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Building Capacity to Use Social Media: How Election Officials Can Leverage Content Creation to Provide Accurate Voter Information

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This is one in a series of papers that are being published by the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard Kennedy School based on the findings of the Executive Session on Elections and Election Administration.

Executive Sessions are a convening of individuals of independent standing who take joint responsibility for rethinking and improving society's responses to an issue. The Executive Session on Elections and Election Administration is a three-year program that brings leading election officials from across the country and political spectrum together with scholars and well informed "others" to discuss the long-term challenges they confront and how to address them.

The Ash Center advances excellence and innovation in democracy through research, education, and public discussion. Additional information about the Ash Center is available at ash.harvard.edu.

The Ash Center Program on Democracy and the Informed Public advances research and policy solutions to help understand how individuals can access reliable, actionable information.

Executive Summary

Content creators play a growing role as information sources in today's society. As Americans continue to struggle with accessing reliable election information, we recommend that local election officials explore creator partnerships to bridge this gap. This paper outlines creators' influence as news sources, identifies the types of creators best suited for these partnerships, provides a framework for how offices can successfully connect with them and offers suggestions for how election officials can create their own social media content in ways that will reach new audiences.

Introduction

Fewer Americans are getting news and information from traditional news sources like newspapers and television. In part, this is

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because they have lost faith in "legacy" media; according to Gallup polling,[1] half of Americans had a "great deal" or "fair amount" of trust in mass media in 2005, but that figure has fallen by nearly half, to 28%, two decades later.

In its place, social media has emerged as an increasingly popular source of news and information, bringing with it profound implications for our democracy. While many view this shift as a problem to be solved, the reality is that Americans are getting their civic information online, and they will continue to do so. The question then becomes what experts (in our case, state and local election officials) can do to ensure the information voters receive is accurate, accessible, and trustworthy.

Active intervention is necessary to ensure reliable information reaches voters, especially on social media platforms, where the Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review found that algorithms encourage passive news consumption rather than active searching for trustworthy sources.[2] The need for proactive outreach is particularly urgent for young adults. In fact, a Pew Research Center study found that 70% of them report getting news simply because they "happen to come across it."[3] But what should that intervention look like?

This paper starts to answer this question by exploring how state and local election officials can understand and leverage the content creator landscape to spread election information online. First, it outlines the social media news landscape and identifies how content creators fit into it. Then, it establishes the need for experts to step into this space and looks at how positive partnerships with creators can be formed and fostered, as well as existing models for doing so. Finally, it concludes with suggestions for how state and local election officials can most effectively create their own content without partnering with existing creators.

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The Landscape

A look at the numbers reveals the growing influence of social media creators. For instance, a 2023 Goldman Sachs report projects the creator economy will be worth $480 billion by 2027,[4] and an Axios report found that the number of full-time content creators was 1.5 million in 2024,[5] a 7.5-fold increase from 2020. Additionally, 2025 research from Pew found that digital devices are the most popular source of information,[6] with over half of adults getting news from them, compared to 32% for television and 7% for print newspapers and magazines. A separate 2025 Pew fact sheet found that 53% of U.S. adults get news from social media at least sometimes[7] with 21% saying they do so regularly. These figures are highest across younger generations. For instance, 2023 research from Morning Consult found that 63% of Gen Z turns to social media for their news at least once a week.[8]

Reporters and news organizations have brought their journalism online in an attempt to share the same stories on social media that they do in print or on television. Fox News,[9] CNN,[10] and MSNOW each have over 7 million followers on their TikTok accounts alone,[11] and many individual journalists affiliated with these outlets have tens of thousands of their own followers—if not more.[12] Still, "traditional" journalism translated online has not been the only way information reaches users, particularly for those less likely to follow the news closely in any format.

