



# Mail-In Voter Fraud: Anatomy of a Disinformation Campaign

## Citation

Benkler, Yochai, Casey Tilton, Bruce Etling, Hal Roberts, Justin Clark, et al. Mail-In Voter Fraud: Anatomy of a Disinformation Campaign, 2020.

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# Mail-in Voter Fraud: Anatomy of a Disinformation Campaign

*The Disinformation Campaign Surrounding the Risk of Voter Fraud Associated with Mail-in Ballots Follows an Elite-Driven, Mass Media Model; Social Media Plays a Secondary Role in 2020.*

Yochai Benkler, Casey Tilton, Bruce Etling, Hal Roberts, Justin Clark, Robert Faris, Jonas Kaiser, and Carolyn Schmitt<sup>1</sup>

## SUMMARY AND OVERVIEW

The claim that election fraud is a major concern with mail-in ballots has become the central threat to election participation during the Covid-19 pandemic and to the legitimacy of the outcome of the election across the political spectrum. President Trump has repeatedly cited his concerns over voter fraud associated with mail-in ballots as a reason that he may not abide by an adverse electoral outcome. Polling conducted in September 2020 suggests that nearly half of Republicans agree with the president that election fraud is a major concern associated with expanded mail-in voting during the pandemic. Few Democrats share that belief. Despite the consensus among independent academic and journalistic investigations that voter fraud is rare and extremely unlikely to determine a national election, tens of millions of Americans believe the opposite. This is a study of the disinformation campaign that led to widespread acceptance of this apparently false belief and to its partisan distribution pattern. Contrary to the focus of most contemporary work on disinformation, our findings suggest that this highly effective disinformation campaign, with potentially profound effects for both participation in and the legitimacy of the 2020 election, was an elite-driven, mass-media led process. Social media played only a secondary and supportive role.

Our results are based on analyzing over fifty-five thousand online media stories, five million tweets, and seventy-five thousand posts on public Facebook pages garnering millions of engagements. They are consistent with our findings about the American political media ecosystem from 2015-2018, published in [Network Propaganda](#), in which we found that Fox News and Donald Trump's own campaign were far more influential in spreading false beliefs than Russian trolls or Facebook clickbait artists. This dynamic appears to be even more pronounced in this election cycle, likely because Donald Trump's position as president and his leadership of the Republican Party allow him to operate directly through political and media elites, rather than relying on online media as he did when he sought to advance his then-still-insurgent positions in 2015 and the first half of 2016.

Our findings here suggest that Donald Trump has perfected the art of harnessing mass media to disseminate and at times reinforce his disinformation campaign by using three core standard practices of professional journalism. These three are: elite institutional focus (if the President says it, it's news);

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<sup>1</sup> Work on this report is part of a project on Public Discourse in the U.S. 2020 Election at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. The project was funded by grants from Craig Newmark Philanthropies, the Ford Foundation, and the Open Societies Foundations.

headline seeking (if it bleeds, it leads); and [balance](#), neutrality, or the avoidance of the appearance of taking a side. He uses the first two in combination to summon coverage at will, and has used them continuously to set the agenda surrounding mail-in voting through a combination of tweets, press conferences, and television interviews on Fox News. He relies on the latter professional practice to keep audiences that are not politically pre-committed and have relatively low political knowledge confused, because it limits the degree to which professional journalists in mass media organizations are willing or able to directly call the voter fraud frame disinformation. The president is, however, not acting alone. Throughout the first six months of the disinformation campaign, the Republican National Committee (RNC) and staff from the Trump campaign appear repeatedly and consistently on message at the same moments, suggesting an institutionalized rather than individual disinformation campaign. The efforts of the president and the Republican Party are supported by the right-wing media ecosystem, primarily Fox News and talk radio functioning in effect as a party press. These reinforce the message, provide the president a platform, and marginalize or attack those Republican leaders or any conservative media personalities who insist that there is no evidence of widespread voter fraud associated with mail-in voting.

The primary cure for the elite-driven, mass media communicated information disorder we observe here is unlikely to be more fact checking on Facebook. Instead, it is likely to require more aggressive policing by traditional professional media, the Associated Press, the television networks, and local TV news editors of whether and how they cover Trump's propaganda efforts, and how they educate their audiences about the disinformation campaign the president and the Republican Party have waged.

On September 23, 2020, in response to a question regarding whether he would accept an election loss and a peaceful transition of power, President Trump responded: "We're going to have to see what happens." "[You know that I've been complaining very strongly about the ballots, and the ballots are a disaster.](#)" He repeated the assertion about voter fraud in mail-in ballots and doubled down on his refusal to commit to accept the results at the close of the presidential debate on September 29. His assertions about the risk of voter fraud are shared widely by Republican voters. A Pew poll published on September 16 found that "[43% of Republicans identify fraud as a major problem with voting by mail versus 11% of Democrats.](#)" That gap grew from 4:1 to 15:1 once comparing Republicans to Democrats who consumed only the major political mass media outlets and no other sources, who made up about 30% of each of the two groups. Sixty-one percent of Republicans whose major source of news was only Fox News or talk radio thought voter fraud by mail was a major issue. Only 4% of Democrats whose source of news was only the New York Times, the Washington Post, NPR, CNN, or MSNBC held the same belief. The gap between the two appears to reflect the roughly 30% of respondents who rely on network television (ABC, NBC, CBS).<sup>2</sup> A month earlier, on August 11, a [Monmouth poll](#) found that "Nearly all Democrats (90%) say expanding vote-by-mail is a good idea but few Republicans (20%) agree. Six in ten (60%) independents say it is a good idea." Moreover, among Democrats, "40% pointing the finger at Russia while 9% name China and 4% name another country" as an important source of possible

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<sup>2</sup> While Pew did not break the data up in the report, [the data available on the site](#) suggest that these respondents ranged from 20% of CBS viewers to 14% of NBC viewers, with 17% of ABC viewers asserting that fraud is a major problem with mail-in votes, similar to CNN (16%), and quite different from either Fox and talk radio (61%), on one side, or to MSNBC, New York Times, or NPR, on the other side (3-4%).

election meddling, more than those Democrats who expected that Trump (31%) along with the Republican Party (16%) would play such a role. By contrast, the poll found that “A majority (55%) of GOP voters, on the other hand, believe the Democratic Party would be the most likely perpetrator of any election interference. Another possible cause named by Republicans is vote-by-mail (11%).” A [Morning Consult](#) poll fielded at the very beginning of August found that “57 percent of Republicans, said the country should not allow all citizens to participate via mail-in elections this year “because it jeopardizes election security,” and that only 27% of Republican voters thought that the election should proceed as planned and most voting should be by mail. By contrast, that poll found that 75% of Democrats and half of independents thought that most voting should be by mail.

These survey responses leave little doubt, as we write in the final stages of the 2020 presidential election and in the midst of the global Covid-19 pandemic, that the question of whether to use mail-in voting, and whether to accept mail-in votes as legitimate will have a dramatic effect on participation rates and the legitimacy that tens of millions of Americans will attach to the outcome of the election. We therefore take the question of how beliefs about the security and legitimacy of mail-in voting during the pandemic are formed as critically important, and doubt that anyone, Democrat or Republican, will disagree with that judgment. It is also a question, about which there are, as the surveys show, starkly differing views within the American population. As such, it offers an excellent core case study to understand how political beliefs and attitudes are shaped at a mass population scale. In particular, we use it to examine three competing conceptions of how public opinion is shaped in the twenty-first century. The conception most commonly discussed in public debates is that social media has changed everything, and that false beliefs spread in the population directly through exposure to social media. It is this belief that sustains the widespread concern with Russian propaganda, trolls, and bots, as well as with Facebook and YouTube dissemination of falsehoods, because the concern is that these actors abuse, or enable abuse, of distributed media and *directly* infect users of these media with false beliefs. Critically, this model focuses on the power of actors who are not political or media elites with access to mass media, but instead are individuals or networks who are empowered to shape public perceptions directly through social media activity and without recourse to mass media. Pizzagate, news sites masquerade as legitimate but are in fact fake and derive their traffic from inauthentic Facebook activity, and Russian-create Facebook groups that trick people into holding false beliefs are quintessential examples. We might call this approach as the *Social Media Dominates* approach. A second, more moderate concept, accepts the importance of mass media, but sees social media as the origin of falsehoods spread initially online, and thereby influencing political and media elites who diffuse the falsehoods more broadly. Here, the broad population may get the false beliefs through a combination of social media and mass media, but the origin of falsehood is largely in social media, from influencers whose influence is based on their social media activity, not mass media or some political role offline, Russians, commercial clickbait fabricators, activists, and so forth, who use social media in part to act directly on other social media users, and in part to shape mass media. We could think of this as a *Social Media Leads* approach. The third approach is that social media has had less of an impact on political beliefs in America than the other two approaches suggest, and that media and political elites still drive agenda setting (what we think about as important) and framing (how we think about it), primarily through mass media. Where activists successfully push narratives, it is through staging protests and media events (often virtual) that have much in common with media happenings and media activism whose roots were in the 1960s. Social media certainly plays a role; sometimes an influencer who is not part of the political and media elites can push a view; activists can stage media happenings purely

through video and online campaigns; but social media mostly serves to recirculate agendas and frames generated through mass media, and plays a secondary or supportive role. We can call this the *Mass Media Leads* model. There are obvious cases where the “Social Media Leads” model is the best explanation of transformations of political discourse. Videos of police shootings of Black men and women shared through social media are the most powerful example of use of social media that transformed public conversation, in combination with very real world sustained protests by the Black Lives Matter movement. Our case study suggests that on the critical question of voter fraud, mail-in ballots, and the legitimacy of the 2020 election, however, the mass media leads model explains what we observe better than either of the models that place social media in the driver’s seat. Decisions that mass media journalists and editors make about what they cover and how appear to be more important than what happens on Facebook, and appear to be driven by the actions of political and media elites, principally President Trump. This is particularly true of the largely-ignored media of network TV (ABC, CBS, NBC), local TV, and CNN, which appear to be the primary source of news for the least politically pre-committed one-third of Americans, [and, in the case of local TV, the least politically knowledgeable](#).

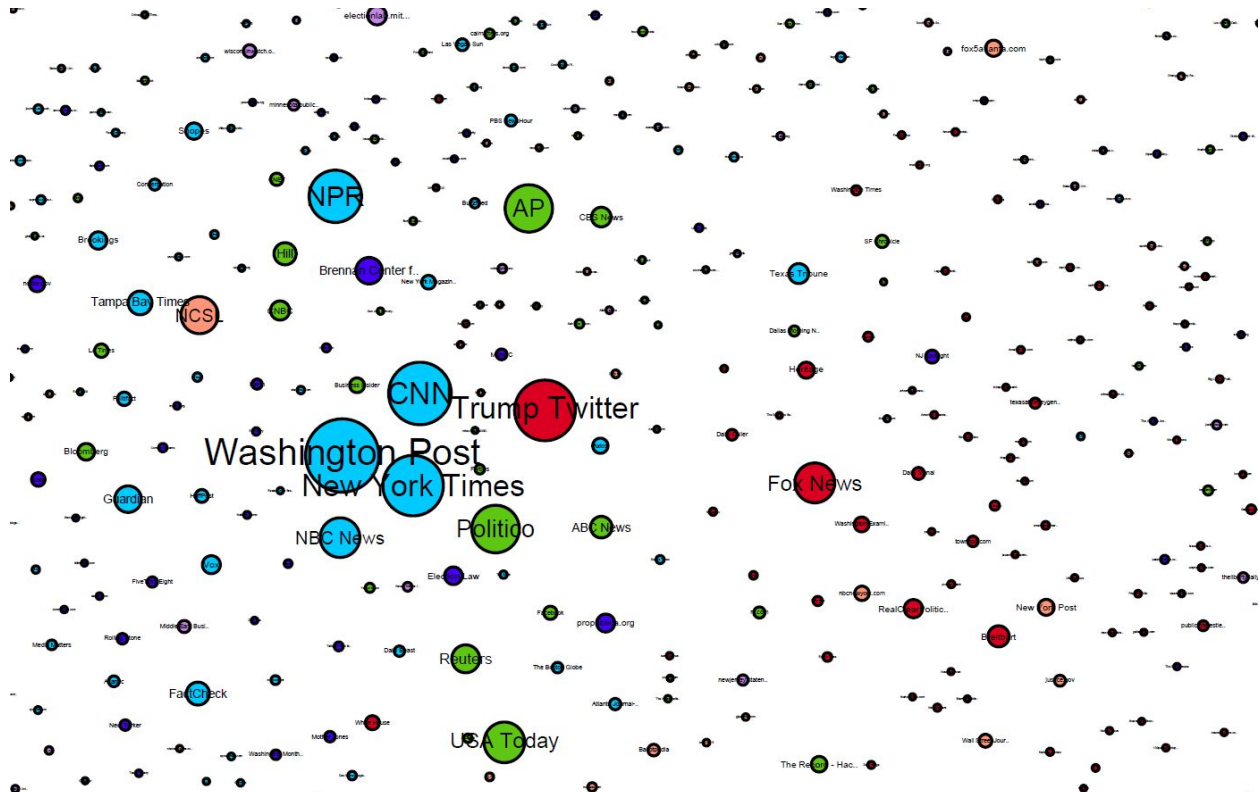
For this study we analyze quantitatively and qualitatively stories published online, tweets, and public Facebook posts and pages that mention words relating mail-in voting or absentee ballots to fraud, election rigging, or similar constructs. We analyze over 55,000 such stories published online across five quintiles of political orientation<sup>3</sup> between March 1 and August 31 2020 collected through [Media Cloud](#), five million tweets, collected through Brandwatch, and 75,000 posts on public Facebook pages, gathered through CrowdTangle. The outlets publishing these stories or linked to by the tweets and posts include mainstream media, including the online presence of local television and radio stations, local newspapers, and cable television, and online-only sources and forums ranging from large entities like the Huffington Post or Breitbart, through forums like Townhall or DailyKos, to personal blogs. We supplement these directly-searchable materials with desk research looking at videos of cable and network television when the online research suggests significant interaction between online media and TV.

Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate our core finding: media coverage across the entire media ecosystem:—online stories across the political spectrum, Twitter, and Facebook—was driven primarily by agenda-setting interventions by President Trump, often closely aligned with the RNC, his campaign, and

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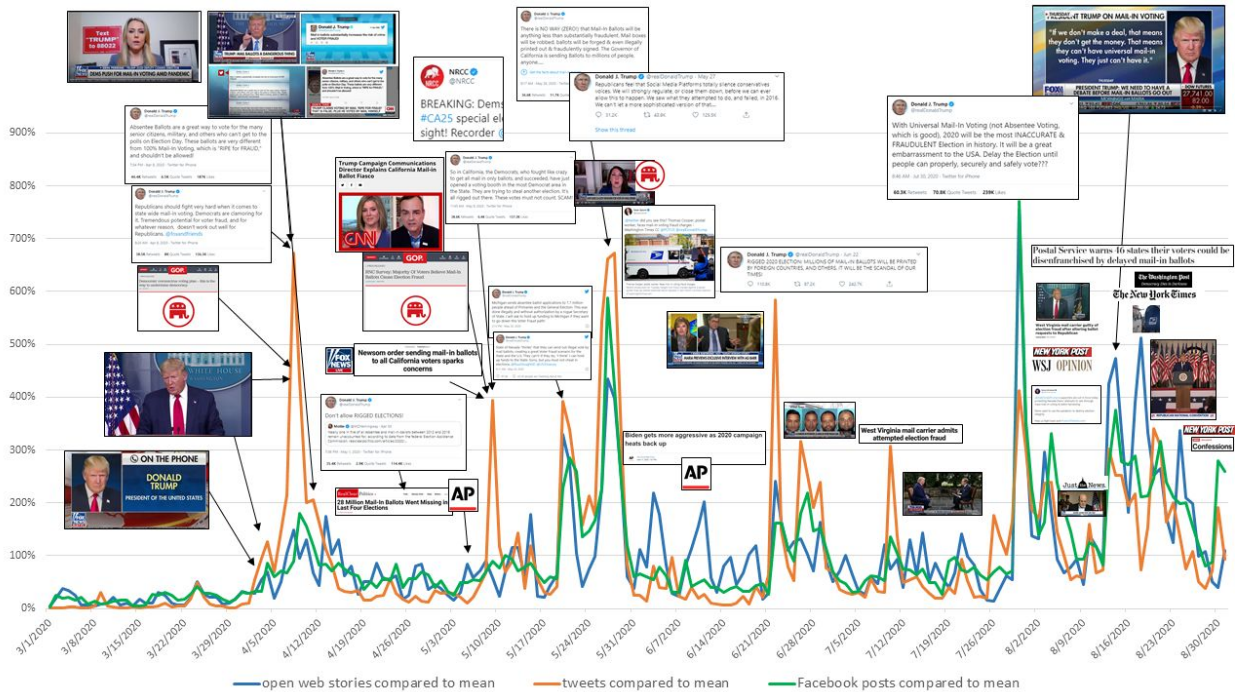
<sup>3</sup> To be able to understand the political orientation of the stories, over fifty thousand of our stories are from sources for which we have already calculated an audience political orientation just before the election period started. We divide these into quintiles: right, center-right, center, center-left, and left. We assign audience political orientation score by calculating, for each of ~15,000 Twitter users that were active between Jan. 2019 and June 2019, an ideology score such that the mean ideology score is 0 and collectively they have a standard deviation of 1. Negative scores indicate a user is politically left of the mean, and positive scores indicate a user is right of the mean. We additionally find the approximate political center by finding the score at which users self-identify as either liberal or conservative at equal rates in their Twitter bio. We assign scores to media outlets based on the relative proportion of Twitter accounts from the left and the right of this center that tweet out stories from the site. We then divide these proportions into quintiles by saying the center is where stories are shared at about an equal rate from the left and right, the center-right and center-left are shared at 2:1 and 1:2 ratios of right to left, respectively, and the right and left are stories that are shared at at least ratios of 4:1 and 1:4. Reuters, for example, has a score near 0.0, which we bin as “center.” The NYT has a score of -0.27, which we bin as “center left.” The Wall Street Journal has a score of 0.21, which we bin as center-right. Fox News has a score of 0.75, which we bin as “right.” Mother Jones or the Daily Kos have scores of -0.87 and -0.88, respectively, and we bin them as “left”.

discrete lawsuits or decisions of Republican officials aimed to limit or delay the use of mail-in ballots. Figure 1 is a network map of all media sources that published stories online about voter fraud associated with mail-in voting from March 1 to August 31, 2020. It underscores the central role of Trump’s Twitter handle, its authority and influence over mainstream media (indicated by its location at the heart of the mainstream network, as opposed to as part of the insular, asymmetrically polarized right-wing media ecosystem), and its influence over the major outlets: the New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN, the Associated Press (AP) and Reuters, NPR, and the television networks. We explain this and related maps in more detail in Part I.



**Figure 1: Network Map of online media outlets.** Nodes sized by inlinks from other media sources to stories they published about mail-in voter fraud, and reflect the influence of each media source on the overall debate. Location on the map determined by the patterns of linking relations among all media sources. “Trump Twitter” is composed of all Trump’s tweets about mail-in voter fraud that received links from any online story during the period observed.

