

THREATS TO ELECTION WORKERS: HOW ELECTION DISINFORMATION IS UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY

“There is nowhere I feel safe. Nowhere. Do you know how it feels to have the president of the United States target you?”

Ruby Freeman (Georgia election worker)

[Testimony](#) before the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack

“Without [volunteer election workers] we simply do not have a democracy and we won’t have a democratic process.... We are on the verge of not having that process anymore ... if these threats and the big lie that is driving them continues.”

Maggie Toulouse Oliver (New Mexico Secretary of State)

[Testimony](#) before the Senate Judiciary Committee (August 3)

“We cannot have a secure democracy if we do not protect the security of the people who administer, protect and stand guard over our elections. ... [T]hose unhappy with the results of the 2020 presidential election have perpetuated an unprecedented, coordinated campaign to erode the public’s confidence in one of the most secure, accessible and transparent elections in our history.”

Jocelyn Benson (Michigan Secretary of State)

[Testimony](#) before the Senate Judiciary Committee (August 3)

As part of GoTV efforts, the response to the all-too-common refrain “my vote doesn’t count” has been “if your vote doesn’t count” why are so many trying to make it more difficult, if not impossible, for you to vote.” Unfortunately, there is now an additional response to that lament, and that is “why are so many intent on subverting your vote.”

We have witnessed a “parade of horrors” since the election of 2020, starting with the Stop the Steal effort and attempted appointment of fake electors, and culminating in the January 6th insurrection, the election forensic “audits,” the myriad other events revealed as part of the January 6th hearings, the election suppression legislation rolled out by Republican-controlled state legislatures designed to reverse the countless reforms and practices that yielded unprecedented turnout in the 2020 election the pandemic notwithstanding,¹ the missing text messages among key officials, and the list goes on.

¹ According to [data](#) compiled by the States United Democracy Center (as part of its Democracy Crisis in the Making series), as of July 31, at least 244 bills had been introduced in 33 states that would interfere with election administration. Of these, 24 have become law (or have been adopted) this year across 17 states. The data track legislative trends that fall within one of five categories:

- usurping control over election results;
- requiring partisan audits of election results;
- seizing power over election responsibilities (shifting from professional election administrators to partisan legislatures or legislatively appointed officials);
- imposing unworkable burdens on election administration (including requiring manual counts); and
- imposing disproportionate criminal or other penalties on election officials (in effect penalizing conduct routinely taken to assist voters on how to cast ballots).

Lost, for many, in that litany though is a two-pronged effort that goes to the heart of subversion of the vote – coordinated threats to election officials and an organized effort to install in key positions in the administration of elections persons who are “election doubters and deniers.”² A new battleground has opened up – and the targets are secretaries of state and others who have operated for years, largely out of the public eye, to ensure the timely and smooth administration of elections in their respective states. It is critical that voters counter the threat, but to do so means understanding the breadth of the threat.

At the heart of the threat is the massive, ongoing disinformation campaign intended to undermine in the minds of the public the integrity of what, in the [words](#) of the Election Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council, was the “most secure [election] in American history.” An election for which there was “no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes or was in any way compromised.” Unfortunately, evidence suggests that election-related disinformation and the attacks perpetrated on the basis of that disinformation are putting the administration of elections, and ultimately the right of every American to have their votes counted, at great risk.

Disinformation

As Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson has [noted](#), the disinformation campaign about the security and accuracy of the 2020 election has taken multiple forms: blatantly false press releases, purely political legislative hearings, bogus legal claims and so-called “affidavits” that fail to allege any clear evidence of wrongdoing. It is a coordinated campaign to erode confidence in the 2020 presidential race (ironically Republicans never seem to concede that if the Biden victory was illegitimate so too was every other race on the ballot, including over-performance by Republicans in House races). As New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver has [noted](#), election administration practices intended to increase access and security, such as secured ballot drop boxes, air-gapped vote counting systems, vote-by-mail and certification processes, form “part of a vast conspiracy meant to undermine our entire American way of life.”

