LYING, MISLEADING, AND NEGLIGENT FALSEHOOD

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Main claims

- There are many ways that statistics can be misleading– and they need not be false to mislead.
- I'll draw some distinctions.
- Then I'll show how these matter in real cases.

(Rough) Definitions and simple invented examples

- Lie: A person knowingly says something false, intending to deceive.
  - "I'm an expert on statistics"

- Deliberately Misleading statement: A person says something true, intending to use this truth to lead the audience into a false belief.
  - "I've appeared on a United Nations Statistical Commission Panel"

- Less familiar distinctions to follow…

(Rough) Definitions and simple invented examples

- Negligent falsehood: Someone makes a claim without sufficient care to ascertain its truth value, and that claim is false.
  - Fred is a public health official who remembers hearing from someone that COVID-19 rates are going down. He doesn't check this, but he does announce it at a press conference. It's false.
  - Note that this perhaps isn't negligent for Bob the bartender, chatting with a friend.

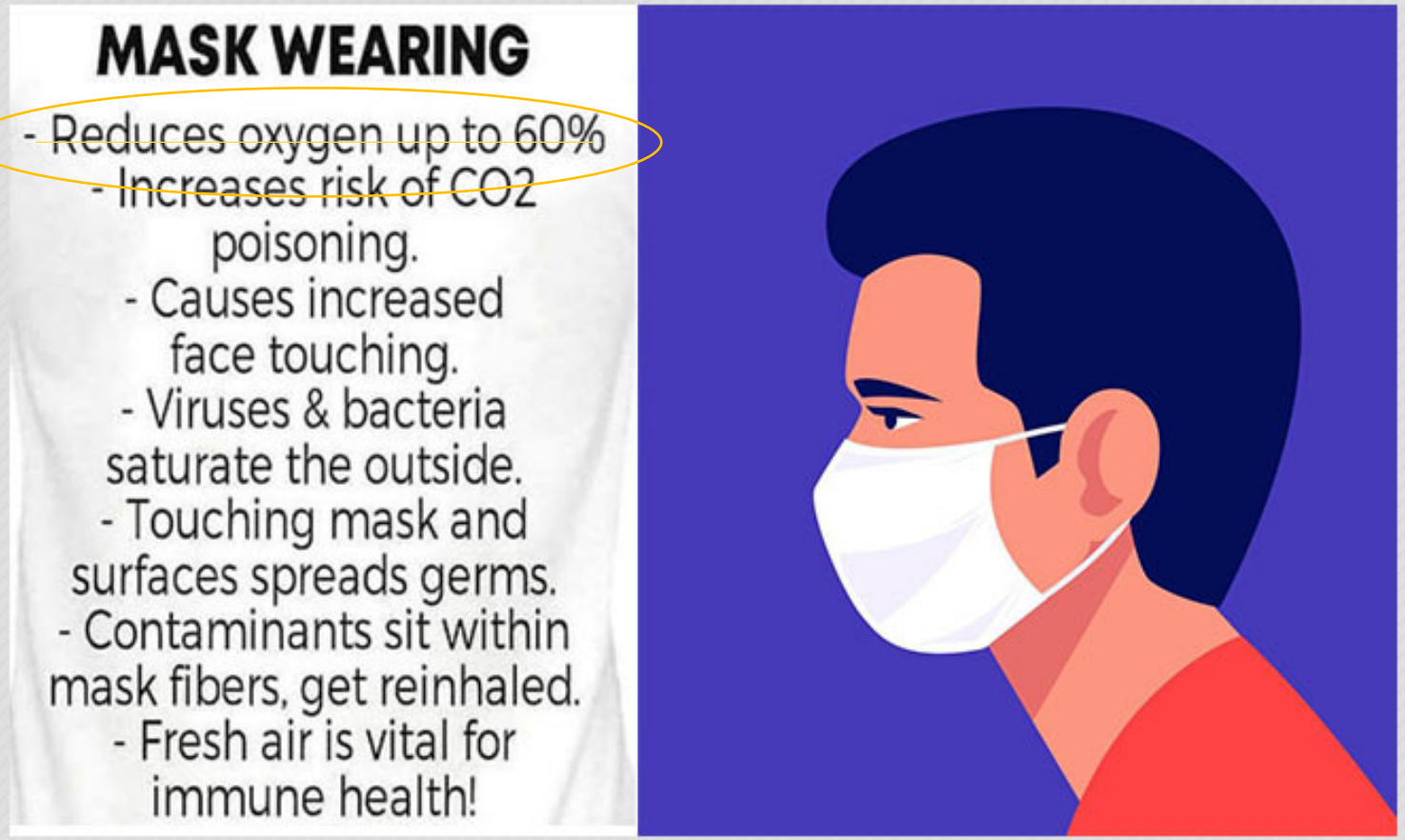
(Rough) Definitions and simple invented examples

