



INDIANA UNIVERSITY

OBSERVATORY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Tracking public opinion about unsupported narratives in the 2020 Presidential election

Observatory on
Social Media (OSoMe)
Indiana University-Bloomington

Tracking public opinion about unsupported narratives in the 2020 Presidential election

Final Summary

Indiana University's Observatory on Social Media (OSoMe) tracked widely circulated but factually unsupported narratives throughout the 2020 presidential election season, with the goal to assess the public's awareness of them, the extent to which they are believed, and whether a person's political leanings, media use, and personal traits are related to vulnerability to these narratives.

This is a summary report on all six waves of data, collected from August through November 2020. The results from individual waves can be found at <http://osome.iu.edu/research/survey/>.

Narratives

In each wave, we showed respondents five screenshots from social media that represented trending but factually unsupported narratives, and asked them if they had encountered the narratives, or similar ones, on social media or the internet. In addition to asking whether respondents had encountered each narrative, we also asked to what extent they believed the narratives.

In Waves 1-6, we tracked two narratives:

Joe Biden is not mentally fit to be President. ¹

Mail-in ballots cause election fraud. ²

Other narratives were tracked individually in each wave.

Wave 1

Dr. Anthony Fauci funded a lab in Wuhan to develop the coronavirus. ³

Joe Biden's family has illegal business ties with China. ⁴

Kamala Harris is not a natural-born US citizen ⁵

Wave 2

President Trump went to the hospital last year because he suffered a stroke. ⁶

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) manipulated the death toll of COVID-19 to exaggerate the impact on Americans. ⁷

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/05/politics/joe-biden-donald-trump-jr-cognitive-test-fact-check/index.html>

<https://www.factcheck.org/2020/08/biden-video-deceptively-edited-to-make-him-appear-lost/>

² <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/08/trump-campaign-exaggerates-potential-for-mail-in-voting-fraud-after-election/>

<https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/apr/09/donald-trump/donald-trumps-dubious-claim-thousands-are-conspiri/>

Wave 3

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation sponsored a vaccine that causes polio in Africa. ⁸

QAnon is correct that pedophiles and cannibals currently serve in US government positions. ⁹

Face masks increase the risk of spreading and contracting COVID-19. ¹⁰

Wave 4

The FBI spied on Trump and his campaign. ¹¹

If re-elected, Trump plans to terminate Social Security and Medicare. ¹²

President Trump faked COVID-19 to win support before the election. ¹³

Wave 5

Hunter Biden's laptop reveals connections to child pornography. ¹⁴

The book/TV series "The Handmaid's Tale" is based on the secretive religious group People of Praise, to which the recently confirmed Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett belonged. ¹⁵

The proposed Biden/Harris insurance reform will eliminate private health insurance plans for over 180 million people. ¹⁶

Wave 6

Vote-counting machines overcounted the Biden votes. ¹⁷

News media called the election for Biden too soon, and had to take it back. ¹⁸

The number of people who voted is higher than the number of eligible voters. ¹⁹

³ <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/07/old-photo-shows-obama-fauci-at-u-s-facility-not-wuhan-lab/>

<https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/apr/30/blog-posting/obama-administration-did-not-provide-38-million-wu/>

⁴ <https://www.politifact.com/article/2020/may/22/hunter-biden-and-china-sorting-through-murky-busin/>

⁵ <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/08/kamala-harris-is-eligible-to-serve-as-president/>

⁶ <https://www.logically.ai/factchecks/library/77bff320>

⁷ <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/09/cdc-did-not-admit-only-6-of-recorded-deaths-from-covid-19/>

⁸ <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/apr/23/facebook-posts/anti-vaxxers-spread-conspiracy-about-bill-gates-an/>

⁹ <https://www.politifact.com/article/2020/aug/12/qanon-pizzagate-conspiracy-theories-co-opt-savethe/>

¹⁰ <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/07/video-misrepresents-the-science-behind-face-masks/>

¹¹ <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/aug/20/donald-trump/donald-trump-repeats-false-claim-obama-spied-his-c/>