Figure 2 is a timeline of changes in the numbers of stories, tweets, and Facebook posts that related to mail-in voter fraud, marked in each case with the precipitating event for the spike in attention to the topic. Peaks in attention reflect days on which attention to the mail-in voter fraud agenda became salient in coverage by online stories, Facebook, or Twitter. We found that the changes across the three platforms were almost always related to each other. Figure 2 makes clear that most of the peaks in coverage of mail-in voter fraud, across all media and social media, were driven by Donald Trump using a combination of his Twitter account, his press briefings, and his interviews on Fox News. We describe each peak in detail in Part II of the report.



**Figure 2: Relative changes in the number of stories published online, tweets, and Facebook posts that mention mail-in voting or absentee balloting and fraud or election rigging, March 1, 2020 to August 31, 2020. Icons represent the precipitating event for each peak. Trump, using Twitter, press briefings, and television interviews, coordinated with the RNC and his own reelection campaign, drives almost all peaks in attention. Detailed description in Part II. To zoom in on a pdf version, see [here](#).**

The political calculus underlying this attack is stated in two of Trump’s statements early in the campaign. On March 30, in his first interview after signing the first coronavirus relief bill, which included 400 million dollars to support state efforts to enable voting by mail during the pandemic, the president went on Fox and Friends and explained that he had forced Democrats to remove voting-related provisions, stating that Democrats’ efforts to make voting easier and more ubiquitous during the pandemic would get so many voters that [“you’d never get a Republican elected in this country again.”](#) On April 3, Trump again said that [“a lot of people cheat with mail-in voting.”](#) An April 8 tweet laid out the strategy and its reasoning plainly: [“Republicans should fight very hard when it comes to state-wide mail-in voting. Democrats are clamoring for it. Tremendous potential for voter fraud, and for whatever reason, doesn’t work out well for Republicans.”](#) During the following six months, the president and the Republican Party executed on this strategy.

All but one of the major peaks, and most of the smaller peaks in attention to the mail-in voter fraud frame are triggered by Trump tweets, press conferences, or television interviews. Often these are backed up by statements from the RNC, Trump’s campaign senior staff, and/or White House staff across diverse media. The one major peak in attention that is partly an exception, around August 16-18, followed new disclosures by the Washington Post about disruptions at the US Postal Service. Even that peak is likely better interpreted as part of a wave of attention that began on August 13th, with Trump’s statement in a Fox Business interview that if he denied funding to the Postal Service, then “they can’t

have universal voting.” It is difficult to strictly separate the peak three days later from the furor those comments triggered. Smaller peaks in attention were also driven by reporting of news stories in mass media about actual events such as litigation over mail-in voting, specific cases of voter fraud charges and guilty pleas entered; or reporting on changes in the Postal Service, as well as by statements of Democrats, primarily Nancy Pelosi or Joe Biden, arguing the importance of mail-in voting and seeking coronavirus relief funding to support transition to voting by mail.

The dominant drivers of the campaign have been the president’s bald assertions that voter fraud is rampant, and his occasional statements that he will do something outrageously aggressive, usually beyond his constitutional power, so as to draw attention to his tweet. These included most prominently his threats to block federal funding to Michigan and Nevada, to delay the election, or to refuse to recognize the results of the election. Beyond that core tactic, which accounts for most of the major peaks in attention, both the president and his party used a tactic that involved identifying truthful stories of actual voter fraud prosecutions or guilty pleas, past or present, and repeatedly referring to them as evidence and reinforcement of the assertion that voter fraud is a widespread phenomenon affecting millions of votes. These included the story of a North Carolina Republican operative who had pled guilty to voter fraud in aid of a Republican primary candidate in 2019; a West Virginia mail carrier who had changed several primary ballot requests mailed by Democrats to “Republican,” “just for fun”; or a city clerk in Michigan who pled guilty to altering 193 absentee ballot requests. Occasionally, the “factual” grounding would be wholly fabricated, as when the president, pressed for evidence of voter fraud at a press conference, claimed that California had reached a settlement with a conservative organization, Judicial Watch conceding that a million votes had been cast illegally, when in fact the state had settled with Judicial Watch to remove registration from 1.5 million voters who had *not* voted in several elections. By far the most prominently covered story was the prosecution and guilty pleas of a local city council seat election in Paterson, New Jersey who in fact sought to mail in 800 false ballots and led a New Jersey court to order a new election for the city council seat. These stories accumulated during the months, and were used repeatedly, often in tandem, as evidence that voter fraud was rampant, and as our description in Part II showed, also made repeated appearances in President Trump’s television appearances and press briefings. Democrats parried with much-harder-to-grasp statistics: that all these cases combine into a tiny number of votes as far as a national election is concerned, and that while individual cases are inevitable in a system involving tens of thousands of local, state, and federal elections, with hundreds of millions of votes cast, the salience of the anecdotes vastly overstates the risk of fraud relative to the risk that voters will be blocked from accessing in-person voting because of fear of the pandemic, or avoid mail-in voting because of an inflated fear of fraud.

We have been unable to identify a single episode where a peak in media attention to the question of fraud associated with voting by mail or absentee ballots, in either mass media or social media, was meaningfully driven by an online disinformation campaign, and for which we did not have an obvious elite-driven triggering event. These spikes in attention of online media sources are closely related to increases in attention on Twitter and posting on Facebook with tweets/posts related to voter fraud in the context of mail-in ballots (Figure 2). The time sequence of these spikes and our qualitative research into each spike in attention confirm that it was these elite actions through Trump’s Twitter account and his appearances on Fox and at press briefings, and through statements by other Republican political elites or conservative media elites that drove the dissemination of disinformation regarding voter fraud in mail-in ballots.

## INTRODUCTION

Concerns about the toxic nature of online communication, particularly on social media, have been a staple of public conversation at least since the 2016 presidential election and the emergence of the idea that social media, in particular Facebook, played a central role in the success of Donald Trump's election. Decisions by Twitter or Facebook to police, or not to police, content on their sites are international news, and reports on how insane political news is on Facebook are regularly published in respectable media. Our own research on the 2016 election and the first year of the Trump presidency suggested reason to think that [social media was not as important](#) as more-or-less everyone thought it was, and we emphasized instead the role of [Fox News](#) and [Trump himself as a candidate](#) in setting the agenda of what the American public was focusing on in the run up to the 2016 election and the first year of the Trump presidency. As part of our ongoing research into the 2020 election, we sought to assess the relative importance of different media in shaping beliefs, setting the agenda, framing the issues, and propagating disinformation. Here we report on coverage dedicated to one of the major issues likely to affect whether and how Americans vote during the Covid-19 pandemic, and is likely persist through election day and the following weeks or months as a major frame through which tens of millions of Americans will process the results, and reject or accept the legitimacy of the outcome of this highly contested election: the implementation of voting by mail and the question of whether it will increase the rate of fraud. The concern with voter fraud facilitated by mail-in votes is also a particularly good object of study, because the academic literature of the past 15 years or so, using diverse methods, has consistently found that allegations of widespread voter fraud over the past 20 years are not supported by credible evidence.<sup>4</sup>

We collected all stories from March 1 to August 31 2020 that are in the Media Cloud collection of media sources for which we were able to calculate a political orientation based on the behavior of Twitter audiences. We then searched this dataset for stories that met a query designed to capture stories that fit cleanly into the frame of voter fraud or election rigging associated with mail-in voting or absentee ballots, and iteratively crawled the links from those stories to discover additional stories.<sup>5</sup> For the six months period, we collected over 55,000 stories published online that fit this query. We also searched for tweets and public Facebook page posts that fit our query on Brandwatch and CrowdTangle, respectively. These searches yielded five million tweets and 75,000 Facebook posts over the period of observation. We use a histogram of the number of stories per day, the number of tweets per day, and the number of Facebook posts per day, normalized, to identify days or clusters of days during which there was particularly intensive coverage on any of the platforms, and in the case of online stories, in any of the political quintiles. Peak coverage and attention on the three platforms (open web, Twitter, and Facebook) are well aligned in most episodes. We use network analysis to describe the shape of influence in the networks, using interlinking among stories related to voter fraud and mail, linking among websites based on tweeting patterns, and linking based on Facebook posts that include links to websites. We use text analysis to produce network maps of clusters of sites that republish the same story as others, allowing us to identify patterns of syndication, particularly the AP, NPR, and the television networks. While these maps do not measure the influence of syndication directly, they do

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<sup>4</sup> For a current review of the academic literature in political science see Sharad Goel et al., "One Person, One Vote: Estimating the Prevalence of Double Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (May 2020): 456–69, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305541900087X>.

<sup>5</sup> The query was {(vote\* or voti\* or ballot) and (mail or absent\*) and (fraud or rigg\* or harvest\*)}.

offer a visual way of understanding how understated the impact of these stories is when we look at maps where prominence is measured at the single story on a single site metric, and ignores the real-world amplification mechanism of syndication. Given what we know of survey evidence of news consumption, the syndicated stories likely garner many more readers and viewers than social media or network only metrics can expose. We complete the quantitative analysis with qualitative desk research into the detailed dynamics of coverage spikes, reading the stories and the most highly-retweeted tweets and posts with the highest engagement metrics during each peak to identify what events or media actions precipitated a given spike in attention, and what stories were particularly influential during that peak. We supplement these observations with searches of TV coverage on the days surrounding the peaks using the Internet Archive.

The fundamental insight we take away is that the media dynamic that has led to the polarized beliefs about mail-in voter fraud is an elite-driven, mass media leads model. In particular, Donald Trump occupies a unique position in driving the media agenda, and his statements, in tweets, press conferences, and television interviews fundamentally shaped the debate over mail-in voting. Throughout the campaign, the president's efforts were supported by the communications teams of both the White House and his reelection campaign, by the Republican National Committee (RNC), and by other leading Republican officials at both the federal and state levels. The coordinated messaging suggests a strategic disinformation campaign, and the president's own occasional unguarded statements, in tweets and interviews, suggest that the campaign is driven by a clear electoral-partisan agenda that is concerned that increasing voter participation during the pandemic will harm Republican chances of reelection. This disinformation campaign is carried out primarily by means of mass media, with social media playing a secondary role. It is supported by a right-wing media ecosystem that has long been subject to a [propaganda feedback loop](#) that marginalizes or suppresses dissenting views within the conservative sphere that try to push back against the mail-in voting fraud narrative: such as the cases we describe in Part II in which Chris Wallace on Fox News or Senators John Thune and Mitt Romney tried to refute or reject the President's false statements at various points in the past six months.

A major means of reaching out beyond the right-wing media ecosystem has been President Trump's successful harnessing of foundational journalistic practices to set the agenda and framing of coverage by outlets used and trusted by Americans outside his base. He uses the power of the office he holds and the horrified fascination with his norms-breaking expressions to force mainstream media to report on his agenda and reinforce the association of mail-in voting with fraud in the minds of distracted readers and viewers. And he uses the balance or neutrality of professional media to draw out legitimating descriptions that treat the position he lays out as one among two competing partisan visions, rather than as a disinformation campaign. The latter strategy was more successful in the early months of the campaign, and seems to have become less successful as we observe mainstream coverage of his statements in August.

Our study also underscores the continued important role of cable, network, and local television, and of local newspapers. For cable, throughout our qualitative work we identify instances where television appearances played a central role. For regional and local news sites, our analysis looks directly at what these outlets publish. For local TV stations, the online news items offer only a rougher image of what airs on TV, but it is not unreasonable to assume that news items published online offer some insight into what the station will choose to air, on the assumption that the TV stations are unlikely to post materials

that are inconsistent with what they broadcast. The salience of syndicated stories around the coverage peaks underscores how much of the daily flow of information to which Americans are exposed does not come from online sources at all, and certainly not from social media. This is consistent with survey evidence of a relatively broad range of Americans getting their political news primarily from sources other than social media. According to the most recent [Pew survey fewer than twenty percent of U.S. respondents](#) say they get their political news primarily through social media. Network TV and local TV, by contrast, are the primary source of political news for about 30% of the population, of which more than half is local TV, and news websites or apps accounted for another 25%. Moreover, adults who get their news from the ABC, CBS, and NBC occupy an intermediate position between Fox News viewers, on the one hand, and readers of the New York Times or NPR listeners, on the other, [in the degree to which they report believing that mail-in voter fraud is a major problem](#). Local TV news viewers, in turn, form the [least politically knowledgeable group of Americans](#), edging out the [much younger respondents who mostly rely on social media](#). When we analyzed the stories about mail-in voter fraud, we observed that peaks in media coverage usually consisted of large numbers of syndicated stories reported by the online sites of local papers and television stations. When we match these to survey evidence about who relies on these media sources, it becomes likely that the way in which local TV, network TV, and local news sites report on the mail-in voter fraud disinformation campaign will play a crucial role in shaping the beliefs and attitudes of the most persuadable 30% of Americans, whose views about mail-in voting and the risk of fraud are the most up for grabs.

Our observations offer reason to be cautious about how important online misinformation and disinformation really is in American political communications. It is critical in this regard to distinguish between different kinds of concerns. There is little doubt that online hate content and disinformation can lead to personal or small network radicalization, and play a role in the increasing risk of violent attacks by members of radical networks, particularly on the right. Nothing in the research we report here is designed to test, much less refute, that insight. We also offer no reason to reject the concern that, should interventions from political campaigns, activists, or foreign actors successfully acquire social media narrowcasting capabilities of specific false information to vulnerable populations, such as location of voting booths or closures, these might succeed in diverting people from their proper voting locations in specific cases. Our research here does not speak to those issues, but rather to the question of what shapes the structure and dynamics of the media environment in which millions of people are embedded. That is the scale at which, if media consumption affects our beliefs at all, one must look in order to explain large scale population patterns of beliefs such as those revealed in the survey evidence concerning mail-in voting and the risk of fraud.

The core issue of voter suppression or electoral participation likely to affect millions, rather than thousands of voters, is likely to be the number of voters, both committed partisans and especially voters who are less politically knowledgeable and committed, who may be deterred from voting by mail because of fear of fraud and from voting in person because of fear of Covid-19. The core issue that will drive peaceful transition or continuation of power will be the tens of millions of partisan voters who will deny the legitimacy of the election should votes cast by mail be decisive to the outcome. But there will also be tens of millions of Americans who would rather not think about politics in their day-to-day lives, and certainly are not going to be obsessive readers of any news source—not the New York Times, not the Gateway Pundit or Occupy Democrats, and not even any of the 24 hour cable news networks. They will be influenced more by a general zeitgeist, through diverse avenues of occasional news consumption,

most prominently local TV news, broadcast television networks, and CNN, and their locally syndicated news outlets, as well as what they hear from their friends and see in their Facebook feed. But there is no survey evidence or other empirically-grounded basis to think that social media will be the primary source of public opinion formation at this mass population level, or the primary driver of mass media coverage, with respect to mail-in voting fraud.

Our conclusions suggest, in turn, that the most important independent actors in the month before the election and the months following November 3 will be the editors and reporters of traditional mainstream media, in particular those who write and use syndicated news stories. Those mass media outlets continue to be the most important source of, and defense against, disinformation in American politics in the 2020 election. As we noted, Donald Trump has perfected the art of using professional journalism's standard practices as a way of harnessing mass media to his disinformation campaign. To the extent that the mass media model we identify here is the primary driver of information disorder, it will not be cured by more fact checking on Facebook. Fox News and talk radio will continue to purvey the President's propaganda, despite Chris Wallace's occasional valiant efforts. The readers of the New York Times and NPR listeners too are unlikely to be in the balance, persuaded as they already are that the allegations of fraud are bunk. Quite possibly the most important efforts will be those of mass media outlets used and trusted by less politically pre-committed, in some cases less politically attentive viewers, readers, and listeners. It will likely require more aggressive editorial counteraction by media editors and journalists of those outlets, in decidedly non-tech organizations such as the AP, the television networks, and local TV news, pursued through choices regarding whether and how they cover the propaganda efforts of the President and his party, and how they educate their audiences about this months-long coordinated disinformation campaign.

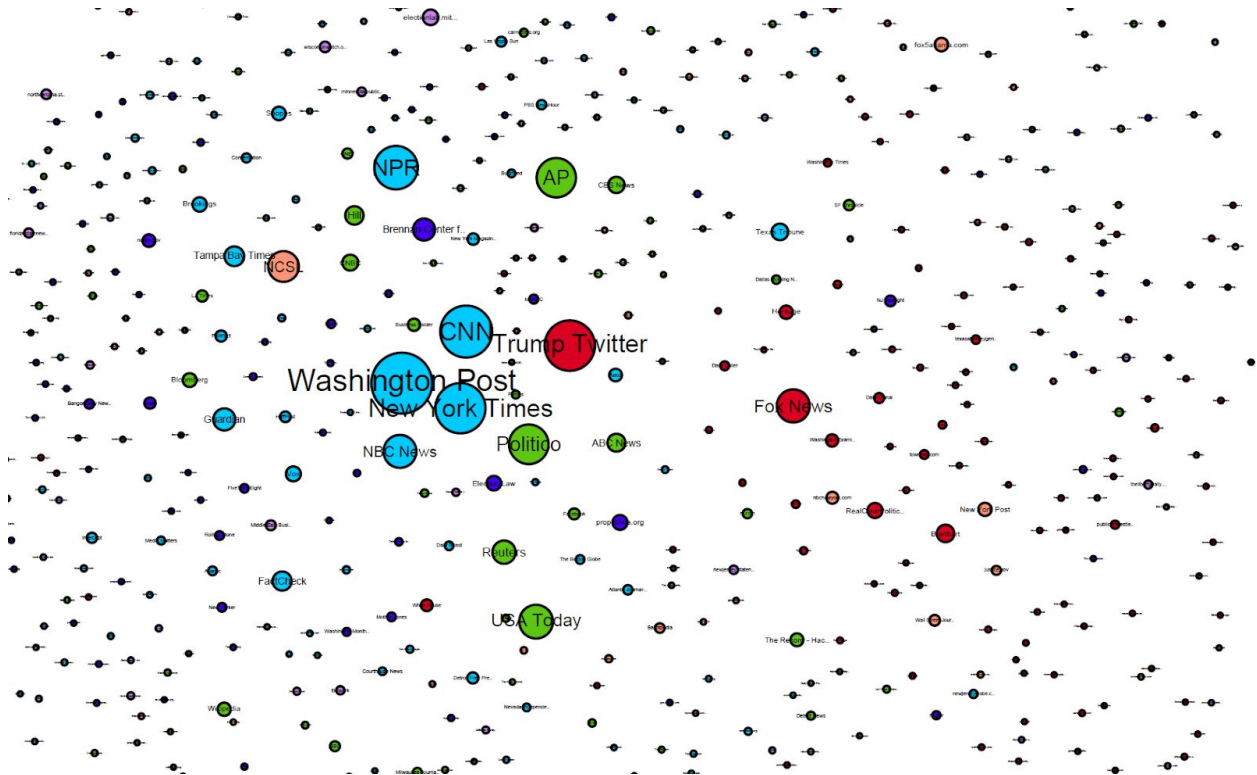
## **I. MAPPING THE VOTER FRAUD BY MAIL DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN**

The following network maps explore the relations among a large set of entities. Here, we describe four different types of networks. Each network consists of nodes and links. Nodes reflect some source of information: media outlets or Facebook accounts. Links reflect some type of relationship among the nodes--whether they link to each other, are shared on Facebook by the same accounts, Tweeted by the same users, or in the case of last map, whether they publish duplicates of the same stories. In all these cases, the network allows us to capture the structure of the relationships between the nodes: who is influential for whom? Who is engaging to the same kinds of audiences? Nodes that are large and at the center of any of the networks are likely to be important to the entire network, and receive links from a broad range of sites. Nodes that are farther removed, even if they are large, are closely connected to only one part of their network, and it is there that they tend to be important for the kind of relationship we are exploring.

