



Misinformation & Misled: Uncertainty, Mistrust and Disinformation Frustrate Voters

Introduction

Disinformation in politics is as old as politics itself. However, its rapacious spread is aided by seismic shifts in how Americans access information in an era of social media. As seen in 2020, [disinformation campaigns](#) can undermine faith in the U.S. elections process, and sow skepticism that can span years. And while most major social media companies have pledged to counter disinformation on their platforms, their efforts may prove grossly inadequate as the 2022 midterm elections loom just weeks away.

The New York Times called TikTok “[a primary incubator](#)” of election disinformation due to its short video format, murky algorithm and huge American user base. Voting rights groups say Twitter’s response to election misinformation on its platform

is [insufficient](#). And Facebook’s parent, Meta, may have actually [scaled back](#) its election safeguards as midterms draw near.

Given the stakes and attention surrounding the 2022 midterm elections, the Reboot Foundation wanted to learn more about American’s encounters with election misinformation, and assess people’s confidence in their abilities to identify it and analyze it. Reboot also wanted to learn whether people thought misinformation was a serious problem.

Key Finding: Americans are poorly informed about elections

The survey started with a short quiz about election and voting facts. The average score was 66 percent– a test grade of D, barely passing.

| Only 14 percent of the survey takers scored a B or higher.

The quiz included questions like:

- A citizen's right to vote is guaranteed by the Constitution
- Do political ads have to be truthful?
- Elections for President and Congress are overseen by the Federal government which sets voting rules that all states must follow.

A person's knowledge about basic election facts was strongly linked to whether they had confidence in the electoral system, in their abilities to spot election misinformation, and whether they thought action needed to be taken to combat misinformation. Those who scored a grade of B or better on the quiz were almost twice as likely to express confidence "in the integrity of the U.S. electoral system overall." They were also twice as likely to feel confident in their abilities to spot election-related misinformation. These same people also saw election misinformation as a serious problem.

Overall, faith in America's election system is vulnerable to manipulation, with 32 percent saying they are not confident in the integrity of our elections. And when it came to identifying election misinformation, only 28 percent of survey takers were "very confident" in their abilities.

Key Finding: Although "critical thinking" is a top tool for assessing misinformation, the results are unsettling

Reboot asked participants what steps they typically take to assess or debunk election claims or misinformation. At 64 percent, the most popular answer was: "I use my critical thinking skills to make my own assessment."

Ultimately, that's what all voters must do: gather information, weigh their findings, and make a reasoned assessment on what it all means. However, when people fail to use true critical thinking techniques, they can be left making decisions and assessments that they believe to be unbiased and logical but are, in fact, fundamentally flawed.

With the numerous investigations, audits and court hearings regarding the 2020 election, a true critical thinker would examine that evidence and reasonably conclude that the election results were entirely credible: that Joe Biden defeated Donald Trump by more than 3 million popular votes, by nearly 75 Electoral College votes, and that he is the undisputed 46th president of the United States.

But that's not what the results of the Reboot survey showed. In fact, the self-described critical thinkers were less confident in the integrity of elections than other respondents, and they reported having a more difficult time determining the truth about the 2020 election.

| Self-described critical thinkers were less confident in the integrity of elections than other respondents

These results are similar to another recent survey. In May of 2022, Reboot queried people on their [critical thinking skills and beliefs in conspiracy theories](#). That survey found that self-styled “critical thinkers” were 63 percent more likely to believe in a conspiracy theory than the survey’s other participants.

Why? It may be because, [as one research team put it](#), these people might be free thinkers, but they’re not critical ones. [People use the term “critical thinking”](#) as an “after-the-fact justification ... to convince others – or themselves – that their opinions or behaviors are sound.” In other words, people use the phrase “I’m a critical thinker” to defend their opinions regardless of how well-researched or logical they are.

When it comes to social media, the critical thinkers also stood out from the rest of the survey takers. While 67 percent of the people surveyed agreed that “social media companies have a responsibility to combat election misinformation,” the critical thinkers disagreed. They were 160 percent more likely to say that social media companies do not bear that responsibility.



Key Finding: Engaging with local government boosts people's confidence in elections and makes them more aware of election misinformation

The survey asked people to identify the ways in which they've engaged with their local governments over the last year. Possible answers included:

- Attending a public or government meeting or hearing
- Making a donation to a political candidate, PAC or other election fund
- Contacting elected officials to discuss an issue of importance
- Voting

In all, there were 11 options for respondents to choose from, and they could select as many as were applicable. The results showed that people who are more engaged with their local government reported higher confidence in how elections are run. They were also 67 percent more likely to say they had encountered election misinformation than those with low engagement.

