

Big Tech Voter Registration & Civic Engagement Tools

November 2, 2020

Social media has become an increasingly popular form of communication, and also plays a significant role in the spread of misinformation. After the 2016 U.S. presidential election, several platforms were criticized for their inaction in dispelling misinformation, so prior to the 2020 election, several platforms have taken steps to promote voter registration and civic engagement. This memo examines election-related policy changes and initiatives designed by Facebook, Google, Snapchat, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube.

Authors: Bronte Kass, Michelle Ly, Chase Small, Olivia Jenks, and Mikaela Pyatt

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	1
Introduction	1
Specific Initiatives	2
Facebook	2
Google	6
Snapchat	8
Twitter	10
TikTok	12
YouTube	12
Conclusion	13

I. Introduction

In the run-up to the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, social media platforms have launched a series of initiatives related to voter mobilization and civic education. With hundreds of millions of users, tech companies are well positioned to influence the attitudes and behaviors of their audiences. According to [the Pew Research Center](#), in 2018, roughly three-quarters of the public used one or more of eight platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, WhatsApp, Pinterest, and

LinkedIn), with a typical American using a minimum of three of these platforms. Usage of electronic devices and social media platforms has only increased since then, especially in recent months as the COVID-19 pandemic has made Americans ever more reliant on technology and connectivity.

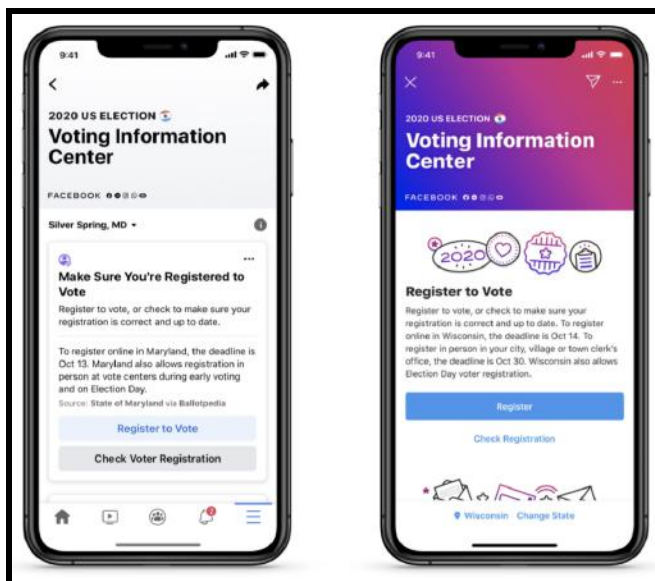
Following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, during which foreign interference and misinformation played an influential role, several technology companies were criticized for inaction towards abuse on their platforms and lack of voter engagement. Consequently, many platforms have designed new initiatives and introduced a series of relevant policy changes for the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

Facebook, Google, Snapchat, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube, in particular, have taken steps to promote voter registration and civic education. For example, through the creation of the Voter Information Center, Facebook aims to register 4 million voters by providing all users with verified information from election officials and nonpartisan partners on how to register and vote in the fall. Google is enhancing security and transparency, connecting more platform users to the democratic process, and updating its search features for voter registration and information on a state-specific level. Snapchat has designed four applications on its platform: a voter registration tool, voter guide, user-specific sample ballots, and checklist. Twitter launched an election hub that communicates information on voter registration, pathways for early voting such as requesting an absentee ballot, and guidance for voting safely during the COVID-19 pandemic. TikTok created an in-app guide that features information such as how to vote as a student, overseas, or as a person with disabilities, and finally, YouTube is providing context and elevating election night coverage from authoritative news partners for related news and information queries in the search results and “watch next” panels.

