

The disinformed election



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Perhaps four years of anxiety were misplaced. Perhaps disinformation did not affect the 2020 election after all. In the weeks and months leading up to Election Day, the biggest disinformation campaigns attempted to suppress voting in general and mail-in voting in particular. Yet, not only did Americans vote in record numbers, it was mail-in ballots — cast overwhelmingly by Democratic Party supporters — that reversed Donald Trump's early leads in key battleground states and handed Joe Biden the victory.

Nevertheless, the disinformation campaign perhaps did have an effect. It was the Republican Party, and Trump in particular, who cast doubt on the reliability of mail-in voting. The same results indicate most of his supporters did listen to him and chose to crowd the polling booths in person — even as COVID-19 cases reached record peaks in the United States — to cast their ballot.

Political scientists would call this a “moderated effect”: the disinformation campaign did affect voting behavior, but the effect was moderated by party affiliation. Republicans were much more likely to be influenced by it than Democratic voters. Nor was this the first instance of such an effect: several scientific studies indicate a strong relationship between partisan bias and susceptibility to “fake news.”

Hiding behind anecdotes and statistics is a deeper truth about disinformation: its acceptance relies less upon the content of a campaign itself and more upon how closely it coheres with an individual's beliefs about the world they live in—beliefs that are increasingly built around partisan boundaries. Discrete pieces of disinformation do not carry any meaning on their own. They have to fit within larger partisan narratives about social reality, narratives that feature good and evil, heroes and villains, victims and oppressors, before they “make sense” to an individual.

Congruence with a narrative — for instance, an “oppressive” Democratic Party trying to snatch the election from Republican “victims” and Trump waging a “heroic” war on behalf of those victims — is what leads a particular disinformation campaign — for instance, mail-in ballots being a fraud perpetrated by the Democrats — to appear meaningful. Those who believe in this narrative buy into the disinformation and act accordingly. Those who believe in a different narrative, in which the heroes and villains are reversed, treat it as “fake news.”

Crucially though, this is not just true for disinformation but for information in general. Republican supporters considered the COVID-19 pandemic to be a hoax because the mounting toll exposed Trump's inefficiency as a president and Trump, the hero, himself played it down. The virus, arriving on the heels of the Democratic impeachment of Trump, simply did not fit into

the Republican narrative of how the world works. What did fit, however, was the idea of the virus as another evil Democratic plot to bring down the good president.

Believing in and acting upon a piece of (dis)information, therefore, has little to do with truth and lies, right and wrong. Instead, it is closely related to people's partisan identities and has become a form of identity *performance* — a ritual of who you are and where you belong in the increasingly fragmented body politic. But identities are always constructed in opposition to an “other:” distrust of and antipathy toward the “other” is fundamental to the conception of the “self.” That is the reason why so much of disinformation is accusatory of the “other” side or showcases one's own side as a victim of the “other's” perfidy — an instance of what political scientists call affective polarization.

Understanding disinformation and its effects in terms of identity performance has important lessons for the media. Over the past four years, so much of this effort has been directed toward “fact checking” discrete pieces of disinformation. But that does not take us very far. Disinformation is unlikely to influence those whose partisan narratives it does not fit — just like Democrats disregarding all the lies about mail-in voting. For whom it does, countering fiction with fact is unlikely to make them disbelieve. After all, four years of fact checking Trump has not made any dent in his credibility among his supporters. Indeed, such attempts may backfire and themselves be viewed as a means to censor their side — thus feeding into the cycle of polarization. For similar reasons, “media literacy” efforts to educate people to detect disinformation are unlikely to have the desired result either.

Acknowledging disinformation as a symptom of the deeper malady of affective polarization also carries lessons for politics and specifically for deliberative democracy. It exposes what Chantal Mouffe has called “a fundamental tension between the logic of democracy and the logic of liberalism”: while liberalism recognizes differences in beliefs and values, deliberative democracy requires “a final rational resolution” of those differences through deliberation. But when people are willing to die for beliefs and values they know to be based on falsehoods, there is little hope for rational resolutions and consensus. Instead, democratic models need to gravitate away from deliberation toward *agonistic pluralism*, in which the “other” is not viewed as an “enemy” to be conquered but as an “adversary” to be accepted as a legitimate political voice, even if that voice disagrees with our own.