- Negligent misleading: someone makes a claim without sufficient care to make sure that it it's not likely to mislead, and it is likely to mislead.
  - Fred is a public health official who knows that there has been a COVID-19 test shortage. He says, truthfully, that *confirmed* COVID-19 rates are declining, not considering how likely this is to mislead people who don't understand about the test shortage.
- 3rd party misuse: someone makes a claim with all due care, but it is used by others to induce false beliefs.
  - Fred carefully explains about the test shortage being the reason for the decline in confirmed COVID-19 rates, but this is edited out when the interview with Fred goes viral.

REAL EXAMPLES

These can be more complex to analyse

Example 1: false claim



Understanding Example 1: false claim

- It is false that masks reduce Oxygen up to 60%.
- If a person who knows that it's false has written it, it's simply a **lie.**
- But what about a person who passes it on, not knowing it's false?
  - If it's someone who should know better, or know to check: **negligent falsehood.**
    - Politicians
    - Journalists
    - Medical professional

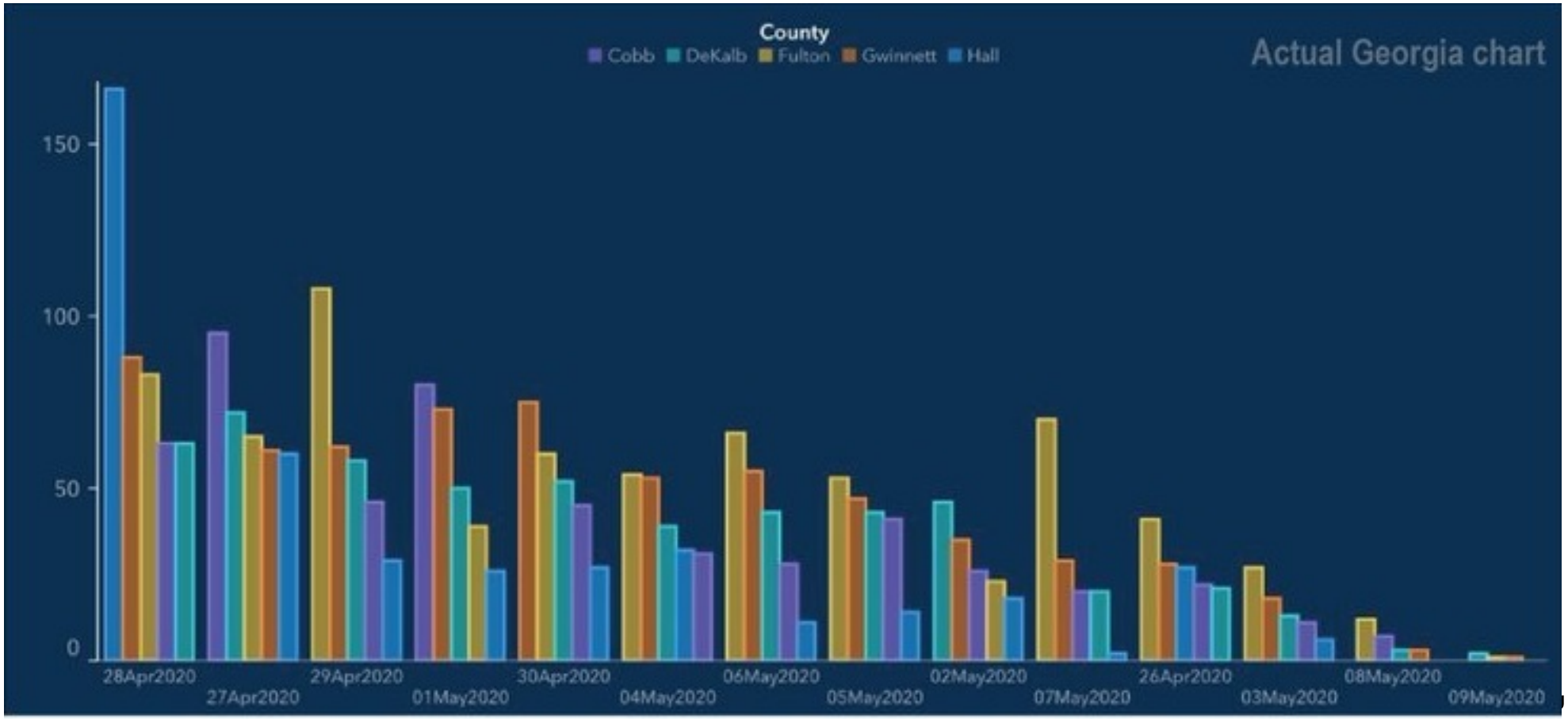
Understanding example 1: false claim

- Not everyone is in a position to know better, Maybe it's **not negligent** for ordinary member of public to pass it on.

- **BUT: Further responsibility for experts to correct this falsehood in a way that sticks.**

Example 2: misleading graph

Georgia COVID-19 rates by county, over time.



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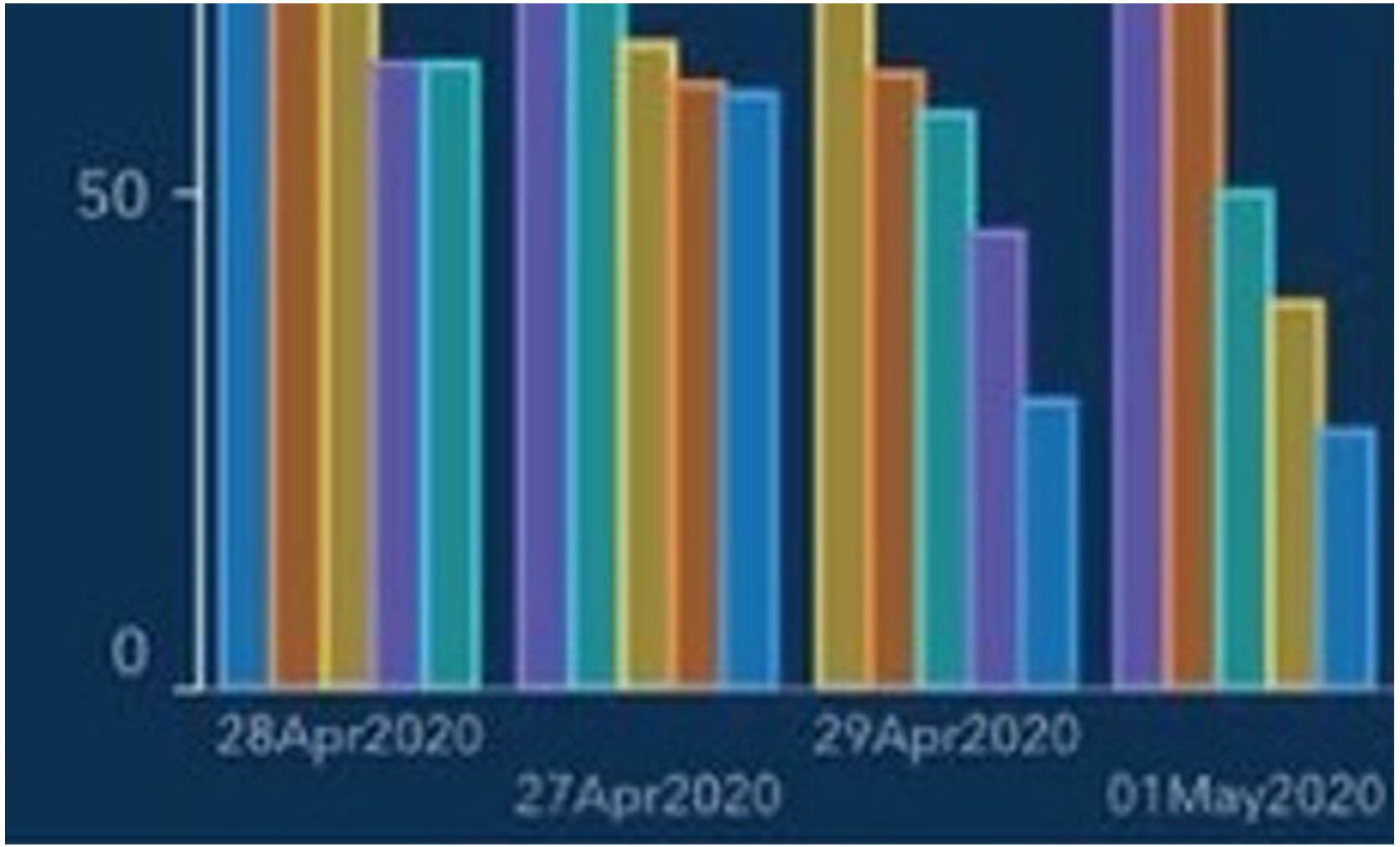
Example 2: misleading graph

Georgia COVID-19 rates by county, over time.



