

Electoral Integrity in the Age of Disinformation: Bridging the Gaps in the Research on Election Disinformation and Electoral Integrity

Başak Bozkurt

PhD Student

University of Oxford

basak.bozkurt@oii.ox.ac.uk



ECPR General Conference - 07.09.2023

Outline

Characteristics of Digital-era Elections

Definitions: Election disinformation, electoral integrity

Impact of Election Disinformation

Research Questions

Gaps in Electoral Integrity Research

- Limited Emphasis on Election Disinformation in Electoral Integrity Analysis

- Expanding the Menu of Manipulation: The Spread of Election Disinformation as a Manipulation Strategy

- Social Media Monitoring

- Limited Temporal Scope

- Exploring the Effects of Corrections on Electoral Integrity

Conclusion

Characteristics of Digital-era Elections

In the digital age, technological advances have dramatically reshaped the electoral landscape.

This transformation spans various aspects, including online campaigning, electronic voting systems, and data-driven voter registration, fundamentally altering how candidates connect with voters and share information.

While this shift presents opportunities for increased accessibility and greater voter engagement, it also introduces notable challenges, such as cybersecurity risks and **the dissemination of disinformation**.

Key dimensions characterising elections in the digital age (Garnett and James, 2020):

- ▶ New Ontological Presence
- ▶ Emergence of Novel Data and Communication Patterns
- ▶ Rapid Communication and Data Exchange
- ▶ Commercialisation of Electoral Data
- ▶ Expansion of Actors

Election Disinformation

Disinformation encompasses any type of false, inaccurate or misleading information that is **intended** to harm the public or generate profit (High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Disinformation, 2018, p. 3)

Election disinformation

- ▶ Fake news (Judge and Korhani, 2020, p. 253),
- ▶ Disinformation in polling data (Bader, 2018, p. 30)
- ▶ Disinformation motivating fraud (Center for an Informed Public et al., 2021, p. 7)
- ▶ Disinformation about voting procedures (Judge and Korhani, 2020, p. 251)
- ▶ Disinformation about political candidates, party leaders (Judge and Korhani, 2020, p. 252)
- ▶ Disinformation by political candidates, party leaders, or election officials (Center for an Informed Public et al., 2021, p. 7; Judge and Korhani, 2020, p. 252)
- ▶ Disinformation in election monitoring (Bader, 2018, p. 32; Merloe, 2015, pp. 86-87)

Impact of Election Disinformation

1. **New Ontological Presence:**

The digital realm offers fertile ground for disinformation, capitalising on anonymity and speed.

2. **Emergence of Novel Data and Communication Patterns:**

New patterns empower tailored disinformation campaigns, customising messages to target voters.

3. **Rapid Communication and Data Exchange:**

Rapid information spread, potentially outpacing fact-checking efforts.

4. **Commercialisation of Electoral Data:**

Profit-driven motives may manipulate public opinion through targeted disinformation campaigns.

5. **Expansion of Actors:**

A wider spectrum of sources and targets, encompassing both state and non-state actors, with diverse intentions and capacities.

Electoral Integrity

- ▶ Electoral integrity has been conceptualised in various ways.
- ▶ A widely acknowledged definition links it to international standards and global norms (Norris, 2013).
- ▶ However, there is a need to evolve and adapt to digital-era challenges
- ▶ In this study, electoral integrity is defined by drawing upon the foundations of democratic theory, following the work of Garnett and James(2020). Three essential principles of electoral integrity:
 - Opportunity for public deliberation.
 - Equality of participation.
 - Professionalism and impartiality of election delivery.

Impact of Election Disinformation on Electoral Integrity

- ▶ **Opportunity for Public Deliberation:** Disinformation can confuse voters and jeopardise public deliberation.
- ▶ **Equality of Participation:** Disinformation on voting procedures can hinder participation, especially for targeted groups.
- ▶ **Professionalism and Impartiality:** Disinformation can undermine confidence in the fairness and impartiality of election processes.

Given the multifaceted impact of election disinformation on electoral integrity, this research aims to understand their relationship and address knowledge gaps.

Research Questions

Limited focus on election disinformation in electoral integrity literature.

To what extent is there a lack of emphasis on election disinformation within the current body of electoral integrity literature, and in which particular domains is this insufficiency most apparent?

What empirical evidence from disinformation studies can be harnessed to enhance our understanding of the effects of election disinformation on electoral integrity?

