Tracking public opinion about unsupported narratives in the 2020 Presidential election

Wave 6, 18 - 27 Nov. 2020

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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 sixth wave of data, collected from Nov. 18 to 27, 2020. The first five waves were pre-election surveys; this last study reports a final wave of data collection after Election Day, though prior to the certification of any results. The reports from Waves 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 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 Wave 6, we continued to track two narratives that were also assessed in the five previous waves:

> 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 6:

> Vote-counting machines overcounted the Biden votes. [3]
> News media called the election for Biden too soon, and had to take it back.[4]
> The number of people who voted is higher than the number of eligible voters.[5]

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[1] https://www.cnn.com/202 0/08/05/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.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/11/14/fact-check-dominion-voting-machines-didnt-delete-switch-votes/6282157002/

[4] https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/11/12/fact-check-cnn-never-made-retracted-arizona-call-joe-biden/6255347002/

[5] https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/11/08/fact-check-post-argues-states-have-more-votes-than-voters/6191399002/

Results

Figure 1 shows results for the two narratives (Biden's cognitive ability and mail-in voting) that were tracked across all previous waves of data collection. Respondents continued to report awareness of the narratives. 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.

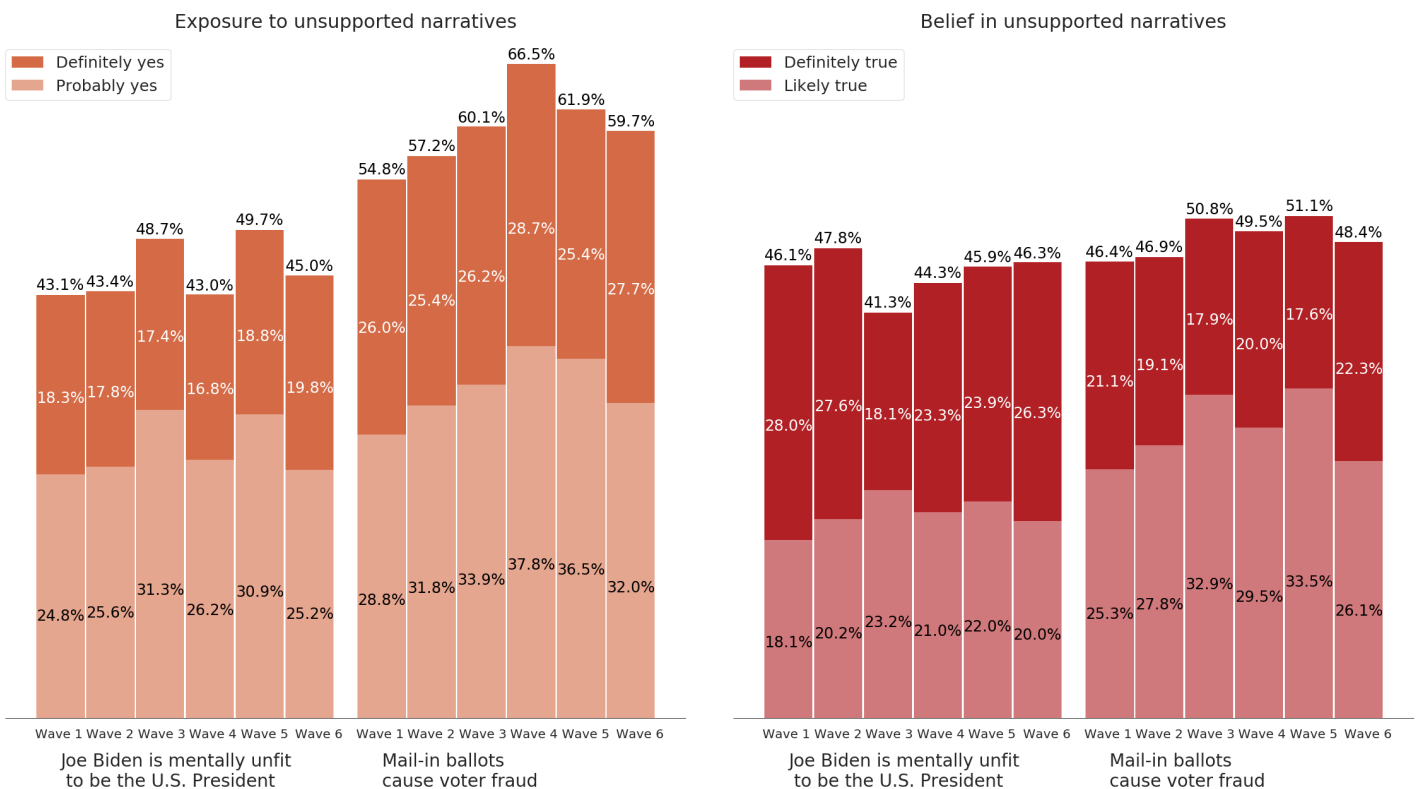**Figure 1** *Responses to unsupported narratives tracked across Waves 1 - 6*

Figure 2 shows results for three narratives included only in Wave 6. There were high levels of awareness of these narratives, with about 50% of participants saying they had encountered them on the social web. Belief in their truth value varied. About 50% believed that more voters voted than were eligible; 44.9% thought that news media had called the election too soon; and 43.3% believed that vote-counting machines had been biased in favor of Biden. Results about other narratives included in Waves 1 through 5 are available in other reports.

