INDIANA UNIVERSITY
OBSERVATORY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Tracking public opinion about unsupported narratives in the 2020 Presidential election

Wave 5, 27 Oct. - 2 Nov. 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 fifth wave of data, collected from 27 October to 2 November, 2020. The reports from Waves 1, 2, 3 and 4 can be found at http://osome.iu.edu/research/survey/.

Narratives

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

In Wave 5, we continued to track two narratives that were also assessed in the four previous waves:

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

We also added three additional narratives in Wave 5:

Hunter Biden's laptop reveals connections to child pornography. [3]
The book/TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* is based on the secretive religious group People of Praise, to which the recently confirmed Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett belonged.[4]
The proposed Biden/Harris insurance reform will eliminate private health insurance plans for over 180 million people.[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.poynter.org/fact-checking/media-literacy/2020/is-the-new-york-post-story-about-hunter-bidens-laptop-legit-heres-how-to-form-your-own-judgment/

[4] https://www.vox.com/culture/21453103/amy-coney-barrett-handmaids-tale-supreme-court

[5] https://www.newsweek.com/fact-check-does-joe-biden-want-eliminate-private-health-insurance-1541757

Results

Figure 1 shows results for the two narratives (Biden's cognitive ability and mail-in voting) that were tracked across Waves 1 through 5. Respondents continued to report awareness of the narratives. The Biden narrative fluctuated somewhat in terms of recognition (ranging from 41.8% to 47.9%) while contact with the mail-in ballot narrative increased (from 55% in the first wave to 62.4% in the fourth). Both narratives showed stability in terms of how many people believe them, with an average of 44% for the Biden narrative and 47% for the mail-in ballot story. Most of the variance across waves was within the margin of error, indicating stability in respondent beliefs in the narratives.

Figure 1 *Responses to unsupported narratives tracked across Wave 1 - 5*

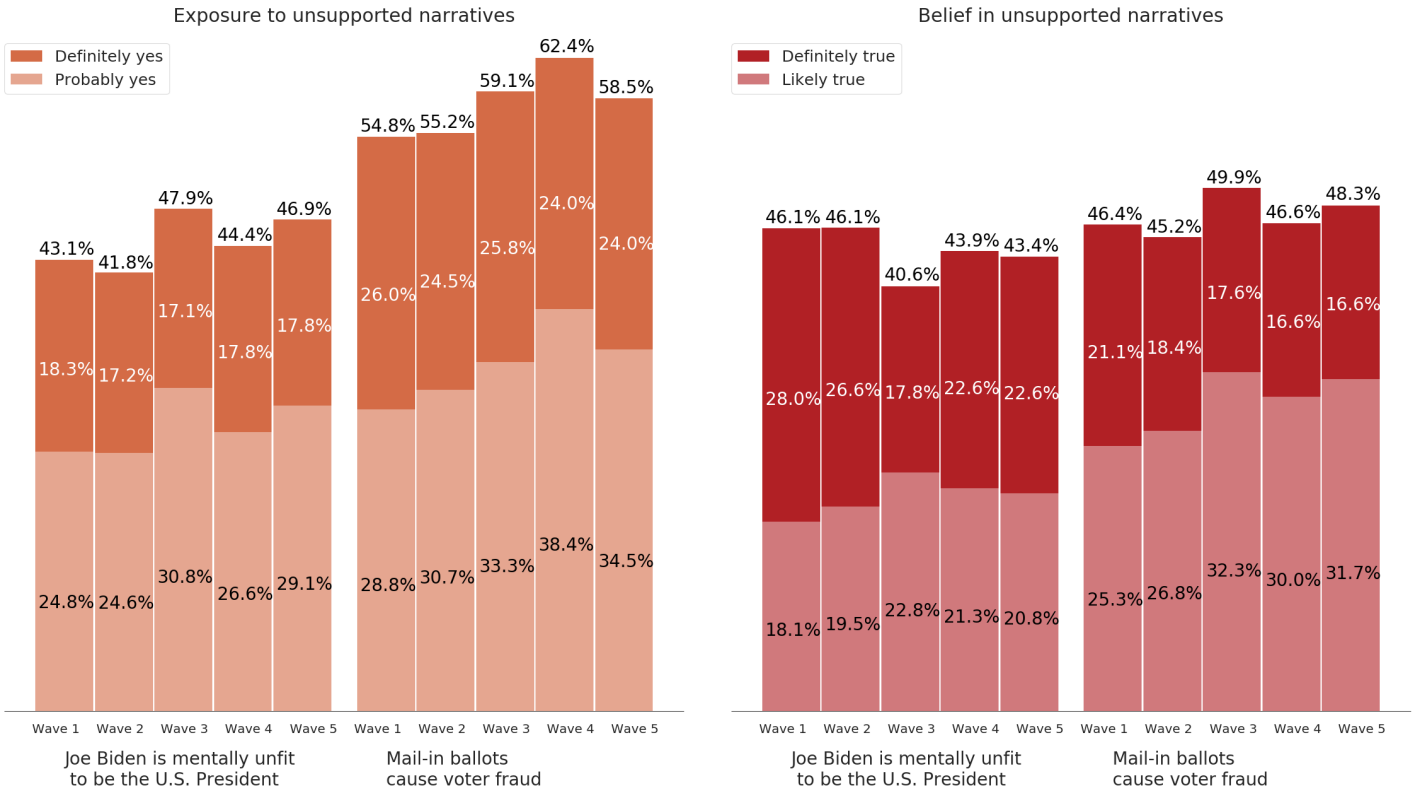
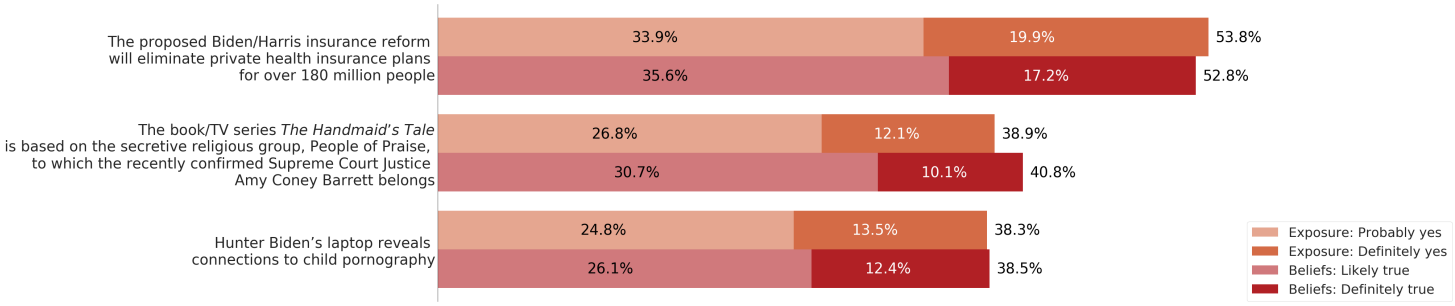


