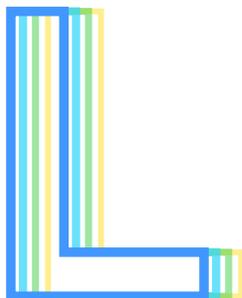


Latinos and a Growing Crisis of Trust



A Landscape Analysis of Disinformation,
Propaganda, and Hyper-Partisan
Narratives in Latino Spaces Online

Latinos and a Growing Crisis of Trust



Latinos in the United States are one of the last great wildcards - the x-factor in American politics and society. Over 60 million Latinos live in the United States today, accounting for approximately 20% of the US population.

Latinos and Hispanics were the largest ethnic minority to vote in the 2020 US presidential election (16.5 million Latinos voted in 2020, up around 30% from 2016¹), and will make up a significant portion of voters in the 2022 midterm elections.

In the United States, Latinos, like many voters, are increasingly targeted by and exposed to false, misleading and harmful information online, a symptom, byproduct, and tool of a growing, global crisis of trust. In the United States, this has affected free and fair democratic discourse and sowed doubt in political leaders, the electoral system, and US institutions.

Latino voters are diverse and complex; they are not a monolith and they do not engage with information or vote as a bloc. That said, Latinos frequently come across and engage with disinformation narratives in part because of the sheer amount of time they are spending online.

Research shows that about half of Americans (48%) get their news from social media at least sometimes.² Latinos and Hispanics in the US, however, over-index at news consumption on social media, especially on Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp. According to Equis research, 47% of Latinos use YouTube as a news source “often” in a typical week, and, overall, Latinx communities are on the platform twice as much as non-Latino adults. WhatsApp is also ubiquitous in the Latino community. About half of Latinos in the United States use it, more than any other ethnic or racial group in the country.

This digitally active nature of Latino media consumption, combined with existing Spanish-language information voids, and combined with cultural nuances among communities, makes

English- and Spanish-language disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, and hyper-polarized narratives targeting Latinos in the US a persistent and growing challenge. The true danger is not that these communities are believing false or misleading information more than others – rather, per Equis research, Latinos are reacting with rational skepticism to any new information they receive, true or false. As a result, as is the case with many voters overall, Latino communities are losing trust in news, information and institutions – far too many people are unsure what to believe.

The situation is made worse because technology companies and social media platforms have done a yet-insufficient and very asymmetrical job of labeling, removing or otherwise acting against Spanish-language disinformation and harmful content that violates their already limited terms of service. This gap in action, combined with the rise of more fringe, closed or encrypted platforms, has and will continue to exacerbate divisions in our society and further silo efforts to expose disinformation and to contest the uncontested hyper-partisan narratives that circulate inside information bubbles. These narratives are expected to morph and permeate discussions online throughout 2022 and leading up to the presidential elections of 2024.

Fueled by the findings of our research, which has included social media monitoring, narrative analysis, polling and surveys conducted over the duration of 2021 and 2022, this report highlights key stakeholders spreading disinformation and propaganda, major narratives targeting Latinos, media consumption trends in Latino communities, and the role of the social media platforms play in this ecosystem.

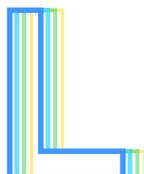
This report also lays out recommendations for steps social media companies, the government, civil society, and online consumers can take to further reduce the spread of Spanish-language disinformation, to foster increased trust with the Latino community, and to strengthen a year-round digital media infrastructure to counter and combat Spanish-language disinformation.

The Bottom Line: Latinos Are Diverse, Digitally Active and... Increasingly Distrusting

Years of Equis research and monitoring have drawn out four key dynamics characterizing influence operations and disinformation targeting Latino and Hispanic communities in the United States:

- Latinos in the United States are exposed to and engage with information and disinformation from **domestic** and **foreign actors**, and content from **Latin America** is shaping their views.
- Spanish-language **information voids** and the changing nature of Latino media ecosystems, including the significant use of **YouTube and WhatsApp as major sources of information and news**, make disinformation problematic in Latino and Spanish-language-dominant communities in the United States.
- **Diverse cultural nuances** and **demographics** in Latino communities, especially **geographic** and **generational**, create opportunities for false and misleading information to spread.
- False narratives spread in Spanish often go **unchecked** and tech platforms have done a **poor job** of **labeling** or **taking down** content in **Spanish** that violates their terms of service.

The Major Players: Domestic and Foreign Accounts and Groups Spreading Disinformation, Propaganda, and Hyper-Partisan Narratives in Latino Spaces Online



Latino social media ecosystems are built around both English- and Spanish-language content. Equis narrative analysis and social media monitoring points to the following key sets of stakeholders targeting Latino and Hispanic communities online with information and disinformation.

Domestic Actors

While disinformation, political propaganda, and hyper-polarized narrative campaigns are not exclusive to any one side of the political spectrum, in the United States, false and misleading narratives targeting Latino and Hispanic communities tend to be overwhelmingly utilized by right-wing and conservative operatives - this happens in both English and Spanish.

Right-wing English-language Latino pages and influencers share similar stories or narratives as those promoted by the broader right-wing ecosystem or news outlets, such as Fox News, Breitbart, and The Daily Wire. They often also co-opt disinformation and hyper-partisan narratives promoted by the right-wing ecosystem and spread it quickly in Spanish.

Many domestic right-wing Latino influencers have drastically increased their support or followers online in recent years and some of these influencers are being elevated by the broader right-wing ecosystem. These influencers are located across the country and some of the most prominent influencers are running for Congress, including in Florida, Texas, Illinois and Tennessee.

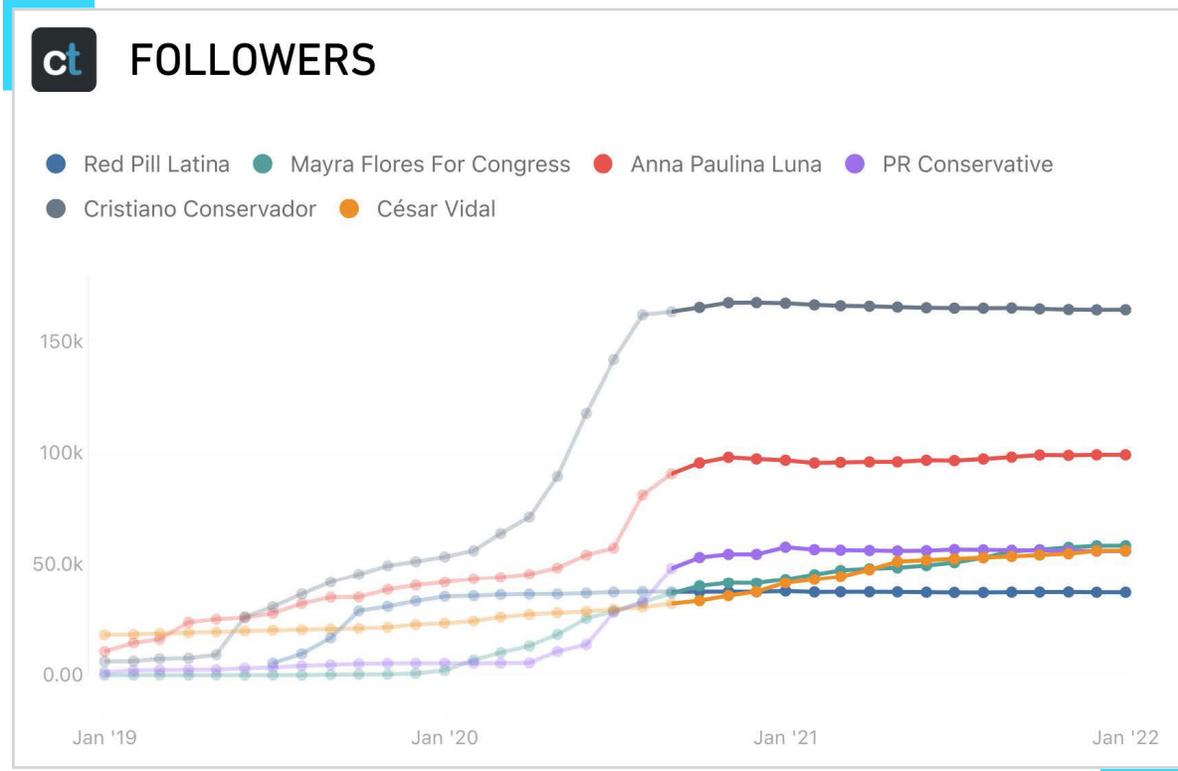


Table 1. This chart shows the increase in followers since January 2019 by some prominent right-wing English- and Spanish-language Latinx influencers on Facebook. The data was compiled via CrowdTangle, which notes that “follower data prior to September 16, 2020, is incomplete and does not include either unfollows or Page-to-Page follows.”



The screenshot on the left is of Alex Otaola, a Cuban-born YouTube personality based in South Florida, interviewing President Donald Trump in October 2020. Otaola hosts a daily Spanish-language online show and often gets more than a hundred thousand viewers per video.

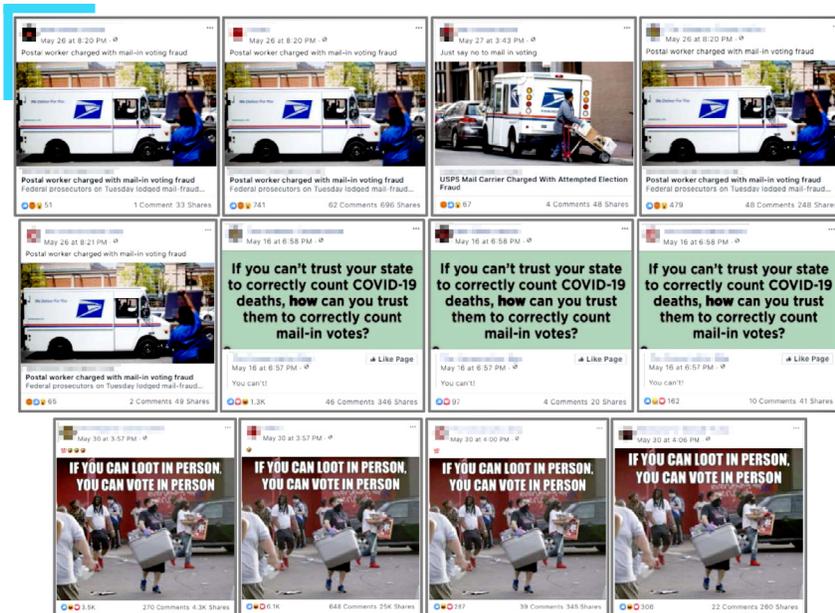


The screenshot on the right is of Drew Hernandez, a right-wing independent journalist and influencer, being interviewed by Tucker Carlson on Fox News.

Coordinated Networks

Domestic coordinated campaigns or networks, where disinformation or misleading narratives often spread, are used to more effectively influence, persuade or manipulate users. For example, a coordinated Latino right-wing movement in the United States was created in 2018 to persuade Latinos to exit the Democratic Party and embrace “conservative values.” The members of the movement have created multiple Facebook pages that have nearly 500,000 followers across accounts, per Equis monitoring. Many of the leaders or managers of these pages also have their own individual Facebook accounts or pages, which range from having thousands to hundreds of thousands of followers.

These networks often coordinate their efforts, with affiliated pages promoting the same narratives and stories at the same time, which gives their messages or narratives a boost and reaches more feeds and people. The ability to spread the same message or narrative repeatedly in many different pages and groups is often more problematic and dangerous than single viral posts.³



Entities & Organizations

Domestic right-wing entities and organizations also help amplify false or misleading information in Latino spaces online. For example, PragerU, short for Prager University – a US advocacy organization that produces short videos on various topics of interest to conservatives – hosts a video series in English targeting the Latino community called *Americanos*, which features different right-wing Latinx influencers. They also have “explainer” videos with titles like, “Why family separation was needed to protect kids from human traffickers,” “Immigrants! Don’t support what you fled,” and “How socialism ruined my country.” These videos often get millions of views.

