



INDIANA UNIVERSITY

OBSERVATORY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Tracking public opinion about unsupported narratives in the 2020 Presidential election

Wave 4, 15 - 24 Oct. 2020

Observatory on
Social Media (OSoMe)
Indiana University-Bloomington

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Indiana University's Observatory on Social Media (OSoMe) continues to track widely circulated but 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 report on our fourth wave of data, collected from October 15-24, 2020. The reports from Waves 1, 2 and 3 can be found at <http://osome.iu.edu/research/survey>.

Narratives

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 Wave 4, we tracked two narratives that were also assessed in Waves 1, 2 and 3. These were:

Joe Biden is not mentally fit to be President. ¹

Mail-in ballots cause election fraud. ²

We also added three additional narratives in Wave 4:

The FBI spied on Trump and his campaign. ³

If re-elected, Trump plans to terminate Social Security and Medicare. ⁴

President Trump faked COVID -19 to win support before the election. ⁵

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/>

³ <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/aug/20/donald-trump/donald-trump-repeats-false-claim-obama-spied-his-c/>

⁴ <https://www.poynter.org/tfcn/2020/fact-check-does-the-president-want-to-defund-social-security/>

⁵ <https://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 Waves 1 through 4. Both narratives continue to be widely seen. The Biden narrative has fluctuated somewhat in terms of recognition (ranging from 39% to 48%) while the mail-in ballot narrative has increased (from 55% in the first wave to 68% in the fourth). Both narratives have shown stability in terms of how many people believe them, with an average of 44% for the Biden narrative and 47% for the mail-in ballot story. Most of the variance across waves is within the margin of error.

