The Origins of Fact-Checking Authority for Election Fraud Claims

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We propose a novel survey experiment extending Berlinski et al. (2023) by including new treatment conditions relating to the source of the fact-checking messages; this novel survey experiment would be conducted simultaneously with our replication. One of the main findings of Berlinski et al. (2023) is that even when tweets with unverified claims of election fraud were supplemented by fact-checking tweets, voters were still likely to have decreased confidence in election integrity. However, the original study looked only at social media posts from media organizations for fact-checking; our novel experiment adds two new treatment conditions - one where posts claiming election fraud were supplemented by posts from elections officials fact-checking misinformation about elections, and one where posts claiming election fraud were supplemented by fact-checking posts from think tanks - to the four existing treatment arms in the original study. By varying the source of the fact-checking, our novel study answers the following question: to what extent does the source influence the effect of fact-checking misinformation on trust in elections?

Background

In the last decade, misinformation about elections has proliferated, particularly in an increasingly technological-reliant age (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). This has led to consequences for both voters' beliefs in election integrity (Fahey 2023), as well as how elections officials must respond to claims against voter fraud (Barrett, Corasaniti, and Fausset 2026). To combat this rise in misinformation, fact-checking has emerged as a possible strategy for reducing the impacts that misinformation has on voters. There is substantial debate as to whether providing accurate information about elections to correct misinformation may be effective at combating the impact of elections-related misinformation on voter confidence (Berlinski et al. 2023; Fahey 2023; Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2023). In these studies, fact-checking often comes from either media organizations, like journalists or newspapers (Berlinski et al. 2023) or elections officials (Gaudette et al. 2025; Lockhart et al. 2024; Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2023), and has varied impact on different outcome measures of voters' trust in elections.

We chose to replicate Berlinski et al. (2023) because it is a prominent study showing that fact-checking from media organizations is unlikely to significantly reduce the impact that misinformation has on voters' trust in elections. One possible explanation is that Americans are increasingly less likely to trust these entities, who have gained a reputation of writing articles that prioritize engagement over communicating actual information (Trexler 2026).

In contrast, both recent and past research has found that voters' trust in elections and likelihood to turn out at the polls increase when elections officials provide vital information about elections (Gaudette et al. 2025; Lockhart et al. 2024; Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2023). Because these officials are the ones who organize elections in the first place, voters are likely to messaging from elections officials as from a "genuinely trusted and authoritative source" (Malhotra, Michelson, and Valenzuela 2012, 331). But if certain voters are inherently less confident in election integrity or believe that officials are directly responsible for alleged voter fraud, they may be less trustful of official messaging (Suttmann-Lea, Merivaki, and Orey 2025). In addition, the literature has mostly left out another key group of actors interested in rebuilding trust in elections: think tanks and nonpartisan organizations. Policymakers already rely extensively on think tanks to provide the expertise needed for defending their choices of policies - in fact, think tanks are staffed by experts in different fields for the purpose of providing much needed expertise to legislators (Lerner 2018; Bertelli and Wenger 2009). Some nonpartisan organizations are also focused on assisting with election administration efforts across party lines (Adler et al. 2026; Lal and Thompson 2024). On the other hand, think tanks have also had a reputation for producing what Rich (2009, 216) describes as "commentary" - content that ideologically aligns with the beliefs of those who seek their expertise - as opposed to content focusing on the quality of information. The implication is that voters are also likely to distrust information from organizations they may recognize as think tanks, even if it is designed to convey accurate information about election administration and fraud.

The motivation for our study thus stems from the fact that Americans have reason to both trust and distrust news organizations, elections officials, and think tanks/nonpartisan organizations when they provide fact-checking resources relating to election fraud and meddling. Our study seeks to address whether these conflicts have implications for who voters choose to believe regarding fact-checking about elections.

Design

Because this study is an extension of Berlinski et al. (2023), the design is largely identical with that of the original study and our replication study; an illustration of the design can be found in the appendix as Figure 1. We propose to embed both the replication and the novel study within the same survey, as running the same survey twice would introduce the risk of demand effects among respondents (Mummolo and Peterson 2019). As a result, we have submitted only one survey instrument for both the replication and novel study.

