Voter Suppression 101

Sylvia Albert, Director of Voting and Elections
Jesse Littlewood, Vice President for Campaigns

Common Cause and the Election Protection Coalition

Common Cause

Agenda

- Voter Suppression – A Brief History
- Contemporary Voter Suppression Tactics
- Recognizing Voter Suppression Online
- Reporting Responsibly on Voter Suppression

Common Cause

Election Protection Overview

- Year-round program, with peak activity in the fall
- Co-led by Common Cause, Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, and State Voices
- 100+ nonpartisan organizations engaged
- Voter hotlines, local elections official engagement, field volunteers, social media monitoring

Common Cause

History and Tactics of Vote Suppression

Common Cause

Voter Suppression Legal Strategies

- Poll taxes
- Literacy requirements
- Strict Voter ID
- Consolidating / removing polling places and dropboxes

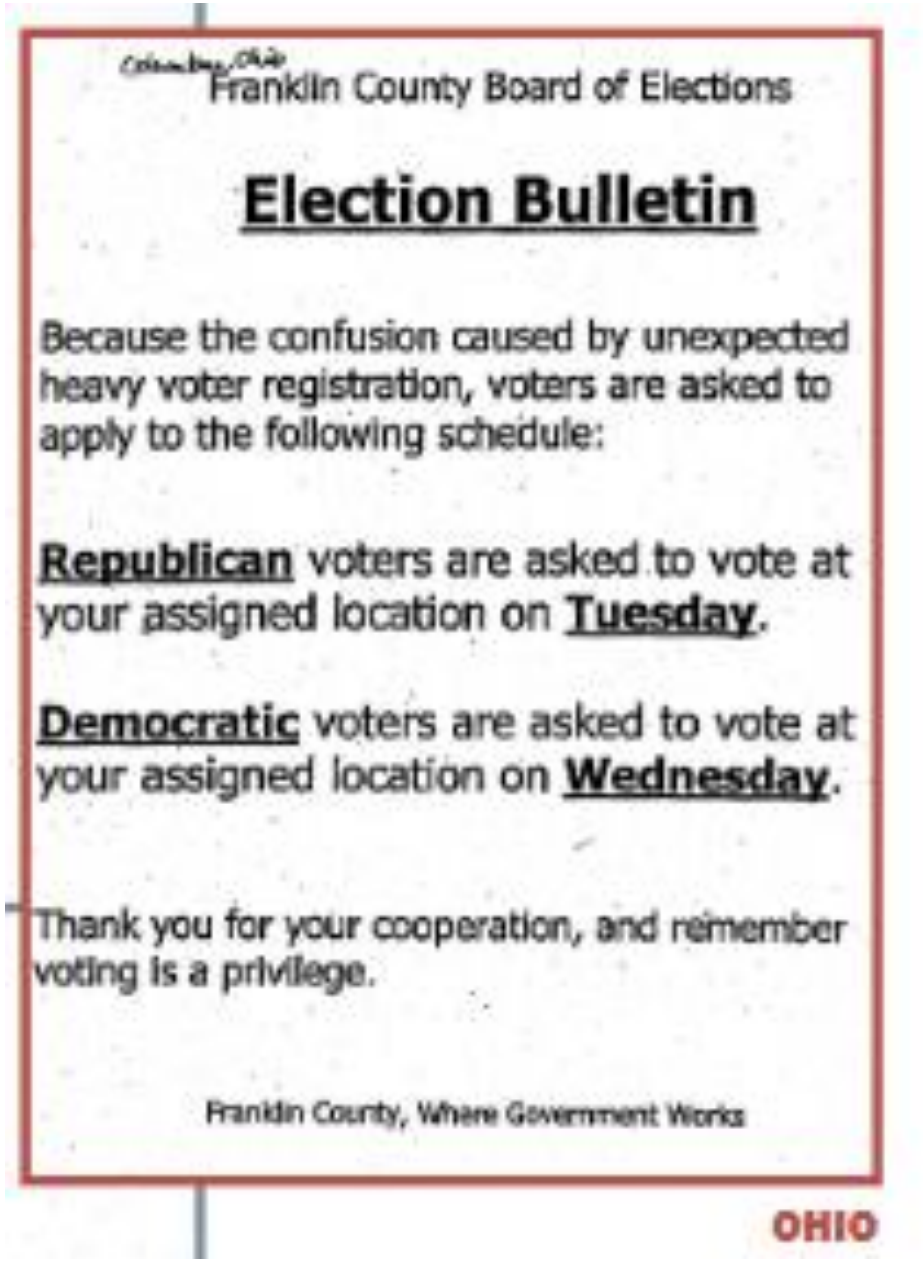
Common Cause

