

Beware of Novel Claims of 2020 Election Fraud

Any ostensibly new intelligence that the Trump administration might muster should be met with extreme skepticism.



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Voting & Elections

The Trump administration has recently escalated its campaign to cast doubt on the 2020 election as part of a broader effort to [undermine future elections](#) [link-1].

Senior political appointees [have enlisted](#) [link-2] intelligence officials and agencies to do so, even as these same agencies have repeatedly affirmed that the election was secure and accurate.

Most notably, in February, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) seized ballots and other sensitive materials from election offices in Fulton County, Georgia. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard was at the scene. While her presence at a law enforcement action was highly unusual, President Donald Trump had [reportedly asked her](#) [link-3] to oversee the raid as part of a broader mandate to investigate baseless claims of irregularities with the 2020 election. The

[affidavit](#) [link-4] supporting the search warrant stated that the investigation was instigated by Kurt Olsen, a White House appointee. After the raid, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) [revealed](#) [link-5] that it had previously probed voting machines used in Puerto Rico in 2020 for security vulnerabilities. ODNI staff have also [reportedly met with](#) [link-6] U.S. Attorney's Offices across the country to discuss alleged vulnerabilities in voting systems. And this month, the [FBI obtained records](#) [link-7] from an Arizona State Senate

investigation into the 2020 election results in Maricopa County.

Given the propensity of many [senior administration officials](#) [link-8] to repeat [debunked falsehoods](#) [link-9] about the 2020 election to justify dubious official actions such as the FBI raid and [Department of Justice \(DOJ\) investigations](#) [link-10], there is [reason to worry](#) [link-11] that federal agencies will continue to release reports that purport to bolster their discredited claims. These reports may include misleading allegations, raw intelligence that authorities had deemed not credible, cherry-picked data without needed context, or discussions of security vulnerabilities that were never exploited and only identified in the process of fixing them.

The public should approach such reports with extreme skepticism. Here are some questions to consider when reading them.

Are the sources objective?

The primary actors who are leading investigations into the 2020 election — and who are likely to contribute to any forthcoming reports — are not operating from an objective position.

The president has tasked Olsen, the White House director of election security and integrity, with

investigating the 2020 election. He is a [special government employee](#) [\[link-12\]](#) — a short-term employee exempt from certain federal ethics rules — and has [reportedly been given access](#) [\[link-13\]](#) to classified intelligence to conduct the investigation. Olsen, a legal activist, was a leader of the “Stop the Steal” movement who in 2020 [pushed the DOJ](#) [\[link-14\]](#) to file a lawsuit to block certification of results in battleground states that Biden had won, according to documents released by the House Oversight Committee. He also spoke with Trump on the phone [at least three times](#) [\[link-15\]](#) on January 6, 2021. In 2025, a [federal court upheld sanctions](#) [\[link-16\]](#) against Olsen for making “false, misleading and unsupported factual assertions” about Arizona’s voting system in an unsuccessful legal challenge to the state’s 2022 gubernatorial election.

Gabbard was previously [praised by Trump](#) [\[link-17\]](#) after her office [claimed](#) [\[link-18\]](#) that a report released last year proved that the Obama administration issued a “false intelligence report used to launch [a] years-long coup to undermine President Trump.” Reports suggest that her current investigations into the 2020 election [may be motivated](#) [\[link-19\]](#) by a desire to get back in Trump’s good graces after he had [rebuked her](#) [\[link-20\]](#) for public comments on other issues.

Forthcoming reports may also come from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), given that last year’s [executive order on elections](#) [\[link-21\]](#) directed the department to “review and report on the security of all electronic systems used in the voter registration and voting process . . . [including] the risk of such systems being compromised through malicious software and unauthorized intrusions into the system.” Secretary Kristi Noem held a [press conference in Arizona](#) [\[link-22\]](#) in February falsely claiming widespread voter fraud as well as [incorrectly stating](#) [\[link-23\]](#) that Congress had given DHS “authorities and duties” for running elections (something the Constitution clearly [leaves to the](#)

[states](#) [\[link-24\]](#)). About a week after this press conference, the acting special agent in charge of the Arizona field office of Homeland Security Investigations (a branch of DHS that typically focuses on drug cartels and human trafficking) [reportedly told](#) [\[link-25\]](#) the state attorney general’s office that he was investigating the 2020 election on “direction from D.C.”

