



## UC Student Research Team Monitors the 2022 Midterm Elections for Voter Suppression and Misinformation



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# Introduction

Beginning in September 2022, student researchers in the Human Rights Digital Investigations Labs at UC Santa Cruz and UCLA School of Law launched an independent online investigation to monitor voter suppression and intimidation as well as disinformation narratives during the U.S. midterm elections on November 8, 2022.

Monitoring online activity during elections helps us to understand how social media is being used to spread different narratives, many of which allege wrongdoing at polling locations and question the validity of elections, and which quickly proliferate.

This short report details the process and open source tools and techniques the student team utilized to document and investigate these narratives during the research, which may serve as a model for future election monitoring.

Students in the labs have been trained in open source research methods, enabling them to conduct investigations drawing on publicly available information on the internet, from online news articles to social media content, to expert reports.

To prepare for the Election Day live monitoring, throughout October and early November the UC research team conducted background research on six swing states – Arizona, Florida, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Texas,

and Georgia – to understand the context of existing voting issues in those states. The team created a set of state-specific fact sheets to synthesize demographic information, develop an overview of documented voter suppression efforts and key controversial issues in each state, document the existing circulation of disinformation narratives to preemptively sow doubt about the election results, and note relevant news and journalists' social media accounts to monitor on Election Day. Researchers also collected voting drop box maps to identify their locations within each state to assist with geolocation efforts, if needed.

In addition to the fact sheets, the team created several spreadsheets that included a list of relevant hashtags to monitor, a list of live monitoring feeds of news agencies or other outlets that would be covering the election in the states of interest, and a list of militia groups present in the states in question. During Election Day live monitoring, the teams added to these lists as new relevant hashtags, feeds, and groups became apparent.

On November 8, the team used techniques that assist with the systematic collection of online information, engaging in targeted searches on various search engines and monitored social media feeds using platforms such as TweetDeck and CrowdTangle.





This report details three examples of content the team found online during the research, and describes the process of using open source tools to investigate in an attempt to verify the veracity of some of the narratives.

## Viral Video Debunked by Geolocation

On Tuesday, November 8, 2022, a now-suspended Twitter user, @KC4RealNews, posted a video of a poll worker and alleged that he was tampering with ballots at the polling place at East Passyunk Community Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. [In the video](#), which alternative social media outlets like Rumble picked up, a man was seated at a table in the polling center and appeared to be marking ballots with a pen. The research team witnessed the video going viral in real time and wanted to verify whether it did show ballot tampering.

Geolocation is the process of verifying the location where a photo or video was taken. When attempting to geolocate photos or videos, the first step is always to do a reverse image search. The team captured screenshots of the video in the @KC4RealNews post and conducted a reverse image search on Google to try to locate matching images that could help to identify the location of the polling place. This approach did not garner any credible leads. The team then found a Fox News segment called “The Faulkner Focus,” which showed the original recording of the video in the @KC4RealNews post. Upon reviewing this segment, the team noticed the video header stated “Madison, WI” as the location, in contrast to @KC4RealNews which claimed the video was taken in Pennsylvania.

The team conducted a second reverse image search adding the terms “Madison, WI” and “voting poll” to the search queries. Through this, the team found images that matched the inside of the building featured in the video, specifically the ceiling. The image results led them to the website of Olbrich Botanical Gardens located in Wisconsin. This location served as a polling station on Election Day, which the team also confirmed by accessing the “Where Do I Vote” feature on the City of Madison website. This proved that the video was not filmed in Pennsylvania, as claimed in the original @KC4RealNews post.



[The Associated Press](#) came to the same conclusion on the location of the polling place in the video and emphasized that, rather than ballot tampering, the poll worker was engaged in a legitimate process of paper ballot verification as required by [Wisconsin state law](#).<sup>1</sup>

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(1) Wisconsin State Legislature 7.37(4) requires a ballot inspector to initial ballots before distributing them to the public.



**Caption:** Screenshot from Fox News segment in which research team focused on the interior of the building, specifically the ceiling, and noted the Madison, WI label at the top.

Public confidence in the election process and results can be undermined when videos purporting wrongdoing start to circulate online. In this case, the viral video from @KC4RealNews contained misleading claims about ballot tampering while also falsely identifying the state of the polling location. Even though the claims were disproved by media on the same day, this video stirred public suspicion, and, based on our research, the revival of a 2020 election hashtag "#PennsylvaniaFraud."

@KC4RealNews was subsequently suspended by Twitter. Though we do not know what specifically led to this, as Twitter does not disclose that information publicly, the account may have violated [Twitter's Authenticity and Civic Integrity rules](#), in which Twitter users must not interfere in elections or civic processes.