II. Specific Initiatives

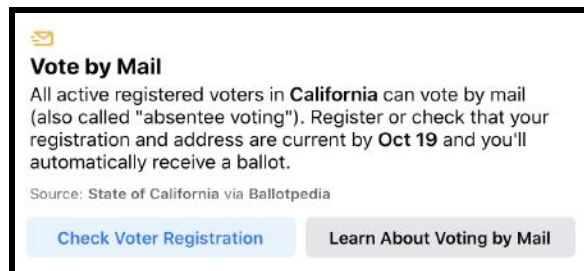
A. Facebook

In June 2020, Facebook announced its plan to launch [its voting information effort](#). With the goal of registering 4 million new voters, the company unveiled [the Voting Information Center](#), through which it aims “to help every eligible voter in the US who uses [their] platform vote this year.” Facebook expects the hub to reach at least 160 million Americans, and CEO Mark



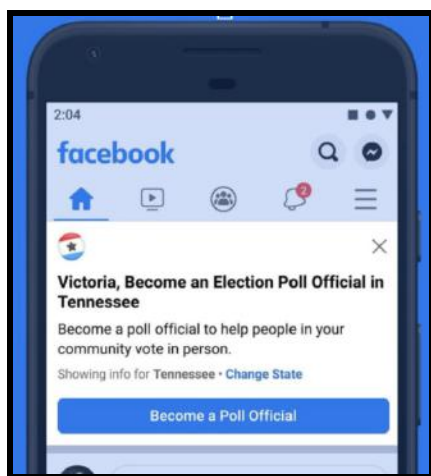
Zuckerberg [announced](#) that in the tool's first three days, nearly 24 million clicks were driven to registration websites. As of late September, [39 million visits](#) have been made. The company projects, based on conversion rates with its partner states, that [an estimated 2.5 million Americans](#) registered across Facebook, Instagram, and Messenger collectively.

[Critics](#) suggest, however, that the effort got off to a slow start. The Voting Information Center was not launched until two months after the initial announcement. Moreover, a July 4th voter registration drive, originally intended to run on July 3rd and 4th, and to include Instagram and Messenger, was in the end limited only to Facebook for one day.



Based on lessons from its COVID-19 Information Center, the Voting Information Center serves as the company's primary tool for providing platform users with information about how to register and vote. Notifications are sent at the top of Instagram and Facebook, and targeted by age and location, so individuals of voting age can see relevant information in their state. The tool helps users check their registration status or register directly through their state elections board or [TurboVote](#).

[Available in twelve languages](#), the Voting Information Center sources its information directly from state election officials, as well as from partners such as [VoteRiders](#), [Ballotpedia](#), and the [Bipartisan Policy Center](#). It summarizes state-specific vote-by-mail information, upcoming deadlines, and early voting options, so users can learn whether their state has expanded vote-by-mail options and thus request an absentee ballot, if available. It also displays information for U.S. voters who serve in the military or live overseas.



The tool features opportunities for platform users to serve as poll workers, and free ad credits are being provided to state election authorities to help with poll worker recruitment. Alongside this effort, Facebook has scaled up its [poll worker recruitment](#) by pushing a message to U.S. users over the age of 18 and offering paid time off to its employees located in the United States who volunteer to staff the polls.

The Voting Information Center is the most recent component of Facebook's approach to [preventing election interference](#). A voting alerts feature helps state and local

authorities reach constituents with important voting-related updates, and labels are added to federal politicians' posts that discuss voting.