This research will synthesise insights from the disinformation studies and electoral integrity literature, drawing on empirical evidence from the former and theoretical frameworks from the latter. It will provide recommendations to address the gaps.

Gaps in Electoral Integrity Research

1. Limited Emphasis on Election Disinformation in Electoral Integrity Analysis
2. Under-conceptualisation of Disinformation as a Manipulation Technique
3. Gap in Research on Social Media Monitoring
4. Limited Temporal Scope
5. The Effects of Corrective Measures on Electoral Integrity

Limited Emphasis on Election Disinformation in Analysis

- ▶ Lack of consideration for disinformation in statistical analyses
- ▶ Suggested data sources for analysis:
 1. Accessible Data for Analysis
 2. Potentially Recollectable Data
 3. Data Requiring Pre-processing
 4. Platform Data

Accessible Data for Analysis

- ▶ The V-Dem Dataset includes indicators related to **dissemination of false information** (Coppedge et al., 2023, pp. 319–321):
 - by foreign governments (*v2smfordom*)
 - by governments domestically (*v2smgovdom*) and abroad (*v2smgovab*)
 - by parties domestically (*v2smpardom*) and abroad (*v2smparab*)
- ▶ The V-Dem dataset also includes an indicator on **government monitoring of political content on social media platforms** (*v2smgovsmmon*) (Coppedge et al., 2023, pp. 324).
- ▶ Recent research emphasizes politicians as primary sources of disinformation (Benkler et al., 2020; DeVerna et al., 2022; Lasser et al., 2022). Introducing a variable for false information spread by politicians would enable the analysis of their influence on electoral integrity.
- ▶ V-Dem indicators cover various aspects, but they are not exclusive to elections.

Potentially Recollectable Data

These datasets encompass specific indicators related to disinformation, but they are only collected during a limited number of survey waves.

The Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Dataset, created by the Electoral Integrity Project, assesses the quality of elections globally. This dataset uses a continuous survey that gathers insights from experts, enabling a comparison of countries' adherence to international standards (Garnett et al., 2023b).

- ▶ Across the survey waves of 2017, 2018, and 2019, respondents were asked about their views on fake news presence.
- ▶ The 2018 and 2019 surveys included inquiries about foreign interference in campaigns.
- ▶ The 2018 survey also aimed to understand perceptions of fake news prevalence on social media platforms.

Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Dataset

These indicators are significant when examining disinformation from the electoral integrity perception standpoint.

However, two limitations need attention:

1. These indicators were collected for only a few years, limiting the identification of trends and generalisability.
2. Their focus on a narrow subset of disinformation, such as "fake news," may not fully capture the broader disinformation landscape.

Addressing Limitations:

- ▶ Expanding the coverage of these indicators within the survey.
- ▶ Adopting more inclusive terminology, such as "disinformation" or "problematic information," rather than "fake news"

In addition including politicians can enhance the dataset's comprehensiveness for analysing the impact of disinformation on election integrity.

Data Requiring Pre-processing

This category involves data that may not be in a suitable state for direct analysis but can be transformed into usable form through pre-processing.

The Computational Propaganda Research Project examined how computational propaganda is conducted by various actors, including government agencies, political parties, civil society organizations and citizens (Bradshaw et al., 2021).

The project's inventory is a valuable resource for compiling a dataset for:

1. **Identifying tactics:** The dataset may shed light on specific tactics employed during elections, such as the dissemination of disinformation, targeted messaging and the use of bots.
2. **Analysing actors:** The dataset could help in identifying which actors were involved in conducting disinformation campaigns during elections.
3. **Comparative studies:** The dataset could also be used for comparative studies between countries to identify similarities and differences in disinformation strategies during elections.

Platform Data

Social media data is crucial for understanding individual interactions with election-related disinformation.

Access to this data is essential for a comprehensive understanding of election disinformation dynamics and its impact on electoral integrity.

Scholars face barriers hindering access to and analysis of mainstream social media platforms.

Addressing these barriers and promoting wider data access are vital steps for future research.

Expanding the Menu of Manipulation

Recent years have witnessed a significant surge in online election disinformation, strategically employed to manipulate elections, such as the Brexit referendum, the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections.

External state actors orchestrate global disinformation campaigns beyond their borders (Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018; Garnett and James, 2020). However, politicians have also become increasingly involved in these activities, such as claims regarding mail-in fraud during the 2020 US elections, fake news originated from politicians during the Australian General Election in 2019.