Voter Suppression Tactics

- Offline “deceptive practices”
  - Billboards, flyers, robocalls
- Online mis- and disinformation
- Intimidation at the polls or in neighborhoods, violence and threats of violence
- Police, military or other enforcement presence

Common Cause

- Individuals using official-looking seals or insignias to intimate voters.
  - In 2003, men with clipboards bearing official-looking insignias and 300 cars with decals resembling those of federal agencies were dispatched in black neighborhoods in Philadelphia to ask voters for identification.
- Flyers with bogus election rules.
  - During the 2004 election, flyers purporting to be from a non-existent group called the "Milwaukee Black Voters League," were distributed in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The flyers were distributed in minority neighborhoods and claimed, "If you've already voted in any election this year, you can't vote in the presidential election; If anybody in your family has ever been found guilty of anything, you can't vote in the presidential election; If you violate any of these laws, you can get ten years in prison and your children will get taken away from you."



Flyers advertising the wrong election date.

Common Cause

Robocalls: September 2020 Robocalls to Ohio, Michigan and other states

The recording falsely claims that voting by mail will allow police departments to “track down old warrants,” credit card companies to “collect outstanding debt” and for the CDC to “track people for mandatory vaccines.” It closes by warning the listener to not be tricked “into giving your private information to the man” and to “beware of vote by mail.”

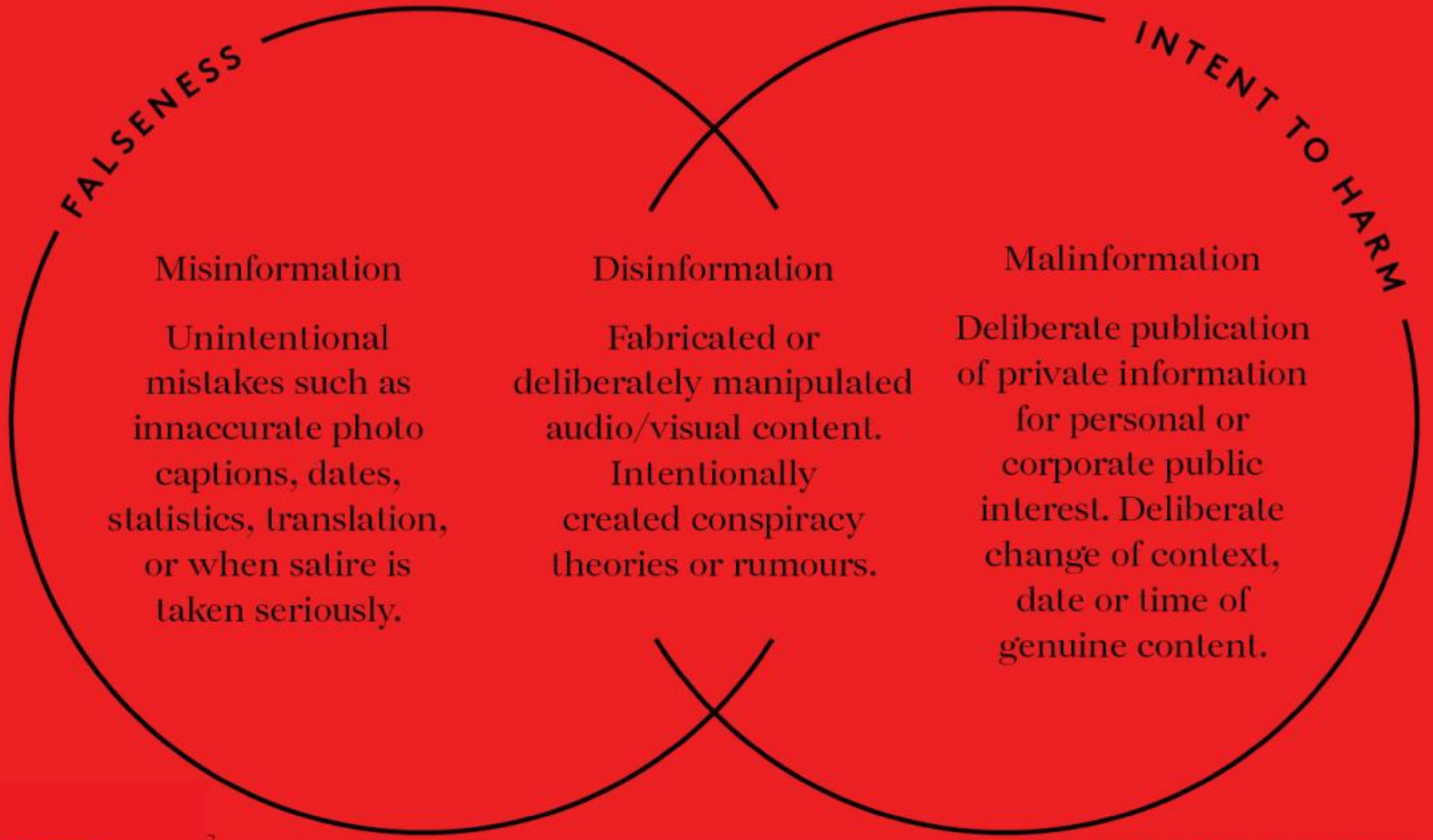
Republican operatives Jacob Wohl and Jack Burkman are charged with intimidating voters with robocalls that falsely warned of 'arrest, debt collection or forced vaccination' if they vote by mail