**Figure 2** *Responses to unsupported narratives in Wave 6*
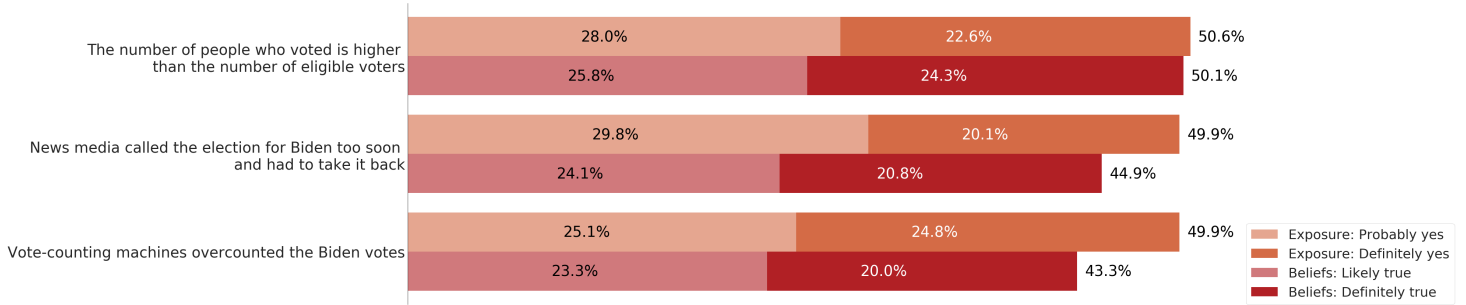
Comparison by voting preference

Figure 3 shows how narratives broke down by political preference. During the Wave 6 data collection, a variety of unsupported narratives circulated to call the results of the election into question. From Figure 3 it is clear that these unsupported narratives were all more frequently believed by Trump/Pence than Biden/Harris supporters.

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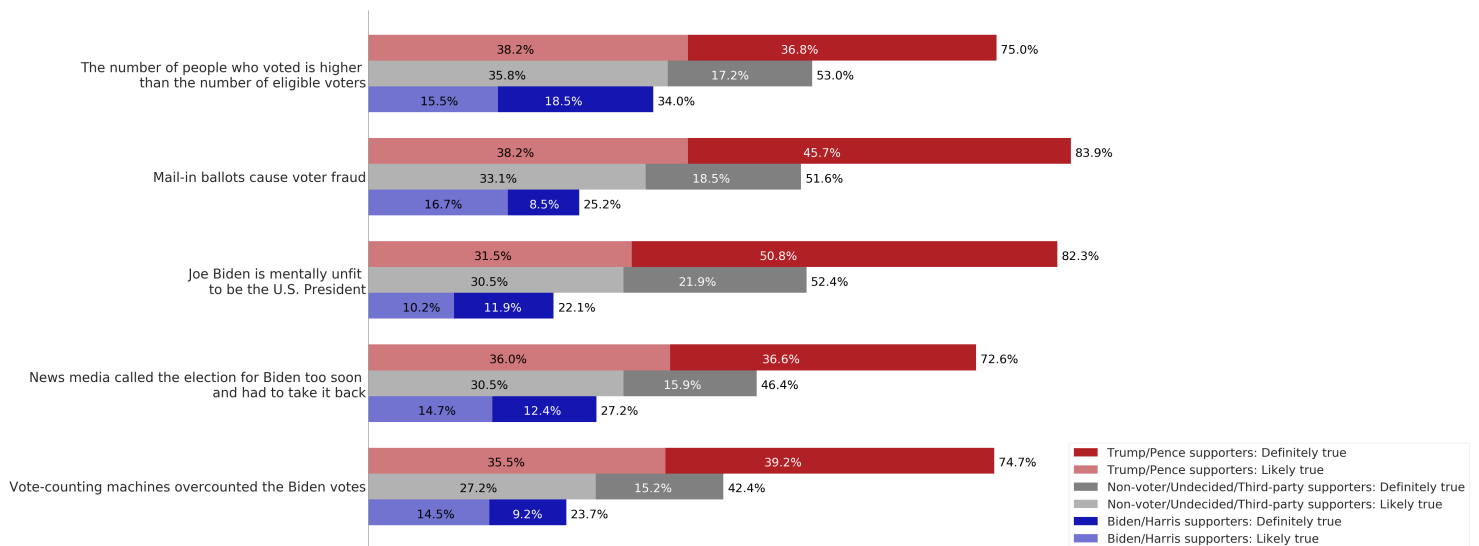
Unsupported narratives and age

In this survey we added questions tapping the democratic values of participants. One such statement was "Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government." Figure 4 shows the breakdown of exposure and belief by those who agreed and disagreed with this statement.

