Mitigating Harms From Crisis Events: Elections

POLARIZATION & EXTREMISM RESEARCH & INNOVATION LAB
SCHOOL of PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Manipulation and Harmful Narratives Surrounding the SAVE America Act

Crisis Background

On February 11, 2026, the U.S. House of Representatives passed S. 1383, the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility (SAVE) Act – widely referred to as the SAVE America Act. The SAVE America Act, a broad election overhaul bill that has been hotly contested, would require every American to present documentary proof of U.S. citizenship when registering to vote and when voting in federal elections. Since mid-March, the legislation has been under Senate debate – and top of mind for President Donald Trump heading into the 2026 midterms.

The bill has also been discussed extensively online, with the most extreme discourse advancing Great Replacement Theory rhetoric, a racist and antisemitic conspiracy of supposed white replacement. In this context, posters suggest that political elites are deliberately importing migrants to dilute white voters' power. Online discourse also incorporated "us vs. them" framing that casts President Donald Trump as the last legitimate federal official and U.S. Senators (including Republicans) as a traitorous "them." Persistent invocations of debunked 2020 "stolen election" claims and "illegals" committing election fraud have also been common in online conversations and serve to further manufacture insecurity about the 2026 midterms.

Themes: Harmful Narratives

One of the key manipulation techniques used in discourse surrounding election fraud is **scapegoating**. Great Replacement Theory narratives often scapegoat migrants for supposedly undermining the voting power and economic security of white American citizens. For example, one poster argued for the necessity of the SAVE America Act because "Your kids will never buy a home. It was given away to illegals." This redirects public frustration about the economy, via election integrity, onto a specific vulnerable population, framing their presence as an "invasion."

Some users also asserted that additional executive power is needed to "meaningfully" reform and secure elections. This argument rests upon a **us vs. them dichotomy**, in which users align with the president as the sole protector of the public and position senators, both Republicans and Democrats, as adversaries. As one poster threatened, "Treason is a crime punishable by death. Pass the (SAVE ACT) now. America has no use for a traitor or Democrat wearing a red shirt." This type of violently polarized rhetoric further erodes trust in public institutions and elevates threats of violence against all politicians.

Conspiracy theories further assert that hidden, powerful groups are orchestrating illegal voting schemes to steal the 2026 midterms. These claims have no basis in factual evidence and instead rely upon fear of institutional corruption. For example, one poster suggested that Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R-SD) is "part of the deep state." This conspiracy suggests, in part, that elections are rigged by deep state actors, often by using "illegal voters" and supposed election fraud.

Word Cloud of Common Terms in Sample Posts Related to SAVE America Act

This word cloud visualizes prominent terms found in the qualitative sample of posts related to the SAVE America Act. Posts ranged from January to March of 2026 and were identified using key term searches related to the SAVE America Act. The terms "SAVE," "act," and "vote/voter" were removed from the sample, as well as "stop words" (e.g., and, or, a, the, he, she, I, etc.), since they were found in almost every post. The larger a word is, the more prominent it was. Notably, Democrat, Republican, Trump, Senate, illegal, and border were all prominent.

Preventing Manipulation

PERIL's evidence-based research shows that teaching about manipulative tactics is more effective than counterarguing with facts. A common starting point is to point out manipulation as a tactic of bad actors who are trying to persuade you. In addition, these three tactics can be addressed directly through evidence-informed responses:

Conspiracy theories can be reduced by fostering critical thinking, engaging in empathetic communication, and providing education on digital literacy.

Scapegoating can be addressed by speaking out against the unjust targeting of groups, building alliances with other communities to enhance solidarity, and calling out discriminatory attitudes.

Us vs. them narratives can be mitigated by shifting focus from divisive labels to common goals while promoting empathy and shared interests.

PERIL analyzes harmful, salient, and fast-moving narratives to inform violence prevention. In this series, we highlight prevalent manipulation strategies that appear in the aftermath of common crises.
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