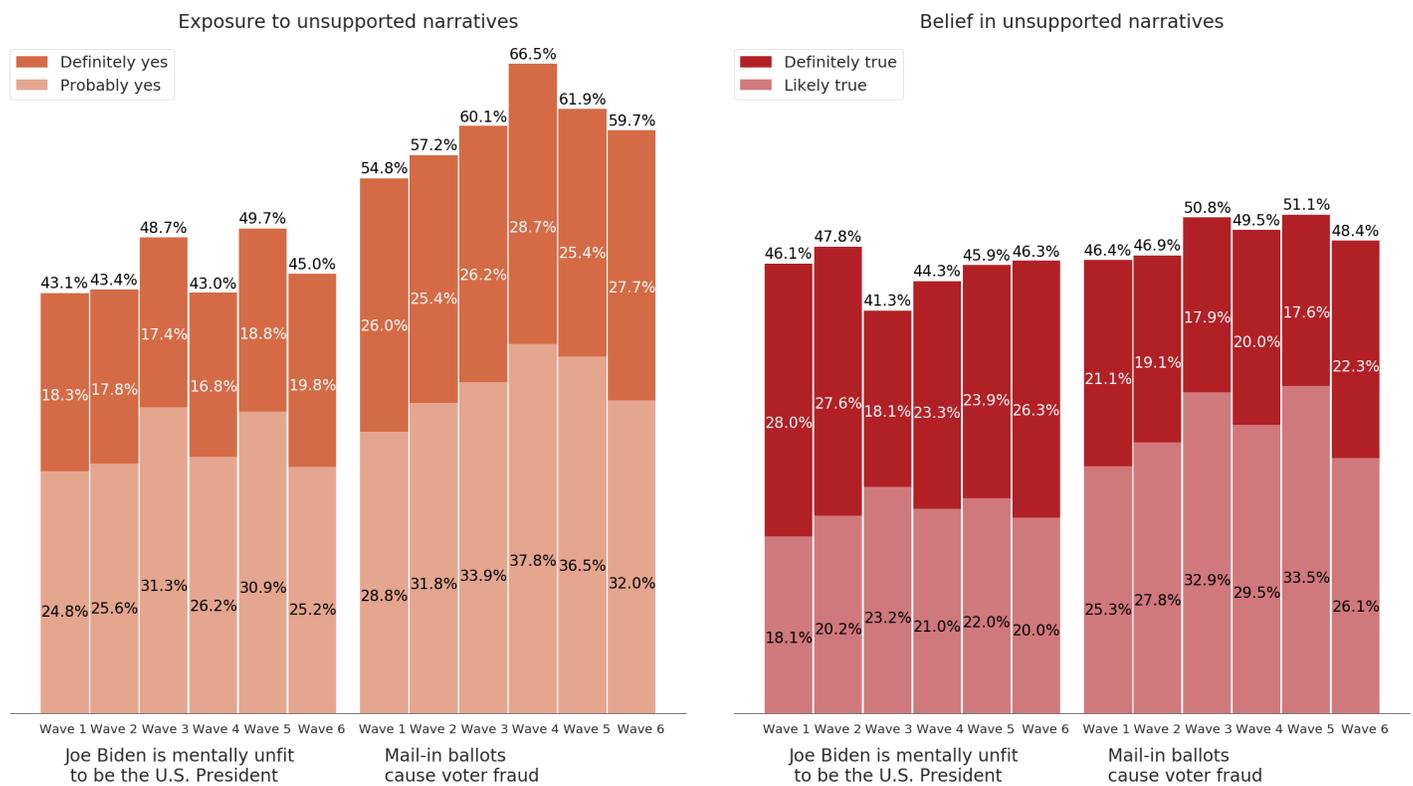
¹² <https://www.poynter.org/tfcn/2020/fact-check-does-the-president-want-to-defund-social-security/>

¹³ www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/10/03/fact-check-false-claim-trumps-covid-19-test-result-con/5894945002/

Results

Figure 1 shows results for the two narratives (Biden’s cognitive ability and mail-in voting) that were tracked across all waves of data collection. The Biden narrative fluctuated somewhat in terms of recognition (ranging from 43% to 49.7%) while recognition of the mail-in ballot fraud narrative peaked in Wave 4 (at 66.5%) but then decreased to 59.7% in the final post-election wave. Both narratives showed stability in terms of how many people believe them, with an average of 45.3% for the Biden narrative and 48.9% for the mail-in ballot story. Most of the variance across waves was within the margin of error, indicating stability in respondent beliefs in the narratives.