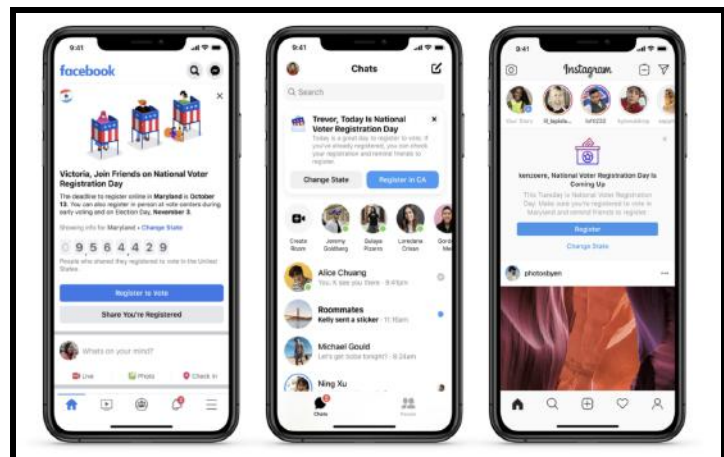


In a first for the platform, Facebook is running a campaign for the company and its apps together—titled “[More Questions, More Answers](#)”—in order to encourage individuals to use the Voting Information Center. The campaign is being featured across national broadcast, cable, radio, and digital homepage takeovers within lifestyle and news outlets. Streaming on the Facebook App page, Facebook Watch hosted a special [Vote-A-Thon 2020](#) to promote voter registration with notable public figures.

In September, Facebook [announced](#) additional updates, including plans to publish information (e.g., video tutorials about absentee voting and state deadlines for registration and voting) on a daily basis at the top of Facebook and Instagram until Election Day. Furthermore, the platform is [collaborating](#) with officials to remove misinformation about voting; to highlight accurate information about voting safely; to attach an informational label to content seeking to delegitimize the outcome of an election or the legitimacy of voting methods; and to enforce violence and harm policies to include election officials themselves. Information about election results will be provided in partnership with Reuters and the National Election Pool.

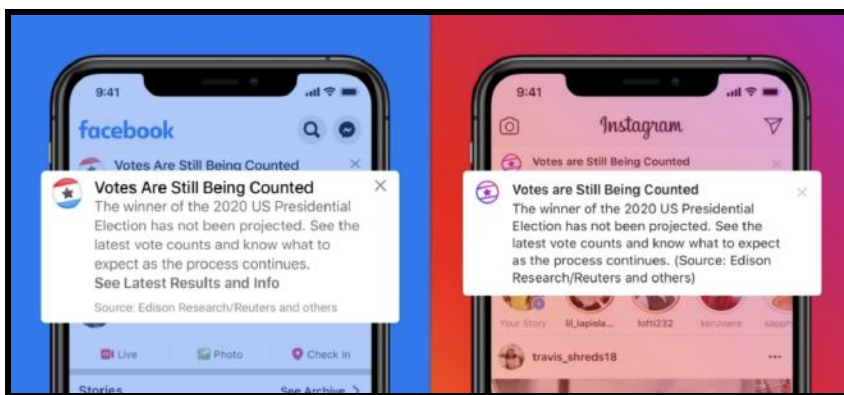
For National Voter Registration Day on September 22nd, Facebook unveiled a campaign with a multi-day promotion of notifications about voter registration at the top of Facebook, Instagram, and Messenger, themed stickers, new challenges, and a designated “Register to Vote” story.

Because the International Fact-Checking Network is now available on WhatsApp, accurate information



about voting is currently accessible in [English](#) and [Spanish](#). Similarly, WhatsApp makes available a chat feature with [Vote.org](#) to provide users with information on how to register or request an absentee ballot, and provide help, if they encounter a problem at the polls. Finally, Facebook will be blocking new political and issue ads beginning October 27, which experts [contend](#) might muzzle important speech (e.g., time sensitive information and reminders) and disproportionately burden challenger campaigns, while favoring more powerful incumbents.

Launched in 2018, [the Elections Operations Center](#) will be again activated for real-time monitoring of potential abuse across the network. A parallel viral content review system is in operation to flag posts and serve as an additional safety net.