### ***Open Web Map***

Figure 3 shows a network map of media outlets that published stories about the mail-in voter fraud frame, based on their hyperlinking practices in stories devoted to that controversy, from March 1 to

August 31, 2020. The map shows the by-now well-known asymmetric polarization of the American political media ecosystem, with a distinctive right-wing media sector and a “rest” of media from the

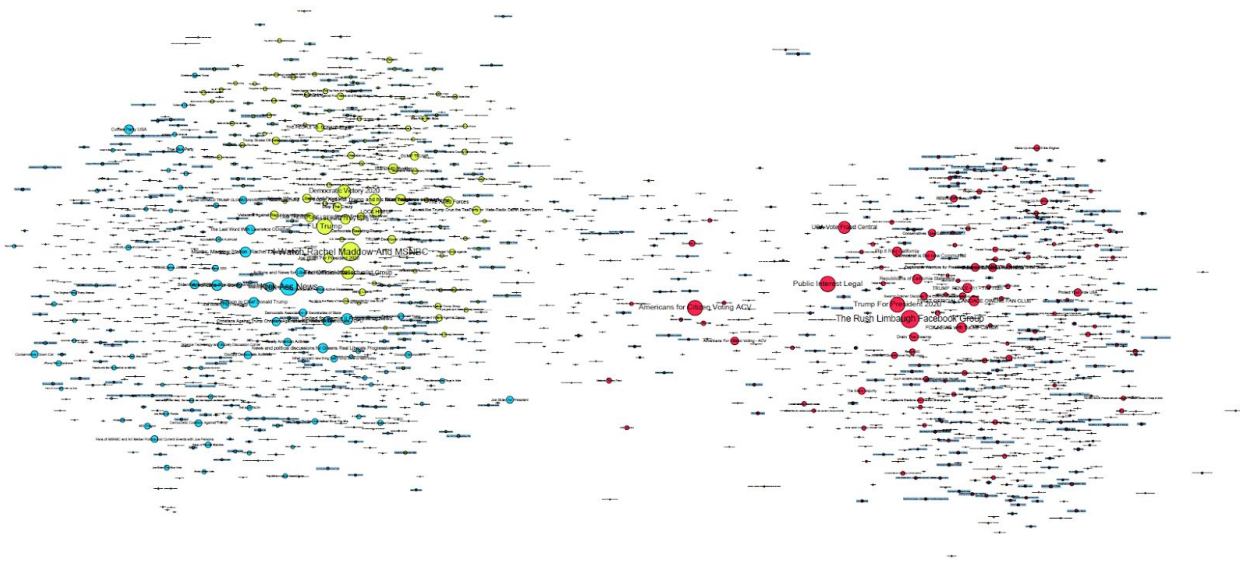


**Figure 3: Stories related to Mail-in Voting Fraud. Media outlets sized and located by interlinking among their web stories about the topic. Trump on Twitter is central to the overall dynamic. Fox News is central to the right. Notable is the significant role that AP, Reuters, NPR, USA Today, and the television networks play alongside the always-leading sites of the NYT, WaPo, and CNN.**

center to the left. The most prominent feature of the map is the central role that President Trump’s Twitter handle plays in the media ecosystem, placing it on par with the most influential media sites, and, indeed, marking it as the most influential source with a right-wing audience orientation. Beyond this remarkable feature, to which we return throughout this report, the centrality of Fox News to the right-wing media ecosystem also emerges clearly. More surprising perhaps is that “center-right” outlets the Wall Street Journal and the New York Post have been pulled deeper into the right wing media ecosystem, and away from “the rest” of the media ecosystem. We interpret this as consistent with a mass media focused, elite-driven campaign when reporting in the New York Post and editorials in the Wall Street Journal offer legitimacy to right-wing online sites whose links have drawn those center-right sites deeper into the right-wing part of the map. The central role of the New York Times, the Washington Post, and CNN to the rest of the media ecosystem continues the pattern we observed in our analysis of the 2016 election and in 2017 using similar techniques. Compared to that earlier work, and to work we are doing on the 2020 election as well, this topic-specific map suggests a large role of NPR, the AP and Reuters, USA Today, and the television networks. Our syndication map below, and the qualitative analysis in Part II suggest that the prominence of these nodes reflects widespread local syndication, and hence actual attention by audiences.

## Facebook Maps

Figures 4, 5, and 6 offer an image of the debate on Facebook. Figure 4 is an overall image of public Facebook accounts, with the edges between them reflecting shared links to external media sites. About 70% of all posts we analyzed include a link to an external media source on the web. Figures 5 and 6 reflect a single network of these sites, with node sizes reflecting two different metrics for the prominence of those sites among Facebook groups and pages. The nodes in each figure are media sites in the open web that were linked to by the posts we analyzed, just like those we mapped in Figure 3. The edges, or links among the media sources reflect sharing practices on Facebook: how often stories from any two media sources were shared on the same public Facebook group. The difference in size of the nodes reflects two different measures. Figure 5 uses the common metric of total engagements: how many shares, likes, etc. all stories from that site received on all Facebook posts that linked to it. Figure 6 uses an alternative measure: node sizes reflect the number of Facebook accounts that included links to stories from those sites. The metric in Figure 6 reflects influence across a range of Facebook pages and groups. It is less susceptible to the influence of a single or small number of Facebook pages that tend to account for the great majority of engagements with any story. It is also less susceptible to manipulation by any single page that seeks to artificially inflate its apparent Facebook success. But Figure 6 will also understate the success of a single Facebook page with a large, highly concentrated and highly engaged fan club.



**Figure 4: Facebook public accounts present a more symmetrically polarized image than online media. Major pages on both the right and the left appear to be highly partisan and anchored around the more partisan of political or media personalities.**

When we map the public pages and groups on Facebook, we color nodes not by political orientation, for which we have no external evidence, but by Louvain community detection (a standard algorithm for measuring clustering of sites in networks). The major groups, like The Rush Limbaugh Facebook Group or Trump for President 2020, do not appear to be affiliated with Limbaugh or the Trump campaign. The most prominent group that seems to bridge the much more starkly polarized Facebook space (by comparison to the open web), Americans for Citizens Voting, is a campaign launched by a conservative organization and directed specifically at Black voters to embrace techniques like voter ID.<sup>6</sup> The other



major node in the subnetwork is the Public Interest Legal Foundation, a conservative nonprofit dedicated to challenging voter access through lawsuits, which authored a misleading report that received substantial attention, including a retweet from the President on May 1, as our discussion in Part II will explain. Facebook pages on the left of the map similarly exhibit a partisan focus and pugilistic naming conventions.

A large majority of posts on Facebook include links to external media sources published online. When we map those sources based on co-linking patterns from Facebook<sup>7</sup> the familiar image of asymmetric polarization emerges. The differences between Figures 5 and 6 are more pronounced on the right than for the rest of the media ecosystem. Figure 5, based on total engagements, has outlier clickbait fabricator Analyzing America playing a more prominent role than it in fact likely is, and FreedomWorks (fwact.org), Glenn Beck's the Blaze, or Diamond and Silk are more prominent than Fox News or Breitbart. This is consistent with widely held beliefs that Facebook is substantially more whacky than the open web or even Twitter. Figure 6 by contrast puts those more "mainstream" sites firmly at the heart of the right-wing media ecosystem as measured by Facebook, and makes the map look more similar to our open web map in Figure 3, or, as we will see in Figure 7, Twitter. In the rest of the media ecosystem, the difference is less stark. Figure 5 mostly adds Occupy Democrats's action site (petitions, fundraising) and MSNBC to the mainstream sites prominent on Figure 6. In our qualitative research, we rely on both measures to identify stories that were prominent in each time period. We offer both maps because we think neither alone fully captures the relative influence of individual pages on Facebook, with Figure 5 likely overstating, and Figure 6 likely understating, the role of pages with an intense group of highly engaged users. The engagement-based metric is a better measure of the intensity of interest and activity on a small number of pages on Facebook. The link-based metric is a better measure for tracking interest in a given story across a wider set of Facebook pages. Notable from both figures is that even though the Facebook groups are more symmetrically polarized, with groups named Watch Rachel Maddow and MSNBC, FU Trump, or Kick Ass News central to the left wing of the Facebook groups map in Figure 4, Figures 5 and 6 show that the news sites that these groups on the left share are overwhelmingly mainstream.

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<sup>7</sup> An edge between site x and site y means that at least one facebook page or group had posts linking to each source; the more two sources are shared by the same Facebook page, the closer the nodes will be to each other

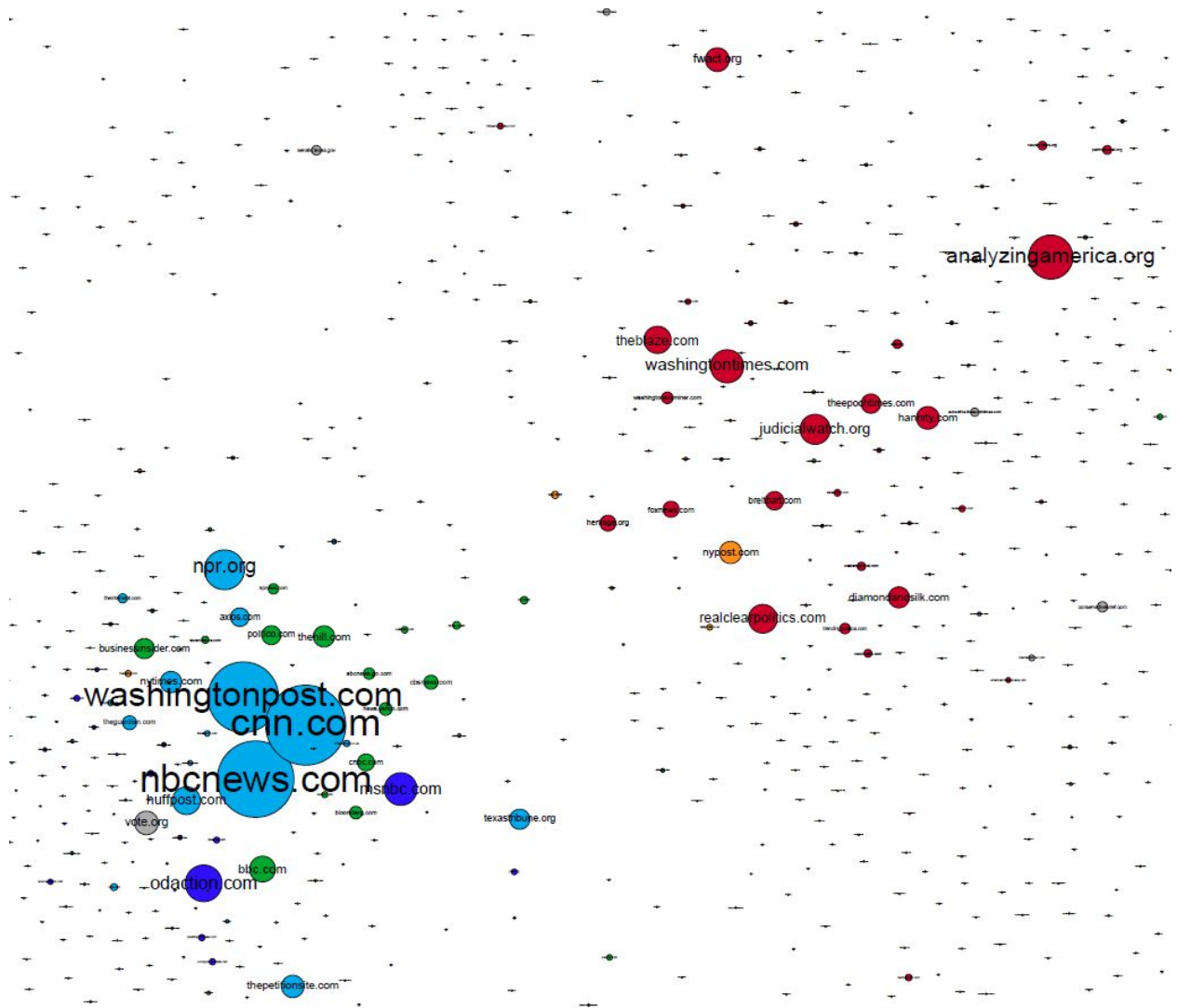


Figure 5: Online news sources network based on total engagement metrics from Facebook. Edges reflect co-sharing on public Facebook pages and groups. Node sizes reflect the sum of total engagements reported by CrowdTangle for all stories on mail-in voter fraud published by each site.

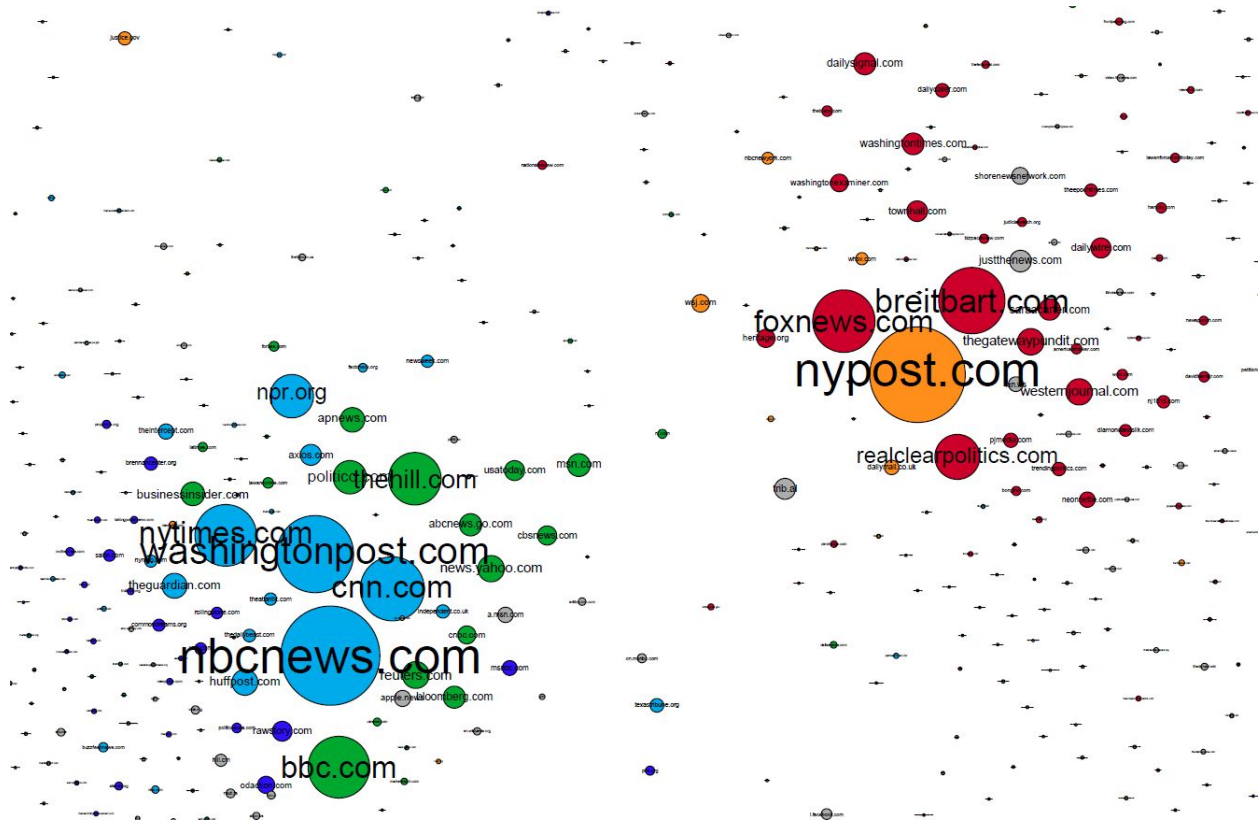


Figure 6: Online news sources network mapped based on the number of Facebook pages that include posts with links to them. Edges reflect co-sharing on public Facebook pages and groups. Node sizes reflect the number of Facebook pages and groups that linked to them.

### Twitter Map

Figure 7 shows media outlets that published stories about mail-in voter fraud that were shared on Twitter. The map is atypical, different from the Facebook and weblinking maps, and quite different from Twitter maps that we have developed in broader political topics, most relevantly the broad 2020 election topic and our analysis of Covid 19. Specifically, Twitter attention on mail-in voter fraud is much more concentrated on a small number of stories, all of which we observe closely in our qualitative work in Part II. In the extreme cases of the New York Post and Sara Carter, which appear to be enormously influential in this map, their position and prominence in the network reflects a single super-tweeted story for each. For the NY Post, it is Jon Levine’s reporting on an alleged Democratic operative who anonymously and without corroborating evidence confessed to running a network of operatives across three states for many years and committing practically every one of the acts that President Trump alleged about how voter fraud works. The story was pumped by the President’s sons and his campaign staff, and occupied Fox and Friends and Tucker Carlson for three nights. In Sara Carter’s case, it was Carter’s role in covering early the story of fraud charges in Paterson, New Jersey, the single most explicit case of voter fraud that emerged throughout the period we studied, which was covered extensively across the right-wing media ecosystem and on Fox News. For Fox News, two of its most widely tweeted stories were opinion pieces: one by RNC Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel, which was among the very first

shots in the disinformation campaign, and another by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton defending Donald Trump after Twitter added a fact check to one of Trump's many false tweet. For Breitbart and JustTheNews, we see high attention to stories we describe in Part II, all identifying specific cases of mail-in voting error or fraud: The Atlanta local Fox affiliate's story of a ballot application sent to a residence addressed to their dead cat; a California man who pled guilty to mailing in a ballot in his mother's name for three elections after she died.

These evocative anecdotes played a central evidentiary role for the disinformation campaign because they rendered the accusations of fraud concrete and memorable. In the New Jersey case in particular, they underwrote a highly racialized framing of the threat. Democrats were left to argue statistics and harder-to-grasp concepts regarding the negligible proportion of votes affected by these stories. The map also suggests an unusual pattern of higher attention on Twitter to right-wing outlets than to the rest of the media ecosystem than we generally have seen for the election and national politics topics, where the New York Times, Washington Post, and CNN are typically larger than Fox News or Breitbart. Because of its atypical structure and the large impact of tweeting patterns around a small number of salient stories, we interpret this map with caution. Nonetheless, when we examine the specific stories that gave rise to this pattern, the map appears to offer some additional support for our conclusion that the campaign was elite driven, in this case as much by media elites as by political elites.

