TRUMAN NATIONAL SECURITY PROJECT

2020 Election Security Toolkit

For Local and national media, Private Companies and Nonprofits, State and Local Government, and private citizens

Introduction

On October 3-4, 2020, 50 members of the Truman National Security Project participated in an election scenario simulation hosted with LA-based Fascination Lab. This simulation explored potential scenarios in the lead-up to and in the days following the November 3 election, and asked players (in their personal expert capacity) to explore potential paths that the Democratic National Committee and Republican National Committee might take in the absence of a clear winner on election night. Within each of these groups, the experts were divided into policy, legal, and communications experts. This document contains their recommendations based upon lessons learned from the election security simulation. These recommendations are for thought leaders, members of local and national media, policy experts, private companies and nonprofits, state and local government officials, and public citizens to deploy prior to and following Election Day on November 3rd. The toolkit utilizes existing and new resources to ensure that individuals know how to protect the operation of our democracy before, during, and after Election Day.

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Things to Remember in the Lead-up to November 3rd

1. **Language matters**: Commentators must stop using words such as "fight" "battle" and other "war-like" words, and also take care about the extent and ways that electoral violence and intimidation is discussed with the public, as they may inadvertently deter some citizens from showing up to the polls. Such language can exacerbate existing partisan tensions, and not only increase the likelihood of violence occuring on and after

Election Day, but also facilitate the normalization of election violence.

2. **Voter Turnout:** Voters should expect that malign actors (be they in person or on social media sites) will attempt to decrease voter turnout throughout the United States. Everyday voters must ensure that they are well-informed and know how and when to vote.

3. **Post-election:** There is an ever-increasing likelihood that the U.S. will not have a clear presidential winner on Election Night. This means that commentators and thought leaders should normalize use of terms like "Election Month," "Election Period," and "Election Season" to describe this time. Preparing voters that there may not be a clear result on November 3rd decreases the opportunities for malign actors to use uncertainty to spread disinformation on the night of the election or thereafter.

4. **Stay Calm, Patient, and Vigilant:** Accurate results are more important than fast results. Slow doesn't mean something is wrong. At the same time, we cannot let our focus on ensuring there *can* be trust in the election gloss over serious issues; The question is: if there are issues (e.g. problems with mail-in ballots, ballot counting, voter turnout, etc…), are they believed to be significant enough to have altered the results of the election? This will take time to determine.

5. **Keep in Mind**: It's also worth considering there will be many other societal pressures occurring at the same time: lift on eviction moratorium, flu season, continued layoffs etc. This will all contribute to instability that may be exploited.

Recommendations for Local and National Media

●   Reframe expectations for "election night" and election results, by walking people through the counting process in the weeks leading up to Election Day. Are absentee ballots allowed to be prepared for counting before E-day? What does that mean for the counting process? Emphasize the likelihood that a final result will not be known on Election night and use terms like "Election Month," "Election Period," and "Election Season" rather than "Election Night."
●   Make sure to talk openly and often about the "Counting period" to describe the interregnum between Election Day and when the results are actually certified.
●   Develop relationships and communication protocols with local authorities (including law enforcement, local Board of Elections, poll watcher organizations) now so as to be ready to get public security information out ASAP in the event of a credibly reported threat at a voting location or political violence in public spaces.
●   Humanizing the election and counting process builds the public's confidence in it. Between now and November 3rd, local news should put an actual face to the election count by showing the process and introducing the people who work at the Board of

Elections. (e.g. "Meet Nancy. Nancy has worked in this office for 15 years. She'll get your mail-in ballot and put it in the counting machine….")