Regional Networks

Diverse cultural nuances and demographics within Latinx communities, especially geographic and generational, create openings for false and misleading information to be circulated and shared. Frequently, domestic regional right-wing Latino networks spread disinformation that feeds into fears and suspicions Latinos might have about government structures, corruption, and authoritarianism.

South Florida

Latinx communities in South Florida are often siloed into an echo chamber — WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, radio, local TV and newspapers — fomented by local players. According to a New York Times article written ahead of the 2020 elections, “misinformation proliferates first online, then is often shared on WhatsApp, which is particularly popular among Latino immigrants. Then, in Florida, it trickles into the Miami media market’s largely unchecked ecosystem of niche Spanish-language newspapers and radio and television stations, whose right-wing hosts and commentators amplify

some of the pernicious messages.”⁴ Notable right-wing and pro-Trump actors and influencers often pushed narratives that promoted racial tension and fear of socialism in and after 2020, and these narratives were endlessly repeated throughout the election cycle across multiple platforms and outlets.

Emerging Regional Networks

While South Florida may have a more developed and larger Latino network to spread disinformation, other regions, such as South Texas,⁵ have less sophisticated networks that could increase to similar levels as South Florida in the future. Some Democrats have warned that Texas is the “next target for disinformation aimed at Latinos.”⁶

In addition, other regions with heavy populations of Latinos could replicate Florida’s network, which could lead to more disinformation or misinformation spreading throughout the country.

Foreign Actors

Latin America

The spread of information and disinformation has no borders. US-Latin America information and disinformation cycles between countries and regions, and often shape the views of Latino communities in the United States and vice versa.

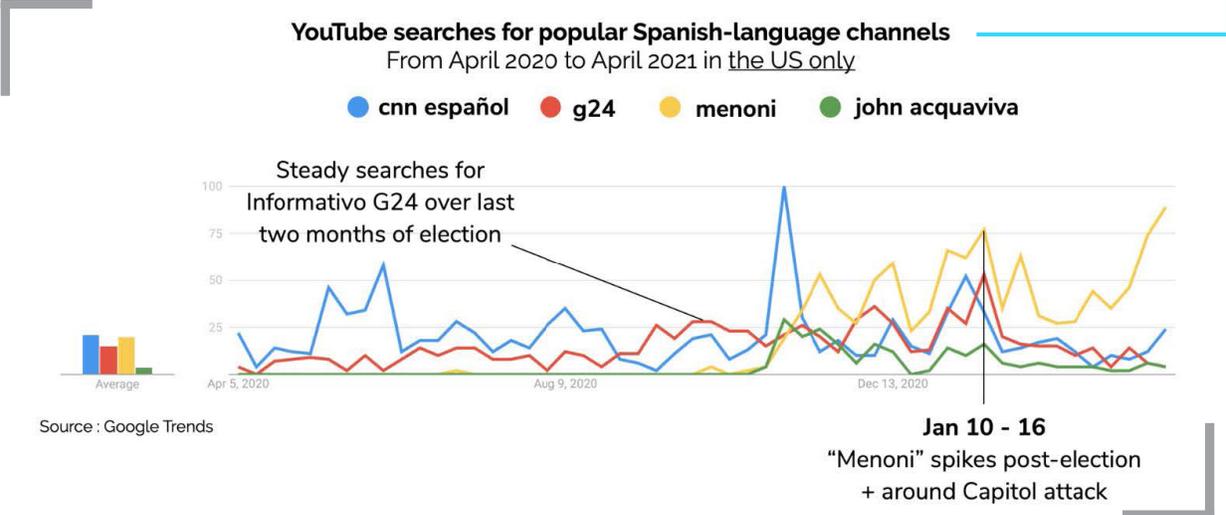
The flow of Spanish-language disinformation is complex. Disinformation originating in the United States, often in English, is co-opted and spread quickly in Spanish, including by foreign accounts and influencers in Latin America, who then spread this disinformation back to Spanish-

speakers in the United States. The same occurs with information originating in Latin America.

During the 2020 election cycle, Spanish-language YouTube and Facebook pages in countries like Colombia, Argentina, and Mexico recycled political propaganda and disinformation originated by the broader right-wing ecosystem in the United States, including anti-socialism, anti-Black Lives Matter, and voter fraud narratives. These actors often translated articles and social media posts to Spanish and shared them across platforms, including on WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube.

The Spanish-language YouTube ecosystem between the regions also includes a steady stream of “news analysis” videos, which are often low-production value, sometimes indistinguishable from podcasts, but often receive tens to hundreds of thousands of views. According to Politico, there was a rise in “Spanish-language conservative media, especially revolving around politics connected to Colombia and Venezuela,” that increasingly showed up in the “social media feeds of South Florida’s Latin America diaspora communities.”⁷ While the motives of these accounts and influencers are unclear, some appear to be right-wing and foreign operatives, malicious actors, and profiteers.

According to Google Trends, users in the United States are actively searching on YouTube for popular Spanish-language channels, including from Latin America (Informativo G24 and Eduardo Menoni), often more than some Spanish-language news sources (CNN en Español) in the United States.



Russia

Latinos in the United States are targeted by foreign actors disseminating both disinformation and propaganda. After the 2016 election, Russian operatives capitalized on growing anti-immigrant/anti-Hispanic sentiment by running Facebook ads targeting the Latino community that fueled identity politics and promoted racial tension through online social networks.⁹ Facebook and Twitter identified hundreds of fake Spanish-language pages created by Russians to propagate deceptive and misleading messages to Latino audiences.¹⁰

In 2020, external foreign interference from Russia exploited hot-button issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement and vote-by-mail. These types of efforts continued beyond the 2020 election and remain today, including via official state-backed channels like RT en Español.¹¹

Most recently, Russian actors have been targeting “Spanish speakers with propaganda that is inaccurate or an incomplete picture of the invasion of Ukraine.”¹² While Russian state-funded media such as RT en Español has been blocked by YouTube globally after the Ukraine invasion,¹³ Meta continues to allow them to promote their content in the United States and Latin America. RT en Español has repeatedly spread false and misleading information in Spanish on Facebook about the situation in Ukraine.

Per Equis monitoring, RT en Español was promoting false and misleading claims that there are bioweapons labs in Ukraine funded by the US government, which has been rated false by USA Today,¹⁴ a Facebook fact-checking partner.¹⁵ Spanish-language Twitter accounts were also spreading misinformation suggesting that US President Joe Biden’s son was involved in financing or funding biolabs in Ukraine, which has also been rated false.¹⁶

Yesterday at 10:09 AM · 🌐

! Vladimir Putin comentó este miércoles sobre la situación actual en Ucrania:

- A Kiev se le ofreció no entrar en combate y retirar sus fuerzas de Donbass, pero no quiso hacerlo.
- El golpe de Kiev sobre Donetsk con el misil táctico Tochka-U el 14 de marzo fue un acto terrorista sangriento.
- En Ucrania funcionaba una red de laboratorios gestionados y financiados por el Pentágono, donde llevaban a cabo programas biológico militares. Allí, se estaban creando los componentes de las armas biológicas.
- La operación especial va bien, acorde al plan. Las tácticas de combate han dado sus frutos. Todas nuestras tareas se cumplirán.
- La aparición de tropas rusas cerca de Kiev y otras ciudades ucranianas no está relacionada con las ganas de ocupar Ucrania, Rusia no tiene ese objetivo. Pero, no permitiremos que Ucrania sirva de 'trampolín' para acciones agresivas contra Rusia.
- Nuestros soldados están demostrando valor y heroísmo.
- En un futuro previsible, el régimen pro nazi de Kiev podría conseguir armas nucleares, y el objetivo sería Rusia.

👍❤️🔥 4.8K 411 Comments 523 Shares

March 26 at 10:27 AM · 🌐

El portavoz del Ministerio de Defensa Nacional de China, Wu Qian, se ha pronunciado este jueves sobre el hecho de que el Ministerio de Defensa de Rusia haya reportado que EE.UU. tiene varios laboratorios biológicos en Ucrania.

El funcionario destacó que "las armas biológicas son armas de destrucción masiva, y la militarización biológica es un tema importante que afecta la paz y la seguridad internacionales, así como los intereses de seguridad de todos los países". Tales hallazgos "deberían ser motivo de gran preocupación para la comunidad internacional", subrayó.

Los laboratorios biológicos de EE.UU. en Ucrania debería ser motivo de gran preocupación para la comunidad internacional

Wu Qian
Portavoz del Ministerio de Defensa Nacional de China

👍 6K 455 Comments 1.2K Shares

Medios afiliados al gobierno, Rusia

El Ministerio de Defensa de Rusia detalla cómo el hijo de Biden está involucrado en la "financiación de programas biológicos en Ucrania" es.rt.com/94ga
Translated from Spanish by Google

Russian Defense Ministry details how Biden's son is involved in "funding biological programs in Ukraine" es.rt.com/94ga

3:39 AM · Apr 1, 2022 · TweetDeck

209 Retweets 8 Quote Tweets 283 Likes

Key Narratives Exposed: The Evolution of English- and Spanish-Language Disinformation, Conspiracies, Political Propaganda, and Hyper- Polarized Content from 2020-2022



Disinformation, conspiracy theories, political propaganda, and hyper-polarized narratives in Latino spaces online will continue to proliferate during the 2022 election cycle and beyond. The following key narratives spreading in Latino spaces have continued to permeate online in English and Spanish, many since before the 2020 election.

Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories

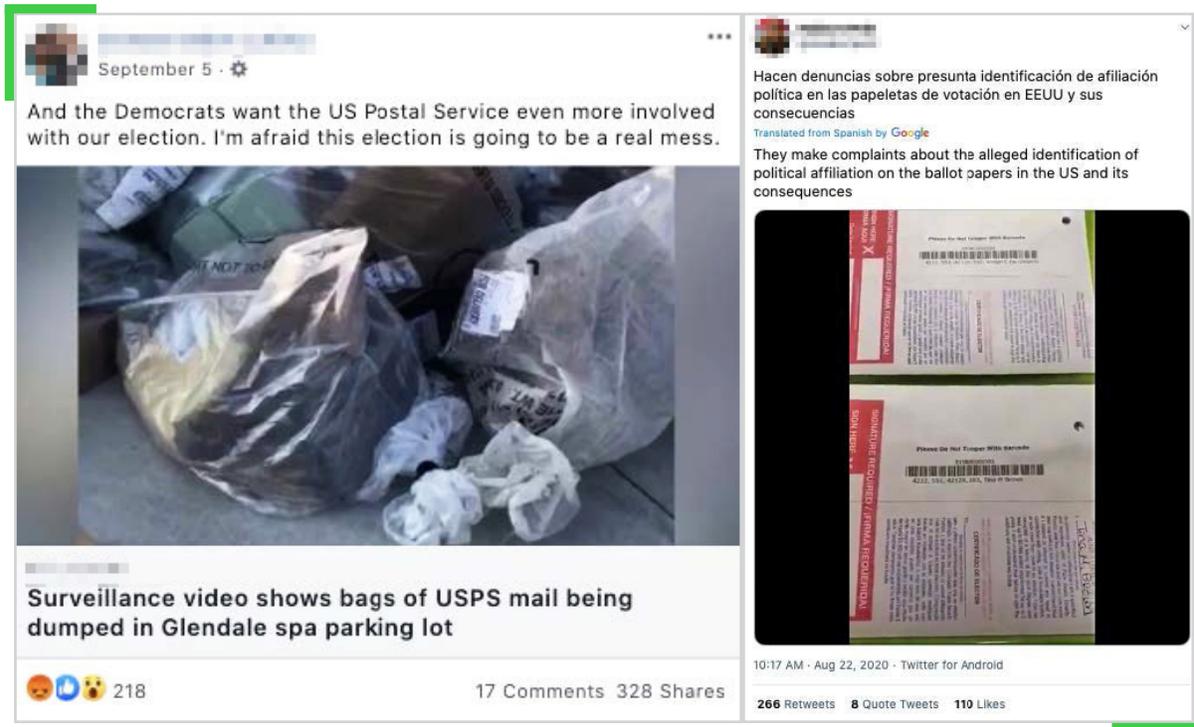
Disinformation (defined as false information spread with the intent to deceive, often for political gain or profit, or to discredit a target individual, group, movement, or political party¹⁷) and conspiracy theories (defined widely as the belief that certain events or situations are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent) spread in Latino spaces online, affecting trust and confidence in governments, institutions, and democratic processes.