Regarding [election results](#),

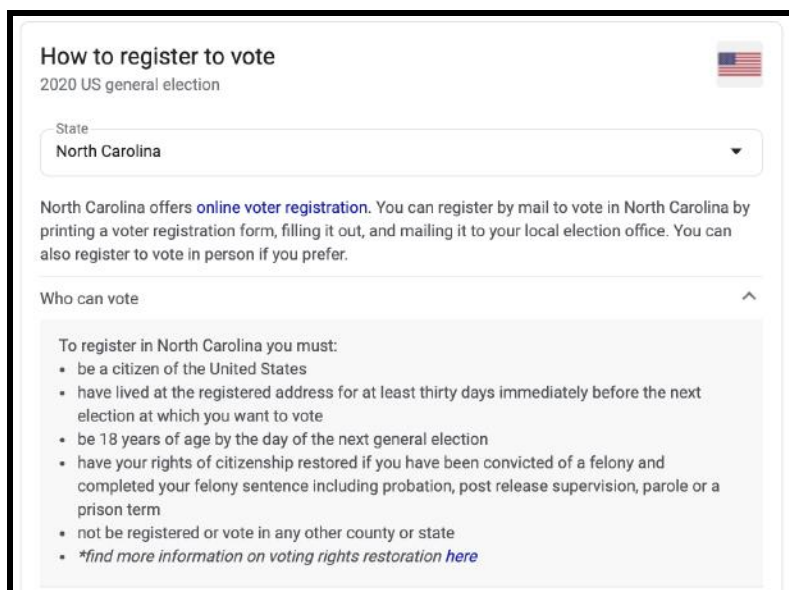
Facebook and Instagram will display a notification and apply labels to candidates' posts directing people to the Voting Information Center. If a candidate or party declares victory before a race is called by major media outlets, specific information will be provided in the notifications to clarify that the counting process is still ongoing and a winner has not yet been determined. If the victory of a candidate who is declared the winner by major media outlets is contested by another candidate or party, Facebook and Instagram will show the name of the declared winning candidate, and posts from presidential candidates will be labeled with a link to the Voting Information Center.

In parallel with removing content from the platform that features coordinated interference by a group or weapons brought by individuals to polling places, Facebook will [remove](#) calls for poll watching engagement that use militarized language or suggest a goal of intimidating, exerting control, or displaying power over election officials or voters. Facebook will continue its communication with state attorneys general and other federal, state, and local law enforcement officials, so that action can be taken quickly when potential voter interference is identified. Finally, the platform [will temporarily pause](#) all social-issue, electoral or political ads in the United States after the polls close on November 3 to reduce opportunities for abuse or confusion. Advertisers will be informed when the policy is lifted.

B. Google

In parallel with equipping campaigns against threats, Google is supporting election-related engagement by educating voters, connecting individuals to the democratic process, and enhancing election security and transparency. YouTube has released [a summary](#) that similarly reviews its support of and policies surrounding elections.

In helping voters access authoritative information, the company recently released two [new Google Search features](#) which provide detailed information about how to vote and how to register to vote. If a user searches “*how to register to vote*,” relevant state-specific information will appear, including deadlines and registration options. For example, a user in North Carolina would see the following:



The tool also offers information in a dropdown menu about voter registration online, by mail, on Election Day, in-person, and for military and overseas voters.

Similarly, if a user searches for “*how to vote*,” the search engine will generate details on ID or other requirements, registration and voting deadlines, and guidance for different means of voting, i.e., in-person or by mail. A user in Wisconsin would therefore see the following:

How to vote

2020 US general election

State

Wisconsin ▼

Election day is Tuesday, November 3, 2020. Wisconsin will mail all registered voters an application to vote absentee prior to the election. You can also vote in person. Wisconsin offers early voting.

Vote in person ^

Vote on election day

Voters registered in Wisconsin can look up where to vote on [Wisconsin's site](#).

Vote early

Wisconsin voters can also vote before Election Day through a process called absentee in-person voting. The period for absentee in-person voting runs from Tuesday, October 20, 2020 to Sunday, November 1, 2020, but dates and hours may vary based on where you live.

