@FLSecofState

Last Monday, I visited @CollierVotes Supervisor of Elections Jennifer Edwards for a transparency tour of her headquarters. She and her staff of elections professionals are hard at work ensuring election integrity in the upcoming 2022 General Election.

2:40 PM · Sep 27, 2022

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Figure 20: Example of **_Trust the People_** Message, election worker training, Illinois State Board of Elections

2.4 Combating Misinformation

2.4.1 Inoculation Efforts

Our priority was to identify best approaches in combating misinformation as the election cycle progressed in real-time. We were particularly interested in state and local EOs' inoculation efforts: ongoing communications about election officials being *trusted sources* of information, election *systems* being secure, and election officials/workers being part of the voters' *community.* Inoculation efforts take multiple forms, starting with having a dedicated *"rumor control" / "myth busting"* presence on election websites and social media. Maryland's Rumor Control web page stands out among states' web pages devoted to sharing facts about the election process (Figure 21).[14] Maryland also includes a hyperlink on the web page linking to the Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency's (CISA) Rumor Control page, which underscores the partnerships state election offices form with federal agencies in election misinformation preparedness.

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Figure 21: Example of **Trust the People** Message, election worker training, Illinois State Board of Elections

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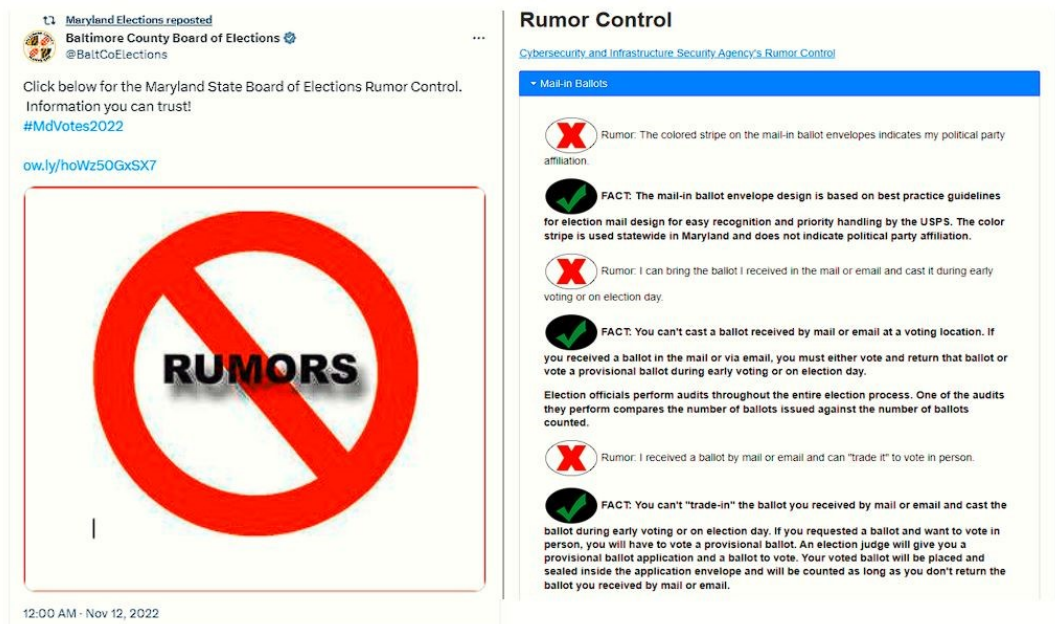
[14]NASS provides a comprehensive list of all states' fact/fiction web pages on its #Trustedinfo campaign page: https://www.nass.org/initiatives/trustedinfo.

State and local election officials' most common messaging structure involved text, a visual, and a link - mostly, but not always, clickable, directing voters to find more substantive information on their elections website. The inclusion of #hashtags in such messages was more of less standard, meant to signal to voters that these communications were part of fact sharing campaigns. Aside from the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag, which represents a coordinated campaign across election officials, states used their own **hashtag campaigns** explicitly designed for misinformation combating/trust-building. These posts would be posted weekly on a specific day of the week, and in some states they run during the post-election period, focusing on election processes like signature verification, audits, and ballot accuracy.

North Carolina State Board of Elections' (NCSBE) inoculation messaging campaign was the most robust among all the states during the 2022 election cycle. Instead of the #TrustedInfo2022 campaign, the NCSBE introduced #YourVoteCountsNC, which was used in all social media communications. As part of this campaign, NCSBE had a weekly myth/fact post series on Facebook and Twitter, with a dedicated *#hashtag* for almost every day of the week, from Monday to Saturday. In Figure 22, we show an example of North Carolina's #YourVoteCountsNC campaign, with original posts from the NCSBE account on Twitter. These posts would often be retweeted by county boards of elections, as in the case of Pitt County, or incorporated in original posts, as in the case of Gaston County (Figure 23).

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Figure 22: Example of *Misinformation Combating - Inoculation* efforts in North Carolina

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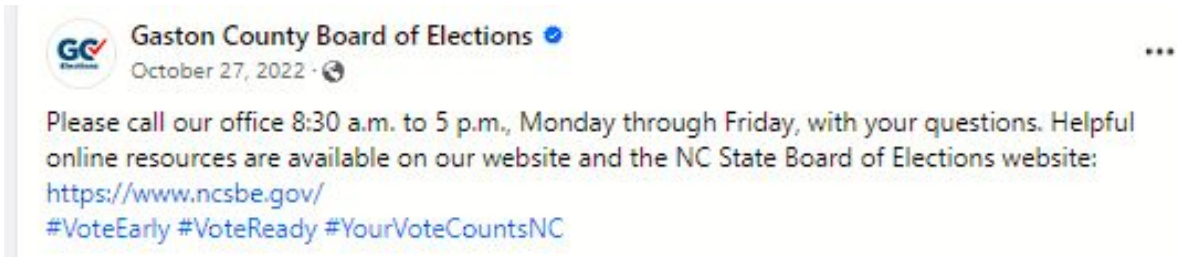Figure 23: Example of *Misinformation Combating - Inoculation* efforts in North Carolina

Table 4: Misinformation combating / Inoculation - Weekly post series by State and EOs

Day of the Week	Campaign
Monday	#MythBustingMonday (North Carolina)
	#MythBustingMonday (Cherokee and Lee Counties, Iowa)
	Monday Mythbusters (Texas)
	Machine Safety Monday (Jersey County, Illinois)
Tuesday	#TriviaTuesday (North Carolina)
Wednesday	Election Term of the Day (North Carolina)
	Working Wednesday (Maricopa County, Arizona)
	What's Up at the SBE Wednesday (Illinois)
Thursday	Election Law 101 (North Carolina)
	#ThursdayTrivia (Pennsylvania)
Friday	#FactCheckFriday (Iowa)
	#FAQFriday (Pennsylvania)
	#FactFriday (North Carolina)
	#FactFriday (South Carolina)
	#FactFriday (Maricopa County, Arizona)
	#FactFriday (Yolo County ACE, California)
Saturday	#SecureSaturday (North Carolina)

North Carolina developed a weekly hashtag campaign, with specific themes dedicated for every day of the week except Sunday, making it by far the most the most consistent myth-busting and fact sharing social media campaign among state election officials. For comparison, we summarize the most consistent inoculation campaigns by state and local election officials in Table 4. Looking at the table, it appears Fridays and Mondays are the most common days for fact sharing messages. These campaigns showcase the intention and creativity behind the design of consistent communications to build resilience against misinformation.