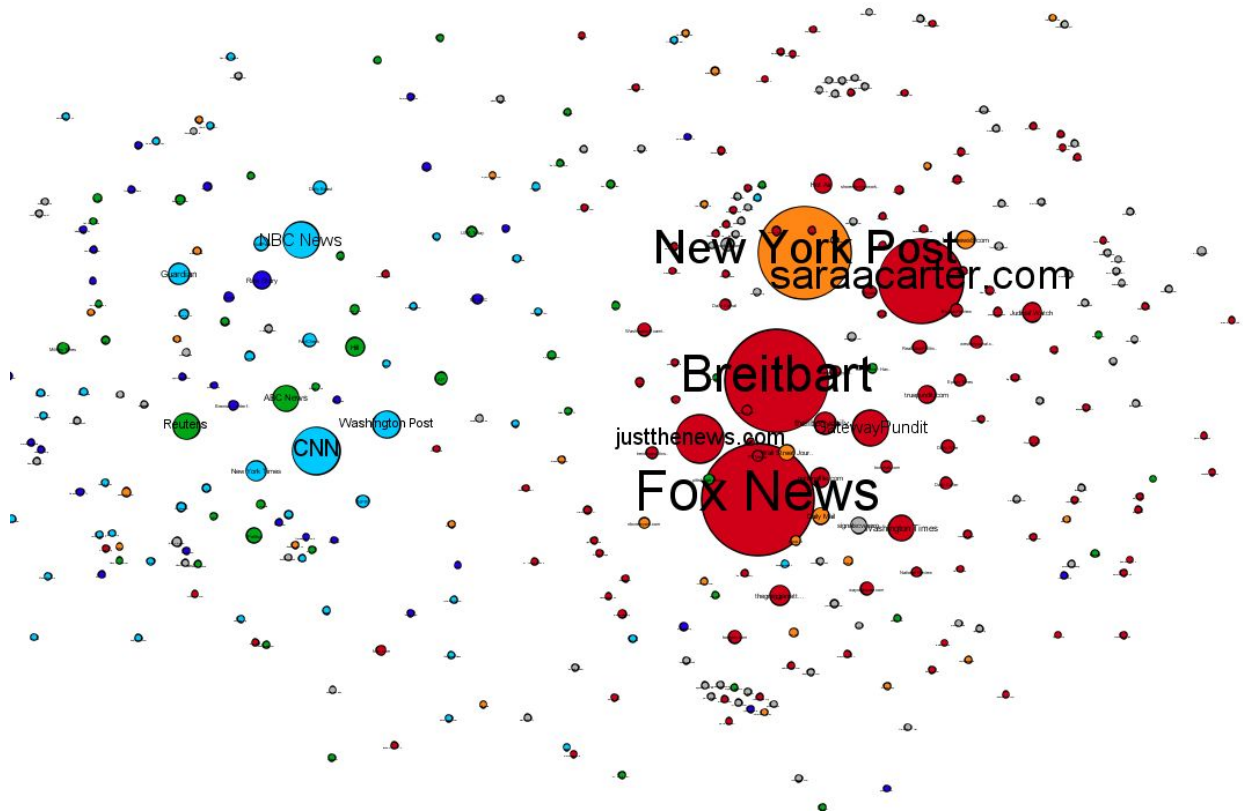


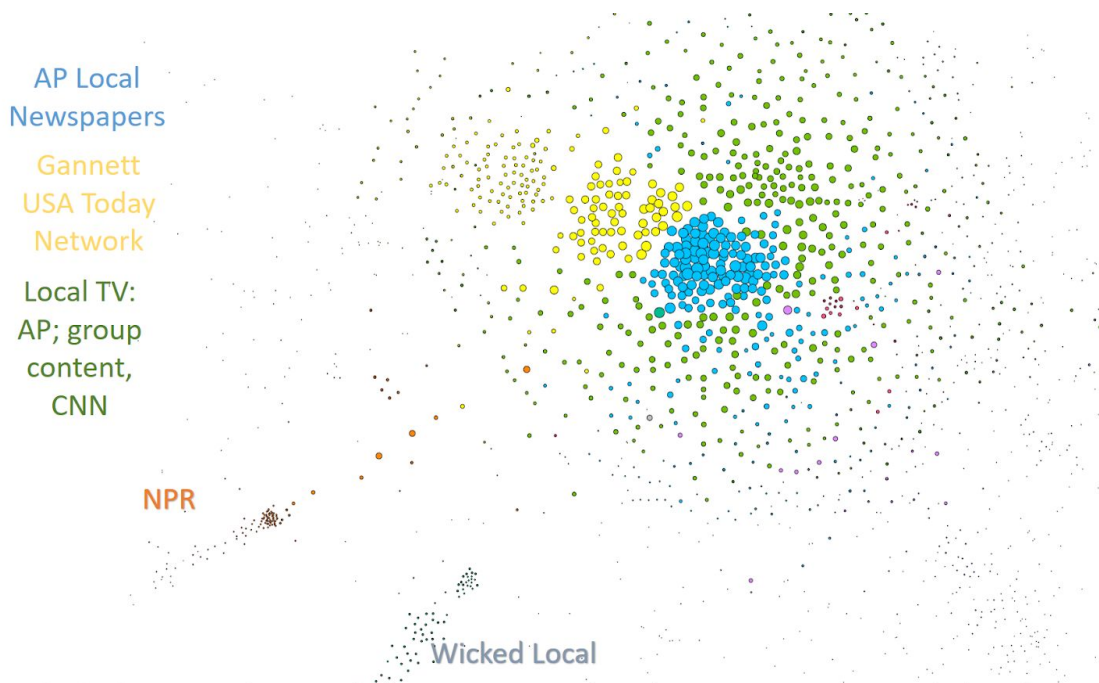
Figure 7: Mail-in voter fraud stories by Twitter sharing. Node size by the number of unique accounts that tweeted the stories. Links by co-tweeting patterns (how many times stories from two sites were tweeted by the same person on the same day).

### ***Syndicated News Map***

One final type of map focuses only on sources that published syndicated news. Our study of the timeline of stories revealed peaks that included significant duplication of syndicated stories. To study these more systematically, we ran text analysis on the stories to create network maps of media outlets based on the frequency and magnitude of replication of their stories. Figure 8A is a map of only those sites that republish stories that have duplicates in other publications. Each node is a single media outlet. The nodes are sized by the number of syndicated stories they publish. The links between the nodes reflect the number of times any two nodes syndicate the same story.<sup>8</sup> Two nodes that often publish the same syndicated stories, say, local newspapers that syndicate the same AP stories, will be closer to each other, and farther away from a different pair of nodes that publish different syndicated stories--say, two NPR affiliates that often publish the same stories from NPR. The color of the nodes reflect their membership in a network community identified by running Louvain community detection. We examined the sites and stories that form each community, and characterize each group by the major outlets and duplicated stories they published. The assignment should be taken as approximate, rather than formal, as each community includes outlets that do not quite fit the generalized description we offer. The three major communities, blue, yellow, and green, all include some stories from the AP, and are distinguished by what other sources they also mix in. The blue community at the center consists primarily of AP syndication by local newspapers and some local television and national sites. The yellow community reflects primarily local media that are part of Gannett's USA Today Network, replicating USA Today stories but also reflecting some AP syndication. The green community consists mostly of local television stations, syndicating a combination of AP materials, CNN reports, and shared stories in group-owned stations such as Nextar or Hearst Communications. NPR is visible in orange in the bottom left. The gray cluster on the bottom left is made of Wicked Local publications. Now, these stories are only from the online sites of the news outlets. For local TV in particular, they are only direct evidence of the online content offered by those local stations, and at most offer indirect indication of topics that may have also been covered on television, rather than how these were framed on TV as compared to online. Nonetheless, given [the relatively high trust that survey respondents place in local media](#), the map does suggest that syndication, particularly by the AP, local television and its group owners, and Gannet and its USA Today network, plays a larger role in shaping Americans' perspectives than current discussions of how public opinion, focused heavily on social media, generally acknowledge.

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<sup>8</sup> "Same story" here means the text of the stories are substantially similar, but not necessarily identical. We look for all pairs of stories where the Jaccard index for the set of unique words in each story is greater than 0.6. Only stories longer than 100 characters are considered.



**Figure 8A: Map of sites that republish similar stories. Nodes sized by the number of duplicated stories they republish. Links by co-publication of the same syndicated stories. Color by Louvain community detection.**

The potential influence across the media ecosystem that syndication can exercise becomes clear when we create a projection of the syndication map onto our open web map. Here, in Figure 8B, we take the basic architecture of the open web map from Figure 3, and project the syndicated communities on it. The *location* of each node is precisely where it is in the broad media ecosystem map of Figure 3. The color, however, is the syndication community each node is part of in Figure 8A. And the size of each node is also taken from Figure 8A: determined by how many *syndicated* stories about mail-in voter fraud that site published. What figure 8B suggests is that syndication plays a particularly important role precisely for those publications that are not the national heavyweights, but rather are the local news sites and TV stations that seek to communicate with people where they live.

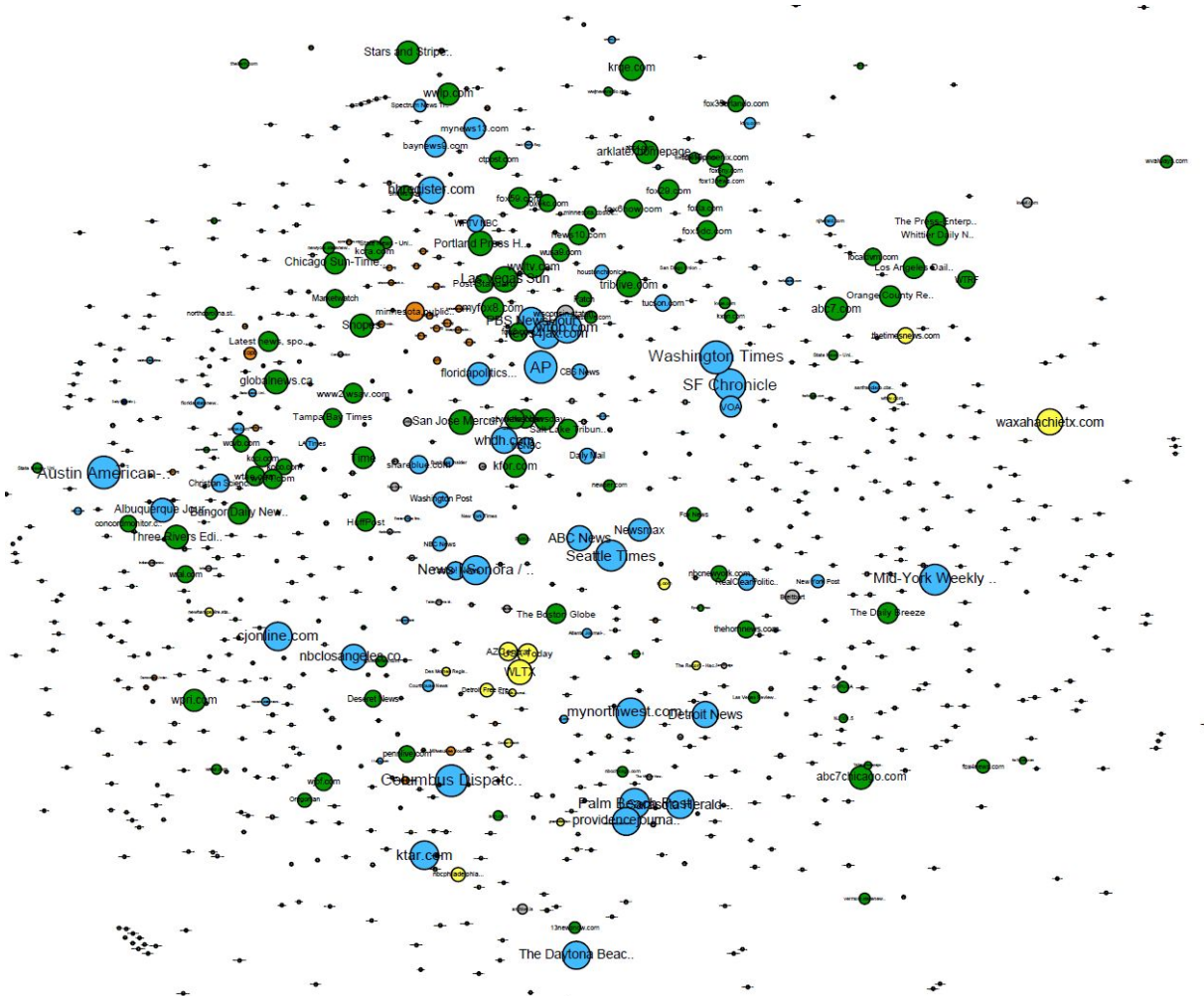
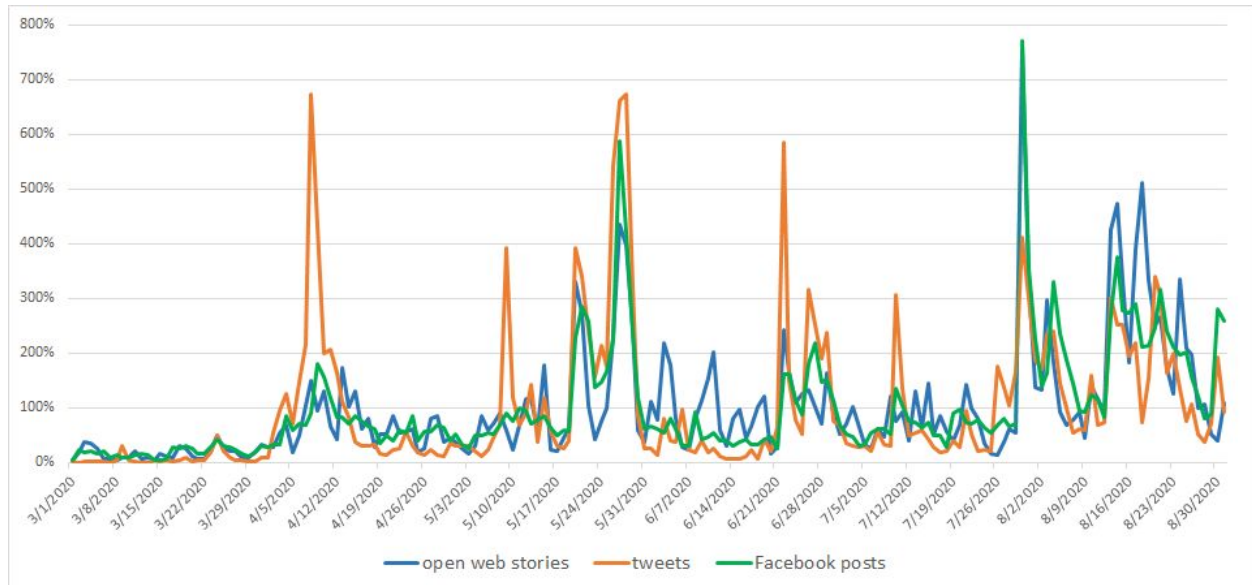


Figure 8B. Map of sites that rely on syndication (Figure 8A) projected onto the overall open web map (Figure 3). Nodes are sized by the number of syndicated stories they published on mail-in voter fraud. Node colors are based on membership in the Louvain communities identified in Figure 8A. Nodes are located where they fall in the overall web map from Figure 3.

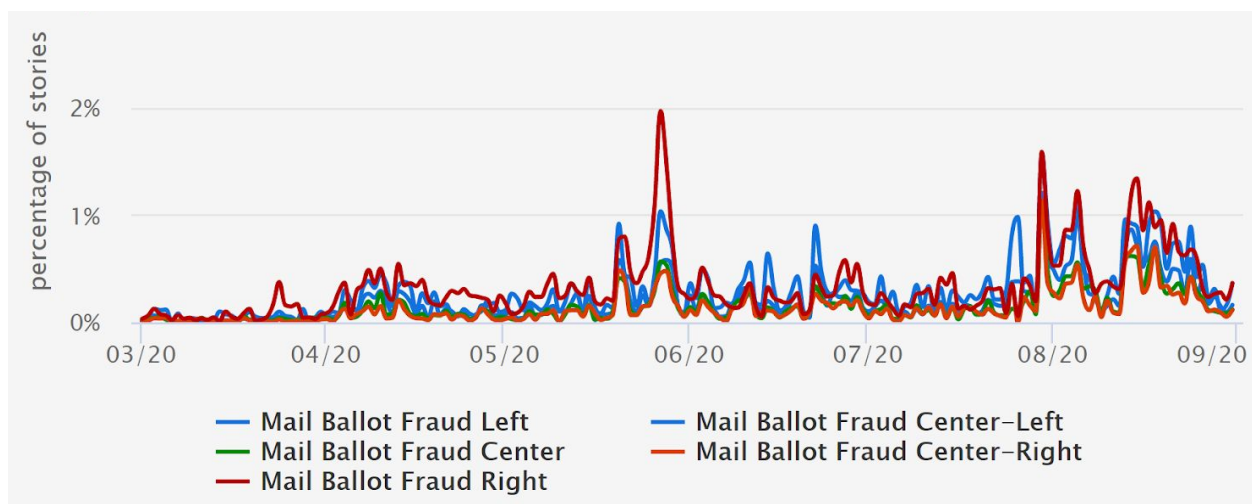
## II. TIMELINE OF THE MAIL-IN VOTER FRAUD DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN

To understand how the disinformation campaign surrounding the risk of voter fraud associated with mail-in ballots unfolded, we are guided by two histograms. The first (Figure 9), overlays peak coverage across each of our three datasets: stories published on the open web, tweets, and Facebook posts, normalized so we can visually observe the peaks. The second shows only online stories, but divides them into media quintiles that reflect the political orientation of the Twitter audience mix of each outlet. This allows us not only to see that coverage of voter fraud by mail was generally more prominent in right-wing media outlets than elsewhere, but it also allows us to identify additional peaks where only one quintile spiked, and we use those to mark additional dates worthy of inquiry.

The pattern of attention to vote-by-mail and fraud is closely related among the three different datasets and among the five quintiles of the media ecosystem. As we see in Figures 9 and 10, attention to the frame emerges in early April and is quite salient in the first half of April; reemerges in the second half of May, in particular towards the very end of the month, is somewhat peaky and primarily a focus of the left and center-left over the course of June and much of July, with a significant peak in the last week of June, and then takes off dramatically and remains salient from late July through the end of August.



**Figure 9: Relative peaks in attention to mail-in voting fraud, across stories, Twitter, and Facebook, Mar. 1-Aug. 31, 2020.** Changes are plotted relative to the average number of stories/tweets/posts per day over the entire period. The average daily number of stories, tweets, or posts over the entire six months period is set at 100%; A day on which there were no stories, tweets, or posts would appear as 0%.