On the whole, those with higher trust in democracy were substantially less likely to express belief in the narratives – around 17.8 percentage points lower, on average, compared to those who expressed lower trust in democracy as a form of government. This discrepancy was greatest for the narrative about more people voting in the 2020 election than were eligible to vote, with a 23.4 percentage point difference between the two groups. Interestingly, differences in exposure to the narratives between the two groups of respondents were less consistent, and in one case (mail-in ballots cause voter fraud) respondents who tended to more highly value democracy tended to express slightly greater exposure to the narrative than those with lower trust in democracy. Despite high awareness of the narrative (60.5%), participants who value democracy seem less likely (42.6%) to believe that mail-in ballots caused vote fraud.

Figure 4 *Exposure to and belief in unsupported narratives among participants with different levels of trust in democracy*
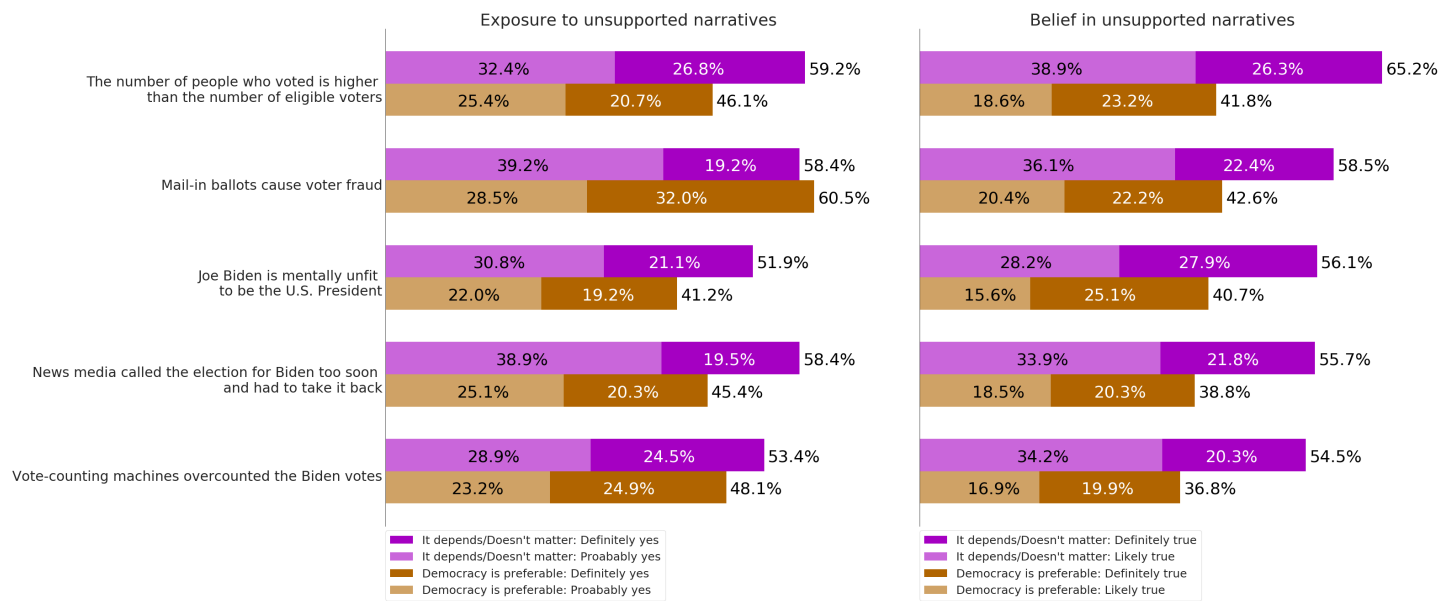
Methodology

This is the sixth of a six-part series of reports tracking the diffusion of misinformation in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Data in this wave were collected from an online panel of American adults, recruited by Qualtrics. Data were collected from 18 to 27 November 2020. The sample size was 1,118 (margin of error ≈ 3%). Fifty-one percent of participants were female. The average age was 46.03 (SD = 17.5), with a range of 18 to 98. The sample was 61.5% white, 13.3% Black, and 8.4% Latina/Latino.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.iu.edu/research/survey/files/W6_data_for_public.pdf