Figure 1 Responses to unsupported narratives tracked across Waves 1 - 6



¹⁴ www.poynter.org/fact-checking/media-literacy/2020/is-the-new-york-post-story-about-hunter-bidens-laptop-legit-heres-how-to-form-your-own-judgment/

¹⁵ www.vox.com/culture/21453103/amy-coney-barrett-handmaids-tale-supreme-court

¹⁶ www.newsweek.com/fact-check-does-joe-biden-want-eliminate-private-health-insurance-1541757

¹⁷ www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/11/14/fact-check-dominion-voting-machines-didnt-delete-switch-votes/6282157002/

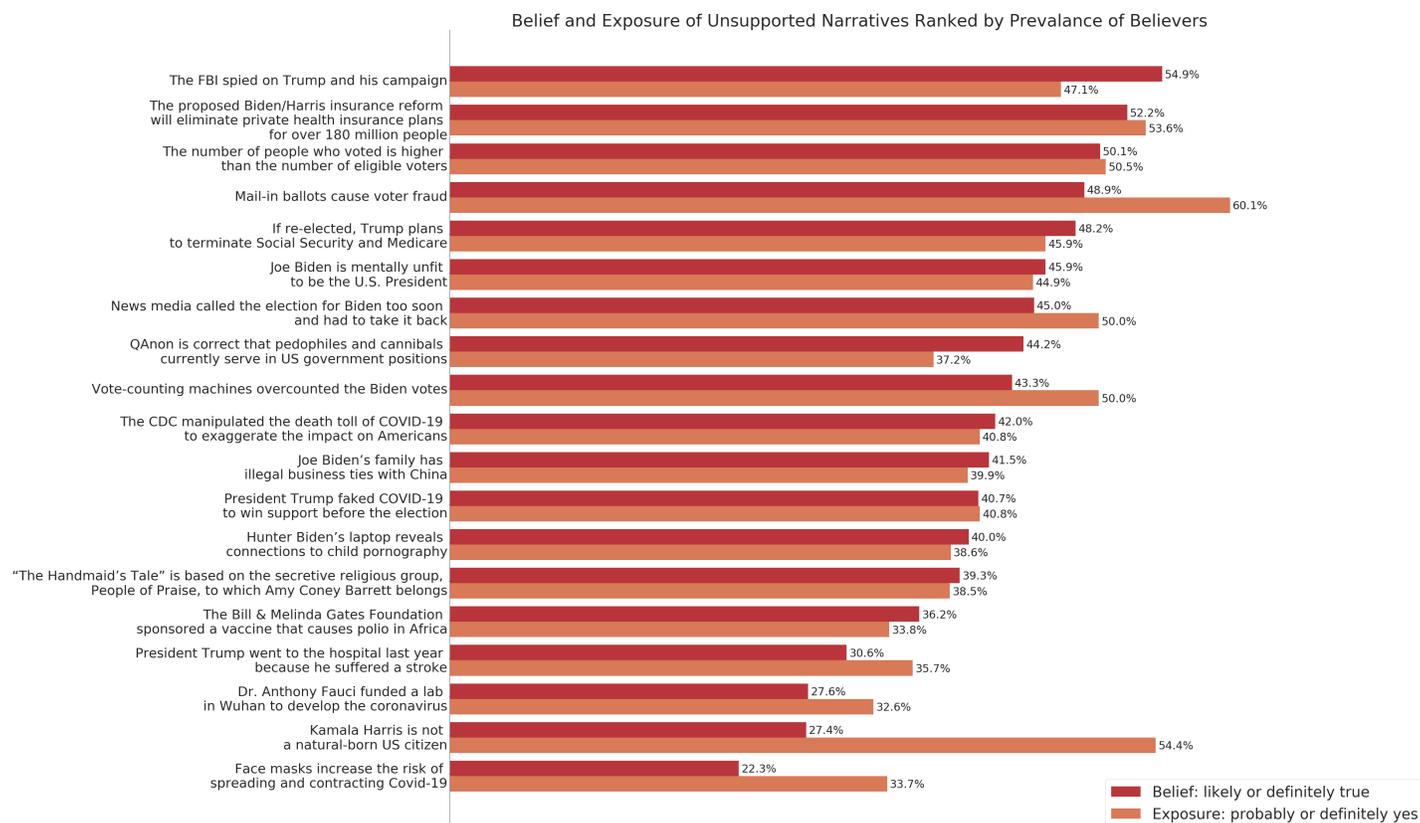
¹⁸ www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/11/12/fact-check-cnn-never-made-retracted-arizona-call-joe-biden/6255347002/

www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2020/the-ap-and-fox-news-say-biden-has-carried-arizona-why-do-other-networks-say-its-too-close-to-call/

¹⁹ www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/11/08/fact-check-post-argues-states-have-more-votes-than-voters/6191399002/

Figure 2 is a summary of all the narratives that were tracked in any of the six waves, ranked by reported belief. The most believed narrative was that the FBI “spied” on Donald Trump’s campaign (54.9%). The least believed narrative was that face masks increase the risk of contracting COVID-19. For most narratives, exposure and belief were generally related, as shown in the figure. For a few, exposure to the story was high but belief much lower (Kamala Harris’ citizenship, for instance). Measured across all 19 narratives, average exposure was 43.9% (SD = 7.8%) and average belief was 40.9% (8.7%).