Common Cause

Recognizing Voter Suppression Online

Common Cause

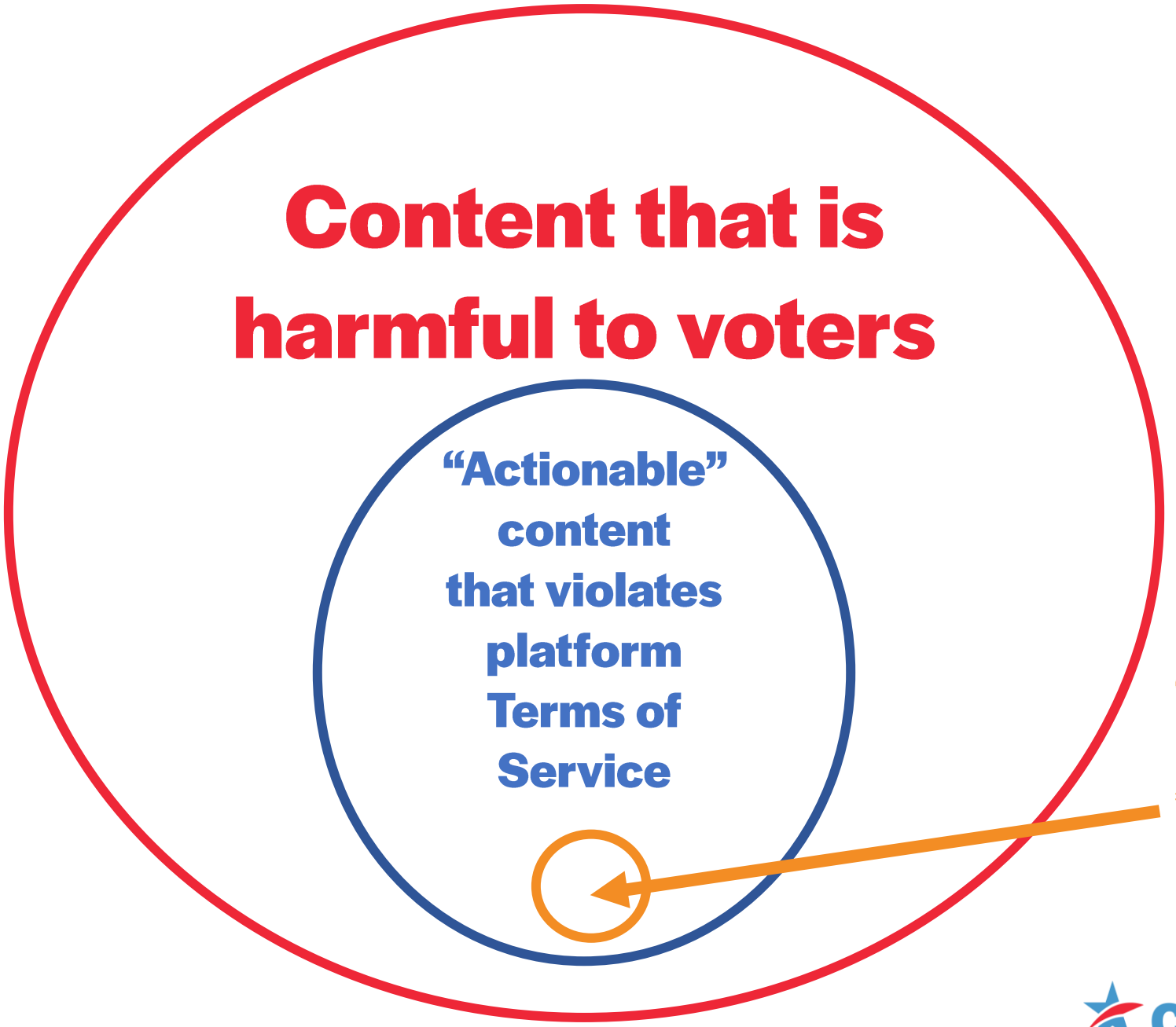
Mis-, dis- and malinformation



Threats

- Time/place/manner of elections (in-person and mail-in)
  - Amplified by changes to elections in response to COVID-19
- False narratives and conspiracy theories
  - “Rigged elections” and “pervasive voter fraud” (also amplified)
- Depress turnout
  - Attacks on candidates, “boycott the vote” campaigns
- Intimidation of election officials
  - Doxxing, threats, etc.

Common Cause



- TOS vary by platform
- Diagram not to scale!

Common Cause

What else to look for

- Robo calls
- Polling place closures
- Long lines
- Turned away from the polls
- Not on the rolls, having to use a provisional ballot
- Police or Military presence

Common Cause

What to be cautious about

- Machines “switching” votes
- Old videos from the primary of “not letting Democrats/Republicans vote”
- Old images of absentee ballots from the primaries that were coded by party in some way

Common Cause

US Border Patrol cancels 'crowd control' training exercise near Texas polling station

Media had been invited to witness 'crowd control' exercise on Election Day.

By **Anne Flaherty**

November 6, 2018, 3:38 PM • 6 min read

Border patrol officials on Tuesday abruptly canceled a "crowd control exercise" it had planned for Election Day near a Hispanic neighborhood along the Texas-Mexico border a half a mile from a polling place.

Common Cause

Reporting Responsibly

Common Cause

Challenge: Amplification

- Kentucky election, November 5, 2019
- Twitter account @OverlordKraken1 had 9 followers

