INDIANA UNIVERSITY
OBSERVATORY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Tracking public opinion about unsupported narratives in the 2020 Presidential election

Wave 3, 2-13 Oct. 2020

Observatory on
Social Media (OSoMe)
Indiana University-Bloomington

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

This is a report on our third wave of data, collected from 2 to 13 October 2020. The reports from Waves 1 and 2 can be found at http://osome.iu.edu/research/survey/.

Narratives

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

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

Joe Biden is not mentally fit to be President. [1]
Mail-in ballots cause election fraud. [2]

We also added three additional narratives in Wave 3:

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation sponsored a vaccine that causes polio in Africa. [3]
QAnon is correct that pedophiles and cannibals currently serve in US government positions. [4]
Face masks increase the risk of spreading and contracting Covid-19. [5]

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

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

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

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

[3] https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/apr/23/facebook-posts/anti-vaxxers-spread-conspiracy-about-bill-gates-an/

[4] https://www.politifact.com/article/2020/aug/12/qanon-pizzagate-conspiracy-theories-co-opt-savethe/

[5] https://www.factcheck.org/2020/07/video-misrepresents-the-science-behind-face-masks/

[6] https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/30/reliable-polls-show-that-biden-won-debate

https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/trump-biden-debate-poll/

https://www.cbsnews.com/news/who-won-debate-first-presidential-biden-trump/

Results

Figure 1 shows results for the two narratives (Biden's cognitive state and mail-in voting) that were tracked across Waves 1, 2, and 3. Both narratives continue to be widely seen, in increasing frequency across the almost two-month period of data collection for the three waves (from 43% for the Biden story to 48% in the third wave). Yet, despite growing awareness of the Biden narrative, belief in its truth-value decreased steadily over time, from 46.1% to 45% and 40.6%. This may reflect Biden's performance in the first presidential debate. Several surveys shortly after the debate showed that viewers perceived Biden not only as performing better in the debate than Trump, but also that Biden had a better command of important issues than the president.[6] Conversely, belief in the mail-in ballot narrative is growing stronger, first going down slightly from 46.4% to 45% in wave two but then up to 50%, as the Trump campaign and political operatives continue to raise questions about the legitimacy of mail-in ballots.