Figure 1 Responses to unsupported narratives tracked across Wave 1, 2, 3 and 4

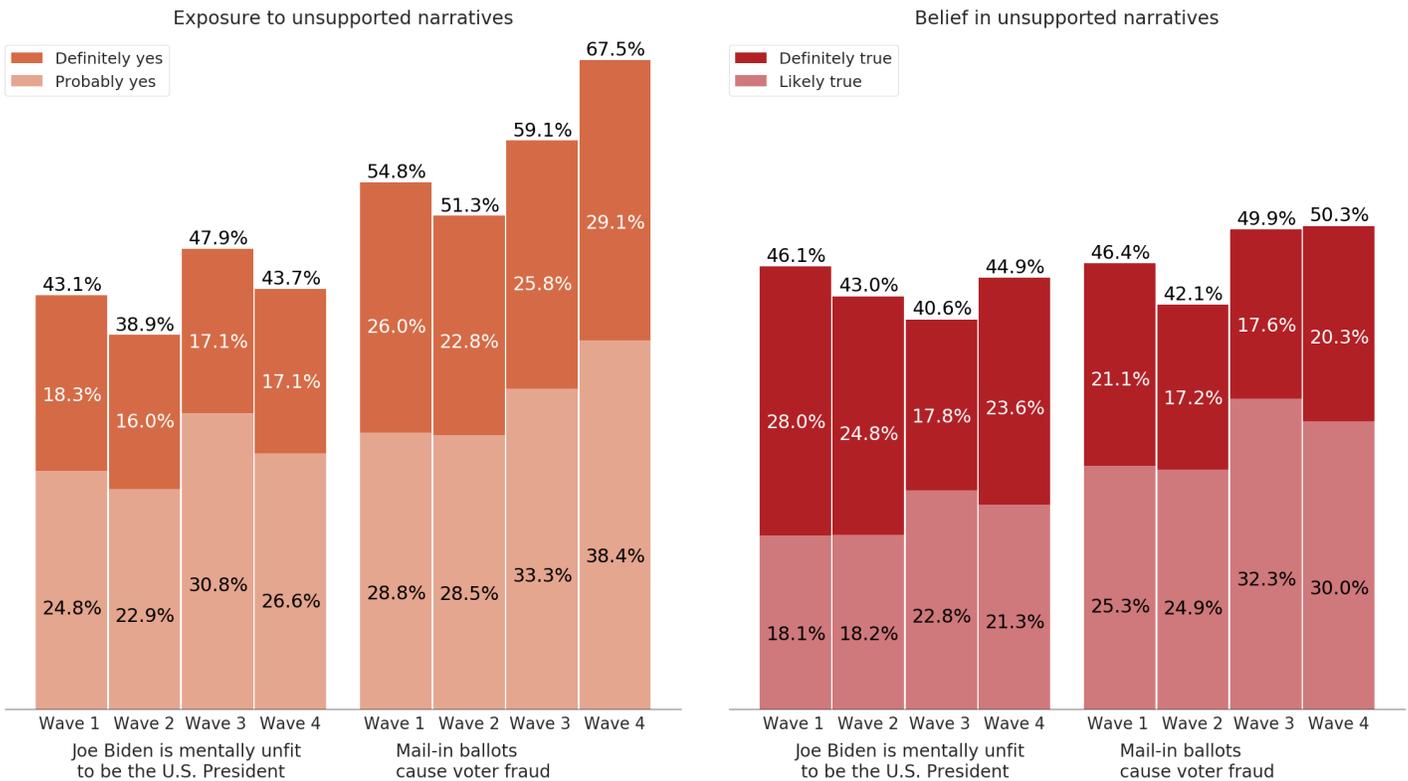
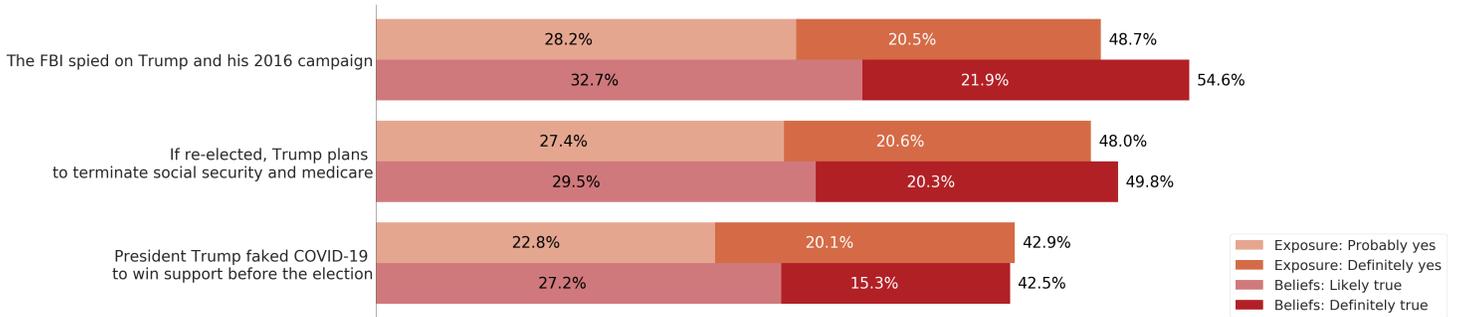


Figure 2 shows results for narratives included only in Wave 4. There were high levels of awareness about all three narratives, with between 42 to 49% of participants saying they had encountered them. Belief in their truth value varied. About 55% thought that the FBI might have spied on the Trump campaign; it is the most-believed unsupported narrative in our 4 waves of data collection. About 50% thought that Trump might defund Social Security and Medicare, and around 42% believed that Trump might have faked his reported COVID-19 infection to win electoral support. (See results about other narratives from Waves 1 through 3 in our earlier [reports](#).)