Another common inoculation tactic was the production and dissemination of ***video series*** throughout the election cycle, to inform voters about how to complete processes such as voter registration, mail voting, and obtaining voter identification, but also about how the elections office prepares for elections. The Wisconsin Election Commission's "Election 101" video series (Figure 24) is a useful example, because it is among the very few campaigns that did not use any hashtags. Arizona, Arkansas, Illinois, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Texas also included informational video series in their messaging campaigns, with many other states using videos throughout the election cycle, although not as part of a regular series.

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Figure 24: Example of *Misinformation Combating - Inoculation* efforts in Wisconsin

Local election officials were by far the most creative in using videos to inform voters about the election process and to build resilience against misinformation. The most common content of such videos included election officials introducing themselves, the election staff, and the facilities used to process ballots. The Palm Beach County Supervisors of Elections (SoE) in Florida is a great example (Figure 23), because the SoE is present in every video produced by the county, which increases the credibility of the source and the message.

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Figure 25: Example of ***Misinformation Combating - Videos*** efforts in Palm Beach County, Florida
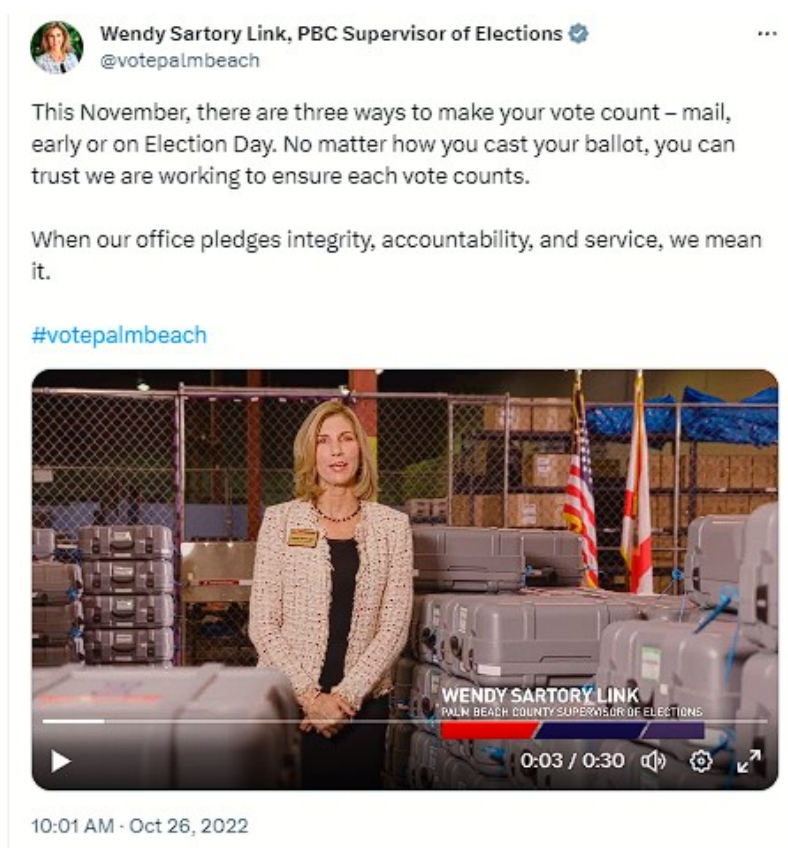
A comparison of how consistently video campaigns were used by state and local election officials is helpful in identifying potential capacity challenges among local EOs, but also how they adjust their messaging strategies to prioritize addressing specific misinformation subjects, like the security of mail voting, and ballot accuracy. In Figures 25 and 26 we compare the volume of videos shared by state EOs and local EOs respectively between September 10 and November 15, 2022. State

EOs' social media communications that included a video were fairly consistent during this time frame, whereas those of local EOs were concentrated towards the last month prior to the November election.

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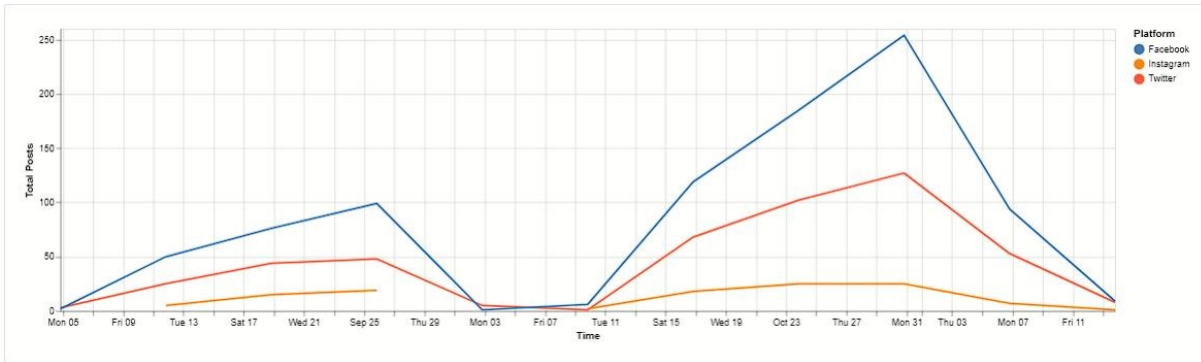Figure 26: Example of *Misinformation Combating - Videos* shared by State EOs