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

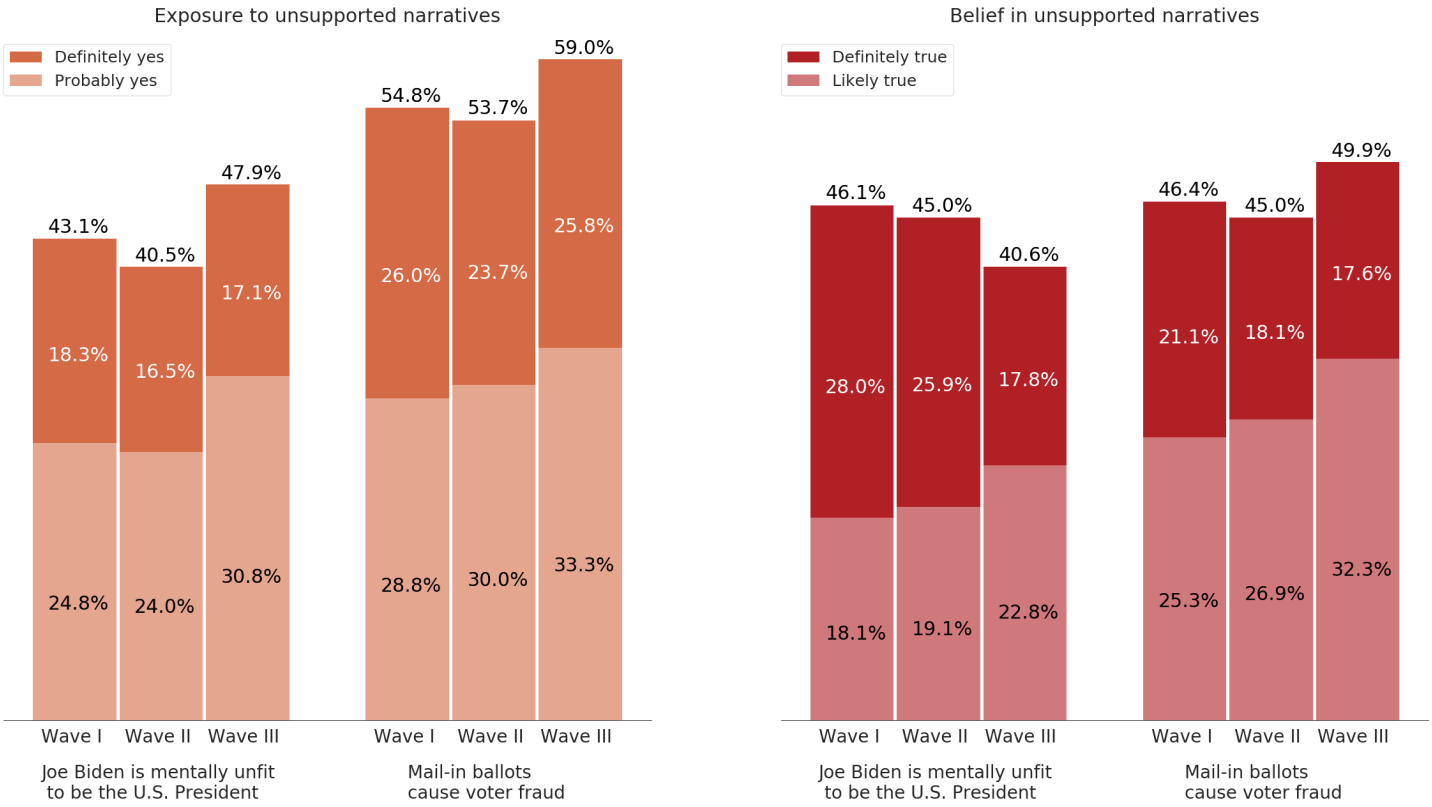
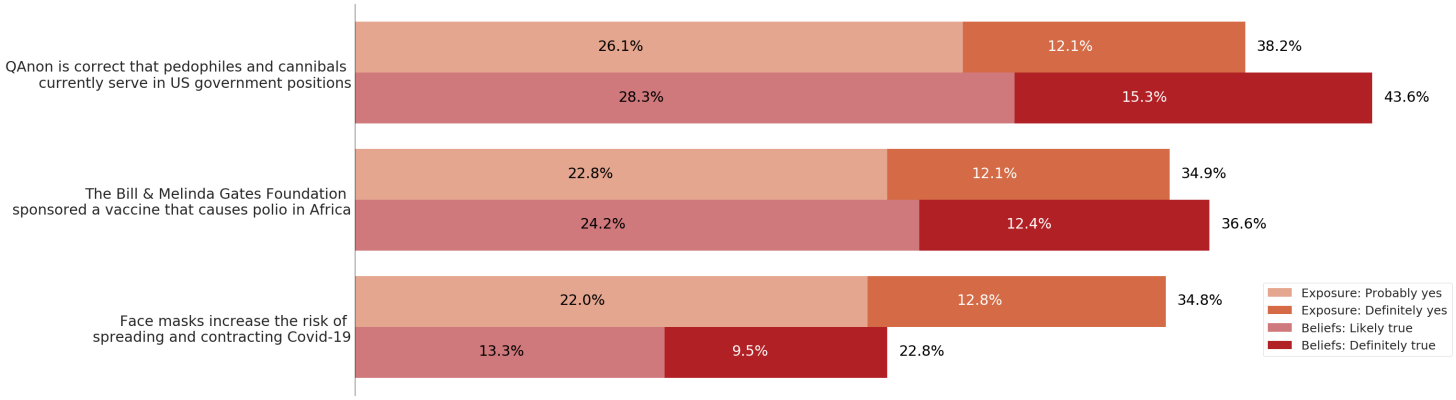


Figure 2 shows results for narratives included only in Wave 3. There were high levels of awareness about all three narratives, with 34.8% to 38.2% of participants saying they had encountered them. Belief in their truth value varied considerably across narratives. About 44% thought that QAnon stories about pedophiles and cannibals could be true. Over 36% thought that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation could have had a role in causing polio through vaccination. Almost 23% thought there is a possibility that mask-wearing facilitates infection with the coronavirus. (See results about other narratives from Waves 1 and 2 in our earlier reports.)