What to bring

- You will need to show a photo ID to vote in Wisconsin. An acceptable photo ID is not required to contain a current address. These photo IDs are acceptable and can be unexpired or expired after the date of the most recent general election, currently, the November 6, 2018 election: Wisconsin DOT-issued driver license, even if driving privileges are revoked or suspended; a Wisconsin DOT-issued identification card; military ID card issued by a U.S. uniformed service; U.S. passport; an identification card issued by a federally recognized Indian tribe in Wisconsin
- The following photo ID is also acceptable for voting purposes, and can be expired after November 6, 2018: a photo identification card issued by a Wisconsin accredited university or college that contains date of issuance, expiration date no later than two years after issuance, and signature of student (must be accompanied by a separate document that proves enrollment).
- The following photo IDs are also acceptable for voting purposes, but must be unexpired: a veteran's photo identification card issued by the Veterans Health Administration of the federal Department of Veterans Affairs; a certificate of naturalization that was issued not earlier than two years before the date of an election at which it is presented; a driving receipt issued by Wisconsin DOT (valid for 45 days); an identification card receipt issued by Wisconsin DOT (valid for 45 days).
- Voters without ID: If you are unable to provide photo ID, you will be able to vote a provisional ballot. Your provisional ballot will not count unless you provide an acceptable photo ID to your municipal clerk in person by 4:00 p.m. the Friday after the election.

In collaboration with non-partisan, third-party partners, such as [Democracy Works](#) (a team of software developers, public policy experts, and civic organizers), Google is aggregating official data from state and county election administrators. Google also provides links to official state government websites. The company updated [the 2020 Election experience](#) on Google News to include extensive coverage of major issues, live streams of major events, and reminders of registration and voting

timelines. It also promotes YouTube as a platform for people to access and watch political debates and event live streams, emphasizing that they are trying to [elevate “quality content”](#) from authoritative voices for search results on election information that are prone to misinformation.

In partnership with USC Annenberg’s program, Google is expanding [its efforts](#) to protect political campaigns from digital attacks, helping nearly 4,000 participants in all fifty states . Alongside these initiatives, Google has created [Protect Your Election](#), a suite of free tools that help protect candidates, campaigns, and journalists from phishing and denial of service (DDoS) attacks. Protect Your Election aims to support campaigns to ensure that voters are receiving transparent, accurate, and untampered election-related information. Furthermore, Google has committed to enforcing policies on [advertisements](#) that undermine the democratic process, such as promoting false information about the census or voting process. Google expects to take action on a limited number of political ads—[only those with clear violations](#) or those that include [illegally obtained materials](#)—because it maintains “that robust political dialogue is an important part of democracy, and no one can sensibly adjudicate every political claim, counterclaim, and insinuation.” However, the Tech Transparency Project (TTP) found that Google was pushing false ads to Americans who searched how to vote. Search terms like “register to vote,” “vote by mail” and “where is my polling place” generated ads linking to websites that charge large voter registration fees, harvest user data or plant unwanted software on people’s devices. The company has since [removed](#) the ads.

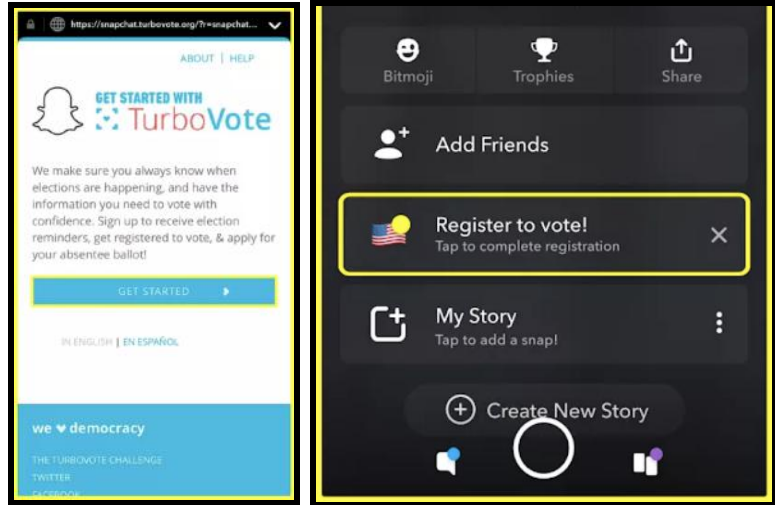
In October, [Google Search and Maps](#) began to provide information on where to vote (e.g., if a user searches “early voting locations” or “ballot drop boxes near me”) and show nearby voting or ballot drop box locations. Google Assistant also can share details on where to vote nearby on an Assistant-enabled phone, smart speaker, or Smart Display. Through the Voting Information Project, Google hopes to share information on over 200,000 available locations across the United States. Google [announced](#) a collaboration with The Associated Press to provide federal and state level race election results in over seventy languages to users of Google Search and Assistant. Real-time election night live streams from major news providers will also be available on YouTube.