The disinformation campaign has two components. First, it is a top down effort by Trump and senior Republican leaders (perhaps the most glaring being the vote by 147 Republicans, only hours after the Capitol was cleared of insurrectionists, to object to the certification of the election in Arizona or Pennsylvania, followed by the pivot of senior Republican leaders away from their in-the-moment reactions to the insurrection to full-throated support for the proposition that the Biden victory was illegitimate). A Majority Staff [report](#) (“‘Exhausting and Dangerous’: The Dire Problem of Election Misinformation and Disinformation”) issued by the House Committee on Oversight and Reform (August 11) characterizes disinformation

Note that the Supreme Court has agreed to hear *Moore v Harper*, which could elevate the independent state legislature theory and remove restrictions on the authority of state legislatures to regulate federal elections.

² See my previous briefing note that touches on this threat, available [here](#) – in essence, the cohort includes those who claim Trump won the 2020 election, spread lies in public forums about the legitimacy of the election, called for “audits” of the election, promoted conspiracies about the election in public forums or otherwise took action to undermine the integrity of the election.

leading to violent death threats against local election officials as often inspired by comments from right-wing politicians and activists. Second, it is a bottom up effort (so-called participatory activism – “this is what I heard, have you?” – that went viral).

These two forces became a potent, toxic mix when they converged. Many of the 147 are running in 2024. Ironically, while in the minds of many, with memories of 2016 still fresh and the benefit of revelations triggered by the Cambridge Analytica scandal that surfaced beginning in 2018, election-related disinformation is foreign-inspired and sourced, today’s efforts to convince Americans that election systems and administrators are corrupt and illegitimate, in fact, are largely domestic.

The threats are pervasive. The House Majority report notes that election misinformation and disinformation “harms nearly every election of election administration.” They often follow a “feedback loop that produces more false information, heightens threats and pressures on election administrators, and increases the possibility of election subversion.”

From a tactical standpoint, the 2022 version of election denial is no longer historical (albeit built on lies unleashed around the 2020 election), but rather forward-looking to the midterms and beyond. If significant numbers of voters in battleground states believe that upcoming elections are illegitimate, the system breaks down completely.

Threats Against Election Officials

A key element of the Stop the Steal effort was to pressure those charged with administering elections – secretaries of state, election board officials and county clerks, among other, to reverse the results of the election. Many who resisted those efforts, and in some cases their families and neighbors, became targets of physical and online intimidation, harassment and threats of violence. Regrettably, those efforts continue, and show little signs of abating.

In [testimony](#) last month before the Senate Judiciary Committee, New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver testified to being doxxed, having her life threatened and having to leave home for weeks under state police protection. These threats cited 2000 Mules, a debunked movie purporting to show widespread election fraud. Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson [testified](#) that, in December 2020, her home was surrounded by armed protesters, waking neighbors, shouting obscenities and graphic threats into bullhorns late at night. The [Democracy Docket](#) (August 25) cites a number of other incidents involving election workers³ in Philadelphia, Maricopa County, Arizona, Nevada, Colorado and Texas. Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs was the target of violent threats, including at her home, first in November 2020 and then around the time of the Maricopa County election “audit.” Concerns were elevated around the anniversary of the January 6th insurrection.

At that same Judiciary Committee hearing, Assistant Attorney General (Criminal Division) Kenneth Polite, Jr. ([see prepared statement](#)) outlined actions of the DoJ’s Election Threats Task Force to combat the surge in threats. The engagement, he notes, is ongoing. As of August 1, the Task Force has reviewed over 1,000 contacts reported as hostile or harassing ([see press release](#)). Election officials in states with close elections and post-election contests were more likely to receive threats. Of the total potentially criminal threats, 58% were in

³ The threats target a range of people involved in the administration of elections. This cohort includes election officials and volunteers who serve as election day poll-workers.

states that experienced post-election lawsuits, recounts and audits, such as Arizona, Georgia, Colorado, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Nevada and Wisconsin. This likely represents only a portion of the daily threats that election administrators continue to face.