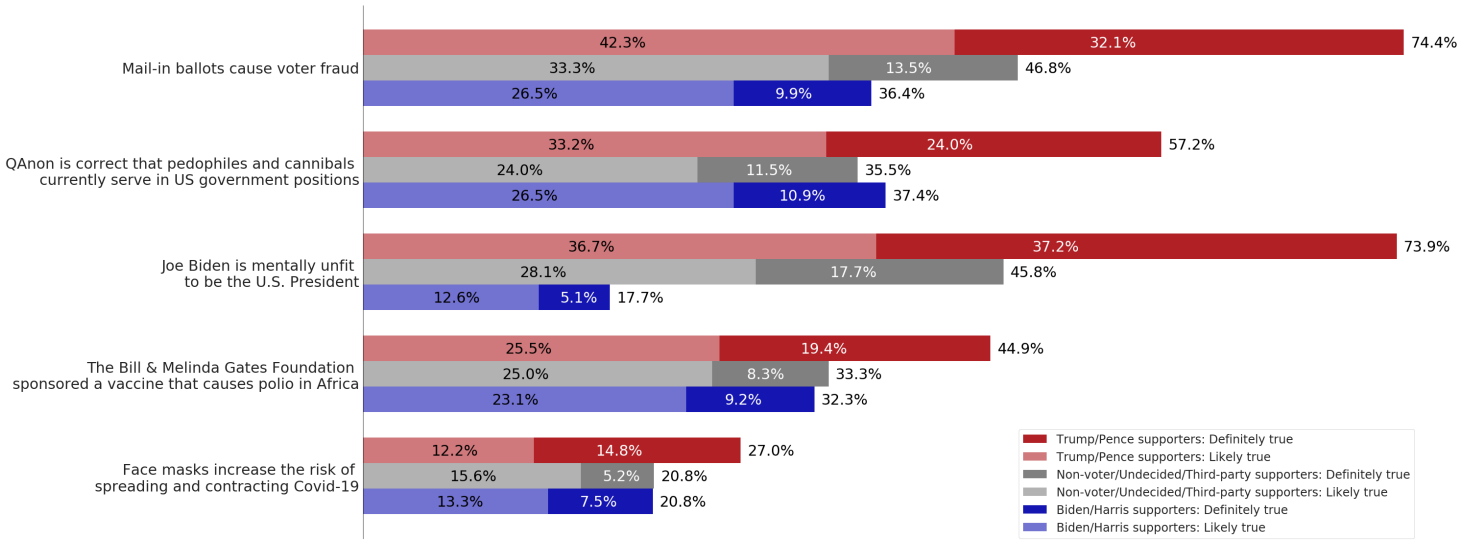
Figure 2 *Responses to unsupported narratives in Wave 3*



Comparison by voting preference

A number of studies have shown that widely diffused but unsupported narratives appear to originate more often from right- than left-of-center sources (see examples in Grinberg et al., 2019[7], Luceri et al., 2019[8], and Lewis & Marwick, 2017[9]).[10] F or this reason we looked at the issue through the lens of presidential candidate preference. As seen in **Figure 3**, each narrative has more adherence among those preferring the Trump/Pence ticket than among supporters of Biden/Harris. As we reported in Wave 2, undecided voters and those expressing preferences for third-party candidates fall somewhere in between. Differences are especially stark for the highly politicized issues of Biden's cognitive state (Trump supporters, 73.9%; Biden supporters, 17.7%) and mail-in ballots (Trump supporters, 74.4%; Biden supporters, 36.4%), reflecting the polarized nature of the current political environment in the United States.