C. Snapchat

During the 2018 midterm elections, Snapchat partnered with TurboVote to [promote National Voter Registration Day](#) to its users. According to Democracy Works, [450,000 individuals](#) on the platform used the tool to register successfully, of which [57% cast a ballot](#). In partnership with Get to the Polls, Snapchat also helped [users determine their voting locations](#) using its Snap Map feature, a location sharing and mapping tool.

For the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Snapchat is promoting four applications on its platform, whose features include a voter registration tool, voter guide, user-specific sample ballots, and checklist.

1. *Voter Registration.* The voter registration tool will allow users [to register to vote](#) directly on Snapchat and includes a tracker to monitor how many users have registered through the app. (By mid-September, [over 400,000 users](#) had already registered using the tool, nearly matching 2018 results.) Its [newest voter](#)



[registration initiative](#) also pushes alerts and reminders to U.S. user profiles when they turn 18, with directions to register to vote. The messages contain a link to a TurboVote registration page, which is also accessible from relevant news stories on the platform. Snapchat is encouraging users to register and vote with curated “Our Stories” centered on the election, and an “I’m Registered to Vote” filter. Throughout the fall, nonpartisan public service announcements will feature notable politicians and celebrities.



2. *Voter Guide.* The voter guide features [resources from initiatives and organizations](#) such as the NAACP, the ACLU, BallotReady, Democracy Works, APIA Vote, I Am a Voter, Vote Early Day, and National Voter Registration Day.

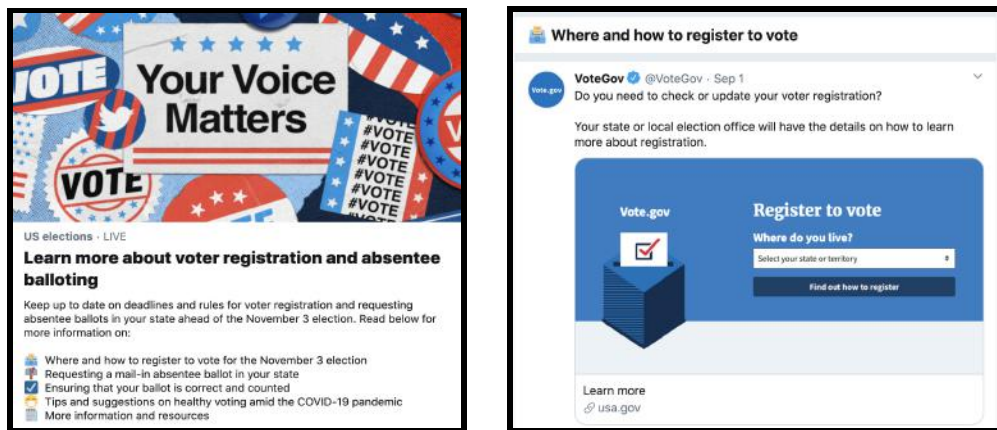
3. *“Before You Vote.”* Created in partnership with BallotReady, this feature [informs users on how to vote](#) and voting options (e.g. in-person voting, vote-by-mail, etc.) offered within their state.

4. *Voter Checklist.* Lastly, the voter checklist is an [interactive platform](#) to ensure that users are registered and ready to vote. This tool was a key part of Snapchat’s effort in registering thousands of voters in 2018.

