

Defend Democracy Project



**NEW REPORT**

# **Beware the Election Denier** **— Playbook —**

*MAGA Republicans around the country  
are adopting the Trump Election Denier Playbook  
for the Midterm Elections*

October 2022

# Report: Beware the Election Denier Playbook

## *MAGA Republicans around the country are adopting the Trump Election Denier Playbook for the Midterm Elections*

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The Election Denying Playbook Explained</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Before the Election</b>	<b>2</b>
Call Into Question Methods of Voting that Advantage Your Opponent and Suggest Likely Voting Fraud:	2
Refuse to Commit to Accept Election Results Based on False Allegations of Voting Irregularities and Fraud Promote Conspiracy Theories:	3
Discredit Election Officials, Especially in Areas of High Voter Turnout for Your Opponent:	4
Train Supporters To Become Election Officials and Call on Supporters to Harass Voters and Election Officials in Heavily Democratic Precincts:	4
<b>On Election Night</b>	<b>5</b>
Declare Victory or Refuse to Concede Even If You've Lost:	5
Again, Discredit Election Officials Especially in Areas of High Voter Turnout for Your Opponent:	5
<b>After the Election</b>	<b>6</b>
Continue to Declare Victory or Refuse to Concede Even If You've Lost:	6
Continue to Discredit and Begin to Intimidate Election Officials Especially in Areas of High Voter Turnout for Your Opponent: and Most Especially in Areas of High Black Turnout Including Where Votes are Still Being Counted:	6
Promote False Conspiracy Theories to Your Supporters About Voter Fraud:	6
Break Laws and Waste Taxpayer Dollars To Needlessly Undermine Confidence In Voting Machines And Election Administration:	7
File Baseless Lawsuits to Slow the Counting and Sow Chaos:	8
Whip Your Supporters Into a Frenzy, Even Inciting Violence and Promoting Racism, Based on False Claims of Voter Fraud:	8
<b>This Is Already Happening</b>	<b>9</b>



# Beware the Election Denier Playbook

## Introduction

Donald Trump established the playbook for falsely disputing the outcome of an election he knew he lost, and even undermining confidence in our elections and methods of voting ahead of time, as far back as 2016 when even in victory he claimed [without evidence](#) that a flood of votes cast illegally was the only possible explanation for him losing the popular vote to Hillary Clinton. This, and years of prior Republican voter suppression efforts, made the ground fertile for scores of Republican voters to believe claims of voter fraud and stolen elections perpetrated by Democrats even though those claims lacked a shred of credible evidence.

Trump knew that his followers would believe his claims as surely as he believed he could shoot someone on 5th Avenue and not lose any voters. So, in 2020, he sowed the seeds of election denialism early - before a single vote was cast - especially with respect to casting doubt on forms of voting he felt disadvantaged him such as voting by mail. He downplayed the safety of voting by mail during a dangerous pandemic wreaking havoc on the country, putting his own voters' lives at risk.

We also now know from evidence gathered and released by the House Select Committee on January 6th that another play in the Trump election denial playbook was to declare victory regardless of the actual outcome, which is exactly what he did on election night 2020.

Now, Trump's handpicked election deniers are preparing to follow his playbook to a tee. They want to discredit voting systems to make it harder for certain people to vote – and essentially, to pick their own voters. They will attack nonpartisan election officials to lay the groundwork to question election results if they lose. They will declare victory or refuse to concede regardless of the outcome and they will call on their MAGA constituents to harass election workers, spread conspiracies about voting irregularities, and even commit violence in order to “stop the steal” and overturn elections they know they lost.

# Beware the Election Denier Playbook

## The Election Denying Playbook Explained

### Before the Election

#### **Call Into Question Methods of Voting that Advantage Your Opponent and Suggest Likely Voting Fraud:**

In the midst of a devastating pandemic that had already caused thousands of American deaths as states scrambled to establish safe ways to conduct elections, Trump launched a relentless assault on the concept of mail-in voting. As early as April 8, 2020, Trump [attacked mail-in voting](#) saying, “it doesn’t work out well for Republicans.” Trump’s disinformation about voter fraud and mail-in voting was so egregious that by May 26 Twitter began putting a [warning label](#) on his tweets. In addition to regular verbal attacks on mail-in voting, Trump was working to [dismantle the post office](#) to make vote-by-mail difficult or impossible. Trump said he would [veto](#) the first massive coronavirus relief package if it included grants to the USPS, and he [threatened](#) to withhold federal funds to the swing states of Michigan and Nevada if they expanded access to absentee voting.