In [testimony](#) before the House Homeland Security Committee in July, Elizabeth Howard (Senior Counsel, Brennan Center for Justice) set out five aspects of the threats:

Disinformation is fuelling threats against election workers across the country, and the threats continue. According to a Brennan Center nationwide [survey](#) cited in the testimony, one in six election officials said that they have experienced threats because of their job, and 77% said that they feel these threats have increased in recent years. More than one in four election officials are concerned about being assaulted on the job, and over half are concerned about the safety of their colleagues. Many see a direct link between the threats and the increase in disinformation about the election process, specifically the lie that the 2020 election was stolen or that widespread fraud affected its outcome. In many cases, the perpetrators specifically cited the lies as justification for threats of death, violence or sexual assault against not only election workers, but their families and children as well.

I should note that while many election workers are nonpartisan, among elected election officials, the targets include Republicans as well as Democrats, including Republicans in overwhelmingly Republican districts.⁴ I should also note that many election workers are women. The literature suggests that while misogyny figures prominently in harassment and threats, and while many of the more visible voices in the fight to secure fair elections are women, the study of gender dynamics of both disinformation campaigns and attacks is only in the early stages. And of course, there is the overlay of the role of social media platforms in amplifying at scale misinformation and disinformation, but that is a separate (albeit critical) topic.

Many election officials are leaving the profession, citing threats and misinformation as key reasons. Nearly one third of election officials knew one or more election workers who have left their job at least in part because of fear for their safety, and 60% are concerned that threats, harassment and intimidation will make it difficult to retain and recruit election workers going forward. Many election officials themselves are leaving their positions, and the principal reason: attacks by political leaders “on a system they know is fair and honest.” The call to Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger is the most well-known and clearest effort to pressure election officials to elevate partisan interests over the democratic ideal of free and fair elections.

To compound the problem, the [Democracy Docket](#) (August 25) reports that, since 2020, 12 states have enacted a total of 35 criminal penalties *targeting* election officials. (*See also, [The Nation - Rising Trends](#).*) As Jocelyn Benson noted, threats are not limited to personal attacks, as they can also involve harassment and attempts to criminalize customary work of election officials. She points to a wave of new state laws subjecting election officials to criminal

⁴ In a recent [interview](#), a Republican election administrator in Arizona, explained that she was resigning due to the persistence of the “big lie” and the steady stream of letters, emails and calls harassing her and threatening her. (Incidentally, the county elections director and elections manager both announced their departures shortly before she announced hers.) What struck me about this story is that this administrator’s district is solidly Republican – Trump won 2-1.

penalties simply for performing their professional duties. They are threatened with arrest for educating citizens about their rights to votes. These typically meritless threats of arrest by Republican officials are barely disguised efforts to intimidate the nonpartisan administration of elections.

Another common tactic is to weaponize the FOIA process by flooding election offices with a seemingly coordinated surge of election-related record requests, preventing officials from performing their primary duties. The Majority Staff report cites lies about the election leading people to “distract” election workers to the point where it is impossible to get necessary work done. Each new false allegation of voter fraud prompts further calls and threats.

The loss of election administration expertise and experience is likely to spur further disinformation. Departing election professionals will leave in their wake a dearth of knowledge on how best to secure elections and serve voters. Significant attrition can only exacerbate what already is a highly fragile and combustible situation. As they are replaced by fewer or less experienced workers, there is greater likelihood of more mistakes or reduced capacity to respond to those mistakes. These situations have the potential to be exploited by conspiracy theorists intent on amplifying any errors, regardless of the magnitude or impact.