Voting and Elections

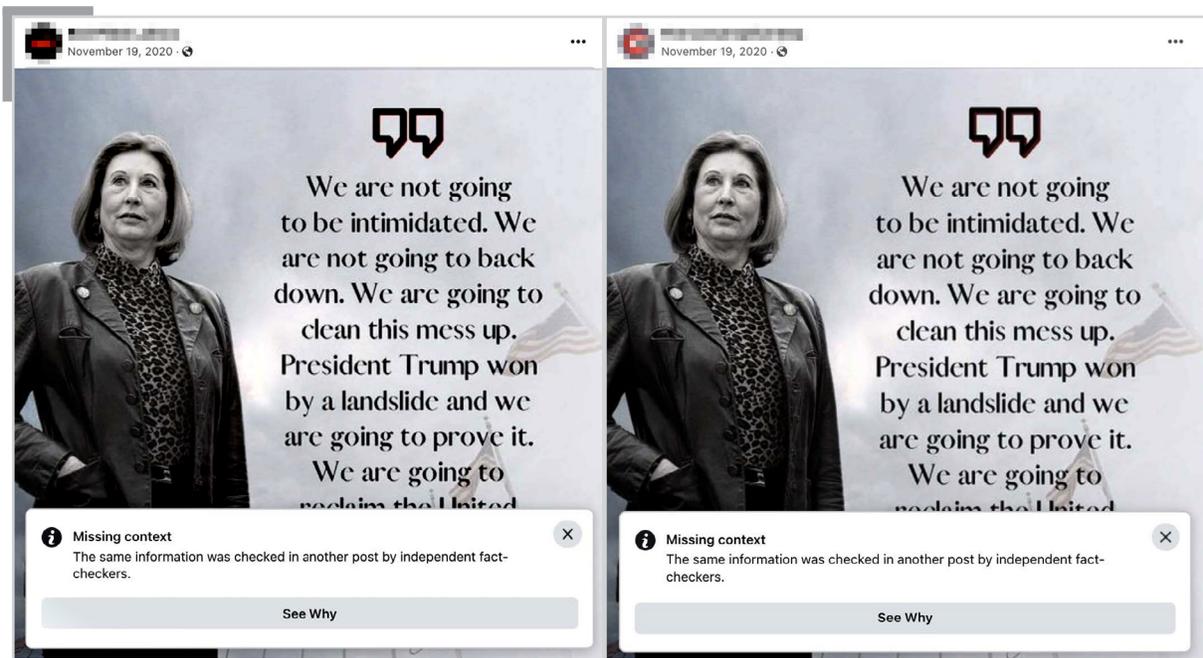
Latino and Hispanic communities are concentrated in some of the most competitive electoral states, including Texas, Florida, Arizona, and Nevada. To deter these populations from voting or voting a certain way, campaigns spread false or misleading information, including promoting deceptive claims about the voting process.

During the 2020 election cycle, including after the election, Trump and right-wing accounts and influencers regularly pushed disinformation about vote-by-mail and the election results, including in Latino and Hispanic spaces. These posts often claimed Democrats were attempting to (pre-election) or successfully carried out efforts (post-election) to rig or steal the election through vote-by-mail voter fraud.

Prior to the 2020 election, networks of Facebook pages and right-wing Latino and Hispanic influencers on Twitter often cherry-picked specific instances of voter fraud to amplify, as evidence of a false trend, or they claimed there were undelivered ballots, ballots being sent to the wrong address, tampered ballots, or extra or unrequested ballots being delivered to voters. Many of these posts received hundreds or sometimes thousands of shares or engagements.



Right-wing Latino and Hispanic accounts appeared to be coordinating their efforts, with multiple pages sometimes sharing the same story and text at the same time across Facebook pages. This is a common disinformation tactic to gain an algorithmic benefit and further boost reach.



After the 2020 election, right-wing Latino and Hispanic accounts and influencers continued to push disinformation and misinformation in Spanish and English about false claims of Democrat-led voter fraud to steal the election. These narratives often included voter fraud allegations, false claims of voter software issues, and false claims that Trump won or was going to win the election.



Such narratives intensified during elections in 2021, including after California Governor Newsom’s recall election,¹⁸ after New Jersey Governor Murphy’s election,¹⁹ and leading up to Virginia’s November 2021 elections.²⁰

Per Equis monitoring, in September 2021, multiple Spanish-language Facebook pages and Instagram accounts were promoting false claims about the Arizona election audit results, including claiming voter fraud or fraudulent votes rigged the election, tens to hundreds of thousands of votes were “lost votes,” “ghost votes,” or switched from Trump to Biden, and that Trump won Arizona.



As of May 2022, baseless voter fraud narratives, including claims of Trump winning the 2020 election or Democrats stealing elections had continued to spread in both English and Spanish, mainly in right-wing Latino spaces online. This suggests disinformation and misinformation about voting and elections will intensify in the lead up to the 2022 midterm elections, which we have already started to see, including right-wing Latino accounts and influencers spreading recycled stories and narratives from the 2020 election and amplifying distrust in our electoral process.

Trump ganó, y Biden es ilegítimo. Lo que está pasando es un circo de falsedades montado por la izquierda demócrata, pero no vamos a retroceder ni a rendirnos. Vamos a ganar esta batalla, la guerra y el futuro de los Estados Unidos.
Translated from Spanish by Google
Trump won, and Biden is illegitimate. What is happening is a circus of falsehoods put on by the Democratic left, but we are not going to back down or give up. We are going to win this battle, the war and the future of the United States.

5:53 AM · Jan 7, 2022 · Twitter Web App

136 Retweets 5 Quote Tweets 266 Likes

August 24, 2021 ·

Todavía a casi un año de las elecciones siguen apareciendo boletas robadas por los DemOCRATAS.....
¡TRUMP GANÓ!

Torrance Police: More Than 300 Stolen Recall Election Ballots Found In Vehicle Of Suspect

👍👎 25 4 Comments 5 Shares

Share

COVID-19 and Vaccines

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, many narratives about the pandemic have spread online, including accurate and important information. But there has also been disinformation, misinformation, and problematic narratives spreading widely.

The disinformation, misinformation, and problematic narratives about COVID-19 in Latino and Hispanic spaces largely reflected the narratives seen in English spaces, such as popular fake cures (e.g. hydroxychloroquine) and conspiracies, anti-mask and anti-vaccine narratives, anti-media and anti-Democratic narratives to politicize the pandemic, and blaming China for the pandemic.

In 2021 and 2022, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued and vaccines became more accessible, Latino accounts and pages, including Spanish-language Twitter accounts, promoted anti-vaccine narratives, including false or misleading claims that the vaccine is not effective or necessary and is causing adverse side effects.



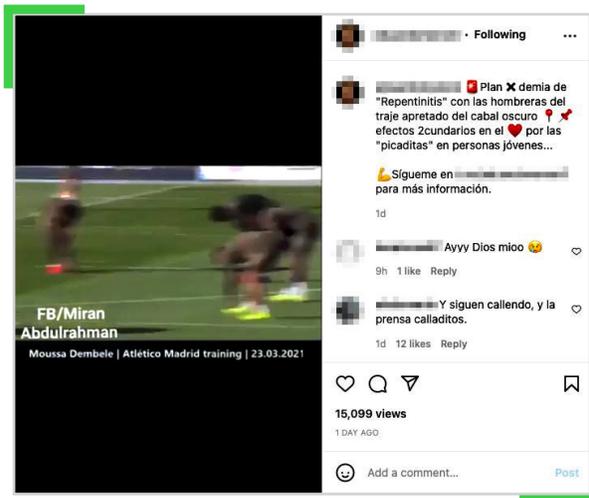
Above: A Spanish-language Twitter account with nearly 2,500 followers is sharing a video clip with the following tweet in Spanish: "It is unbearable how 13 children in a school in Africa died in less than 40 minutes due to direct effects of the Pfizer vaccines." The video in the tweet was actually taken in 2020 and shows children who died in a stampede at school in Kenya and not from vaccines.

Multiple Spanish-language Facebook pages spread the microchip conspiracy in 2021 without the posts being labeled or removed by Facebook, despite Meta having announced in 2020²¹ that they would “remove false claims that COVID-19 vaccines contain microchips” on Facebook and Instagram. The posts often claimed that Bill Gates is inserting microchips in the COVID-19 vaccines. Many such posts remain up and have not been labeled false as of May 2022.

In 2022, some Spanish-language Facebook pages and Instagram accounts have been spreading videos showing news clips or video highlights of athletes who are collapsing with heart issues, often claiming it is because of COVID-19 vaccines. This claim has been rated false by Meta’s fact-checking partners in the United States, including PolitiFact.²²

One Spanish-language Instagram account posted one of these videos in January 2022 with the following caption in Spanish: “Plandemic of ‘Suddenitis’ with the shoulder pads [meaning COVID-19 vaccine] of the dark cabal’s tight suit [...] secondary effects on the [heart] due to the ‘bites’ [meaning shots] in young people.” The post had more than 18,500 views and had not been labeled as false or missing context as of May 2022.

Multiple right-wing Latinx accounts and pages are also using the COVID-19 pandemic to promote distrust in the government and media, including suggesting the government is trying to control us. These narratives are also common outside of conversations about the COVID-19 pandemic and have continued to spread in 2022.



40 9 Comments 148 Shares

April 15

“Bill Gates está promocionando la vacuna del anticristo por todas las naciones para luego implementar el certificado de vacunación obligatorio, que significa una recopilación de datos biométricos de cada habitante, esto mediante un microchip llamado ID 2020 que sería la marca de la bestia Debido a que menos de la mitad de la población de los Estados Unidos de América está considerando la posibilidad de vacunarse contra el COVID-19, incluso con una bonificación de 100 dólares en efectivo, el multimillonario eugenista Bill Gates apela desesperadamente a los provacunadores en el poder para encontrar nuevas formas de manipular a las personas para que sean inyectadas, incluso en la iglesia.” (Pero con Francisco no tiene problema porque ya ha pedido que se vacune a los pobres, es decir, a la mayoría de la población mundial, con lo que Gates tiene en él un socio servil).

“Habiendo tenido ya éxito en Nigeria, utilizando a los responsables religiosos para engañar a sus feligreses y hacerlos caer en la trampa, Gates pretende realizar las mismas campañas de propaganda aquí, en los Estados Unidos de América. “(Los pastores, sacerdotes y reverends podrían proclamar desde el púlpito que las vacunas COVID-19 son seguras y efectivas, lo que llevaría a un mayor acatamiento de las vacunas)”.

“En una reciente entrevista con el Consejo de Directores Generales del “Wall Street Journal” Gates amenazó con que “los países ricos” como los Estados Unidos de América sólo podrían volver a la normalidad a finales de (2021) si la gente aceptaba vacunarse (aceptar el control). Para lograrlo, Gates espera que los trabajadores pro-vacunas puedan invadir con éxito las “redes de confianza” de la gente y convencerla de que las vacunas COVID-19 son la cura para la pandemia.”