**Figure 10: Proportion of stories about mail-in vote fraud in each media quintile, Mar. 1-Aug. 31, 2020, as a proportion of all stories published by all outlets in each quintile on the same day.**

This part of the report describes in detail the dynamics in each of the periods where the frame that vote-by-mail presents a major risk of fraud became salient. A visual summary was presented as Figure 1.

### **Late-March and April 2020**

On March 23, negotiations over the first coronavirus relief bill stalled in the Senate, while the House leadership distributed its own version of the stimulus bill, a bill that introduced a range of elements including [“\\$4 billion in state election grants and a national requirement for 15 days of early voting and no-excuse absentee voting as fears grow about coronavirus spreading at crowded polling sites.”](#) That afternoon, Greg Sargent wrote [an opinion piece in the Washington Post](#) entitled “Democrats throw down the gauntlet on vote-by-mail,” Adam Schiff made the argument in [an appearance on All In with Chris Hayes](#), that “what Donald Trump would like, what Mitch McConnell would like, is a situation where they can create a corporate slush fund that they can do with as they choose, [and the voters won’t be able to hold them accountable, they won’t be able to get to the ballot places without risking their lives.](#) We view the economic health and the health of our democracy as interrelated. They view the health of their slush fund and suppressing the vote as interrelated, and I think that’s part of the conflict.” The small spike in right-wing media attention largely revolves around these developments. Ohio Republican Congressman [Warren Davidson’s tweet](#) criticizing the Democrats’ proposal was widely retweeted, and [actor James Wood quote tweeted](#) to his 2.5 million followers [a tweet by Tom Fitton](#), President of [Judicial Watch](#), a veteran right wing activist organization been behind many of the lawsuits to release Clinton emails, and in this context, engaged in litigation to purge voter rolls in California, [litigation cited misleadingly by President Trump](#) over the prior year, who tweeted out a clip of his own appearance at CPAC with the statement: “WARNING: Leftists using pretext of [#CoronavirusOutbreak](#) to push unsecure, ‘vote by mail’ free for all, no voter id anywhere for 2020 elections. [#HowtoStealAnElection](#)”. At the same time, the views had not yet hardened. March 24 saw an opinion piece published in the Washington Times by [former RNC Chair Michael Steele and Republican strategist Eli Lehrer](#) arguing that “it’s time for Republicans to get behind much broader use of mail-in absentee ballots,” while [ProPublica published a piece](#) in which it cited a fifteen year old report for the proposition that “There is bipartisan consensus that mail-in ballots are the form of voting most vulnerable to fraud.”<sup>9</sup> This statement received wide circulation in right-wing sites.

At the end of that week, on March 27, President Trump signed the first coronavirus stimulus bill with a much reduced budget to support mail-in voting, and no mandates attached to it. It was then that the political campaign around mail-in voting began in earnest. The buildup toward the first coverage spike, on April 3-4, began on Monday, March 30, when the president went on Fox and Friends and explained that he had forced Democrats to remove voting-related provisions, stating that Democrats’ efforts to make voting easier and more ubiquitous during the pandemic would get so many voters that [“you’d never get a Republican elected in this country again.”](#) The Washington Times then published a [story](#) on the resistance of Republicans to mail-in voting, and an [op-ed](#) rejecting mail-in voting as an opportunity for fraud. On March 31, Joe Biden used an MSNBC interview to call on governors to expand secure remote voting, a call [picked up on by right-wing media](#) as an opportunity for fraud. On April 2, on the CBS Late Show, it was Nancy Pelosi who put mail-in voting back in the frame. Pelosi stated that Democrats hope to get more funding for voting by mail into the next coronavirus response bill. In response to her April 2 statement, there were a handful of responses on the right wing, in [Breitbart](#) and

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<sup>9</sup> The paragraph backed that assertion with the following two sentences: “A 2005 commission led by President Jimmy Carter and James A. Baker III — George W. Bush’s secretary of state — concluded that these ballots “remain the largest source of potential voter fraud. Ballot harvesting scandals, in which political operatives tamper with absentee ballots that voters have entrusted to them, have marred recent elections in North Carolina and Texas.”

later replicated on [Free Republic](#). That night, Laura Ingraham used statements from Stacey Abrams, Pelosi, and Joe Biden as examples of efforts to exploit the Covid-19 epidemic to “[create more opportunities for ballot harvesting or even voter fraud](#).”



Figure 11: Ingraham Angle, April 2, “vote harvesting”

Meanwhile, that day the Huffington Post published one of the stories that would get the most Facebook engagement in April, quoting the [Republican Speaker of the House in Georgia](#) saying that “The president said it best — this will be extremely devastating to Republicans and conservatives in Georgia,” emphasizing that he continued that “This will certainly drive up turnout.”

The next morning, April 3, Donald Trump offered his own statement, at a morning press briefing, that “[a lot of people cheat with mail-in voting](#).” This comment was widely circulated and reported across all quintiles of the media ecosystem, some giving it familiar twists, such as framing the [vote-by-mail efforts as funded by George Soros](#), a favorite bogeyman of the right to which we return later. The discussion on right-wing sites tended to amplify and rally around the president’s statement, recirculate the Soros conspiracy story, or republish [Breitbart writer John Nolte’s opinion piece from April 3](#), which appears to be a response to Pelosi. On Twitter, the most influential tweets (other than the President’s own tweet) were those of [Colorado Senator Michael Bennet’s](#) counter argument that Colorado has had mail-in voting for years with no fraud, as did a response by Jennifer Cohn, an activist, to another quote tweet by James Woods’, again of Tom Fitton. [Breitbart’s story criticizing Pelosi’s stance](#) also received substantial attention on Twitter. The discussion in outlets with a centrist audience orientation reported the controversy in terms of a tension between two positions. The AP, for example, in a widely syndicated [April 4 story](#), framed its story in a standard “balanced” frame: “Trump, Dems clash on boosting mail-in voting during the pandemic.” Reuters, in turn, [published a poll on April 7](#) that asserted that most Americans disagree with Trump about the desirability of mail-in ballots to mitigate the risks of voting during a pandemic. Other coverage in center sites ranged from reporting on the fight, to reporting on local concerns that replicate the national concern over mailing ballots, to circulating links or replications of fact checking Trump’s position.

The second attention spike, or perhaps it is better understood as a continuation of the first episode, was precipitated by an April 6 op-ed by RNC Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel in a [Fox News op-ed](#) republished on the [RNC’s primary website](#) and across the [right wing ecosystem](#), and was among the most widely tweeted stories of the month for Fox News. This first step was reinforced on April 7 when, Trump, at a press conference, [reiterated](#) his view that vote-by-mail is “horrible” and “corrupt,” “they grab thousands

of mail-in ballots and they dump it," "There's a lot of dishonesty going along with mail-in voting, mail-in ballots." This drove coverage on [Special Report with Bret Beier](#), as well as on [Fox News](#) online. It was then covered on several leading shows on both MSNBC and CNN on April 8, after Trump reiterated his assertions on Twitter, in a tweet that was very revealing about the political calculus behind the assertions: "Republicans should fight very hard when it comes to state-wide mail-in voting. Democrats are clamoring for it. [Tremendous potential for voter fraud, and for whatever reason, doesn't work out well for Republicans. @foxandfriends.](#)" He later reinforced the claim that same evening: "[Absentee Ballots are a great way to vote for the many senior citizens, military, and others who can't get to the polls on Election Day. These ballots are very different from 100% Mail-In Voting, which is "RIPE for FRAUD,"](#) and shouldn't be allowed!". Twitter also offered a platform for disseminating rebuttals. [Dan Rather's tweet](#), in which he implored news organizations: "Every headline, news organization tweet; article or broadcast that gives oxygen to President Trump's statements about voting by mail must include the truth that this system is already in place with years of proof that it is effective and free from fraud," was the third most retweeted tweet about voter fraud and mail that day. Similarly influential was a tweet by [CNN's Jim Acosta](#), linking to a year old Politifact Fact Check about a false claim Trump had made about voter fraud in California. Republicans seeking to show evidence that mail-in ballots were fraught with fraud tweeted out references to a case from early 2019 in which a North Carolina political operative was arrested for "ballot harvesting": collecting other people's absentee ballots to deliver them. Although the story was about a Republican operative, breaking the law for a Republican candidate in a primary, it was primarily driven by Republicans as evidence of the risk of fraud. On Twitter, the most influential version was the report in [the Los Angeles Times](#). This was most [widely shared by Wayne King](#), a former Deputy Chief of Staff to Mark Meadows when Meadows was a Congressman, and [a professional lobbyist](#) for a Republican-oriented lobbying firm that claims connections to Mike Pence. On Facebook, it was [the Reuters report of the same old story](#) that was linked to by a broad range of Facebook groups. This pattern of identifying and disseminating anecdotal cases of voter fraud as evidence for the general proposition that voter fraud is a major problem with mail-in voting would become a recurrent pattern in the following months.

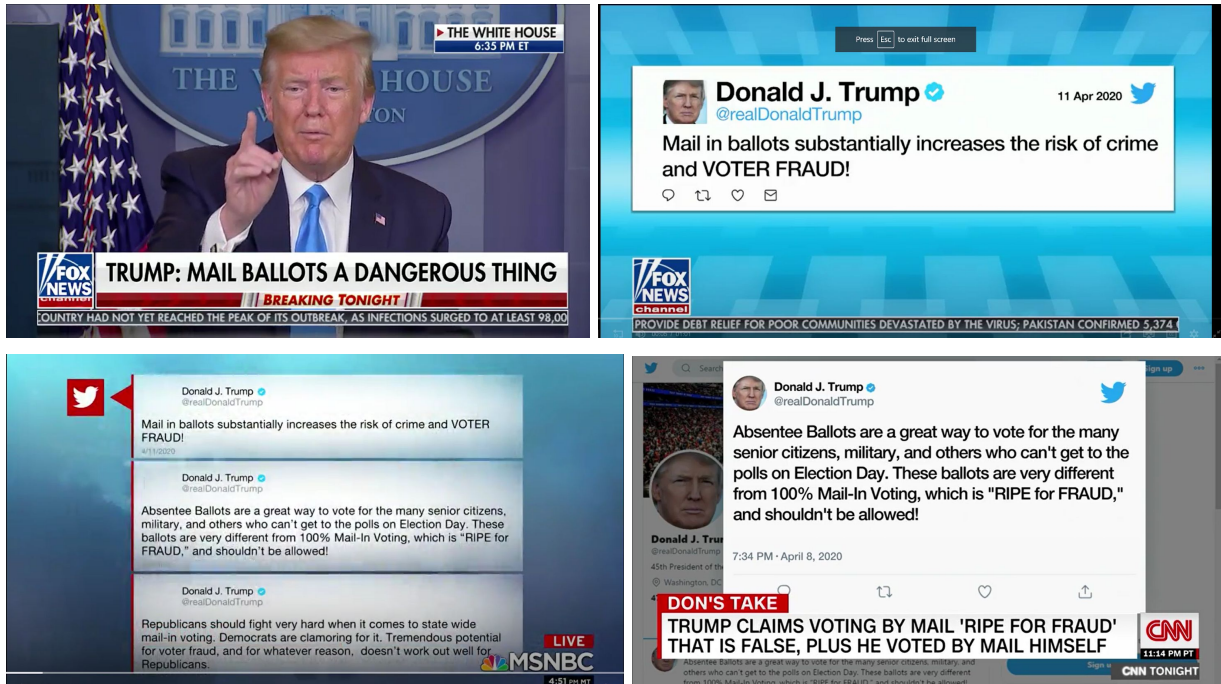


Figure 12: April 7 Press Conference on Bret Beier; [Don Lemon](#), CNN, April 8; [MSNBC Live](#) April 12; [Outnumbered Overtime with Harris Faulkner](#) Fox News Apr 13 (top right)



Figure 13: Trump Deputy Communications Director, Fox and Friends First, April 9, universal vote-by mail systems “ripe for fraud”

In the following few days, President Trump continued to tweet out assertions of voter fraud associated with mail-in ballots, and his tweets were reported across the cable news ecosystem. Figure 12 represents the ways in which Trump’s performances, both in the April 7 press conference and in tweets on subsequent days become the images driving television coverage on the cable news channels. He also repeated his allegations in press conferences. In response to CNN’s Jim Acosta demanding an evidence to support Trump’s allegation, [the President falsely asserted](#) that California and “Judicial Watch settled where they agreed that a million people should not have voted, where they were 115 years old and lots of things, and people were voting in their place.” In fact, the lawsuit settlement required California to remove from the voter roles 1.5 million people who had *not* voted in repeated elections. A video clip of this exchange became one of the Facebook posts that received the most engagements in April, [posted on Occupy Democrats](#).



**Figure 14. Representative Matt Gaetz on Laura Ingraham’s show and on Twitter**

On Fox News on television, and on Twitter, Republican elites and the Trump campaign continued to repeat the line. From the Trump campaign’s Deputy Director of Communications, who went on the early morning of April 9th on Fox and Friends First, to Florida Representative Matt Gaetz appearing on the Ingraham Angle that night and tweeting, the theme was repeated. On Twitter in particular, Judicial Watch president Tom Fitton continued to garner significant attention to his tweets warning about voter fraud. Countering these were [several tweets](#) from Twitter users who were not media or political elites on the left, arguing the hypocrisy of Trump’s voting by mail in Florida, or emphasizing that the prosecution in North Carolina was, actually, of a GOP candidate.

Over the course of these few days outlets in the center and center-left ran a range of stories debunking the Trump claims, or reporting on in-person voting difficulties in Wisconsin following that state Supreme Court’s invalidation of the governor’s executive order seeking to delay the primary until safer voting processes could be implemented due to the pandemic. The [New York Times ran a fact check](#) entitled “Trump Is Pushing a False Argument on Vote-by-Mail Fraud. Here Are the Facts.”, a story widely syndicated on other sites, and NPR too ran [a fact check](#) explaining, with regard to Trump’s assertion, that “Election experts say Trump is partially correct, that there is slightly more fraud in mail-voting than in-person voting. But they caution that both can be done safely and securely, and that election fraud is extremely rare in all instances.” Business Insider emphasized that the US military had been using mail-in voting since the Civil War.

Not all major media took the path of direct refutation of Trump’s false assertions. Stories in the center quintile peaked around April 9-10, [with particularly wide syndication of one AP story](#) again reporting on the conflict, framed as:

“Democrats want to bolster mail-in voting and take other steps to make balloting easier this November in the next round of congressional efforts to revive the economy and battle the coronavirus pandemic, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said.

Pelosi’s still-evolving proposals Thursday drew immediate condemnation from House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, echoing President Donald Trump’s opposition to federal attempts to prod states to relax restrictions for this fall’s presidential and congressional elections.”

[USA Today's coverage](#) had a similar political horse race framing, as did various Nexstar-owned [local television](#) stations (Nexstar is the largest multiple station operator of local TV, edging out the more explicitly right-wing Sinclair). Not all stories syndicated in centrist media took this line. Another AP story from the same time accounts for an additional slew of stories in local newspapers on those two days, this one framed [As Trump rails against mail voting, some allies embrace it](#). This story actually leads with “President Donald Trump is claiming without evidence that expanding mail-in voting will increase voter fraud.” Another story that received widespread replication in centrist local public radio stations was a [Morning Edition story on NPR](#), a story that emphasizes the challenge that the pandemic poses for voting, as evidenced by the Wisconsin primary, the utility of mail-in voting, and Trump’s opposition despite there being “only limited examples that such fraud has occurred.” Morning Edition is among the most widely listened to programs, with about 90% the listenership of Rush Limbaugh or Sean Hannity on radio.

Around April 23 there is relatively high activity in right-wing media involving stories referencing Stacey Abrams’ statement that Trump is afraid of mail-in voting because “he is illegitimate and should not hold office,” but although these appear in influential media like Breitbart and TruePundit, the stories get little traction on Facebook or Twitter. Much more influential [is a story by Mark Hemingway published on Real Clear Politics](#) on April 23, about a report of the Public Interest Legal Foundation (PILF), a conservative organization dedicated to purging voter rolls and spreading claims about voter fraud, that 28 million ballots had gone missing between 2012-2018. The story received extensive engagements on Facebook, and was linked and reported in the [New York Post](#) and [replicated on the Gateway Pundit](#). The story, as we will see, continued to propagate in the right-wing media ecosystem over the following weeks. As a factual matter, the story was debunked by [ProPublica by May 2](#).

The final surge in attention in April 28-30 was prompted by the conclusion of Ohio’s mail-in primary, and release of an AP poll showing that Democrats supported mail-in voting more than Republicans did. The right-wing media ecosystem also reported on the poll, but [primarily responded to a statement by Nancy Pelosi](#) in an interview on MSNBC Live that vote-by-mail would be a central demand in the next coronavirus relief package. Part of the response was substantial [syndication across the right-wing](#) media of a piece by Tony Perkins, President of the Family Research Council, a long-standing Fundamentalist Protestant lobbying organization, which reiterated the claims of the PILF report on the 28 million mail-in ballots lost in four elections as “28 Million reasons not to trust a mail-in election.” On April 30, Mark Hemingway’s Realclearpolitics story on the PILF report was tweeted by his wife, [Mollie Hemingway](#), senior editor of the Federalist and a Fox News contributor, whose tweet was then [retweeted by Donald Trump](#) the next day. The PILF report was the only major successful bit of disinformation related to voter fraud by mail that did not originate with the President, his campaign, or the RNC. But it, too, comes from relatively established sources—a non-profit right-wing think tank, propagated through one of the most centrist of right-wing sites, Real Clear Politics, repeated by a longstanding Fundamentalist activist organization, the Family Research Council, and tweeted by a Fox News contributor. It is not an example of right-wing conspiracies that emerge on the fringe, outside of the commercial outrage industry or the established right, that force themselves into public consciousness.

The one major conspiratorial story related to mail-in voting that circulated in April was based more on unstated associations and driven by what, by now, is an established outlet, Breitbart. This was an assertion that the Democrats vote-by-mail efforts are funded by George Soros. The origin of this [story was Breitbart](#), a report whose core factual assertions were true: that the Brennan Center is the leading

organization pushing programs to enable vote-by-mail, that it is funded by the Open Society Foundations, and that other organizations that are involved in expanding access to the vote are the ACLU, Common Cause, Public Citizen, the League of Women Voters all received funding at one point or another from the Open Society Foundations. Without following up in detail on the specifics of the funding, there is no clear reason to doubt the factual veracity of the claims. The primary impulse is not falsehood, but an effort to harness the conspiracy thinking and antisemitism that references to Soros evoke. None of these stories gravitated with any influence into center, center-left, or left publications, where references to Soros were few, and focused either on major announcements of Open Society Foundations co-funding Way to Win with the Ford Foundation, and a story from ProPublica, republished primarily on the left, about disinformation on the right using Facebook, which mentioned anti-Soros narratives.

