CORRECTION INTERVENTIONS TO PROMOTE ELECTION-RELATED INFORMATION INTEGRITY

Brendan Nyhan, Charlene J. Stainfield, and Julie Anne Weaver

SUMMARY

Fears about election misinformation have spiked since the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Correction interventions like prebunking and debunking, which expose individuals to fact-checks or other corrections before or after exposure to misinformation, have been shown to reduce misperceptions about issues like climate change and public health. Yet are they effective at countering election misinformation? This brief synthesizes evidence from tests of nine different interventions to counter election-related misinformation and generates actionable recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

Worries about misinformation abound in the run-up to the 2024 U.S. presidential election. News reports frequently cover the latest false

Highlights

Correction interventions like debunking and prebunking are generally effective at combating the negative effects of election misinformation in the United States. Moreover, they do not generate adverse effects, like making people distrustful of truthful information. **This makes them a low-risk approach to stemming election misinformation.**

Correction interventions are most effective at reducing belief in the specific election misinformation targeted by the correction. For the greatest impact, interventions should directly challenge the specific belief policymakers want to correct.

Correction interventions are less effective at reducing belief in broad false claims about elections or in bolstering general beliefs in electoral integrity. This suggests that different methods are needed to counter distrust in the electoral system.

Partisans might be more likely to be exposed to and believe misinformation. Existing research is not conclusive about how to design correction interventions to be effective among specific partisan groups, but **using co-partisan messengers and sources is a promising approach.**

and unsupported claims from politicians and more than 50% of Americans report being "extremely" or "very" concerned that the media itself will report inaccurate information.[1]

The proliferation of misinformation about elections in the United States raises serious concerns, threatening public confidence in election results and potentially putting election officials in danger.[2] Ultimately, these claims can cause people to question the integrity of the electoral system and the democratic process. For example, as of June 2024, two-thirds of Republicans still reject Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election.[3]

These beliefs are not just expressions of partisan loyalty; survey evidence indicates that individuals who report these beliefs are answering sincerely.[4,5] This electoral skepticism is not unique to the 2020 election, as almost 40% of Democrats report questioning Trump as the 2016 winner.[6] Overall, fewer than 30% of Americans are "very confident" that votes nationally will be counted as voters intend in the upcoming 2024 election.[7]

Individuals are exposed to misleading or false information about U.S. elections through a variety of mediums. Traditional news media is still the dominant source of news for Americans, with television accounting for five times more consumption than online news.[8] Because it relies on video, TV news might be especially prone to amplifying elite statements of all kinds, including false claims.[9] However, misinformation also circulates on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter/X, which enable elites to share information directly with the public and allow false claims to circulate rapidly without journalistic scrutiny.

Exposure to election misinformation can have pernicious consequences. One study shows that exposure to tweets by former President Trump questioning the legitimacy of the 2020 election reduced trust in election results and increased perceptions that the election was rigged among his supporters.[10]

In short, election misinformation is prevalent, widely believed among sympathetic audiences, and has deleterious consequences. Research has increasingly focused on correction interventions like debunking and prebunking (see Box 1) as potentially effective tools to combat misinformation. What does the academic evidence suggest about the effectiveness of these interventions?

WHO IS MOST SUSCEPTIBLE TO ELECTION MISINFORMATION?