In Nevada, MAGA extremists have continued to rail against the state’s [highly-popular](#) universal mail-in voting system in 2022. In spite of the evidence against these unproven conspiracy theories, Trump Republicans have been united in their [opposition](#) to easily-accessible absentee voting. They have [baselessly accused](#) Nevada’s system of ‘generating’ mail-in votes and [characterized](#) it as a ‘socialist’ policy in an attempt to delegitimize the practice. Some election deniers have even successfully used these wild accusations to convince county election boards to [hand count all midterm election results](#). These efforts represent just one example of Trump and his allies’ attempts to “[poison the well](#)” by suggesting that the November election will be conducted using supposedly-fraudulent voting systems.

#### **Refuse to Commit to Accepting Election Results Based on False Allegations of Voting Irregularities, Fraud, and Wild Conspiracy Theories:**

# Beware the Election Denier Playbook

In 2020, Trump [repeatedly](#) and explicitly refused to commit to accepting the results of the general election. At a September press conference at the White House, he again [refused to commit](#) to a peaceful transfer of power, and told a reporter, “Get rid of the ballots and you’ll have a very peaceful — there won’t be a transfer, frankly. There will be a continuation.” He accused Democrats of “rigging” the election and [told crowds](#) of his supporters that the only way he would lose is through fraud.

And as we saw in 2020 and 2021, one way to fan the flames and accelerate the spread and acceptance of election lies among supporters is to undermine trust in reputable media sources and promote the rapid spread of disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories. As Steve Bannon has infamously [said](#): “The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit.” And Bannon and others in the MAGA movement have [become](#) a platform for baseless conspiracy theorists, like QAnon. At one point Bannon even [said](#): “The elephant in the room is, people say they’re crazy, I’m just leaving that — put a pin in it. But when they look at the facts of this, how are they not, at least an aspect of their argument, at least appears directionally to be correct.”

In 2022, Trump Republicans in Arizona were some of the first to pre-emptively refuse to accept election results, citing long-debunked allegations of “voter fraud.” During the primaries, multiple candidates declared they would [refuse to concede and demand full hand recounts](#) in the event of any suspected impropriety. Top MAGA Republicans have [continued refusing](#) to say whether they will honor the election results, [casting doubt on the outcome](#) before the votes have even been cast.

## **Discredit Election Officials, Especially in Areas of High Voter Turnout for Your Opponent:**

In 2020, the #StopTheSteal hashtag [began trending](#) weeks before Election Day, created in a now-deleted September 7, 2020 Tweet from right-wing social media personality and OANN correspondent Jack Probosiec who claimed, “#StopTheSteal 2020 is coming...” The night before Election Day 2020, Trump [attacked](#) the Supreme Court for its decision to allow an extended count of Pennsylvania mail-in ballots postmarked by Election Day. “The Supreme Court decision on voting in Pennsylvania is a VERY dangerous one,” Trump tweeted. “It will allow rampant and unchecked cheating and will undermine our

# Beware the Election Denier Playbook

entire systems of laws. It will also induce violence in the streets. Something must be done!”

This year, Trump and his allies are already working to delegitimize election officials presiding over some of the largest cities in the country. Georgia officials, including Governor Brian Kemp, have been working to [investigate and take over](#) Atlanta-based Fulton County [elections](#). Fulton, the state’s largest county, has a Black-plurality, and its election precincts have been [placed under heavy scrutiny](#) by the Kemp-appointed State Election Board. Once the review is [complete](#), the Board plans to replace Fulton’s election administrators. Amid the looming state review, Fulton County is [struggling to hire a new elections director](#) as disinformation campaigns and [threats of harassment circulate](#) ahead of the midterm elections.

## **Train Supporters To Become Election Officials and Call on Supporters to Harass Voters and Election Officials in Heavily Democratic Precincts:**

In [repeated](#) tweets, speeches, and paid advertisements, Trump and his 2020 campaign called for an "army" of poll watchers to monitor contested election areas. The ads exhorted supporters to "Fight for President Trump," and promoted the website "ArmyForTrump.com." In Minnesota, a [private security company](#) said it was recruiting former U.S. military Special Operations personnel to guard polling sites on Election Day, an effort the chairman of the company said was intended to prevent left-wing activists from disrupting the election.

This year, MAGA groups [led by former Trump staffers](#) Stephen Miller and Mark Meadows are pushing lawsuits and initiatives in Pennsylvania that would require suburban Philadelphia counties to [place “monitors” at all ballot drop boxes](#), even though the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has cautioned that the monitors would amount to [illegal voter intimidation](#). Across Lake Erie, in Michigan’s largest counties (including Detroit-based Wayne and Macomb counties) election deniers have teamed up with local Republican leaders to [host MAGA training sessions](#) for poll workers and partisan observers. These trainings are encouraging new recruits to [ignore local election regulations](#) and break rules to act as “undercover agents” in the midterm elections, instructing them to [report any “bad stuff happening”](#) during the vote count.