22 7 Shares

QAnon and Other Conspiracy Theories

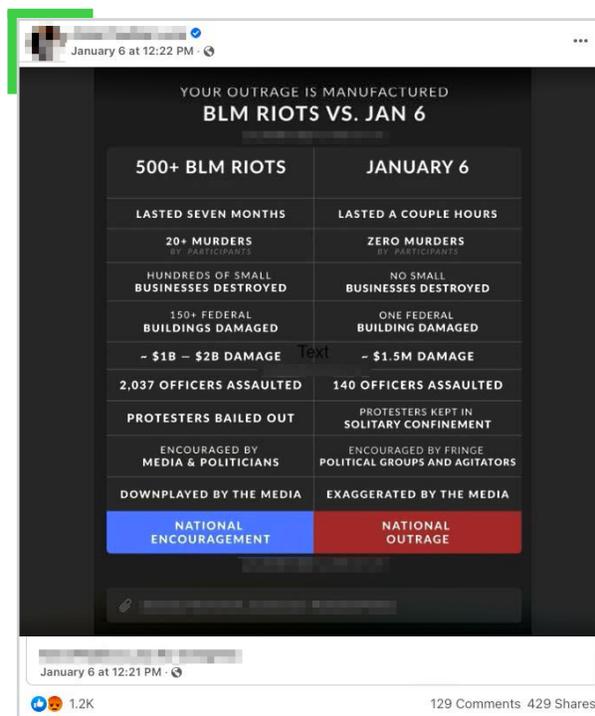
Data and robust information voids in Latino and Hispanic news (especially Spanish-language news) are exploited and easily filled by false or deceptive narratives, including conspiracy theories, from and by extremists. Latino and Hispanic voters are exposed to conspiracy theories, including claims of a “deep state” global conspiracy network led by George Soros, claims of Joe Biden being a pedophile, and other narratives associated with QAnon.²³

One common hashtag connected to QAnon and used during the 2020 and still today by some far-right actors online is the #savethechildren. Some networks of Latino and Hispanic accounts and pages were using the hashtag to spread a more mainstream version of the dangerous QAnon conspiracy - claiming Trump was actively fighting human trafficking, amplifying stories that made trafficking and pedophilia seem rampant, and positioning Democratic leaders and global elites at the center of a trafficking conspiracy.

For example, one Facebook page shared a video on Facebook and Instagram connecting Trump to ending human trafficking and connecting Hollywood and Biden to child trafficking and pedophilia. The posts used the #saveourchildren, and the Facebook video had more than a thousand shares, which was on the higher end of average for this account.

In addition to QAnon-affiliated conspiracy theories, right-wing Latinx accounts continue to spread conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic (Read: COVID-19 & Vaccines section) and the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol.

Some right-wing Latinos appeared to have been involved in the lead up to the January insurrection at the Capitol²⁴ and some Latinos were in the Capitol during the insurrection.²⁵ After the insurrection, right-wing Latinx influencers, including in South Florida, downplayed the violence, blamed the left, and falsely claimed Black Lives Matter and Antifa were behind the attack.²⁶ Conversations about the January 6th insurrection are expected to continue in 2022 given that the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol is still investigating.²⁷ Per our monitoring, in 2022, during the 1 year anniversary, right-wing Latinx accounts and pages across social media platforms were downplaying the attack and claiming Democrats’ outrage is “manufactured” or “propaganda.”



Political Propaganda and Misleading, Hyper-Partisan Narratives

Political propaganda (defined as the deliberate spread of information or ideas to influence a person, group, institution, or nation in support of—or in opposition to—a particular cause²⁸) and hyper-partisan narratives (recognized here as extremely biased information often used out of context and many times framed in favor of a political party), are also co-opted by actors online in very nuanced ways to influence Latinos and discredit democracy and fact-based discourse.

Socialism

Some online actors are looking to create confusion and distrust in order to depress voter turnout or influence voters. One common tactic is to create narratives that feed into fears and suspicions Latino and Hispanic voters might have, including Spanish-speakers and recent immigrants.

For example, right-wing media outlets and influencers sometimes utilize the specter of a socialist takeover of the United States to elicit fear among some Hispanic communities – especially among Cuban and Venezuelan Americans – who fled the socialist regimes of their respective countries.

Trump campaigned on a fervent anti-socialism message, vowing to “protect America from becoming a socialist country” and painting Democrats as socialists. In 2016 and 2018, some right-wing campaigns characterized Democratic candidates as “far-left extreme socialists” to seek support from some of the Latino communities. These narratives continued in 2020 with some right-wing Latinx accounts and pages, including pro-Trump and Spanish-language users, heavily pushing narratives around the perceived threat of socialism.

Many of these accounts and pages claimed Biden, Harris, and the Democrats were radical and socialist, and Trump’s campaign regularly held Latinos for Trump live stream events where the guests served as surrogates for that propaganda. Latinos for Trump and Equipo Trump, the Spanish-language and Latino Facebook and Twitter accounts for the Trump campaign, often claimed Latin American

socialists were promoting Biden. They would also connect the protests and confrontations around racial justice to actions in Latin American socialist countries and claim Democrats and the left are responsible. The Trump campaign also ran Spanish-language ads on Facebook and YouTube ahead of the 2020 election calling Biden a “socialist” who embraces “extremist politics of the left.”²⁹

In 2022, right-wing Latinx accounts and pages have continued to promote anti-socialism narratives, including connecting socialism or socialist policies to President Biden and the Democrats.



Florida

In 2020, Latino and Hispanic voters in Florida, especially Cubans and Venezuelans, were heavily targeted with disinformation and “wild conspiracy theories,”³⁰ which was also a common theme in past elections.³¹ Cubans in Florida represent 29% of the Hispanic eligible voter population³² and have repeatedly helped Republicans win the state, with 54% of Cubans in Florida voting for Trump in 2016 and playing an important role in 2020.³³ Eduardo Gamarra, a pollster and director of the Latino Public Opinion Forum at Florida International University claimed the disinformation targeting Latino and Hispanic voters in South Florida showed up in polling and focus groups.³⁴ According to the Miami Herald, the targeted messaging of “instilling fear about socialism coming to America helped the president rally Cuban-American voters” in 2020, which was “part of the reason he carried Florida.”

Google Trends data helps support this hypothesis. In 2020, searching for the term “socialismo” (socialism in Spanish) on Google was most popular in Florida over any other state, which was determined by the fraction of total Google searches or proportion of all queries in Florida.³⁵ The term also reached its peak popularity on Google search the week of the 2020 election and received more interest in 2020 compared to 2016, including in Florida.³⁶ Some Cuban Americans have also amplified anecdotal evidence about family and friends being fed misinformation claiming Democrats are “radical” and “socialist.”³⁷

According to the Miami Herald, “the Trump campaign made a concerted effort to misleadingly portray Biden as a socialist, posting manipulated images of him embracing Venezuelan strongman Nicolás Maduro and claiming he was ‘the candidate of Castro-Chavismo’ in one of its most viewed ads in South Florida. Such accusations found fertile soil in Miami Cuban media and were amplified on local Miami radio, TV stations, and by social media influencers who had welcomed Trump’s tough talk on Cuba and Venezuela.”³⁸

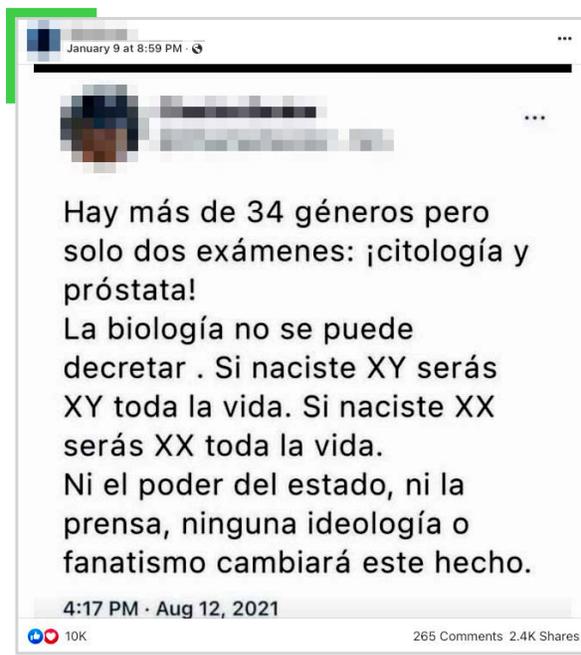


The anti-socialism message in Florida would also often be linked to other prominent narratives by the broader far-right, including attacks on Black Lives Matter (BLM). Multiple right-wing Spanish-language influencers in South Florida would associate BLM with socialism and communism. For example, many influencers amplified an out-of-context photo of a BLM co-founder with Nicolas Máduro. Alex Otaola,³⁹ a Cuban-born YouTube personality based in South Florida, frequently promoted narratives about the perceived threat of socialism and communism, including connecting it to Biden, Democrats and BLM. Otaola regularly connected Biden and Democrats to BLM and violence, including warning of the alleged radicalism or the supposed threat of socialism, crime, and violence from a Biden-Harris presidency.

According to Google Trends data, searching the term “socialismo” (socialism in Spanish) on Google continues to be most popular in Florida over any other state in 2022, which was determined by the fraction of total Google searches or proportion of all queries in Florida.⁴⁰ The term also continues to have similar interest on Google in 2021 and 2022 as it did leading up to the 2020 election before reaching its peak the week of the election, which may be a warning sign of what to expect leading up to the 2022 midterm elections.

Gender-Identity and Anti-LGBTQ Content

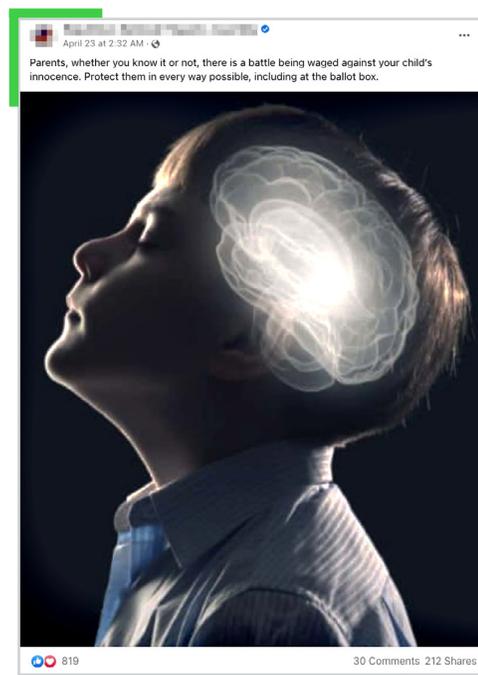
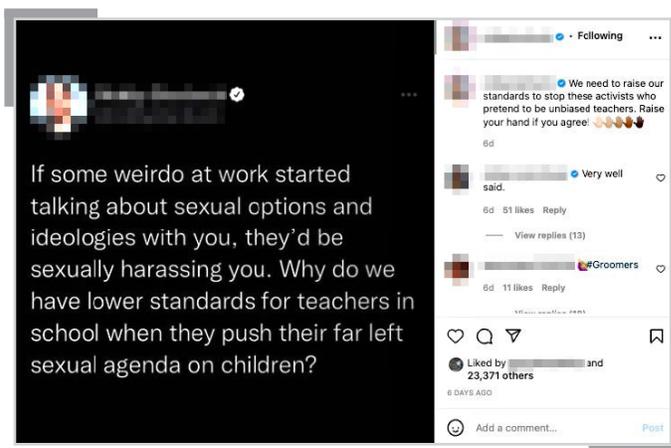
Right-wing actors often target Latinos with narratives that feed into religious beliefs and values they believe some Latinos may have. One common narrative found in right-wing Latinx spaces online is anti-LGBTQ content, including opposition to same-sex marriage, multiple gender options and people who are transgender. This content is also often spreading in Spanish-language religious spaces online.



While anti-LGBTQ narratives have been spreading in right-wing Latinx spaces for years, in 2022, right-wing actors are often connecting this content to sex education in schools. For example, in March 2022, right-wing Spanish-language Facebook pages were praising Florida Governor Ron DeSantis for signing a law that “banned the teaching of gender-related issues to kids younger than third grade.”⁴¹ Disney expressed opposition to this legislation, which resulted in right-wing actors, including Latinx accounts and pages across social media platforms, claiming that Disney was seeking to “groom” children with what the right-wing characterizes as a “radical LGBTQ agenda.”⁴²



This content is also often disguised as “parental rights,” with right-wing Latinx accounts and pages showing their opposition to the teaching of gender-related issues to kids by claiming they are indoctrinating children. This content is expected to continue throughout the 2022 election cycle, with one right-wing Latinx account saying, “Parents, whether you know it or not, there is a battle being waged against your child’s innocence. Protect them in every way possible, including at the ballot box.”