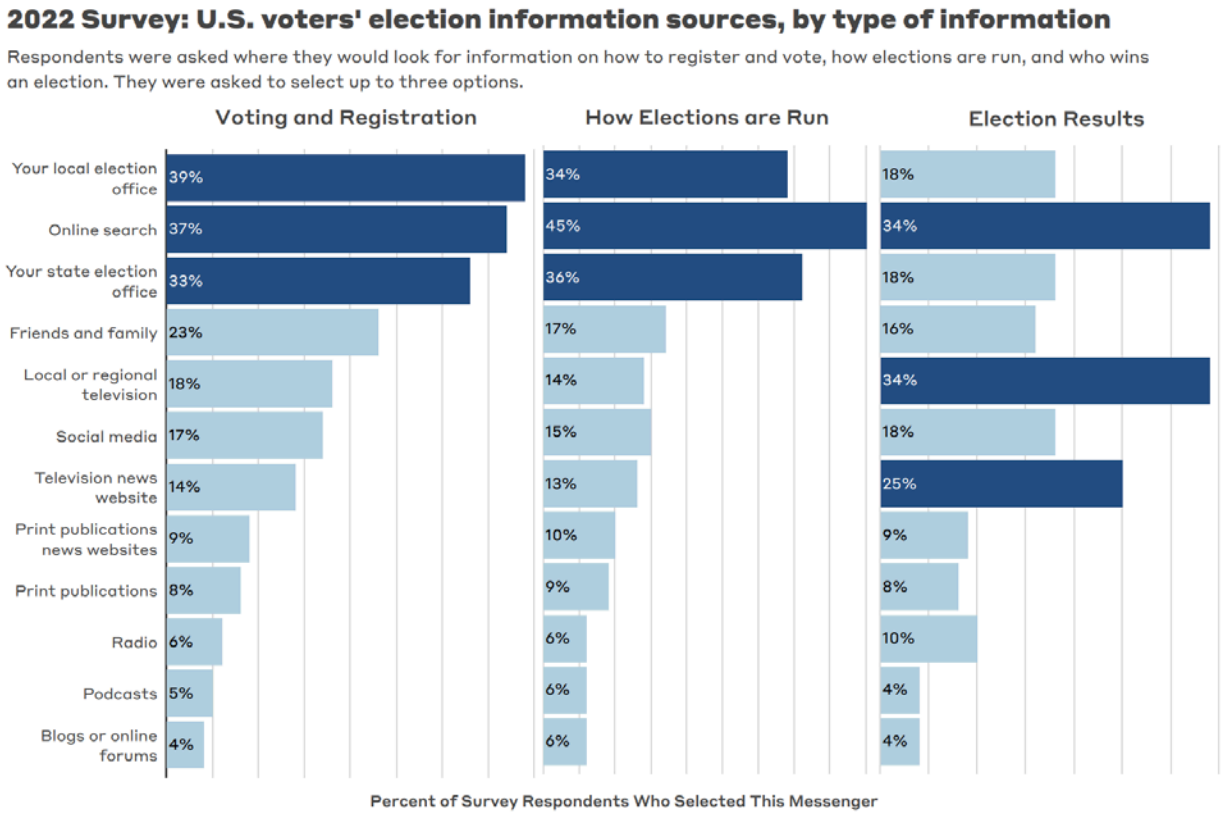
Instead, unaffiliated content creators have emerged as news sources in their own right, reaching citizens who might not otherwise interact with traditional media, whether in print or online. These creators' approach to sharing news and information spans the gamut: some report on daily headlines from behind a desk, while others share information as they apply makeup or try a new coffee in the passenger seat of their car. Such creators may focus on different interests such as sports, cooking, or travel, mentioning public issues only occasionally. In these instances, audiences are exposed to news just incidentally.

What remains constant, however, is the importance of a creator's perceived relatability. Unlike brands, institutions, or legacy media outlets, content creators cultivate relationships with their audience that feel authentic and human—much like that of a friend. Researchers call these "parasocial relationships." Followers don't consume a creator's content like they do a television show; instead, they feel connected to the creator and their message in a more personal way. A 2024 report from the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy found that creators' personal connections with their audience foster trust in a way that traditional media cannot.[13] In contrast, trust in journalists has eroded, with 2025 Pew research finding that only 43% of American adults are confident that journalists will act in the public's best interests.[14]

While journalists must develop their expertise—through research, sourcing, and verification—largely behind the scenes of a story, creators operate in a far less opaque environment. As a result, they replace traditional signals of expertise, like degrees or accreditations, with lived experience, speaking to realities they know personally and inviting their audiences to relate. For instance, a newsroom reporter may be assigned to cover a labor union strike in their city, but a member of that union can make a video after a day on the picket line, giving their followers direct updates on their contract negotiations. In the context of elections, a local election official's knowledge can be complemented by a creator's experience as a citizen who has gone through the registration and voting process. Content of this nature might feature a retelling of their experience registering to vote after moving and the information they learned that aided the process.

