

We the People: Fighting Online Disinformation through Real-Life Conversations

Key Observations

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Abstract. *The research hub at Georgia Alliance conducted an event with community members of College Park, Georgia aimed at highlighting the prevalence of online disinformation, our collective susceptibility to believing it, and tools to defend against it both online and in person. Building on our work of identifying disinformation's effect on Black voter behavior, this event sought to test whether disinformation training would influence the attendees' belief that their vote has the power to change what matters to them in their communities. Preliminary results found that the event increased the attendees' vote power perception by 1.25 points (out of a 0–10-point scale) from 7.4 to 8.7. These results further suggest the usefulness of in-person disinformation defense education in inoculation from false narratives that promote voter apathy.*

Keywords: *Disinformation · Defense · Trainings*

1 Introduction

Robert Mueller's 2016 election report revealed that malicious actors targeted Black Americans with disinformation to promote voter apathy [1]. Building on these findings, our research explored how online disinformation has impacted perceptions of vote power in the Black community. Since 2022, we have observed disinformation amplified by an online right-leaning Black identity group (which we presented at the IdeaS conference in 2023) and developed a method to combat false narratives: the disinformation feedback loop. This feedback loop method, presented at IdeaS in 2024, armed canvassers with disinformation inoculation techniques and utilized canvassers as researchers to report offline disinformation.

In 2025, we furthered our research by testing the effects of our inoculation training on voters themselves. We the People: International Incubator Series is a three-part program that took place at a College Park, Georgia precinct known for low voter turnout. The second installment of the series, Combatting Disinformation, explored the question: does offline disinformation inoculation training affect people's perception of their own vote power? The lesson plan taught during the event covered different types of misinformation, the dangers and prevalence of misinformation in everyday life, and how to best combat misinformation, especially when it extends beyond online communities to an individual's personal network of friends and close acquaintances.

2 Methodology

On June 19, 2025, Georgia Alliance for Progress along with the Tau Epsilon Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. hosted We the People: Combatting

Disinformation, where we facilitated lessons for media literacy and disinformation defense best practices with attendees ranging from their early twenties to their seventies. This is the second installment of an Intergenerational Incubator series which seeks to explore and test new methods of encouraging cross-generational conversations about voting to leverage the reach of everyday trusted messengers in their own networks.

Tau Epsilon Omega Chapter, which serves the East Point and College Park, GA communities, recruited attendees, with a focus on those aged 40 and older. The Georgia Alliance team reached out to key partners to ask them to invite members of the community to attend and contacted previous attendees from the first installment of We the People. The event was hosted at the Tracey Wyatt Recreation Center in College Park, and participants were recruited on site with 53 in total attendance.

2.1 “Real or Fake?” Ice Breaker

For their first activity, the attendees were presented with four different statements that were read aloud by the facilitator. By a show of hands, the attendees were asked to distinguish between whether each statement was true or false. The statements were as follows:

1. Hand sanitizer will make you combust in the sun (FALSE).
2. The Biden Administration had the lowest level of Black unemployment in recorded U.S. history (TRUE).
3. McDonald's has created a bubblegum-flavored broccoli (TRUE).
4. Bald eagles are nearly extinct (FALSE).

2.2 Disinformation Defense Training

Disinformation 101 packets containing the training deck were distributed to the attendees. The facilitator guided attendees through the packet, beginning with the terminologies of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, as well as the fast-rising prevalence of social media and its contribution to the spread of misinformation. Next, the attendees learned about the Ad Fontes Bias Media Chart [2], which rates various media on their partisanship and analytical biases. They were encouraged to refer to this chart to gauge which sources are accurate.

The next phase of the training focused on specific tools to combat disinformation while in conversation, particularly in-person conversations. Attendees were taught the concept of the pink elephant paradox, which suggests that repeating false or misleading information can inadvertently spread the misinformation. The attendees were advised to instead respond with a statement of truth. We provided an example: “The sky is always red.” The more effective response would be, “the sky is usually blue” as opposed to “the sky is not always red.” This introduced the concept of the “truth sandwich,” which argues that an effective way to respond to misinformation is to state the truth, qualify what the person said (without repeating it), and end the response reaffirming the truth. Reusing the statement, “The sky is always red,” one might say, “The sky is usually blue. There are definitely times when the sky is a lot of different colors throughout the day, but the sky is usually blue.”