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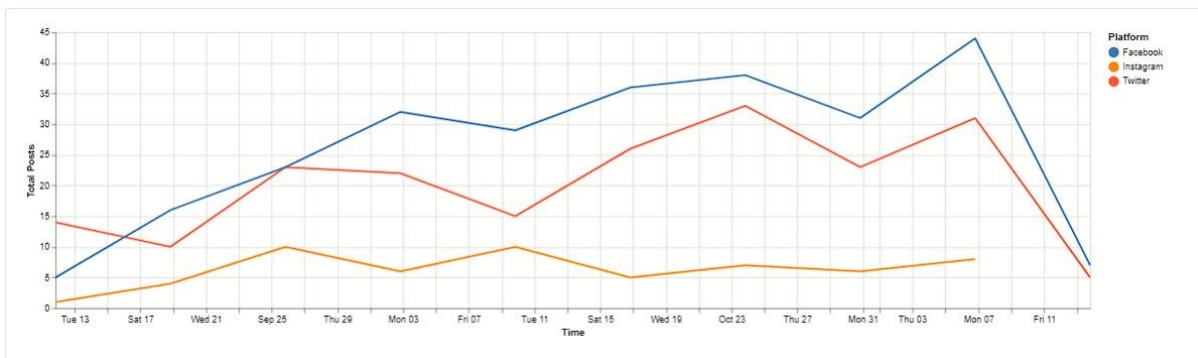
Figure 27: Example of *Misinformation Combating - Videos* shared by Local EOs

Despite these differences, which are likely due to gaps in capacity and expertise with digital content creation, there were local election officials who did invest in a producing video series. Osceola County Supervisor of Elections, for example, shared their "ABCs of Elections" series on their YouTube channel, covering voter registration, mail voting, tracking of mail ballots, training of poll workers, logic and accuracy testing, and ballot processing, among other topics.[15]

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[15]Osceola County Supervisor of Elections, Florida, YouTube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/@voteosceola6814.

Finally, an important part of election officials' efforts to inoculate voters against misinformation was to educate them on *what is misinformation and how to spot it*, and *what to do* if they were exposed to it. Washington Office of the Secretary of State and the Illinois State Board of Elections (SBE) serve as examples of these educational efforts (Figure 28). In the former, the post was shared in multiple languages, uncovering another important layer in the study of EOs' social media communications, namely how this information is disseminated to all voters, including language minority voters. In the case of the Illinois SBE, the "8 Common Types of Election Misinformation" flier was shared by several local election officials, suggesting a strong effort to coordinate messaging campaigns by state and local EOs.

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Figure 28: Example of *Misinformation Combating - Education* shared by Local EOs
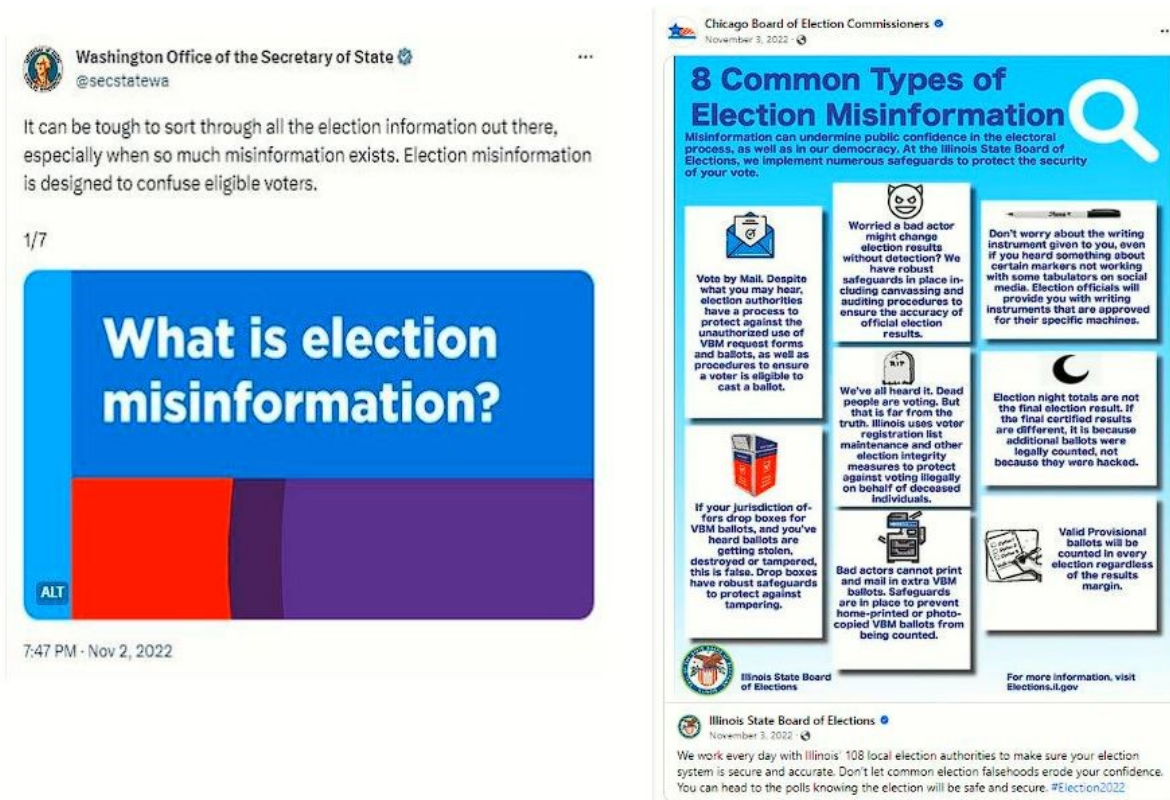
2.4.2 Debunking Efforts

Our analysis of all election officials' social media communications in 2022 show high levels of election preparedness to inoculate voters against misinformation, as we showed in the previous section. We found that states were equally prepared to respond to emerging issues in-real time by sharing **"debunking/misinformation alert"** messages, often directing voters to their myth busting/rumor control web page.

Debunking messages are very diverse and state/jurisdiction specific, yet we identified similarities in emerging issues across states about multiple election processes, from voter list maintenance to counting votes on Election Day. On Table 5, we showcase dominant misinformation subjects across states, and report the specific content of misinformation as addressed by state and local election officials. The most frequent subject of misinformation was about polling locations; election officials in Alaska, Delaware, Kansas, Nebraska, North Carolina, and Ohio alerted voters about third-parties sharing *text messages* or *mailers* with incorrect locations. Text and mail was used to misinform voters about their eligibility (Texas), and early in-person voting (North Carolina). Absentee/mail voting, perhaps unsurprisingly, was also a dominant subject, with election officials in Missouri, Ohio, Illinois, and Iowa correcting the record about the availability of pre-paid postage (Ohio), and returning a mail ballot to one's polling place on Election Day. When alerting voters, election officials would often include a flier stating the subject of misinformation and share the correct information. In Iowa, such alerts included the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag, as shown in Figure 29.