Figure 2 shows results for narratives included only in Wave 5. There were high levels of awareness of the three narratives, with 38% to 54% of participants saying they had encountered them on the social web. Belief in their truth value varied. About 53% believed the Biden/Harris insurance reform narrative, 41% thought *The Handmaid's Tale* is based on People of Praise, and 39% believed that Hunter Biden's laptop reveals connections to child pornography. Results about other narratives included in Waves 1 through 4 are available in other reports.

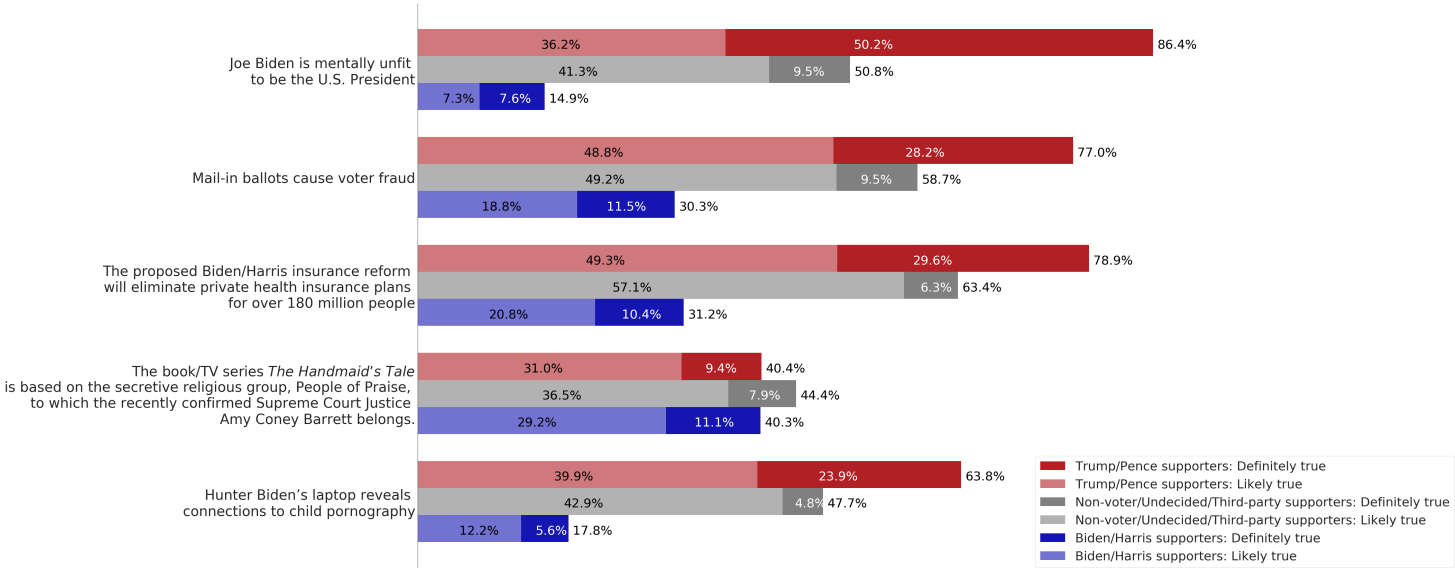
Figure 2 *Responses to unsupported narratives in Wave 5*