Noem was subsequently dismissed for unrelated reasons, but her nominated successor, Sen. Markwayne Mullin, has also repeatedly denied the legitimacy of the 2020 election, [saying](#) [\[link-26\]](#) in January 2021 that “due to all of the fraud and uncertainty surrounding the 2020 election there is no way I can vote to certify the Electoral College.” Also at DHS, Heather Honey, the deputy assistant secretary for elections integrity (a position Noem created last year), has a history of [making false election claims](#) [\[link-27\]](#) as an activist; she has [continued to make false claims](#) [\[link-28\]](#) about the 2020 election since her appointment.

Future claims about the 2020 election may come from these individuals or from other political appointees whose motives are similarly compromised.

Have established protocols been followed?

Protocols are in place to [prevent federal agencies](#) [\[link-29\]](#) from exploiting sensitive election security information for political purposes. Since 2019, under the first Trump administration, the executive branch has [maintained](#) [\[link-30\]](#) “a notification framework to ensure that foreign intelligence regarding foreign malign influence and interference operations targeting U.S. elections is shared appropriately with government officials, the private sector, and the public to protect U.S. national security, including the integrity of our election processes.” One of its guiding principles is that “partisan politics shall not play a role in the decision to provide notifications.” An “experts’ group” of career intelligence analysts and other civil servants from across

relevant agencies makes the initial determination as to whether there should be a public notification of suspected interference.

When reading any report from the White House, the ODNI, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), or DHS related to election security or the 2020 election, it is critical to ask whether civil servants with elections and national security expertise drove the decision to release the new information according to extant processes and principles, or whether that decision was driven by political appointees. Similarly, consumers of such information should ask whether, in the process of deciding to release such information or author such reports, any civil servants resigned, were reassigned or terminated, or refused to participate.

Many of the career civil servants at the ODNI, DHS, CISA, and the DOJ tasked with detecting and deterring election interference have been [dismissed or reassigned](#) [\[link-31\]](#), or have resigned following the closure of their offices. In the case of the raid in Fulton County, [reporting indicates](#) [\[link-32\]](#) that the “special agent in charge of the FBI’s Atlanta field office was forced out . . . after questioning the Justice Department’s renewed push to probe Fulton County’s role in the 2020 election.” These departures may be leading to lapses in protocol and violations of legal responsibilities. [Critics have raised questions](#) [\[link-33\]](#) about whether the FBI agent who ultimately signed the affidavit upon which the search warrant relied followed the requirements to note evidence that would have cast doubt on the credibility of his sources, or contradictory conclusions from previous investigations.

As career civil servants are sidelined or pushed out by political appointees, the public should be all the more skeptical about the credibility of new allegations.

Is the information new?

While states are responsible for administering and securing elections, the federal government has played a

growing role in supporting them since 2016, as foreign threats to election integrity became more sophisticated. Federal agencies have collected and shared intelligence with state and local officials; offered guidance, assessments, and response support; and provided resources to help states better secure their systems. Through these efforts, federal agencies have collected a wide range of information on both potential threats to election infrastructure and their potential vulnerabilities.

Most critically, agencies including the State Department, the FBI, the CIA, DHS, and the National Security Agency have collected, analyzed, and shared intelligence on potential threats originating from foreign actors. The director of national intelligence, who facilitates information sharing among agencies, has access to intelligence they have collected. This includes raw intelligence — unprocessed, unevaluated data collected from single sources, such as surveillance, intercepts, or agents’ reports — that have not yet been analyzed or contextualized. In some cases, the source may intend to mislead or sow deceit. Career analysts are needed to determine whether raw intelligence is credible. Just because raw intelligence was not previously released does not mean it was not previously analyzed by national security experts.

To share information on emerging threats and vulnerabilities from the federal government and among states, CISA helped fund the Election Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center (EI-ISAC). The EI-ISAC provided cybersecurity services to election officials and enabled rapid real-time situational awareness and cybersecurity information sharing across the [election infrastructure community](#) [\[link-34\]](#), identifying national patterns and recommending mitigation measures. There is some danger that the information shared by this network could be taken out of context to suggest successful malicious actions when there were none.