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Table 5: Misinformation combating / Debunking - Responses to Emerging Issues in Real Time

Subject	Issue (State)
Incorrect polling place information	Text messages (Alaska, Delaware, Kansas, Nebraska, Ohio)
	Mailers (Miami County, Kansas, North Carolina)
Voter eligibility/Address Verification	Mailers (Tarrant County, Texas)
	Revoking voter registrations (Texas)
Voter ID	Photo ID required to vote (Lucas County, Ohio)
Early In-Person Voting	Mailers with incorrect dates (Wayne County, North Carolina)
Absentee voting	Pre-paid postage availability (Ohio)
	Returning ballots on Election Day (Missouri, Iowa, Illinois)
Voting	Voting on the phone (Crawford County, Iowa)
	Voting online (Illinois)
Voting machines	Breakdowns (Ohio)
Ballot counting	Counting before polls close (Campbell County, Kentucky)

Figure 29: Example of **Misinformation Combating - Alert** shared by Iowa Secretary of State
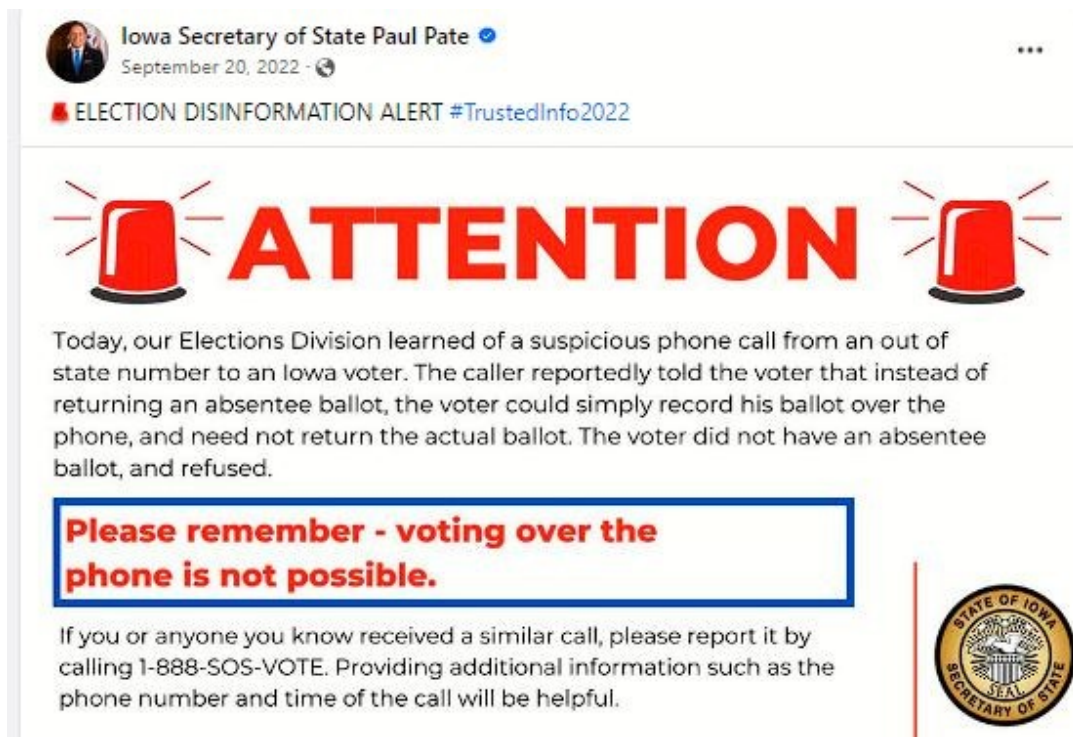
A few state election accounts were actively monitoring social media and intervened to respond to posts that were clearly shared by *trolls*. West Virginia and Ohio are good examples: On November 8, 2022, a Twitter account posted "Listen, I already voted 17 times" at 7:55am. The Secretary of State's office responded an hour later "We know you are joking, but please do not give anybody reason to doubt the integrity of our elections. We take this seriously." In the case of Ohio, the state's official election Twitter account "Verify Ohio" directly responded to what seemed like identical posts from Ryan, Brian, and Anthony, who each had different accounts and claimed they planned on voting in multiple states. In its response, Verify Ohio asked them to reconsider, stated that double voting is illegal, and that states check post-election and involve law enforcement when they find people who voted twice. We share these examples as evidence of states' awareness that misinformation breeds on social media, and their preparedness to respond in-real time. These examples provide testimony to the multiple shades of misinformation during the election cycle.

2.5 Phase IV: The #TrustedInfo2022 Dataset

Coding for this project began in October 2022 - after conducting coder training, practice rounds, and inter-coder reliability checks - and completed in July 2023. The total corpus of posts coded from state and local election officials' accounts on the three target platforms is 50,000. We call this corpus the #TrustedInfo2022 dataset. The unit of analysis is the individual post, and the time frame covered is September 10 to November 15, 2022.

There are several ways to organize the dataset, starting with sorting by state and locality. We produced two data sets, one for the state officials, and one for the local officials, because they were coded separately. Each row includes the account name, channel ID, platform used, time the post was shared, engagement metrics (overall impressions, likes/shares/comments), followed by a total of 93 labels, which receive a value of 1 or zero. These labels are organized thematically across our Tier 1 and Tier 2 labels, as outlined in Phase I. In the Appendix, we provide images of the full label structure our coding team used to code each post in Junkipedia.

The Junkipedia platform, where all posts are "housed," can facilitate selective exports of the dataset by account, date, date range, and label/s. At the moment, Junkipedia is not a public facing platform, similar to other databases that allow interested individuals to select the data they wish to export, and then request a csv file to be sent to their email (like the Voting Rights Lab).

While this feature is under development, we will be making available in the Harvard dataverse the full dataset, with a detailed codebook. We will also make available separate datasets that we used to measure trust-building campaigns, which are subsets of the full dataset with specific "filters," such the presence of the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag AND|OR the presence of terms such as "trusted|safe|secure."

Due to the dynamic nature of this dataset, it can be organized in many different ways. For instance, data can be organized by election process, or by whether posts included visuals with clickable links. Publishing the full dataset with all labels will allow users to identify the labels of interest and sort the dataset accordingly.[16]

3 Products

In this section, we list all complete and in-progress scholarly and public facing products that have resulted from this project.

3.1 Conference Presentations

- **Southern Political Science Association Annual Meeting**, St. Petersburg Beach, Florida (January 2023): "#TrustedInfo2022: Variation and Patterns in How Election Officials Maintain a Transparent Information Ecosystem Online," (Thessalia Merivaki and Mara Suttmann-Lea).

- **Election Sciences, Research, and Administration Conference**, Athens, Georgia (May 2023): "Are hashtags enough? Assessing the role of state election officials as information and opinion leaders," (Thessalia Merivaki, Mara Suttmann-Lea, and Rachel Orey).

- **Electoral Integrity Project** Virtual Conference (July 2023): "Are hashtags enough? Assessing the role of state election officials as information and opinion leaders," (Thessalia Merivaki, Mara Suttmann-Lea, and Rachel Orey).