Comparison by voting preference

A number of studies have shown that widely diffused but unsupported narratives appear to originate more often from right- than left-of-center sources (see examples in Grinberg et al., 2019 [6], Luceri et al., 2019 [7], and Lewis & Marwick, 2017 [8]). The narrative that *The Handmaid's Tale* is based on People of Praise offered an opportunity to study unsupported information originating from left-leaning sources on the social web. In this case, non-voters, third-party, and undecided voters—as a group—were most likely to believe the false narrative. Trump (40.4%) and Biden (40.3%) voters gave virtually even credence to this narrative. Biden supporters were, however, more likely to believe *The Handmaid's Tale* is based on People of Praise than any of the other four narratives included in this wave.

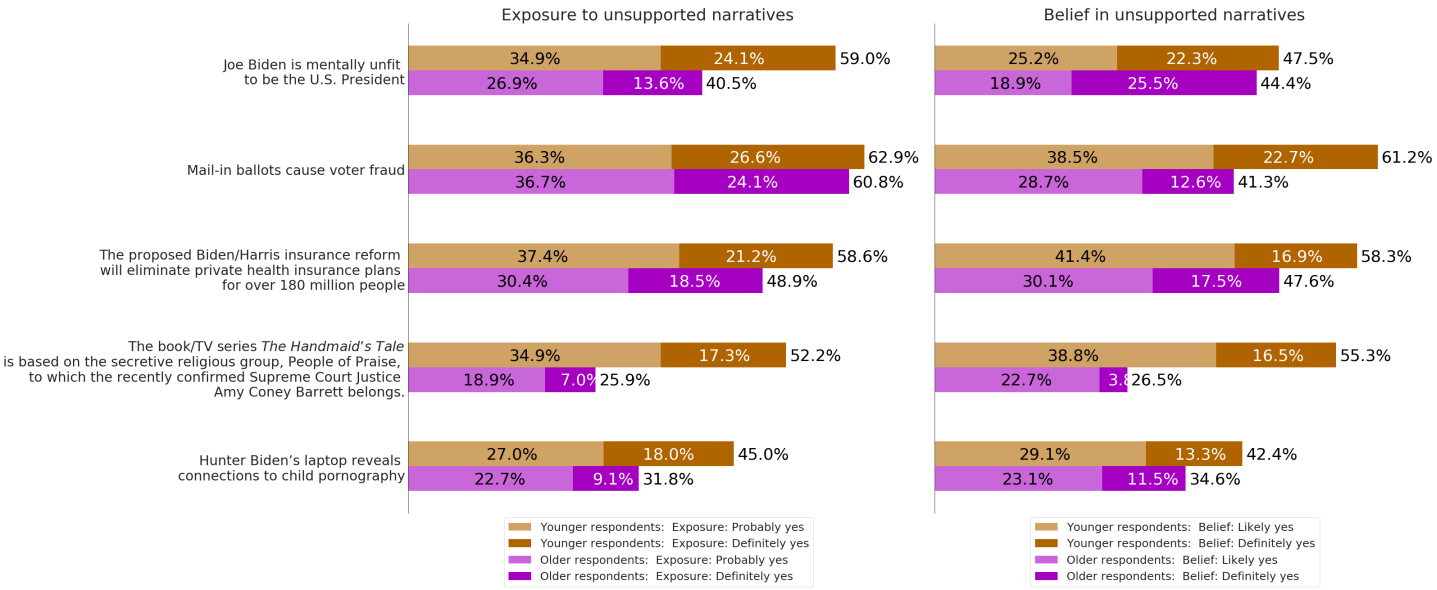
Figure 3 *Belief in the truth-value of narratives by candidate preference*



Unsupported narratives and age

Previous studies have found that age increases vulnerability to misinformation. [9] Our Wave 5 findings show the opposite. When splitting the respondents into younger (18-43, N = 278) and older (43-85, N = 286) groups by median age, not only was the younger age group more aware of unsupported narratives than the older group—they were also more likely to believe every one of the five narratives. On average the younger group was 13.96 percentage points more likely to report that they had encountered the narratives on social media and 14.06 percentage points more likely to believe the narratives than the older group. Note that these findings do not account for the relationship between partisanship and the age of participants in our study. More analysis is needed to see if our results align with existing studies identifying the 60- to 80-year-old age group as particularly vulnerable to misinformation.

Figure 4 *Exposure to and Belief in unsupported narratives by age groups*



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

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

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

[9] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0963721420915872
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/11/health/misinformation-social-media-elderly.html
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1461444820925041

Methodology

This is the fifth 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 27 October to 2 November 2020. The sample size was 564 (margin of error ≈ 4%). Forty seven percent of participants were female. The average age was 46.5 (SD = 16.6), with a range of 18 to 85. The sample was 60.8% white, 12.7% Black, and 11.7% 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/W5_data_for_public.pdf