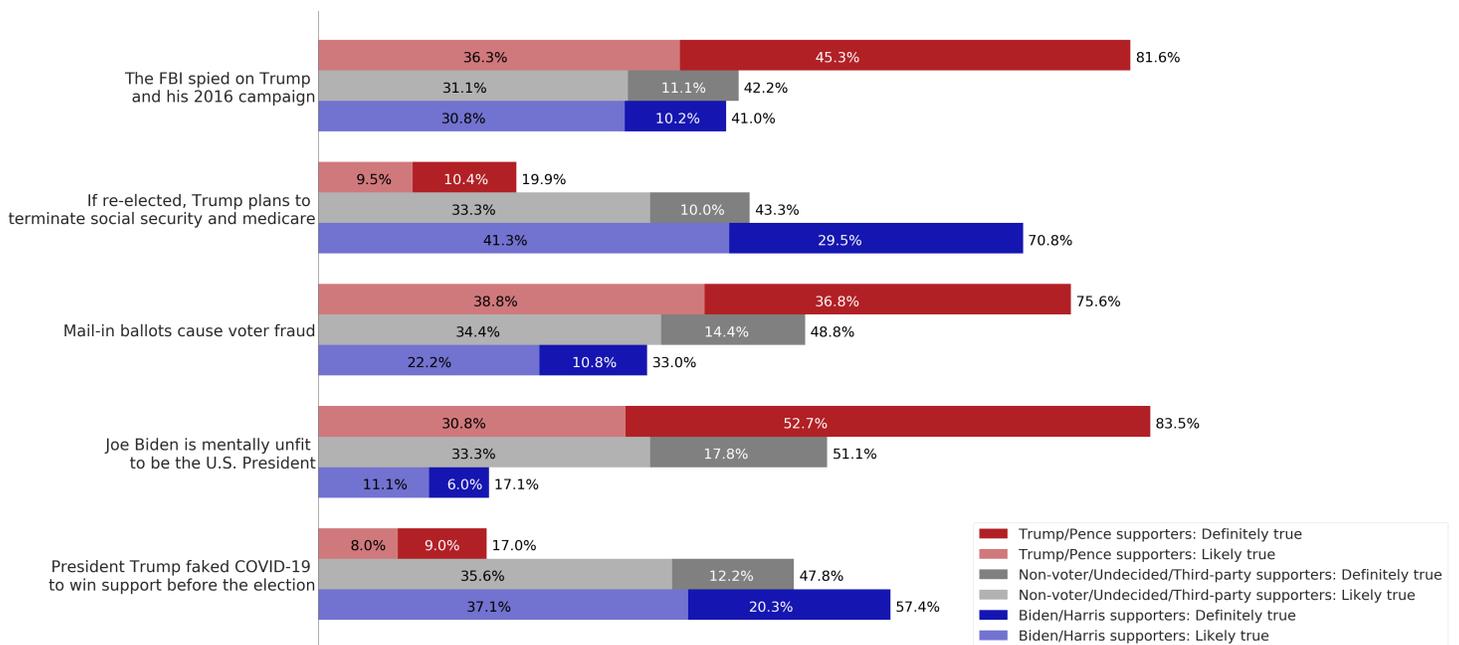
Figure 2 Responses to unsupported narratives in Wave 4



Comparison by voting preference

A number of studies have shown that widely diffused but unsupported narratives appear to originate more often from right- than left-of-center sources (see examples in Grinberg et al, 2019 ⁶, Luceri et al., 2019 ⁷, and Lewis & Marwick, 2017 ⁸). We included two unsupported narratives that emerged from left-leaning sources on the social web in this wave for balance: stories about Trump faking his COVID-19 infection and Trump’s supposed defunding of Social Security if re-elected. The results show that Biden supporters were more likely to believe narratives that align with their political orientation. The other three narratives had more adherence among Trump supporters. Stories about Biden’s cognitive state and alleged FBI spying on Trump were particularly strong among these individuals, as was the mail-in ballot narrative. Independents’ levels of belief consistently occupy a middle ground between Trump and Biden supporters, regardless of the narrative’s political content.