Looking at the stories that were linked to by the largest number of Facebook groups over the course of April 2020 certainly supports the proposition that social media clickbait is alive and well on the platform. Raise the Black and NewsPunch for example, did very well. The specifics of the materials distributed, however, hardly support a narrative in which crazy stories invented by alt-right trolls, Macedonian teenagers, or any other nethercyberworld dwellers drive American political communications. The first simply recirculated a two-week-old tweet from James Wood and Tom Fitton, both media and political elite supporters of Trump. The latter circulated a six-months-old true report from a local newspaper, hyping its significance as evidence that voter fraud is rampant. The timing of both posts (April 7 and 9, respectively) reflect a “jump on the bandwagon” dynamic, taking advantage of media attention generated by Trump, his campaign, and the RNC. Other high performing right-wing oriented stories are from Breitbart or RealClearPolitics, while high performing posts critical of the mail-in voter fraud claims all respond to Trump’s media appearances and offer mostly full-throated rebuttals to the vote-by-mail fraud disinformation campaign. Posts that received high engagements without being linked by diverse Facebook groups (and may reflect spam engagements) largely consisted of [reporting on the President’s press](#) briefings or tweets and linking to Fox News coverage of these statements.

Right-wing sites did try to push other narratives. [Breitbart tried to push allegations of a Democratic plan to steal 24 million votes](#) by advancing mail-in voting. These allegations were made in a book and article by Eric Eggers, a writer at the Government Accountability Initiative (GAI). The GAI was co-founded by Steve Bannon and funded by Robert Mercer, and was the outfit that had successfully produced the “Clinton Cash” attack on Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election cycle, as well as pushing the Biden Ukraine corruption narrative in 2018 and 2019. While that story was [repeated and linked to by the Daily Wire](#), and ranked within the top 40 most Facebook-shared stories in April, it nonetheless did not get replicated and shared across right wing media, much less outside the right wing media ecosystem, in the way that the RealClearPolitics story did, particularly after it was retweeted out by the president.

### **May 2020**

After its launch in the early days of April, the campaign to undermine participation and confidence in mail-in voting continued into May. It reached peak attention on May 21 and May 27, which are the highest peaks by number of stories, tweets, and Facebook engagement until the July 30 and mid-August explosion of concern over whether the Postal Service was being intentionally hobbled by Louis DeJoy,

Trump's appointee to Postmaster General. A closer look at the May data reveals, other than those two peak days, there are four more, smaller spikes in coverage: May 5, 8-9, 13, and 15, peaks in stories, only the May 8-9 peak was also associated with a spike in Twitter attention.

May 1, as we noted, started with Donald Trump retweeting Mollie Hemmingway's dissemination of the PILF report asserting that 28 million ballots "have gone missing" in the four elections from 2012 to 2018. The small spike in stories on May 5, particularly in the center and center-left, is driven by syndication of an AP story entitled "[Vote-by-mail debate raises fears of disinformation](#)," which offers a superb case study of a problem we identified already in the 2016 election: in the presence of asymmetric propaganda, traditional journalistic efforts to not only be objective, but to visibly perform neutrality can actually emphasize and support right-wing propaganda. Recall that Donald Trump's May 1 tweet on "RIGGED ELECTIONS!" is a retweet of Hemmingway's tweet of the RealClearPolitics story about the PILF factually questionable report.

The story's opening line is: "A bitterly partisan debate unfolding on whether more Americans should cast their vote through the mail during the pandemic is provoking online disinformation and conspiracy theories that could undermine trust in the results..." Note that the partisan debate is (a) passive voice unfolding and (b) provoking *online* disinformation.

The next paragraph states:

Historically, there is no evidence of widespread voter fraud through mail-in voting. But social media users are already pushing grandiose theories casting doubt on the method. President Donald Trump has encouraged the skepticism, saying during a televised briefing that "a lot of people cheat with mail-in voting." On Saturday, he tweeted: "Don't allow RIGGED ELECTIONS!"

While the first sentence is factual and important to emphasize, note that our review of April stories about mail-in voting fraud makes eminently clear that it is not "social media users" who are "already pushing grandiose theories casting doubt." And yet it is these anonymous "social media users" who are the subjects of the first active voice sentence in the piece. Rather, from the very beginning of April, it was President Donald Trump, aided by Fox News, the RNC's chairwoman, his campaign communications team and other political and media elite Republicans who are "pushing grandiose theories." And Trump's intervention, reported here as on TV and by his Twitter handle, is what triggers coverage across the media ecosystem; these are not "social media users" as the term is deployed in this paragraph, and the causal direction of the social media attention is exactly inverted in the AP story relative to what it was in reality.

The story never followed up on the actual tweets of the president. It never identified the tweet it mentioned as circulating the PILF paper, and although published two days after ProPublica debunked that PILF report, the AP story makes no mention of the debunking of the specific story the president retweeted, or the organization behind the report. Instead, in the very next paragraph, the AP story itself proceeds to lend credence to the underlying concern with vote-by-mail, by writing:

Justice Department officials are concerned foreign adversaries could exploit any vulnerabilities in the vote-by-mail process, especially since even minor tampering could trigger widespread doubts about the integrity of the vote.

Although the story follows this up with “Several disinformation experts said they have not found evidence yet that foreign actors are covertly pushing a false narrative about mail-in voting,” it again quickly reasserts a quote from a Washington think tank that “But a sham social media campaign that feeds existing doubts about the U.S. election process would align with the Kremlin’s playbook.” The story then continues on with several paragraphs of fear mongering about what might happen with foreign interference, followed by several paragraphs quoting reasonable, well-educated people raising concerns with a major transformation of election practices that will play out for the first time in a highly contested election. These are followed by a few more paragraphs on Russian propaganda and RT. Again, the structure of the piece lends credence to the skepticism about mail-in voting that supposedly social media users are stoking, but is in fact a Republican strategic propaganda campaign to reduce turnout, built on the belief that low turnout helps Republicans win.

The story shifted from Russia to Facebook with reference to Facebook group chatter that Democrats are hyping the pandemic to push for mail-in voting, and asserts that the chatter spiked after Nancy Pelosi’s statements that expanding early voting is necessary to deal with the challenge of the pandemic. But again, as we saw looking at April, the responses to various comments Pelosi made over the course of April were most influentially instigated by a sustained attack by political elites—from President Trump himself, Republican leadership, and Fox News, and was unsurprisingly therefore also present as a spike on Facebook.

Finally, the story concluded with a false equivalence of “for under \$100, the Alaska Republican Party took out a Facebook ad that said: “Democrats are using the coronavirus pandemic to gut election fraud protections. Don’t let them. Add your name to our petition to STOP BALLOT HARVESTING!”; and to gain “balance,” the story continues: “Meanwhile, liberal social media users are pushing mail-in voting as a surefire option, glossing over some of the challenges such drastic changes to the voting system will present. Facebook groups like Occupy Democrats and Being Liberal widely circulated an article promoting vote-by-mail, saying it has a history of success because the U.S. military has used the method for decades.” The fact that the story so circulated was published in mainstream media like NBC News and Business Insider went unmentioned in the AP story.

What we see here is a classic case in which AP, syndicated across many diverse centrist outlets around the country, itself contributes to the confusion and misdirection. The actual story of debates over the month that preceded this AP story is a simple one. Democrats, led by Nancy Pelosi, tried to include in the coronavirus stimulus bill support for the states to expand vote-by-mail, aligned with the Democrats’ long term goal of expanding access to the vote. Republicans, following their own long-term strategy of making access to the ballot harder, attacked mail-in voting as raising a risk of fraud. The Republican strategy was led by Donald Trump using televised press briefings and interviews and his Twitter account, and supported by RNC chairwoman Ronna McDonald, various other Republican leadership figures, as well as by fairly established Republican-aligned organizations like Judicial Watch, the Public Interest Legal Foundation and the Family Research Council. By emphasizing unnamed “social media users”, Russian propaganda, and Facebook, the AP covers up the basic story—that vote-by-mail fraud is Republican partisan propaganda to prevent widespread adoption of mail-in voting during the pandemic, which as President Trump put it so plainly in his April 8th tweet, [“for whatever reason, doesn’t work out well for Republicans.”](#) If anything, the arc of the AP story lends credence to that partisan propaganda by propagating a narrative that “both sides” are politicizing vote-by-mail and by quoting non-partisan sources to reinforce the Republicans’ effort to increase public concern about vote-by-mail and the risk of fraud. It is almost certain that an AP report such as this was seen by more readers, as well as local news

reporters and opinion writers, than the Facebook groups that propagate conspiracy theories. And the damage to the legitimacy of the election that such stories are likely to cause is therefore likely larger.

The first real Twitter spike in May, accompanying a spike in stories by right-wing media, occurs on Saturday, May 9. On Friday, May 8th, [Governor Gavin Newsom signed an executive order](#) providing for mail-in ballots to be sent to every registered voter in California for the November presidential election. That decision was [covered](#) and criticized by Fox News, [the Trump campaign itself](#), and by top media across the right-wing media ecosystem. That same day the Republican National Committee of a “Protect the Vote” campaign, against “the left’s attempts to ‘use coronavirus and the courts to legalize ballot harvesting, implement a nationwide mail-in ballot system, and eliminate nearly every safeguard in our elections.’” That campaign also saw [substantial coverage on right-wing media](#), as did a [survey the RNC released](#) claiming that two-thirds of Americans were worried about voter fraud by mail, [which also got wide coverage on the right](#). Later on the afternoon of the 8th, the LA County Registrar announced that the city [would add an in-person voting center in Lancaster](#) for the following week’s special election to replace Representative Katie Hill in California’s 25th District. The decision responded to complaints filed several days earlier by Democrats in LA, [emphasizing that Lancaster, a city with a large Black population, had no voting center](#). That evening, the [National Republican Congressional Committee](#) (NRCC) tweeted out that the Democrats are trying to steal the CA 25th election by adding a voting booth only in a Democratic-heavy area, an accusation [repeated by RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel](#) soon thereafter. The next morning, Saturday May 9, NRCC chair [“sent a memo to all House Republicans ... with an ‘urgent call to arms’](#),” repeating the same accusation, as Fox News reported in an exclusive. By midday, Trump had connected Newsom’s order and the LA County registrar’s decision into a single grand conspiracy: that Democrats want both universal mail-in voting and discriminatory placement of in-person voting booths in Democratic voter-heavy towns in order to steal the election. He [tweeted](#), “So in California, the Democrats, who fought like crazy to get all mail-in only ballots, and succeeded, have just opened a voting booth in the most Democrat area in the State. They are trying to steal another election. It’s all rigged out there. These votes must not count. SCAM!” He followed this with [a second tweet](#) a few hours later. These were the two most influential tweets that day, followed by [Ronna McDaniel’s tweet of the RNC’s poll](#) touting 62% of Americans are concerned about voter fraud, complemented by a [Fitton tweet](#) criticizing Newsom’s executive order as inviting voter fraud. The most tweeted URLs on May 9th were the Daily Caller story about the RNC poll, and the newly launched RNC campaign Protect the Vote. Facebook posts did not respond as actively to the two days’ events. Instead, the posts that received the most engagement were a story on [NewsPunch](#), the new name of one of the most notorious clickbait fabricators in 2016 and 2017, YourNewsWire, and a 2019 story from the [Washington Times](#), both reviving the guilty plea of a Democratic City Clerk in Michigan who had pled guilty to altering 193 mail-in ballots. This would become another of the various anecdotes that would come to be the evidence that mail-in ballot fraud is rampant, although at the time Michigan’s Secretary of State said that the [changes did not affect the outcome of any election](#).

The next two observable spikes in online stories occur on May 13 and 15. May 13 exhibits a mini-spike, in stories only, not social media. It was led by coverage of a [lawsuit filed by Texas AG Ken Paxton](#), asking the Texas Supreme Court to order local officials to reject requests for mail-in ballots that cite fear of coronavirus as their reason for requesting a mail-in ballot. This widely-syndicated AP story was complemented, primarily on the center-left media, with [reporting on the success of a Republican candidate](#) in the CA-25 election that had been the subject of the NRCC’s “call to arms,” a mostly-by-mail special election to the House. The center-left media framed that victory as partial refutation of the Republican concerns that mail-in ballots will systematically favor Democrats. This mini-spike was not accompanied by major attention on either Twitter or Facebook.

The much smaller spike in attention on May 15<sup>th</sup> is the only example we found of a day on which a temporally aligned spike in stories across platforms did not reflect convergence on content as well. The spike in online stories is readily explained by the combination of Democrats' efforts to [reintroduce 3.6 billion dollars in funding for vote-by-mail as part of a coronavirus stimulus package](#), and the Texas Supreme Court's acceptance of AG Paxton's petition to block mail-in voting purely for fear of getting coronavirus. The widely syndicated [CBS/AP reporting on the Texas Supreme Court decision](#) was framed in partisan terms, "Voting by mail in Texas is generally limited to those 65 or older or those with a 'sickness or physical condition' that prevents voting in person. Paxton petitioned the Republican-dominated high court after officials in some predominantly Democratic areas approved measures to allow voters to claim a disability and request mail-in ballots if they are worried about getting sick at polling places." The AP report on the House stimulus bill, in turn, framed the story more as a Democratic partisan move, entitled: "Democrats try again with sweeping mail voting requirements." The story itself seems almost written to fit a Republican framing,

The most controversial aspect of the election funding section of the bill is another round of mandates that Democrats wish to place on states to ensure they have fair and safe elections at a time when crowded polling stations are a potential health risk.

The bill would require states to end requirements that voters get a legal excuse to request an absentee ballot, mandate 15 days of early voting and order states to mail a ballot to every voter during emergencies.

The Senate blocked similar requirements in a coronavirus relief bill in March.

The active partisan players in this framing are "Democrats," while the blocking, passive respondent is institutional: "The Senate." The entire framing of Democrats trying to "federalize" what should be a states' issue is, similarly, a continuous theme in Republican propaganda around vote-by-mail. In this regard the story offers another example of Republicans successfully leveraging the neutrality norms to recruit the AP to legitimate and disseminate their strategic disinformation campaign on voter fraud by mail.

The spike on social media, by contrast, was driven by a Fox News report published that day under the headline "[Nevada's vote-by-mail primary stirs fraud concerns, as unclaimed ballots pile up: 'Something stinks here'](#)". On Twitter, the spike is almost exclusively constructed of permutations of tweeting out that story. On Facebook, that day, the second most highly linked post represents the first time we encounter a New World Order-type conspiracy theory of the type we usually think of in public discussions of conspiracy theories propagated on Facebook.

All these earlier spikes in attention are overshadowed towards the end of the month, on May 21 and 27. The former [was triggered by Trump's May 20 twitter attacks on Michigan and Nevada's mail-in-vote](#), in particular his [threat to withhold federal funding from states that implement](#) universal mail-in voting. Some of these stories had explicitly debunking framings, such as the Washington Post's Fact Checker "[Trump's phony claims about 'illegal' voting in Michigan and Nevada.](#)" The AP's framing of that day's story directly pointed the finger at Trump and framed the actions of the states he was trying to punish as [intended to make voting easier and safer during the pandemic](#). The story was also central to a spike in right-wing media coverage of the topic that day. On Twitter, surprisingly perhaps, Trump's two tweets about Michigan and Nevada were only the second and third most retweeted. Both were beaten out by Congressman [Adam Schiff's tweet](#) rebutting the president's claims that vote-by-mail raises the risk of fraud, with other tweets receiving notable, but not equivalent attention, from Elizabeth Warren, on one

side, and Tom Fitton, on the other side, excoriating and embracing the president’s threats to withhold funding. On Facebook, the most widely linked posts link to stories in mainstream (New York Times, CBS, NBC) and online centrist (Yahoo) or left-oriented (Vox) media that covered Trump’s threat. One of the top 20 posts by engagements was from a story from [Breitbart](#) about a [Department of Justice prosecution of](#) an election official in Pennsylvania, a Democrat, who pled guilty to fraudulently voting multiple times at a voting booth in order to shape the results from his precinct in exchange for money. Meanwhile, on Fox News’ America’s Newsroom, on the morning of May 22, [Chris Wallace appeared on a several minute segment](#) and asserted consistently and repeatedly that “there really is no record of massive fraud or even serious fraud from mail-in voting,” that there is no evidence it helps Democrats more than Republicans, that possibly ballot harvesting could lead to problems, and there is one case where a Republican in North Carolina used it to commit fraud, but that is no evidence of fraud when people mail in their own ballots. Wallace then proceeded to directly refute Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick’s claims to the contrary. Interestingly, two of the Facebook posts that received the most engagement in May, from [Breitbart](#) and [Conservative Opinion](#), reported Wallace’s comments without refutation or negative commentary.



Figure 15: Chris Wallace on America’s News Room, May 22, “no history of fraud at all”

The largest spike in coverage in May, and one of the two the largest spikes in attention given mail-in voting fraud throughout the period of coverage, was sparked by the conflict between Trump and Twitter on May 26 and 27. On May 26, Trump tweeted “There is NO WAY (ZERO!) that Mail-In Ballots will be anything less than substantially fraudulent.... The Governor of California is sending Ballots to millions of people,...” The precipitating event was that the [Republican National Committee sued California Governor Gavin Newsom](#) that day, together with the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) and the California Republican Party, seeking to block the Governor’s plan to mail absentee ballots to all Californian voters for 2020. [Judicial Watch too launched a similar suit](#) a couple of days earlier. It’s reasonable to assume from the timing of Trump’s tweet, that the extensive discussion with [RNC chair Ronna McDonald on Fox and Friends](#) that morning, about an hour before Trump’s tweet, was the precipitant for that particular tweet (given that the suit itself had been filed a day earlier). On the 26th, Trump’s words were retweeted and supported by [Dan Patrick, Lieutenant Governor of Texas](#), [James Wood criticized a CNN story](#) collecting sources of evidence that show that fraud is a negligible problem with vote-by-mail, and White House Press Secretary [Kayleigh McEnany tweeted out the Fox News](#) story from May 15th, in support of the president’s Twitter attack on Nevada’s plans. Twitter, the platform, in turn, marked Trump’s tweet with a caution, in red, “Get the facts about mail-in ballots!”

linking to its own tweets and noting CNN, Washington Post, and other outlets have found Trump’s claim about the risk of voter fraud associated with mail-in voting to be unsubstantiated.

