I. Introduction

Ballot drop boxes are a secure and accessible means for voters to physically drop off absentee or mail ballots instead of voting in person or by mail. They are used in thousands of locations across the country and experimental data suggests that drop boxes have a positive and significant effect on a prospective voter’s probability of voting. While the use of drop boxes rose during the COVID-19 pandemic as a safety measure, they have been employed for years as a way to securely shorten voting lines and increase voter participation. Ballot drop boxes have been used in states across the country, including Arizona, for about two decades.

In 2020, political contention over drop boxes arose from a combination of factors, including increased use of the boxes, false fraud narratives around the presidential election, and as a result of disparate jurisdictional frameworks. Even with these challenges, an analysis of drop boxes in the 2020 election demonstrated their dependability and found almost no security or fraud issues associated with their use.

In the 2022 midterm election, ballot drop box locations were again the site of contestation between those pushing fraud and “election integrity” narratives and those seeking to expand voter access. Calls to “monitor” ballot boxes for evidence of ballot “harvesting” and “stuffing” were proliferated on social media platforms and were reported by the New York Times as early as August 2022, with the first incident of physical monitoring activity on the second day of the month. The narrative ballooned on social media, with the Election Integrity Partnership tracking thousands of accounts circulating misleading “evidence” of drop box fraud in the run-up to the 2022 election. Concerns over drop boxes vaulted to the forefront of American political discourse by October 2022, with candidates, pundits, and newspapers highlighting the threat of “armed vigilantes staking out drop box locations.”

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1 According to the Election Assistance Commission (EAC), a drop box is defined as a “locked container (located either indoors or outdoors) where voters (or voters’ authorized representatives, if allowed by state law) may deliver their voted mail ballots for collection. Drop boxes are operated or controlled by election officials. Drop boxes are separate from ballot boxes, which are located at in-person polling places for voters to place their ballots immediately after voting in person.”

2 In the lead-up to the 2020 election, there were several reports of arson in relation to drop boxes. One report was of a ballot box being intentionally set on fire outside of a public library in Baldwin Park, California, which damaged around 100 ballots. Another report was of a fire at a ballot box in the Back Bay neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts, which damaged dozens of ballots before it was put out.
But did online discourse transfer to offline activity? And, if so, how prevalent was this activity? This Issue Brief provides an assessment of in-person, offline mobilization at drop box sites through analysis of known, reported activity nationwide, alongside case studies of two of the states that saw the highest number of incidents: Arizona and Pennsylvania. It finds that, like 2020, only limited offline monitoring activity was reported at drop box locations during the 2022 midterms, as well as during off-year elections in 2023. The analysis exposes a gap between online rhetoric and offline action and provides new insights into approaches that can help prepare communities for contentious activity around the election in 2024.

II. Methodology and Descriptive Analysis

Over the course of the 2022 election cycle, BDI researchers tracked and coded incidents of offline physical activity across the U.S. related to ballot drop boxes. Specifically, activity taking place at ballot boxes and locations where voters could drop off their ballots before and on the day of elections. These incidents are collated within BDI's Drop Box Monitoring Dataset.

Information was collected via open source methods by: tracking news stories via NexisUni, among other sources; monitoring social media, as well as other public online channels and forums, for activity involving drop boxes; and by consulting with local and national partners. Relevant protest information from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC) datasets was also included. Lastly, information on multiple cases related to reported drop box intimidation and violence from the Election Monitoring Hotline, via the Lawyer's Committee, shared with BDI, was also included following independent open-source investigation by the BDI team.

As these methods rely heavily on events observed in media and social media, it is possible that physical activity that may have occurred at drop boxes yet was not observed or

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3 In June 2023, the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) released its Election Administration and Voting Survey 2022 Comprehensive Report, which collected data on the use of drop boxes for the first time. In total 39 states allowed the use of drop boxes. The EAC found that of the states that replied to their survey (32 out of 39), over 13,000 drop boxes were available to voters during the 2022 general election and over 8,300 during the early voting period, and that around 40% of mail-in ballots returned by voters were returned in drop boxes. Of the 24 states that were able to report data on mail in ballots returned via drop box, the EAC found that a total of 11,473,653 mail ballots were returned by drop box.