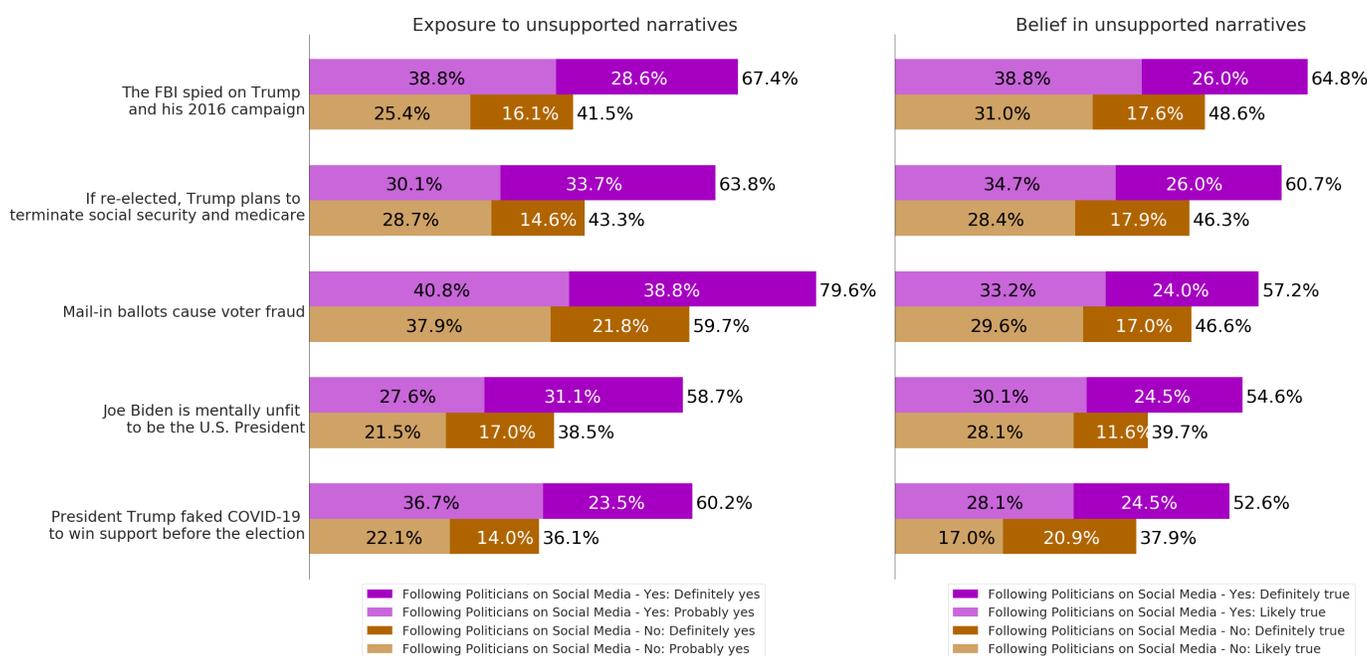
Figure 3 Belief in the truth-value of narratives by candidate preference



Unsupported narratives and following politicians on social media

Existing research suggests that politicians are among the most prolific spreaders of dis/misinformation on social media.⁹ We found support for this idea and its possible impact on the beliefs of citizens who participated in our wave 4 study. From **Figure 4** it is clear that participants who follow politicians on social media were more likely to be aware of unsupported narratives than participants who do not follow politicians, by 20 to 26 percentage points. Those who follow politicians were also more likely to believe the five misleading stories included in our study. Followers were more likely than non-followers to believe the narratives, by 10 to 16 percentage points. These findings emerged for all narratives, regardless of their political leaning. Following politicians on social media is associated with higher rates of exposure and vulnerability to misinformation.

Figure 4 Exposure to and belief in unsupported narratives: followers vs. non-followers of politicians on social media



⁶ Grinberg, N., Joseph, K., Friedland, L., Swire-Thompson, B., & Lazer, D. (2019). Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election. *Science*, 363(6425), 374-378.

⁷ Luceri, L., Deb, A., Badawy, A., & Ferrara, E. (2019, May). Red bots do it better: Comparative analysis of social bot partisan behavior. In *Companion Proceedings of the 2019 World Wide Web Conference* (pp. 1007-1012).

⁸ Lewis, R., & Marwick, A. (2017). Taking the red pill: Ideological motivations for spreading online disinformation. Understanding and addressing the disinformation system. Retrieved from <https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-Disinformation-Ecosystem-20180207-v2.pdf>.

⁹ <https://theconversation.com/the-real-news-on-fake-news-politicians-use-it-to-discredit-media-and-journalists-need-to-fight-back-123907>

Methodology

This is the fourth of a six-part series of reports tracking the diffusion of misinformation in the 2020 U.S. presidential election campaign period. Data in this wave were collected from an online panel of American adults, recruited by Qualtrics. Data were collected from 15-24 October, 2020. The sample size was 606 (margin of error \approx 4%). Forty seven percent of participants were female. The average age was 46.1 (SD = 18.8), with a range of 18 to 98. The sample was 57.8% white, 13.9% Black, and 11.1% 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.

For more information:

http://osome.iuni.iu.edu/research/survey/files/W4_data_for_public.pdf