- National media should take a page out of the local media playbook and spotlight local actors in both R and D districts.
- Avoid "combat-related" language. Avoid using words like "war," "battle," "fight," or others that could inspire would-be agitators or normalize physical/violent action in connection with the election. This is especially true for networks perceived to be highly-partisan like Fox News and MSNBC.
- Resist the temptation to report the most sensational news first or without context. For instance, there may in fact be some foreign interference in the election period. But its scope and impact is not as great as domestic actors spreading mis- and disinformation as part of a voter suppression strategy. Responsible reporting requires placing these headline-like stories in context. Is the foreign interference the news, or the focus of the mis- and disinformation itself? Even the inadvertent spread of mis- or disinformation helps malign actors and benefits those who wish to sow chaos amongst our democracy. Triple check stories and double down on process and context in the days leading up to and the weeks following Election Day.
- Ensure that every Election Night discussion panel has a mix of Democrats and Republicans. Verify claims from discussion panels and ensure that they are fact-checked. Flag false information.
- To avoid escalating already-fraught situations that are causing the public anxiety, do not jump to conclusions before the data is in-hand. For example, it may be that initial in-person results lean toward one potential outcome, but a final count that includes all votes including mail-in ballots has a different outcome. This is a normal possibility in elections with a lot of mail-in votes; it is not a "surprise" or "unusual" concern.
- National and local print news (especially those who have an online platform) are highly encouraged to provide resources or an FAQ with accurate and verifiable information to voters to guide them through the elections process in their states and various important deadlines. These FAQs should be tailored to each state, and if possible, locality. A great example is the Washington Post's "How to vote"
  - The FAQ/resource list should include links to government websites where voters can go to: check on their voter status, register to vote, apply for a mail-in or absentee ballots, and check on their Election Ballot status (if voting by mail or absentee). All links should be verified and lead to a state's Department of State website.
  - These news platforms are also encouraged to engage with their audience to survey the types of problems and concerns that voters, poll workers, and election officials currently face with the voting process.
- National and local anchors and reporters should offer information to all voters on how to protect their personal information. These recommendations should be reported in a way that can be understood and digested by a wide range of audiences. The recommendations

should also be presented in a manner/framework that does not evoke panic and emphasizes normalcy.
- *Local voices need to inoculate against violence and misinformation*. They are often more trusted than national media.

Recommendations for Private Companies and Nonprofits

- Private companies (and nonprofits, if they have the financial capacity) should give employees Election Day off so they can vote without risking their employment, even if the lines and waiting times are long. Employers can also encourage their employees to serve as nonpartisan poll workers.
- Provide employees with voting information, and encourage them to confirm registration and a voting plan.
- Encourage employees to be safe and support them with the resources they need. Prepare employees by providing them with emergency-contact numbers and information on security resources beforehand, so they have the information they need in order to stay safe when the time comes.
- Hold national and social media accountable for the spread of mis- & disinformation through use of ad boycotts or by pulling ads from these platforms.
- For nonprofits in the election security space: ensure that there are guardrails for social media (and national media) disinformation and make sure that the information gained from these platforms is reliable and safe. Sources should be verified and fact-checked.
    - Develop relationships with third-party fact checkers on social media to expedite review of problematic claims
    - Fact check social media claims and flag false information for media outlets and social media platforms

Recommendations for State and Local Government

- According to More in Common, 68% of voters have confidence in local officials to do what's right for America, and only 39% have confidence in federal officials to do what's right for America. Therefore, local government officials are best-placed to ensure a peaceful, safe, and trustworthy election.
- For local government and state government that fall into different political camps, prepare for potential disagreements. Local officials should have clear plans in place if, for example, a Secretary of State refuses to certify election results. Open cross-party lines of communication now to facilitate communications later.
- Establish lines of communication between local officials and important faith and community leaders. Should tensions arise, these lines will be crucial to mitigation and de-escalation. Additionally, these faith and community leaders can also serve as a channel for elections messaging from elections officials to voters.
- Build strong relationships with Boards of Elections and local media in the weeks leading up to the Election to ensure easy and seamless communication and information sharing.

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Provide clear instructions for how poll workers should communicate with the media if approached, and make sure workers know exactly who to direct media to should there be questions.

- Have someone (staff or volunteer) identified to monitor social media for reports of voting disinformation or disruptions at the polls.
- Make sure county elections offices have rapid response plans for disinformation about polling place closures or issues (website, Facebook, Twitter, local media contact lists — send to trusted government County Elections office website websites for credible voting station information).
- Consider identifying a particular hashtag you want the public to use to report problems at polls in your jurisdiction. (e.g." #PHLVotes.")
- Coordinate with local election officials, your Secretary of State, and others to release ballot count information at regular and anticipated intervals throughout Election night and the days following. Count information should focus on the progress in completing the count. How many ballots are there, how many have been counted, and from which precincts/counties?
- Proactively communicate about any slowdowns in ballot counting. If it is to ensure accuracy, make that clear. If there is an issue, make clear that a dip in reporting on the tally is to ensure any issues are addressed properly. Silence in these moments could become a flashpoint for mis and dis-information, and be leveraged by bad actors to stoke unrest and undermine trust in the process as a whole.
- Help local election officials prepare for the possibility of violence or intimidation at the polls. Normalize deescalation tactics as part of poll worker training. Provide poll workers with appropriate emergency numbers in case of conflict or incident.
    - Work with local law enforcement before the election to create a contingency plan in case armed protestors *do* show up at polling places. Determine accountability and safeguard measures to protect peaceful protestors and ensure that these measures are implemented and enforced by the local government and law enforcement.
- Take precautions to protect information security for individuals in positions of election responsibility. Malign actors might attempt to doxx or otherwise intimidate them in the case of close votes, so personal and professional digital security is very important.
- Establish a clear stance against unnecessary interference in the election process by outside groups, specifically private military and security companies (PMSCs) and other similar contractors. If such entities are present at polls on Election Day, local and state officials and authorities must hold both the individual contractor/member of the PMSC contingent as well as the company(ies) & individuals to whom the PMSC/contractor is contracted to accountable for their actions to the fullest extent of state and federal laws.
- Coordinate with local health officials, non-profits, and private companies to create contingency plans to ensure that voting can be conducted in as safe a manner as possible during a pandemic and other public health crisis settings. Educate and train poll workers, local law enforcement and political camps on implementation of these measures. Ensure