At the start of the survey, respondents will answer several questions typical of all surveys, measuring their general interest and knowledge in politics, their trust in mass and social media on reporting the

news, their beliefs in conspiracies, and who they voted for in the most recent presidential election (2024).[1] Respondents will also answer a question asking whether they voted in the 2026 midterm election; this directly corresponds to one of the outcome measures.

After a pre-treatment attention check, we use a completely randomized design to assign respondents who pass the attention check into six possible treatment conditions. Respondents assigned to the control condition are shown four food-related posts on X; respondents assigned to the "low dose" condition are shown a random subset of four out of eight posts from X where a political figure claimed that election fraud was occurring; respondents assigned to the "high dose" condition are shown all eight of the posts from X where a political figure claimed election fraud was occurring; respondents assigned to the "low dose with news fact-checking" condition are shown the random subset of four posts claiming election fraud, as well as four posts from journalists and media organizations, like the New York Times, linking to articles that fact-check claims of election fraud; respondents assigned to the "low dose with news fact-checking" condition are shown the random subset of four posts claiming election fraud, as well as four posts from elections officials that provide fact-checking of claims regarding election fraud; and respondents assigned to the "low dose with news fact-checking" condition are shown the random subset of four posts claiming election fraud, as well as four posts from think-tanks and nonpartisan organizations linking to articles that fact-check claims of election fraud.

The first four treatment conditions were those used in the original study; they form the basis of the replication component. The last two treatment conditions are the conditions for our novel survey experiment. After randomization, we would expect the proportion of individuals assigned to each treatment group to approximate that of Table 1.

Table 1: Expected proportion of individuals assigned to each treatment group among Rep Data sample.

	Control	High Dose	Low Dose	Fact-Check, EO	Fact-Check, News	Fact-Check, Think Tank
Proportion	1/6	1/6	1/6	1/6	1/6	1/6

For our treatment condition involving fact-checking from elections officials, our goal is to obtain posts from state elections officials across multiple states in the United States on X. For our treatment condition involving fact-checking from think tanks and non-partisan organizations, our goal is to obtain posts from think tanks and nonpartisan organizations that have produced research on elections without respect to party on X. As with the posts for the other treatment conditions in the replication, we would obtain the exact posts closer to the general elections in November 2026, and all of our social media posts will be obtained solely from the platform X (formerly Twitter).

Our outcome measures will be identical to those of the original survey - respondents will answer seven questions on their confidence in different aspects of elections being properly administered. We will then combine the responses into a single composite outcome variable using a structural equation model and the `psych` and `lavaan` packages in R. Our targeted estimands and estimation process for each novel treatment condition will be similar to those of the replication study.

[1] These questions were used in the original study prior to treatment, and will serve as our covariate battery.

Hypotheses and Expected Results

This study plans to test six new hypotheses (predicted effects are bolded), though additional hypotheses may be added prior to pre-registration:

- *H1a: Exposure to four posts claiming voter or election fraud and four posts from elections officials fact-checking claims of voter or election fraud will reduce confidence in elections and support for democracy relative to a placebo.* **Consistent with the findings of Berlinski et al. (2023), we expect that the impact of misinformation would still be negative, but reduced significantly by fact-checking from election officials.**
- *H1b: Exposure to four posts claiming voter or election fraud and four posts from think tanks and nonpartisan organizations fact-checking claims of voter or election fraud will reduce confidence in elections and support for democracy relative to a placebo.* **Similar to hypothesis H1a, we expect that the impact of misinformation would still be negative, but reduced significantly by fact-checking from think tanks and nonpartisan organizations.**
- *H2a: Exposure to four posts claiming voter or election fraud and four posts from elections officials fact-checking claims of voter or election fraud will reduce confidence in elections and support for democracy less than exposure to four posts claiming voter or election fraud without fact-checks.* **Our expectation of the effects and reasoning is identical to that of Hypotheses H1a and H1b.**
- *H2b: Exposure to four posts claiming voter or election fraud and four posts from think tanks and nonpartisan organizations fact-checking claims of voter or election fraud will reduce confidence in elections and support for democracy less than exposure to four posts claiming voter or election fraud without fact-checks.* **Our expectation of the effects and reasoning is identical to that of Hypotheses H1a and H1b.**
- *H3a: Exposure to four posts claiming voter or election fraud and four posts from elections officials fact-checking claims of voter or election fraud will reduce confidence in elections and support for democracy less than exposure to four posts claiming voter or election fraud with fact-checks from .* **We predict that fact-checking from elections officials would be more effective at combating the effects of misinformation compared to fact-checking from media organizations for reasons described in Section , and expect this effect to be positive.**
- *H3b: Exposure to four posts claiming voter or election fraud and four posts from think tanks fact-checking claims of voter or election fraud will reduce confidence in elections and support for democracy differently than exposure to four posts claiming voter or election fraud without fact-checks.* **Our hypothesis is agnostic to the direction of effects because we believe that voters have equal reason to be persuaded (or unpersuaded) by fact-checking from think tanks and nonpartisan organizations. We would expect, however, that the effect is far from zero regardless of direction.**