Snapchat has the potential to reach a demographic of young users who do not vote often. The platform claims that [75% of its 100 million U.S. users](#) are between the ages of 13 and 34, with 80% of its users being of voting age, and some 300,000 to 500,000 of its users turn 18 every month. Consequently, Snapchat can play an important role in registering new voters and educating them on how to vote in November.

D. Twitter

In September 2020, [Twitter launched its election hub](#) to help platform users in the United States access accurate information on voter registration, pathways for early voting such as requesting an absentee ballot, and guidance for voting safely during the COVID-19 pandemic.



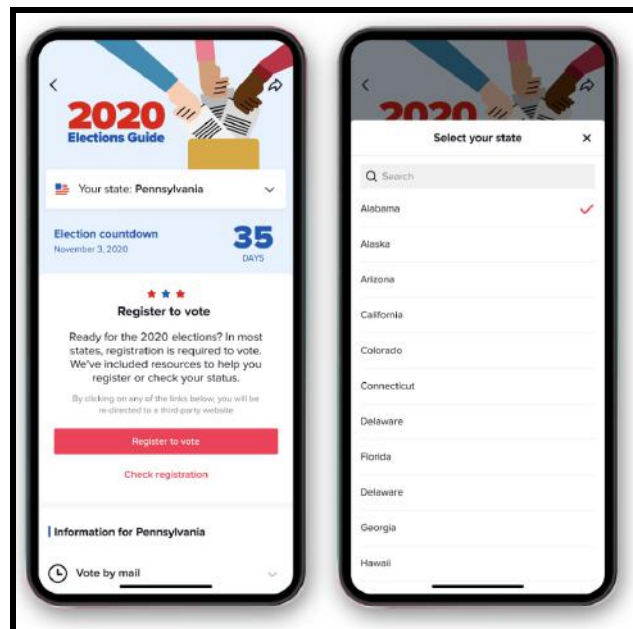
Appearing at the top of the “Explore” tab for U.S. users, [the election hub](#) displays Twitter Moments from media outlets, provides information about poll worker recruitment, and features localized news and resources by state. It includes a series of [voter education public service announcements](#) that are being run through Election Day. Related news in both English and Spanish, as well as live-streamed debates and other major events, is also available.



Platform search results about voter registration now lead [with official sources](#), and the company provided its employees with resources through [PowerThePolls](#) to sign up to become poll workers. Current updates are shared on [TwitterGov](#) and [TwitterSupport](#).

For the 2018 midterm elections, Twitter created several similar initiatives. The [#BeAVoter](#) campaign promoted increased informed participation by creating more access to voter registration information, such as election reminders and a FAQ for absentee ballots. The campaign became the top U.S. trend on the platform, and the 2018 U.S. midterm elections were [the most Tweeted-about midterm elections](#) in history. In addition, U.S. users were prompted on their timeline with information on how to register to vote. Five days before the 2018 elections, U.S. users saw an [Election Day countdown](#). [In the week before Election Day](#), users saw labeled accounts approximately 100 million times per day.

To inform users on candidates in the 2020 primary election and presidential election, Twitter is using the same [Election Labels](#) that were initially launched in 2018. Through a partnership with Ballotpedia, Twitter is [identifying](#) the accounts of candidates running for House of Representatives, Senate, or Governor who have qualified for the general election ballot. Furthermore, the platform will selectively turn on a tool that enables the reporting of deliberately misleading information about elections or other civic events.



To confirm the results of an election in the United States, Twitter will [require](#) an announcement from state election officials (as indicated by the National Association of Secretaries of State and the National Association of State Election Directors) or public projections from at least two national news outlets that make independent calls (ABC News, Associated Press, CBS News, CNN, Decision Desk HQ, Fox News, and NBC News). More specifically, accounts with US 2020 candidate labels, US-based accounts with more than 100,000 followers, and Tweets that have significant engagement (25k likes or 25k Quote Tweets and/or Retweets) are eligible for being labeled. Eligible tweets that falsely claim a win for any candidate will be [labeled](#) accordingly to provide context. Eligible tweets encouraging violence or calling for interference with election results or the smooth operation of polling places will be [removed](#).