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[16]The dataset will be released in two phases; the State EO social media communications will be made available in the Harvard Dataverse by April 2024. We anticipate publishing the local election social media communications by August 2024.

- **American Political Science Association** Annual Meeting (August 2023)."Are hashtags enough? Assessing the role of state election officials as information and opinion leaders," (Thessalia Merivaki, Mara Suttmann-Lea, and Rachel Orey).

3.2   Invited Talks & Presentations

- National Conference of Citizenship, Planet Word Museum, Washington D.C (November 2023): "#TrustedInfo2022: Building confidence in elections on social media" (Thessalia Merivaki).

- Brennan Center for Justice, New York University School of Law (August 2023): "Polls are Open, Rain or Shine: Using social media to evaluate election administration during emergencies" (Thessalia Merivaki).

- Election Community Network monthly virtual meeting (November 2022): "How Election Officials Engage with Voters on Social Media: The 2022 Midterm Elections" (Mara Suttmann-Lea and Thessalia Merivaki).

3.3   Manuscripts under peer-review

- "The TrustedInfo2022 dataset: States' trust-building social media campaigns during the 2022 election cycle" (Thessalia Merivaki and Mara Suttmann-Lea - *Forthcoming in State Politics Policy Quarterly*).

- "Are you there, voter? It's me, your election official: Evaluating election officials' efforts to build trust in election integrity." (Thessalia Merivaki, Mara Suttmann-Lea, and Rachel Orey - *Under Review*).

- "Staying close to home: Preferred sources of information and voter confidence" (Thessalia Merivaki, Mara Suttmann-Lea, and Rachel Orey."

3.4   Chapters in edited volumes

- Joelle Gross, Samuel Baltz, Mara Suttmann-Lea, Thessalia Merivaki, and Charles Stewart III. Local Election Officials on social media in Dari Tran ed. "Elections in the Time of COVID-19.

Lexington Books.

- Mara Suttmann-Lea and Thessalia Merivaki. "How Local Election Officials Educate Voters about Voting Requirements and Election Reforms." In Gronke et al. eds. Local Election Administrators in the United States - The Frontline of Democracy, Palgrave McMillan.

3.5 Working manuscripts

- Fernanda Gonzalez, Alejandro Flores, Samuel Baltz, Thessalia Merivaki, Mara Suttmann-Lea, and Charles Stweart. "¿Dónde diablos voto? Unexamined variations in linguistic responsiveness by governments and representatives."

- Thessalia Merivaki, Mara Suttmann-Lea, and Martha Kropf. "Building an Informed Citizenry, Starting with Elections: Do Election Official Communications Increase Americans' Knowledge about Voting Rules and Requirements in their State?"

- Zachary Djanogly Garai, Samuel Baltz, Joelle Gross, Thessalia Merivaki, Mara Suttmann-Lea, and Charles Stewart. "How do election officials respond to emerging election-related issues? An analysis of communications shared on Twitter between 2012 and 2022."

3.6 Public Facing Scholarship

- Thessalia Merivaki and Mara Suttmann-Lea. (August 31, 2022). "Local election offices often are missing on social media, and the information they do post often gets ignored," **The Conversation**.

- Thessalia Merivaki and Mara Suttmann-Lea. (September 7, 2022). Local election offices often are missing on social media – and the information they do post often gets ignored." **Electoral Integrity Project** Blog.

3.7 Webinars

- "Building Trust in Elections: Lessons from 2022, Best practices, and Resources for Election Officials." Hosted by MIT Election Data and Science Lab (MEDSL).[17]

3.8 Datasets

- "The #TrustedInfo2022 Dataset: State and Local election official communications during the 2022 midterm elections."

4 Summary of Empirical Findings and Recommendations for Election Officials

Our scholarship places voter education at the heart of democratic listening. We argue that election officials are uniquely equipped to provide accurate, reliable election-related information to their constituents. By exposing voters to accurate information, and equipping them to distinguish between factual and false information, the overall quality of democratic listening improves. Our research so far has established that election officials' communication and outreach efforts have educative effects: by informing voters about *how* election processes work, such as registering to vote and voting by mail, voters are more likely to navigate them successfully [18] We also find robust evidence that increased investment in voter education, both in terms of monetary resources as well as social media communications, icrease confidence in ballot accuracy.[19].

This project allowed us to test the relationship between election officials' trust-building efforts and public attitudes about ballots cast being accurately counted more closely, particularly relating

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[17]Recording available here: https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/projects/learning-from-elections/building-trust-webinar.

[18]Merivaki, Thessalia, and Mara Suttmann-Lea. "Can electoral management bodies expand the pool of registered voters? Examining the effects of face-to-face, remote, traditional, and social media outreach." Policy Studies 44.3 (2023): 377-407; Suttmann-Lea, Mara, and Thessalia Merivaki. "'Don't Drown the Message: The Effects of Voter Education on Mail Ballot Acceptance in North Carolina.'" Journal of Election Administration Research and Practice 1.2 (2022).

[19]Suttmann-Lea, Mara, and Thessalia Merivaki. "The Impact of Voter Education on Voter Confidence: Evidence from the 2020 US Presidential Election." Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy (2023).

to statewide confidence, namely the question of "Do you feel confident that votes cast in your state are counted accurately?". Our scholarship confirms that voters feel more confident that their votes, and votes in their community are counted accurately, and we theorize that this happens because of the information ecosystem cultivated locally by local election officials and local media.[20] The literature has not adequately examined why voters are less confident that votes in their state, and nationwide are counted. This project allowed us to examine this more closely. Drawing from the #TrustedInfo2022 dataset, we evaluated whether increased usage of trust-building messages, both explicit - using terms like "safe," "secure," "trusted," - and implicit - including the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag - were associated with higher confidence that votes cast in one's state are counted as intended.[21] We find that prioritizing explicit trust-building messages increase statewide voter confidence, and theorize that this happens because such messages help voters make the connection that the information shared by election officials is relevant in the context of ballot accuracy. We also theorize that statewide ballot confidence can be a reflection of how the public views state election officials, whose position has been highly politicized and scrutinized recently. Our ongoing work suggests that compared to local EOs, state EOs have a higher bar to meet when it comes to connecting with their constituents and assuaging concerns about election integrity, and nonpartisan election administration.

How can these findings be used in practice by election officials, and the broader election community? In Figure 30, we present a list of best practices for state and local election officials that capture how content is communicated - the message - and how accessible it is to voters with unique information needs like voters with disabilities and language minority voters. We also spotlight recommendations to address persistent challenges in making voters aware that election officials are sharing information in online and offline spaces, and draw attention to the importance of keeping officials' often conflicting roles - partisan candidates for office and nonpartisan public servants - separate.