The attendees were then introduced to the seed of doubt concept to be used for misinformation spreaders that are not open to seeing their own beliefs as

misinformation. This concept argues that merely suggesting to the person that their beliefs may not be accurate can encourage the person to question their sources of information and eventually lead themselves to the truth.

Next, attendees were given advice on two situations. The first involved individuals spreading misinformation who believe their sources to be accurate. The second was a scenario where the individual combating misinformation is underinformed about the subject at hand. The seed of doubt was encouraged in both situations. In the second scenario, we advised attendees to acknowledge that they aren't well-informed on the subject of the possible misinformation. Throughout most of the training, we reminded attendees that we are all prone to misinformation and that we probably all currently believe something that is not true. Because of this reality, it was advised that they engage in conversations with empathy and the understanding that no one wants to feel unintelligent.

2.3 Improvised Conversations

For the purposes of practicing the taught disinformation defense tactics, attendees participated in an acting exercise where each person was paired and given scenarios in which one person inherited a character that believes in a conspiracy theory and the other inherited a character that wanted to combat that theory. The pairs were encouraged to decide on a familial relationship with each other. The instructions were for each pair (which consisted of one person aged 40 and over and another under 40) to receive one envelope which contained two red cards and two green cards. Each person was to take one red and one green card (which were labeled by their age group). One person's red card (the conspiracy theory believer) corresponded with the other person's green card (the disinformation defender). The conspiracies chosen were meant to be obviously false or have no real factual evidence to avoid any hostility from the attendees that could lead to the program's derailment.

The instructions on the red card listed the conspiracy theory, where the person heard it, how deeply they believe it, and what they want from the conversation. The green card's instructions listed what theory the other person believes, the truth that is contrary to the theory, what this person wants out of the conversation, and what tactics they should use to get what they want (such as the truth sandwich or seed of doubt). After receiving the envelope, the attendees were given four minutes to act out their scenes with each other and two minutes to debrief on how the conversation went. The process then began again for a second round of conversations with their other card.

2.4 Pre- and Post-event Survey

Attendees scanned a QR code to access and complete an online pre- and post-event survey which included the following questions.

Pre-event Survey.

1. How much power do you feel that your vote has to make change on the problems in your community, even if you haven't voted recently? Rate on a scale from 0–10.
 - A lot of power (8–10)
 - Some power (6–7)

- Neutral (5)
 - Not a lot of power (3–4)
 - Not powerful at all (0–2)
2. Did you vote in the November 2024 presidential election?
 - Yes
 - No
 3. [YES] Why was it important to you to vote in 2024? (open-ended)
 4. [NO] What stopped you from voting? (open-ended)
 5. Are you aware of this year's elections? In November, there will be elections for Mayor & city council positions in Atlanta, College Park, and East Point. Additionally, the Public Service Commission will be adding two new commissioners, as voted on by you. The Public Service Commission sets utility rates and regulates Georgia Power.
 6. On a scale of 0–10, how would you rate the importance of municipal elections, with 0 being “not important at all,” and 10 being “extremely important.”
 7. On a scale of 0–10, how likely are you to vote in the November 4, 2025 municipal and Public Service Commission elections, with 0 being “not likely at all,” and 10 being “extremely likely.”
 8. On a scale of 0–10, how good are you at deciphering real information from disinformation, with 0 being “not good at all,” and 10 being “very good.”
 9. How are you educating yourself about local, state and federal politics and current events?
 - Friends and family
 - Other people in your life (coworkers, neighbors)
 - Social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, etc.
 - Alternative media sources such as podcasts, streamers, group message apps
 - Mainstream television or radio media (CNN, MSNBC, FOX News)
 - Newspapers or magazines
 10. What is your age?
 - 18–24
 - 25–29
 - 30–39
 - 40–49
 - 50–65
 - 65+
 11. Which of the following best represents how you think of yourself?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Genderqueer/other

12. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
 - 12th grade or below, no high school diploma
 - High school graduate/diploma or equivalent
 - Some college but no degree
 - Associate's degree
 - Bachelor's degree
 - Master's degree
 - Professional degree (e.g., MD, DDS, JD)
 - Doctorate
13. What is your zip code? (open-ended)

Post-event Survey.

