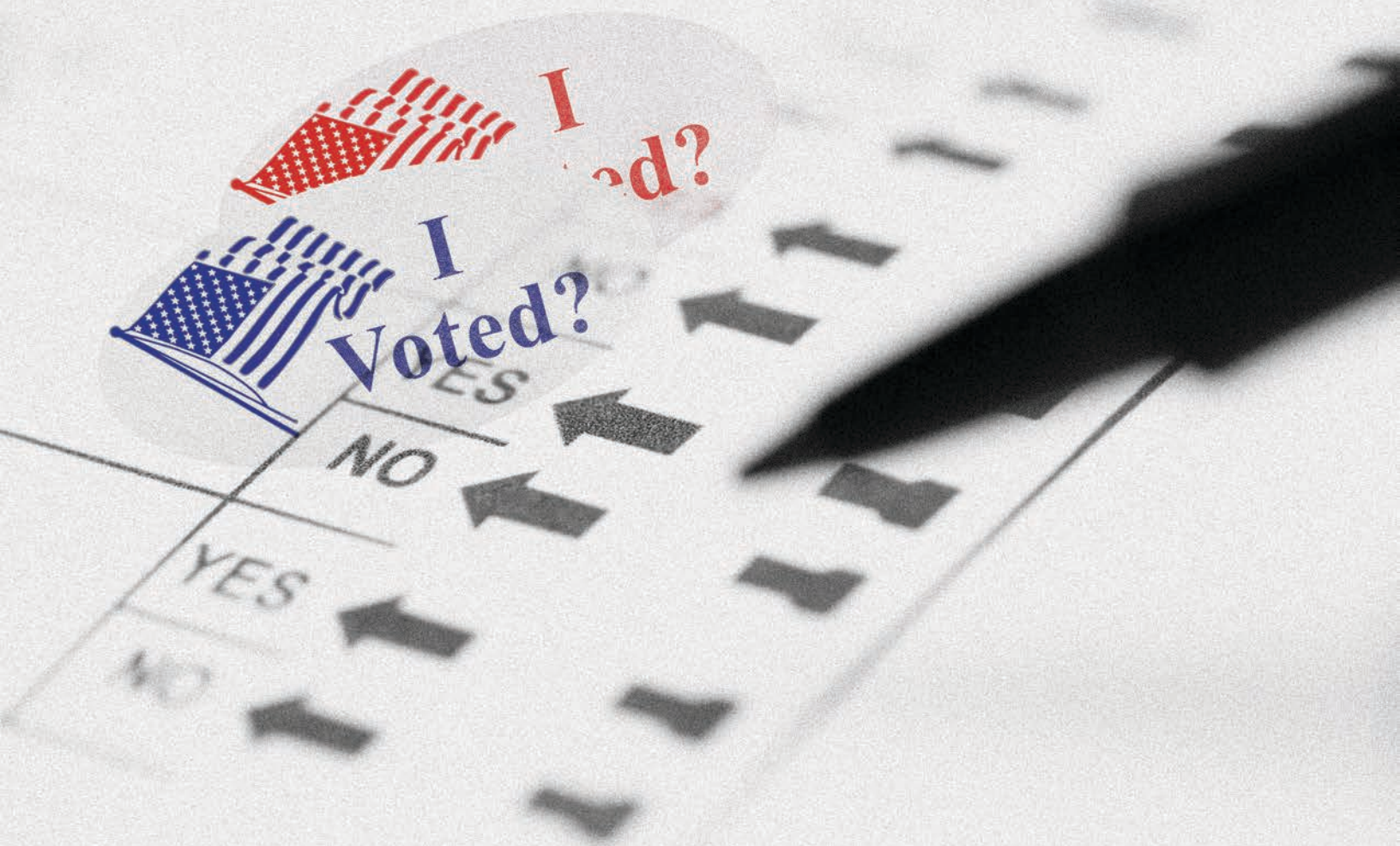


THREAT
ANALYSIS

•|||• Recorded Future®

By Insikt Group®

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HOAX IN THE MACHINE: Disinformation Against Voting Systems Manufacturers and Technologies in the 2022 US Midterm Elections



This report presents Recorded Future's insights and assessments on disinformation and influence efforts targeting United States (US)-deployed voting technologies up to, during, and in the aftermath of the 2022 midterms, including electronic voting systems, voting machines, and various Election Assistance Commission-approved software and hardware used in the administration of US elections at the local, state, and federal levels. While we acknowledge that voting technologies have faced a long history of criticisms in the US, we intentionally focus this report on election infrastructure disinformation and influence efforts generated between the 2020 general election and the 2022 midterm elections.