*Public confidence in election results can be undermined when misinformation videos purporting wrongdoing start to circulate online.*

## Absence of Videos or Photos to Corroborate Claim of the Presence of Firearms at Polling Locations

Many news outlets maintain live feeds which are constantly updated with emerging news. These are particularly useful when monitoring elections, where circumstances on the ground can change from minute to minute.

During live monitoring of news feeds based in Pennsylvania on Election Day, the team saw mention of problems at polling places in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. [An Allegheny County spokesperson alleged](#) that several members of a group calling themselves "The Commission Security" were carrying firearms around polling places.

An online article from the Pittsburgh Post Gazette stated [The Commission Security group](#) consisted of ten people from Allegheny County, each with a background in security. The article stated that these individuals self-identified as Black and had been hired by Pennsylvania Voice. [Pennsylvania Voice](#) is an affiliate of the [State Voices organization](#), a left-of-center advocacy group fighting for "... a healthy democracy and political power for Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), and all people of color (BIPOC)." Pennsylvania Voice partners with more than 50 organizations—including well-known advocacy organizations like Common Cause and Planned Parenthood—and states their goal is to "support and protect voters in communities of color."

Pennsylvania Voice [vehemently maintained](#) that any individuals carrying firearms were not associated with The Commission Security group.

Pennsylvania Voice stated that the group's objective was to encourage voters to remain in line, or to procure food and water for voters. They further stated that the activities this group conducted were lawful, and they had many similar teams in other counties, with Allegheny County being the only jurisdiction in which they faced obstacles. In response to the allegations, Pennsylvania Voice [released a short statement to local media](#), suggesting that racial background may have played a factor in singling out their group in Allegheny County.

The team subsequently learned that the Allegheny County Court in Pennsylvania issued a cease-and-desist order on Election Day for all members of a group called "The Commission Security," and specifically named three individuals.

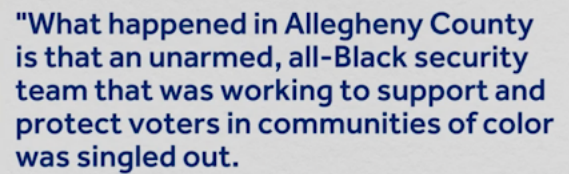
When conducting digital investigations, it is necessary to verify and authenticate claims found online. Researchers will generally seek to identify and triangulate multiple pieces of information, drawing on a variety of online sources, to develop a complete picture of what happened and to verify claims made. In this example, there were two competing narratives and the team sought to find additional information to understand what happened.

Despite repeated efforts, the research team could not find any evidence online to support the serious charges of firearms near a polling place. Researchers found no social media posts claiming the presence of firearms, nor photographs or videos depicting such. These allegations were not made in any other online media. While an absence of photos and videos online is not conclusive, in our social media saturated environment is unusual that such instances would not be documented and posted to platforms or detailed in other news media. This suggests the allegations were unfounded.

## Far-Rights Groups Discuss How to Avoid Another "Stolen Election"

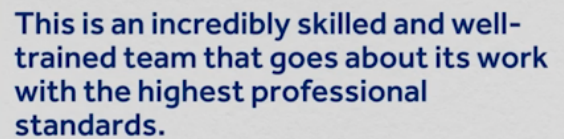
The 2020 Presidential election was dogged with allegations of voter fraud and an election stolen from Donald Trump, [all of which has been disproven](#). Nevertheless, many on the right and far-right continue to perpetuate those claims. The research team wanted to observe how those individuals and groups were talking about the 2022 Midterms online.

During the preparatory research ahead of Election Day, the team identified a number of far-right groups discussing strategies to avoid another case of a "stolen election." Much of this rhetoric percolated on messaging platforms such as Telegram and Truth Social, the platform owned by Trump. The team identified various far-right channels, such as "Free Minnesota," "PATRIOTPARTYMN" and "Free Illinois," where many of the posts were made by accounts that



"What happened in Allegheny County is that an unarmed, all-Black security team that was working to support and protect voters in communities of color was singled out.

Pennsylvania Voice





This is an incredibly skilled and well-trained team that goes about its work with the highest professional standards.


Pennsylvania Voice


Caption: Screenshots of the statement released by Pennsylvania Voice during a local TV news report.


claim affiliation with QAnon, a formerly fringe but now more established [far-right conspiracy theory](#) that falsely claims that “a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media,” which former President Trump is fighting against. Researchers discovered many posts that emphasized the need for channel members to become integrated in the election process as poll workers, [election judges](#), and on election boards to “defeat corruption,” “hold the line,” and prevent a “rigged election.” Many of the posts utilized hashtags that have been weaponized against the 2020 election results, including #stopthesteal which was the rally on January 6th, 2021, which immediately preceding the assault on the United States Capitol in Washington D.C..