# Beware the Election Denier Playbook

Steve Bannon has [urged](#) listeners of his “War Room” show to get involved with local politics and election administration – even saying: “We want you to sign up to be a volunteer election official – not just to be a poll watcher, to be in the room[.]” Reporting from ProPublica suggests there has been a correlation, and possibly even causation, to Bannon’s advocacy and MAGA Republicans [signing up](#) to be low-level election officials, such as precinct captains.

## On Election Night

### **Declare Victory or Refuse to Concede Even If You’ve Lost:**

At the end of the night on Election Night 2020, several states remained in the process of counting votes and neither candidate had won enough electoral votes to claim victory. At 2:30 AM on November 4, [Trump appeared](#) in the East Room at the White House and called for vote counting to halt, falsely describing the situation as a “major fraud in our nation” and vowing to take his case to the Supreme Court. Trump claimed victory in the election saying, “To me, this is a very sad moment, and we will win this. And as far as I’m concerned, we already have.” Trump’s declaration fired up his supporters to [begin organizing](#) to overturn the legitimate results of the election and left [social media platforms](#) and [media outlets](#) scrambling to assert that the election had not been called yet.

### **Again, Discredit Election Officials Especially in Areas of High Voter Turnout for Your Opponent:**

On November 5, 2020, Trump [claimed without evidence](#) that the ballot counting process in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was rigged. In an effort to discredit election administrators in the majority-minority city, he [baselessly accused](#) supposedly-“corrupt” local officials of allowing people to vote without any identification, blocking poll observers, and accepting late mail-in ballots, stating, “They don’t want anybody watching them as they count the ballots.” Trump’s lies encouraged his supporters to [organize protests at vote-counting centers](#), hindering election officials and slowing the count.

# Beware the Election Denier Playbook

## After the Election

### **Continue to Declare Victory or Refuse to Concede Even If You've Lost:**

On November 7, 2020, Joe Biden was declared the winner of Pennsylvania and the presidency. Trump [refused to accept the results](#) or concede, claiming that the election was “far from over” and that his campaign was “prosecuting our case in court to ensure election laws are fully upheld.” That afternoon Trump’s legal team, led by Rudy Giuliani, held a [bizarre press conference](#) at a landscaping business in Philadelphia to advance more conspiracy theories about the election and lay out the plot to overturn the election results.

### **Continue to Discredit and Begin to Intimidate Election Officials Especially in Areas of High Voter Turnout for Your Opponent:**

In 2020, Trump personally pressed officials in multiple states urging them to interfere with the certification process. In November 2020 Trump called two Republican members of the board of canvassers in Wayne County, [Michigan](#). After speaking with the president the two attempted to rescind their votes to certify the election results. Trump also [met](#) with several Republican members of the Michigan state legislature at the White House seeking to block certification of the state’s results. Trump repeatedly placed calls to the speaker of the [Pennsylvania](#) House and Gov. Brian Kemp in [Georgia](#) pushing them to reverse the election results in their states and to [Georgia](#) Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to demand that he “find” 11,000 votes for him. Trump also called Gov. Doug Ducey of [Arizona](#) while he was certifying his state’s election results in a last-ditch effort to overturn the outcome. Trump went so far as to [target](#) two front-line election workers in Georgia with false attacks, unleashing a mob of his supporters on them with racist invective and violent threats.

### **Promote False Conspiracy Theories to Your Supporters About Voter Fraud:**

On the day after Election Day in 2020, Donald Trump, Eric Trump, and top members of his campaign began promoting a series of [unfounded conspiracy theories](#) about the vote-tallying process to claim that Democrats were rigging the final count. Eric Trump



# Beware the Election Denier Playbook

tweeted a QAnon video purportedly showing someone burning ballots cast for his father. Eric Trump, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany and other Trump allies claimed falsely that the president had won Pennsylvania. And Trump campaign spokesman Tim Murtaugh falsely claimed that crowd control at a ballot processing center in Detroit was part of an effort to thwart Trump's victory, while the campaign was also tacitly endorsing disruptive protests in Philadelphia and Detroit aiming to "stop the steal." The campaign [simultaneously](#) attempted to use the courts to halt vote-counting in Pennsylvania and Michigan, sought a recount in Wisconsin and challenged the handling of ballots in Georgia.