that these contingency plans include factors such as long waiting lines or the presence of protestors.

  - Plan now for where the waiting line for a polling place can snake in a safe and socially-distanced manner, if necessary.
  - Work with local (and national) media, political camps, and other citizen/activist groups to disseminate accurate and factual information regarding these public health-oriented safeguards and processes.
- After the FBI foiled a militia group's (Wolverine Watchmen) plot to kidnap the sitting governor of Michigan, it is imperative to ensure the physical safety of local and state officials (especially those who have influence in the Elections process) against credible threats of physical and bodily harm. Officials must also work with local and state law enforcement and authorities, as well as both political camps to ensure that peaceful protesters remain protected.

Do You Want to Become More Politically Active?

- Focus on being calm, patient, and vigilant on Election Day and the days/weeks following. Don't expect election results by the end of Election day. Slow and accurate reporting is better than fast and wrong. Do pay close attention to the progress in counting over the days following the election.
- Double and triple check your information, especially if you're reading news and find that it provokes a strong reaction (either negative or positive) in you.
- Research your local election websites and seek out trainings from civil society organizations that are offered for activists/citizens to safely engage in protests, de-escalate volatile situations, responsibly record violations of law, know their rights, report disinformation, and more.
- Take non-violent direct action training(s), or better yet contact a training organization and schedule trainings for a civic organization of which you're a part.
- Review the list of 300+ nonviolent tactics from Nonviolence International, Beautiful Rising, or the Einstein Institute and pick something you like. Do it with friends!
- Work with an existing organization or start a community action group that follows the Commitment to Uphold Democracy Planning Guide to press government officials to sign a commitment to respect the election process until every vote is counted and respect the results.
- Sign up with an organization that is assisting mail-in voters troubleshoot their issues, helping poll-day voters who have special needs ensure they can vote, or training people to be a poll watcher.
- Join a mis/disinformation watch effort (e.g. SQUINT, a USG-funded MITRE project that issues user accounts to local and state government officials as well as accredited election integrity civil society organizations for purposes of one-click reporting of incorrect information that government agents can then quickly correct).

- Would you like to help ensure safe and peaceful elections and a credible result? Seek out, join, and complete any necessary training by organizations that are coordinating poll monitoring, voter assistance for citizens requiring rides or language assistance, etc., and other forms of support to the process.
- Concerned about your mail-in ballot? Read this article. How to prevent your mail ballot from being rejected (Elise Viebeck, *The Washington Post*)
- Are you a part of a civil society organization? Civil society organizations are highly encouraged to provide resources or a FAQ with accurate and verifiable information to voters to guide them through the elections process in their states and various important deadlines. These FAQs should be tailored to each state, or if possible, locality. A great example is the Washington Post's "How to vote"
    - The FAQ/resource list should include links to gov websites where voters can go to: check on their voter status, register to vote, apply for a mail-in or absentee ballots, and check on their Election Ballot status (if voting by mail or absentee). All links should be verified and lead to a state's Department of State website.
- Share the above and attached resources with organizations or individuals who could use them.
- Take care of the frontliners. Check in with friends who are working their tails off on election-related issues, as well as friends who seem worried. Make sure they are ok or see how you can be supportive, and reassure them that it is ok to take a break and take care of themselves when things get too overwhelming. This might not be a short election period, so we need to care for ourselves as though we might be in for a long haul!
- Become a Poll Observer!