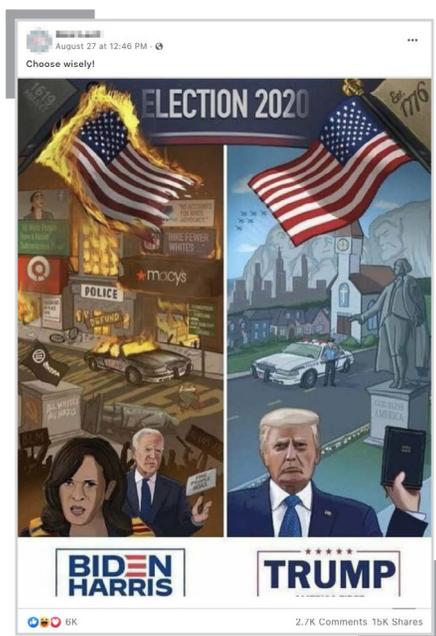


Racially Divisive Content

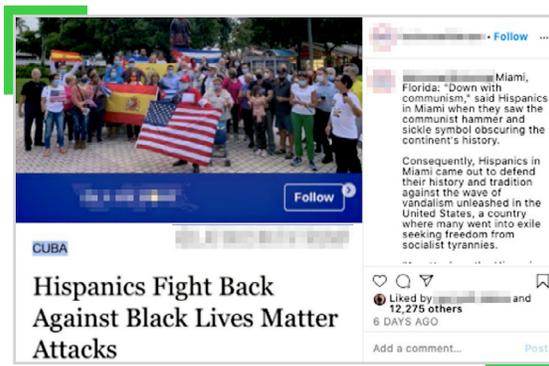
Bad actors often target communities of color in malign campaigns, including to exacerbate racial divisions in the United States.

In 2020, a common theme by actors was to inflame pre-existing tensions within and between communities. With a heightened focus on Black Lives Matter (BLM) and brands responding to the moment around racial justice, bad actors took advantage of opportunities to create divisions among communities of color.⁴³ Some Latino and Hispanic accounts and pages repeatedly promoted anti-Black narratives throughout the election cycle, including amplifying misinformation against BLM.

The BLM conversation within right-wing Latino and Hispanic spaces largely reflected the broader right-wing social media conversation, with bad actors looking to undermine the movement and paint protestors as violent. Multiple right-wing Latino and Hispanic accounts and pages repeatedly tried to discredit BLM by connecting the protest violence to Antifa, Marxism, and communism, and often sharing stories and videos of the rioting, looting, and violence as a result of the protests. Some right-wing Latino and Hispanic influencers and pages, including Spanish-language pages, often connected Biden, Harris, and the Democratic Party more broadly to conversations of violence and unrest.



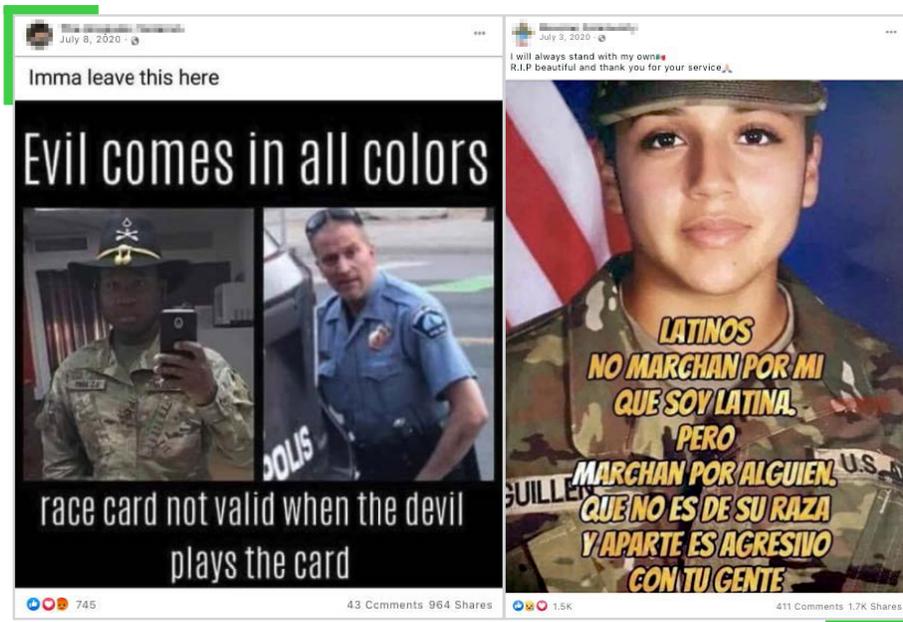
After the murder of George Floyd, there was an increase in efforts by bad actors, including right-wing Latino and Hispanic actors, to fuel racial tension between Black and Brown communities. During the summer of 2020, some right-wing Latino and Hispanic pages were promoting stories of Latinos fighting back against BLM, and other pages, including less partisan Latino and Hispanic pages, were promoting stories of Black men violently attacking Latino or Hispanic men. Some users were also painting BLM and protesters as anti-Hispanic by sharing stories of protesters vandalizing statues honoring Hispanics.



Right-wing Latino and Hispanic actors often hijack conversations around specific news stories, including the murder of Vanessa Guillen and the Goya boycott, to help drive wedges between Black and Brown communities, but also within the Latino community.

Conversation around Vanessa Guillén,⁴⁴ a Latina Army Specialist who was murdered and whose remains were found in Texas, looked to build racial tension between Black and Brown communities by criticizing BLM for not protesting her death. Some Latino and Hispanic accounts and pages, including less partisan Latino pages, amplified the fact that her alleged killer was Black and promoted the “All Lives Matter” narrative. One popular meme that circulated in right-wing Hispanic and Latino spaces online was a photo of the Black man who allegedly murdered Guillén next to a photo of the police officer who killed George Floyd with the message: “Evil comes in all colors. Race card is not valid when the devil plays the card.”

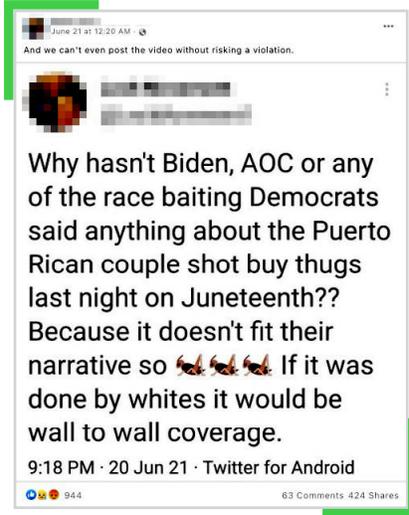
In July 2020, a less partisan Facebook page with more than 235,000 followers, posted a picture of Guillén with a message in Spanish: “Latinos no marchan por mi que soy Latina. Pero marchan por alguien que no es de su raza y aparte es agresivo con tu gente” (“Latinos do not march for me and I am Latina. But they march for someone who is not their race and is also aggressive with their people”). The post received nearly 2,000 shares and hundreds of comments, which was higher than average for this account.



In July 2020, Trump hosted the Goya Foods CEO Robert Unanue in a White House event. Unanue stated that the nation is “blessed” to have Trump as a leader. The clip of Unanue praising Trump began circulating on Twitter, and almost immediately Latinos, progressives, and supporters of Goya criticized the CEO’s remarks. At the same time, many public figures, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Julián Castro, suggested people not buy Goya products in response to the meeting. During the “Goya boycott,” the right, including right-wing Latino and Hispanic pages and pro-Trump influencers, attempted to drive a political wedge within the Latino and Hispanic community by claiming the “boycott” of Goya was an attack on Hispanics and a Hispanic-owned business, and that Democrats are anti-Latino or anti-Hispanic.



Since the 2020 election, right-wing Latinx accounts and pages have continued to hijack conversations around specific news stories to promote racial tension between Black and Latinx communities. For example, in the summer of 2021, right-wing Latinx accounts and pages were promoting racial tension after a Puerto Rican couple was shot in Chicago by a group of Black men, including claiming Democrats don't care about Latinos, that the response would be different if the shooters were white, and criticizing Black Lives Matter. In addition, right-wing Latino accounts and pages have continued and are expected to continue to promote anti-BLM narratives.



Immigration

A USA Today⁴⁵ report analyzing Russian-sourced Facebook ads found over a hundred paid ads targeted the Latino and Hispanic community with anti- and pro-immigration messaging to exacerbate racial tensions between 2016-2017. For example, Russian pages such as “Brown Power” and “Aztlán Warriors” circulated pro-immigrant, anti-colonialism memes to progressive Latinos on Facebook and Twitter.

These ads relied primarily on historical references of oppression and long standing grievances among Mexicans to fuel internal and external racial tensions. These pre- and post-election ads were viewed by millions. The 14 videos posted by Aztlán Warriors were viewed more than 1.4 million times. Some examples are shown below:



On Reddit, political trolls took advantage of apparent data voids in conversations about immigration within Latino and Hispanic communities to increase exposure to false narratives. Other Reddit users used similar tactics, sharing fake crime stories allegedly committed by undocumented immigrants.⁴⁶

Not all Russian-backed content was fabricated; some operatives co-opted authentic social media posts for their own purposes. For example, when a young Latina woman posted a photo with her graduation cap that read, “Job-stealing immigrant,” it was co-opted by Russian operatives who then turned it into a viral anti-immigration post. Often, these negative and deceptive counter-narratives were shared and reproduced at a higher rate than the original post.⁴⁷

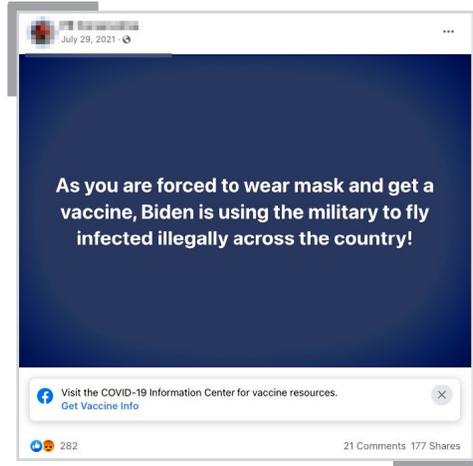
Right-wing disinformation campaigns also capitalize on existing anti-immigrant sentiments within the right-wing Latino and Hispanic community. A 2018 Pew report indicates Republican Latinos are nearly twice as likely to say there are too many immigrants in the US as Democratic Latinos.⁴⁸ A 2019 Univision study finds that more than a third (36%) of Latino and Hispanic voters agree with Trump on building the border wall.⁴⁹ This is a particularly salient point in Texas and California, where false or misleading stories about criminals, drug cartels, and gangs provoke fear within Latino and Hispanic communities and provide a rationale for increased border security.

Similarly, since the start of the Biden administration, the right-wing online ecosystem has criticized Biden and the Democrats on immigration and the border. The conversations on Biden’s immigration policies and the border in right-wing Latinx spaces online largely reflect the broader right-wing ecosystem, including many Spanish-language accounts co-opting these narratives. One common narrative since the start of the Biden administration that has continued to spread as recently as January 2022 is accusing Biden of causing a “border crisis” and claiming Biden and Democrats are doing nothing to address the issue.



Another prominent anti-immigrant narrative in 2021 was misleading claims that undocumented immigrants were spreading COVID-19 in the United States, also often blaming Biden for allegedly allowing this to happen.

In addition to anti-immigration disinformation, a report from the Tech Transparency Project⁵⁰ found that Facebook is allowing human smugglers to “advertise services”⁵¹ and connect with migrants, often spreading a “false hope of reaching the United States.”⁵² Facebook groups with tens of thousands of users are used by human smugglers, drug cartels, and criminal groups to advertise human smuggling services, including posting prices, routes and misinformation about the immigration process.



Economy

Since the start of the Biden administration, the right-wing online ecosystem has criticized Biden and the Democrats on the economy and over Biden’s economic and spending plans. Multiple right-wing Latinx accounts and pages across social media platforms, including in Spanish, are blaming Biden for the rise in inflation and cost of goods, often connecting stories about the inflation rate being the highest in decades to Biden and his economic policies.