The same Shorenstein Center report noted that creators, like traditional journalists, operate in low-trust online environments. But while people hold creators and journalists to different standards, creators ultimately even the playing field by building trust with their audiences as individuals. Moreover, unlike a journalist who ties their credibility to an established outlet with vigorous reporting standards, creators have more of a burden to explain and defend their expertise. This dynamic often makes them more likely to engage with critics, answer questions, and provide overt transparency about how they found their information. By contrast, traditional journalists frequently fall back on an assumed faith in newsroom standards and training. Furthermore, though few content creators have direct experience in the specific field of election work, they are all citizens and, ideally, voters themselves, who can—and do—speak to their firsthand identities as Americans to relay authenticity.

Still, according to Pew,[15] social media is often the source of misinformation and may spread false information to a greater extent than traditional outlets. This underscores the importance of disseminating as much correct nonpartisan information through these channels as possible.



Source: Research from the Bipartisan Policy Center

Furthermore, research from the Bipartisan Policy Center shows that local election officials are the most trusted source for information on registration and among the most trusted sources for how elections are run.[16] These findings suggest that while the knowledge of these offices is highly valued, reaching voters remains challenging.

Disseminating Accurate Voting Information Through Content Creator Partnerships

Given that many Americans now consume news primarily via social media, it is important that election officials' expertise reaches these platforms. One way to achieve this is by working *with* content creators that have their own audience. Election officials can equip them with tools and information, including upcoming dates, deadlines, and voting logistics, to ensure they can successfully participate. This is especially important for reaching young voters who frequent social media. By doing so, local election officials can also help increase transparency into the electoral process and give creators the tools to help "pre-bunk" online rumors or misinformation.

Recent research has highlighted the effectiveness of pre-bunking efforts on social media. A new study published in the Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review,[17] for instance, found that pre-bunking emotionally manipulative content with an informative video significantly increased Instagram users' ability to correctly identify manipulation in a news headline. Better yet, the effect of the pre-bunking intervention persisted months

after it was given to the treatment group. Furthermore, a 2024 study by Lockhart et al. also highlights the effectiveness of pre-bunking in an electoral context.[18] The authors' survey of nearly 10,000 American adults revealed that while informing voters of longer-than-expected periods of vote counting decreases trust in elections, pre-bunking that news with an informative video on why these delays may occur mitigates their hesitancy.

Applying these findings to the social media space, creators can partner with election officials to proactively head off the impact of misleading content with accurate information and links to credible sources from an election official's office.

There are existing models for these types of partnerships. For years, brands and institutions have worked with content creators to leverage their audience relationships in order to promote products and causes in a personal yet direct way. All the qualities that make creators such ideal intermediaries for selling material products—trust, authenticity, and relatability—also make them ideal messengers for sharing ideas and information.

Increasingly, political groups and NGOs are using social media to share messages and information. For example, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which represents roughly 2 million workers, has fostered relationships with creators online and at in-person events. In 2024, they hosted a summit at which workers and digital creators came together to share resources, collaborate, and lift each other's voices online, ultimately accumulating 8.8 million impressions on the event's hashtag.[20]

While there are many benefits to creator partnerships, as outlined above, it's equally important to recognize the many costs associated with this kind of work. From an election official's perspective alone—setting aside concerns creators might have about creating

The Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health has hosted a Creator Program since 2023 that serves as a useful model to consider.[19] The program has brought together a cohort of creators who post about public health or are interested in doing so and connects them with key resources from the Chan School. Leaders of the group host an ongoing series of expert briefings, hold periodic in-person summits at Harvard, and develop toolkits on individual topics to help creators post quality public health information.