1. How much power do you feel that your vote has to make change on the problems in your community, even if you haven't voted recently? Rate on a scale from 0–10.
 - A lot of power (8–10)
 - Some power (6–7)
 - Neutral (5)
 - Not a lot of power (3–4)
 - Not powerful at all (0–2)
 - Don't know/refused
2. On a scale from 0–10, how good are you at deciphering real information from disinformation, with 0 being “not good at all,” and 10 being “very good.”
3. What is one thing you learned today? (open-ended)
4. Did you feel listened to and heard?
 - Yes, quite a lot
 - Yes, a little
 - Unsure
 - No, not much
 - No, not at all
5. On a scale of 0–10, how would you rate this event?

3 Preliminary Outcomes

The event was well-received by attendees. They actively participated in each planned activity and engaged with the subject matter thoroughly. The survey administered at the end of the event confirmed that both generations felt heard and empowered to speak their minds.

3.1 “Real or Fake?” Impressions

Each statement received mixed perceptions on their accuracy, with attendees indicating that their answers were guided by their knowledge, lack of knowledge, expectations,

and lived experience around the statement's subject matter. For example, multiple attendees said that their answers regarding statement three were guided by their expectations for McDonald's market audience. For statement four, one attendee attributed his knowledge to the fact that he often sees bald eagles near his home, which implied to him that eagles must not be near extinction. The facilitator noted how easily false information can be believed and true information can be discounted, which led to the disinformation defense training.

3.2 Disinformation Defense Training Impressions

The attendees were engaged throughout the training, often maintaining eye contact and reacting to much of what they heard. They were invested in the suggested tools of combatting disinformation and seemed eager to try the tools out for themselves. The opportunity to practice these tools was offered in the final activity of this event: improvised conversations.

3.3 Improvised Conversations Impressions

Once the group reconvened afterwards to discuss the exercise, most of the attendees expressed elation from the experience. Many praised their partner's commitment to character and their own abilities to commit to imaginary circumstances. They also reflected on which tactics were easier or harder to initiate on the spot. Most people who commented noted that the seed of doubt tactic was the easiest to initiate, and the truth sandwich arose as the more difficult tactic to do naturally. One attendee, over 40, commented on how the conspiracy theory she received was similar to a theory that she already believed, so it made it easier to get into character, and the defense tactics used on her had legitimate effects to her ways of thinking around that conspiracy, encouraging her to be less prone to theories like this and further educate herself on possible misinformation before believing them. Another attendee, under 40, commented on how she tended to be uninterested in engaging in disinformation defense with people because she saw it as a waste of time, but after the activities, she felt more motivated to intervene with disinformation spreaders.

3.4 Survey Results

During the event, attendees took a survey upon arriving and completed the survey upon departure. Out of the 53 attendees, 20 (just under forty percent) took both surveys.

All 20 respondents voted in the 2024 presidential elections. Answers related to why it was important to vote in 2024 included:

- To make a difference in the country or their community (ten respondents)
- To make their voice heard (four respondents)
- To influence specific issues like education reform, the economy, climate policy, civil rights, healthcare, and global leadership (four respondents)
- To have officeholders that reflected the values and beliefs they hold (four respondents)
- To uphold their civic duty, referencing their ancestors fighting for the right to vote (four respondents)

One respondent wrote that they voted “because every vote matters. We need to participate in the development of our communities and have people making the decisions that mirror our morals and values.”

Attendees were asked how they educate themselves about politics and current events. The top three sources of information were mainstream television or radio media, social media networks, and friends and family (Fig. 1).