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[20]Staying close to home: Preferred sources of information and voter confidence" (Thessalia Merivaki, Mara Suttmann-Lea, and Rachel Orey."

[21]"Are you there, voter? It's me, your election official: Evaluating election officials' efforts to build trust in election integrity." (Thessalia Merivaki, Mara Suttmann-Lea, and Rachel Orey - *Under Review*).

Figure 30: Trust-building communications online and offline: Best practices and ongoing challenges

- **Concise, clear messages.**
  - *"Trust the source | system | people."*
  - *"Here is how we do it."*
- **Integrity in the context of the whole cycle.**
  - *"Safeguards through every step of the process."*
- **Continuity in messaging.**
  - *NCSBE daily thematic posts (#MythbustingMonday - #SecureSaturday).*
  - *CA SOS "Vote Safe California" logo.*
- **Cross-platform consistency.**
- **Information accessibility.**
  - *Clickable links/QR codes; multi-lingual.*
- **Coordination across/within states.**
  - *"Elections in our state|the U.S. are secure."*
- **Name/Office visibility.**
  - *Logos/seal/image on comms.*
- **Message amplification online and offline.**

- **Getting the message out; do voters know you are online?**
  - *Recommendation: mailer with social media/newsletter info.*
- **Applying best practices locally; do LEOs have the resources they need?**
  - *Recommendation: CEO toolkits for LEOs.*
- **Finding trusted surrogates for communities of interest (opinion leaders).**
  - *Recommendation: Leverage partnerships with local civil society & media.*
- **Relying too much on hashtags.**
  - *Recommendation: hashtags are OK, but explicit messages may be more effective.*
- **Minimizing election denial.**
  - *Recommendation: candidate forums, local/state party trainings, media invitations.*
- **Mixing campaigning with educating.**
  - *Recommendation: election office account vs personal account.*

We made the conscious decision not to create a typology of "bad"/"good" messages, since we lack a comprehensive overview of every state's and locality's capacity and level of expertise with digital content creation and voter communications. As we have demonstrated in the previous sections, election officials are actively engaged in their communities, at least to the extend we can capture in this project. That said, we consider the items included in Figure 30 as best practices, because they meet three important goals: a. conveying consistent and clear messages, b. clearly connecting the message to the messenger, and c. making information inclusive and accessible.

5 Outreach and Partnerships

In preparing for this project, we built upon ongoing partnerships with multiple stakeholders in the election system, particularly **Common Cause**, the **Center for Tech and Civic Life** (CTCL), and the **National Conference on Citizenship**. These partnerships helped us build a strong foundation for our data collection process, taking into consideration the usability of our data for election officials, and all interested stakeholders.

Throughout this project, we have established a strong partnership with our project team member Cameron Hickey (Algorithmic Transparency Institute - National Conference on Citizenship), who provided technical and subject matter expertise for anything related to Junkipedia. Our collaboration has been mutually beneficial; our coding needs required for adjustments in the platform, which we would communicate to Mr. Hickey, and he would implement them. Whereas our coding process was not impacted, these improvements allowed us to export and manage all coded data more efficiently. Importantly, we have identified key ways to build a public facing platform to allow users to access our data on the platform, and download data relevant to them. To showcase how we used and adapted the platform for our needs, Thessalia Merivaki was invited to give a talk to the Future of Citizenship conference hosted by the National Conference on Citizenship in November 2023, in Washington D.C.[22]

Beyond our work with Junkipedia and the Algorithmic Transparency Institute, we have collaborated with multiple election stakeholders and election officials to disseminate the findings from this research, and to build capacity for future projects. We have actively sought to make the broader election community in the United States and abroad about our research through participating in virtual meetings; In February, we shared our methodology and preliminary findings at the monthly **Election Community Network** (ECN) virtual meeting. We also have a long-standing relationship with the **International Foundation for Electoral Systems** (IFES), with whom we shared our findings during the first stages of our research. IFES and CTCL are two partners that have a vested interest producing social media guides for election officials, with a particular focus on accessibility and usability across multiple platforms.

Since our project is part of a series of MIT-funded projects aimed to identify best practices in combating election misinformation, we have partnered with Rachel Orey, Senior Associate Director of the Bipartisan Policy Center's Elections Project on a series of research projects that relate to how voters seek information about elections and how this information seeking behavior can affect confidence in ballot accuracy. These projects have resulted in two manuscripts that are currently under peer-review.

Over the last years, our research has allowed us to build connections with election officials and

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[22]The Future of Citizenship Conference, Planet Word Museum, November 30, 2023: https://ncoc.org/2023-agenda/.

multiple stakeholders in the broader election system. We leveraged these connections to put together a webinar in July, titled **"Building Trust in Elections: Lessons from 2022, Best practices, and Resources for Election Officials."**.[23] This webinar brought together researchers, election officials, and organizations dedicated to supporting the work of election officials for a series of panels reflecting on lessons learned about voter education and outreach during the 2022 midterm election cycle. The panels included an analysis of trust-building practices used by election officials during the election cycle, a discussion with select officials about their experiences using social media for voter outreach, and a spotlight on resources available for officials to develop, share, and learn from one another's communication practices. Our invited local election officials were Julie Wise, Director of Elections for King County, Washington; Dustin Czarny, Democratic Election Commissioner for Onondanga County, New York; Jeff Danovich, Poll Worker Trainer from Clayton County, Georgia; Brianna Lennon, County Clerk from Boone County, Missouri; and Lori Edwards, the Supervisor of Elections from Polk County, Florida. Our invited election stakeholders and non-profits were Austin Boral, co-founder of Civic Roundtable, Steve Wanczyk, founder of Protect our Elections, Omar Parboo of Ideas 42, and Avery Davis Roberts of the Carter Center. Over 300 individuals from the academic, news media, non-profit, and practitioner community registered to attend the webinar, with about 150 attendees joining to watch the full event. Since the webinar, we have received positive feedback from election officials and other partners about the usefulness of our findings for the election community.

With the data collection phase complete, our team identified stakeholders that play a big part in the election information ecosystem, namely the **Election Hero Day** campaign team. We reached out to them to discuss potential collaboration projects, and we are in the process of strategic planning with the whole **Civic Holidays** team, as they have developed a series of social media campaigns to promote voter registration (*National Voter Registration Day*), Early In-Person Voting (*Vote Early Day*), and voter education (*National Voter Education Week*), including *Election Hero Day.*

Finally, this project is organically connected to efforts by the **U.S. Election Assistance Commission** to produce voter education for election officials. Our established partnership with the U.S.

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[23]https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/projects/learning-from-elections/building-trust-webinar.

EAC allows us to share our findings and be a part of this effort both in a formal and an informal capacity.