CISA has also [worked with](#) [\[link-35\]](#) state and local officials on a voluntary basis over the past decade to

conduct cyber and physical security assessments, continuously scan election infrastructure systems and networks for internet-facing vulnerabilities, and offer incident management assistance. It has undoubtedly uncovered vulnerabilities through these efforts. Such discoveries are inevitable with close examination of any technology, especially when experts are given unfettered access to systems with the express purpose of identifying security gaps — a level of access that is not otherwise available in the election process. But identifying a vulnerability is not the same as proving that it was exploited. Sates have multiple safeguards in place to ensure a secure and accurate vote count, and CISA's goal in all cases was to mitigate vulnerabilities and address incidents as they arose.

The first Trump administration worked closely with state and local officials in the lead-up to the 2020 election and had full insight into any potential security threats. A year before the election, a [joint statement](#) [\[link-36\]](#) from the ODNI, DHS, the DOJ, and other federal agencies said that “in an unprecedented level of coordination, the U.S. government is working with all 50 states and U.S. territories, local officials, and private sector partners to identify threats, broadly share information, and protect the democratic process.” Ahead of the 2020 primaries, these agencies [reaffirmed](#) [\[link-37\]](#) that “the level of coordination and communication between the federal government and state, local, and private sector partners is stronger than it’s ever been.”

Yet no credible claims of rigged elections were ever raised. Instead, intelligence agencies [concluded](#) [\[link-38\]](#) in 2021 that there was “no indication that any foreign actor attempted to alter any technical aspect of the voting process in the 2020 US elections, including voter registration, casting ballots, vote tabulation, or reporting results.” They also assessed “that it would be difficult for a foreign actor to manipulate election processes at scale without detection by intelligence collection on the actors themselves, through physical and cyber security monitoring around voting systems across the country, or

in post-election audits.” Furthermore, the FBI and the DOJ, which have the primary responsibility for investigating foreign influence operations and enforcing federal election interference laws more generally, never brought charges against *any* actor for tampering with or manipulating any aspect of the voting process in a way that would impact the results.

Is context included?

Every state has slightly different election security protocols, but all states have redundant layers of security to protect the integrity of their election results. Given [what we know](#) [\[link-39\]](#) about the tropes and falsehoods about elections that administration officials have relied on in recent months and years, any forthcoming report on election security from the government will likely concern voting machines, noncitizen voting, election workers, or mail voting. Allegations or disclosures that appear damning in isolation may come to appear trivial or innocuous when viewed in context.

Voting machines. Election officials understand that no technological system is completely secure, which is why they implement a series of checks to ensure an accurate vote count. Voting machines are tested and certified to state and federal standards before deployment. Election officials typically test voting systems before each election to check that they are functioning correctly and conduct postelection audits to verify that machines counted ballots accurately. Most importantly, in 2020, [98 percent](#) [\[link-40\]](#) of all votes were cast with paper. In the most scrutinized contests (such as Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin), those paper records were used to confirm the accuracy of election results through audits and recounts. We can expect an even higher percentage of votes to be cast on paper in future elections.

Noncitizen voting. Federal law dictates that only U.S. citizens can vote in federal elections. Voters must swear that they are a citizen under penalty of criminal

prosecution when registering, and ineligible voters face severe penalties, such as jail time or deportation. Because of these penalties and the rigorous safeguards that states have in place to prevent ineligible voters from casting ballots, instances of noncitizen voting are extremely rare. States such as Georgia, Idaho, Louisiana, and Utah have all [undertaken audits](#) [\[link-41\]](#) in recent years to identify possible noncitizen voting and have found potential instances that represented minuscule fractions of 1 percent of all votes cast, in no case approaching a level that could plausibly affect an election's outcome.

Election workers. Because elections are run locally, the people who administer them, oversee voting, and count ballots are members of their communities. No one is infallible, and with something as logistically complicated as an election, mistakes are bound to happen on occasion. Election officials plan for these possibilities and have [procedures](#) [\[link-42\]](#) to ensure that only eligible voters can cast ballots and that every vote is counted accurately. When lawsuits claimed that errors prevented an accurate election result in 2020, judges [repeatedly rejected them](#) [\[link-43\]](#).

Mail voting. Perhaps no form of voting has come under greater attack than mail voting, which dates back to the Civil War, when it allowed soldiers to cast ballots. In the years since, states have developed protocols to ensure the integrity of such ballots.