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Understanding example 2: misleading graph

- The person who made the graph MAYBE **did not lie**– each number does correspond to each date and county.
- But they constructed the graph in a very misleading way, and it is hard to see how this could be anything but **knowingly misleading.**
- If they describe the graph by saying “there is a steadily declining rate over time” then they have definitely **lied.**

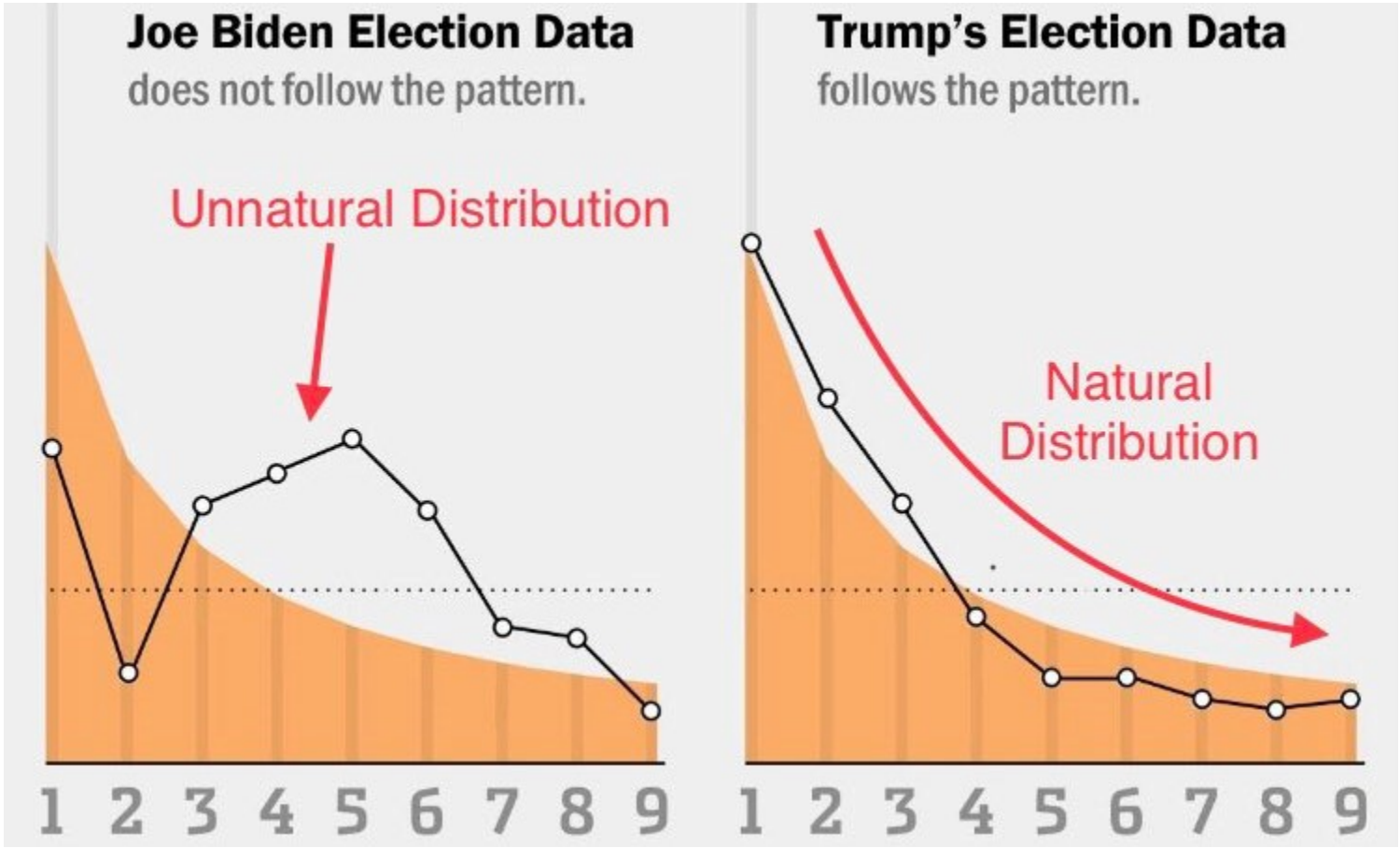
Understanding example 2: misleading graph