Research into the program's activities found the use of toolkits to be particularly effective. To come to this finding, the team conducted a field experiment in conjunction with a program for mental health influencers on TikTok.[21] Influencers who participated in the program received evidence-based digital toolkits covering five mental health topics such as barriers to accessing care, intergenerational trauma, and climate anxiety. Approximately half of the influencers who received the toolkits were also invited to a series of virtual forums. Compared to a control group, the creators who received the toolkits were three percent more likely to incorporate evidence-based content into their videos, which translated into 800,000 views. The creators' additional participation in the virtual forums did not result in a discernable difference, highlighting the high impact of a low-cost, scalable approach.

content they might incorrectly perceive to be political—this work requires resources. Time, money, and knowledge about disclosures, trends, and scripting are some of the main requirements. Additionally, election officials might have concerns about which creators they partner with and the risk of being associated with other messages shared on a creator's profile. Ultimately, while these concerns and considerations are valid, we still believe that thoughtful collaborations with creators are enormously beneficial and necessary to reach audiences otherwise uncaptured by current methods of information dissemination.

What We Know About How to Partner with Content Creators

Selecting the Right Creators to Work With

For the purposes of this paper, picking a content creator (interchangeable with "influencer" here) is not just a matter of choosing someone with a follower count of a certain size. It is vital to consider how they share their content: they must share it publicly, regularly, and intentionally. Thus, under this definition, someone who posts to a *private* Instagram account of 5,000 followers would not be considered a content creator; however, someone who frequently posts to a public account with 500 followers to deliberately engage with that audience would be.

Content creators come in all shapes and sizes, but a 2025 study by Christian von Sikorski et al. details three helpful spectrums by which they can generally be sorted in the context of sharing political and/or social messages:[22] (1) density of political content, (2) presentation style (opinion vs. facts-based), and (3) political content proximity (how close the content is to an ideology, politician, goal, etc.). The table below presents the categorization of creators across these criteria:

SMI-Type	Density of Political Content	Presentation Style of Political Content	Proximity of Political Content to Political Actors, Institutions, and Ideologies
The Non-political Influencer	Not applicable, as no political content is disseminated	Not applicable	No proximity
The Lifestyle-Based Sporadic Political Influencer	Low density of political information	Ostensibly fact-based and opinion-based presentation style	No proximity or low proximity
The Lifestyle-Based Politically Engaged Influencer	Moderate density of political information	Ostensibly fact-based and opinion-based presentation style	Low to moderate proximity
The Political Mediator and Educational Influencer	High density of political information	Primarily (ostensibly) fact-based	No proximity or low proximity
The Ideological Political Influencer	Moderate-to-high density of political information	Primarily opinion-based with the presentation of ostensibly fact-based, ideologically consistent information	Moderate to close proximity, but primarily no direct funding from political actors and institutions
The Political AstroTurf Influencer	Moderate-to-high density of political information	Primarily opinion-based with the presentation of ostensibly fact-based, ideologically consistent information	Undisclosed close proximity to full organizational and financial dependence

Given the goal of reaching low-information voters, the best creators to work with as a local election official are those in the first two categories: the Non-Political Influencer and the Lifestyle-Based Sporadic Political Influencer. These types of creators are defined by an audience who:

1. Already trusts the creator about something other than politics, such as sports, fitness, or general lifestyle content.
2. Is less partisan or politically engaged than the audience of a creator who posts about politics at a moderate or high density.
3. Is more trusting of micro- and niche creators than they are of large creators. This is corroborated by a 2021 Forbes report,[23] which found "stronger relationships built on expertise and trust" with micro-influencers than larger creators. Because smaller creators serve "more niche audiences," the report claims, they "provide access to a small subset of a targeted demographic."

For instance, a local creator based in Phoenix, who posts about their family and Arizona sports, may attract an audience of other parents and state residents that typical election messaging may not have reached, even online. Additionally, their ability to tailor the delivery of election messaging to their audience in a way that is most authentic to them can increase engagement with and internalization of the content. The key is not to focus on *how many* people a creator can reach (measured mainly through follower count), but *who* they are reaching and who is engaging the most with the content (measured by post interactions and content type).