 Channel: Free Minnesota  
If you haven't already, sign up to be an election judge and help make sure that our elections are secure this time! We can never allow a stolen and rigged election like 2020 to happen again! #stopthesteal #counteverylegalvote #midterms2022 #redwave2022 #electionintegrity <https://gopvictory.com/minnesota-poll-watcher-sign-up/>

 Channel: PATRIOTPARTYMN  
If you are a conservative in Minnesota, sign up to be an election judge for the midterm elections! We can't assume that the votes will be counted fairly, we need to get involved on the process and make sure that they are. Minnesota has been a victim of fraudulent elections for a long time and it needs to stop! #stopthesteal #counteverylegalvote #midterms2022 #trumpwon #bidencheated #minnesota #electionintegrity <https://www.mngop.org/election-protection/>  
👍 6

 Channel: Free Minnesota  
I believe that Minnesota is already a leaning-red state, this November we just have to make sure that our votes are counted fairly so our elections will represent that. Get involved in our election process and become an election judge! #counteverylegalvote #stopthesteal #midterms2022 #minnesotaelections2022 #electionintegrity <https://www.mngop.org/election-protection/>  
👍 1

 Channel: Free Illinois  
Illegals “VOTING?” We The People had better be DILIGENT in becoming INVOLVED as Election Judges, and get on Election Boards, etc. Just getting involved, our mere presence defeats corruption!

 Channel: Free Illinois  
Thank you for sharing this information for those of us who do not live in Chicago. Yes we need poll watchers and election judges, ones who are ready to hold the line and stand firm.

Caption: Screenshots of private Telegram channels discussing how to avoid another “stolen election”

The posts often included a hyperlink to the Republican party’s website or other Republican messaging voting websites, such as [the “New Movement” page](#) of Minnesota, for example, encouraging those visiting the site to sign up to be an election worker. Telegram channels such as “Patriot Army,” “Patriot Party MN,” and “John F. Kennedy Jr” suggested that even if voters were based in right-leaning states, the Democratic party was still making a concerted effort to silence them. According to users on these channels, becoming an election judge was one way to respond and protect the vote.

Although recruiting poll workers and observers is a key component in ensuring that our democratic process can function, the rhetoric on conservative and far right-leaning channels is encouraging individuals to apply for these election worker roles based on the false premise that the previous election was “stolen.” This aligns with tactics of high ranking Republican officials and far-right activists [urging supporters to become poll watchers and poll workers](#) in the 2022 midterm elections to “stop the steal.” Marketed as an effort to combat “voter fraud,” a myth [disproven by extensive research](#), GOP leaders have also [advocated for illegal strategies](#), such as hiding cell phones and taking physical notes and videos of voters at polling places and vote-counting centers.



[An October 7, 2022 podcast episode of \*This American Life\*](#) discussed how many people who question the outcome of the 2020 election became poll workers in the 2022 midterms. According to host Ira Glass, Republicans were more inclined to sign up to become election judges and poll monitors in fear of the Democratic party suppressing their votes.



While many were likely subject to indoctrination by online communities like those mentioned above, many are still impacted by the falsehoods spread by former president Donald Trump after the 2020 election. The episode includes an interview with [Peggy Dumas](#), “someone who never paid attention to her precinct until she just became a [precinct] committee member” in 2022.

In the interview, Ms. Dumas said she refused to use felt-tip pens provided by poll workers due to the conspiracy that ballots cast using Sharpies given out during the 2020 elections couldn't be read by the voting machines and sabotaged the results, one of many [debunked conspiracy theories](#) that continues to fuel the right's claims of a stolen election.

Our research confirmed that conspiracy groups are easily accessible through online platforms like Telegram and Truth Social where the right and far-right are actively keeping the falsehoods about stolen elections alive on public and semi-private platforms. That some of these groups are encouraging individuals to pursue positions meant to safeguard the integrity of elections ensures the strategic talking point to sow doubt in the US elections process remains enduring and may contribute to the continued public distrust in the electoral process.



## Conclusion

This brief report details the process the UC student research team undertook to monitor the 2022 Midterm Election and shows some of the ways in which open source techniques can be used to investigate and verify claims, and to disprove those that are fraudulent. In the first example, the research team was able to use geolocation to quickly disprove allegations of ballot tampering in Pennsylvania made by angry social media users. In the second example, the research team was unable to find corroborating information to support claims of voter interference via individuals carrying weapons in Allegheny County, PA. Although not conclusive, an absence of information online in today's hyper-connected world calls into question the veracity of the claims. In the third example, the research team mined far-right channels on Telegram and Truth Social to gather information on the ongoing rhetoric of a "stolen election," finding evidence that QAnon and other far-right supporters who dispute the fairness of the 2020 election are advocating for members to become involved in the election process.



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## About the Network

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