

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 3, 2021

Mark Zuckerberg  
Chief Executive Officer, Facebook  
1 Hacker Way  
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

We write to express concern and request information following recent news reports indicating that Facebook's leadership blocked certain plans at WhatsApp – the Facebook-owned encrypted messaging app – to further promote reliable Spanish-language voting, election, and poll worker information in advance of the 2020 election based on concerns that such plans would not be seen as “politically neutral.”<sup>1</sup> In particular, we write to request information on the events outlined in these reports and on WhatsApp's efforts to counter Spanish-language misinformation and disinformation on the platform.

Hispanic and Latino Americans registered and voted in record numbers for the 2020 presidential election, accounting for approximately one in ten votes cast.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, eligible Hispanic and Latino voters still registered to vote and voted at lower rates as compared to voters of other ethnicities.<sup>3</sup> WhatsApp, which has more than 75 million monthly users in the United States, is particularly popular among Hispanic and Latino Americans, over half of whom use WhatsApp and who make up 13 percent of all eligible U.S. voters.<sup>4</sup>

Recent news reports indicate that leaders at Facebook stopped efforts at WhatsApp to further promote reliable Spanish-language voting, election, and poll worker information last year similar to the information provided by Facebook's Voting Information Center. The Voting Information Center, which Facebook created in August 2020, included factual information in multiple languages including Spanish about how to register to vote, cast a ballot, and sign up to be a poll worker. It was described by the company as “a one-stop shop to give people in the U.S. the tools

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<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Dwoskin, Tory Newmyer, and Shibani Mahtani. "The Case against Mark Zuckerberg: Insiders Say Facebook's CEO Chose Growth over Safety." The Washington Post. October 26, 2021.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/25/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-whistleblower>.

<sup>2</sup>Suzanne Gamboa, "Over Half of Eligible Latinos Voted in 2020 - a Historic First." NBCNews.com. May 12, 2021.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/half-eligible-latinos-voted-2020-historic-first-rcna899>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Daniel Carnahan. "Facebook Is Advancing Its Shopping Push on WhatsApp with Carts." Business Insider.

December 09, 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-advances-shopping-push-on-whatsapp-with-carts-2020-12>; Victoria Montenegro Caspe. "How WhatsApp Became the Go-to Messaging App for US Latinos."

Digital Trends. September 22, 2021. <https://www.digitaltrends.com/mobile/why-american-latinos-love-whatsapp/>;

Jacob Fabina. "Despite Pandemic Challenges, 2020 Election Had Largest Increase in Voting Between Presidential

Elections on Record." U.S. Census Bureau. October 08, 2021. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/04/record-high-turnout-in-2020-general-election.html>.

and information they need to make their voices heard at the ballot box.”<sup>5</sup> While WhatsApp’s policy provided users the option to report problematic content in messages and allowed them to access information about voting through an automated chat function that reacted to users’ inquiries, Facebook executives were reportedly concerned that other proposed measures to increase access to accurate voting information for Spanish-language WhatsApp users would not be seen as “politically neutral.”<sup>6</sup> While we understand the unique challenges of countering the spread of disinformation on encrypted messaging apps that allow users to communicate privately, we are concerned by the reports that the plans developed at WhatsApp were blocked because of the view that further promoting access to accurate voting information could be perceived as political in nature.

WhatsApp’s response to misinformation and disinformation is especially important because ahead of the 2020 elections, experts warned that Spanish-language misinformation and disinformation was rapidly spreading on the platform. Much of this disinformation targeted users based on their culture and heritage with divisive content and aiming to stoke racial divisions.<sup>7</sup> While misinformation and disinformation campaigns targeted Spanish-speaking voters through social media during the 2016 elections, reports indicate the problem became “exponentially worse” since then and that Spanish-language misinformation and disinformation “flourished” online around Election Day last year.<sup>8</sup>

In light of these reports, we ask that you respond to the following questions by November 12, 2021:

- Do you agree that all Americans, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or language preference, should have access to accurate voting and election information?
- Was there a proposal to promote a Spanish-language version of the Voting Information Center to WhatsApp users or otherwise provide Spanish-speaking WhatsApp users with increased access to reliable information about the 2020 election?

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<sup>5</sup>“*Launching Our Voting Information Center on Facebook and Instagram.*” Facebook for Business. August 13, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/launching-our-voting-information-center-on-facebook-and-instagram>

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Dwoskin, Tory Newmyer, and Shibani Mahtani. “*The Case against Mark Zuckerberg: Insiders Say Facebook’s CEO Chose Growth over Safety.*” The Washington Post. October 26, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/25/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-whistleblower>.

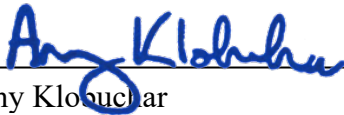
<sup>7</sup> Jerry Clayton. “*Misinformation About 2020 Election Spread Via WhatsApp, Targeted Spanish-Speaking Voters.*” Texas Public Radio. November 22, 2020. <https://www.tpr.org/government-politics/2020-11-22/misinformation-About-2020-election-spread-via-whatsapp-targeted-spanish-speaking-voters>; Sabrina Rodriguez and Marc Caputo. “*This is f---ing crazy’: Florida Latinos swamped by wild conspiracy theories.*” Politico. September 14, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/14/florida-latinos-disinformation-413923>

<sup>8</sup> Caroline Covington. “*WhatsApp-Based Misinformation Campaigns Target Spanish-Speaking Voters.*” Kut 90.5. October 27, 2020. <https://www.kut.org/texas/2020-10-27/whatsapp-based-misinformation-campaigns-Target-spanish-speaking-voters>; Christopher Bing, Elizabeth Culliford, Paresh Dave. “*Spanish-language misinformation dogged Democrats in U.S. election.*” Reuters. November 7, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-disinformation-spanish/spanish-language-misinformation-dogged-democrats-in-u-s-election-idUSKBN27N0ED>

- Did any executive at Facebook or WhatsApp express concern regarding any proposal to increase access to or further promote voting and election information in Spanish on the basis that they would not be “politically neutral” or that providing this information would be inadvisable for any other reasons? If so, did these concerns play a role in any decisions about what information or services WhatsApp or Facebook provided in Spanish in advance of the 2020 election?
- In advance of the 2020 election, did any employee at Facebook or WhatsApp approve any project to provide voting, election, or poll worker information that was not simultaneously available in both English and Spanish?
- In light of experts’ warnings about the spread of Spanish-language misinformation and disinformation before Election Day, did staff at WhatsApp reconsider any of its existing policies, develop new proposals, or take additional actions to counter election-related misinformation or disinformation?

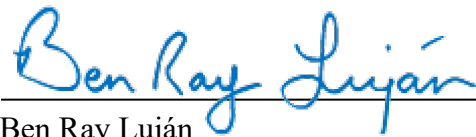
Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



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Amy Klobuchar  
U.S. Senator



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Ben Ray Luján  
U.S. Senator