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report survey across 40 countries found that the public believes most false information comes from domestic politicians.(40%). They are followed by political activists (14%), journalists (13%), ordinary people (13%), and foreign governments (10%) (Newman et al., 2020, p. 18)

Disinformation as a New Manipulation Strategy

Despite increasing empirical evidence on the spread of disinformation by politicians during elections, disinformation is rarely discussed as a form of electoral manipulation, with only a few exceptions (e.g. Annala, 2021; Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018).

Existing literature on election manipulation has mainly focused on offline techniques like vote buying, and to a lesser extent, rule manipulation or institutional effectiveness (Alvarez et al., 2009; van Ham and Lindberg, 2016).

The spread of disinformation should be included in the “menu of manipulation” (Schedler, 2002) as a means of manipulating genuine voter preferences (Birch, 2011b)

Disinformation as a New Manipulation Strategy

- ▶ Disinformation is characterised by its covert nature. It offers advantages in terms of evading accountability.
- ▶ It is achievable with minimal human resources.
- ▶ It can be employed by both incumbents and opposition groups.
However, use of disinformation may vary between different regimes:
 - In liberalized media environments, opposition groups can utilise established channels like mainstream media and social media.
 - In authoritarian regimes, government control over information can hinder opposition strategies.
- ▶ While much empirical evidence comes from democracies, there is limited theoretical knowledge regarding the decision-making processes of incumbents in democracies regarding manipulation strategies.
- ▶ More empirical analyses in authoritarian contexts, are needed to understand how leaders employ disinformation as a manipulation tool.

(Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018; Bader, 2018)

Social Media Monitoring

- ▶ A significant knowledge gap exists in understanding the impact of social media monitoring on electoral integrity.
- ▶ A large body of research devoted to election monitoring
- ▶ Traditional election monitoring methods no longer sufficient. Responding to emerging challenges, organizations have started monitoring social media. Examples include: European Union Election Observation Missions, East StratCom Task Force (European External Action Service, 2021) and a few civil society organisations in Europe (Brady, 2020), Nigeria (Bartlett et al., 2015) and Brazil (González and Bernardi, 2023).
- ▶ New actors, including governments, for-profit companies (e.g. Brandwatch) and social media platforms are now engaging in monitoring.
- ▶ Social media monitoring, involving the surveillance of large-scale data, relies heavily on AI. This underscores the significance of integrating ethical discussions related to AI.
- ▶ Further research is needed to explore the role of social media monitoring and the involvement of new actors.

Limited Temporal Scope

- ▶ Majority of research has focused on election-day irregularities, such as the vote tabulation process (Norris, 2014, p. 33).
- ▶ Neglects pre-election factors and the more technical and covert manifestations of malpractice (Birch, 2011a).
- ▶ Disinformation can impact every stage of the electoral cycle.
- ▶ Disinformation researchers typically cover one year to five months pre-election and about one month post-election (e.g. Benkler et al., 2020; Pierri et al., 2020).
- ▶ Comprehensive scrutiny of the electoral process is essential in electoral integrity research to effectively analyse the challenges posed by election disinformation.

Exploring the Effects of Corrections on Electoral Integrity

How do corrections of disinformation affect voters' beliefs and attitudes?

Disinformation studies focus on:

1. The impact of fact-checking on voters' beliefs regarding politicians' claims.
2. The effect of fact-checking on voter support for politicians.

Findings indicate that while corrections can influence beliefs, attitudes toward politicians may remain unchanged, often due to partisan affiliations (Swire et al., 2017).

However, in some cases, when participants are exposed to a significant volume of disinformation compared to factual statements, it can lead to a decline in support for a politician (Aird et al., 2018; Prike et al., 2023; Swire-Thompson et al., 2020).

To assess these findings in the context of electoral integrity:

- ▶ Investigate how the dissemination of disinformation and subsequent corrective actions impact the perceptions of electoral integrity.
- ▶ Analyse how institutions, such as election management bodies, respond to disinformation and assess whether these institutional responses impact perceptions of electoral integrity.

Conclusion

Identified gaps:

- ▶ Lack of consideration for disinformation in statistical analyses
- ▶ Under-conceptualisation of disinformation as manipulation strategy
- ▶ Gap in research on social media monitoring
- ▶ Limited temporal scope
- ▶ Effects of corrective measures

Addressing these gaps will enrich our understanding of electoral integrity while also providing valuable insights to the field of disinformation research, such as offering a necessary theoretical framework to understand politicians' motivations behind the dissemination of disinformation.

Thank you!

basak.bozkurt@oii.ox.ac.uk