E. TikTok

At the end of September, TikTok launched [its in-app guide](#) to the 2020 U.S. elections, which will be accessible to platform users through the Discover page, election-related search results, on videos from verified political accounts, and below related videos. This tool is part of [its larger efforts](#) to uphold the integrity of U.S. elections and its platform.

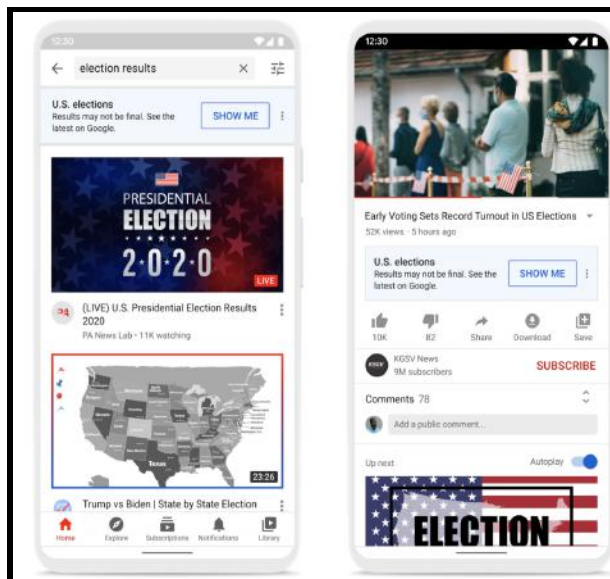
Through the guide, information is provided for 100 million Americans on voting in every state from the National Association of Secretaries of State; on misinformation and media literacy from MediaWise; on voting as a student from Campus Vote Project; on voting as an overseas citizen or service member from the Federal Voting Assistance Program; on voting as a person with disabilities from SignVote; on voting as a person with past convictions from Restore your Vote; and on federal, state, and local candidates from BallotReady.

F. YouTube

Seeking to become a more reliable source for election-related information, YouTube has raised up authoritative content, reduced the spread of borderline content, removed violative videos, and created [information panels](#) for federal and presidential candidates, as well as voting by mail. Misleading claims about voting or content encouraging interference are prohibited by Community Guidelines. Policies have also been established to prohibit harassment, deceptive practices, hate speech, and incitement to violence. For example, content inciting individuals to commit violence against groups of people at polling places should be removed.

Fact check information panels have been expanded and now placed under videos and in search results to provide additional context. Such panels will also link to [Google’s election results feature](#) which enables platform users to track results in real time. Links to timely, relevant information are promoted at the top of YouTube’s homepage, including a link to Google’s [how to vote feature](#) and [where to vote feature](#).

As voting closes, a live stream of election night coverage by authoritative news partners will be elevated for election-related news and information queries in the search results and “watch next” panels. The recommendations systems will [limit](#) the spread of borderline content and election-related misinformation.



III. Conclusion

For the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Facebook, Google, Snapchat, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube have launched numerous election-related initiatives and tools related to voter registration and civic education. Facebook’s tools aim to promote voter registration and participation, poll worker recruitment, and other forms of civic participation through the Voting Information Center. Similarly, Twitter has introduced an election hub that brings together its engagement tools, educational resources, and related policies. Google has updated its search feature to drive voter registration and improved elections-related information, while Snapchat has created several applications that feature voter registration, a voter guide, user-specific sample ballots, and a reminder checklist. TikTok has also launched an in-app guide for platform users that provides information for millions of Americans, and YouTube’s information panels contextualize election results for platform users.

Collectively, across the various platforms, these tools offer numerous avenues for millions of U.S. users to engage in the electoral process, including checking voter registration status, registering to vote, requesting and returning an absentee ballot, reviewing state-specific deadlines, safely casting an in-person ballot during the COVID-19 pandemic, serving as a poll worker, viewing a sample ballot or voter guide, watching live-streamed events and candidate debates, and more generally, accessing elections-related information and media.