A real-world example is Candice Nguyen, a Philadelphia-based lifestyle creator who posts about nails, travel, and sports. In May 2026, Nguyen published a video about voting in Pennsylvania's primary elections,[24] recording clips of her in-person experience to show her followers how fast the process was. In the caption, she provided timing information on how to vote that day. While she rarely posts about politics and made no specific references to candidates or issues, her video gained a similar number of views to her usual content.

Beyond showing how a lifestyle creator can adapt their content to foster civic participation in a nonpartisan way, Nguyen exemplifies a trust-building model of seeking and sharing information at which creators excel. Rather than just telling her audience how to vote, she walked them through the exact process, showing what it looks like and how long it takes. Again, this speaks to creators' potential role as information sources over traditional mediums; they excel at showing, not telling, and they build trust with their viewers by doing so.

Matt Todd, host of "The Ranch Podcast," is another example.[25] In 2022, Todd launched a podcast studio and began producing episodes about life in Idaho. Along the way he occasionally started inviting many local and state leaders on as guests to join him. "The Ranch Podcast," like many other podcasts, has also amassed a social media following, including 7,000 followers on TikTok, by posting full and clipped videos of episode recordings.[26] Recently, Todd hosted Idaho's secretary of state as a guest.

Creator Incentives

This paper has already introduced what local election officials stand to gain from working with content creators. But what about the creators themselves? Amanda Yarnell, senior director of the Harvard T.H. Chan School

of Public Health's Center for Health Communication, shared with us that creators who partner with election offices might see three nonmonetary benefits: community, solidarity, and verified information.

On the first two points, creators brought together by local election officials can build relationships with other aligned creators they may not have otherwise met. By finding community with other civic-minded peers, a creator can experience a sense of solidarity that fuels their work and makes the process feel more collective than individualistic. Regarding verified information, providing creators with high-quality information gives them material for posts, easing the pressure to constantly verify, produce, and post new content.

While providing monetary incentives may be an option, it is important to note that even with sufficient resources to do so, election officials and creators need to be mindful of any legal requirements around disclosures of payments.

What to Do

Creating Toolkits and Briefings

A simple first step election officials can take to engage with creators is making a creator toolkit: a consolidated set of resources that distills their knowledge into what a creator needs to accurately share an election official's message via image and video content. Toolkits are always unique to the mission but are designed in an easy-to-read, digestible format that—like a resume—condenses relevant facts, talking points, and posting instructions into one or two pages.

Importantly, toolkits *do not* dictate the types of videos creators should post. Just as a journalist's North Star is their editor, a creator's North Star is their audience. Creators know their followers best and understand how to integrate information authentically. Instead, a toolkit's purpose is to give creators the necessary information to seamlessly work a factual message into their content while allowing for creativity in the editorial process.

Erin Strenio of Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center created a toolkit template for election administrators to use and adapt to their jurisdiction.[25]

Election officials can find the elements of a successful creator toolkit for video content by looking at the one developed by our colleagues at the Harvard Chan School as part of their program to partner with content creators about public health information. It includes the following:[26]

- Headline and subtext
  - Depending on the contents of the briefing, this could take a few different forms, including a tagline, title, or hook. Generally, it should allow the creator to immediately know what the briefing is for and how the topic could be summarized in a sentence or two.
- Key figures/dates/facts
  - Pick 3–4 items that are most important for the audience to know. These could be dates for registration, key reminders of what to bring with you to the polls, or critical updates on ballot counting.
- Talking points
  - These facts should provide the substance for the rest of the video. You're not giving creators a script; instead, you're sharing important details that they will work naturally into their own styles. In other words, this is where to put the meat of the information you're trying to

share, expanding on the headlines and key takeaways already introduced.
- CTAs (calls to action)
  - It's always good to include actions for the viewer to take, whether that be registering to vote, finding their polling place, or something else.
- Resources
  - These can include links a creator can put in the comments or integrate into their profile to facilitate the CTA or provide additional information to the viewer.
- Logistics
  - At the end of the briefing, it's helpful to include any logistics that might be useful to the creator, such as good hashtags to use, any necessary partnership disclosures, and/or timing for posting the video.