More worryingly, replacement elections workers may have embraced the “big lie.” The testimony cites at least 17 instances where supporters of the “big lie” have gained, or attempted to gain, access to voting equipment to find evidence of false election claims, often in coordination with, or with the support of, prominent sources of election disinformation. One notable adverse consequence of unauthorized access is that it can place the actual integrity of election infrastructure at risk.⁵

Election officials are not getting the federal support they need. The testimony calls for a significant increase in resources and protections for election workers. DoJ and DHS should provide meaningful access to existing federal grants for election security, and the Election Threats Task Force should expand its remit to liaise more formally with local law enforcement. The Brennan Center, separately, has [estimated](#) that keeping election offices and workers physically secure for the next five years would cost \$300 million.

A whole of society approach is needed to address the problems of election disinformation. Countering threats to election security requires participation by political leaders, government officials, journalists, civil society, the social media platforms, business leaders and individuals. I have explored in previous briefing notes (available [here](#)) the role of disinformation in creating, maintaining and exacerbating the divisions in America that are undermining democracy and solutions for addressing the threats (available [here](#)). Disinformation does not exist in a vacuum – far too many political leaders are exploiting election disinformation as a means to curry favor with a conservative base, which brings me to the second prong of the issue.

⁵ The Arizona election “audit” triggered decertification of certain election equipment, once the chain of custody was broken, requiring outlays of taxpayer money to replace decertified voting machines.

Perpetuating the “Big Lie”

Denying the election is increasingly becoming the litmus test for GOP candidates. According to data [published](#) by the Washington Post, among winning candidates in GOP primaries in six battleground states for positions that have a role in the election certification process, 54 of 87 candidates (62% - 12 of 13 in Arizona, 13 of 19 in Georgia, 10 of 16 in Michigan, 5 of 19 in Nevada, 10 of 19 in Pennsylvania and 4 of 11 in Wisconsin) are elections deniers (by directly questioning Joe Biden’s victory, voting against certifying the Electoral College count, supporting post-election “audits,” signing on to a lawsuit seeking to overturn the election results or expressing support for the insurrection. These include the winners of the GOP primaries for Michigan secretary of state, Pennsylvania governor, and Arizona governor and secretary of state (both of whom have pledged that they would not have certified Joe Biden’s victory in Arizona). More broadly, across 41 states with primaries as of mid-August, approximately 250 candidates in 469 primaries have embraced the “big lie.”⁶

Concluding Thoughts

I return to the story of Leslie Hoffman (*see* note 4 above). When asked what policymakers and others could do address the threats, she calls on people to speak up and support those that are simply trying to do their jobs. The purveyors of disinformation, and the messengers of hate, are a minority, but they are loud and only a few dare to speak out against them. This regrettably is a feature of a broader landscape that also now includes school board meetings.

In June 2021, the Brennan Center, together with the Bipartisan Policy Center and the Kennedy School’s Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation [set out](#) a series of recommendations to address threats to election workers. In August, the Brennan Center posted a [report](#) that included recommendations for combating election-related disinformation. Also in August, testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee set out a list of action items that Congress should take up with urgency. Overhauling the Electoral Count Act is not enough. Protecting election workers and the administration of elections should be a bipartisan effort.

Finally, we need to ensure that election deniers and doubters lose at the ballot box due to overwhelming support for those running against them. Secretaries of state, attorneys general and governors that stand behind the rule of law and support democratic institutions and processes must prevail. As President Biden noted this evening in his Soul of the Nation [speech](#), “[f]or a long time, we’ve told ourselves that American democracy is guaranteed, but it’s not. We have to defend it, protect it, stand up for it – each and every one of us.”

* * *

Mark S. Bergman
7Pillars Global Insights, LLC
Washington, D.C.
September 1, 2022

⁶ A July 18 [analysis](#) on FiveThirtyEight concluded that half the GOP nominees for Senate, House, governor, attorney general and secretary of state (531 out of a total of 1,148) had at least “dabbled” in denying the election” (346 explicitly denied the election’s legitimacy and 185 questioned it). This was assumed to be an undercount, as a significant number had not articulated a position either way.