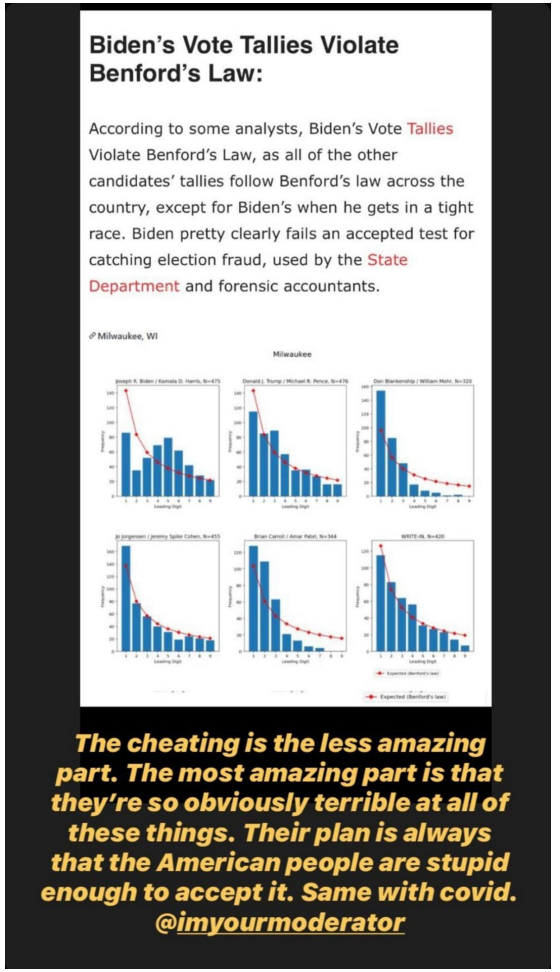
- What about someone who passes this on?
- If they are someone who should know to check carefully– a journalist, a public health official– then they have **negligently misled.**
  - What if they say, *based on the graph*, that COVID rates have steadily declined? Then they have uttered a **negligent falsehood.**
- If they are a member of the general public, then it is arguably **not negligent** to pass it on.
- **Again: responsibility of experts to find a way to correct false beliefs effectively.**

Why do these distinctions matter?

- Because the spread of falsehood is not all about lies.
- People who don't mean to deceive can spread falsehood through negligence.
- Truths can be used to spread falsehood, and often play significant role in conspiracy theores.

Benford's Law and 2020 Election Conspiracy Theory





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Benford's Law and 2020 Election Conspiracy Theory

- A law regarding the likely distribution of digits for certain sorts of sets of numbers.
- This *is* sometimes used as an indicator of election fraud.
- And Biden's **precinct-level vote totals in key states did violate the first-digit** version of this law.

Benford's Law and 2020 Election Conspiracy Theory

- This has helped fuel the conspiracy theory that the US 2020 election was stolen from Trump.

- But: Benford's law does not apply to **first digits of precinct-level vote totals.** (Because of the small size of precincts, and role of partisan composition in determining first digits of vote totals)

Benford's Law and 2020 Election Conspiracy Theory

- True claims are being asserted by elections officials regarding Biden's vote totals. There is nothing negligent about this.
- A true claim was also made by an expert on Benford's Law before the election:
  - "The test is worth taking seriously as a statistical test for election fraud." (Mebane 2006)
- This was not misleading at the time that Mebane uttered it, in its full context.
- But now that true claim, and true claims about vote totals, are being used to fuel a very dangerous conspiracy theory.

Benford's Law and 2020 Election Conspiracy Theory

- Mebane has now followed up his original article on Benford's Law and elections with a new quickly written one:
  - "The displays shown at those sources using the first digits of precinct vote counts data from Fulton County, GA, Allegheny County, PA, Milwaukee, WI, and Chicago, IL, say nothing about possible frauds…**It is widely understood that the first digits of precinct vote counts are not useful for trying to diagnose election frauds"**

    --"Inappropriate Applications of Benford's Law Regularities to Some Data from the 2020 Presidential Election in the United States", 10 November 2020

Benford's Law and 2020 Election Conspiracy Theory

- Great example of the way that statisticians' responsibilities extend beyond just making true claims.
- Important to think about how these claims are understood, and how they are used (including by other people).
- And sometimes important to intervene.