In addition to the typical PDF or Word document, toolkits can take the form of slideshows, provided the content remains concise. It can be helpful to think of toolkits as a transfer of expertise, where the author is distilling their knowledge so a creator can adapt it to the kind of content they believe is best. The Shorenstein toolkit provides an example of a slideshow-based toolkit for local election officials to customize for creators in their jurisdiction.

Another useful toolkit to look at is the Vote Early Day toolkit, which is another example of how election information can be organized into a toolkit format. This toolkit features many of the elements of a successful toolkit outlined above, including resources, talking points, key dates, and logistics helpful to creators.

Briefings and in-person summits can also play an important supplemental role in fostering community among an established cohort of creators. Briefings are typically digital gatherings that share the same information as toolkits but in an interactive way. Though hard to schedule and more time-consuming for organizers and attendees than a toolkit, they offer added community benefits through guest hosts and Q&A sessions.

After a recent in-person summit for their Creator Program, researchers at the Harvard Chan School wrote a follow up article that contained qualitative data collected from attendees about their experience at the event.[27] Findings showed that creators had largely positive takeaways. They reported that the summit "gave them new content they could use, taught them how to better frame their content, and helped them understand how to search for evidence-based information to share with their audiences." With respect to their identities as creators, respondents revealed that the summit also showed them how to play a bigger role in public health, "heightened their sense of responsibility toward their audience," and cultivated community among fellow creators.

How to Connect

Do Your Own Research

Given sufficient resources, an election official's staff may be able to identify and conduct direct outreach to appropriate creators. Nonetheless, it can be daunting to know where to start. Identifying which creators to work with and knowing how to make contact may not be considerations at the forefront of an election official's mind, though it's possible for those with the patience and available resources. In 2024, for instance, Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro's office invited roughly 50 content creators to an in-person Democracy Summer Camp event, where they gathered to learn and post about Pennsylvania voting and misinformation. Activities included panels,

speakers, and breakout sessions featuring a bipartisan group of experts and content creators to bridge the gap between the two fields.

Finding the right creators is work, but the Harvard T.H. Chan School created a possible recruitment model during their initial research into mental health creators.[28] First, they isolated the necessary criteria for participants in their study. Participants had to speak English, be over 18 years old, and post publicly rather than to a private group. They also had to have a sufficiently large reach, with a follower count above a certain threshold; post frequently about topics related to mental health; and have active accounts on TikTok for at least one year prior to the study period.

Next, the team used research assistants to employ "snowball sampling techniques" to build a specific list of creators. These included:

- Collecting word-of-mouth recommendations from community members.
- Finding top mental health creators and reviewing what creators they follow.
- Searching relevant hashtags on the topic, such as #mentalhealth and #selfcare.
- Browsing the "following" list of previously identified creators found through community recommendations.
- Collecting creators surfaced by TikTok's algorithm through searches.

Finally, research assistants manually reviewed the last six months of an identified creator's content for "red flags," such as videos that spread misinformation.

While the Chan School's study targeted creators who already spoke about a particular topic (in this case, mental health), local election officials should focus instead on non-political creators who focus on subjects highly relevant to the local community. This search methodology could be adapted to identify local creators whose audiences are more likely to capture those in an official's jurisdiction.

Use a Firm

Marketing agencies offering services that pair brands with creators, leveraging their ability to influence their followers' product choices, is nothing new. Recently, though, this concept has expanded from brands to causes, and new groups have formed specifically for the purpose of helping organizations, campaigns, and nonprofits cultivate creator relationships and outreach. These groups—or connective organizations, as this paper refers to them—are designed to match an election official's expertise with the creators best suited to deliver their message. They handle the entire process, including working with an office to determine a budget, drafting a creator list, and devising an outreach strategy to ensure the right message is reaching its target audience.