[Thirty-one states](#) [\[link-44\]](#) verify signatures. Voters must sign their ballot envelopes; election workers are trained to compare signatures across records, sometimes with techniques used by police; uncertain cases are typically reviewed by bipartisan teams; and in [30 states](#) [\[link-45\]](#), voters are contacted if a signature is missing or inconsistent. Suspected fraud is referred to law enforcement.

Additional protections prevent duplicate or unauthorized voting: [42 states](#) [\[link-46\]](#) require voters to request a

mail ballot, verifying that only one ballot is issued per voter and that it is issued to the correct address, while the remaining [8 states](#) [\[link-47\]](#) send mail ballots to all eligible voters and regularly update their registration records to ensure that mail ballots reach the correct address. Ballots are sent in individualized packets and often include unique serial numbers or barcodes; nearly every state provides ballot tracking to reduce the risk of diversion in transit. Together, these and other measures create a layered security framework backed by strict penalties for fraud, instances of which are exceptionally rare.

How do the allegations square with previous audits and investigations?

The 2020 presidential election was one of the most scrutinized in American history. Georgia conducted [a full hand recount](#) [\[link-48\]](#) of nearly 5 million ballots, confirming Biden's margin of victory there. The vote in Arizona's Maricopa County underwent multiple audits, including a [Republican-commissioned review](#) [\[link-49\]](#) by the firm Cyber Ninjas, which ultimately confirmed Biden's win in the state. [Michigan conducted](#) [\[link-50\]](#) a statewide risk-limiting audit, full hand-counts in more than 200 precincts, and an audit of processes for counting absentee ballots in four of its largest jurisdictions.

In total, [more than 60 lawsuits](#) [\[link-51\]](#) challenging the 2020 results were filed in state and federal courts nationwide, and nearly all were dismissed or rejected — by judges appointed by both Republican and Democratic presidents — due to [lack of credible evidence](#) [\[link-52\]](#). The DOJ, when it was still led by Trump's attorney general, William Barr, said that it [found no evidence](#) [\[link-53\]](#) of fraud sufficient to change the election's outcome. The leaders of CISA, the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, and national associations of election officials [called the 2020](#)

[election](#) [\[link-54\]](#) “the most secure in American history.” State election officials from both parties, including Republican secretaries of state in contested states such as Arizona and Georgia, certified the results and [defended their integrity](#) [\[link-55\]](#). These independent bipartisan and nonpartisan reviews consistently reached the same conclusion: The 2020 election reflected the will of the voters, and no errors prevented the outcome from being correctly determined.

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The federal government — including the ODN and all other federal agencies — does not administer elections. The Constitution instead [tasks state and local officials](#) [\[link-56\]](#) with running elections, under rules set by Congress and states. These officials deploy rigorous

and layered checks to ensure the security and accuracy of elections. When their work has been tested through audits and recounts and evaluated by courts, the results have been consistent: Modern elections in the United States — in 2020 or otherwise — have been secure and accurate.

Any new claim from the federal government to the contrary should be met with extreme skepticism. The public should question the means and motives of political appointees advancing these claims. Putting forth manufactured or misleading intelligence to justify official actions should be considered an outrageous abuse of power. And the public must strongly reject any efforts to use misleading claims to [undermine future elections](#) [\[link-57\]](#).

MORE ON

[Election Integrity](#) [\[link-58\]](#)

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Links

[link-1: undermine future elections](#) <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/trump-administrations-campaign-undermine-next-election>

[link-2: have enlisted](#) [https://www.wsj.com/politics/elections/spy-chief-tulsi-gabbard-is-hunting-for-2020-election-fraud-07ea2383?](https://www.wsj.com/politics/elections/spy-chief-tulsi-gabbard-is-hunting-for-2020-election-fraud-07ea2383?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=AWETSqdlHwBYWwEWSbLOyK37iyugREHdcCmr1BNEp6uUjxJbbtPDT5Dn7I1&gaa_ts=6993364f&gaa_sig=xK1unOEdayTIBLrC_6ZIA1tFXyI44I6rXA39-dcQt1HXOaAXCETCEkKIOLEoRTyB1XYfDSUWalmXcCidsJFRQ%3D%3D)