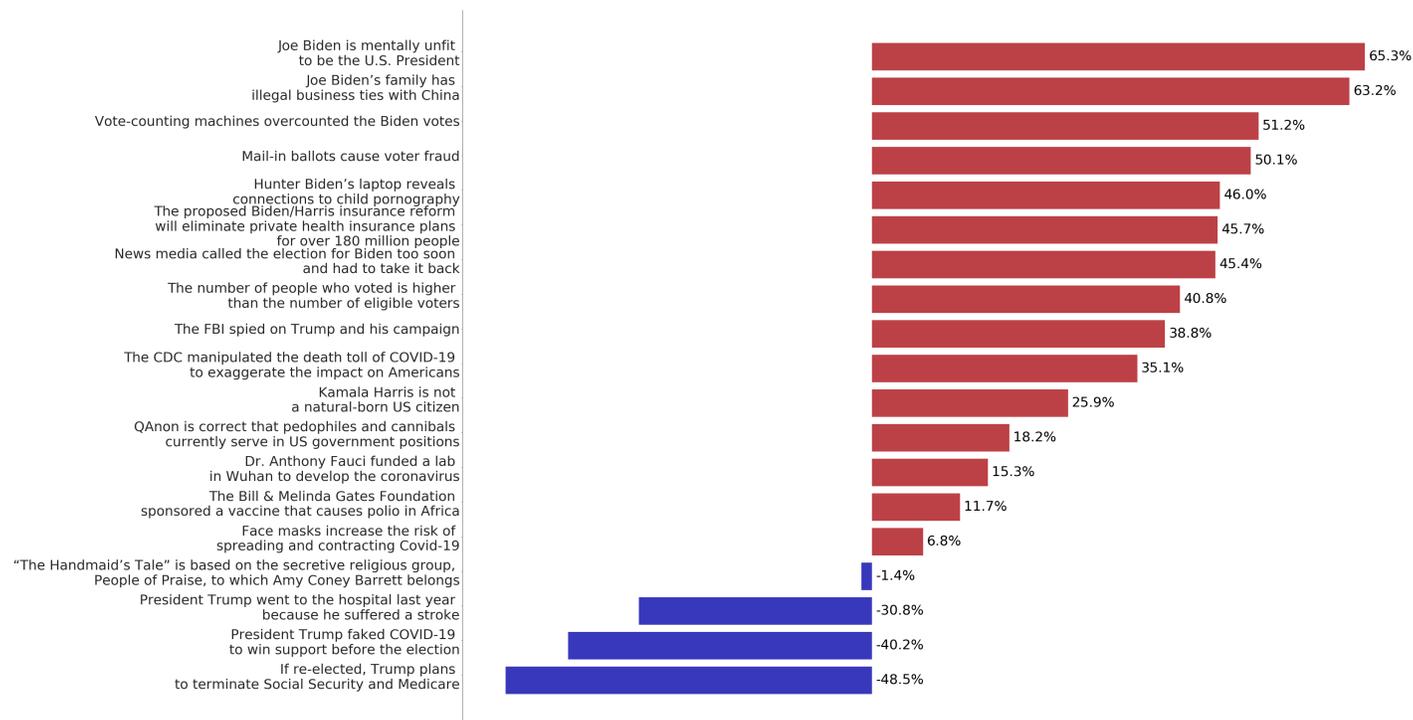
Figure 2 Responses to unsupported narratives



Comparison by voting preference

Figure 3 shows how narratives broke down by political preference. Most of the narratives that we tested were more believed by voters at the rightward end of the political spectrum, and many of them originated from right-wing sources. However, there were also narratives that found audiences on the left, such as the idea that Trump faked COVID-19, or that he would terminate Social Security if elected. The two most polarizing narratives had to do with Joe Biden: his fitness for office and alleged ties to China.

Figure 3 *Belief in the truth-value of narratives by candidate preference*



Methodology

This is a summary of a six-part series of reports tracking the diffusion of misinformation in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Data were collected from an online panel of American adults, recruited by Qualtrics. Data were collected from August through November 2020. The sample size was 4,190 (margin of error $\approx 2\%$). Approximately 51% (50.5%) of participants were female. The average age was 46.56 (SD = 17.73), with a range of 18 to 98. The sample was 61.1% white, 13% Black, and 9.5% Latina/Latino.

OSoMe

The Observatory on Social Media is a joint project of the Network Science Institute (IUNI), the Center for Complex Networks and Systems Research (CNetS) at the Luddy School of Informatics, Computing, and Engineering, and the Media School at Indiana University.