4 The Drop Box Monitoring Dataset does not include law enforcement activity. While in some cases law enforcement actors have taken constructive approaches to address concerns around drop boxes and election security, in other cases they have engaged in monitoring activity that may have had similar intimidatory effects as non-state monitoring. Examples of relevant cases are discussed below in the Issue Brief, but these incidents are not captured in the Drop Box Monitoring Dataset.

5 The Drop Box Monitoring Dataset is available upon request. Please contact BDI for more information.
reported on is ‘missing’ from this data collection. However, such missingness is likely limited given the heightened scrutiny around drop boxes during this period (by key actors, such as activists and media outlets), which likely contributed to high levels of reporting. In fact, over-reporting, rather than under-reporting, is more likely – as evidenced by the ‘false positives’ that some activists on the ground reported (more on this below, within case studies). Careful review and validation of incidents by BDI researchers ensures that such false positives are not included. As such, the Drop Box Monitoring Dataset reflects the most comprehensive attempt to capture all drop box monitoring incidents during the 2022 election cycle. BDI researchers supplemented the dataset with open-source tracking and analysis conducted around off-year elections in 2023.

Further, following the election, the collected data was triangulated via consultations with state-based community and national research partners, including the Brennan Center for Justice, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), and the Arizona League of Women Voters. Further, reviews of documents and data provided by state-based community and national research partners were also considered. Despite data on offline engagement at drop box sites being sparse, existing data collected by other organizations largely corroborates BDI’s findings. For example, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) produced analysis for 2022 focused on online concentrations of drop box “chatter” on Telegram, Gab, and Twitter, and found – similar to BDI’s assessment of offline incidents – that Arizona and Pennsylvania were home to a high level of relevant chatter.6

In total, BDI has identified fewer than 20 drop box locations where offline monitoring occurred in 2022. As a result of repeat monitoring incidents at some of these drop boxes, the dataset captures a total number of 44 monitoring incidents, with the majority occurring in Arizona (25), followed by Pennsylvania (6) and Washington (6). Other states that saw drop box monitoring incidents include Michigan (5), Maine (1), and Colorado (1). This means that of the estimated 13,000 total drop box voting locations across 39 states that used drop boxes during the 2022 election, physical monitoring incidents were reported at approximately 0.1% (see graph above).

In most incidents, 52% (23 of 44), only a single person was present as a drop box monitor. In all other cases, fewer than six individuals were present as monitors. In 89% of incidents (39 of 44), the drop box monitors could not be attributed to a particular group. Of cases where those who were monitoring drop boxes could be identified, watchers were affiliated with groups including the local county Republican Committee in Montgomery County,

6 In addition to Arizona and Pennsylvania, ISD also found Michigan to be home to much of the online chatter.
Pennsylvania (2); and Clean Elections USA (more on this group below) (2). The only case to involve arms was one of the drop box monitoring incidents involving Clean Elections USA.

The vast majority of incidents did not involve violence, with only a single reported incident in Phoenix, Arizona, where a man who claimed there was an election conspiracy got into a fistfight with another person on election day. There was no evidence of counter-protests at any incident. Photography or video recording by monitors was reported in nearly every incident.

III. Case Studies

With a view toward the 2024 election, the swing states of Arizona and Pennsylvania – two of the states that saw the highest levels of offline monitoring activity in 2022 – are analyzed as case studies below. Qualitative information on each incident in these states provides richer context for the larger number of events observed, helping to bring the data to life by tracking the emerging narratives and identifying points of mobilization and demobilization that played a wider role in trends nationwide.

Arizona

On October 13, 2022, news broke of ballot drop box watchers in Mesa, Arizona. Votebeat discovered a Clean Elections USA signup sheet, circulated online via Telegram, where at least 345 people volunteered to monitor drop boxes across the state, alongside disinformation posted to their website, like articles titled, “10 plus ways the election was rigged in Maricopa County.” Their actions are based in part on 2,000 Mules, a discredited documentary and book project that makes false claims of widespread fraud in the 2020 elections. Other groups too, such as Yavapai County Preparedness Team (YCPT) and the Lions of Liberty (LOL), also attempted to organize volunteers to monitor ballot boxes. As a result, fears of mass voter intimidation began to increase among Arizonans and, soon after, voters across the U.S.