But while connective organizations are great options for offices with the resources, it's critical to note that they cost money, into the tens of thousands of dollars. Moreover, even when spending this much is an option, if disclosure is required, that may cause concerns among creators that they will jeopardize their credibility and appear inauthentic. This could not only dissuade some creators who are already wary of speaking about politics but can also foster distrust among their audience.

The Alternative: Do It Yourself and Create Your Own Content

Though this paper's primary recommendation is to encourage the cultivation of partnerships between local election officials and independent content creators, we do

not want to dissuade officials from becoming creators themselves. Surveys repeatedly show that people trust local election officials more than any other group involved in the elections process, with States United Democracy Center finding that six in 10 Americans have a great deal or fair amount of trust in state and local officials,[29] much higher than others in public life.

Creating an account and producing consistent content may seem daunting, but the posting process does not have to become burdensome for an office. As a starting ground, we recommend those interested focus on growing TikTok accounts, given the app's increasing influence as a news source (according to recent findings by Pew)[30] and low barrier to successful video creation.

The point is to direct people to your websites and to you for voter information as much as possible. Below, we have outlined helpful tips to approach content creation that encourage individuality, without stress:

1. **You never know what might go viral.** Even if it's your first post or you have only a handful of followers, TikTok is designed to amplify videos to hundreds of thousands of users. A 2022 Penn State University study found that the app's recommendation algorithm makes it easier for political videos,[31] in particular, to go viral, regardless of an account's following. This means offices should just start posting; you never know what might take off. For example, Secretary of the State Stephanie Thomas did not anticipate that her intern's post would end up being viewed 202,000 times.[32]
2. **High-quality content doesn't have to mean high production.** Video creation might seem like a daunting commitment from the outset, but users value authentic content. Recent research submitted to the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) shows that a low-production, face-to-camera video[33]—featuring speakers without established credibility—can significantly boost trust in election information, with effects comparable to high-production content. It's important to note that, while these findings highlight the power of authenticity, the extent to which creators *with* established credibility in the field further influence or mitigate this trust remains unclear. Still, these findings suggest that prioritizing authenticity and clarity may be just as important as investing in production value.
3. **The more, the merrier.** Simply put, the internet is filled with an enormous amount of misinformation, and having experts creating factual, reliable content cannot hurt—even if it doesn't reach absolutely everyone who needs to hear it. For those willing, taking the time to film a quick video walking through a polling place, explaining ballot tabulation, or discussing ID requirements can help dilute false claims with accurate ones. Furthermore, a 2021 investigation by The Wall Street Journal found that TikTok's algorithm recognizes types of content that users linger on or interact with and continues to promote it back to them;[34] that means those who express interest in election information will be fed more of it. This content doesn't need to be anything fancy—it just needs to be authentic. The impact of a single video should never be underestimated. Additionally, by maintaining a regular presence on social media and posting as much as possible, local election officials can continue to grow their presence on a platform that can be used to share critical

information during election cycles or times that necessitate pre-bunking efforts.

4. **Play to your strengths.** If a local election official has a young staffer or family member that they can delegate the technology and set-up to, then they can focus on what's happening in front of the camera. By doing what feels most comfortable for them—whether that be sitting down, talking directly to the camera, or incorporating light humor into a discussion about misinformation—officials position themselves for greater success. Ultimately, posting on social media should be seen as a marathon rather than a sprint; finding a consistent and sustainable content style and posting rhythm that is sustainable ought to be the paramount goal.

Conclusion

The rapid decline of trust in traditional news sources, coupled with the rising influence of creators, underscores the need for new methods to meet the public where they are. By creating pathways through toolkits and outreach, state and local election officials can bridge the gap between their expertise and creators' platforms, delivering vital information to populations who are often overlooked.

Precedents established at the Harvard Chan School provide a model for these types of partnerships, alongside prior creator outreach campaigns. While this paper introduced options available for identifying creators to work with, election officials should also feel empowered to create their own content.

Ultimately, and especially in an era of increasing artificially generated content, establishing connections with trusted, authentic online messengers is vital. By working with content creators—or becoming creators themselves—election officials can translate their expertise to new media platforms, leveraging these new modes of communication in ways beneficial to our democracy.

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