

Combatting misinformation and building trust in elections: Assessing election official communications during the 2020 election cycle

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Project summary

This project aims to measure and assess the information ecosystem cultivated by state and local election officials (EOs) to address misinformation and build trust during the 2022 midterm elections. In partnership with the Algorithmic Transparency Institute (ATI.io), we collect and code data on EOs' online communications from their official websites, **Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter** accounts. We ground our assessment to the \#TrustedInfo2022 messaging campaign promoted by the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) as a baseline for communications. We leverage this unique dataset to construct indicators that capture EO efforts to build trust and combat misinformation, which we label as: **trust-building** and **combating misinformation – direct / indirect & proactive / reactive**. We will merge these data with the Survey of the Performance of American Elections to assess the relationship between EO communications on misinformation and trust in elections, and voter confidence in the 2022 midterms. A database of these communications will be made available for evidence-based development of voter education policy, program evaluation, and academic research.

Project methodology:

In partnership with the Algorithmic Transparency Institute (ATI.io)¹, we collected 50,000 organic social media posts from 123 state EO social media accounts and over 1,000 local EO social media accounts between September 10 and November 30, 2022.²

We used ATI.io's investigation and research platform Junkipedia, which is designed to monitor, track, and analyze misinformation on social media.³ The platform allows us to access historical content for up to 12 months since an account is uploaded, and any new content that is posted by officials, and set up topic-specific data pulls that allow the construction of separate datasets based on specific topics and terms.

We employ quantitative manual content analysis with the individual post the unit of analysis. Coding was conducted on a custom-built integration to Junkipedia.⁴ For each social media post, we used a combination of methods to extract content, including text, image, and video. We coded each post for the presence of any of 30 variables, which we aggregated into a hierarchy of seven thematic categories (Table 1). We developed our taxonomy deductively based on our previous hand-coded content from the 2020 election cycle. During this process, we refined the codebook deductively and inductively through pre-testing with randomly selected samples of posts from narrow time periods during the 2022 cycle and through five rounds of coder training.

¹ The Algorithmic Transparency Institute: <https://ati.io/about/>.

² "Organic" posts do not include ads, which are paid and may be subject to content rules and disclosures.

³ Junkipedia: <https://www.junkipedia.org/about>.

⁴ We replicate the methodological approach followed by other researchers who have used the platform for research purposes. See for example Surpan and ATI.io's working paper, "Three Shades of Green(washing): Content Analysis of Social Media Discourse by European Oil, Car and Airline Companies," available at: <https://ati.io/three-shades-of-greenwashing/>.

Table 1. Taxonomy Table, EOs social media communications⁵

Tier 1	Tier 2
Type	In the News; Election deadline; How to; Voter outreach; Reply / Thread; Post share / Retweet
Videos	Human Imagery; Non-human imagery; Videos
Access	Multilingual
Trust-building	#TrustedInfo2022
Alert	Misinformation
Signaling	Keywords (trust; safe; accurate, etc.); Hashtag/s
Theme	Election procedures (ongoing; pre-election, post-election) Voter registration; Voting Methods Election ready; Motivational/GOTV

Top-line findings⁶:

- **Volume of social media activity by state EOs across platforms:**
 - Facebook is by far the most popular platform, followed by Twitter.
 - Volume of posts vary dramatically, with state accounts posting more than twice/day and some posting infrequently.
- **Building Trust in Elections:**
 - **#TrustedInfo2022 Campaign (NASS)**
 - A handful of states pledged to incorporate the initiative.
 - Montana is the only state that made a formal pledge but has no social media presence.
 - Spotty usage by states who pledged, with Arizona the most consistent messenger: 50% of all Facebook posts included the hashtag, 53% on Instagram and 30% on Twitter.
 - The second most consistent usage was from the New Jersey Secretary of State's Instagram account (66% of all posts).
 - The third was Delaware Secretary of State's Facebook account, with 44% of all posts including the hashtag.
 - **Trust-building messages**
 - Variation in how often these messages were *repeated* across states.
 - Iowa and Michigan the most consistent, followed by Washington, Arizona, and West Virginia.
 - Variation in state messaging campaigns beyond #TrustedInfo2022.
 - #YourVoteCountsNC in North Carolina.
 - #TrustedSources in Colorado.
 - #GeorgiaLeads in Georgia.
 - “Elections 101” voter education campaign in Wisconsin.
 - Variation in local election official activity in sharing these messages consistently.

⁵ Taxonomy table is condensed due to space limitations.

⁶ Coding is still ongoing.