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7 Although BDI analysis indicates that the Yavapai County Preparedness Team (YCPT) and Lions of Liberty (LOL) are major influences for drop box incidents in Arizona, BDI could not attribute any specific offline cases to these groups (i.e. the information needed to code when/where these groups were identified physically monitoring drop boxes). As a result, they are absent from the above mentioned list.
8 Votebeat is a non-profit news organization focused on local, non-partisan coverage of election administration and voting access.
9 Clean Elections USA is a conservative advocacy group that supports claims of widespread election fraud during the 2020 presidential election and, in response, started to organize and gather volunteers to monitor drop boxes during the November 2022 election.
10 YCPT is an autonomous chapter of the Oath Keepers, a far-right anti-government group. While they still call themselves Oath Keepers, they act independently from the largely defunct national entity. LOL is an affiliate of YCPT.
Steps taken by law enforcement and concerned citizens, however, helped to contribute to demobilization. On October 24, two organizations – Arizona Alliance for Retired Americans and Voto Latino – filed a restraining order against Clean Elections USA and its founder for alleged voter intimidation, followed by the League of Women Voters filing a suit against LOL and YCPT for the same reason. In response, LOL and YCPT agreed to stand down and end their drop box monitoring.

A federal judge granted the temporary restraining order, and videos emerged showing deputies de-escalating a tense incident between voters and drop box monitors. The Maricopa County Supervisor dispatched plain-clothes officers and coordinated with election officials to address monitoring concerns. Nevertheless, drop box monitoring incidents continued to occur. In response, law enforcement ramped up security around the Maricopa County Elections (MCTEC) office in early November, including setting up a barricade, deploying drones, and maintaining an extra police presence at the location, which may have curbed the number of protesters that gathered during the tabulation process. Ultimately, a Maricopa County judge ruled on November 12 (after the election) that Clean Elections USA had to stop using the name because Arizona already had an organization named “Clean Elections,” and the founder was ordered to remove false election information from social media.

In total, according to data collected by BDI, 25 offline drop box monitoring incidents were reported in Arizona, all in Maricopa County, across eight different drop box locations. The majority of these cases took place in Phoenix (12) and Mesa (11). According to the EAC, there were 391 drop boxes in Arizona during the 2022 election cycle, meaning that physical monitoring incidents were reported at approximately 2% of locations across the state. Most of the Arizona incidents recorded in the dataset (10) took place at the drop box at the Maricopa Juvenile Justice Court in Mesa. While there were three incidents of monitors wearing combat or tactical gear, and one incident of monitors carrying arms, only one case of violence was reported: a fistfight that broke out in Phoenix. A timeline of related events in Arizona is included at the end of this section below.

Overall, the extent to which the legal cases and law enforcement response led directly to the demobilization of ballot box monitors in Arizona is unclear. However, statements from LOL and YCPT indicated their intent to stand down in response to legal action, and the lawsuit against Clean Elections USA helped prevent the organization from further spreading disinformation, suggesting that these types of concrete approaches to drop box monitoring do have tangible outcomes for the election security environment.

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11 Although plans for drop box monitoring in counties elsewhere in the state were also identified online, physical offline monitoring was only reported in Maricopa County.
Arizona Timeline
Drop Box Monitoring Activity and Related Events

**July – October 2022**: Clean Elections USA starts a drop box monitoring volunteer sheet across the U.S., including in Arizona.

**July 2022**: During a YCPT meeting, the group’s founder, Jim Arroyo, coordinates with Sheriff David Rhodes, who said he would arrest anyone he saw stuffing ballots.

**August 2022**: Jim Arroyo urges his followers to monitor drop boxes in Yavapai County during a YCPT meeting.

**August 2022**: A group of “ballot watchdogs” question a woman and her husband in Gilbert when going to drop off their ballots.

**September 24, 2022**: During a YCPT meeting, members discuss watching drop boxes.

**October 13 – 22, 2022**: There are at least 9 incidents of ballot monitoring in Maricopa county where individuals watch, photograph, and/or film other individuals. On October 21, armed individuals in tactical gear gather outside of the Mesa ballot box and take pictures of voters.