## **Break Laws and Wasting Taxpayer Dollars To Needlessly Undermine Confidence In Voting Machines And Election Administration:**

Shortly after the 2020 election in Georgia, Trump and his attorneys worked to [undermine confidence](#) in election administration citing a surveillance video [allegedly depicting election workers](#) stuffing ballots from suitcases hidden under a table. On Dec. 3, 2020, Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani was [invited](#) to a Georgia Senate Judiciary subcommittee hearing on "election integrity," where he [spread false conspiracy theories](#) about the suitcases that directly resulted in threats of violence against Georgia polling officials alongside Trump lawyers [John Eastman](#) and [Jenna Ellis](#), blaming Atlanta poll workers for [supposed election fraud](#). On Jan. 3, 2021, Trump administration officials [asked](#) District Attorney Byung J. "BJay" Pak to use taxpayer dollars to investigate the alleged suitcase. After Pak's [investigation](#) found that the container in question was an official ballot lockbox, not a suitcase, and that "the allegations made by Mr. Giuliani were false," he was [pressured to resign](#). Less than a week later on Jan. 7, a group of forensics experts working for lawyers allied with President Donald Trump spent eight hours at a county elections office in rural Georgia. Trump lawyer Sidney Powell contracted a MAGA cybersecurity firm to [illegally breach sensitive election infrastructure](#), [accessing data](#) from a secure election server, voter check-in devices, and ballot tabulation memory chips. Trump allies were [billed for coordinating the effort and were given access to](#) all of the data collected. The Georgia scheme, which is [under criminal investigation](#) by the state bureau of intelligence, was part of a [broad, national effort](#) by Trump's MAGA allies to [access voting machines](#) and other election equipment after the 2020 election.

# Beware the Election Denier Playbook

In Michigan, Trump and his allies worked to undermine confidence in electronic voting machines after the 2020 election. Trump’s campaign submitted [238 pages of sworn affidavits from poll watchers](#) who complained about vote counting procedures — but they “provided no direct evidence of fraud and were quickly dismissed by a judge.” After a Republican attorney [successfully sued](#) heavily-Republican Antrim County in November 2020, baselessly alleging a vast conspiracy against election equipment made by Dominion Voting Systems, Trump lawyer Sidney Powell [arranged for](#) investigators from a MAGA cybersecurity firm to [dismantle the machines](#) and [copy hard drive data](#). Powell also contracted so-called investigators to [seize voting data](#) in Wayne County, Michigan’s Detroit-centered largest county. One Michigan sheriff, Dar Leaf, was connected to the plot as well; he [attempted to seize multiple voting machines](#) across the state.

## **File Baseless Lawsuits to Slow the Counting and Sow Chaos:**

Trump filed [more than 60 lawsuits](#) seeking to halt ballot counting or overturn the results of the election in 2020. Nearly all were failures, but they served to further undermine faith in the election.

In Nevada, an election denier has [already announced plans to file lawsuits](#) to contest the 2022 election results.

## **Whip Your Supporters Into a Frenzy, Even Inciting Violence and Promoting Racism, Based on False Claims of Voter Fraud:**

Right wing militia groups like the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers [began planning](#) for violent protests in support of Trump within days of the 2020 election. As early as November 5, Oath Keepers leader Stewart Rhodes messaged his followers to say, “We aren't getting through this without a civil war. Too late for that. Prepare your mind, body, spirit.” On the morning of Jan. 5, Steve Bannon declared, “We’re in a war right now...just understand this: All hell is going to break loose tomorrow,” [insisting](#) that Trump’s 2020 election outcome was “the biggest landslide in American political history.” Trump and his allies [spent weeks](#) hyping up the January 6 protest identifying it as a day to gather in Washington to “save America” and “stop the steal.” In just one of

# Beware the Election Denier Playbook

many tweets promoting the protest, on December 19, Trump tweeted, “Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!”

## **This Is Already Happening**

MAGA Republicans across the country have shown time and time again that they will stop at nothing to pick their own voters in order to take away our most fundamental rights.

Trump came far too close to overthrowing the results of the 2020 elections, resorting to violence when his scheme was unsuccessful. They are already following the steps closely by refusing to say that they will accept the results of the 2022 election, sowing conspiracy theories about voter fraud, and discrediting and intimidating election officials. On election night, we should be prepared for these election deniers to refuse to concede if they lose and to declare victory no matter the results. Sadly and unfortunately, we should also be prepared for them to threaten and harass election workers and even incite violence.

We must hold these Trump-loving Republicans accountable for their violent, criminal attack on our country and put a stop to the ongoing threats against our freedoms. And whenever and wherever we see Trump’s election-denying playbook being used to undermine confidence in our elections or overturn legitimate results his supporters don’t like we must call it out.