6 Impact

This project is the first of its kind effort to systematically track the election information ecosystem as maintained by state and local election officials, during a major election cycle across the United States. In total, our data provide a detailed picture of the communications shared by nearly all state election offices, and all of the local election officials who are active on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. While we recognize these tools are not the only means election offices communication information to voters, to our knowledge these data are currently the most systematic and efficient means of mapping the information ecosystem cultivated by election officials in the United States.

While there are extensive data collected on the information ecosystem maintained by political campaigns, party organizations, and other political actors during election cycles through efforts like the Wesleyan Media Project, to date there has not been a similar effort to build a picture of what the most director arbiters of democracy - state and local election officials - do to inform voters of how to access the ballot, and how to feel confidence that their vote will count. This project makes great progress in addressing this gap. In short, given the novelty of our efforts and what they add to our understanding of the election information ecosystem in the United States, the impact of our work for the field of election sciences and for election administrators is quite substantial. We feel this work will have a lasting positive effect, especially as we continue data collection efforts in future election cycles.

During our conversations with election officials and multiple stakeholders from the non-profit sector, we were told there is a need to a. understand the election information environment within which EOs operate, b. understand how these officials communicate with their voters on social media, identifying gaps in how information is shared, and c. develop structures to disseminate these data to election officials, election journalists, and organizations who want to amplify EOs' education efforts. The common challenge identified in these conversations was lack of capacity and resources to put such a project together. In effect, creating a database of all state and local election officials' social media presence, which provides the foundation for our project, was possible thanks

to extramural funding.[24] Updating the database in anticipation of the 2022 election cycle was done by Dr. Suttmann-Lea and a research assistant without additional support.

Our team has now a robust census of all state and local election officials' accounts on three social media platforms, and we receive multiple requests to share the database. Thus, as a product in itself this database is significant because it provides a foundational structure to answer the questions we outlined above. With high election official turnover however, the expansion into other social media platforms, and changing use of current platforms by election officials, there is a need to identify sustainable and efficient ways of updating the database in a sustainable manner. We hope this work has demonstrated that these data collection efforts are essential for the field of election sciences and for the maintenance of a healthy election information ecosystem; we intend to build data collection capacity for future election cycles with support of our partners, since we consider these data a public tool.

Our dataset is a one-of-a-kind repository of all social media communications of state and local election officials. Outside of this extensive data collection effort, our major contribution lies in the development and application of a hierarchical, nested labeling scheme that captures the core functions of election officials during an election cycle. As we outlined in the first section, we have coded over 50,000 organic posts by election theme, but also by type and by features that help evaluate how messages are crafted and disseminated (usage of visuals, QR codes, clickable links, etc.).

We anticipate this dataset to have multiple usages across stakeholders in the election system. First, from an academic standpoint, the dataset allows for theory-building, measurement, and theory-testing. Our theory development efforts center around the role of election officials in their capacity as *information leaders* and *opinion leaders*, in building local connections with their constituents.

In our review of content shared by election officials on social media, we observed that EOs appear to signal to voters they are trusted sources of information - *information leaders* - and that they are authorities in the subject of election administration and election integrity- *opinion leaders*.

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[24]Connecticut College. October 12, 2020. "Professor Suttmann-Lea wins competitive fellowship from Social Science Research Council to support election research": https://www.conncoll.edu/news/news-archive/2020/suttmann-lea-grant/.

When they say that elections are secure they are signaling that the public should trust them and form their opinions about the integrity of election administration based on their expertise. We also observed local EOs make concerted efforts to connect with their community and present themselves as a trusted "friend and neighbor." These observations are reminiscent of well-established theories of the relationship between political actors and the public such as Richard Fenno's "Homestyle" and V.O. Key's "friends and neighbors" hypothesis, both of which suggest cultivating close to home connections is beneficial for candidates.

Our dataset allows for scholars to build election officials into these established theories, and develop new pathways of understanding how the public relates to the most direct arbiters of democracy. While election officials are unique in broader world of the political actors embedded in campaigning in that they are often (though not always) tasked with both running for office and administering fair and secure elections as public servants, we feel theoretical possibilities identified through this project are an important and underexplored area of research within the broader field of American politics. It is one that will provide election scientists with solid theoretical footing for positioning election officials and administration within the broader theoretical canon in the field.

From an analytical perspective, these data offer significant power to scholars in election science. Given that in its raw form, the dataset has the single post as the unit of analysis, the data can be organized in different ways: by state/locality, by time, by account, and by label. In our current work, we utilize posts designed to build voter trust, which we call "trust-building" messages, and merged these indicators with existing datasets of voter behavior, like the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAE), to test whether trust-building messages on social media are associated with voter attitudes about election administration and ballot accuracy. This research is currently under peer-review.[25] We are also in the process of merging our data with other national surveys such as the Cooperative Election Study to evaluate the link between election official communications and other voter behavior, like knowledge of election policy.

While our primary focus for this project has been to assess the relationship between EO communications and voter attitudes towards election administration, these data can also be merged

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[25]"Are you there, voter? It's me, your election official: Evaluating election officials' efforts to build trust in election integrity." (Thessalia Merivaki, Mara Suttmann-Lea, and Rachel Orey - *Under Review*).

with other administrative data such as those on mail ballot casting and rejection rates and registration rates to assess the impact of these communications on voter access. For example, Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea (2023) shows that sharing content about registration on Facebook can increase usage of Online Voter Registration, and (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2022) illustrates how communicating vote by mail specific content decreases the likelihood mail voters will face ballot rejection. Without these data, our only measure would be whether an election official has an account on social media or not, which is an incomplete proxy for social media communications by election officials. As we show in (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2022), election officials are not equally active on social media posting behavior, not only in how often they post, but which topics they inform voters about.

Thus far, measuring voter education efforts offline and online has been a challenge, as there is no centralized voter education database (Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea 2022). We have been creative in overcoming this challenge by identifying publicly available datasets from specific states (Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea 2023), or by using proxies, such as how much states spent on communications from federal, state, and private grants , and how frequently election officials share messages on social media(Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2023). When evaluating the impact of election voter education efforts on voter confidence in ballot accuracy, we have found a positive association between these metrics and our outcome of interest. However, focusing on *trust-building* efforts on social media allows us to more closely investigate whether such campaigns are effective, which is what we investigate in one of our current manuscripts. Thus, the dataset allows us to improve the **construct validity** of voter education measures, especially as they relate to public communication campaigns.