**October 15, 2022**: During an LOL meeting, Luke Cilano, one of the group’s leaders, mentions that members were watching drop boxes, and that they received a cease and desist order. They determine that LOL will not accept new volunteers or coordinate the drop box program, but Cilano himself will continue to monitor drop boxes.

**October 24 – 27, 2022**: There are 8 incidents of unarmed individuals watching ballot boxes in Maricopa County. In one of these incidents on October 26, there are camo-clad men with tactical vests outside of a polling area. Other incidents include photographing and filming of individuals.

**October 24, 2022**: The Arizona Alliance for Retired Americans and Voto Latino file a restraining order against Clean Elections USA and its founder, Melody Jennings, for alleged voter intimidation.

**October 26, 2022**: The League of Women Voters files a suit against LOL and the YCPT for voter intimidation.

**October 27, 2022**: LOL and YCPT announce that they will stand down and end their drop box monitoring.

**November 1, 2022**: Federal Judge Michael Liburdi grants a two-week temporary restraining order in the League’s case. The judge rules that members of Clean Elections USA cannot film anyone nor follow anyone within 75 feet of the drop boxes. The members also cannot speak or yell at anyone unless spoken to first.

**November 2, 2022**: Maricopa County Supervisor Bill Gates says he will dispatch plain-clothes officers and that he is coordinating with election officials.

**November 1 – 8, 2022**: There are at least 7 additional incidents of drop box monitoring in Maricopa County. Two of these events are on election day, where individuals tell others how to vote and make claims about a stolen election.

**November 8 – 9, 2022**: Law enforcement ramps up security around the MCTEC office. Police set up a barricade, deploy drones, and maintain an extra police presence at the location.

**November 12, 2022**: A Maricopa County judge rules that Clean Elections USA has to stop using the name because Arizona already has an organization named “Clean Elections.” The same ruling also tells Melody Jennings to scrub her social media of false election information.
Pennsylvania

On September 13, 2022, Audit the Vote PA\(^\text{12}\) (ATVPA) emailed the Chester County Commissioners and Director of Elections, asking the county to ban the use of ballot drop boxes based on their “investigative research” and canvassing following the 2020 election. The month prior, they had announced plans to launch sign-up sheets for people to volunteer as drop box watchers. Later in September, ChescoUnited\(^\text{13}\) directed its supporters on Telegram to sign up to be a poll watcher, mail-in ballot watcher, or drop box watcher – hoping to catch voters committing fraud in the act, and to find evidence that could help secure a legal injunction barring the use of drop boxes.

In late September, Berks County Board of Commissioners Chairman Christian Leinbach proposed a policy change at an elections board meeting, which was passed unanimously by commissioners, for a deputy sheriff to actively question anyone dropping off a ballot at a drop box in Berks County whether the ballot they cast is their own.\(^\text{14}\) This monitoring then began in earnest in early October. In response, voting rights and interfaith organizations staged a “Party at the Polls,” intended to counter hesitations voters may feel due to the presence of law enforcement at drop boxes.

In the lead-up to the election, national, statewide, and local activist groups, as well as Republican officials, encouraged and organized supporters to monitor drop box locations. For example, the Montgomery County GOP directed supporters on Facebook to sign up as drop box monitors through precinct-specific forms. In response, in October, the Chester County Board of Elections implemented new procedures regulating the conduct of drop box watchers, and Chester County agreed to staff every drop box, to limit their hours of availability, and to include video surveillance at all locations.

ATVPA proceeded to publicize allegations that several witnesses observed a previously closed ballot drop box with 10 “pre-loaded” ballots in Centre County – claims circulated widely by right-wing media, including The Gateway Pundit, despite being debunked. Additional reports of individuals monitoring mail-in ballot drop box locations began to emerge in Chester and Montgomery counties, with reports that monitors may have impersonated authorized officials, asked for personal information, written down license plate numbers, and taken photos of voters.

\(^\text{12}\) ATVPA is a conservative grassroots organization that has questioned the legitimacy of the 2020 election, citing debunked conspiracies, and has pressured election officials to limit supposedly fraudulent electoral practices.

\(^\text{13}\) ChescoUnited is a Chester County-based conservative organization that has espoused election conspiracies, and has filed legal challenges to the county’s election results and practices.