Survey data can tell us who already questions election integrity and therefore might be more susceptible to believing election-related misinformation. Historically, partisans have been more likely to endorse claims of fraud when their side loses: 37% of Democrats believed Bush's win in 2004 was due to voter fraud, and 36% of Republicans made the same claim when Obama won in 2012.
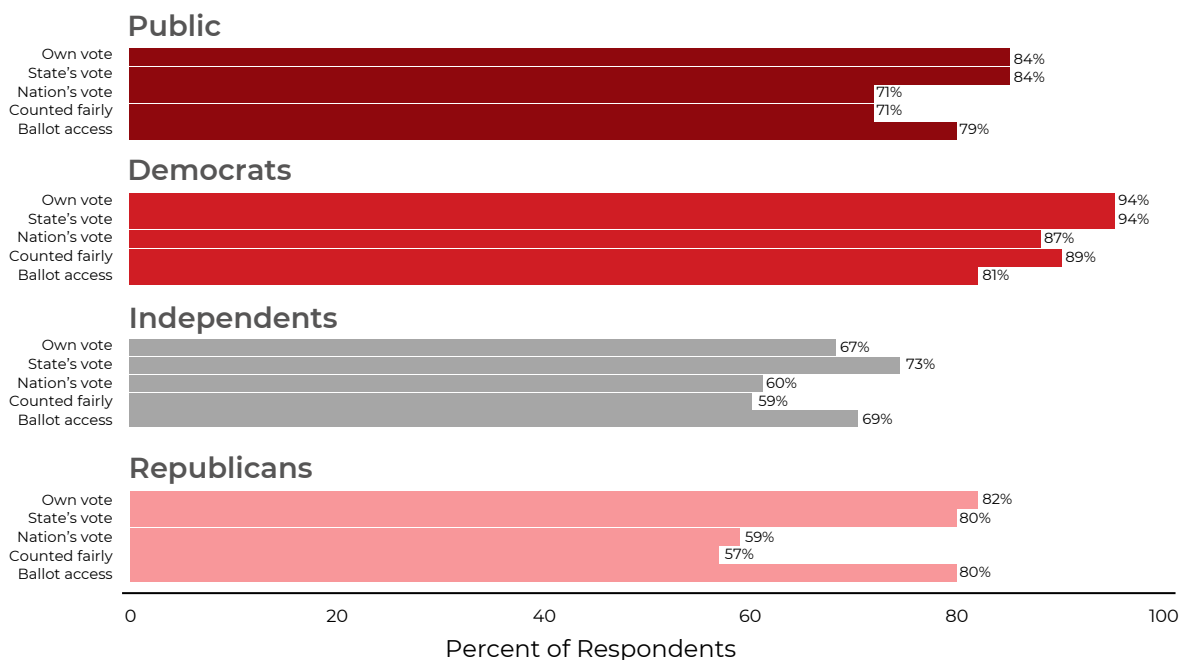
People also tend to be more likely to question the integrity of elections at the national level, as multiple surveys show that voters have more confidence in their own vote being counted accurately than they do in the national vote count as a whole.[11,12] This pattern appears to be holding in the 2024 election, as shown in Figure 1. This suggests

voters are not forming attitudes based on their own voting experiences but on what they imagine voting is like elsewhere in the U.S.[13]

Over the past two decades, confidence in elections has remained stable in the aggregate, but has become polarized along party lines. Polls show that confidence in the vote count declined incrementally among Republicans from 2000 to 2020 (with an uptick after Trump's victory in 2016). Trust remained stable among Democrats until 2020, when their confidence increased sharply (presumably as a backlash against Trump's. attacks on the legitimacy of the outcome of the presidential election and subsequent Democratic defense).[14]

While partisanship remains the most powerful predictor of rejecting Biden as the winner in 2020 (consistent with the known tendency for supporters of the winning party to express

Figure 1: Confidence in the 2024 Election by Partisanship and Level of Government

Public
- Own vote: 84%
- State's vote: 84%
- Nation's vote: 71%
- Counted fairly: 71%
- Ballot access: 79%

Democrats
- Own vote: 94%
- State's vote: 94%
- Nation's vote: 87%
- Counted fairly: 89%
- Ballot access: 81%

Independents
- Own vote: 67%
- State's vote: 73%
- Nation's vote: 60%
- Counted fairly: 59%
- Ballot access: 69%

Republicans
- Own vote: 82%
- State's vote: 80%
- Nation's vote: 59%
- Counted fairly: 57%
- Ballot access: 80%

Percent of Respondents

Source: BrightLineWatch

greater trust in electoral outcomes than supporters of the losing side), other factors also contribute. Among Republicans, denial of the 2020 presidential election result was associated with high levels of racial resentment and a willingness to embrace conspiratorial beliefs.[15] Questioning the integrity of the 2020 election outcome among Independents was correlated with higher levels of conservatism, racial resentment, and agreement with tenets of Christian nationalism.[16] While 2020 election denialism was rarer among Democrats, those who did embrace it also tended to have higher levels of racial resentment.[17]