One common narrative is criticizing Biden for the cost of gas prices. Right-wing Latinx accounts are also blaming Biden for shortages and supply chain issues, specifically claiming Biden is at fault for the alleged “empty shelves” at retail stores. Many of these accounts are often promoting Biden’s approval ratings with these narratives and suggesting the economy under the Biden administration is worse than the Trump administration.



Family Values, Religion, & Abortion

Conservative and right-wing pundits often seek to capitalize on traditional religious beliefs and family values among some Latino and Hispanic individuals as an entry point to gaining support. Throughout the 2020 election cycle and since then, right-wing English and Spanish-language influencers and pages also often characterize the left as “anti-God” or anti-religion, especially around issues of abortion. For example, one pro-Trump and Spanish-language Facebook page with 38,000 followers shared a video in Spanish claiming Catholics and Christians can not vote for a Democrat, a narrative also promoted by the Trump campaign’s Spanish-language Twitter account. The video promotes a common narrative continuing to spread in right-wing Latinx spaces - the left wants to kill babies and supports late-term abortions. This particular post had more than a thousand shares and tens of thousands of views, which was on the higher end of average for this account.

Anti-choice conservatism are typical in right-wing Latinx spaces, especially in Spanish-language and Christian or Catholic social media spaces online. In 2022, as Republican-controlled state legislatures continue to introduce and pass extreme anti-choice legislation, and the Supreme Court is expected to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, right-wing Latinx accounts, including Spanish-language accounts, will continue to spread anti-choice narratives and criticize Democrats and the left-wing ecosystem.



Latinos Over-Index on Social Media Consumption

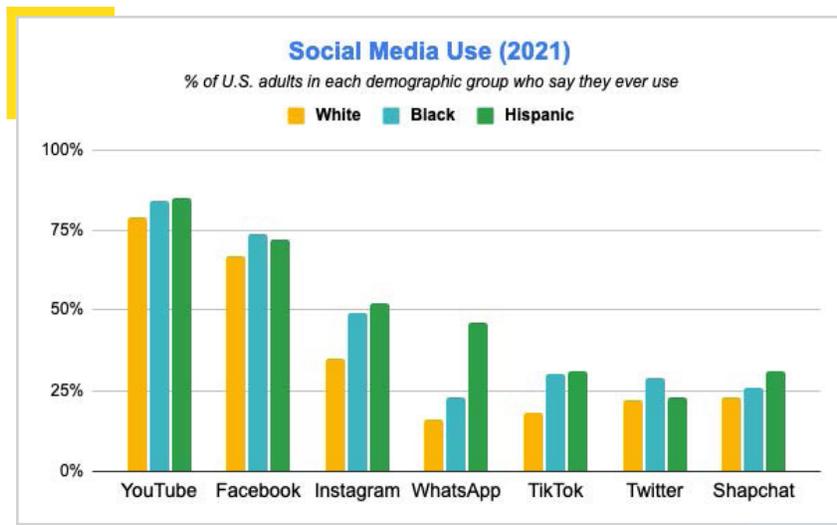


Research shows that about half of Americans (48%) get their news from social media at least sometimes.⁵³ However, Latinos and Hispanics over-index on news consumption on social media. A 2016 Pew Research Center report indicated nearly three-quarters of Latinos and Hispanics get news from internet sources such as social media and smartphone apps – nearly

equal to those who do so from television.⁵⁴ This increase in digital usage also increases exposure to false and misleading information.

According to The Washington Post, “Online platforms are particularly fertile ground for manipulating conversation among voters of color, opinion surveys suggest. Black and Hispanic users are more likely than White users to see social media as important to them in identifying like-minded people.”⁵⁵ For further readings on the breadth of the issue see: *The Human Consequences of Computational Propaganda* by the Institute for the Future.⁵⁶

The following chart⁵⁷ shows the percentage of US adults in each demographic group, including Hispanics, who use prominent social media platforms:





Facebook

Despite being critical to the spread of disinformation and hate speech in the country, Facebook also provides a space for marginalized communities in the country to make their voices heard.⁵⁸ According to Pew Research Center, nearly three-quarters (72%) of US Latino and Hispanic adults use Facebook, slightly more than the general public.⁵⁹ And according to Equis research, more than a third of (38%) of US Latino and Hispanic adults are using Facebook as a news source “often” in a typical week.

In the 2020 election cycle, Facebook was also a prominent platform for the spread of disinformation targeting Latino and Hispanic voters, including in Spanish. Right-wing Latino and Hispanic Facebook accounts and pages often promoted narratives from the broader right-wing social media ecosystem, including anti-socialism, anti-Black, and voter fraud messages.

The Spanish-language content on Facebook was also problematic because there was less monitoring and accountability. Facebook would sometimes flag false content in English, but the same material in Spanish would live longer or not get flagged.⁶⁰ For example, Spanish-language voter fraud narratives were more likely to stay up longer on Facebook.

Most of the misinformation narratives on Facebook were in more partisan pages or groups, such as right-wing and pro-Trump pages; however, less partisan Latino and Hispanic pages also helped spread misinformation and problematic narratives, especially around conversations that either resonate with the Latino or Hispanic community or are conversations in the mainstream media.

For example, during the 2020 election cycle, some nonpartisan Latino or Hispanic Facebook pages amplified anti-Black or anti-BLM narratives that fueled racial tension between Black and Brown communities. These nonpartisan spaces can be more dangerous because they appear to be more trustworthy messengers. The Facebook users in these pages and groups are often there to be part of an online community and may believe or trust what they are seeing.

In 2022, Facebook will continue to be a go-to source for Latinos to get news and information, and disinformation, misinformation, and problematic narratives will continue to spread in Latinx spaces on Facebook.



YouTube

According to Pew Research Center, 85% of Hispanic adults use YouTube, compared to 81% of all US adults.⁶¹ And according to Equis research findings, nearly a half (47%) of US Latino and Hispanic adults are using YouTube as a news source “often” in a typical week. Latinos may be seeing misinformation on YouTube more than others simply because of how much time they are spending online — twice as much on YouTube as non-Latino adults, according to Equis Research and Harmony Labs.⁶²

Throughout the 2020 election cycle, YouTube did a poor job detecting and actioning Spanish-language content, which gave Spanish-speaking YouTube influencers the ability to share disinformation and fringe conspiracy theories without platform oversight. Many of the narratives, including voter fraud messages, continued to be amplified after the election.

In the 2020 election cycle, YouTube was a prominent platform for the spread of disinformation targeting Latino and Hispanic voters, especially in Spanish. Spanish-language YouTube accounts often promoted narratives from the broader right-wing social media ecosystem (e.g., voter fraud), but also amplified dangerous conspiracy theories (e.g., QAnon).

Disinformation targeting Latinos is varied and engaging. Some common examples from right-wing backed approaches include low-budget “news-analysis” videos coming not just from the United States, but also from Latin America; hybrid celebrity gossip and political news based daily talk shows; and organized, well-resourced entities engaged in “re-education programs” around issues like socialism.

In addition, many Spanish-language YouTube accounts were foreign (e.g. Colombia, Spain, Venezuela), but discussed US politics and often echoed messages from the information ecosystem in the US, such as anti-socialism and QAnon narratives. Many of these YouTube videos would also be shared into US groups and pages on Facebook and WhatsApp.

According to Equis, YouTube “played a significant role in convincing some Latino voters to support former President Donald Trump in higher percentages than expected by carefully

targeting them.”⁶³ In 2022, YouTube will continue to be a leading source for Latinos to get news and information, and disinformation, misinformation, and problematic narratives will continue to target Latinos. As a result, in 2021, Equis partnered with Harmony Labs to get a better understanding of the types of content Latino audiences were engaging with on YouTube in order to provide advocates and organizers a deeper, more powerful framework upon which engagement and persuasion efforts can be better constructed on YouTube specifically.⁶⁴



WhatsApp

WhatsApp is popular among immigrant communities who use it to communicate with family and friends abroad. Nearly half (46%) of Latinos and Hispanics use Meta-owned (previously Facebook) WhatsApp, more than any other ethnic or racial group in the US and 23 points higher than the general public.⁶⁵ According to Equis, a fifth (20%) of US Latino and Hispanic adults are using WhatsApp as a news source “often” in a typical week. Despite being critical to the spread of disinformation, WhatsApp could also be used as an organizing tool to reach voters, especially Latino and Hispanic voters.

WhatsApp is a closed and difficult to monitor platform, making it a perfect target for disinformation campaigns hoping to go undetected. In the 2020 US election cycle, WhatsApp was a prominent platform for the spread of disinformation targeting Latino and Hispanic voters in certain regions in the United States, especially in Spanish.

Right-wing Spanish-language influencers often spread disinformation or misinformation on Facebook or YouTube, but the conversations often moved to WhatsApp groups. Some of the disinformation or false information spread on WhatsApp is also “being passed from those living outside the United States.”⁶⁶

For example, bad actors from the United States and abroad spread disinformation narratives that reach individuals or groups in

Latin America and those messages will spread throughout their communities, including in the United States. A problematic issue is that often the conversations occurring on WhatsApp are between Latinos in the US and their family and friends abroad, which often makes the disinformation or misinformation spreading on the platform more believable or trustworthy.⁶⁷ According to Equis, nearly 90% of Latinos who are getting their news and information on WhatsApp are getting it in individual group chats with one other person or in small group chats with family and friends.

In South Florida, WhatsApp disinformation campaigns targeted Latino and Hispanic voters.⁶⁸ For example, WhatsApp groups “dedicated to updates on the pandemic and news for the Colombian and Venezuelan communities became intermittently interspersed with conspiracy theories from videos of far-right commentators or news clips from new Spanish-language sites, like Noticias 24 and PanAm Post, and the YouTube-based Informativo G24 website.”⁶⁹

WhatsApp has taken some action to try and curb disinformation on the platform. For example, WhatsApp limited how many users at a time could receive forwarded messages to five and implemented an in-app fact-checking tool, allowing “users to conduct Google searches on information contained in viral messages they receive.”⁷⁰

End-to-end encryption and closed group chats make curbing disinformation on WhatsApp exceptionally difficult. More research is needed to better understand the volume and content of disinformation in WhatsApp conversations, but the 2020 election showed that WhatsApp is fertile ground for the spread of disinformation targeting Latino and Hispanic audiences and that problem is likely to continue ahead of the 2022 midterm elections.



Instagram

Latinos over-index on Instagram usage overall. According to Pew Research, more than half (52%) of Hispanic adults have used Instagram,

more than Black and White adults and 12 points higher than the adult population in the US.⁷¹ And according to Equis, nearly a third (30%) of US Latino and Hispanic adults are using Instagram as a news source “often” in a typical week.

Instagram is proliferating with harmful narratives targeting Latinos, including disinformation, misinformation, and problematic narratives about COVID-19 and vaccines, elections and voting, race-baiting and hate, and fringe conspiracy theories. The disinformation and misinformation spreading in Spanish on Instagram is primarily going unchecked, with less moderation and harmful posts left up longer than in English.

Notable right-wing Latinx accounts and influencers on Instagram often promote similar content or narratives as the right-wing Latinx accounts and influencers on Facebook. Furthermore, many popular Latinx accounts and influencers have accounts on multiple platforms, including Instagram, allowing them to cross post or post the same content on multiple platforms at the same time, allowing their content to reach more users.

Similar to Facebook, coordinated actors often post identical images and captions at the same time, which gives the message or narrative an algorithmic boost and reaches more feeds and people. The ability to spread the same message or narrative repeatedly by many different accounts is often more problematic and dangerous than single viral posts.

In 2022, Instagram will continue to be a go-to source for Latinos to get news and information, and disinformation, misinformation, and problematic narratives will continue to spread in Latinx spaces on Instagram.



Twitter

Twitter is not as popular of a platform for US adults as other social media platforms. According to Pew Research Center, only about a quarter (23%) of US Latino and Hispanic adults use Twitter, the same as all US adults.⁷² However, according to Equis, 15% of US Latino

and Hispanic adults are using Twitter as a news source “often” in a typical week.