\(^\text{14}\) “The county [had] had deputy sheriffs man ballot drop boxes ever since widespread voting by mail was first allowed by the state in 2020,” but not actively question voters. “The change will require the deputies to confirm that voters are dropping off their own ballot. The same policy has previously been used when voters drop off their ballot at the election services office.”
During this time, ChescoUnited announced that all of its poll watcher, drop box watcher, and mail-in observer positions were full – despite their online sign-up sheet appearing to be short several dozen volunteers from its 100-person goal – and instead began to direct its supporters to volunteer as “poll greeters,” to help voters with their final candidate selections by staying out of the polling area and “[h]and[ing] out literature and [h]elp[ing] answer questions voters may have.” While the group did not cite the November 1 Arizona court ruling (where a federal judge had granted a temporary restraining order against Clean Elections USA), their announcement came shortly thereafter, and reflects less confrontational instructions for volunteers.

ChescoUnited subsequently deleted the online sign-up form for drop box watching volunteers – and, perhaps as a direct result, there were no additional observed incidents at drop box locations, despite self-claims by some individuals that they continued monitoring. On March 15, 2023, the Aston, Pennsylvania Board of Commissioners voted to remove the township’s ballot drop box from the old township building. At the time, this marked the fourth town in Delaware County to remove drop boxes, following Upper Chichester, Bethel, and Newtown Township, the latter of which replaced its drop box after receiving complaints from residents. Township Board Vice President Michael Higgins justified this decision in part by referencing the alleged harvesting of ballots, a claim that gained prominence through the widely debunked election conspiracy film and book project, *2,000 Mules*.

In total, per BDI data, at least six offline drop box monitoring incidents were reported at six locations in Pennsylvania, concentrated in three counties: Centre (1), Chester (2), and Montgomery (3). While some reports of monitors confronting voters emerged, there were no recorded incidents of violence. In other cases in Pennsylvania, law enforcement was tasked with engaging voters around drop boxes by policy. In Berks County, for example, *Sheriff’s Deputies* staffed the county’s two drop box locations, with instructions from county election officials to question voters if their ballots were their own, and whether it was signed and dated (similar to questions asked at other voting locations). These cases may have impacted voter use of drop boxes but are not included in the dataset. According to the EAC, there were 137 ballot drop boxes in Pennsylvania during the 2022 election cycle, meaning that physical monitoring incidents were reported at approximately 4% of locations across the state. A timeline of related events in Pennsylvania is included at the end of this section below.

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15 While six incidents are included in the dataset, reports around at least one of these incidents suggests that it could potentially account for multiple sub-incidents. As reporting is not more detailed, however, it is coded as a single event in the dataset.

16 The Drop Box Monitoring Dataset does not include law enforcement activity. While in some cases law enforcement actors have taken constructive approaches to address concerns around drop boxes and election security, in other cases they have engaged in monitoring activity that may have had similar intimidatory effects as non-state monitoring. Examples of relevant cases are discussed below in the Issue Brief, but these incidents are not captured in the Drop Box Monitoring Dataset.
Overall, despite multiple organized drop box monitoring efforts, actual offline activity was not widespread in Pennsylvania, and it did not result in reports of significant disruption. Similar to Arizona, an array of factors likely contributed to the low level of drop box monitoring activity. Pennsylvania state clarification around the legal consequences of monitoring, county agreements (whether compelled or not) on drop box security measures, and fallout from national and local attention and court cases may have all played a role in ultimately reducing mobilization.
**Pennsylvania Timeline**

**Drop Box Monitoring Activity and Related Events**

**August 16, 2022:** ATVPA announces that it plans to launch sign-up sheets for people to volunteer as drop box watchers.

**September 13, 2022:** ATVPA emails the Chester County Commissioners and Director of Elections, asking the county to ban the use of ballot drop boxes, based on their “investigative research.”

**September 26, 2022:** ChescoUnited directs its supporters on Telegram to sign up to be a poll watcher, mail-in ballot watcher, or drop box watcher.

**Early October 2022:** Sheriffs in Berks county decide to staff drop boxes.

**October 6, 2022:** The Chester County Board of Elections implements [new procedures](#) regulating the conduct of drop box watchers.

**October 17, 2022:** Chester County agrees to staff every drop box, limit their hours of availability, and include video surveillance at all locations.