Trump’s [early morning tweet on May 27 responded to Twitter’s action by threatening to “close them down” or “strongly regulate” social media](#) because “Social Media Platforms totally silence conservative voices.” There was also some coverage outside of right-wing media based on a report in the [Tampa Bay Times](#) that Kayleigh McEnany had voted by mail 11 times in 10 years, a report [repeated on CBS](#). McEnany, in turn, responded in [a widely retweeted tweet](#) that “absentee ballots” mean you are absent, and that’s fine; President Trump is against mail-in ballots, “which has a high propensity for voter fraud.” McEnany tweeted out additional arguments that voter fraud is a problem with mail-in ballots, quoting from the ProPublica report from early March that “[A bipartisan commission led in-part by former President Jimmy Carter \(a Democrat\) concluded that mail-in ballots “remain the LARGEST SOURCE OF potential voter FRAUD.”](#) as well as a Wall Street Journal editorial arguing for a tightly restricted vote-by-mail option, to avoid “[A Vote-by-mail nightmare.](#)” A video of [McEnany’s performance in a press briefing](#) was also the second most widely engaged Facebook post in our May data. The next most retweeted [tweet was from Sean Spicer](#), tweeting out [a Washington Times](#) story about a West Virginia postal worker who changed several primary absentee ballot requests from Democrat to Republican, a story that, in its [Daily Beast telling](#), was widely tweeted that day. The story from West Virginia also got extensive engagement on Facebook, with stories from the Breitbart, the Gateway Pundit, the Daily Wire, and the Epoch Times among the top 20 most engaged posts that day, alongside mainstream media focused on the Twitter decision to add a warning to Trump’s tweet. Meanwhile, on Twitter, [FEC Commissioner Ellen Weintraub tweeted](#) her refutation of the claims of voter fraud associated with mailed ballots “conspiracy theory.” Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton joined the fray with a Fox News opinion piece, which both [he](#) and [the RNC](#) tweeted with many retweets the next day, but again, on the 28th, the most widely retweeted tweet was [from the president himself](#), celebrating Paxton’s successes in persuading the courts to block municipalities from expanding vote-by-mail opportunities for their citizens. As in many other cases, the tweet asserts without basis that mail-in ballots will lead to “MASSIVE FRAUD AND ABUSE,” will be detrimental politically to Republicans, (“THE END OF OUR GREAT REPUBLICAN PARTY,”) and that the Republican Party losing is a national tragedy (“WE CAN NEVER LET THIS TRAGEDY BEFALL OUR NATION.”) Posts on Facebook, in turn, followed the events of the past two days in similar patterns of attention, with Trump’s own Facebook page getting the second largest number of engagements (after an ABC news story) for a through-the-looking-glass post in which he, as president, will protect free speech by regulating private companies that fact check his tweets based on fact checks by major independent media outlets. (Figure 16)



Figure 16. Trump May 26 Facebook post

The last ten days of May encapsulate what our review of the entire first six months of the disinformation campaign concerning voter fraud makes clear. The campaign is driven by political elites: the president and his staff, the RNC and NRCC, and high ranking Republican state officials. The primary channels of communication for party propaganda is Fox News (with the notable exception of Chris Wallace), amplified by Trump's Twitter and feeding back into the right-wing media ecosystem. These propaganda efforts are integrated into an institutional and political strategy of litigation and administrative actions designed to prevent or contain mail-in voting, and to limit access to the ballot during the pandemic in the 2020 election. According to the president's explicit statements in interviews, press conferences, and on Twitter, the strategy is designed to achieve partisan electoral advantage.

Mainstream media stories that seek to explain rumors and conspiracy theories about mail-in voting in terms of shady Facebook groups; unnamed social media users; or Russian propagandists are not merely beside the point. They are dangerous distractions from the very intentional and direct attack by the Republican Party and the president on measures aimed to make possible widespread access to the ballot in a time of pandemic because that party believes that its strategic electoral imperative is to restrict access to the ballot. That strategic imperative may make sense from the perspective of a minority party that has successfully wielded power by leveraging every countermajoritarian lever that American institutions provide. But it does not help American democracy for its major media outlets to divert attention from that basic calculus and point fingers at "neutral" external factors, be they technology, Russians, or unnamed irresponsible fringe social media actors.

### ***June to mid-July 2020: A relative lull***

June and most of July did not see quite as much attention to the mail-vote fraud frame, certainly less than May or late July and most of August would see. June 3 and 11 saw minor spikes, primarily in left and center-left media stories. June 3 largely involved continued working out of the prior week's fracas from the Trump-Twitter, Trump-California dustup. June 11 was almost entirely driven by [coverage, much of it syndication of an AP story, of Joe Biden's statement](#) the night before, on Trevor Noah's Daily Show, that "This president is going to try and steal this election", noting that "This is a guy who said all mail-in ballots are fraudulent, voting by mail, while he sits behind the desk in the Oval Office and writes his mail-in ballot to vote in the primary." Neither of these provoked much social media response.

June 22 was awakened by an early morning tweet by Trump, in which he proclaimed "RIGGED 2020 ELECTION: MILLIONS OF MAIL-IN BALLOTS WILL BE PRINTED BY FOREIGN COUNTRIES, AND OTHERS. IT WILL BE THE SCANDAL OF OUR TIMES!" This theme of foreign interference was introduced the day before by Attorney General Bill Barr, in an interview with Maria Bartiromo on Sunday Morning Futures on June 21, an interview [whose video on Breitbart](#) received extensive Facebook engagements. The interview was also previewed on [Fox and Friends on Sunday](#) in a segment that emphasized Barr's baseless assertions that foreign governments could print up absentee ballots, and which was referred back to on June 22 in Fox and Friends in the morning, not long before Trump's tweet. This tweet produced the expected outpouring of fact checking across the mainstream media ecosystem, including widely republished and syndicated fact checks from [NPR](#), and [USA Today](#). Besides Trump's tweet (as well as a later morning tweet along the same lines), most of the highly-retweeted tweets that day responded

with efforts to refute or reject Trump's claim: with [Dan Rather's exhortations to journalists](#) not to lose sight of the core story gaining the most traction.<sup>10</sup> That day also saw significant syndication of [an AP story pointing out the hypocrisy of the attack on mail-in voting](#) given that not only the president, but the Vice-President and many of the president's closest advisors have repeatedly voted by mail. On June 25th, the president again insisted that mail-in ballots would lead to fraud at a Fox News televised town hall in Green Bay, WI; the next morning on America's NewsRoom on Fox Chris Wallace once more insisted that there was no history or evidence of mail-in voter fraud, and once more [Breitbart reported on these comments](#) in a story that received a high volume of engagements on Facebook.

June 26 and 27 lit up primarily on the right, with the announcement by New Jersey's Attorney General of charges against four individuals for committing voter fraud in Paterson, N.J., following an investigation by the U.S. Postal Investigation Service that found hundreds of mail-in ballots in a single mailbox. On Facebook, posts were anchored primarily around local New Jersey Media: the most widely linked story by a wide range of Facebook groups was a story on [Shore News Network](#), a local news site whose owner described as "the Fox News of New Jersey," and coverage on [New Jersey 101.5](#). The leading coverage on Twitter consisted of tweets and mentions of a [Sara Carter Show story](#) on the charges, including many retweets of Carter's own tweets of the story, with some references to a John Solomon version of the same story. Tweets by Laura Ingraham of a local TV report on the events on the morning of the 26th, and by Maria Bartiromo of a HotAir version, continued to draw attention to this story through June 27. By June 28, Breitbart, Gateway Pundit, the Daily Caller, Epoch Times, and other sources on the right had picked up the New Jersey prosecutions as exhibit one in the case for the proposition that mail-in ballots were ripe for the fraudulent taking, and tweets and Facebook posts pushed these outlets across the right-wing media ecosystem. Versions of this story on [the Blaze](#) and the [DailyWire](#) registered particularly large numbers of engagements on Facebook. And because the defendants were all Black and Hispanic, the imagery associated with the story was distinctly racialized and featured prominently in all the right wing coverage, as Figure 17 from Fox News amply demonstrates. Trump himself [tweeted the story out](#) later that evening, this time following, rather than instigating, the wave of attention.

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<sup>10</sup> "In 2016, Pres. Trump claimed voter fraud to explain his loss in the popular vote. It was a lie. Now, with horrible polling, he's trying to delegitimize the vote - through suppression and more lies about voting by mail. This is a big story. Put all his allies on the record."



Figure 17: Screen capture from America’s News Room, [June 28, 12:23-12:24pm EST](#)

A distinct take on the story that received substantial attention on Facebook and in web linking was [Mark Hemingway’s take on RealClearPolitics](#), in which he tied the fraud charges concerning 800 ballots to the fact that 19% (over 3000) of the ballots mailed in in the Paterson election were rejected as flawed, suggesting a much broader concern with the integrity of voting by mail. This story elicited substantially more engagements on Facebook than any other on June 27, and remained first or second by that measure through the end of the month.

On July 10th, a spike of Twitter attention and stories accompanied reports of the guilty plea of the West Virginia mail carrier whose story we first encountered when he was charged, although the top tweets of that day are still generic Donald Trump morning tweets asserting voter fraud, and a [Donald Trump Jr. tweet](#) of a [Breitbart story](#) based on a report from the local Fox affiliate in Atlanta about a voter who received a mail-in ballot request addressed to her dead cat. On Facebook, the West Virginia story remained the most highly engaged story for several days, from July 10 to 14. The July 13 mini-spike in the number of online media stories was comprised primarily of syndicated stories: an AP story that emphasized [that “California rejected 100,000 mail-in ballots.”](#) suggesting that voting at home, without poll workers to help, could lead to errors and therefore disqualification of voters, and noting that “President Donald Trump is among those questioning the integrity of vote-by-mail elections.” A [second AP story](#) that was syndicated widely explored the new, added costs associated with running an election in a pandemic, particularly preparing, sending, and counting mail-in ballots. The story started with a very apolitical statement of the problem, “COVID-19-related worries are bringing demands for steps to make sure elections just four months away are safe. But long-promised federal aid to help cash-starved states cope is stalled on Capitol Hill. The money would help pay for transforming the age-old voting process into a pandemic-ready system.” But over the next few paragraphs the story outlines the partisan positions on the question of funding. The AP stories were sufficiently in line with the right oriented skepticism about mail-in voting that both the high cost and disqualified ballot stories also were

republished in right wing media that day. The third story that got substantial replication [focused on an NPR report](#), aired on Morning Edition that day, that analyzed mail-in ballots in primaries in 2020, and emphasized that at least 65,000 mail-in primary ballots had not been counted because they arrived after the deadline, although voters were often not at fault. By July 20, there was an increase in coverage related to [Trump's interview with Chris Wallace on Fox News Sunday](#), in which the president said "we have to see" in response to Wallace's question about whether he would accept the election results, and the CNBC, Washington Post, and Huffington Post stories about the interview became among the most engaged Facebook posts in July. [Maria Bartiromo's July 23 interview with Tom Fitton](#), keying off the interview she had conducted with Barr the month before and starting with "concerns about mail-in voting, that's the next way that some of these skeptics are going to cheat coming into this election," was also among the videos that received the most Facebook engagement in July. But the real spike in coverage would have to wait until the closing two days of the month.

### ***Late-July and August 2020***

The major spike in coverage of mail-in ballots and fraud on July 30 was entirely driven by responses across the political spectrum, with horror or support, [to a morning tweet by Trump](#) stating that "With Universal Mail-In Voting (not Absentee Voting, which is good), 2020 will be the most INACCURATE & FRAUDULENT Election in history. It will be a great embarrassment to the USA. Delay the Election until people can properly, securely and safely vote???" It is not entirely clear what precipitated this tweet. On July 28, Attorney General Barr testified in Congress and admitted, under questioning, [that he had no evidence that voter fraud occurred](#) with mail-in voting. It is possible that the debates around Barr's testimony prompted Trump's July 30 tweet. More likely, on July 29 the RNC had tweeted out a CBS News simulation, on CBS This Morning, setting up a simulation of mail-in ballots to see how many would arrive at a simulated election office. The television station's simulation showed that three percent of the 100 ballots they sent did not arrive. This "experiment" was then cited by the RNC Research Twitter handle, [caught Trump's attention](#), and he [retweeted the RNC Research at 7:29pm on July 29](#). This "experiment" was then featured prominently (alongside coverage of Trump's own floating of the idea of delaying the election) in right wing media on July 30. While we cannot be certain that this episode led to his tweet, 13 hours later, proposing delaying the election, that may well have been the trigger for Trump's musings the next morning. That certainly was the association [that Laura Ingraham's Lifezette](#) made later that day (suggesting that the CBS story prompted Trump to his email). There was no major Twitter activity peak around vote-by-mail fraud that day, but the most retweeted story that day was by Fox contributor Sara Carter, who tweeted out a clip in which Jenna Ellis of the Trump campaign appeared on Tucker Carlson's show to reiterate the mail fraud allegations.

Interestingly, on Facebook, almost every one of the top fifty highest engagement stories were mainstream media stories about Trump's musing about delaying the election. The most widespread engagements went to the [BBC version](#), the [AP's version](#), [CNN](#). The AP's report framed the proposal in terms of the president, "lagging in the polls and grappling with deepening economic and public health crises, on Thursday floated the startling idea of delaying the Nov. 3 presidential election." The report immediately continued in this tone, specifically characterising Trump's word as "His campaign to sow doubt about the election's outcome drew immediate pushback from Democrats and Republicans alike in

a nation that has held itself up as a beacon to the world for its history of peaceful transfer of power.” This framing is a far cry from AP stories earlier in the disinformation campaign, leading with a clear identification of political motive, and a clear assertion of how far outside of the constitutional norms the tweet was. Coverage by the New York Times, Bloomberg, the Washington Post, CBS, and other mainstream outlets also performed very well on Facebook. Some posts that did exceptionally well were not coverage of the delay controversy, but an [NPR explainer on what mail-in voting is](#), and Vote.org’s landing page for directing voters to how they can request mail-in ballots. The only posts from the right that were in the top 50 that day were a Townhall post about the CBS experiment from the day before, and a churlish Gateway Pundit piece entitled “If people can line up to pay respects to Rep John Lewis, then we can have in-person voting in November.”

On July 31, the BBC story was still getting linked from the widest array of Facebook pages, but various conservative sites began to emerge, among them a well-known clickbait factory, neon nettle, which introduced what would become a major focus of right-wing media over the course of August: the New Jersey case in Paterson, at this stage still with the framing of “four charged with mail-in voter fraud,” and later in the month, as we will see, the court order to re-run the election because of the fraud.

Another story, originally [published by the Washington Post](#) on the evening of July 30, and would be covered by the [New York Times](#) story on July 31, started to get more attention on Facebook on August 1 and 2 (although a [Facebook post by Heather Cox Richardson](#) that explained the essentials of the story would attract more links from other Facebook pages than either those mass media stories on August 1). The Washington Post quoted postal employees and union officials “say the changes implemented by Trump fundraiser-turned-postmaster general Louis DeJoy are contributing to a growing perception that mail delays are the result of a political effort to undermine absentee voting.” The Times was even more forthright, framing the story as part of “Trump’s yearslong assault on the Postal Service.” The heart of the story, as the Times framed it, was “In recent weeks, at the direction of a Trump campaign megadonor who was [recently named the postmaster general](#), the service has stopped paying mail carriers and clerks the overtime necessary to ensure that deliveries can be completed each day. That and other changes have led to reports of letters and packages being delayed by as many as several days.” Concerns over Louis DeJoy’s reorganization of the Postal Service, in particular its potential political motivation, and aimed to hobble mail-in voting would become the central story of the month, [continued over the following weeks](#), peaking between August 13-18.

Over the next few days, Twitter followed a consistent pattern of media and political elites tweeting out mostly mass media reported stories. Ari [Berman’s tweet](#) listing counter arguments to Trump’s claims was widely retweeted, as was a [Washington Examiner story](#) that excavated and mischaracterized a 2008 interview with Debbie Wasserman Schulz expressing skepticism about mail-in voting.<sup>11</sup> RNC chair [Ronna McDaniel tweeted](#) in support of protests in Nevada against implementation of vote-by-mail in Nevada. A [Wall Street Journal op-ed](#) by Scott Hogenon, an experienced Republican communications strategist and consultant, entitled: *An invitation in the mail for election fraud* also got substantial retweets, as did an August 2 [story in the New York Times](#) about how the delay in mail-in ballots could cause significant

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<sup>11</sup> At the time, Howard Dean was chair of the DNC and had proposed mailing ballots as a way for Florida, where Wasserman Schulz was a representative, to redo its primary without breaking DNC rules about early primaries, so the state could have its DNC representatives seated. The Washington Examiner described Schulz as having said there was a possibility of fraud. The CNN story did not quote her as making such a statement. She only said it was risky to experiment with a new method in a new approach to an election in a crucial vote.

mistaken reporting on the results on election night itself, which received extensive Twitter attention August 3-4. [Ari Fleischer tweeted](#) out [a New York Post](#) story "In NYC, a judge ruled ballots without postmarks count, even if they arrived 2 days after the election. This gives the post office huge power. The morning after a close election, ballot harvesting and no postmarks can change results." The lede of the NY Post story was: "A federal judge ordered election officials to count thousands of mail-in ballots throughout New York State that were declared invalid for not having a post-mark or arriving at offices shortly after the June 23 primary." [Jaime Harrison tweeted an attack on his rival in the S.C. Senate race, Lindsay Graham](#), linking to [a Salon article](#) that called out Graham as a hypocrite for saying vote-by-mail is prone to fraud while voting by mail himself. Gateway Pundit published a story about Trump's anticipated challenge of Nevada mail-in voting in court; while a [USA Today story on the West Virginia mail carrier](#) was tweeted out both as evidence of fraud (on the right) and as evidence the system worked (he was caught) on the left. On August 4th, Trump appeared at a press conference and, in response to a reporter's question, wove together the range of stories: Hemingway's one-in-five ballots rejected in New York, Paterson NJ, the West Virginia mail carrier, together with an attack on the historical mismanagement of the post office and the strain that Amazon puts on the Postal Service (Trump's distaste for Amazon is thought to reflect Jeff Bezos's ownership of the Washington Post, but in the press conference Trump refers to people buying online instead of going to shopping malls, suggesting his real estate investor background may drive a more direct grudge against Amazon itself) to again suggest that universal mail-in voting, contrary to absentee ballots, will cause fraud and disruption. In response to a follow-up as to whether he will issue an executive order, Trump demurred, "we have a right to do it," but was focusing on litigating the issue for now. The next day, the Facebook post that received the second most engagements was a 5 minute [video clip](#) from C-Span of the press conference, followed by an assertion that Trump threatened an executive order which he does not have power to issue. Another widely-posted video was [a clip from that afternoon on Bill Hemmer Reports](#), in which conservative commentator Andrew McCarthy hammered in the claim that the post office is overwhelmed and cannot be trusted to deliver the mails. Like the NJ fraud charges story, the imagery (Figure 18) of the Fox News segment seems designed to invoke racial anxiety in viewers concerning who would be stealing the election through vote-by-mail, or whose competence and integrity you (the mostly white, older audience of Fox News) would need to trust in order to trust voting by mail.



Figure 18: Screenshot from Fox commentator Andy McCarthy on Bill Hemmer Reports

The next day, August 5th, Senate Majority whip John Thune came out in defense of mail-in voting, in a statement that received some coverage on [CNN](#) and [Fox News](#). The Fox News online story was framed interestingly as “In the Trump era, it’s rare to see a GOP leader in Congress publicly disagree with President Trump on an issue of great importance to the president. But that’s what happened this week when Sen. John Thune of South Dakota – the second highest-ranking Republican in the Senate – pushed back when questioned about Trump’s monthslong crusade against expanding voting by mail.” But Thune’s comments received scant coverage elsewhere, either in mainstream or social media, and on August 7 the [Lou Dobbs program](#) ran a segment with Tom Fitton of Judicial Watch designed as a direct refutation and rejection of Thune’s statement.