Finally, electoral confidence is also split along racial lines. Surveys from the 2016, 2020, and 2022 election cycles reveal that white voters are much more confident on average in vote counts than Black Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic/Latino Americans by margins of up to twenty percentage points.[18]

THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF CORRECTION INTERVENTIONS

Correction interventions, such as debunking and prebunking, offer one popular set of strategies to address misinformation. Recent academic reviews suggest these corrections are generally effective at combating misinformation. However, many of the studies included in those reviews focus on climate change or public health-related misinformation.[19] Consider climate change: while undoubtedly partisan, misinformation about the topic has been subject to extensive correction based on scientific evidence. Studies that employ correction interventions targeting climate change misinformation have generally reported positive effects.[20] This is especially true when the logic and rhetorical strategies

behind climate change denial are revealed and challenged.[21,22]

We know less about whether correction interventions work when the misinformation concerns the more overtly political realm of U.S. elections. Electoral misinformation might be especially difficult to correct due to its inherently political nature. The most effective strategies to combat it might differ from other types of misinformation. Moreover, it is important to assess not just whether corrections counter belief in specific misinformation, but whether they undo any damage to confidence in U.S. elections as a whole. Accordingly, this brief summarizes the scientific evidence assessing the efficacy of correction interventions on both belief in the accuracy of specific claims about voter and election fraud and confidence in U.S. elections overall.

WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SAY?

We conducted a literature review to identify all experimental studies of correction interventions that targeted election misinformation in the U.S.[23] We restricted our search to experimental studies that evaluate correction interventions on one or both of two outcomes: (1) belief in specific election-related misinformed claims; and/or (2) general confidence in electoral integrity.

To date, seven studies have tested nine different interventions to correct election misinformation in the U.S.[24] Six test the effects of corrections on belief in specific false claims about election fraud. All nine test effects on overall confidence in U.S. elections. The full set of articles is provided in Table 1 in the Supplemental Information and a database of the studies is available online.[25]

Survey experiments allow researchers to test the causal effects of correction interventions. Researchers first recruit a sample to participate in the survey and then randomly assign respondents to treatment or control groups. The treatment group is exposed to the intervention (e.g., a debunking or prebunking correction) while the control group is not (see Figure 2 for an example). Respondents in both treatment and control groups then proceed to answer identical survey questions designed to capture the main outcomes of interest.

Researchers then compare the average outcomes for the treatment and control groups. Because experiments involve random assignment to treatment and control groups—which ensures the groups are practically identical prior to the intervention—any difference in outcomes between the groups can be attributed to the intervention itself. In this way, experiments allow researchers to estimate the causal effect of debunking, prebunking, or other interventions, which is otherwise difficult to convincingly establish.

At the same time, survey experiments face an important limitation in terms of their *external validity*, or whether the results generalize to other populations or contexts outside of the survey experiment. For example, it is difficult to know if results would hold when individuals participate in a survey versus when they see a correction intervention in real life. This might impact how we think about scaling up the results from survey experiments to broader interventions on social media platforms or text messaging apps.

All of the studies included in this brief use online survey experiments to test the effects of an intervention on individual beliefs and attitudes (see Box 2). The interventions are delivered to participants in the form of mock news articles with varying degrees of realism. One of the studies presents real corrective tweets with a headline and link to a news article as opposed to the full article, and another shows respondents a short video and text passage containing real statements from a politician affirming election results. Figure 2 shows an example of an intervention from the treatment (left image) and control groups (right image).[26]

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

TAKEAWAY 1:
Corrections are almost always successful at reducing inaccurate beliefs about the specific claims they target. However, they do not necessarily increase resilience to misinformation more broadly.

Four studies investigate the effects of corrections on belief in election misinformation. These studies test six distinct interventions: two prebunking and four debunking. The studies

Figure 2: Sample Correction Intervention

Note: The left image shows the correction intervention: a tweet fact-checking election misinformation that was shown to the treatment group. The control group was shown a tweet unrelated to the election (right image). At the end of the survey, both groups were asked the same outcome questions, and their responses were compared.[27]

primarily present corrections in the form of mock news articles that address explicit false claims about past elections (a debunking correction) or upcoming elections (a prebunking correction), although one debunking correction uses video and text.