Latino and Hispanic Twitter is difficult to define given the vast cultural nuances of Latino and Hispanic users. Right-wing Latino and Hispanic influencers have smaller followings compared to broader right-wing Twitter influencers, and the Latino and Hispanic influencers with larger followings tend to have a broader audience that includes users outside of the Latino and Hispanic community. However, some right-wing Spanish-language Twitter users often tweet more extreme content, including misinformation and conspiracy theories, than Spanish-language content spreading on other platforms like Facebook.

In the 2020 election cycle, Twitter was a prominent platform for the spread of disinformation, misinformation, and problematic narratives, including in Spanish. Right-wing Latino and Hispanic Twitter users often promoted narratives from the broader right-wing social media ecosystem, including anti-socialism and voter fraud messages. Some foreign Spanish-language Twitter users also discuss US politics and often echo messages from the right-wing ecosystem in the US. The disinformation and misinformation spreading in Spanish on Twitter is primarily going unchecked, with posts rarely getting labeled or taken down.

While Twitter may not be as prominently used as Facebook or YouTube in Latino and Hispanic communities, right-wing Latino and Hispanic accounts and influencers continue to spread misinformation and problematic narratives on the platform. In addition, notable right-wing Latino and Hispanic influencers may be consuming information on Twitter and then spreading it to their audiences on other platforms.

TikTok

In the first quarter of 2022, TikTok was the world’s most downloaded app, and in the United States, TikTok has been the top downloaded app every quarter since Q1 2021.⁷³ Latinos over-index on TikTok usage overall. According to Pew Research, nearly a third (31%) of Hispanic adults have used TikTok, more than Black and White adults and 10 points higher than the adult population in the US.⁷⁴ And according to Equis, more than a



fifth (22%) of US Latino and Hispanic adults are using TikTok as a news source “often” in a typical week.

TikTok is proliferating with Spanish-language disinformation, misinformation, and problematic narratives, including about COVID-19 and vaccines, elections and voting, race-baiting and hate, and fringe conspiracy theories. This content is coming from TikTok accounts in the United States and from abroad, including Latin America. The disinformation and misinformation spreading in Spanish on TikTok is often going unchecked, with Spanish-language content infrequently getting labeled or taken down.

For example, the minimal content that is getting labeled about COVID-19 and vaccines only includes a label to “learn more about COVID-19 vaccines,” and none of the videos identified in our research include a label mentioning that the content was false or misleading. While not all the TikTok videos have high levels of engagement, multiple TikTok videos in Spanish do appear to receive higher levels of engagement than some of the Spanish-language posts or videos on Facebook and YouTube.

Like Facebook and YouTube, TikTok’s platform and algorithm provides users with related content that they are watching and engaging with; however, users may be getting more of this content and faster than other platforms because TikTok is primarily short videos. This can be problematic because a user who engages with disinformation or misinformation can get siloed into an echo chamber of problematic and harmful content.

According to a Wall Street Journal (WSJ) investigation, TikTok’s algorithm recommends related content based on the amount of time a user “linger[s] over a piece of content.” The WSJ “created dozens of automated accounts” on TikTok that “watched hundreds of thousands of videos” on different topics. They found that TikTok can quickly lead users into rabbit holes of harmful content, including content about depression, suicide, eating disorders, and election conspiracies.⁷⁵

While TikTok may not be as prominently used as Facebook or YouTube in Latino and Hispanic communities, it is becoming increasingly more popular, especially among younger demographic groups.

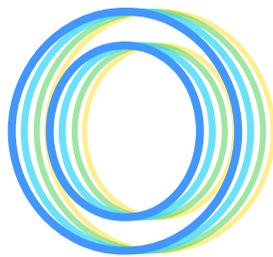
Other Platforms

Other social media platforms and messaging apps are becoming increasingly more popular, especially by users who believe mainstream social media platforms are censoring or restricting content. These platforms are going unchecked and often contain more extreme and dangerous content, including disinformation, conspiracy theories, and hate speech.

According to Nielsen, young Hispanics ages 18-34 are more than twice as likely than the general population to use Telegram.⁷⁶ And according to Equis, 5% of US Latino and Hispanic adults are using TikTok as a news source “often” in a typical week. Similar to WhatsApp, Telegram is proliferating with Spanish-language disinformation, misinformation and misleading content. Spanish-language Telegram groups are a loud echo chamber where users are constantly receiving messages, audios, videos, and links from other users. Many groups are highly active with hundreds of messages being sent and received per day. The Spanish-language disinformation narratives and conversations spread on the mainstream platforms such as Facebook and YouTube are also being spread on Telegram, but the conversations around these narratives become more extreme and harmful. QAnon, anti-vaccine, and 2020 election disinformation that may be flagged or taken down by the more mainstream platforms is flourishing on Telegram.

Some in the right-wing ecosystem have also launched or are launching their own platforms like Parler, GETTR, and Truth Social (Trump’s social media platform). During and after the 2020 election, multiple right-wing Latino and Hispanic accounts and influencers, including Spanish-language users, attacked the media and social media companies for allegedly being biased against Trump and Republicans and censoring them online. Some right-wing Latino and Hispanic accounts and influencers responded to baseless claims of censorship by pushing users to move to more fringe platforms, such as Parler, MeWe, Gab, and Rumble. It is difficult to determine how many right-wing Latino and Hispanic users joined or will join fringe platforms in the future, but it could lead to further radicalization and more disinformation such as conspiracies reaching mainstream platforms faster. More research is needed into conversations on fringe platforms targeting Latino and Hispanic voters, including in Spanish.

Taking Action (or Not): A Negligent Response by Social Media Platforms



Our research shows that social media companies are doing an asymmetrical job of addressing Spanish-language disinformation and misinformation, with less moderation and harmful posts left up longer than in English.

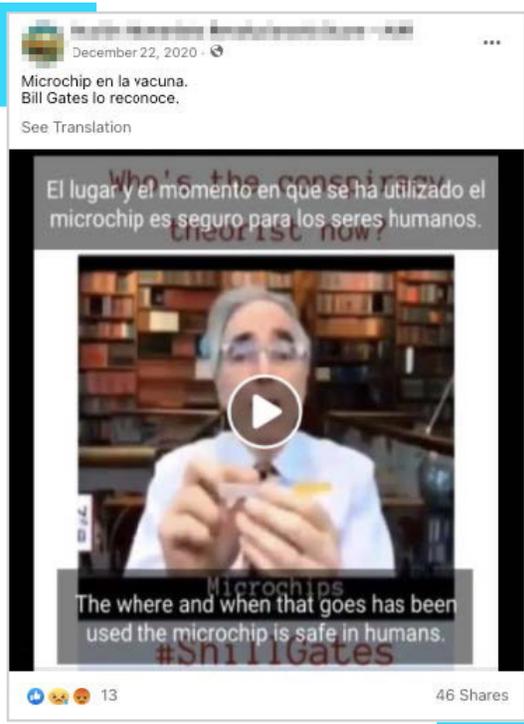
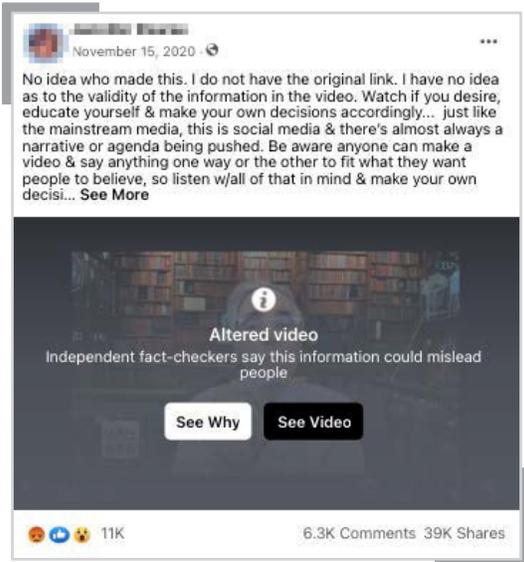
Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter still have Spanish-language posts active today from November 2020 that promote election lies with no fact-checks or warning labels. In addition, baseless voter-fraud narratives, including false claims of Trump winning the 2020 election or Democrats stealing elections, have continued to spread in both English and Spanish in right-wing Latino spaces online as recently as this year.



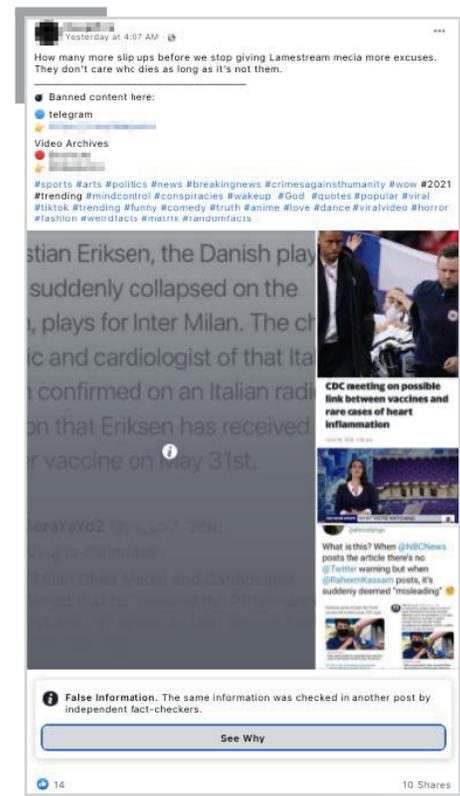
In 2020, Facebook⁷⁷ and YouTube⁷⁸ both announced policies to remove or restrict QAnon content, but it continued to spread in Spanish.⁷⁹ The platforms let QAnon content stay up for weeks until it was flagged by others outside the company, including Equis, and they still would not take all the content down.

In December 2020, Facebook announced that they would “remove false claims that COVID-19 vaccines contain microchips” on Facebook and Instagram. This claim has also been rated false by Facebook’s fact-checking partners in the United States, including Reuters and USA Today. However, Equis found that Facebook would flag vaccine misinformation content in English, but the same content in Spanish took days to get flagged, if it ever did. As of April 2022, Facebook still has Spanish-language content promoting false claims that the COVID-19 vaccines contain microchips without any labels.

The following are two posts from 2020 promoting the same video falsely claiming the COVID-19 vaccine has a microchip; however, the English post was labeled by Facebook and the Spanish post was not labeled or removed until at least January 2022.



The following are two Facebook posts from 2021 promoting a conspiracy theory that a soccer player who collapsed during a soccer match was a result of receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. The English post was labeled as “false” shortly after being posted; however, the Spanish post took days to get labeled by Facebook.



In Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen's testimony before Congress, she revealed that 87 percent of misinformation spending is on English, but only about 9 percent of the users are English speakers.⁸⁰ Haugen claimed Facebook had a "consistent pattern of under-investment in languages that are not English"⁸¹ and their own researchers have "repeatedly warned that the company appears ill-equipped to address issues such as hate speech and misinformation in languages other than English."⁸² Internal Facebook documents also reveal that Facebook is aware that they are "not good at detecting misinfo in Spanish" and that they "still have gaps in detection and enforcement" of Spanish-language content.⁸³

Haugen exposed how the company's profit incentives prompt it not to offer the same safety systems for every language on the platform or every country where Facebook is used: "Every time Facebook expands to a new one of these linguistic areas, it costs just as much, if not more, to make the safety systems for that language as it did to make English or French," she told "60 Minutes." "Because each new language costs more money but there's fewer and fewer customers. And so, the economics just doesn't make sense for Facebook to be safe in a lot of these parts of the world."⁸⁴

As seen above, there are clear asymmetries between the moderation of English content vs Spanish content by social media platforms. Advocates have been pushing for a set of solutions that the platforms can take — including hiring a C-suite position to oversee Spanish-language content moderation,

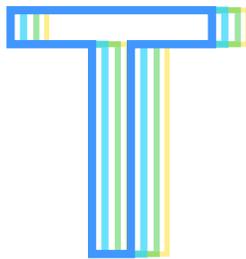
expanding Spanish-language moderation capacity and being more transparent about their moderation systems and processes — but with little to no success.⁸⁵

In addition, repeated requests from members of Congress⁸⁶ and advocacy groups asking the platforms about their efforts to mitigate Spanish-language disinformation, including the amount of content moderators dedicated to Spanish-language content, have gone unanswered.⁸⁷

Senator Bob Menendez called responses from social media platforms to inquiries from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus "completely unsatisfactory"⁸⁸ and a spokesperson for Rep. Tony Cardenas said Facebook provided "no concrete, direct answers to any of our questions."⁸⁹ The lack of self-correction by the platforms have many advocates now calling on Congress and the Biden administration to not only demand answers but regulate the platforms, including passing legislation with transparency requirements and adopting federal privacy legislation that prohibits algorithmic discrimination.