Our ability to "house" the dataset in Junkipedia also allows us to apply additional taxonomies depending on which research question we are interested in. To illustrate, for this project, our focus was *misinformation*, so in addition to labels that capture election administration activities like voter registration, mail voting, poll worker trainings, among others, we produced specific labels to track misinformation responses, and the use of the #TrustedInfo2022 hashtag (see Table 1). Whereas we created a coding label for the presence of hashtags, we did not create campaign-specific labels other than TrustedInfo2022. With this coding infrastructure, we are able to extract subsets of data based on classifiers of interest, like for example foreign language accessibility, which is the subject of a working manuscript resulting from this project.

Our dataset can also be used for educational purposes like supporting student research. We

have been asked by fellow academics to make our dataset available for their students to work on projects that investigate how election officials inform college students to vote, and the data has been used in classroom exercises and assignments. Importantly, these data can be used by other researchers, election journalists, and stakeholders in the election community who wish to develop communication strategies in future elections.

Finally, we consider this product to have the most meaningful impact on the election official community, as it provides a robust way to visualize and disseminate thematically how election officials and their peers communicate with voters. When we began this project, we kept election officials and the public top of mind, consistently reflecting on how collecting, organizing, and disseminating a dataset of the election information ecosystem cultivated by election officials might support their work, and the public's trust in election administration.

Our greatest hope for this project was that these data and analyses that result from it become repository of resources for election officials to draw from as they connect with their constituents about the voting and election process in the United States. Indeed, when we presented top line findings in our July 2023 webinar, our invited election officials confirmed our findings are consistent with guidance they have received from their communications department about how to cultivate trust with their constituents, and their ongoing efforts to connect with voters on and offline. Overall, we feel we have made exceptional progress in bringing our goals to fruition thanks to the support from this grant. We have a strong foundation to expand our efforts to map the election information ecosystem created by election officials in future election cycles.

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7 Appendix

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Figure 31: Example of label structure in Junkipedia

Figure 32: Example of label structure in Junkipedia

Figure 33: Example of label structure in Junkipedia
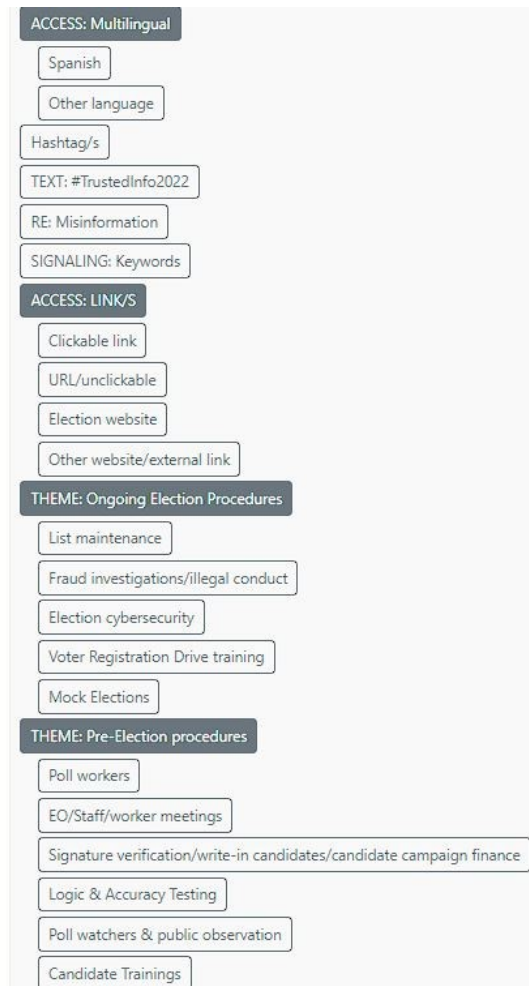
Figure 34: Example of label structure in Junkipedia

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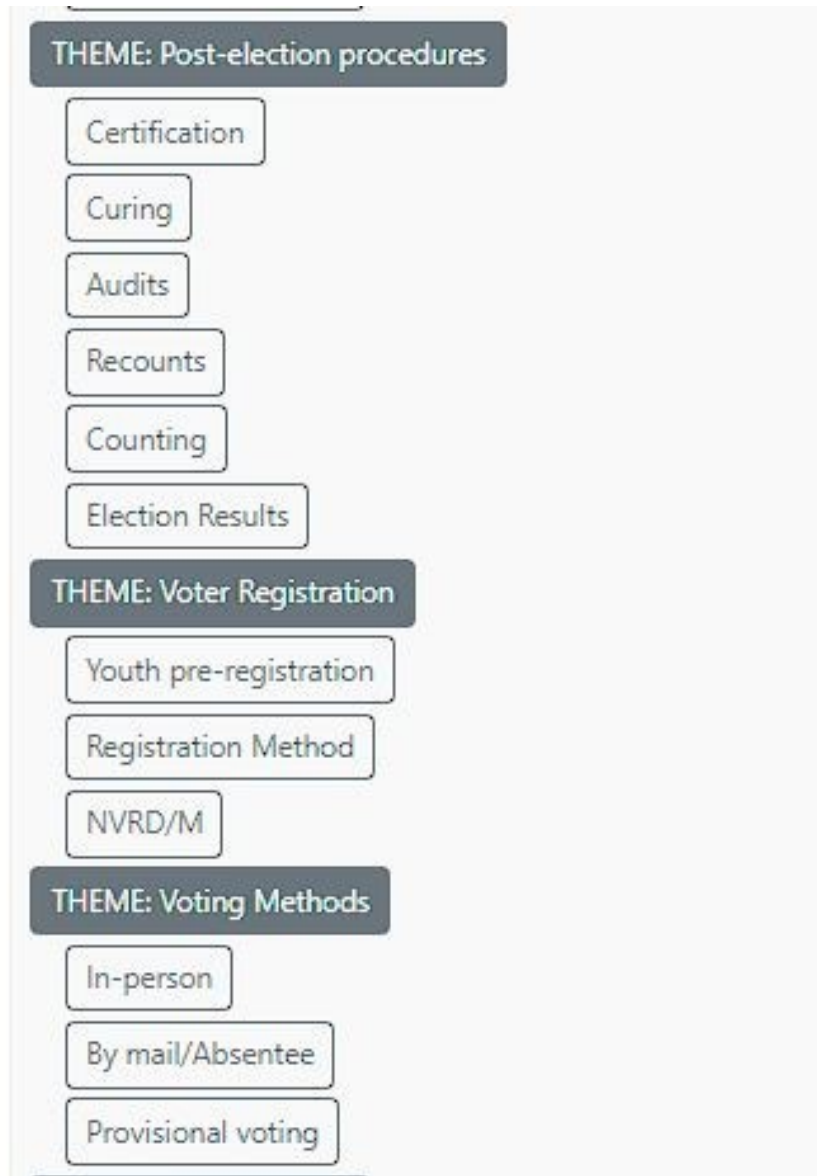
Figure 35: Example of label structure in Junkipedia