The effects of these treatments are often measured on perceptions of who won a given election; most commonly, whether an individual considers Biden to be the rightful winner of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Other outcomes measure belief in specific claims of electoral fraud (e.g., during the 2022 Arizona gubernatorial election).

Generally, these interventions work (see rows 1-6 of Supplemental Information Table 1). Five of the six interventions report positive effects on at least one belief outcome.[28] Moreover, none of the studies had a negative effect on belief accuracy; that is, none of the correction interventions backfired and created greater fraud beliefs.

However, there were some mixed results. Only one of the interventions had a positive effect on all outcomes tested.[29] Three other interventions that were tested in one study had effects on some, but not all outcomes.[30] Finally, one intervention only worked when the source of the correction was provided by a co-partisan.[31]

These mixed outcomes seem to be a reflection of the conceptual distance between the intervention and the outcome in question. Interventions most frequently had positive effects on the outcome that most closely corresponds to the intervention text. For example, the positive effect on belief accuracy in one study is based on a survey question about claims of fraud in Maricopa County,

Arizona–the exact scenario addressed in the prior debunking text.[32] Another study reported mixed results for three interventions on belief in the number of House seats won due to fraud, an outcome that is not directly referenced in the text of the interventions.[33] The only intervention that reported uniformly null effects on beliefs uses a host of outcomes not addressed in the intervention.[34]

Box 3: Inoculation vs. prebunking

Inoculation is an approach to countering misinformation in which individuals are 1) warned in advance about potential future exposure to false or misleading claims (inducing a sense of threat), and then 2) provided a snippet or dose of impending misinformation along with a refutation. This design aims to help people recall and refute false claims they encounter before any adverse effects take hold. *Prebunking* is similar but does not seek to induce a sense of threat via forewarning (although some scholars use the two terms interchangeably). While previous literature claims that forewarning is a crucial step that activates the salience of the information that will follow, recent evidence suggests that forewarning might be unnecessary and even detrimental in some cases.[35] However, more research is needed before drawing strong conclusions.

TAKEAWAY 2:
Interventions designed to correct election misinformation sometimes, though not always, increase confidence in U.S. elections.

Each of the nine interventions reviewed in this brief examines the effects of corrections on confidence in U.S. elections. Two of the interventions employ prebunking; the other seven test debunking. Table 1 in the Supplemental Information summarizes the studies and their findings.

Confidence in U.S. elections is assessed in a variety of ways. Some studies ask a series of questions about an individual's confidence in their own vote being counted correctly in a given election, as well as vote counts locally, state-wide, and nationally. Other studies inquire about individuals' perceptions of the prevalence of specific types of election-related fraud, such as ballot tampering and targeted voter intimidation.

In total, eight of the nine interventions report at least one positive effect on confidence, suggesting that these interventions tend to work. Again, none of the interventions was found to cause negative impacts, suggesting little risk of adverse effects.

Still, these results should be interpreted with caution. Six of the interventions had mixed effects,[36] while only two found uniformly positive effects.[37]

One reason effects might be mixed is source credibility, specifically the partisanship of the cited source, particularly for Republicans. For example, the two studies that explicitly tested for source effects found them: Republicans only responded to corrections from Republican elites in one study, and to conservative sources in the other. On the other hand, the accuracy of beliefs among Democrats only improved when the correction source was neutral or conservative.[38] And in a study conducted among Republicans, a video debunking intervention was only effective at increasing confidence and electoral trust when the correction source was Republican rather than Democratic politicians.[39]

Additionally, individuals might have a hard time extrapolating from specific misinformation to broader views. One study

tested the effects of a correction intervention. on both specific claims of fraud and broader views on electoral integrity. The correction succeeded in reducing belief in the specific misinformation claim it targeted, but had no effect on broader trust in U.S. elections.[40]

Finally, it might simply be difficult to change people's views about electoral integrity without changing the messages they receive from co-partisan elites. For example, a correction intervention found that a video featuring Republican politicians was effective in improving Republicans' beliefs in the integrity of the 2020 election.[41] In addition, in a survey that was not a part of the correction interventions summarized here, respondents were asked about scenarios that would cause them to believe Biden had won the 2020 election. The scenario that would change the highest percentage (45%) of skeptics' views about the rightful winner was "Donald Trump concedes the election to Joe Biden."[42]

Box 4: What can we learn when findings are mixed?