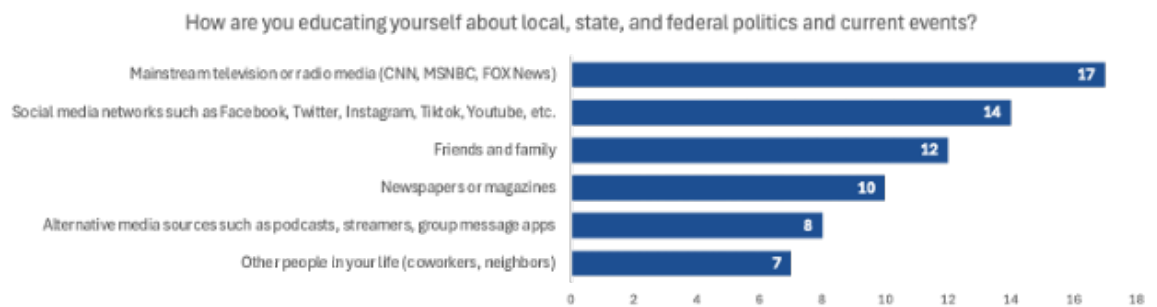


Fig. 1. Sources attendees use to educate themselves about local, state, and federal politics and current events (self-reported, n = 20).

Attendees were asked how much power they feel their vote has to change the problems in their community on a scale of 0–10 at the beginning and end of the event. At the beginning of the event, attendees rated their vote power at a 7.4. The average for those under 40 was 6.6, and the average for those over 40 was 7.9. By the end of the event, all numbers rose. The overall average increased by 1.25 points to a new rating of 8.7 out of 10. The average for those under 40 increased by 1.3 points to 7.9. The average for those over 40 increased by 1.2 points to a 9.1.

Attendees were also asked “How good are you at deciphering real information from disinformation?” on a scale ranging from 0–10 with 0 being “not good at all” and 10 being “very good.” The average response was 7.75 amongst attendees at the start of the event. The average response amongst attendees below 40 at the start of the event was 7.57. Respondents aged 40 and above had a slightly higher average at 7.85. At the end of the event, the average response was 7.9 amongst attendees. The average rating of respondents under 40 increased to 7.86 post-event. The average rating for respondents who were 40 and above increased to 9.08.

These results showcase the usefulness of voter education. When we inform voters about disinformation and arm them with the tools to combat it in their everyday lives, voters feel more empowered to engage others in civic conversations. One attendee spoke to this, saying: “By being both the promoter and debunker of information, I learned that it is easy to pass and make people believe misinformation and disinformation which can be crafted to seem believable. Critical thinking and fact checking are essential to bringing out the truth. This exercise also showed me how persuasive false narratives can be and how powerful it is to challenge them with the truth.” With the prevalence of disinformation in our society, we hope that the spread of these tools will have a ripple effect on perceptions of power.

At the end of the event, we asked attendees what they learned. Thirteen attendees highlighted the tactics and strategies to combat disinformation. Three attendees spoke

to the difference between misinformation and disinformation while another three spoke to the need to be a good listener when combatting disinformation.

Attendees were asked if they felt listened to and heard during this event. Nearly all reported they felt listened to either a lot (15 attendees) or a little (four attendees). The attendees were also asked to rate this event between 0–10, with 0 being “not good” and 10 being “very good.” We received a rating of 9.7 out of 10.

4 Conclusion

Disinformation is varied in its content, targets, and mediums. Our research began as observations of racialized online disinformation narratives and actors, and it has evolved into observing the effects these narratives have on people in real life and testing different ways to combat them. Our latest test, the disinformation defense training within our We the People Event Series, explored the effects of disinformation training on people who are constantly affected by disinformation itself. As we have seen with disinformation's ability to dissuade Black voters from the polls, we found through this study that arming them with ways to protect themselves from disinformation can increase their perception of their vote power, which our prior research suggests may result in higher voter turnout. Though this was a small, unrandomized study with likely voters, which increases the potential for response bias, the findings provide legitimate exploratory evidence of the potential relationship between disinformation defense training and perceptions of vote power. Future experimentation will build on these findings over the coming months by replicating and broadening the test across race, geography, education, voter propensity, and other forms of identity. The We the People Event tested in College Park, Georgia acts as a roadmap to what is possible for combatting the ever-evolving online disinformation landscape with offline intervention methods.

References

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