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[link-3: reportedly asked her](#) <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/09/us/politics/tulsi-gabbard-2020-election.html>

[link-4: affidavit](#) https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.gand.355087/gov.uscourts.gand.355087.22.2_1.pdf?inline=1

[link-5: revealed](#) https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-spy-chiefs-office-investigated-voting-machines-puerto-rico-2026-02-04/?utm_source=braze&utm_medium=notifications&utm_campaign=2025_engagement

[link-6: reportedly met with](#) https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/2026/03/arizona-election-investigations/686310/?gift=AwR_TGzSRSrLueG5W7xh0Rc3QzSjM1KLxfEr-dJMZ43E

[link-7: FBI obtained records](#) <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/09/nyregion/fbi-subpoena-arizona-maricopa-county-election.html>

link-8: senior administration officials <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/02/03/trump-cabinet-2020-election-deniers/>

link-9: debunked falsehoods <https://www.democracymagazine.com/analysis/trumps-administration-is-full-of-election-deniers-theyre-already-working-to-rig-the-vote/>

link-10: Department of Justice (DOJ) investigations <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/trump-directs-doj-to-investigate-former-administration-officials-who-criticized-him>

link-11: reason to worry <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/02/09/kurt-olsen-2020-election-intelligence-00771580>

link-12: special government employee <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/202>

link-13: reportedly been given access <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/02/09/kurt-olsen-2020-election-intelligence-00771580>

link-14: pushed the DOJ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/15/us/politics/trump-justice-department-election.html>

link-15: at least three times <https://www.businessinsider.com/who-trump-spoke-to-on-the-phone-on-day-of-january-6-riots-timeline-2022-3>

link-16: federal court upheld sanctions <https://www.dailyjournal.com/article/387216-federal-appeals-court-split-on-attorney-sanctions-in-arizona-ballot-case>

link-17: praised by Trump <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-live-white-house-holds-news-briefing-as-house-ends-session-early-over-epstein-vote>

link-18: claimed <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/press-releases-2025/4090-pr-18-25>

link-19: may be motivated <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/09/us/politics/tulsi-gabbard-2020-election.html>

link-20: rebuked her <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/20/us/politics/trump-tulsi-gabbard-iran.html>

link-21: executive order on elections <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/presidents-executive-order-elections-explained>

link-22: press conference in Arizona <https://azmirror.com/2026/02/13/kristi-noem-was-unable-to-cite-single-election-fraud-case-during-secretive-arizona-visit/>

link-23: incorrectly stating <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGZnzhz25c>

link-24: leaves to the states <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/states-not-president-run-elections-america>

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link-26: saying <https://perma.cc/444Y-DLUX>

link-27: making false election claims <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/why-future-federal-reports-election-security-may-be-unreliable>

link-28: continued to make false claims <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/22/us/politics/trump-election-deniers-voting-security.html>

link-29: prevent federal agencies <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/10/28/the-us-spies-who-sound-the-alarm-about-election-interference>

link-30: maintained https://www.dni.gov/files/FMIC/documents/Overview_of_the_Process_for_the_Executive_Branch_to_Notify_the_Public.pdf?inline=1

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link-33: Critics have raised questions <https://thedispatch.com/article/fbi-affidavit-fulton-county-2020-voting-records-flaws/>

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link-39: what we know <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/what-expect-next-trump-administrations-strategy-meddle-vote>

link-40: 98 percent <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/some-good-news-donald-trump-we-already-use-paper-ballots>

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link-45: 30 states <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/table-15-states-with-signature-cure-processes>

link-46: 42 states <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/voting-outside-the-polling-place>

link-47: 8 states <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/table-18-states-with-all-mail-elections>

link-48: a full hand recount <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/georgia-expected-release-results-trump-biden-hand-recount-n1248234>

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link-52: lack of credible evidence <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aqorZ61AYFqZU-EDQBBzjqfvAoC5nKcB/view?pli=1>

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link-55: defended their integrity <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/its-official-election-was-secure>

link-56: tasks state and local officials <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/states-not-president-run-elections-america>

link-57: undermine future elections <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/timeline-trump-administrations-efforts-undermine-elections>

link-58: Election Integrity <https://www.brennancenter.org/topics/voting-elections/election-integrity>