The evidence synthesized in this brief shows results were mostly mixed; we do not observe positive findings on every outcome tested. How could we design interventions that will generate a more consistently positive response? Unfortunately, not enough studies exist to be sure, but the main text describes how factors such as partisanship and the source of the correction play an important role.

In addition, we also know that certain factors are not explanatory since they do not vary across the interventions. The mixed findings cannot be explained by having differential effects on sub-populations not included in the study, since all of the studies targeted a nationally representative sample of the U.S. population. Mixed findings also cannot be explained by variation in the intensity of the treatment because all of the interventions were one-time, light-touch initiatives displayed through an online survey environment.

TAKEAWAY 3:
Partisanship might limit the effectiveness of corrections of election misinformation, but more research is needed to be sure.

Partisanship is an important influence on exposure to and belief in misinformation. Researchers have therefore tested whether the effects of corrections differ for Republican versus Democrat respondents. Results are again mixed.

For belief in specific misinformation, there is some suggestive evidence that the interventions are more effective among Republicans.[43] Specifically, four of six interventions examining effects on belief accuracy test for whether effects differ by partisanship. Two interventions yield stronger effects for Republicans. However, two others find no evidence of differences by party.[44]

The evidence is more contradictory for effects on election confidence, where some interventions find a stronger effect among Republicans and others find a stronger effect among Democrats. Seven of the nine interventions that measure effects on trust in elections investigate whether there are effects vary depending on partisanship. Three find no difference in effects between Republicans and Democrats (two of which had positive effects overall).[45,46] In one case, though, the intervention found positive effects persisted only for Democrats but not Republicans.[47]

The other four interventions find partisan-dependent effects but in opposite ways. Two interventions only work for Democrats, and Democrats and Independents, respectively.[48] In contrast, two interventions from the same study are most effective among Republicans, highlighting the mixed nature of the findings.[49]

TAKEAWAY 4:
There is limited evidence that positive impacts persist over time.

A key question of interest to policymakers and practitioners is whether corrections of election misinformation generate lasting effects. We find limited evidence that effects persist over time. In particular, we find more persistence for the strongest effects, which were on the specific misinformation claims targeted by the corrections, while effects on broader measures of confidence in elections were generally weaker and did not last.

Both studies that test the durability of effects on belief in specific information find these tend to persist over time. One found continued, but weaker, effects from both the prebunking and debunking interventions it tested,[50] while the other found that the initial positive effect persisted.[51]

The durability of effects on electoral confidence was tested for four interventions. In these cases, we observe only weak evidence that positive effects persist. Two of the debunking interventions found that initial positive effects disappeared among respondents overall.[52] In the third debunking intervention, the positive effect on perceptions of fraud prevalence disappeared among Republicans but not Democrats.[53] Finally, in the only prebunking intervention that tested for longer-term impact, the results were mixed: effects on vote confidence dissipated over time but effects on perceptions of fraud prevalence did not.[54]

RECOMMENDATIONS

This review suggests four actionable recommendations for policymakers and practitioners as they consider whether and how to implement correction interventions.

1. **Correction interventions should continue to be employed as low-risk strategies to combat electoral misinformation,** given that they often have some positive effects without generating backlash.