August 7th also offers us an opportunity to observe how discrete bits of the vote-by-mail fraud narrative are produced, and more importantly, the damage that the obsession with Facebook misinformation and the narrow focus on “fact checking” Facebook posts instead of focusing on the strategic disinformation campaign of which they are a part. The day before, August 6, [Fairfax County election officials notified voters](#) that a mass mailing by the Center for Voter Information, a nonprofit dedicated to increasing voter participation among women and other historically-marginalized groups (that is, typically Democratic voters), which sought to mail official mail-in ballot applications to voters in Virginia. Of the two million applications, 500,000 had the return address sent to the [City of Fairfax instead of to Fairfax County](#), and the county’s notice explained the discrepancy and how voters could assure they are getting correct official ballots. The following morning, August 7, the [Washington Examiner](#) and John Solomon’s [JustTheNews](#) wrote about the erroneous mailing in a way that relied on the Trump campaign to transpose it into evidence of voter fraud risk when managed by the actual competent election authorities. [JustTheNews](#) quoted “Jenna Ellis, senior legal adviser to Trump 2020 campaign, reacted to

the absentee ballot application problems in Virginia and connected it to what could happen in Nevada, specifically.... What will stop a 'printing flub' for actual ballots under a universal vote-by-mail system?" she said. "President Trump warned about these dangers months ago. The Democrats' plan to intentionally undermine election security will cause incalculable chaos unless we have securities that our campaign lawsuits are insisting on to protect all voters." The JustTheNews story also included the line: "One person stated that a dead person received one and a pet received one," said Deb Wake, president of the League of Women Voters in Virginia." While the initial [Fox New online report](#) on the affair cited the Washington Examiner's version, it was the JustTheNews version that got the most influence through the good offices of radio talk show host [Mark Levin, in an appearance on Fox and Friends Sunday](#) on August 9, where he reference JustTheNews and reinforced the core message of "500,000 incorrect absentee ballot applications sent across virginia including to dead people," and, like Ellis of the Trump campaign, tied this to Nevada's mail-in ballot program. Trump himself returned to the specific bit of narrative to reinforce his broad voter fraud message in his August 10 press conference, in which the president said ["This just came out: half a million incorrect ballot applications sent all over the state of Virginia to many people that weren't living. They had some sent to pets — dogs. This is what we're going to get into, and it's going to be a disaster. And it's going to be thought of very poorly, and it's going to hurt our country."](#) Recall that the JustTheNews article (this just came in) reflects the Trump campaign's own use and framing of the story, via Jenna Ellis's quote. Despite the overwhelming evidence that the disinformation framing built around the core factual elements of the Virginia story either originated in JustTheNews with the help of the Trump campaign, or in the Trump campaign with the help of JustTheNews, both the [AP Fact check](#) and the [PolitiFact check](#) focused on "A widely circulated post on Facebook asks, "Why isn't anyone mentioning over 500,000 mail in ballots found in Virginia and 200,000 in Nevada with dead peoples names and pets?" The [post](#) was, according to PolitiFact, flagged as part of Facebook's efforts to combat false news and misinformation on its News Feed. The idée fixe with Facebook disinformation is so overwhelming that the PolitiFact report itself said that "President Donald Trump chimed in as well," quoting the president's White House press briefing that had occurred several hours before the post was posted to Facebook. Few discrete examples offer as clear a picture of how the Facebook and fact checking obsession keep disinformation researchers' eyes off the ball. Two major fact-checking organizations spent time and energy chasing down a Facebook post with 277 interactions and 23 thousand shares, only so they could downplay the fact that the core elements of that Facebook post had been an integral part of the president's disinformation campaign over the preceding four days, and had been restated and republished across the major media of the right wing ecosystem.

Coverage in both mainstream and social media attention peaked on the following week. The president continued his drumbeat, claiming in an [interview with Sean Hannity aired the night of August 11](#) (minute 6:40) repeating his claim that mail-in ballots are a rigged election, that "the mailman" and "China and Russia" are all to "grab batches" of mail-in ballots. The next morning Trump said in a [press briefing on August 12](#): "Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi are holding the American people hostage over money for their radical left wing agenda that the country doesn't want and won't accept. For example, they've asked for a ridiculous \$3.5 billion, that's billion, \$3.5 billion for universal mail-in voting, a system riddled by fraud and corruption." The major peak in online stories, tweets, and Facebook posts was, however, triggered by an August 13 morning [phone interview with Maria Bartiromo on Fox Business](#), in which Trump added to his usual narrative, explicitly stating that his refusal to accept funding for the Postal Service as part of coronavirus relief funding was "If we don't make a deal, that means they don't get the money. That means they can't have universal mail-in voting. They just can't have it."

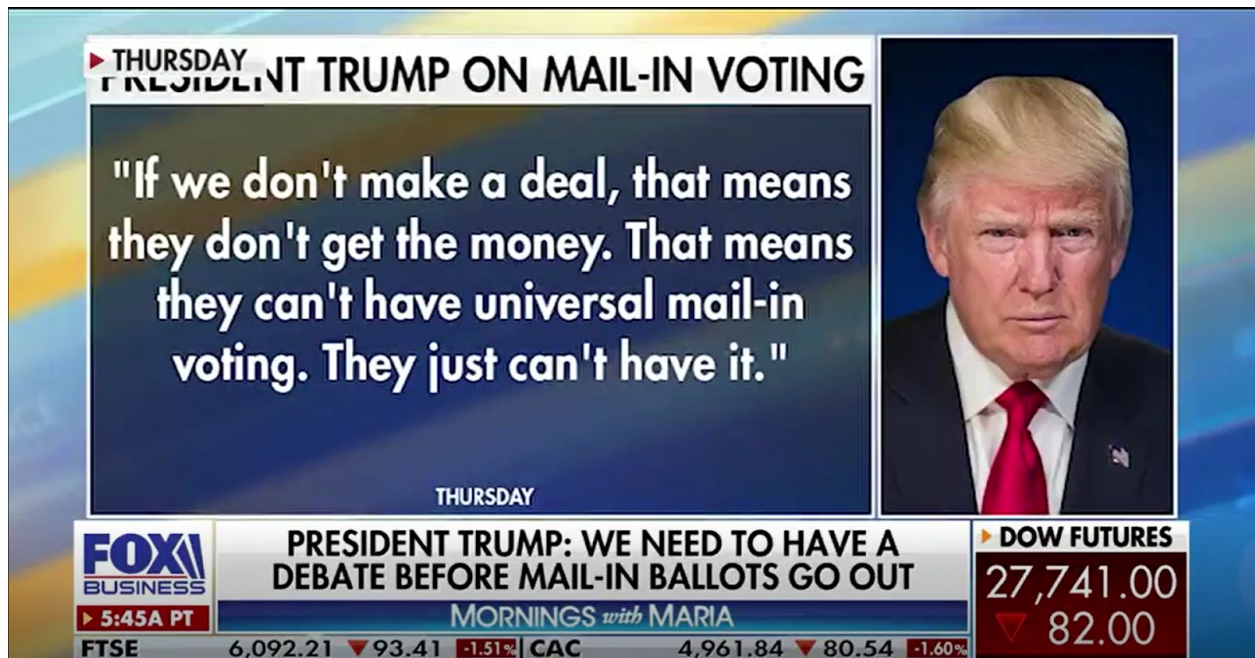


Figure 19: Screenshot of President Trump's interview with Maria BArtiromo, August 13, 2020

Coverage across the media quintiles, but particularly in the center-right, center, and center-left, exploded around this statement. A [widely syndicated AP report](#) (carried for example on [local TV affiliates](#) websites as well) opened with a more critical framing than usual:

President Donald Trump declared Thursday that he opposes additional funding for the U.S. Postal Service, acknowledging that his position would starve the agency of money Democrats say it needs to process an anticipated surge in mail-in ballots during the coronavirus pandemic.

Trump also claimed anew — falsely — that Democrats were pushing for universal mail-in voting and predicted without providing evidence that mail-in voting would lead to massive voter fraud in the November election.

[CNN similarly provided a crisp statement](#) that “The pandemic has led to record-shattering levels of voting-by-mail, but Trump has tried to restrict the voting method because he says it will hurt his re-election and Republicans across the board.” Similar coverage appeared across the media ecosystem outside right wing media. This CNN report was widely tweeted that day (as did the less critical Fox News online report), drawing counterarguments from [Michael Ahrens, Communications Director of the RNC](#) and the [RNC Research twitter handle](#), trying to refocus attention on the Paterson, NJ fraud case as evidence that CNN and other fact checkers claiming that voter fraud was rare were ignoring critical evidence of fraud. On Facebook, posts that shared links to these various mainstream and center-left media criticisms of Trump's comments occupied most of the top slots by engagements, the [Washington Post's version leading among them](#). On Twitter, in addition to these, some of the most highly retweeted tweets referred to a [CNN report](#) that a federal judge in Pennsylvania had ordered the Trump campaign to offer evidence of its claims concerning voter fraud related to mail-in voting. The lawsuit was brought by the Trump campaign in an effort to get a federal court to overturn state officials efforts to expand

safe access to voting, [including both mail-in ballots and installing ballot drop boxes in densely populated areas](#).

The next day, August 14, the Washington Post published a story revealing a letter that the U.S. Postal Service had sent to 46 states and the District of Columbia, "[warning that it cannot guarantee all ballots cast by mail for the November election will arrive on time to be counted](#)." Trump's frank admission of the partisan nature of his opposition to funding the Postal Service revived interest in DeJoy's administrative measures in the Postal Service. Although some outlets had already been speculating about whether the [Postal Service shake-up was an effort to undermine vote-by-mail](#), on the background of Trump's admission that denying funding to the Postal Service was tactically advantageous to his reelection bid, that frame received increased [coverage](#), emphasizing not only the personnel leadership changes but also the removal of sorting machines, shortening of opening hours, and [removal of mailboxes](#) from street corners. On Friday, August 14, [Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer](#) issued a joint press release specifically calling out these organizational changes and demanding they be paused until after the election. The announcement got coverage on [radio](#), including revival of an [American Public Media report](#) from earlier in the week about postal failures in several swing states. Over that weekend, [Nancy Pelosi recalled the House](#) to vote to block the changes in the Postal Service, and several [state Attorneys General were coordinating to sue](#) the administration and Postal Service [to prevent mail slow-down prior to the election](#). That day, Mitt Romney publicly said that "[I don't know of any evidence that voting by mail would increase voter fraud](#)," a statement that earned him a mocking [Facebook post by Breitbart](#) that received over 100,000 engagements. That Monday saw several stories about [postal workers' concerns](#), and by Tuesday August 18 DeJoy announced [he would suspend](#) some of the measures he had introduced, Florida saw [vastly expanded use of mail-in ballots](#) for its primary.

Beyond concerns over partisan sabotage of the Postal Service, as the month wound down the president continued his nearly daily [Twitter repetition](#), a round of online stories revolved around [left-leaning outlets](#) and Twitter handles focusing on the [Trump campaign's filing in Pennsylvania federal court, which was unable to identify evidence of significant voter fraud](#), while supporters of the president focused on a new JustTheNews story about [a California man who pled guilty to voter fraud](#) after voting by mail for his dead mother in three elections, but overwhelmingly placed its emphasis on a judicial order to rerun the election for a city council seat in Paterson, NJ, which was [widely reported](#) and [tweeted](#) by Hannity and other media personalities like [Diamond and Silk](#) on the right. [Hannity's story was also widely engaged with on Facebook](#).

The following Monday, August 24, [President Trump gave his first address at the Republican National Convention](#), covered widely in mainstream media and through [widely-syndicated AP stories](#), but triggering little attention on either social media platform we covered. "What they're doing is using Covid to steal an election. They're using Covid to defraud the American people, all of our people, of a fair and free election," Trump warned the delegates. "The only way they can take this election away from us is if it's a rigged election," the president continued. Mail-in ballots were at the heart of the plot the president was spinning: "We have to be very careful because they're trying it again, this whole 80 million mail-in ballots that they're working on. Sending them out to people that didn't ask for them. They didn't ask, they just get them, and it's not fair, and it's not right, and it's not going to be possible to tabulate, in my opinion." Responding to the preceding week's focus on the Postal Service, the president further argued that Democrats "are trying to do it with the whole post office scam, they'll blame it on the post office. You can see them setting it up. Be very careful and watch it very carefully."

The month ended with a bang: a too-good-to-be-true story that instantly catapulted to the top spot in terms of Facebook posts and engagements in August, was widely repeated across the right-wing media ecosystem, but received no attention, confirmation, or refutation in any mainstream media despite its explosive allegations. The report by Jon Levine of the [New York Post](#) opened with the words: “A top Democratic operative says voter fraud, especially with mail-in ballots, is no myth. And he knows this because he’s been doing it, on a grand scale, for decades.” Levine quoted the single anonymous source as asserting that “fraud is more the rule than the exception,” and that he had “led teams of fraudsters and mentored at least 20 operatives in New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania — a critical 2020 swing state.” The source remained anonymous for fear of prosecution. The story read as list of “greatest hits” from Trump’s allegations over the preceding six months, hitting all the high points of the months-long propaganda campaign. It wove in a specific reference to New Jersey, where the Paterson case was a central exhibit in the Trump campaign’s vote fraud claim, and asserted that ““There is no race in New Jersey — from city council to United States Senate — that we haven’t worked on,”. It then asserted the ease of fraud associated with mailed ballots: “I just put [the ballot] through the copy machine and it comes out the same way,” the insider said. The story then wove in the continuous complaints about ballot harvesting, stating that: “He would have his operatives fan out, going house to house, convincing voters to let them mail completed ballots on their behalf as a public service. The fraudster and his minions would then take the sealed envelopes home and hold them over boiling water. ‘You have to steam it to loosen the glue,’ said the insider. He then would remove the real ballot, place the counterfeit ballot inside the signed certificate, and reseal the envelope.” The “whistleblower” then conveniently confirmed the line that postal employees were going to, as Trump had said, “grab bunches” of ballots: “The tipster said sometimes postal employees are in on the scam. ‘You have a postman who is a rabid anti-Trump guy and he’s working in Bedminster or some Republican stronghold ... He can take those [filled-out] ballots, and knowing 95% are going to a Republican, he can just throw those in the garbage.’ In some cases, mail carriers were members of his ‘work crew,’ and would sift ballots from the mail and hand them over to the operative.” To complete the tapestry, the story harps on the fears of older voters: “Hitting up assisted-living facilities and ‘helping’ the elderly fill out their absentee ballots was a gold mine of votes, the insider said. ‘There are nursing homes where the nurse is actually a paid operative. And they go room by room to these old people who still want to feel like they’re relevant,’ said the whistleblower. ‘[They] literally fill it out for them.’”

The story immediately exploded across the right-wing media ecosystem, with attention directed to it energetically by the Trump family and campaign. The president’s sons [Donald Jr.](#) and [Eric Trump](#) tweeted it out, as did [Trump campaign communications director](#) Tim Murtugh and deputy communications director [Zach Parkinson](#), alongside various Fox contributors and veteran conspiracist [Jack Posobiec](#). The story alleged a widespread, systematic fraud operation, operating across multiple states for decades and involving “at least 20 operatives.” Yet it relied on a sole anonymous source. While [Media Matters published a criticism](#) of the article’s method and its reporter, no mainstream media outlet was willing or able to pick up the mantle and seek to confirm or refute these remarkable accusations. The story remains unconfirmed except for repetition on [Fox News online](#), on Fox and Friends on both [Sunday August 30](#) and [Monday August 31](#), on [Tucker Carlson on Tuesday, September 1](#), and on online media like the [Washington Examiner](#) and the [Daily Caller](#) (itself reporting on the Tucker Carlson report). On Facebook, [the Breitbart repetition of this story](#) gained more engagement than versions elsewhere in the right wing media ecosystem. Given the momentous allegations, it is hard to imagine that no reporter in a traditional media outlet looked into this. One has to assume that no one found corroboration despite the supposed widespread conspiracy that this practice would require, but also that no one was able to specifically refute it, given that the source was anonymous. Levine too did not add followup reporting with more evidence or details. It is hard to credit the story as true based on

a single report in a Murdoch-owned tabloid, alleging a widespread, many-participant, years-long criminal conspiracy carried out over several states, itself based on a single anonymous source and offering no supporting documentation. If the story is untrue, it is also impossible to tell whether Levine is the perpetrator or a willing victim of someone else's information operation, and if so, whose. What is clear is that in the [propaganda feedback loop](#) that has increasingly characterized the right-wing media ecosystem for the past three decades, and for a Trump campaign that has long been pushing every element of this narrative, this was a story too good to be checked.

## CONCLUSION

When President Trump concluded his performance in the first presidential debate on September 29, 2020, he reiterated the false claim that mail-in ballots were subject to mass election fraud, and cited this concern to justify his refusal to commit to accepting the results of the election should he be defeated. This assertion capped a six months long disinformation campaign waged by the president and his party against expansion of mail-in voting during the pandemic of 2020. There is no disinformation campaign more likely to affect voter participation in the 2020 U.S. election and perceptions of the election's legitimacy than the repeated false assertion that mail-in voting is fraught with the risk of voter fraud. This was not a social media campaign. Our study here, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis of online stories, tweets, and Facebook pages over six months, establishes that the disinformation campaign was elite-driven, and waged primarily through mass media responding to false assertions from President Trump, his campaign, and the RNC.

Many current efforts at identifying online disinformation campaigns focus either on actors from the political and media periphery or foreign agents masquerading as such actors, using distributed network methods to shape the main agendas and frames in the 2020 election. Most efforts to respond to this kind of disinformation involve tracking disinformation on social media and introducing fact checking in context to deflect and refute social media disinformation. We do not wish in this report to imply that those efforts are unnecessary or ill advised. We do, however, suggest that on the question of voter fraud, the origins and dynamics of disinformation are very different, as no doubt the cures, if any are to be had, must be.

For the elite-driven, mass media campaign we observe, Facebook or Twitter fact checking will play a secondary and supportive role to the actions and choices of mass media editors. Thirty percent or more of the U.S. adult population is less committed politically and less uniformly committed to a belief that mail-in voting is, or is not, pervaded by fraud. Survey [evidence from Pew suggests that](#) these are precisely the people who report that the TV networks, CNN, and local TV are their primary source of news. These local media, in turn, depend on syndicated news. Early in the campaign, it is these journalists and editors who appear to have been the most susceptible to Trump's tactics of harnessing professional journalism to his disinformation campaign. Coverage at that time emphasized a "balanced" approach that repeated and in effect reinforced and legitimated the president's framing of the problem as a partisan conflict. By August, more of the stories, including the syndicated stories, in either the headline or the lede, underscored that the president's assertions were false, and even briefly reminded readers of Trump's specific electoral strategy that leads him to make these false claims.

In the coming months, it will be critical for editors of these national and local media, particularly on the television stations trusted by the least politically pre-committed and often least politically

attentive citizens not to fall for the strategy that the president has used so skillfully in the past six months, not to capitulate to the inevitable charges of partisanship that will befall any journalists and editors who call the disinformation campaign by its name, and not to add confusion and uncertainty to their readers, viewers, and listeners by emphasizing false equivalents or diverting attention to exotic, but according to our research, peripheral actors like Facebook clickbait artists or Russian trolls.