Executive Summary

Recorded Future has observed substantial evidence of misinformation and disinformation targeting voting systems manufacturers (VSMs) across both mainstream and alternative internet platforms ahead of the 2022 US midterm elections. Disinformation involving voting technologies intends to instill doubt in electoral results and distrust of the US electoral system broadly. The [key players](#) providing voting technologies for jurisdictions across the US remained largely the same between 2020 and 2022, and 2022 midterms-oriented disinformation is likely to continue to target those manufacturers who are already well-known: [Dominion Voting Systems](#), [Election Systems & Software](#), and [Smartmatic](#).

False claims are already circulating that voting technologies developed and deployed by these 3 well-known VSMs will be used to falsify the results of the midterms. Misinformation and disinformation targeting these companies will almost certainly continue to be generated from existing election denialist cohorts on the political right, though we expect a decrease in the intensity of such efforts when compared to the 2020 elections due to the absence of former president Donald Trump from the ballot in the 2022 midterm elections and because midterms elections typically garner less public attention than presidential elections. Additionally, it is likely that misinformation and disinformation surrounding voting technologies will be most prominent in jurisdictions that are facing particularly contentious races, such as the gubernatorial elections in Arizona and Pennsylvania and the Senate election in Georgia.

Key Judgments

- The VSMs most likely to be targeted by misinformation and disinformation following the 2022 midterms are Dominion Voting Systems, Smartmatic, and Election Systems & Software.
- Recorded Future has already identified claims across numerous facets of the mainstream and alternative social media landscape suggesting that technologies deployed by the aforementioned companies will be used to falsify the results of the midterms.
- Prominent political figures will almost certainly give voice to false information related to voting technologies in use for the 2022 midterms in counties in which their preferred candidate(s) lose the popular vote. This especially applies to those VSMs administering elections in jurisdictions with contentious races that are either highly publicized or in crucial swing states or jurisdictions.
- The vast majority of false information targeting VSMs is likely to originate from domestic sources in the US rather than from foreign influence. However, it is likely that foreign state-owned media organizations will amplify false claims to increase domestic distrust in US elections.
- We believe that while there will almost certainly be new disinformation efforts targeting VSMs following the 2022 midterms, the intensity of these claims will be lessened in comparison with the 2020 general election due to the absence of Donald Trump from the ballot and because midterm elections typically garner less public attention when compared to a general election.

Background

The 2022 US midterm election cycle faces targeted disinformation and influence efforts intended to instill doubt in electoral results and distrust of the US electoral system broadly. These efforts target every facet of the electoral process, including local, state, and federal authorities, political candidates, election administrators and poll workers, voting dates and methods, and VSMs and their technologies, the last of which is the focus for this report. Voting technologies have faced both [legitimate criticism](#) and misinformation and disinformation; disinformation often, but not always, builds on false claims made in works of misinformation.

Disinformation around voting technologies seeks to attack a foundational component of democracy: that the electorate decides who will represent them in government. Undermining this foundation poses a threat to the continuation of democratic norms and social stability. The US has faced this challenge at an extraordinary scale since the 2020 general election with the spread of “the Big Lie” theory, which is very likely to affect the 2022 midterm elections. The Big Lie refers to a theory, most popularly [asserted](#) by former president Donald Trump, that the 2020 election was “hacked”, “rigged”, and “stolen” by a variety of anti-Trump actors in order to engineer President Joe Biden’s electoral victory. The responsible culprits allegedly included powerful individuals like billionaire [George Soros](#) and the Clintons, nation-states like [Italy](#) and [Venezuela](#), poll workers like [Shaye Moss and Ruby Freeman](#), election administrators like Philadelphia’s [Al Schmidt](#), so-called “deep state” intelligence agencies like the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)¹ and the Central Intelligence Agency ([CIA](#)), and VSMs like those discussed in this report. The Big Lie is the primary conspiracy theory around which US election denialist conspiracy theories are framed, and the Big Lie was the primary catalyst that led to the insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

According to the US Election Assistance Commission (EAC), [11 registered voting systems manufacturers](#) meet the safety requirements laid out in the EAC’s [Testing and Certification Program Manual](#): (alphabetically) Avante International Technology, Inc., Clear Ballot Group, Inc., Dominion Voting Systems Corp., Election Systems & Software, Inc. (ES&S), Hart InterCivic, Inc., MicroVote General Corp., Smartmatic USA Corporation, Unisyn Voting Solutions, Vidaloop, Inc., Voterite, Inc. (dba Votrite), and VotingWorks. The US federal government does not endorse any particular voting manufacturer for use in state or federal elections and only provides guidelines for security and standardization protocols. Voting systems manufacturers create both software and hardware election administration tools, both of which have been discussed in various election denialist conspiracies.

This report focuses on the companies and manufacturers that have been, and are most likely to continue to be, the targets of disinformation in the lead-up to and aftermath of the 2022 US midterms. We base our likelihood assessment on our analysis of current trends in VSM-focused disinformation and the use of equipment or software from particular vendors in contentious elections across the US. On these grounds, we focus this research on disinformation targeting voting technologies from Dominion Voting Systems, ES&S, and Smartmatic USA. We also include a brief discussion of Scytl, a VSM that is not 1 of the 11 registered with the US EAC but that featured prominently in some of the most viral disinformation targeting voting technologies after 2020.

While no election jurisdiction is immune to VSM disinformation, some, because of their strategic political positions, are likely to be targeted more than others. The following states (and smaller election jurisdictions within them) are [most likely](#) to be the targets of continual VSM disinformation efforts: [Georgia](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Arizona](#), [Pennsylvania](#), [Nevada](#), and [Florida](#).

Disinformation Targeting Voting Systems Manufacturers

The following section documents viral misinformation and disinformation (of unknown origin) and directed disinformation campaigns (foreign and domestic) against the aforementioned VSMs within the last 2 years. At the time of writing, we expect that these manufacturers will continue to be targets of these existing and new misinformation and disinformation efforts before, during, and following the 2022 midterms, particularly in jurisdictions with histories of election denialism.

Because these manufacturers service elections in many countries around the world, some of the false information about them is focused on alleged international scandals. We include such instances in our research in acknowledgment of the multinational nature of malign influence attacks against VSMs that are intended to destabilize democracies.

Dominion Voting Systems

Dominion Voting Systems is perhaps the most well-known voting systems manufacturer to face election fraud accusations after 2020. As early as November 6, 2020, an [irregularity](#) in Antrim County, Michigan, initially resulted in the county being called for Biden instead of Trump by county election administrators. Though an audit revealed this to be due to [human error](#) (failure to update software components), rather than any software or hardware supplied by Dominion, and the county was correctly called for Trump in the end, viral [rumors](#) baselessly [alleged](#) that Dominion software was “intentionally and purposefully designed with inherent errors to create systemic fraud and influence election results”.

Dominion’s technology serviced 28 states in the 2020 election, and early denialists quickly wove the Antrim County miscount into a broader narrative of national election fraud. There is strong evidence, presented at the end of 2021 to the [Select Committee to Investigate the Jan. 6 Attack on the United States Capitol](#), to suggest that the intentional misrepresentation of Dominion voting technologies in Antrim County was part of a broader plan to discredit 2020 presidential election results, as laid out in a “[Strategic Communications Plan](#)” used by the “[Rudy] Giuliani Presidential Defense Team”.

Pseudo-legal documents and affidavits surfaced, authored by persons who claimed to have directly witnessed vote tampering or whose professional expertise allowed them to determine that digital fraud had taken place. One such example, a “forensics report” written by Bill Bailey and entered into an Antrim County lawsuit by election denialist lawyer Matthew DePerno, alleged that Dominion software was designed to “[generate] an enormously high number of ballot errors”². The claim was, and remains, a cornerstone of election denialist disinformation concerning both the 2020 and upcoming 2022 elections³. Former President Trump’s own claims of Dominion election fraud further secured the false narrative through the present day. On November 12, 2020, Trump [said on social media](#):

REPORT: DOMINION DELETED 2.7 MILLION TRUMP VOTES NATIONWIDE. DATA ANALYSIS FINDS 221,000 PENNSYLVANIA VOTES SWITCHED FROM PRESIDENT TRUMP TO BIDEN. 941,000 TRUMP VOTES DELETED. STATES USING DOMINION VOTING SYSTEMS SWITCHED 435,000 VOTES FROM TRUMP TO BIDEN. [@ChanelRion](#) [@OANN](#)

This early assertion of the Big Lie, one of the countless others that would emerge in the following weeks and months, received more than 186,000 shares. From it, and other claims of rigged Dominion software, the web of misinformation and disinformation branched across [mainstream](#) and [alternative](#) social media [platforms](#), news outlets⁴, [web forums](#), [conferences](#), [summits](#)⁵, and even on extremist platforms like the neo-Nazi website Stormfront⁶.

What to Expect for 2022 Midterms Concerning Dominion Voting Systems

Dominion Voting Systems frequently [refuted](#) “disinformation”, repeatedly denied all claims of election rigging, and filed defamation [suits](#) against Fox News, Newsmax Media, One America News, Mike Lindell, Sidney Powell, Patrick Byrne, and Rudy Giuliani. Despite enormous and ongoing efforts to [discredit](#) the vendor, Dominion voting technologies will service more than 1,200 election jurisdictions across the US in November 2022, according to [VerifiedVoting](#).

Recorded Future has surfaced false claims that Dominion technologies will be purposefully rigged for the 2022 midterms across most major facets of mainstream and alternative media, including [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Telegram](#), [Gab](#), [Patriots\[.\]win](#), and [4chan](#). Recorded Future has also identified the promotion of materials likely intended to create doubt against Dominion technologies regarding the 2022 midterms from Russian propaganda outlet Red Spring Information Agency (IA)⁷ in addition to Centre for Research on Globalization⁸, a [documented](#) pillar of Russian disinformation and propaganda, which has previously “published or republished seven authors attributed by Facebook to be false online personas created by The Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, popularly known as the GRU”. Additionally, a [known](#) Russian covert propaganda account [first identified](#) by Graphika, [@NoraBerka](#) on [Gab](#), has promoted [election integrity content](#) that suggests that voting machines in the state of Missouri have been corrupted. Dominion will service [26 Missouri counties](#) in the 2022 midterms.

It is very likely that allegations of rigging, hacking, and algorithmic cheating will be directed at Dominion following the 2022 midterms should results be considered unfavorable toward the interests of existing election denialist candidates (such as [Kari Lake](#) of Arizona and [Doug Mastriano](#) of Pennsylvania) and partisan political commentators. As stated in the Background section of this report, we anticipate that the most attention will be paid to races in highly contested jurisdictions in which Dominion voting technologies will be in use: [Georgia](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Arizona](#) (including [Maricopa County](#)), [Pennsylvania](#), [Nevada](#), and [Florida](#).

Smartmatic

As early as 2006, Smartmatic faced [criticism and conspiracist backlash](#) in the US, where its market share is relatively small. It is now one of the best-known VSMs embroiled in election denialist conspiracies due in part to its participation in a potentially costly [defamation suit](#) brought against Fox News Corporation. In the aftermath of the 2020 election, Fox News [made](#) multiple unsubstantiated and false on-air claims that reportedly included the following:

- Smartmatic is a Venezuelan company [under control](#) of the deceased dictator Hugo Chavez.
- Smartmatic provided voting technologies for elections in 6 key swing states.
- Smartmatic software was engineered to change votes from Trump to Biden.
- Smartmatic software was used in concert with Dominion Voting Systems hardware, and Smartmatic covertly [owned](#) Dominion.
- Smartmatic software sent votes [abroad](#) for tabulation.