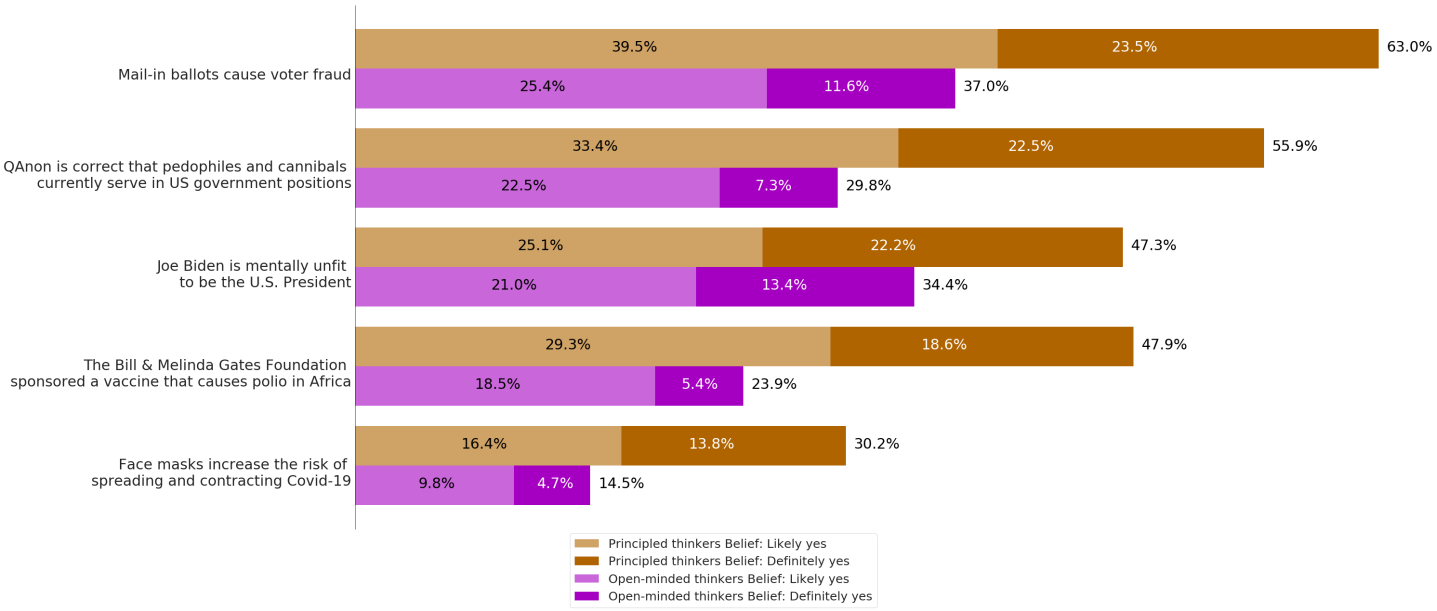
Figure 3 *Belief in the truth-value of narratives by candidate preference*



Unsupported narratives and open-mindedness

In recent years researchers have used a number of questions to investigate how an actively open-minded thinking style about evidence (AOT-E) can influence a person's beliefs, values, and opinions.[11] In our studies we tested if open-mindedness puts a person at greater or lesser risk for believing unsupported narratives. To do that, we asked participants to use a 7-point scale to indicate their level of agreement/disagreement with statements such as: *"I believe that loyalty to one's ideals and principles is more important than "open-mindedness.""* **Figure 4** shows results for those who scored above and below the mean on this item. It is clear that principled thinkers are almost twice as likely to believe all five of the unsupported narratives. One might intuitively think that open-minded thinkers would be more vulnerable to entertain suggestion, rumor, and unsupported information – and that might very well be the case. But when it comes to evaluating information for its believability, open-minded thinkers may be more guided by evidence and perhaps less vulnerable to misinformation than principled thinkers.

Figure 4 *Beliefs in the truth value of narratives among principled versus open-minded thinkers*



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

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

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

[10] This report features narratives more believed on the right. Our Wave 2 report looks at an example of a narrative with more credence on the left (relating to Trump's supposed stroke), and our upcoming Wave 4 report looks at COVID narratives that seem to have a left origin.

[11] Baron, J. (1993). Why teach thinking? An essay. Applied Psychology: An International Review, 42, 191–214; http://www.sjdm.org/presentations/2019-Poster-Pennycook-Gordon-Pennycook-AOTE-Beliefs.pdf

Methodology

This is the third of a six-part series of reports tracking the diffusion of misinformation in the 2020 U.S. presidential election campaign period. Data in this wave were collected from an online panel of American adults, recruited by Qualtrics. Data were collected from 2-13 October, 2020. The sample size was 587 (margin of error ≈ 4%). Forty five percent of participants were female. The average age was 46.5 (SD = 19), with a range of 18 to 96. The sample was 57.1% white, 14.3% Black, and 12.4% Latina/Latino.

OSoMe

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

For more information:

http://osome.iu.edu/research/survey/files/W3_data_for_public.pdf