2. Corrections are most effective at changing beliefs by targeting specific election misinformation. They are less effective at affecting beliefs in related false claims. **Policymakers and practitioners could increase impact by designing interventions targeted to the specific misinformation they are trying to alter.**

3. Increasing confidence in U.S. elections is difficult. Misinformation corrections are not a silver bullet. However, **convincing co-partisan elites to publicly counter misinformation might be an effective strategy.**[55] In addition, survey data tells us that several factors might make individuals more susceptible to doubting electoral integrity. These include partisanship, ethnicity, racial resentment, and conspiratorial beliefs. **Correction interventions might be more impactful if they target specific sub-groups.**

4. Partisanship seems to impact who is susceptible to misinformation. However, more research should focus on how to design specific corrections for each partisan group. **One promising area that should continue to be pursued is targeting partisan groups by using correction information from co-partisan sources.**

About the Authors

Author Affiliations

Brendan Nyhan - James O. Freedman Presidential Professor, Department of Government, Dartmouth College
Charlene J. Stainfield - Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Political Science, Ohio State University
Julie Anne Weaver - Research Director, Democratic Erosion Consortium (DEC)

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SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

THE EVIDENCE SEARCH

To synthesize current evidence on the efficacy of correction interventions to address election misinformation in the United States, we conducted a literature search in June 2024. The search was conducted on Google Scholar and Elicit to maximize the likelihood of including all relevant studies, both published and unpublished. The Google Scholar search terms were structured as follows, with backslashes indicating separate searches per term: "debunking / prebunking / inoculation / correction / correcting / + misinformation / disinformation / fake news / false news + election fraud / voter fraud / big lie + false beliefs / discernment / confidence in elections / election integrity + United States / America."

The question fed to Elicit, an AI search engine that uses language models to pull relevant research from Semantic Scholar after given a research question, was as follows: "Are debunking and prebunking interventions effective at countering election misinformation in the United States?"

We only included studies that specifically focused on U.S. elections in both the correction intervention and the outcomes tested. We also only included articles that used a randomized component, thereby increasing confidence in the causal claims.

INDIVIDUAL STUDIES IN THE EVIDENCE BASE

Table 1: Summary of Evidence

Study	Intervention Description	Effects on Beliefs	Durability of Belief Effects	Effects on Confidence	Durability for Confidence
Carey et al. (2024)	**Debunking** - News article on 2022 Arizona fraud from the Associated Press	**Positive**	Effect persisted	**Mixed** - Only positive for Hobbes wrongful winner of 2022 election	Effect dissipates for Hobbes wrongful winner of 2022 election
Carey, Fogarty, Gehrke, Nyhan, and Reifler (N.d.)	**Debunking** - retrospective article on 2020 misinformation from Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) website	**Mixed** - Only positive for Biden rightful winner of 2020 election and # House seats won due to fraud in 2022 election	Effect dissipates for Biden rightful winner of 2020 election	**Mixed** - Only positive for prevalence of fraud in 2020 and vote confidence in 2020 election	Effect dissipates for all outcomes
Carey, Fogarty, Gehrke, Nyhan, and Reifler (N.d.)	**Prebunking** - prospective article on 2022 election misinformation from Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) website	**Mixed** - Only positive for Biden rightful winner of 2020 election	Effect dissipates for Biden rightful winner of 2020 election	**Positive**	Effect dissipates for vote confidence, effect for reduced fraud belief persisted
Carey, Fogarty, Gehrke, Nyhan, and Reifler (N.d.)	**Prebunking** - prospective article on 2022 election misinformation with and without forewarning from Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) website	**Mixed** - All increased discernment, only positive for House seat fraud outcomes when forewarning was missing	—	**Mixed** - Only positive when forewarning was missing	—

Study	Intervention Description	Effects on Beliefs	Durability of Belief Effects	Effects on Confidence	Durability for Confidence
Clayton and Willer (2023)	**Debunking** - videos from partisan elites and short statements on 2020 election misinformation	**Mixed** - Only positive when Republican elites corrected misinformation	—	**Mixed** - Only positive when Republican elites corrected misinformation	—
Holman and Lay (2018)	**Debunking** - News article on 2016 election misinformation from varied sources	**Null**	—	**Mixed** - Only positive among Democrats when source is neutral or conservative	—
Bailard, Porter, and Gross (2022)	**Debunking** - News article on 2020 election misinformation from Politifact	—	—	**Mixed** - Only positive among Democrats and Independents	—
Berlinski et al. (2023)	**Debunking** - Tweets with articles on 2020 election misinformation linked from various sources	—	—	**Null**	—
Jenkins and Gomez (2024)	**Debunking** - News article on 2020 election misinformation from varied sources	—	—	**Positive**	Effect dissipates among Republicans