People who are more engaged with their local government reported higher confidence in how elections are run

Why? It could be that engagement helps people better understand government systems and processes. It could be that when people come to know government officials, their overall trust in government increases. Or, it could be that highly engaged people are simply better informed on issues like elections, and they use that knowledge accordingly.

On the flip side, respondents who reported having little to no engagement with their local government were among those with the least confidence in their ability to spot misinformation, and they don't see election misinformation as a threat to democracy.

However, some notable findings came out of the data when analyzing it through the lens of where engaged citizens live. According to the Reboot survey, city dwellers were far more likely to be engaged in their local politics than are people who live in rural communities or in the suburbs, and it wasn't even particularly close.

Compared to people who identified themselves as living in a rural community, city dwellers were twice as likely to demonstrate engagement in their local government and politics. And compared to suburban residents, urbanites were four times more likely to be engaged in their local governments.

A key component of critical thinking is the ability to engage with and understand the viewpoints of others. One of the options available to survey respondents in answering the question about their engagement with local government was whether they had, in the past year, "worked or cooperated with others to try to solve a problem affecting your city or neighborhood."

While only 15 percent of respondents answered affirmatively, those that did were twice as confident in their abilities to spot election misinformation than those who had not engaged in community problem-solving. Did this particular kind of community engagement broaden respondents' perspectives, open them to new ideas, and improve the critical thinking skills necessary to identify misinformation? The results of this survey don't answer those questions, but they are worthy of additional study.



Key Finding: Many people rely on unofficial sources to help them make sense of election information

When people encounter information that they suspect might be untrue or intentionally misleading, what steps do they take to verify it?

As mentioned earlier, people primarily rely on their “critical thinking” skills to “make [their] own assessment.” But they also check the information against what is reported in mainstream news outlets (52 percent), and about half of the survey participants said they also use “fact-checking” websites like [Politi-fact](#) and [Verify](#).

But large numbers of people also reported turning to informal and less authoritative sources of information for help. More than 40 percent said they use “independent news outlets, like podcasts, YouTubers, or newsletters and websites that are not affiliated with a mainstream news organization.” Sixteen percent said they ask friends and family members, while 13 percent said they ask their social media friends and networks for help.

And a significant number of people have given up trying to make sense of the information coming at them: Nearly 12 percent report that they “rarely try to determine the truth of political information I see.”

Conclusion

The crisis of misinformation is really a crisis of media literacy and critical thinking among a huge swath of the American population. It's why people need a reliable and accessible complement of tools to identify and mitigate misinformation they encounter.

Efforts like “pre-bunking” – preemptively showing people videos about misinformation tactics – must also be coupled with stronger civics education so that voters have a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how elections are run in their communities. Schools must take media literacy and critical thinking education seriously and incorporate teaching these skills across the curriculum. This is actually a popular idea – 70 percent of this survey's respondents agreed that “Schools have a responsibility to teach students how to detect and avoid election misinformation.”

Government has a role to play as well. Policymakers may have to use their imaginations to explore solutions in an industry that is constantly evolving and expanding. Requiring platforms to share data with researchers so that risks and trends can be assessed and evaluated rigorously and independently would be a great start. So too would laws requiring transparency around platforms' algorithms. There is good evidence that these algorithms can erode users' mental health and accelerate extremism by elevating hurtful speech and disinformation. At the very least, the public must be shown how these algorithms work and given the option to opt out.

Congress needs to reform Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act that gives platforms like Facebook legal immunity for user-generated content. If a social media platform manipulates, sells or otherwise generates revenue from the content it hosts, then it should be held responsible for that content, in some way. The government regulates activities that it deems addictive or dangerous, like smoking, gambling and drinking. It might be time to consider social media in that group. But while policy solutions like these are important to develop and consider, they will not be a panacea on their own.

When left unanswered, misinformation and disinformation campaigns can distort public discourse and disrupt the democratic process. But we do know how to better address this challenge – and in knowing better we have the potential to do better, provided we have the will.

Methodology

This report was based on the results of a survey of more than 350 people between the ages of 18 and 74. The survey was administered in September 2022, and asked participants a series of questions about elections, their encounters with misinformation, and how they go about assessing it.

The survey was conducted through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), and participants were recruited using methods that ensure high data quality. Additionally, participants were compensated at a fair rate equal to at least \$12 an hour. The survey has a margin of error of +/-5 percent.

The data analysis of the survey results was conducted by Tessa Benson-Greenwald, a postdoctoral associate with the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh.