

# **How to Stop Disinformation in Democracy: Citizens' Assemblies as an Antidote to Skyrocketing Disinformation in Elections**

Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council Advisory Committee on the  
Impact of Disinformation on the Enjoyment of Human Rights

**American University**

February 27, 2025

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## **Summary**

Disinformation skyrockets when elections are held with tremendous social harm and detriment to human rights. Part one of this report details how the 2024 elections in the United States generated unprecedented disinformation in the areas of: 1.1 Sexist Disinformation, 1.2 Anti-LGBTQ+ Disinformation, 1.3 Racist Disinformation, 1.4 Xenophobic Disinformation, 1.5 Vaccine Disinformation, and 1.6 Economic Disinformation. Part two of this report demonstrates how using citizens' assemblies for democratic policy-making limits the impact of disinformation, drawing on the empirical successes of citizens' assemblies in Ireland and France on issues such as same-sex marriage, reproductive rights, and the climate crisis. With disinformation in future elections projected to accelerate, this report calls for increased use of citizens' assemblies in democratic policy-making to limit the impact of disinformation and better secure human rights.

## **Introduction**

This report finds that disinformation cycles skyrocket within the United States during election seasons, using the 2024 United States presidential election as an example of a concerning trend. The 2024 United States presidential election was defined by intense disinformation campaigns and alarming polarization. While elections are established to provide people with a voice, disinformation campaigns taken on by political leaders, media outlets, private corporations, and other groups unduly influence elections with false information, undermining the integrity of democracy and infringe on the enjoyment and realization of human rights. By spreading disinformation, these political actors are actively misleading public opinion solely for personal gain. In the 2024 Presidential election, that disinformation took the form of

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sexist, anti-LGBTQIA+, racist, xenophobic, and anti-vaccine sentiment.<sup>1</sup> Human rights must be guaranteed for people of all backgrounds and identities.<sup>2</sup>

Disinformation has the power to undermine democracy; when people vote, they choose a candidate based on how their policies align with the voter's view of important issues. If people vote based on incorrect facts spread by disinformation campaigns, they may choose candidates that do not truly represent their best interests. Given policymakers' power to either uplift or deny residents' ability to enjoy the human rights to which they are entitled, disinformation in election campaigns represents a fundamental threat to human rights.

This report recognizes the heightened negative impacts of disinformation on marginalized communities in the United States, and urges the OHCHR to develop guidelines that ensure the protection of such communities at the international level, including promotion of citizens' assemblies as a method of lessening the harmful impacts of disinformation on election cycles. Citizens' assemblies are democratic bodies consisting of a representative sample of the population that are empowered to hear from a range of experts, interests, and civil society, deliberate, and make informed public policy decisions. This report calls on successful examples of Irish, French, and global citizens' assemblies on issues of reproductive rights, gender equality, same-sex marriage, the Climate Crisis, and immigration to show that citizens' assemblies have an empirical record of success in producing successful outcomes while limiting the impact of disinformation. Not only do citizens' assemblies empower everyday citizens, their educational and community-based nature furthers democracy, mutual understanding, and human rights.

## 1. The Problem: How Elections Drive Skyrocketing Disinformation

### 1.1 U.S. Elections and Sexist Disinformation

In recent years, sexist disinformation surrounding politics has skyrocketed,<sup>3</sup> and the 2024 U.S. election highlighted this fact, with the month of August alone witnessing over 15,000 sexist and racist attacks on U.S. presidential candidate Kamala Harris with 80,000 re-shares and replies.<sup>4</sup> Sexist disinformation made up 31% of all these posts. Studies have shown such sexist disinformation affects 87% of women negatively, for example, making them less confident in expressing political views, thus causing women to withdraw from politics.<sup>5</sup> This data supports the argument that sexist disinformation surrounding elections undermines democracy,<sup>6</sup> women's

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<sup>1</sup> Myah Ward. "We watched 20 Trump rallies. His racist, anti-immigrant messaging is getting darker." *Politico*. October 12, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/10/12/trump-racist-rhetoric-immigrants-00183537> (accessed February 23, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly, Resolution 217A (III), Universal Declaration of Human Rights, A/RES/217(III) (December 10, 1948), <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (accessed February 23, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Di Meco, Lucina and Saskia Brechenmacher (2020) "Tackling Online Abuse and Disinformation Targeting Women in Politics." <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/11/tackling-online-abuse-and-disinformation-targeting-women-in-politics?lang=en>.

<sup>4</sup> Moceri, Alana. (2021) "Gendered Disinformation Campaigns, an Attack on Democracy." <https://www.ie.edu/insights/articles/gendered-disinformation-campaigns-an-attack-on-democracy/>.

<sup>5</sup> Cordova, Sirena. (2023) "Misinformation Online Is Hurting Girls around the World." <https://www.planusa.org/blog/intl-day-of-girl-youth-summit-online-misinformation/>.

<sup>6</sup> Moceri (2021).

right to participate in government,<sup>7</sup> and women’s right to non-discrimination.<sup>8</sup> Disinformation can even endanger women's lives, such as through stigmatizing abortion healthcare.<sup>9</sup>

In the 2024 election, Presidential candidate Kamala Harris’s identity as a woman was part of many social media disinformation campaigns seen by millions of potential voters. These campaigns attacked Harris largely by sexualizing her or playing into gender role norms. These attacks were not limited to Harris and can be seen as undermining women’s participation in politics as well as their freedom from discrimination.

Harris was sexualized as a method of attempting to undermine her political platform; a deepfaked image of Harris working as a prostitute, accompanied by allegations she was a “sex worker,” surfaced in an attempt to delegitimize her campaign.<sup>10</sup> Deepfakes also showed her with the rapper Sean P. Diddy, who is currently under investigation for sexual assault among other charges, to insinuate a sexual relationship between the two.<sup>11</sup> A report by All in Together, a women’s advocacy organization, suggests that such sexist rhetoric and images contributed to the majority of the 6.62 billion views and impressions that sexist and racist attacks on Harris received.<sup>12</sup> In addition to Harris, other female politicians such as Marjorie Taylor Green, a representative from Georgia, were also subject to sexist deep fakes.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, prominent deep fakes of male politicians such as President Trump and former President Biden do not take a sexual tone; women are almost exclusively the targets of such sexualization.<sup>14,15</sup> This sexism is further demonstrated by the fact that of the 26 members of Congress who have been subjected to sexualized deep fakes, 25 were women.<sup>16</sup>

During her Presidential campaign, Harris was also subjected to gendered stereotypes that because she had not had children, she was transgender.<sup>17</sup> This accusation perpetuates the sexist expectation that women must reproduce, and the use of the label “transgender” as an attack on Harris represents transgender identity as shameful, thus perpetuating harms against the

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<sup>7</sup> Mocerri (2021).

<sup>8</sup> The United Nations, (1948) “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/universal-declaration-of-human-rights/illustrated-universal-declaration-human-rights>.

<sup>9</sup> Surana, Kavitha (2024). “Abortion Bans Have Delayed Emergency Medical Care. In Georgia, Experts Say This Mother’s Death Was Preventable.” <https://www.propublica.org/article/georgia-abortion-ban-amber-thurman-death>.

<sup>10</sup> Settles, Gabrielle (2024). “Purported Risqué Photos of Kamala Harris Are Not Legitimate | Fact Check.” <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2024/08/30/kamala-harris-sex-worker-photos-fact-check/74923322007/>.

<sup>11</sup> Hasan, Ilma (2024). “Fake Images, Sexist Posts Target Female Leaders in 2024 U.S. Polls.” <https://www.logicallyfacts.com/en/analysis/fake-images-sexist-posts-target-harris-congresswomen-ahead-of-2024-us-polls>.

<sup>12</sup> Elangovan, Priya (2024). “Tracking Gendered and Race-Based Attacks on Vice President Harris.” <https://aitogether.org/gendered-attacks-vp-harris/>.

<sup>13</sup> Hasan, Ilma (2024). “Fake Images, Sexist Posts Target Female Leaders in 2024 U.S. Polls.” <https://www.logicallyfacts.com/en/analysis/fake-images-sexist-posts-target-harris-congresswomen-ahead-of-2024-us-polls>

<sup>14</sup> Bond, Shannon. (2024) “Criminal Charges and FCC Fines Issued for Deepfake Biden Robocalls.” <https://www.npr.org/2024/05/23/nx-s1-4977582/fcc-ai-deepfake-robocall-biden-new-hampshire-political-operative>

<sup>15</sup> Mines, Priscilla (2025). “AI-Generated Deepfakes of Trump Aimed at Misleading Kenyans, Nigerians.” <https://www.voanews.com/a/ai-generated-deepfakes-of-trump-aimed-at-misleading-kenyans-nigerians/7923816.html>

<sup>16</sup> Rodriguez, Barbara (2024). “AI Enters Congress: Sexually Explicit Deep Fakes Target Women Lawmakers” <https://19thnews.org/2024/12/ai-sexually-explicit-deepfakes-target-women-congress/>

<sup>17</sup> Eisele, Ines (2024). “Hate Speech Targets Kamala Harris on Social Media.” <https://www.dw.com/en/kamala-harris-battles-hate-speech-and-false-claims-online/a-69872700>

transgender community as well. Disinformation campaigns also claimed that Harris slept with Willie Brown, a married California politician, to become San Francisco’s District Attorney; however, Brown and his wife were separated at the time, and there is no evidence the relationship was founded on Harris’s desire to become district attorney.<sup>18</sup> This example showcases the stereotype that women gain power only through men. These combined instances show the role of sexist disinformation in creating a discriminatory space against women in politics.

In addition to the perpetuation of sexist stereotypes in disinformation campaigns, they can also reflect into devastatingly harmful real-life policies. Reproductive healthcare was a major issue in elections throughout 2024, from State House races to the Presidential campaigns. With the issue getting such a large platform this election cycle, the amount of disinformation spread about reproductive health care only grew.

On the Presidential Debate stage, President Donald Trump claimed that Democrats support “afterbirth abortions” that involve executing a baby after it is born.<sup>19</sup> Research by KFF shows that not only are “afterbirth abortions” illegal, but they do not occur.<sup>20</sup> By platforming this false idea of “afterbirth abortions,” the stigma around pregnant people receiving abortions is falsely perpetuated. Even the phrase “late-term abortion,” that was thrown around a lot during the election, has no recognized medical meaning by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.<sup>21</sup>

This disinformation surrounding abortion creates chaos and confusion and allows states to pass restrictive abortion laws that are threatening pregnant people’s lives. After the landmark Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* that established over-restriction of abortion as unconstitutional was overturned by the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs v. Jackson* ruling, many states have put into place increasingly restrictive regulations on abortion and maternal healthcare. In Georgia, this has led to devastating impacts: two women’s causes of death were ruled to be related to their inability to “access legal abortions and timely medical care”.<sup>22</sup> In one case, Amber Nicole Thurman had taken abortion pills, but faced a rare complication that required dilation and curettage, also known as a D&C. Despite this being a routine procedure, after the *Dobbs* decision, it is now a felony under Georgia law.<sup>23</sup> Based on that law, a doctor is not allowed to assist a woman with a D&C until it is a life-threatening situation—by that point, it was too late for Thurman, and she passed away. Online, individuals commented that Thurman’s death was due to a “botched

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<sup>18</sup> Goldin, Melissa, and David Klepper (2024). “Fact Focus: A Look at False Claims around Kamala Harris and her Campaign for the White House.” <https://apnews.com/article/harris-trump-biden-election-misinformation-d4efb8f48904d71e914e4d1376ca9b28>

<sup>19</sup> McCammon, Sarah (2024). “Trump Repeats the False Claim that Democrats Support Abortion ‘After Birth’ in Debate.” <https://www.npr.org/2024/09/10/nx-s1-5107942/abortion-roe-wade-ivf-donald-trump-kamala-harris-debate-2024>.

<sup>20</sup> Gomez, Ivette; Salganicoff, Alina, and Sobel, Laurie (2024). “Abortions Later in Pregnancy in a Post-Dobbs Era.” <https://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/issue-brief/abortions-later-in-pregnancy-in-a-post-dobbs-era/>

<sup>21</sup> The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (2024). “ACOG Guide to Language and Abortion.” <https://www.acog.org/contact/media-center/abortion-language-guide>

<sup>22</sup> Surana, Kavitha (2024). “Abortion Bans Have Delayed Emergency Medical Care. In Georgia, Experts Say This Mother’s Death Was Preventable.” <https://www.propublica.org/article/georgia-abortion-ban-amber-thurman-death>

<sup>23</sup> Georgia House of Representatives (2020). “House Bill 481”. <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20192020/187013>

abortion” and questioned the safety of the pill,<sup>24</sup> despite the FDA approval of medication-induced abortion in 2000. Claims that these medications are unsafe continue to circulate despite the Supreme Court upholding the FDA’s approval of mifepristone in 2024. Abortion care is healthcare, and the complication Thurman faced was rare, as complications are possible with any kind of medication. Thurman was not acting dangerously; she was acting within the bounds of overly restrictive maternal healthcare laws that ultimately killed her. So often, the narrative is pushed that people seeking out abortions are irresponsible or hate children; in reality, Thurman was a proud mother to her six-year-old son. Regardless, it should not matter why a pregnant person is seeking out an abortion. Pregnant people should not be made to fear not making it out of the hospital alive. Pregnant people should not be denied lifesaving healthcare to the point that they are literally past the point of saving. Thurman should not have died; her death is a tragic result of sexist disinformation.

Disinformation regarding sex leads to dangerous real-life impacts. In the post-*Dobbs* world where the right to abortion was overruled, restrictive abortion laws have been significantly on the rise. After the 2024 reelection of Donald Trump, there have already been major changes made to the federal landscape. An executive order now only recognizes the biological sex of male and female.<sup>25</sup> A memo was released from the Office of Personnel Management that called for scientific research to remove language regarding “gender ideology”, which impacts both women and LGBTQ+ people as populations targeted for discrimination based on gender.<sup>26</sup> The rise of disinformation has given way to these policies that have not only impacted, but endangered, the lives of women. There have now been multiple cases of women dying in America because they were denied necessary reproductive healthcare. These issues are compounded by disinformation’s ability to disempower women in politics, as shown above, such that disinformation must be taken seriously to prevent more tragedies.

## 1.2 U.S. Elections and Anti-LGBTQ+ Disinformation

According to a 2024 Gallup poll, 7.6% of adult Americans identify as LGBTQ+.<sup>27</sup> About 1% of American adults identify as transgender.<sup>28</sup> While data collection on this demographic is relatively new, it has become clear that each new generation is twice as likely to identify as LGBTQ+ than its predecessor. Despite the community’s minority status, American politicians like Vivek Ramaswamy frequently describe LGBTQ+ identities as a “social contagion ... spreading like wildfire across this country.”<sup>29</sup> Statements like Ramaswamy’s have led to one in

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<sup>24</sup> Washington, Irving and Yilma, Hagere (2024). “How Abortion Misinformation Gives Rise to Restrictive Abortion Laws.” <https://www.kff.org/the-monitor/how-abortion-misinformation-gives-rise-to-restrictive-abortion-laws/>

<sup>25</sup> Migdon, Brooke (2025). “Trump Signs Executive Order Recognizing Only 2 Sexes.” <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/5097278-trump-executive-order-gender-transition/>

<sup>26</sup> Christensen, Jen (2025). “Trump Administration Gives Warning About ‘Gender Ideology’ on Some Government Health Websites.” <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/14/health/gender-ideology-warning-websites/index.html>

<sup>27</sup> Mandler, C. “The Number of U.S. Adults Who Identify as LGBTQ+ Doubled in 12 Years, New Poll Shows.” NPR, March 13, 2024. <https://www.npr.org/2024/03/13/1238262638/lgbtq-adults-us-gallup-poll-bisexual-transgender>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Litz, Steve. “Politifact: How Many Trans People Are There in the U.S., and Why Do We Overestimate It?” NBC 6 South Florida, July 19, 2023. <https://www.nbcmiami.com/news/local/politifact-how-many-trans-people-are-there-in-the-u-s-and-why-do-we-overestimate-it/3074621/>.

five Americans holding the belief that 30 percent of the U.S. population is gay, and 21 percent is transgender.<sup>30</sup> This inflated view of the LGBTQ+ community’s demographic breakdown has made it easier to incite public panic through disinformation.

Historically, some U.S. officials and celebrities have pushed back on queer identity entering the mainstream by constructing disinformation narratives. During the Cold War, Senator Joseph McCarthy championed the idea that gay people were “more susceptible” to communist recruitment, which led to the ousting of over 100 queer officials in the federal government—and the dishonorable discharges of countless queer service members—during the “Lavender Scare.”<sup>31</sup> Homosexuals were deemed unfit for office, sociopathic—even a national security threat. In the 1970’s, as cultural divisions deepened within the nation, Anita Bryant’s “Save Our Children” campaign sought to fight back against the perceived pedophilic threat posed by homosexual men allegedly “recruiting” (or grooming) young people.<sup>32</sup> These historic campaigns have provided current U.S. officials the rhetoric and public misunderstanding of the LGBTQ+ community to use as a springboard during election season.

The recent rise of technological capabilities—namely Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the expansion of social media—along with increased political polarization and reactionary politics, have all encouraged the production and consumption of “fake news,” or content that is “intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers”.<sup>33</sup> Social media companies, by creating algorithms that promote content that is highly interacted with, reward users who post content that is jarring and provocative, not necessarily true.<sup>34</sup> Disinformation campaigns are then able to exploit algorithms by creating deepfakes, utilizing outrageous statements, or other strategies that will cause audiences to engage with their content more, thus promoting it to more and more people. Historical, strategic uses of anti-gay disinformation have focused on narratives of family, children’s safety, and what may be considered traditional American values. Similar narratives have been reintroduced, with transgender people as their new target. Considering the technological and political environment the internet curates that allows for disinformation and hateful rhetoric to be presented to many as undeniable truth, anti-trans rhetoric in the media represents a larger problem than ever before. Essentially, algorithm-based platforms ease the spread of disinformation on LGTBQ+ and other populations. An examination of the uptick in transgender disinformation in correlation with the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election serves as a strong example of the harms of algorithm-based social media on disinformation.

Leading up to the 2024 election, President Trump’s campaign and allies spent tens of millions of dollars on anti-trans political ads, with just two of these ads being funded with more

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<sup>30</sup> Orth, Taylor. “From Millionaires to Muslims, Small Subgroups of the Population Seem Much Larger to Many Americans | Yougov.” YouGov, March 15, 2022. <https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/41556-americans-misestimate-small-subgroups-population>.

<sup>31</sup> “The Lavender Scare.” National Archives Foundation, August 2, 2023. <https://archivesfoundation.org/newsletter/the-lavender-scare/>.

<sup>32</sup> Watters, Dana. “Pride v. Prejudice: The Threat of Misinformation to the LGBTQ+ Community.” National League of Cities, January 12, 2024. <https://www.nlc.org/article/2023/06/26/pride-v-prejudice-the-threat-of-misinformation-to-the-lgbtq-community/>.

<sup>33</sup> Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (2017): 211–36, <https://web.stanford.edu/~gentzkow/research/fakenews.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> David Medzerian, “Study Reveals Key Reason Why Fake News Spreads on Social Media,” *USC Today*, December 8, 2023, <https://today.usc.edu/usc-study-reveals-the-key-reason-why-fake-news-spreads-on-social-media/>.

than \$19 million from the Trump Campaign alone.<sup>35</sup> Similar imagery was used during Trump campaign rallies, where the President played videos mocking trans people in the military.<sup>36</sup> However, much of the rhetoric shown in these videos has either been proven untrue or to have been based on falsities. Despite this, disinformation spreads with the help of engagement-based algorithms. JD Vance claims that teens “become trans” to get into Ivy League schools, and Trump suggests that children return from school with sex changes.<sup>37</sup> They both spoke of “transgender insanity,” reinforcing the historical myth of queerness as a mental illness.<sup>38</sup> When the politicians themselves are using disinformation-based statements to get cheers during rallies, it is not surprising that they continue to use these statements. However, these impacts are not contained to the voting booth. While political speeches may contain fake news, they can cause real violence.

Disinformation may largely be a means to the end of gaining votes, but the power of social media has reinforced, even accelerated, the real-world damage of such disinformation. Such disinformation takes on different forms: false ‘accusations’ of transness (to anyone from Olympic boxers, school shooters, to even Michelle Obama or Kamala Harris), incorrect claims of school-day transgender operations, hurtful rhetoric targeting U.S. service members, and more.<sup>39</sup> Simultaneously, the epidemic of violence against transgender Americans has rapidly worsened. In a 2024 report, the Human Rights Campaign Foundation has documented 372 incidents of transgender Americans who have lost their lives to fatal violence since 2013.<sup>40</sup> In 2025 alone, the ACLU is tracking 388 anti-LGBTQ+ bills in the U.S.<sup>41</sup>, in comparison to 2021, where there were at least 130 bills.<sup>42</sup> In the wake of discriminatory "Don't Say Gay or Trans" bills, an engineered disinformation campaign— driven by extremist politicians, with hopes of riling up extreme members of their base ahead of midterm elections<sup>43</sup>— saw discriminatory "grooming" content surge by 400%.<sup>44</sup> The wide accessibility of misinformation and

<sup>35</sup> “Trump Campaign Has Spent Millions on Anti-Trans Ads,” CBS News, accessed February 11, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-anti-trans-ads-spending/>.

<sup>36</sup> Bill Barrow, “Trump and Vance Make Anti-Transgender Attacks Central to Their Campaign’s Closing Argument,” *AP News*, November 14, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-harris-transgender-politics-61cff97a64fac581ffc5f762be4c57d3>.

<sup>37</sup> “Why the Trump Campaign Is Spending Heavily on Ads on Trans Issues.” *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/usa/2024/11/02/why-the-trump-campaign-is-spending-heavily-on-ads-on-trans-issues>.

<sup>38</sup> Bill Barrow, “Trump and Vance Make Anti-Transgender Attacks Central to Their Campaign’s Closing Argument,” *AP News*, November 14, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-harris-transgender-politics-61cff97a64fac581ffc5f762be4c57d3>.

<sup>39</sup> Angela Dallara, “GLAAD, Transgender Service Advocates Respond to Discriminatory Executive Order Regarding Transgender People in the Military,” *GLAAD*, January 28, 2025, <https://glaad.org/releases/glaad-transgender-service-advocates-respond-to-discriminatory-executive-order-regarding-transgender-people-in-the-military/>.

<sup>40</sup> “The Epidemic of Violence against the Transgender & Gender-Expansive Community,” Human Rights Campaign, <https://reports.hrc.org/an-epidemic-of-violence-2024#epidemic-numbers>.

<sup>41</sup> “Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures in 2025.” American Civil Liberties Union, February 8, 2025. <https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights-2025>.

<sup>42</sup> Madeleine Carlisle, “Anti-Trans Violence Reaches Record Highs across U.S. in 2021,” *Time*, December 30, 2021, <https://time.com/6131444/2021-anti-trans-violence/>.

<sup>43</sup> “Digital Hate: Social Media’s Role in Amplifying Dangerous Lies,” <https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/CCDH-HRC-Digital-Hate-Report-2022-single-pages.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> “New Report: Anti-LGBTQ+ Grooming Narrative Surged More than 400%,” *HRC*, <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/new-report-anti-lgbtq-grooming-narrative-surged-more-than-400-on-social-media-following-floridas-dont->

disinformation about transgender Americans in the media ecosystem has coincided with upticks in violence, hate, and hostility towards LGBTQ+ people.

The anti-LGBTQ+ disinformation campaigns run by U.S. officials have historically, and continue to run, infringe upon those individuals' enjoyment and realization of their human rights by increasing their exposure to identity-based violence with the intention to limit their participation in public life. While anti-LGBTQ+ disinformation is not a new phenomenon, the prevalence of the internet and algorithm-driven social media has amplified power-seeking individuals' ability to spread incorrect information at an unprecedented scale. By constructing false narratives like that of a unique perversion of transgender women and girls in bathrooms or sports, or of sinister intentions behind drag queen story times and pride parades, elected officials give queer people an unthinkable choice: be seen and risk violence or isolate and closet themselves entirely.

### 1.3 U.S. Elections and Racist Disinformation

Donald Trump claimed that "Muslim refugees are a 'secret army' who wish to destroy America."<sup>45</sup> Such false narratives are increasingly used by political elites, propagated by the media, and accepted by the public as truth. The racialization of Muslims and their increased visibility in political discourse enabled Trump to capitalize on the fears and hostilities U.S. voters feel toward Muslim-Americans and win votes. Despite the vilification and low status on the social hierarchy, Muslim-Americans continue to mobilize against misinformation and influence election outcomes.

Of the 4 million Muslim-Americans, over 40% are born in the U.S., the rest coming from Asia, Africa, and Europe. 50% are Asian or Black, while the rest include Arabs, Whites, and Latinos. Despite the diversity, politicians and media often lump Muslim-Americans as racialized others—inferior, militant, and violent.<sup>46</sup> Such misrepresentation supports the post-9/11 practice of Arabization and racial scapegoating. In national political discourse, White voters often evaluate candidates based on their attitude toward Muslims.<sup>47</sup> Trump exploited this identity-based discrimination by making Muslim-Americans highly visible and demonized during his administration and election campaigns, ensuring that American voters harbored lasting resentment and scrutinized views.<sup>48</sup>

Trump's 2016 presidential campaign ran on anti-minority rhetoric with considerable attention on Muslims.<sup>49</sup> He promised, "... I am going to keep Radical Islamic Terrorists out of

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[say-gay-or-trans-law-as-social-platforms-enabled-extremist-politicians-and-their-allies-to-peddle-inflammatory-discriminatory-rhetoric.](#)

<sup>45</sup> Khan, Mohsin Hassan, et al. *Trump and Muslims: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Islamophobic Rhetoric in Donald Trump's Selected Tweets*. SAGE Open, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Calfano, Brian Robert, Lajevardi, Nazita, and Michelson, Melissa R. *Trumped up challenges: limitations, opportunities, and the future of political research on Muslim Americans*. *Politics, Groups and Identities*, 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Jardin, Ashley, Stephens-Dougan, LaFleur. *The electoral consequences of anti-Muslim prejudice*. *Electoral Studies*, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Reddi, Madhavi, Kuo, Rachel, Kreiss, Daniel. *Identity propaganda: Racial narratives and disinformation*. *New Media & Society*, 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Raza, Umar, Khan, Mohsin Hassan, Bukhari, Shema Bukhari. *Trump and Muslims During US Presidential Elections 2016: A Sentiment Analysis of Muslim Community on Twitter*. *Media Education*, 2020.

our country!”<sup>50</sup> Thus, misinformation is used to win right-wing support.<sup>51</sup> He tweeted, “... radical Islam attacks never end! Strengthen the borders. No more being politically correct.”<sup>52</sup> Without evidence, Trump led voters to believe that Islam is responsible for all Americans’ suffering and corruption. He used counterfactuals in 2015, writing, “Refugees from Syria are now pouring into our great country. Who knows who they are—some could be ISIS?”<sup>53</sup> Such hyperbolic misinformation dehumanized Muslims, painting them as dangerous. In another exaggeration, Trump claimed, “27% of Muslims around the world are very militant.”<sup>54</sup> Repeating false and racist sentiments often enough contributed to lasting hatred among non-Muslim voters.<sup>7</sup> Other Republicans helped out as Ted Cruz called for a ban on Muslim immigration, and Bobby Jindal stated, “Islam has a problem.”<sup>55</sup> The generalized rhetoric stoked voters’ anxieties and impacted their decisions during the general election.<sup>56</sup>

Believing false and/or misleading information can significantly impact voter preferences and behavior.<sup>57</sup> For instance, the acceptance of electoral disinformation led many Obama voters from 2012 away from Clinton in 2016.<sup>58</sup> So, Trump continued to employ anti-Muslim rhetoric during his administration through executive orders like the Muslim travel ban and attacks on Sharia laws mirroring racist tones in branding Muslims as backward and violent.<sup>59</sup> Not surprisingly, Islamophobia remained the trademark of Trump’s subsequent presidential campaigns, where he recycled falsehoods like “Muslims cheered 9/11 attacks while watching it in their homes.”<sup>60</sup> His comments, such as “Islam hates us,” are untrue orientalist stereotyping that served to increase distrust between Muslim-Americans and other groups,<sup>61</sup> galvanizing and strengthening his support base.<sup>62</sup> This base includes the white underclass, Republicans with higher levels of nationalism, and those likely to engage with disinformation.<sup>63</sup>

Trump was then aided in identity propaganda by the mainstream media that used othering and essentializing narratives that alienated and marginalized Muslim-Americans.<sup>64</sup> Media streams uncritically repeated Trump’s misleading statements against Muslims and Islam during the campaign seasons. Once gaining traction and even going viral, the disinformation themes were entrenched in public consciousness and accepted as truth. Even if the false claims are retracted, the public remembers and uses that disinformation to make voting decisions.<sup>65</sup> Trump’s goal of gaining supporters against Muslim-Americans was further aided by social media

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<sup>50</sup> Khan et. al, 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Raza et al., 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Reddi et al., 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Gunthera, Richard, Becka, Paul, Nisbetb, Erick. “Fake news” and the defection of 2012 Obama voters in the 2016 presidential election. *Electoral Studies*, 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Calfano et al., 2019.

<sup>60</sup> Middle East Eye, 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Khan et al., 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Nuruzzaman, Nura Ahmad. *Uncommitted: The Limitations of Election Forecasting on Minorities and the Case of American Muslim Voters*. Cambridge University Press, 2024.

<sup>63</sup> Jardin & Stephens-Dougan, 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Holtz-Bacha, 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Haber et al., 2021.

companies that propagated racist rhetoric and facilitated toxic online spaces distinguished by close-mindedness and dogmatism.<sup>66</sup>

Trump's hate speeches and policies may have won White and right-wing votes but undermined the Muslim voters' reaction. The Republican party candidates are usually suspicious and discriminatory against Muslims, while the Democratic party's acceptance is measured and conditional.<sup>67</sup> Despite this intimidating context, Muslim-Americans participate in elections in large numbers.<sup>68</sup> They felt anger, fear, and sadness at being targets of Trump's misinformation campaign and racist policies. The corresponding discrimination and hate crimes caused some to retreat from public spaces for a while. Ultimately, there was a rise in activism and engagement among Muslim-American voters, and record numbers turned up to vote in 2018 and 2020, especially in battleground states.<sup>69</sup>

However, in the wake of Biden's unconditional support of Israel during the Israel-Palestine war, Biden quickly lost Muslim-American support, going from 65% in 2020 to 18% in 2024.<sup>70</sup> Ironically, Biden tried out Trump's playbook of political racism and misinformation campaigns against Muslims and Arabs. The lies started with "terrorists beheading children" and Israeli women "raped, assaulted, paraded as trophies" to "Israel doesn't target civilians and journalists" and claims of Hamas presence underneath the al-Shifa Hospital.<sup>71</sup> All were proven false but still repeated while stating "no confidence in the number the Palestinians are using" for civilian casualties.<sup>72</sup> Biden also targeted pro-Palestine students and protesters, tweeting that they were Antisemites celebrating the 10/7 attack, vandalizing Jewish homes, attacking Jewish faculty, and harassing commuters—all the incidents Biden was referring to were proven to be fake news.<sup>73</sup>

Biden's misinformation campaign to increase anti-Muslim prejudice, discredit pro-Palestine movements, and silence protesters on campuses and city streets had initial success. Still, it was ultimately a disaster for his second presidential run. Biden, like Trump, underestimated Muslim-Americans' ability to mobilize when their civil liberties are threatened, decreased tolerance for pervasive discrimination and violence against Muslims at home and abroad, and the electorates' ability to fact-check.

Trump, who has always advocated an "America First" policy and has always taken a strong stance against immigrants, made many discriminatory statements against them during his campaign. By repeatedly making discriminatory claims, he has instilled in the public the perception that the presence of immigrants is dangerous and has fueled people's fears and anxieties about the "invasion" of immigrants. Particularly, some of his statements seen during this election were misinformed and discriminatory toward certain racial groups, and the issue became more heated when they were spread on SNS by influential people around Trump.

On September 10, 2024, he mentioned many Haitians in Springfield, Ohio, as such. "In Springfield, they are eating the dogs. The people that came in, they are eating the cats. They're

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<sup>66</sup> Sedique, 2024.

<sup>67</sup> Ocampo et al., 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Raza et al., 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Hobbs & Lajevardi, 2018.

<sup>70</sup> Sedique, 2024.

<sup>71</sup> Moor, 2024.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Talia, 2023.

eating—they are eating the pets of the people that live there.”<sup>74</sup> This statement was made during a debate between Trump and former Vice President Kamala Harris, which was watched by a large audience. The statement was not based on solid evidence, and the debate moderator denied any such fact. However, after the debate, this unsubstantiated claim was boosted by posts on social networking services (SNS) by prominent people, including Republican committee members and Elon Musk, who support Trump. For example, the House Judiciary GOP account shared an AI-generated image of Trump holding a cat and duck, which attempted to plant the image that Trump was protecting the pets of nearby residents from the threat of Haitian immigrants.<sup>75</sup> JD Vance, then a vice presidential nominee, also released a video of himself reading a letter from Springfield City Manager at a July Senate Banking Committee hearing about the city's housing challenges with the growing Haitian immigrant population. He also repeated on his SNS Trump's false claim that Haitian immigrants were eating people's pets in Springfield. This is not the only time Trump or his political associates have made unsubstantiated disinformation about Haitian immigrants. He has made the following statements about AIDS to Haitian immigrants in the past and offended the dignity of Haitian immigrants<sup>76</sup>: “all have AIDS.” in 2017 and “We have hundreds of thousands of people flowing in from Haiti. Haiti has a tremendous AIDS problem.” in 2021<sup>77</sup>.

The presidential election has shown a negative loop of disinformation about specific racial groups spreading as Trump speaks out in front of large audiences and is joined by influential people around him. While the spread of disinformation about a particular race may have a temporary impact on the public, the distrust of the government created by such disinformation strategies cannot be dispelled.

#### 1.4 U.S. Elections and Xenophobic Disinformation

In every election, immigration is a talking point. In the 2024 presidential election as well as the midterms, the U.S. saw a rise in concerns about immigration. Specifically, Republicans overwhelmingly (82%) reported that immigration is a leading issue, an increase from 2020.<sup>78</sup> Deportation is a major talking point with roughly 63% of Trump supporters saying there should be a national effort to deport undocumented immigrants currently living in the U.S. compared to about 11% of Biden supporters.<sup>79</sup> This rise in xenophobia is “...rooted in a fear or hatred of immigrants”.<sup>80</sup> This rise in xenophobia correlates with a rise in media and political discussions of immigration. A Tufts professor explains this rise, saying that the “extent to which [immigration is] on people’s radars corresponds to how much the candidates are talking about it, and how much media is talking about it...it’s very easily manipulated by political and media

<sup>74</sup> Cheetham, Joshua. 2024. “Donald Trump repeats baseless claim about Haitian immigrants eating cats and dogs in Springfield, Ohio.” *BBC*, September 15, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c77128myezko>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Duffy, M. (2019). “Wagging the dog”: Feigning crisis in U.S. anti-migration narratives to create crisis. *REI - REVISTA ESTUDOS INSTITUCIONAIS*, 5(2), 656–698. <https://doi.org/10.21783/rei.v5i2.389>.

<sup>77</sup> Shear, Michael D. 2024. “Trump's Derision of Haitians Goes Back Years.” *The New York Times*, September 18, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/18/us/politics/trump-haitians.html>

<sup>78</sup> Nadeem, R. (2024b, September 9). 2. Issues and the 2024 election. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/09/09/issues-and-the-2024-election/>

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Samari, G., Nagle, A., & Coleman-Minahan, K. (2021). Measuring structural xenophobia: US State immigration policy climates over ten years. *SSM - Population Health*, 16, 100938. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2021.100938>.

entrepreneurs to raise voters' racial and economic anxieties and catch their attention."<sup>81</sup> This matters because nearly 40% of Americans reported Trump's claims during his campaign have harmed how they are treated as immigrants.<sup>82</sup> When misinformation spreads, Americans may believe it and act and vote accordingly.

Anti-Haitian xenophobic rhetoric can be traced back to the Haitian Revolution in 1804. Haitian's ability to overthrow the oppressive French colonial government frightened American politicians in favor of slave labor. Those fears proved true as famous figures within the Abolitionist Movement became inspired by the Haitian Revolution and used it to fuel events such as Nat Turner's Rebellion and the ideologies of John Brown.<sup>83</sup> Specific anti-Haitian immigration rhetoric gained popularity during the Obama administration as white nationalist figures warned that the Obama Administration's extension of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Haitian immigrants fleeing violence, poverty, and malnourishment would devastate white Americans. A now-suspended white nationalist blog site VDARE wrote in 2008 about Haitian migrants, "Why, Americans in general might ask, does the country need more of a people who have spectacularly failed to make anything of their own countries, many with extremely alien habits, who will instantly qualify for Affirmative Action benefits at the expense of the majority?"<sup>84</sup>

Although nearly 17 years old, this rhetoric closely mirrors the language used by Republican strategists and candidates in the 2024 election. False claims that Haitian immigrants were kidnapping and eating pets in small-town Springfield, Ohio, spread through right-wing media and were ultimately amplified by Republican candidate Donald Trump during the presidential debate.<sup>85</sup> These falsehoods amplified by politicians feed into the rhetoric of "alien habits." While easily debunked, misinformation is dangerous not just for its inaccuracy but for the severe consequences it can unleash. Vice President JD Vance defended these fabrications, stating, "If I have to create stories so that the American media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that's what I'm going to do."<sup>86</sup> Yet these falsehoods fueled real harm, as schools, libraries, and community centers in Springfield and beyond faced

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<sup>81</sup> McNeil, T. (2024, October 17). Immigration and the Presidential Election | Tufts Now. Tufts Now. <https://now.tufts.edu/2024/10/17/immigration-and-presidential-election>.

<sup>82</sup> Schumacher, S., Montero, A., & Published, L. H. (2024, September 24). Misinformation About Immigrants in the 2024 Presidential Election. KFF. <https://www.kff.org/health-information-and-trust/poll-finding/misinformation-about-immigrants-in-the-2024-presidential-election/>.

<sup>83</sup> Forsdick, Charles, and Christian Høgsbjerg. ". . . One and All: 1804-." JSTOR, Pluto Press, 2017, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1pv89b9.12](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1pv89b9.12). Kieffer, Caleb, and R.G. Cravens. "Tracking the Spread of Hateful Anti-Haitian Rhetoric." Southern Poverty Law Center, 6 Feb. 2025, [www.splcenter.org/resources/hate-watch/tracking-anti-haitian-rhetoric/](http://www.splcenter.org/resources/hate-watch/tracking-anti-haitian-rhetoric/).

<sup>84</sup> Cleburne, Patrick. "Obama's Immigration Policy: Bring in More Haitians | Blog Posts." VDARE.com, 3 Aug. 2008, [web.archive.org/web/20181106103955/https://vdare.com/posts/obama-s-immigration-policy-bring-in-more-haitians](http://web.archive.org/web/20181106103955/https://vdare.com/posts/obama-s-immigration-policy-bring-in-more-haitians).

<sup>85</sup> Forsdick, Charles, and Christian Høgsbjerg. ". . . One and All: 1804-." JSTOR, Pluto Press, 2017, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1pv89b9.12](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1pv89b9.12). Kieffer, Caleb, and R.G. Cravens. "Tracking the Spread of Hateful Anti-Haitian Rhetoric." Southern Poverty Law Center, 6 Feb. 2025, [www.splcenter.org/resources/hate-watch/tracking-anti-haitian-rhetoric/](http://www.splcenter.org/resources/hate-watch/tracking-anti-haitian-rhetoric/). Accessed 16 Feb. 2025.

<sup>86</sup> Maher, Kit, and Chris Boyette. "JD Vance Defends Baseless Rumor about Haitian Immigrants Eating Pets." CNN, CNN, 15 Sept. 2024, [www.cnn.com/2024/09/15/politics/vance-immigrants-pets-springfield-ohio-cnntv/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2024/09/15/politics/vance-immigrants-pets-springfield-ohio-cnntv/index.html).

bomb threats and hate speech.<sup>87</sup> This xenophobia is not unique to the U.S.; the Dominican Republic has long faced accusations of anti-Haitian immigration policies rooted in xenophobia and has been criticized by the UN for violating Haitians' human rights. When questioned in 2024 about their policies, the Dominican government responded that they were acting, "[t]he same way the United States and the Bahamas and all the other countries."<sup>88</sup> The misinformation and xenophobia surrounding Haitians in the U.S. echo globally, shaping migration policies and influencing electoral politics worldwide.

In addition, xenophobic disinformation also fueled hate against South Asians and Arabs. As South-Asian figures, namely, Kamala Harris and Usha Vance, became prominent on the American political stage, South-Asian hate spiked.<sup>89</sup> In the lead-up to the 2024 U.S. presidential election, misinformation and disinformation campaigns significantly influenced public perceptions of Arab and South Asian communities, exacerbating xenophobic sentiments and impacting political engagement. The spread of false information led to increased fear and safety concerns, discouraging political involvement among these communities. Post-9/11 security policies, such as the PATRIOT Act, continued to disproportionately affect Arab and South Asian communities, with misinformation often used to justify heightened surveillance and restrictive immigration practices.<sup>90</sup> The proliferation of conspiracy theories regarding South Asian politicians influenced voter alignments and party strategies, leading to polarized electoral landscapes.

Disinformation campaigns can target specific communities, falsely associating candidates with foreign influences or extremist ideologies.<sup>91</sup> For example, ads that targeted Arab-American voters described Harris and her husband as "America's pro-Israel power couple," while others, targeting Jewish-Americans, claimed, "two-faced Kamala stands with Palestine." These ads were created by a Musk-lined PAC, and aimed to hurt Harris's campaign.<sup>92</sup> Social media platforms and partisan news outlets amplified these narratives, shaping public opinion and influencing voter behavior.

Despite challenges, grassroots initiatives emerged to combat misinformation and mobilize voters within these communities. Organizations focused on enhancing digital literacy and providing accurate information to empower community members.<sup>93</sup> Political campaigns adapted by implementing fact-checking measures and engaging in community outreach to

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<sup>87</sup> PBS News. "WATCH: Trump Amplifies False Racist Rumor about Ohio's Haitian Immigrants in Debate." PBS News, 11 Sept. 2024, [www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-trump-amplifies-false-racist-rumor-about-ohios-haitian-immigrants-in-debate](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-trump-amplifies-false-racist-rumor-about-ohios-haitian-immigrants-in-debate).

<sup>88</sup> Sackur, Stephen. "HARDtalk - Luis Abinader: Will the Dominican Republic Help Haiti? - BBC Sounds." BBC, 2024, [www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3ct4nzx](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3ct4nzx).

<sup>89</sup> *Study finds election-inspired spike in anti-South Asian hate – AAPI Equity Alliance Website.* (n.d.). Retrieved February 20, 2025, from <https://aapiequityalliance.org/study-finds-election-inspired-spike-in-anti-south-asian-hate/>

<sup>90</sup> Targets of Suspicion: The Impact of Post-9/11 Policies on Muslims, Arabs and South Asians in the United State. (n.d.). Immigration Policy Center, *Immigration in Focus*, 3(2).

<sup>91</sup> Washington, H. T. (2024, October 21). *Musk-funded ads tell voters Kamala Harris is pro-Israel—And anti-Israel.* <https://www.thetimes.com/world/us-world/article/elon-musk-republican-politics-ads-trump-dcjqv6pvyb>.

<sup>92</sup> Perkins, T. (2024, November 4). Musk-linked Pac accused of targeting Jewish and Arab Americans in swing states. *The Guardian.* <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/04/election-musk-pac-michigan-ads-israel-gaza>.

<sup>93</sup> Ozawa, J. V. S., Woolley, S., & Lukito, J. (2024). Taking the power back: How diaspora community organizations are fighting misinformation spread on encrypted messaging apps. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review.* <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-146>.

address and correct false narratives.<sup>94</sup> Collaborations with social media platforms aimed to identify and mitigate the spread of misinformation targeting these communities.<sup>95</sup>

Xenophobia within U.S. elections typically follows crisis or *perceived* crisis events in which Americans are conditioned to believe they are facing a direct threat. This threat is then attributed to an ethnic group, whose belonging in America then becomes a debate threat in the election cycle. The 2004 election followed anti-Arab xenophobia attributed to 9/11,<sup>96</sup> the 2016 election followed anti-Central American xenophobia attributed to a perceived border crisis which was extended to Haitian migrants in the 2024 election,<sup>97</sup> and the 2020 election followed anti-East Asian xenophobia following the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>98</sup>. These crisis events incite xenophobic reactions when fear becomes weaponized by political figures, including violence against the targeted group. These civilian-on-civilian acts of violence are perpetuated by political figures with little, if any protections afforded to targeted groups. Some potentially helpful policies could include those requiring greater transparency in political advertising, strengthening of law against voter intimidation, and implementing greater media literacy education.

US elections must implement stricter transparency requirements for political ads to prevent the spread of xenophobia and other misinformation, which has risen with the emergence of AI technology. Requirements should be placed on PACs and other ad-making bodies also to disclose their funding sources for campaign advertisements targeting minority communities. Social media platforms including but not limited to, YouTube, TikTok, and Meta should be held accountable for ads that micro-target certain communities.<sup>99</sup> This can be done by strengthening moderation policies on social media platforms to prevent the spread of xenophobic content and increasing government oversight on AI-driven content recommendations that amplify divisive narratives.<sup>100</sup>

To effectively combat xenophobic rhetoric in political campaigns, it is imperative to implement specific legal consequences for candidates and organizations that engage in such behavior. One approach is to establish penalties for rhetoric that incites xenophobic violence, recognizing that while hate speech is often protected under the First Amendment, speech that directly incites violence is not. Additionally, enforcing political censure or disqualification from holding public office could serve as a deterrent against the use of xenophobic language. These measures aim to uphold free speech while preventing rhetoric that poses a threat to public safety and social cohesion.

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<sup>94</sup> *DNC counter-misinformation*. (n.d.). Democrats. Retrieved February 21, 2025, from <https://democrats.org/combating-online-misinformation/>.

<sup>95</sup> Shahbazi, M., & Bunker, D. (2024). Social media trust: Fighting misinformation in the time of crisis. *International Journal of Information Management*, 77, 102780. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2024.102780>.

<sup>96</sup> Zughbi, Mona. "Arab-Americans Turning Away from Bush." NBC News, 22 Sept. 2004, [www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna6056602](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna6056602).

<sup>97</sup> Perry Bacon Jr. "How the 2016 Election Exposed America's Racial and Cultural Divides." NBC News, NBC News, 11 Nov. 2016, [www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/how-2016-election-exposed-america-s-racial-cultural-divides-n682306](http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/how-2016-election-exposed-america-s-racial-cultural-divides-n682306).

<sup>98</sup> Human Rights Watch. "Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide." Human Rights Watch, 12 May 2020, [www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide](http://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide).

<sup>99</sup> Political Advertising on Social Media Platforms. (n.d.). Retrieved February 21, 2025, from <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/resources/human-rights/archive/political-advertising-social-media-platforms/>

<sup>100</sup> Marwick, A., & Lewis, R. (n.d.). *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*.

At the polls, the U.S. needs to strengthen laws against voter intimidation tactics. Specifically, the implementation of laws that focus on the acts of questioning voters on their eligibility to vote, spreading false information about voting requirements, and otherwise harassing voters.<sup>101</sup> The rise of voter intimidation directly correlates with increasing the safeguarding of poll workers, the number of which has been rapidly declining. Implementing media literacy programs in schools and communities would also help prevent misinformation from being effective. This can be done by introducing digital literacy curricula that teach voters how to identify misinformation and by promoting public awareness campaigns about the dangers of xenophobic disinformation.<sup>102</sup>

## 1.5 U.S. Elections and Vaccine Disinformation

Vaccines have had a lengthy, largely positive, history in the U.S., dating all the way back to 1855 when Massachusetts became the first state to require the smallpox vaccine for children to attend school.<sup>103</sup> By 1998-1999, all but four states had vaccine requirements for students in K-12 education.<sup>104</sup> Immunizations have had extraordinary impacts on health, such as extending life spans and reducing the mortality rates of many diseases. The measles vaccine, for example, prevented 25.5 million deaths between 2000-2021, and the polio vaccine has brought cases down by over 99% since 1988.<sup>105</sup> These are remarkable scientific advances that should be regarded with admiration and a sense of responsibility to maintain and respect.

However, despite their clear importance, vaccines have never been under contention as much as they are today, because of their politicization. The basic understanding of vaccines as a necessity for a long and healthy life has been twisted into a partisan issue through the spread of disinformation, and the issue was on the frontlines in the most recent election cycle.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has played a major role in the spread of disinformation in regards to vaccinations. He was initially running for President, but dropped out of the race near the end of August, and instead put his support behind Donald Trump, who welcomed the endorsement with open arms.<sup>106</sup> Healthcare professionals raised concerns at the endorsement, considering RFK Jr. is known for his anti-vaccination rhetoric, going as far as to run an anti-vaccine group called Children's Health Defense. During the pandemic, in 2020, the organization doubled their profits, and was said to be targeting individuals more susceptible to their rhetoric, such as mothers and Black Americans.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Know Your Rights | Voting Rights | ACLU. (n.d.). American Civil Liberties Union. Retrieved February 21, 2025, from <https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/voting-rights>.

<sup>102</sup> Lazer, D. M. J., Baum, M. A., Benkler, Y., Berinsky, A. J., Greenhill, K. M., Menczer, F., Metzger, M. J., Nyhan, B., Pennycook, G., Rothschild, D., Schudson, M., Sloman, S. A., Sunstein, C. R., Thorson, E. A., Watts, D. J., & Zittrain, J. L. (2018). The science of fake news. *Science*, 359(6380), 1094–1096. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aao2998>.

<sup>103</sup> History of Vaccines RSS, *Timeline of Vaccination Mandates*, <https://historyofvaccines.org/blog/timeline-of-vaccination-mandates> (accessed February 19, 2025).

<sup>104</sup> Mayo Clinic, *History of Vaccine Requirements and Research Highlights*, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/history-disease-outbreaks-vaccine-timeline/requirements-research>.

<sup>105</sup> World Health Organization, *Counting the impact of vaccines*, <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/counting-the-impact-of-vaccines>.

<sup>106</sup> CNN, *Trump leads, and his party follows, on vaccine skepticism*, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/30/health/trump-vaccine-skepticism-partner-kff-health-news/index.html>.

<sup>107</sup> AP News, *How a Kennedy built an anti-vaccine juggernaut amid COVID-19*, <https://apnews.com/article/how-rfk-jr-built-anti-vaccine-juggernaut-amid-covid-4997be1bcf591fe8b7f1f90d16c9321e>.

This did not deter Trump from appointing Kennedy Jr. to his transition team<sup>108</sup>, nor from saying that he was considering banning vaccines, and that he needed to consult with his experts. The openly anti-vaccination attitudes of the new administration are concerning, especially considering we are already witnessing the detriments to public health by Trump, as well as the increasingly conservative republican party as a whole. From 2018 to 2022, overall trust in the scientific community reduced by 2% for Democrats, and 23% for Republicans.<sup>109</sup> Overall confidence in medicine saw no significant change for Democrats from 2018 to 2022, remaining around 38%, while Republicans dropped from 45% to 26%. This clearly demonstrates that Republicans are rapidly changing their views on vaccinations, which is unsurprising when reflecting on the anti-vaccination attitudes of their party leaders.

Unfortunately, these views are having quantifiable consequences in terms of health. In the 2022-2023 school year, vaccination exemption rates rose in 41 states, from 2.6% to 3%, the highest it has ever been.<sup>110</sup> In summer 2024, Oregon experienced its worst measles outbreak since 1991.<sup>111</sup> Vaccine disinformation has led to what would otherwise have been easily preventable deaths.

## 1.6 U.S. Elections and Economic Disinformation

Within democracies, disinformation can completely dismantle the institutions in place and push a voter base to create opinions on inadequate information. Another dimension of this would be economic disinformation perpetuated by political parties and leaders. In the context of the United States, disinformation represents a barrier to enjoyment of fundamental human rights. The topic of economic disinformation gained traction during the 2016 election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, since Trump had fed into the economic anxieties of the white working-class<sup>112</sup>. This resonated with that specific population due to the historical background of white supremacy, which refer to the systems which perpetuate power dynamics and privileges of white views. This context is important to understand the continued perpetuation of racial, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic stereotypes. By continuing to perpetuate these stereotypes, marginal communities are impacted and targeted through elections.

Awareness of economic disinformation during elections is highly important since the narrative and media can be easily twisted, causing voters to be swayed for one political party rather than another. During the 2024 election cycle, Trump was accused of spreading high levels of disinformation about the economy, specifically inflation, unemployment, and the GDP, which caused citizens to have inaccurate views, aiding his campaign and eventually resulting in his

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<sup>108</sup> CNN, *Trump leads, and his party follows, on vaccine skepticism*, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/30/health/trump-vaccine-skepticism-partner-kff-health-news/index.html>.

<sup>109</sup> AP NORC, *Major declines in the public's confidence in science in the wake of the pandemic.*, <https://apnorc.org/projects/major-declines-in-the-publics-confidence-in-science-in-the-wake-of-the-pandemic/>.

<sup>110</sup> Kolman and Meyer, "Routine Child Vaccination Rates Lower Than Pre-Pandemic Levels", *NCSL*, February 29, 2024, <https://www.ncsl.org/state-legislatures-news/details/routine-child-vaccination-rates-lower-than-pre-pandemic-levels>.

<sup>111</sup> CNN, *Trump leads, and his party follows, on vaccine skepticism*, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/30/health/trump-vaccine-skepticism-partner-kff-health-news/index.html>.

<sup>112</sup> Kuo, Rachel, and Alice Marwick. "Critical Disinformation Studies: History, Power, and Politics." *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, August 12, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-76>.

political victory.<sup>113</sup> However, upon assuming office, Trump started to dismantle U.S. institutions without taking economic actions promised during the election cycle. Additionally, the economic disinformation was in conjunction with xenophobia, causing further aggression towards marginalized communities. This cyclical tension continues to not only perpetuate stereotypes but also contributes to democratic backsliding, creating a nexus between disinformation and barriers to the enjoyment of human rights. Without proper authority, the dismantling of institutions harms the protections and safeguards around human rights, creating a misguided citizenry. Therefore, by misusing the media during the election cycle and promoting disinformation on the economy, leaders such as President Trump widen the inequality between income classes, continue to uplift and even worsen structural violence, and dismantle institutions in place to safeguard human rights.

Throughout the 2024 election cycle, economic disinformation emerged in various ways, notably surrounding inflation. Although inflation peaked at 9.1% in mid-2022 due to pandemic-related supply chain issues and geopolitical conflicts, the Federal Reserve's monetary policies stabilized prices, leading to a decline.<sup>114</sup> Despite this, President Trump and his allies have made false claims about the economy and exaggerated inflation, as the "worst in our nation's history."<sup>115</sup> However, there is evidence to the contrary: inflation had fallen from 9.1% to 2.7% by November 2024.<sup>116</sup> Nevertheless, many people faced financial hardship, with high prices for essential goods like eggs and gas.<sup>117</sup>

Another key aspect of economic disinformation during the election was taxation. In 2017, President Trump signed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act into law, and during this election cycle, he announced that he would be extending the TCJA; it would be "the biggest in the history of our country."<sup>118</sup> However, reports showed that these cuts primarily benefited the wealthy and failed to deliver promised economic benefits. According to the Tax Policy Center, households in the top 1% would receive cuts exceeding \$60,000, while those in the bottom 60% would see less than \$500.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, people earning under \$114,000 in 2016 saw "no change in earnings" due to these cuts, while executive salaries rose.<sup>120</sup> As explained by Pew Research Center, there is

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<sup>113</sup> West, Darrell M. "How disinformation defined the 2024 election narrative." Brookings. Last modified November 7, 2024. Accessed February 13, 2025. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-disinformation-defined-the-2024-election-narrative/>.

<sup>114</sup> Federal Reserve. "Monetary Policy Report – March 2024." Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 1 Mar. 2024, [www.federalreserve.gov/monetarypolicy/2024-03-mpr-summary.htm](http://www.federalreserve.gov/monetarypolicy/2024-03-mpr-summary.htm).

<sup>115</sup> Dorn, Sara. 2024. "Trump Falsely Claims Inflation 'Worst in Our Nation's History': Here's the Truth." Forbes, September 12, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/saradorn/2024/09/10/trump-falsely-claims-inflation-worst-in-our-nations-history-heres-the-truth/>.

<sup>116</sup> Trading Economics. 2024. "United States Inflation Rate." Trading Economics. 2024. <https://tradingeconomics.com/united-states/inflation-cpi>.

<sup>117</sup> Dale, Daniel. 2024. "Fact Check: Trump Won't Stop Inflating Inflation Numbers | CNN Politics." CNN. March 19, 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/19/politics/fact-check-donald-trump-inflation/index.html>.

<sup>118</sup> Luhby, Tami. 2024. "\$3.4 Trillion in Individual Tax Cuts Are Expiring next Year. Biden and Trump Would Handle It Very Differently | CNN Politics." CNN. June 13, 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/06/13/politics/tax-cuts-expiring-trump-biden/index.html>.

<sup>119</sup> "T17-0314 - Conference Agreement: The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act; Baseline: Current Law; Distribution of Federal Tax Change by Expanded Cash Income Percentile, 2025." 2017. Tax Policy Center. December 18, 2017. <https://taxpolicycenter.org/model-estimates/conference-agreement-tax-cuts-and-jobs-act-dec-2017/t17-0314-conference-agreement>.

<sup>120</sup> Kennedy, Patrick, Paul Landefeld, Christine Dobridge, and Jacob Mortenson. 2024. "The Efficiency-Equity Tradeoff of the Corporate Income Tax: Evidence from the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act." [https://patrick-kennedy.github.io/files/TCJA\\_KDLM\\_2024.pdf](https://patrick-kennedy.github.io/files/TCJA_KDLM_2024.pdf).

an ever-expanding income inequality in the United States with minority groups being more likely to live in lower-income U.S. households.<sup>121</sup>

Tariffs became an essential part of Trump's campaign, promising extensive tariffs to protect American industries and reduce the trade deficit, including a universal 10-20% tariff on imports and a 60% tariff on Chinese goods. Trump falsely portrayed tariffs as boosting U.S. manufacturing, creating jobs, and reducing illegal immigration.<sup>122</sup> However, such tariffs could face legal challenges under laws like the IEEPA and Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act. Tariffs may raise consumer costs, provoke retaliatory trade measures, and disrupt supply chains.<sup>123</sup>

The economic disinformation spread during the 2024 election cycle misled voters and manipulated public perception to serve political interests. While economic misinformation is not a new tactic, the rise of social media and digital platforms has allowed misleading narratives to spread. Politicians like Trump crafted a false reality that influences voter decisions and economic confidence by distorting facts about inflation, taxation, and trade policies.

## **2. Solutions: Using Citizens' Assemblies to Limit Disinformation and Secure Human Rights**

### **2.1 Feminist Democracy: Irish Reproductive Rights and Gender Equality Citizens' Assemblies**

As has been established, elections often allow for the spread of disinformation. This issue could be addressed through the implementation of citizens' assemblies as a complement or alternative to elections. The case of Ireland highlights the efficacy of these assemblies in preventing disinformation as well as affecting real policy changes. In 2016-2018, an Irish citizens' assembly convened to discuss several important issues, one of which being the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, which made abortion illegal except in cases where the mother's life was deemed to be in danger.<sup>124</sup> Ultimately, the assembly issued a recommendation to Ireland's Parliament to repeal this law. Upon deliberation, Parliament passed legislation that repealed the amendment.<sup>125</sup>

The assembly was composed of 99 members randomly chosen to represent the demographic makeup of the country including different ages, genders, and socioeconomic statuses.<sup>126</sup> During the time spent deliberating this issue, a panel of experts was brought in to provide background information and prevent the use of disinformation. This Expert Advisory Board included experts in the fields of political and social science, constitutional law, medical

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<sup>121</sup> Kochhar, Rakesh, Mark Lopez, and Tanya Ardit. "The State of the American Middle Class." Pew Research Center, May 2024. Accessed February 13, 2025. [https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/05/RE\\_2024.05.31\\_American-Middle-Class\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/05/RE_2024.05.31_American-Middle-Class_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>122</sup> Schneid, Rebecca. 2025. "What Are Tariffs and Why Is Trump in Favor of Them?" TIME. Time. February 2, 2025. <https://time.com/7212166/what-are-tariffs-trump-imposing-import-taxes/>.

<sup>123</sup> Maruyama, Warren, Lyric Galvin, and William Alan Reinsch. 2024. "Making Tariffs Great Again: Does President Trump Have Legal Authority to Implement New Tariffs on U.S. Trading Partners and China?" Csis.org. 2024.

<sup>124</sup> "About the 2016-2018 Citizens' Assembly," Citizens' Assembly, Accessed February 18, 2025, <https://citizensassembly.ie/previous-assemblies/2016-2018-citizens-assembly/>.

<sup>125</sup> "About the Citizens' Assembly Behind the Irish Abortion Referendum," Involve, May 30, 2018, <https://www.involve.org.uk/news-opinion/opinion/citizens-assembly-behind-irish-abortion-referendum>.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

law and ethics, and medicine and obstetrics. Additionally, the assembly was guided by six key principles: openness, fairness, equality of voice, efficacy, respect, and collegiality.<sup>127</sup> One particular quote from a member who participated in the 2016-2018 Assembly demonstrates the commitment to being guided by facts:

“I felt relieved that the rest of the country listened to the same amount of facts that we heard. I don’t think anybody went into this celebrating abortion being anything other than a tragic necessity at times. We were not guided by emotion. We were guided by facts and by experts. It seems that somehow that got into the national consciousness. I believe that as an exercise in deliberative democracy, the citizens’ assembly proved its worth.”<sup>128</sup>

This experience paints a starkly different picture than electoral systems, which are often manipulated by politicians who use disinformation and misinformation as a scare tactic to secure votes in their favor. Perhaps no example demonstrates this more clearly than Donald Trump publicly stating that Democrats are allowing abortions to take place after a child has been born.<sup>129</sup> In the U.S. 2024 Presidential Election, abortion became a central issue to candidates and voters. Many states had reproductive rights on the ballot, and these referendums won in seven out of ten states.<sup>130</sup> History has proved that the public consistently votes in favor of reproductive freedom. Despite this, the spread of misinformation led to the emergence of false narratives that attempted to sway voters towards candidates supporting restrictive abortion laws.<sup>131</sup>

Similar trends to the assembly concerning abortion were presented in the 2020-2021 Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality. The original goal of the assembly was to revise outdated language used in the constitution that used gender specific language, referring to “women in the home.”<sup>132</sup> It was broadened to address other gender equality issues as well, such as the pay gap and the disproportionate caregiving burden that is often placed on women.<sup>133</sup>

99 randomly chosen participants were selected, and the process of deliberation began in January 2020.<sup>134</sup> However, shortly after their work commenced, the COVID-19 pandemic brought operations to an abrupt halt. Several months later, the committee reconvened virtually, and continued to meet online with the last session ending in April 2021.<sup>135</sup> Due to the majority of the assembly being held online, it received a lack of attention, which experts say contributed to

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> “Trump Falsely Claims Democrats Support Abortions “After Birth” Here’s a Fact Check.,” CBS News, September 11, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-falsely-claims-democrats-support-abortions-after-birth/>.

<sup>130</sup> Guarnieri, Isabel, and Leaphart, Krystal, “Abortion Rights Ballot Measures Win in 7 out of 10 US States,” Guttmacher, November 24, <https://www.guttmacher.org/2024/11/abortion-rights-state-ballot-measures-2024>.

<sup>131</sup> Washington, Irving and Yilma, Hagere, “How Abortion Misinformation Gives Rise to Restrictive Abortion Laws” KFF, October 24, 2024, <https://www.kff.org/the-monitor/how-abortion-misinformation-gives-rise-to-restrictive-abortion-laws/#:~:text=False%20claims%20about%20abortions%20later,individuals%20seek%20abortions%20after%20birth>

<sup>132</sup> “Ireland Referendum Embarrassment for Politicians Shows What Happens If You Don’t Listen to Citizens,” Sortition Foundation, March 14, 2024, [https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/embarrassment\\_for\\_irish\\_politicians](https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/embarrassment_for_irish_politicians).

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Jane Suiter, Kirsty Park, and Yvonne Galligan, *Evaluation Report of the Irish Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality*, 2021, <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1041&context=aaschsslrep>.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

the proposed changes to the constitution - the family amendment and the care amendment - being ultimately struck down by the public vote.<sup>136</sup>

The clear and organized layout of citizens' assemblies enhances the members' ability to make educated and informed decisions on the topic. Gender equality assembly participants were presented with a variety of information concerning care work, pay inequalities, barriers to women's participation in society, parental care, and societal norms around gender.<sup>137</sup>

While the Irish government is not required to follow through with the recommendations of the citizens' assembly, they are required to review and publicly respond to them.<sup>138</sup> However, some argue language used in the proposals was watered down when implemented into policy, though there has never been a case where the government has completely disregarded the committee's decision. While the messaging of the recommendations following the assembly could have been improved, the assembly itself still proved effective in educating members on aforementioned gender equality topics and drafting proposed revisions to the constitution. These proposed revisions also help facilitate the approval of future revisions, and moves towards gender equality.

The Irish have demonstrated a clear ability to reach a unified and informed consensus on a variety of complex issues, as well as implement the recommendations proposed by the committee. Other countries such as the United States might consider applying a similar approach, especially considering the results of the 2024 Presidential Election. How can voters know what the truth is when they are bombarded by misinformation from all sources of media?<sup>139</sup> Additionally, powerful non-elected officials, such as Elon Musk, are heavily influencing campaign messaging on media platforms.

The U.S. system needs a radical change; the public cannot make an informed decision when presidential candidates are preaching hateful and incorrect rhetoric. An illustration of this is a statement made by Donald Trump during the presidential debate of November 2024 in reference to former Vice President Kamala Harris, "she wants to do transgender operations on illegal immigrants that are in prison".<sup>140</sup> This fear mongering rhetoric has little to do with informing voters on factual information, and is much more focused on fostering division and animosity within the country. Similar to the issue of abortion, this radical perspective of transgender people is not shared by the majority of the American public.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> "'No' in Referendums on Gender Equality," Bürgerrat, March 9, 2024, <https://www.buergerrat.de/en/news/no-in-referendums-on-gender-equality/#:~:text=Replace%20%22women%27s%20place%20in%20the.non%2Ddiscrimination%20in%20the%20Constitution>.

<sup>137</sup> Elaine O'Mahoney, Presentation to the Citizens' Assembly: Gender in Ireland Today: Key Facts, accessed February 21, 2025, <https://citizensassembly.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/gender-equality-key-facts-elaine.pdf>.

<sup>138</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)," The Citizens' Assembly, accessed February 21, 2025, <https://citizensassembly.ie/about/faq/>.

<sup>139</sup> Darrell M West, "How Disinformation Defined the 2024 Election Narrative," Brookings, November 7, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-disinformation-defined-the-2024-election-narrative/>.

<sup>140</sup> Paige Oamek, "Trump's Craziest, Most Idiotic, Right-Wing Mad Libs Line during Debate," The New Republic, September 11, 2024, <https://newrepublic.com/post/185839/trump-right-wing-mad-libs-trans-migrants-prison>.

<sup>141</sup> Daniel Lewis et al., "American Attitudes toward Transgender Rights," The Gender Policy Report, November 15, 2023, <https://genderpolicyreport.umn.edu/american-attitudes-toward-transgender-rights/>.

## 2.2 Queering Democracy: Irish Same-Sex Marriage Citizens' Assembly

Ireland's Citizens' Assembly on same-sex marriage is a groundbreaking example of deliberative democracy that played a crucial role in the country's path to marriage equality. The process began with the establishment of the Constitutional Convention in 2012, which was composed of randomly selected citizens and politicians.<sup>142</sup> This body was responsible for discussing significant constitutional issues, including legalizing same-sex marriage. The Convention ultimately recommended a referendum to allow same-sex couples to marry, a proposal that the government accepted. The 2015 referendum that followed resulted in an overwhelming victory for marriage equality, with 62.1% of voters supporting the change, making Ireland the first country to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote.<sup>143</sup>

The Citizens' Assembly, defined as a group of people selected by lottery from the general population to deliberate on important public questions, was a part of the newly elected Irish Government's promise to place citizens at the heart of political reform. Citizens' assemblies are structured in four parts: the selection of a random sample size, listening to presentations from professionals, deliberation between participants, and a decision-making phase. While the citizens' assembly cannot ratify legislation, they serve as an important advisory body for policymakers – especially those willing to listen to public opinion. Throughout this process, Irish policy makers took inspiration from *We The Citizens*, an organization focused on educating legislators on public opinion through the process of deliberation – the art of discussion. The *We The Citizens* model for deliberation and discussion became the inspiration for the Irish Constitutional Convention, and more particularly its Citizens' Assembly on Marriage Equality<sup>144</sup>.

One of the defining features of Ireland's approach was its emphasis on transparency and public trust in the deliberative process. The Citizens' Assembly model facilitated open discussions, uplifting the voices of diverse perspectives while grounding decisions in factual information rather than ideological rhetoric. The structured nature of the Assembly, with expert depositions and extensive debates, minimized the influence of disinformation, creating a more informed electorate. Ireland's Constitutional Convention sharply contrasts with electoral processes in countries like the United States, where misinformation and partisan manipulation often shape public debates, particularly in high-stakes elections. The Irish case demonstrated that when democratic processes prioritize clarity, inclusion, and deliberation, public trust in institutions strengthens, and misinformation loses its power.

While the Irish Citizens' Assembly on Same Sex Marriage was undoubtedly a milestone for LGBTQ+ equality, it is also immensely important for scholars to understand how Citizens' Assemblies directly support democratic values and ideals. The European Union Center for Not-for-Profit Law conducted a study on the efficacy of citizens assemblies. In this study, they found that representative governance models value quality over quantity by focusing their attention on

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<sup>142</sup> Eoin Carolan, Ireland's Constitutional Convention: Behind the hype about citizen-led constitutional change, *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2015, Pages 733–748, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/mov044>

<sup>143</sup> “2013-2014 Convention on the Constitution,” Citizens' Assembly, September 4, 2024, <https://citizensassembly.ie/previous-assemblies/2013-2014-convention-on-the-constitution/>.

<sup>144</sup> Farrell, David, Clodagh Harris, and Jane Suiter. “The Irish Vote for Marriage Equality Started at a Constitutional Convention.” *The Washington Post*, June 5, 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/06/05/the-irish-vote-for-marriage-equality-started-at-a-constitutional-convention/>.

getting a small sample size of people to have detailed and thought-provoking conversations about controversial topics. This allows lawmakers to successfully understand public opinion by analyzing how citizens respond to accurate information presented to them by accredited professionals<sup>145</sup>. The success of the Citizens' Assembly in Ireland highlights the broader importance of transparency in democratic decision-making. Ireland significantly reduced the spread of misleading narratives by ensuring the public had access to transparent, fact-based discussions, allowing for a more substantive and respectful national conversation.<sup>146</sup> This model offers valuable lessons for other democracies, particularly in an era where digital misinformation threatens electoral integrity, and limits the chances for wealthy or powerful individuals to exert inappropriate influence. The case of marriage equality in Ireland emphasizes that when citizens feel heard and trust in the process, democracy can lead to transformative and widely accepted social change. Strong, accountable relationships between citizens and government are what build resilient, democratic systems. Governments should develop stronger partnerships with citizens, enabling them to feel a greater sense of agency and acknowledged value within the political culture.

Social media, especially with the rise of artificial intelligence, can divide communities, and create polarization through the intentional dissemination of misinformation. This, in turn, causes citizens to lose faith in political institutions. Through expanding democratic institutions, specifically by establishing citizens assemblies, governments can increase public trust by showing that they listen to diverse perspectives. Artificial intelligence makes it significantly easier for people to spread misinformation online, and citizens assemblies could be a solution to increasing democratic representation. Citizens' assemblies present individuals with various informed perspectives and experiences and a comprehensive overview of a specific policy issue. During these conversations, participants are encouraged to think critically and to deliberate over multiple arguments to form their own stance. As the information regarding the referendum becomes public and widely communicated, this extensive evidence fosters informed public debate on the policy issue, helping to mitigate the effects of misinformation about it in society.

When analyzing the impact of misinformation on public policy and public trust, it is important to understand the impact of the Irish Citizens' Assembly on Same-Sex Marriage. By using this landmark policy as a case study for future social initiatives, it is clear that the 2015 Irish Citizens' Assembly on Same-Sex Marriage helped Irish policymakers – and the Irish public – make educated decisions on an important social issue through integrating accredited, unbiased information with public opinion and deliberation.

### **2.3 Greening Democracy: French, Irish, and Global Climate Assemblies**

The precursor to the model of Irish citizens' assemblies, the Irish Constitutional Convention (ICC), emerged during Ireland's economic meltdown in 2008-09 an economic calamity that hit the political system hard. Irish Citizens vented their anger in the 2011 general election, installing a new government. The ICC put ordinary citizens at the heart of the process.

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<sup>145</sup> European Center for Not-for-Profit Law. 2024. "Citizens' Assemblies: participatory democracy in action." ECNL. <https://ecn.org/news/citizens-assemblies-participatory-democracy-action>.

<sup>146</sup> Česnulaitytė, Ieva, and By. "Citizens' Assemblies: Democratic Responses to Authoritarian Challenges in Central and Eastern Europe." Citizens' Assemblies: Democratic Responses to Authoritarian Challenges in Central and Eastern Europe | IWM WEBSITE, November 21, 2024. <https://www.iwm.at/europes-futures/publication/citizens-assemblies-democratic-responses-to-authoritarian-challenges>.

Irish citizens would sit side by side with politicians with ordinary citizens comprising two-thirds of the 100 members, with members of parliament the other one-third. The ICC's citizen members were selected randomly, ensuring that they were there in their own right as ordinary citizens; they did not feel mandated as a result of fighting for office, nor did they feel duty-bound to represent vested interests. Rather than the norms of parliamentary grandstanding and debating from fixed positions, the norm was deliberation, with detailed discussion after becoming informed on all sides of the issue, respecting differing views, and being prepared to change one's mind.

Originally started as an experiment in democracy, Ireland's Citizens' Assembly has gained recognition for its sweeping accomplishments in advancing social justice. In 2015, Ireland's Citizens' Assembly passed a referendum on the constitution, legalizing same-sex marriage<sup>147</sup>, again in 2018, The Irish Citizens' Assembly led Ireland's efforts to vote in overturning an abortion ban<sup>148</sup>. But Ireland's Citizens' Assembly was not finished with just tackling issues of social inequality.

In 2018, the Citizens' Assembly released its Final Report on "How the State Can Make Ireland a Leader in Tackling Climate Change". Within this report were recommendations proposed by the Assembly. The recommendations were reached by a majority vote of the Assembly Members following two weekends of deliberation which focused on a broad range of issues, including the science of climate change, current efforts to tackle it in Ireland and internationally, energy generation and efficiency, transport policy in Ireland, current agriculture and land use policy and the climate change advisory council.<sup>149</sup> Irish climate advocates were initially skeptical about giving such a broad and complex issue to the Citizens' Assembly, however, Ireland's bottom-up approach to policy making is at the forefront of a trend towards more participatory, consultative democracies aimed at building popular consensus.

Ireland's Citizen Assembly has had profound impacts globally, for example, British politicians, including former prime minister Gordon Brown, are pointing to the Irish example in calling for a series of citizen assemblies on Brexit. Brown argues that this would lead to "constructive reconsideration by parliament of our relations with Europe"<sup>150</sup>. Furthermore, the model of the Irish Citizens' Assembly could also have the potential to build broad support for climate change efforts. The shift toward citizens' direct involvement in determining policies related to the climate internationally with the UN's intergovernmental panel of climate scientists cited education, information, and community approaches as accelerating changes in behavior, as long as the changes are seen to be distributed fairly.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Citizensinformation.ie, "Rights of Same-Sex Couples," [www.citizensinformation.ie](http://www.citizensinformation.ie), March 25, 2022, <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/birth-family-relationships/cohabiting-couples/rights-of-same-sex-couples/>.

<sup>148</sup> IFPA, "Abortion in Ireland: Legal Timeline," Irish Family Planning Association, 2018, <https://www.ifpa.ie/advocacy/abortion-in-ireland-legal-timeline/>.

<sup>149</sup> The Citizens' Assembly, "Publication of Citizens' Assembly Final Report on How the State Can Make Ireland a Leader in Tackling Climate Change | Citizens' Assembly," Citizens' Assembly, April 18, 2018, <https://citizensassembly.ie/publication-of-citizens-assembly-final-report-on-how-the-state-can-make-ireland-a-leader-in-tackling-climate-change/>.

<sup>150</sup> Gordon Brown, "A Citizens' Assembly Is Now the Only Way to Break the Brexit Deadlock," the Guardian (The Guardian, January 20, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/20/citizens-assembly-brexit-article-50-britain>.

<sup>151</sup> Megan Darby, "37 Things You Need to Know about 1.5C Global Warming," Climate Home News, October 8, 2018, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2018/10/08/37-things-need-know-1-5c-global-warming/>.

The French Citizens' Convention for the Climate (CCC) was established as a democratic experiment aimed at addressing climate policy through citizen participation while minimizing disinformation in decision-making. By using a democratic lottery system to select participants, the assembly hoped to ensure diverse representation and prevent powerful bodies such as political parties and fossil fuel lobbies from dominating the conversation.<sup>152</sup> The CCC's primary goal was to offer policy recommendations directly informed by scientific expertise and public deliberation, fostering an informed electorate and policy decision-making process.

A key impact of the CCC was its contribution to public awareness and political discourse. The assembly prompted significant public debate on climate transition and the role of citizens' assemblies in democratic governance. Moreover, this widespread attention helped raise the general public's awareness of climate issues.<sup>153</sup> Some assembly members even emerged as prominent figures in the media and even pursued political careers, further legitimizing the role of citizen participation in policy decisions.

Despite its promise, the CCC also highlighted the shortcomings of government follow-through on citizens' recommendations. While the Climate and Resilience Bill in 2021 incorporated some of the CCC's proposals, many were altered before becoming law.<sup>154</sup> The most significant shortcoming was the failure to pass the proposed constitutional amendment, which was modified by the government in the draft bill and then subsequently blocked by the French parliament, undermining President Macron's initial pledge to submit the assembly's proposals to parliament in an "unfiltered" manner.<sup>155</sup>

Beyond legislative alterations, the implementation of the CCC's recommendations faced further dilution. With 149 proposals in total from the assembly, only 15 total proposals were accepted that followed the "no filter principle."<sup>156</sup> Overall, "10% of the CCC's recommendations were accepted by the government without modification, 37% were modified or watered down, and 53% were rejected."<sup>157</sup> This discrepancy reveals a disconnect between the citizens' assembly process and actual policymaking. Moreover, the lack of transparency in the CCC's formation also raised concerns. "Decisions related to the CCC's launch and design choices were neither done with transparency nor public justification," potentially skewing the ideological diversity of participants.<sup>158</sup>

There are several ways for governments to better support citizens' assemblies and their proposals. One approach could be to mandate that a predetermined percentage of assembly proposals be implemented without alteration. Alternatively, governments could establish an

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<sup>152</sup> "Introducing Climate Assemblies." Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies. Accessed February 20, 2025. <https://www.knoca.eu/climate-assemblies>.

<sup>153</sup> "Introducing Climate Assemblies." Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies.

<sup>154</sup> "French Citizens' Convention on the Climate." Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies. Accessed February 20, 2025. <https://www.knoca.eu/national-assemblies/french-citizens-convention-on-the-climate>.

<sup>155</sup> Shiloh Vidon, Tamar. "After Bold Promises, Macron on the Defence over His Climate Policies." France 24, December 7, 2020. <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20201207-facing-criticism-macron-defends-his-government-s-climate-policies>.

<sup>156</sup> d'Allens, Gaspard, Nicolas Boeuf, and Léa Dang. "Convention Pour Le Climat : Seules 10 % Des Propositions Ont Été Reprises Par Le Gouvernement." Reporterre, le média de l'écologie, April 2, 2021. <https://reporterre.net/Convention-pour-le-climat-seules-10-des-propositions-ont-ete-reprises-par-le-gouvernement#>.

<sup>157</sup> Courant, Dimitri. "The Promises and Disappointments of the French Citizens' Convention for Climate." Deliberative Democracy Digest, June 9, 2021. <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/the-promises-and-disappointments-of-the-french-citizens-convention-for-climate/>

<sup>158</sup> Courant, Dimitri. "The Promises and Disappointments of the French Citizens' Convention for Climate."

independent oversight body to ensure transparency and accountability in assembly-related decisions. Other nations seeking to implement citizens' assemblies should learn from France's experience by enhancing the transparency of participant selection and ensuring that policymakers remain accountable for enacting assembly recommendations. By providing clearer legal commitments to uphold citizens' proposals, governments can strengthen trust in democratic innovation and counteract the spread of disinformation in policy debates. When properly implemented, citizens' assemblies offer a promising means of fostering informed decision-making and strengthening public confidence in democratic governance.

## 2.4 Citizens' Assemblies on Immigration

In today's day and age of severe political polarization and the rapid growth of social media, it is imperative that measures are put into place to mitigate disinformation's role in public influence. Immigration has been a leading point of division in the last few US presidential elections, but how the 2024 presidential election was surrounded by myths regarding immigration that evidently stuck with and heavily influenced a substantial number of U.S. citizens. September 10th's presidential debate is a prime example of how quickly immigration rhetoric can become salient amongst the population.

During the debate, Former President Donald Trump made numerous false accusations, one of the most bizarre being claims of Haitian immigrants eating pet cats and dogs in Springfield, Ohio.<sup>159</sup> He continued to peddle warnings to U.S. citizens about "millions and millions" of immigrants coming to the country and draining social services or taking jobs. These types of claims quickly became viral on social media platforms such as Facebook and X where communities feed off mutual fear and shared misconceptions, causing these beliefs to fester into further hysteria.

Narratives like these completely distract from discussions on benefits of immigration such as its positive impact on the economy and the workforce. The Center for Countering Digital Hate speaks to how far of a reach disinformation can have. The CCDH found that misleading or false claims made by Elon Musk on X leading up to the election have been viewed 2 billion times, one of the most viewed claims being that democrats were importing illegal voters.<sup>160</sup> With the rate at which this disinformation circulates, it is inevitable that we have had and will continue to have elections influenced by less informed voting decisions, and the communities this disinformation targets will remain to be at a disadvantage. Taking this into account, we must evaluate different methods of informing the public of accurate immigration data in order to prevent mass hysteria and foster informed discussion.

Citizens assemblies are one way in which other countries have attempted to keep the public well informed on topics at the forefront of today's politics. Members of a citizens' assembly are provided with detailed information regarding the issue from "a range of experts, stakeholders, and advocates."<sup>161</sup> They then conduct independent discussions with the aim of

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<sup>159</sup> Mike Catalini, Julie Carr Smyth, and Bruce Shipkowski, "Trump Falsely Accuses Immigrants in Ohio of Abducting and Eating Pets," AP News, September 12, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/haitian-immigrants-vance-trump-ohio-6e4a47c52b23ae2c802d216369512ca5>.

<sup>160</sup> Review of *Musk's Political Posts: How Elon Musk's Political Posts Amass More Views than All U.S. Political Campaign Ads on X's Disclosure Data Set*. n.d. Center for Countering Digital Hate

<sup>161</sup> "Citizens' Assemblies." 2024. Institute for Government. March 27, 2024. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/citizens-assemblies>.

considering the evidence that has just been presented to them and come to a conclusion. As a result, a set of recommendations are presented to policy-makers. Governments are not obliged to act on these recommendations but must explain why if they do not.<sup>162</sup> Citizen assemblies provide an educated space in which citizens with often different opinions can have difficult conversations and discussions. If our aim is to reduce disinformation and its negative effects on the realization of human rights, we must consider enacting this type of public participation. When it comes to immigration, citizens assemblies are one way we could foster a significantly more well-informed voting population. Citizens' assemblies on immigration have shown to be positive forms of conversation in various cases.

The case of the United Kingdom serves as an example. It is important to mention that during this time tensions were rising surrounding the UK wanting to leave the European Union, a decision that was eventually confirmed in 2016 through the Brexit referendum<sup>163</sup>. The National Conversation on Immigration was held in 2018, and proved to engage in critical discourse prompting the topic of the effects of immigration in the UK and its future in the country. These conversations were conducted by social justice organizations: *HOPE not Hate* and *British Future*. *HOPE not Hate* is an advocacy group who brings awareness to racism and extremism<sup>164</sup>. Similarly, *British Future* is an independent think tank and charity who focuses on informed debate on EU migration<sup>165</sup>.

Throughout 2018, these groups hosted over 130 meetings around the United Kingdom, in which they had everyday people as well as local authorities and community-based groups come together. To prepare for these discussions, “nationally-representative” research was conducted about the topic. Overall conclusions on these various citizens’ assemblies were that, contrary to what polarized media had been putting out, the public was much more nonpartisan on immigration. People were able to see how immigration was able to help the British economy, but also how citizens saw inter-community challenges in housing and education sectors. Those who lived in a much smaller area with less socioeconomic opportunities tended to feel as if immigrants were going to strain public resources, while the opposite remained true for those who lived in areas where there was more work.

To contrast this, these two organizations also created an online conversation in which the topic could reach more people. As expected, conversations were much more biased. Based on their research, out of the 9,327 people surveyed, about a third of them appeared opposed to immigration<sup>166</sup>. This proves that people oftentimes have a much louder voice when behind a screen. The in-person panels allowed for immigrants to be discussed as sentient people, rather than just numbers on a report. This in person assembly facilitated others to listen to people's experiences, thoughts, and arguments, rather than disinformation over-broadcasted in the media. Concerns surrounding harmful stereotypes were brought up as points of anxiety. It is through

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<sup>162</sup> “Citizens’ Assemblies.” 2024. Institute for Government. March 27, 2024. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/citizens-assemblies>.

<sup>163</sup> Barnier, Michel. n.d. “Timeline - The EU-UK withdrawal agreement - Consilium.” Consilium.europa.eu. Accessed February 19, 2025. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/the-eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement/timeline-eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement/>.

<sup>164</sup> Lowles, Nick. n.d. “About Us – HOPE not hate.” HOPE not hate. Accessed February 19, 2025. <https://hopenothate.org.uk/about-us/>.

<sup>165</sup> British Future. n.d. “About Us.” British Future. <https://www.britishfuture.org/about-us/>.

<sup>166</sup> Rutter, Jill, and Rosie Carter. 2018. “National Conversation on Immigration.” British Future. <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Final-report.National-Conversation.1.7.9.18.pdf>.

these discussions that people are able to express their concerns and think out loud about possible solutions that work for everyone.

Overall, this case shows how disinformation and the spread of false rhetoric about a national issue such as immigration should be discussed amongst various individuals with different opinions. This specific case shows that there is in fact middle ground for the reform of immigration policy, as shown in the EU.

## Conclusion

Disinformation in the media, education systems, and academia provides an outlet for politicians and companies to spew false information and harmful rhetoric to push their own agendas. This leads to polarizing topics, including sexism, racism, xenophobia, queer rights, vaccine and healthcare trust, and the stability of democracy to become even more heavily politically charged. During U.S. election cycles, these topics become widely debated and misinformation heavily fuels these debates. In fact, today, only 24% of the US population trusts the government, leaving 76% of the population feeling that the federal government is incompetent.<sup>167</sup> The danger of disinformation has undermined the public's confidence in their politicians and elections.

A rise in concerns regarding issues of deportation and anti-immigrant rhetoric exemplifies the xenophobic disinformation that is ramped up and spread during election cycles, substantially affecting both the leading narrative behind immigration politics and subsequently, how many citizens support those discriminatory policies. The amplification of sexist disinformation in the 2024 US election cycle adversely discourages women from participating in electoral and political processes. The attacks on Kamala Harris' identity, stereotypes reinforcing sexualization and regressive gender norms, as well as stigmas surrounding reproductive healthcare were all topics where disinformation permeated the election and situated sexist rhetoric at its forefront.

Along with sexism, racism is rooted in US electoral processes, bolstering oppressive belief systems, harmfully affecting nearly 30% of the US population, many of which identify as "BIPOC." Racist sentiments reiterated by politicians during the election cycle, fueled existing discriminatory fears and anxieties toward certain racial groups. The perpetuation of disinformation within economic policies, are intertwined with racist sentiments, as minority groups are more likely to be affected by economic inequality in the US. Disinformation spread by Trump regarding inflation, unemployment and the GDP further encouraged voting outcomes that aligned with the conservative party.<sup>168</sup>

The Trump administration also attacked public health and the historical success of vaccines.<sup>169</sup> Robert F. Kennedy Jr. the United States Secretary of Health and Human Services has been a major political actor in spreading anti-vaccine rhetoric, leading to healthcare officials and citizens concerned over the rise of preventable diseases. Ultimately, the widespread

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<sup>167</sup> The Partnership for Public Service. 2024. "The State of Public Trust in Government 2024." Partnership for Public Service.

<sup>168</sup> Swire B, Berinsky AJ, Lewandowsky S, Ecker UK. Processing political misinformation: comprehending the Trump phenomenon. *R Soc Open Sci.* 2017 Mar 1;4(3):160802. doi: <https://www.doi.org/10.1098/rsos.160802>.

<sup>169</sup> Ray, Rashawn, Gabriel R. Sanchez, and Elaine Kamarck. 2025. "RFK Jr.'s history of medical misinformation raises concerns over HHS nomination." Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rfk-jr-s-history-of-medical-misinformation-raises-concerns-over-hhs-nomination/>.

distribution of disinformation that occurred during the 2024 U.S. election cycle reinforced existing social inequalities, and through this, shaped the public perceptions and policy decisions in ways that will further marginalize vulnerable communities.

This report presents Citizens' Assemblies as a valuable complement to elections. The Irish Citizens' Assembly, which was designed to involve ordinary citizens in policy making, leading to the legalization of same-sex marriage through educated deliberation and debates rooted in fact, not ideology.<sup>170</sup> Then in 2016, the assembly repealed the Eighth Amendment which restricted abortion rights, leading to strengthened public trust in the decision-making process and showed the effectiveness of deliberative democracy over election-based systems. This assembly led to social change and climate justice and encouraged the creation of the French Citizens' Convention for the Climate (CCC).<sup>171</sup> The CCC was developed to shape climate policy through citizen participation and through trial and error, they found lessons for future citizen assemblies to learn from. In highlighting the benefits of the general assembly's evaluating issues of immigration; the case of the United Kingdom's use of this particular type of institution to critically assess the context of immigration in relation to the BREXIT policy found a level of success. Rather than allowing anti-immigration rhetoric to remain as a leading narrative, the guided discourse resulted in a more non-partisan understanding of the topic.

This report showcases the daunting influences of disinformation through the example of that the 2024 US election cycle, recommending Citizens' Assemblies as a plausible complement or alternative.

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<sup>170</sup> "About the 2016-2018 Citizens' Assembly," Citizens' Assembly, Accessed February 18, 2025, <https://citizensassembly.ie/previous-assemblies/2016-2018-citizens-assembly/>.

<sup>171</sup> "Introducing Climate Assemblies." Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies. Accessed February 20, 2025. <https://www.knoea.eu/climate-assemblies>.