Smartmatic itself has [corrected](#) many of these allegations, noting specifically that the only place Smartmatic technology was used in the 2020 election was in Los Angeles (LA) County. Despite this, disinformation echoing these claims persists across alternative internet spaces and on alternative news media.

Disinformation concerning Smartmatic's administration of elections has spanned the globe since before 2020. In 2018, Danish tabloid Berlingske [published](#) an article claiming that the "disgraced company from Venezuela" would be building Denmark's electoral system, with 4chan users recently [citing](#) on October 14, 2022, the false link between Smartmatic and Venezuela to support their belief that the company is corrupt. On 4chan, Smartmatic and other entities believed to be part of a popular anti-Semitic conspiracy theory postulating a grand plot for Jewish world domination are expressed with 3 parentheticals on either side, an internet shorthand for alleged Jewish corruption (expressed "(((Smartmatic)))"). This denotes a common overlap between election-related disinformation and older, grandiose anti-Semitic conspiracies about Jewish world domination.

Recorded Future discovered multiple instances of misinformation and disinformation targeting Smartmatic with corruption and rigging claims: an Italian-language post on [Gab](#) speculated about relationships between Smartmatic and the Clintons, allegations on Patriots[.]win claimed that the 2022 Argentina election was [rigged](#) by Smartmatic machines, and the English-language [Federal Security Service-directed](#) site SouthFront[.]org claimed that there is a "British hand behind the US coup", stating that a British spy agent is a key figure controlling Smartmatic9. This underscores the manner in which US conspiracism is simultaneously exported abroad and fed by international events.

What to Expect for 2022 Midterms Concerning Smartmatic

Smartmatic will once again only service elections in LA County in the November midterms, according to [VerifiedVoting](#). Despite the company's small market share, LA County's size and prominence on the national stage will likely result in continued misinformation and disinformation targeting Smartmatic's technology and business practices. There will likely also be increased scrutiny following alleged [gerrymandering](#) during LA's 2021 redistricting process.

Recorded Future has surfaced numerous claims that Smartmatic technologies will be used to falsify the 2022 US midterms across multiple high-profile platforms and media including [Patriots\[.\]win](#), [Gab](#), [4chan](#), [GreatAwakening\[.\]win](#) (a QAnon forum), [Truth Social](#), and [Telegram](#). Most of these claims are made under the false assumption that Smartmatic is a subsidiary or contractor of Dominion Voting Systems, which administers elections across many more jurisdictions than Smartmatic.

Additionally, on September 25, 2022, newly launched media outlet Semafor published an article on its [Medium page](#) alleging that Smartmatic is currently the subject of a US Department of Justice (DOJ) investigation concerning potentially corrupt business practices in its acquisition of election contracts in the Philippines in 2016. Recorded Future has not identified any additional reliable sources corroborating the investigation, but the very rumor of the investigation itself, echoed by election denialist outlets10 11 12, will almost certainly feed any allegations of corruption in jurisdictions using Smartmatic technology in the US. As in 2020, it is also likely that conspiracists will insist that Smartmatic technology was used in other jurisdictions where their favored candidates lose, such as those jurisdictions that use Dominion hardware. Previous Smartmatic conspiracy theories have alleged that Smartmatic provides software to Dominion machines; both parties have denied this as the companies are competitors.

Election Systems & Software, Inc. (ES&S)

One of the voting systems manufacturers in widest use in 2020, ES&S, administered elections in several of the most disinformation-fraught jurisdictions, including hundreds of municipal elections in battleground states [Wisconsin](#) and [Pennsylvania](#). Rumors about ES&S following the 2020 election featured a mix of allegations over technical vulnerabilities¹³ and conspiracies regarding the company's ownership and alleged conflicts of interest¹⁴.

As seen in disinformation campaigns against Dominion and Smartmatic, our analysis reveals that most ES&S-targeted misinformation and disinformation is concentrated on far-right and ultraconservative alternative social media platforms and "news" blogs. One such site, [DC Dirty Laundry](#), said in late-November 2020 that ES&S had been in league with Microsoft (a common target of disinformation owing to a long history of conspiracies surrounding Bill Gates) to deploy "ElectionGuard", a software the site [claimed](#) is a "Trojan horse for takeover of American elections".

For the past 2 years, Joe Oltmann, a previously obscure political operative from Colorado who ["played \[a\] big role"](#) in popularizing 2020 election denial, has disparaged ES&S as corrupt and unreliable dozens of times to his large social media following on Telegram. His latest [post](#) concerning ES&S ties the company to a wider "deep state" conspiracy: "These pieces of garbage collectively have been stealing our elections. They have recycled code, manipulated votes and destroyed our voices while stealing elections at every level. Make no mistake. The FBI is involved. The CIA is involved." On Telegram alone, [Oltmann](#) commands an audience of more than 42,000 subscribers. In April 2022, celebrity lawyer and Trump affiliate [Lin Wood](#), whose subscriber base is 10 times that of Oltmann, repeatedly [claimed](#) that "[he] was demanding that South Carolina get rid of the ES&S cheat machines before demanding that South Carolina get rid of the ES&S cheat machines was cool." In July 2022, QAnon-adjacent Telegram channel [EvidenceAnon](#) [claimed](#) to have spoken to an unnamed Secretary of State who "confirmed" that the ES&S DS200 machine "has code in it that is flipping the voting method (In-person, early, absentee). We got this information from the SoS's investigative unit lead, but you can bet she would disavow having said any such thing."

What to Expect for the 2022 Midterms Concerning ES&S

ES&S has [refuted](#) disinformation about its technologies and denied all claims of election rigging. ES&S voting technologies will service thousands of election jurisdictions across the US in November 2022, including a substantial number in historical swing states and current hotbeds of election disinformation [Arizona](#), [Pennsylvania](#), and [Florida](#), according to [VerifiedVoting](#). ES&S has not been the most popular target for election denialist disinformation in comparison to Dominion, Smartmatic, and Scytl (a fact several conservative "election integrity" commentators have [noted](#)), but any potential software or hardware errors that occur on ES&S technologies during the midterms is likely to result in new waves of targeted misinformation and disinformation against the company.

Big Lie-related false information concerning ES&S after 2020 has also carried forward into claims about the 2022 midterms, and Recorded Future has observed misinformation and disinformation targeting ES&S voting technology and alleging that its use in 2022 will lead to election fraud. On August 24, the Gateway Pundit published an article that ES&S machines in Alabama accepted "xeroxed" copies of official ballots¹⁵, an uncorroborated claim stemming from Mike Lindell's "Moment of Truth" election denialist conference in the summer of 2022¹⁶. The article has been circulated on alternative social media like [Patriots\[.\]win](#). In April 2022, anonymous 4chan users [discussed](#) Biden's chances of re-election considering his poor polling numbers at the time. "With control of the Dominion and ES&S machines," a user quipped, "[Democrats] don't even need the voters".

ScytI

ScytI voting technologies were not used for vote handling in any US election jurisdiction in 2020, but the company has had an outsized presence among conspiracy theories due to allegations of foreign vote tabulation involving the company. We include ScytI because we believe disinformation efforts will both directly target the company and use allegations about the company to target other VSMs in the 2022 midterm elections.

On November 13, 2020, Republican Congressman Louie Gohmert claimed in an [interview](#) with Charlie Kirk, the head of conservative activist group Turning Point USA, that the US Armed Forces had raided ScytI's offices in Germany to secure servers that contained "[evidence of voting irregularities](#)". Gohmert himself admitted in the same interview that he had no evidence of any such irregularities or of any US military action in Germany, but social media chatter concerning "ScytI" and "Germany" quickly spiked. A Youtube video of the interview was uploaded on November 16, 2020, and shared widely across alternative social media and web forums. The "German servers" scandal was quickly ingrained into the early fabric of the Big Lie, despite swift denials from ScytI, [independent fact checkers](#), and [the US Army](#). On November 19, 2020, Rudy Giuliani and Sydney Powell, two of the most prominent proponents of election denialism, [falsely confirmed](#) at a press conference a version of the conspiracy in which ScytI and Dominion jointly held the non-existent servers in Germany, launching the hoax into the broader public eye.