Common Cause

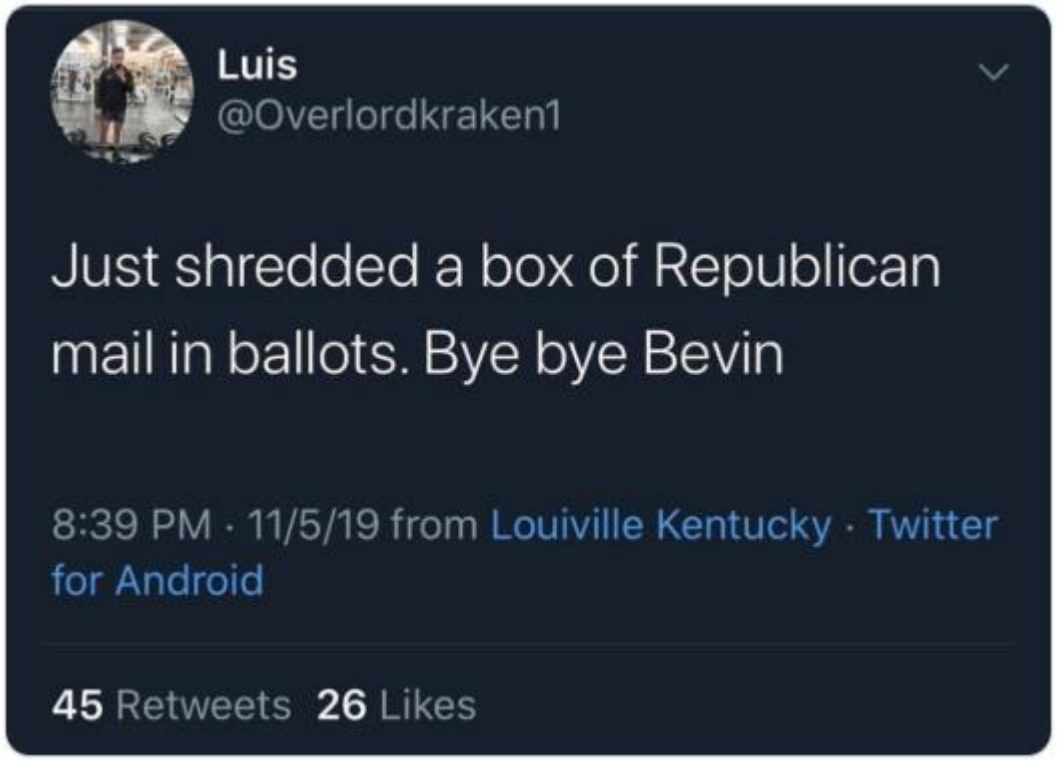
Challenge: Amplification

Common Cause

Challenge: Amplification

Common Cause

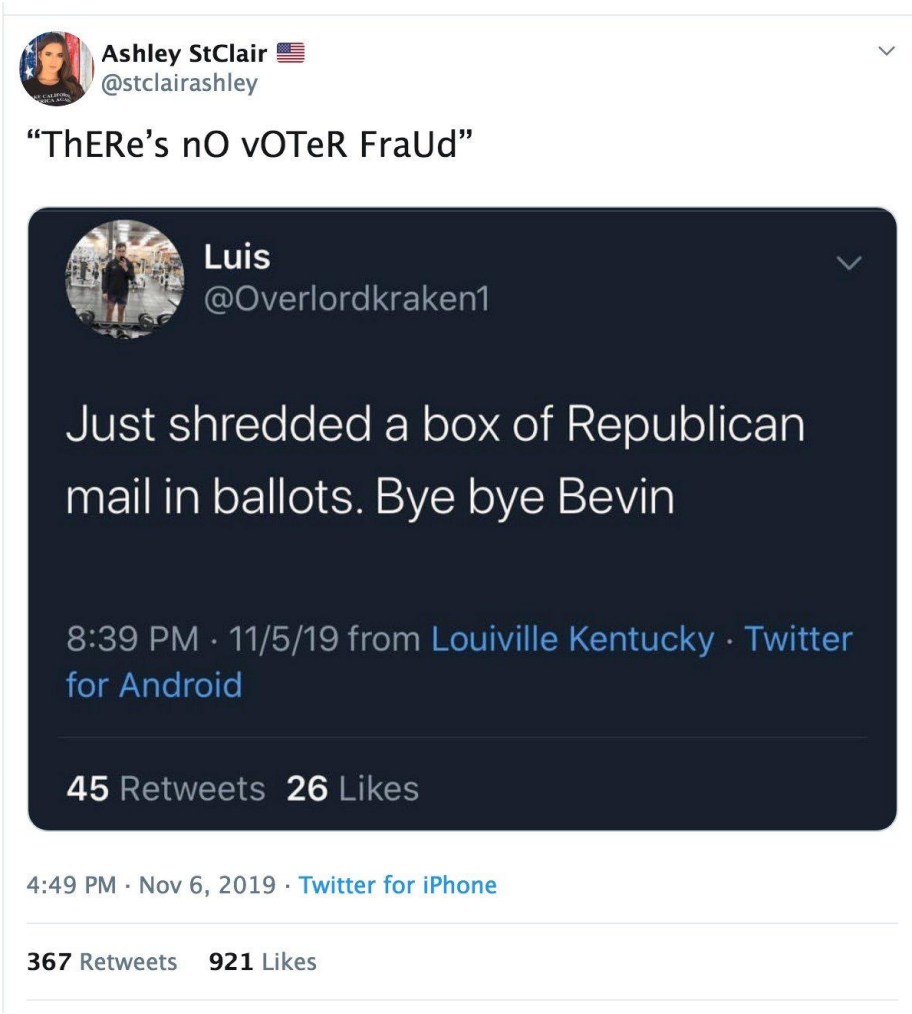
Challenge: Amplification



Common Cause

Challenge: Amplification

- Right-wing accounts to promote the false narrative



Common Cause

LEX18

NEWS

'Irregularities': Where are the voter fraud claims coming from?

- Local Lexington, KY NBC news reported on the tweet and included a copy of the screenshot

LEX18

One tweet that was shared across Twitter claimed to have destroyed ballots for Bevin. It came from the account of @Overlordkraken1 and it said "just shredded a box of Republican mail in ballot. Bye bye Bevin." The tweet has the user's location listed as Louisville, but the city's name is misspelled.

Challenge: Amplification

- USA Today
- NYT
- Dozens more

Close Election in Kentucky Was Ripe for Twitter, and an Omen for 2020

By Matthew Rosenberg and Nick Corasaniti

Nov. 10, 2019

A few hours after polls closed in Kentucky last Tuesday, a Twitter user writing under the handle @Overlordkraken1 posted a message to his 19 followers saying he had "just shredded a box of Republican mail-in ballots."

It was clear that the Kentucky governor's race was going to be excruciatingly close, and that the Republican incumbent, Matt Bevin, could be headed to defeat. But just in case anyone missed the significance of the destroyed-ballots claim, @Overlordkraken1 added a final touch

red state leaned blue, the fact that @Overlordkraken1 did not appear to be in Kentucky — ag on his tweet, for one thing — was not going to get in the way of a useful narrative. Nor was

t, as it became apparent that Mr. Bevin was trailing in the vote tally, hyperpartisan a screenshot of the message, boosted by what appeared to be a network of bots, and providing t in Kentucky. High-profile right-wing figures were soon tweeting out their own conspiracy messages that were in turn pushed by even more trolls and bots — and the Bevin campaign vote without offering any specifics or evidence.

USA TODAY

[News] Sports Entertainment Life Money Tech Travel Opinion