We will obtain IRB approval from the University of California, San Diego prior to conducting this study. We also commit to posting a preprint of the findings following the analysis of the novel survey experiment, along with replication data. All materials, including both proposals and the survey instrument will be stored in a public GitHub repository for the project, unless instructed otherwise.

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Appendix

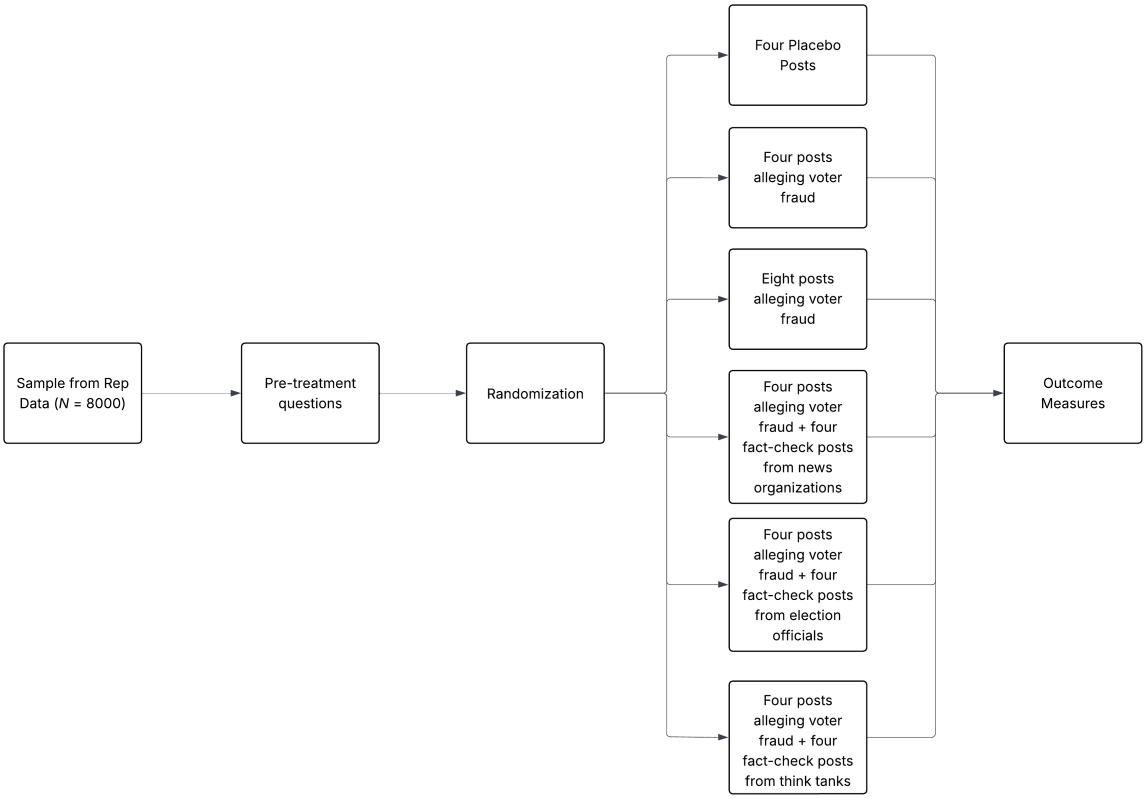

Figure 1: Proposed Experimental Design for Replication and Novel Study.