It remains to be seen whether the platforms will respond fully to more recent letters of inquiry from Congress, including an April 2022 letter sent by US Senators Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), Ben Ray Lujan (D-N.M.), and Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), alongside US Representative Tony Cardenas (D-Calif.-29), and 17 others urging Mark Zuckerberg to increase platform moderation of Spanish-language disinformation from Russian-owned media outlets on the war in Ukraine.⁹⁰

A Call to Action: What More Can Be Done?



Today's information environment is nuanced and complex. With greater interconnectivity has come a growth of disinformation (false information spread with intent to deceive), political propaganda (information of a biased or misleading nature used to advance a political perspective), and uncontested hyper-polarized political content. Ahead of the 2022 midterm elections and more long term, the following recommendations for social media companies, legislators, civil society, and

information consumers can help address the corrosive impact of disinformation and harmful narratives affecting Latinos and Hispanics in the United States:

For social media platforms:

IMPLEMENT EQUITY IN ACTION AGAINST NON-ENGLISH-LANGUAGE DISINFORMATION AND INAUTHENTIC COORDINATED BEHAVIOR THAT VIOLATE TERMS OF SERVICE:

- There are asymmetries between the moderation of English content and Spanish content on multiple social media platforms. These companies have an opportunity to expand their Spanish-language resources and at the bare minimum, take the same actions on Spanish content as they do for English content. Social media platforms can improve machine-learning models to better detect inauthentic coordination and networks spreading Spanish-language disinformation, hire more culturally fluent Spanish-language moderators, make sure they have effective and efficient integrity systems in place for non-English languages, have more Spanish-language fact-checking partners, and increase their transparency on content moderation practices.

INCREASE TRANSPARENCY AND DISCLOSE MORE ON NON-ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACCOUNTS FOR RESEARCHERS:

- Many social media companies disseminate transparency reporting on different aspects of actions taken to address violations of terms of service. These transparency reports should provide more information on non-English language content by allowing for segmentation by country and language. Social media companies can also consider showcasing the top Spanish-language accounts and posts, as some already do for English-language accounts.

For legislators:

DEMAND MORE EQUITABLE TREATMENT OF NON-ENGLISH-LANGUAGE DISINFORMATION, MODERATION PRACTICES AND EXTERNAL ACCESS TO DATA FOR RESEARCHERS:

- Despite pressure and inquiries from Congress, the platforms have not been completely transparent about the resources allocated to monitoring and acting on non-English disinformation and violations of

terms of service. Congress can continue to pressure platforms to be transparent about the resources being used to counter non-English disinformation. On the side of encrypted messaging platforms, where content is neither visible to the companies nor to researchers, Congress can continue encouraging encrypted messaging platforms to reduce the tools that enable content to go viral behind the walls of encryption - WhatsApp's moves to reduce the number of times content can be forwarded and to how many groups is a positive step here.

GIVE THE FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO BE A WATCHDOG:

- The FTC is best positioned to be an ongoing accountability watchdog of the tech platform's response to Spanish-language disinformation as it directly creates consumer harm. Congress can provide more resources and funding to the FTC so they have additional resources to deal with platform accountability, whether algorithm reports or transparency reports. In May, the Senate confirmed Alvaro Bedoya to the Federal Trade Commission. He will play an important role in this effort.

BOLSTER TRUSTED LOCAL AND ETHNIC MEDIA WHO PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN PROVIDING NEWS AND INFORMATION TO LATINO COMMUNITIES:

- Ethnic and local media are still trusted messengers among Latino communities. Congress can amplify the critical role played by local and ethnic media organizations that are building robust and year-round media infrastructures to offer reputable news to Latinos in their native language. In a world where minority media ownership is shrinking, Congress and the Federal Communications Commission must work to ensure that the number of minority-owned and targeted news platforms is increasing, not decreasing.
- Congress can also appear more in local media, assuring they are being seen and reaching non-English language communities where they consume news.
- Congress can also support grants that build two-way engagement and harness trusted messengers to deliver accurate information to Latinos where they consume information (YouTube, Radio, WhatsApp).

For grassroots civil society organizations and local media: STRENGTHEN A ROBUST AND YEAR-ROUND DIGITAL MEDIA INFRASTRUCTURE FOR LATINO VOTERS

- While social media platforms and the government need to do more to combat Spanish-language disinformation flourishing on social media platforms, countering or combatting disinformation online also requires action from Latino-serving and progressive organizations. Building a robust and year-round digital media infrastructure for Latinx voters, including in Spanish, is crucial. Too many Latinos feel left out of mainstream American society and politics, and Spanish-language information voids are filled with right-wing disinformation and problematic narratives, which has resulted in little sense-making media and information for new Latino audiences. Civil society has an

opportunity to engage the Latino community by investing in creating organic content and online distribution channels, building trust with Latinos, and using trusted messengers to deliver accurate information to the Latino community.

ENGAGE LATINOS WHERE THEY CONSUME INFORMATION

It is also vital for Latino-serving organizations to engage with Latinos where they are getting their news and information - social media. While it may be difficult to compete with disinformation and the far-right ecosystem online more broadly, it is possible to compete in specific regions by building out digital infrastructures and small-scale regional media campaigns. Engaging with Latinos where they consume information can help provide an inclusive space for them to make sense of the world.

For consumers of information online:

DO NOT ENGAGE WITH DISINFORMATION DIRECTLY

Retweeting, commenting on, or amplifying disinformation directly can unintentionally draw more attention to a false or misleading narrative. If and when you find the need to engage with disinformation, do so by taking a screenshot of the post and commenting on it that way. When possible, do not direct more followers to the page or network spreading disinformation.

DIG DEEPER ON THE MESSENGER

When looking to understand a message, it is important to recognize, acknowledge and investigate the messenger. A google search can shed light on a person's leanings, history of commentary, or affiliations. This information can help you determine if a message is biased and if the messenger has a history of spreading false or misleading information that has been previously corrected or debunked.

ACKNOWLEDGE SHARED CONCERNS AND REDIRECT TO INFORMATION FROM OFFICIAL SOURCES

Few people like to be made to feel they have been duped or deceived. When engaging with colleagues, friends, or acquaintances around disinformation online or on messaging platforms, do so with empathy and an eye for the types of emotions content can generate. Rather than approaching someone with assertions about the veracity of their content, first do some research, and if possible, focus on sharing resources that offer debunked or corroborated information about the topic or theme.

Looking to the Future



While it is difficult to measure the impact of disinformation on election outcomes, Equis quantitative and qualitative data has shown that disinformation, misinformation, and hyper-polarized narratives targeting Latino and Hispanic communities continues to proliferate widely in the United States, exacerbated by gaps of information and gaps created by diverse cultural

nuances within Latino and Hispanic communities, especially geographic and generational.

Many of the disinformation narratives promoted by the broader right-wing ecosystem, such as voter fraud, anti-vaccine, or conspiracy theories are also being promoted in right-wing Latino and Hispanic spaces online, including in Spanish. With the rise of more fringe and closed platforms, monitoring disinformation and misinformation becomes increasingly difficult, as does mapping and countering narratives. This is especially problematic as social media platforms and messaging platforms are doing an insufficient job of detecting and actioning Spanish-language content, especially on Facebook and YouTube.

As we approach the 2022 midterm elections in the United States, it is crucial that social media companies, legislators, grassroots organizations, local media and online consumers work to address the issue of Spanish-language disinformation as Latinos increasingly turn to social media for news and information. In an environment filled with Spanish-language news deserts, Latino media organizations must be bolstered and Latino-serving organizations must continue to strengthen a robust, year-round communications infrastructure to counter and combat Spanish-language disinformation, political propaganda, and hyper-partisan right-wing narratives, and to strengthen trust in a time of uncertainty.

ENDNOTES

[1 The Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies at The Graduate Center, CUNY](#)

[2 Pew Research](#)

[3 MIT Technology Review](#)

[4 New York Times](#)

[5 Wall Street Journal](#)

[6 Newsweek](#)

[7 POLITICO](#)

8 The above chart shows how content from Latin America is shaping the views of Spanish-language users in the United States.

[9 USA Today](#)

[10 New York Times](#)

11 RT is a Russian international media network funded by the Russian government and identified as a source for disinformation and pro-Russian propaganda.

[12 NBC News](#)

[13 Reuters](#)

[14 USA Today](#)

[15 Meta](#)

[16 Washington Post](#)

[17 Media Manipulation Case Book](#)

[18 The Washington Post](#)

[19 Associated Press](#)

[20 USA Today](#)

[21 Meta](#)

[22 PolitiFact](#)

[23 The New York Times](#)

[24 Reuters](#)

[25 CNN](#)

[26 Miami Herald](#)

[27 Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol](#)

[28 Media Manipulation Case Book](#)

[29 Vox](#)

[30 Politico](#)

[31 Miami Herald](#)

[32 Pew Research Center 2020](#)

[33 Miami Herald](#)

[34 Politico](#)

[35 Google Trends](#)

[36 Google Trends](#)

[37 Twitter](#)

[38 Miami Herald](#)

39 Alex Otaola is a Cuban-born YouTube personality who hosts a conservative online show in Spanish that has tens of thousands of viewers. Otaola has multiple social media pages on each platform, but his most popular accounts have over 133 million views on YouTube (Cubanos por el Mundo), 255,000 followers on Facebook, and 298,000 followers on Instagram.

[40 Google Trends](#)

[41 Washington Post](#)

[42 CNN](#)

- 43 [New York Times](#)
- 44 [The Washington Post](#)
- 45 [USA Today](#)
- 46 [Institute for the Future](#)
- 47 [Digital Intelligence Lab](#)
- 48 [Pew Research](#)
- 49 [Univision](#)
- 50 [Tech Transparency Project](#)
- 51 [CNN](#)
- 52 [NBC News](#)
- 53 [Pew Research Center](#)
- 54 [Pew Research Center](#)
- 55 [The Washington Post](#)
- 56 [Institute For The Future](#)
- 57 [Pew Research Center \(Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 25-Feb. 8, 2021\)](#)
- 58 [Equality Labs](#)
- 59 [Pew Research Center](#)
- 60 [MIT Technology Review](#)
- 61 [Pew Research Center](#)
- 62 [Equis Research](#)
- 63 [Axios](#)
- 64 [Harmony Labs](#)
- 65 [Pew Research Center](#)
- 66 [New York Times](#)
- 67 [American Press Institute](#)
- 68 [CBS Miami](#)
- 69 [Politico](#)
- 70 [Business Insider](#)
- 71 [Pew Research Center](#)
- 72 [Pew Research Center](#)
- 73 [TechCrunch](#)
- 74 [Pew Research Center](#)
- 75 [Wall Street Journal](#)
- 76 [NBC News](#)
- 77 [NBC News](#)
- 78 [NBC News](#)
- 79 [Vice](#)
- 80 [NBC News \(YouTube\)](#)
- 81 [NBC News \(YouTube\)](#)
- 82 [CNN](#)
- 83 [Los Angeles Times](#)
- 84 [CBS News](#)
- 85 [Real Facebook Oversight Board](#)
- 86 [Axios](#)
- 87 [Los Angeles Times](#)
- 88 [Axios](#)
- 89 [Los Angeles Times](#)
- 90 https://www.menendez.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/meta_rt_and_spanish_language_disinformation_congressional_letter_final.pdf



About Equis:

Equis is a set of organizations working to create a better understanding of Latinos, innovate new approaches to reach and engage them, and invest in the leadership and infrastructure for long-term change and increased engagement.

Learn more about our work: <https://weareequis.us>.