What to Expect for the 2022 Midterms Concerning ScytI

ScytI has [refuted](#) disinformation about its technologies and denied all claims of election rigging. ScytI technologies will not be used for voting in any election jurisdiction in the US in 2022 according to [VerifiedVoting](#). However, ScytI [announced](#) in October 2022 that it has partnered with 24 states to administer election worker training, election night reporting, and online voting education during the 2022 primaries. Despite not being directly involved in handling ballots, this close association with the tabulation process may spark additional hoaxes from election denialists who still subscribe to the ScytI-Germany hoax. It is also likely that disinformation tying ScytI and Dominion will continue to proliferate.

Catalysts for Continued Proliferation of Disinformation Against VSMs and Technologies

Recorded Future has identified the following factors as likely catalysts for the continued proliferation of election technology hoaxes.

- Faults of Technology.** Voting technologies are neither [invulnerable nor infallible](#). Past systems' failures increase the skepticism of technology and foment public distrust in the reliability of election results. Influence actors can manipulate historic malfunctions to create present fears.
- Lack of Government Communication.** Election authorities do not always make clear how voting technologies function or a jurisdiction's process for vetting and selecting vendors. The salience of some false information [may be reduced](#) if trusted government or election authorities focus on educating the electorate. However, [recent studies](#) suggest that inoculation against disinformation must involve more than simple fact-checking.
- Political Instability, Corruption, and Conspiracies.** Perceptions of government corruption very likely decrease trust in voting technologies, regardless of their actual performance or of information available about how they function. In 2021, Transparency[.]org's [Corruption Perception Index](#) scored the US at 67 out of 100, with 100 indicating very high public trust. As demonstrated by the persistent state of election disinformation in the US since 2020, fact-checking, transparency, and education have been unable to compensate for lack of trust in government institutions and authority.

Outlook

The US can almost certainly expect to see a continuation of misinformation and disinformation targeting voting systems manufacturers in the lead up to, during, and following the 2022 midterms. As in 2020, such misinformation and disinformation will very likely concentrate on elections in contentious “battleground” states and counties, including [Georgia](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Arizona](#), [Pennsylvania](#), [Nevada](#), and [Florida](#). Election administrators in such jurisdictions should be prepared for hyper-scrutiny of both voting technologies used and administrators themselves in connection to the technologies’ functioning.

Additionally, it is very likely that “experts” aligned with election denialist views will write and publish additional statements claiming proof of voting technologies malfunctioning or intentional “rigging” in the hours, days, and weeks following the closing of polls on November 8. These persons are likely to be championed by existing election denialist circles, and such claims may generate lawsuits in multiple contentious jurisdictions.

According to the Brookings Institution, there are [more than 300 election denialists](#) running for public office in November. It is very likely that some of those who are unsuccessful in their races will pivot toward disinformation concerning unfavorable results, including disinformation against voting technologies, their manufacturers, and election administrators who are required to interact with said technologies. This is likely to result in [threats](#) against both personnel at the voting systems manufacturers and local election jurisdictions; after 2020, election administrators frequently [received](#) death threats.

Voting technologies can face legitimate errors during the electoral process, either as a function of human mishandling or by malfunction of the software or hardware itself. To have the best chance at reducing false information, it is paramount that VSMs acknowledge and explain such errors publicly as swiftly as possible.

Lastly, it is crucial to note that US election denialism and VSM disinformation harm the democratic world at large. Dominion, Smartmatic, and ES&S will likely continue to face echoes of US-based conspiracies concerning their voting technologies in other elections around the world, as observed by Recorded Future and election watchdogs in [Australia](#), [Brazil](#), [the Philippines](#), and [Kenya](#).

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Insikt Group is Recorded Future's threat research division, comprising analysts and security researchers with deep government, law enforcement, military, and intelligence agency experience. Their mission is to produce intelligence on a range of cyber and geopolitical threats that reduces risk for clients, enables tangible outcomes, and prevents business disruption. Coverage areas include research on state-sponsored threat groups; financially-motivated threat actors on the darknet and criminal underground; newly emerging malware and attacker infrastructure; strategic geopolitics; and influence operations.

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Learn more at recordedfuture.com and follow us on Twitter at @RecordedFuture.

Endnotes

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