**October 25, 2022:** The ATVPA Telegram channel reports that drop box observers witnessed a previously closed ballot drop box with 10 “pre-loaded” ballots. These claims were widely shared by rightwing media, despite being [debunked](#).

**October 26 – November 1, 2022:** Three separate reports of individuals monitoring mail-in ballot drop box locations emerge in Chester County, with indications that individuals may have impersonated authorized officials, asked for personal information, written down license plate numbers, and taken photos of voters.

**October 27 – November 5, 2022:** Four additional incidents of individuals monitoring mail-in ballot drop boxes are reported in Center and Montgomery counties.

**November 2, 2022:** ChescoUnited announces that all of its poll watcher, drop box watcher, and mail-in observer positions are full. The group then directs its supporters to volunteer as “poll greeters,” who can help voters with their final candidate selections.

**November 4 – 5, 2022:** The last drop box monitoring incidents in Pennsylvania are reported. These took place in Chester Springs, Chester County, and Lansdale, Montgomery County.

**March 15, 2023:** The Aston, Pennsylvania Board of Commissioners votes to remove the township’s ballot drop box from the old township building.

**November 1, 2023:** An individual who was driving by a drop box in Lansdowne, Delaware County, confronts two election workers picking up mail-in ballots, who they purportedly believed were “stuffing” the drop box.†

**January 18, 2024:** The Lebanon County Board of Commissioners votes 2-1 to remove the county’s only mail-in ballot drop box. On March 7, following public pressure, the county votes to implement a manned drive-thru mail-in drop-off zone.

**March 6, 2024:** The Westmoreland County Board of Commissioners states that they will not consider installing drop boxes for the 2024 election in the county. The county had drop boxes in at least 6 locations during the 2020 election, but cited the alleged declining use of drop boxes as rationale for their removal.

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† This 2023 incident is not captured in the Drop Box Monitoring Dataset for 2022, but included for reference in the Issue Brief as part of ongoing open-source tracking and analysis.
Conclusions and Recommendations for 2024

Overall, the data demonstrate a very low frequency of incidents of offline monitoring of ballot drop boxes. During the 2022 election, across all of the estimated 13,000 drop box voting sites in 39 states, monitoring incidents were reported at 0.35% of total locations.

Nevertheless, the prevalence of mis- and disinformation surrounding drop boxes poses significant challenges to the election process that must be addressed. For example, states such as Wisconsin, Kansas, and Wyoming have already instituted restrictions on the use of drop boxes for the 2024 election, despite evidence that they are a secure and reliable means of voting. Former President Trump’s 2024 presidential announcement called for exclusive same-day voting, indicating that this issue will continue to be a focus of political contention during the campaign and beyond. Drop boxes are likely to remain particularly contentious in swing states like Pennsylvania and Arizona that have seen relatively higher levels of drop box-related activity. Examples include ongoing court cases as well as mis- and disinformation circulated over early closures in Arizona, despite the relatively limited number of races and active drop box voting sites in 2023.

Based on analysis of the Drop Box Monitoring Dataset, BDI offers four preliminary recommendations to help prepare for the upcoming 2024 election. First, national and local stakeholders should build on positive de-escalation approaches that contributed to low levels of physical drop box monitoring and related violence risks in 2022 and 2023, from legal challenges to effective community organizing against election interference. Second, the wide range of research and election protection groups tracking intimidation and monitoring incidents at voting sites should increase collaboration to ensure timely and clear identification of potential threats at drop box locations, in order to supplement private complaints about monitoring activity. Third, this network of groups should enhance strategic communication coordination to disseminate consistent and accurate information on the drop box voting process and any potential risks, with a view toward correcting misperceptions of the threat environment and debunking mis- and disinformation that could fuel monitoring activity. And fourth, this network should prioritize outreach to local communities and trusted information sources like local media to open up space for constructive dialogue and preparatory action around election security issues. These steps can help prevent the amplification of rumors, false claims, and unfounded threat messaging aimed at suppressing voter turnout in targeted communities, which can inadvertently boost the real-world impact of threatened acts of intimidation at drop box locations that have so far mainly failed to materialize.

To request access to the Drop Box Monitoring Dataset, please contact BDI for more information.