After being retweeted at least 91 times, the account was suspended — though Blocq said a screenshot of the tweet was then posted Tuesday night and "we saw huge bot networks just pushing it around."

While the suspended account was likely a real person just "trolling" with the shredding tweet, Blocq said "thousands" of bot accounts spread the screenshot in parallel with other tweets alleging that the election was rigged, showing "this is not a small operation... it is not just one

A screenshot of a tweet from a deleted account went viral on the night of the election, spread by a network of bot accounts. *Via Twitter*

Common Cause

Reporting Responsibly Tips

- Just because there is a problem at a polling place right now doesn't mean it won't be solved quickly.
- Don't treat singular incidents as indicative of a broader pattern.
- Avoid implying intent: in most cases, problems are the result of clerical or voter mistakes.
- Election night is probably not going to be results night.
- Refrain from conducting your own voting "studies."
- Don't spell out how bad actors can use certain news to their benefit.
- When you analyze what is possible, clarify what is probable.
- Avoid giving airtime to partisan attacks dressed up like 'research'.

Common Cause

Getting Involved

- Join our collaboration and engage your audience
  - Contact Jesse Littlewood at jlittlewood@commoncause.org
- Submit tips to our Disinfo Tip Line: commoncause.org/disinfo
- Tell us about your organization, your audience and what resources you'd like.
  - Resources for communications
  - Tools for monitoring
  - A Tip Line for disinformation for your organization
  - Training of your members/volunteers
- We will reach out to set up an onboarding and training.

Common Cause

More information

- First Draft News: https://firstdraftnews.org/
- Field Guide to “Fake News”: https://fakenews.publicdatalab.org/
- Recent Brennan Center report: https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/voters-vs-disinformation
- Disinformation game: https://www.getbadnews.com/#intro
- Please contact me with any additional questions or if you are interested in learning more or collaborating: jlittlewood@commoncause.org

Common Cause