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#### **Publication Date**

2018

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, MERCED

Tell Me Lies: Fake News, Source Cues, and Partisan Motivated Reasoning

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Political Science

by

Chelsea M. Coe

Committee in charge:

Professor Stephen P. Nicholson, Chair

Professor Teenie Matlock

Professor Alexander G. Theodoridis

2018

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The Dissertation of Chelsea M. Coe is approved, and it is acceptable  
in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Professor Stephen P. Nicholson, Chair

University of California, Merced

2018

*To both of my loving and powerful grandmothers,  
who were never allowed the opportunity to go to college  
but taught me that knowledge is power.*

## Abstract

With the rise of social media and fast-paced news, the American electorate is inundated with information now more than ever. One of the consequences of the increase in technology is the proliferation of fake news. Fake news is defined as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent” (Lazer et al. 2018). The growth of the Internet means that more information is conveniently accessible to people without any sort of vetting for factual basis.

Although scholars have done much to chart the landscape of fake news, less is known about how much people believe it and why. This dissertation seeks to understand the role of news source cues and the individual characteristics and traits that shape the believability of news.

The credibility of a source affects whether people believe what they see, read, or hear. When the source is high in credibility, people are likely to accept the information as true but if the source is low in credibility, people are likely to be skeptical or reject the information. For the news, previous research suggests that source credibility matters in precisely this way (Druckman 2001). Yet, the credibility of a news source can be ambiguous, and people often have biases that predispose them to believing a story. Such is the world of fake news wherein “news organizations” masquerading as reputable sources peddle sensationalistic stories.

Using a nationally representative sample, I conducted a survey experiment featuring ten news stories and a variety of news sources, mainstream and fake. I find little evidence that people are mindful of the news source. Regardless of whether a story comes from a well-established source such as ABC News or an unknown fake news source, people largely disregard news source cues. Instead, in line with the theories of partisan motivated reasoning, respondents react to the partisan tenor of news, believing news that confirms their partisan biases and disbelieving news to the contrary. Aside from partisanship, I also find various traits, some political and some nonpolitical such as the Big 5 personality traits, to help account for who is susceptible to fake news. I find that those who are low in political knowledge, high in self-monitoring, and high in magical thinking are more likely to be susceptible to believing in fake news.

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## Acknowledgments

Throughout my graduate career, I daydreamed about writing the acknowledgments section of my dissertation. Just like the last bite of a favorite dessert, I saved this bit for last and used it as a motivator to block the lingering thoughts of whether or not I would ever get to the point of being able to write it at all. The idea of being able to formally thank all of the people who got me to this moment is something I've been looking forward to since I started this whole process. It feels surreal to be writing it now.

I would first like to thank the Political Science Department. It has been a pleasure to see it grow and to be a part of one of the first classes. I especially want to thank Thomas Hansford for being an amazing co-author and mentor. Thank you to Matthew Hibbing for igniting my interest in politics starting from my undergrad years to supporting me through research and in life into my graduate years. Thank you to my peers who got me through the first year of graduate school and qualifying exams. Thank you to Josh Franco, who was always a phone call away. And a special thank you to Kayla Canelo for being a dear friend through the thick and thin of graduate school. You are an amazing researcher, co-author and genuine friend.

Thank you to my friends and family. To my friends who continued to encourage me and congratulate me for little accomplishments along the way even though you had no idea what I was doing in this weird world of academia. You guys are the reason I didn't go crazy. Thank you to my extended family (Kristine, Sha, Dianne, Vinson Family) for your support! It means the world. I am so lucky to call you family.

Thank you to my mom who is undoubtedly my number one fan. Thank you for your unconditional love and for giving me the guts to do anything I want in this world. I know I can take risks and shoot for the moon because I know you will be there to catch me if I fall. We say I'm a mini version of you, and I'm so proud of that. I hope I can be as courageous and loving as you are. Thank you for never giving up on me and always encouraging me to be the best person I can be.

Thank you to my dad who taught me to be a thinker and showed me the value in being an independent and intellectual woman. You have truly showed me what it means to never give up. Thank you for being an amazing father and for always teaching things to us ever since we were little. For always putting us first. I think all of the hamburger helpers and impromptu spelling and vocabulary questions paid off!

Thank you to my little sister, who is not so little anymore. You are an inspiration in and of itself. Thank you for supporting any decision I made. For being there when I needed to cry it out or being there when I needed a good rant. For always telling me that I can do it. For truly being there every minute of every day. You are the best gift I have ever been given, and I couldn't have done it without you. (Oh and thanks for all the proofreading!)

To David, my partner in academia and in life. From the beginning, you continuously told me that you believed in me and in my intellect, and then one day, I realized that I was starting to believe in myself too. You are the first person who made me value myself in a way that I never have before. For that, I am eternally grateful. It's crazy to think that we were together for the entirety of both of our graduate careers. If we can get through that, we can get through anything right? Thank you for all of the late night talks, drunken intellectual arguments, all the ramblings, and editing my work. Thank you for showing me the true wealth that there is in knowledge and in learning. For teaching me so many things every single day. I am always in awe of your curiosity and ideas (even if I get annoyed sometimes). Know that you are my inspiration.

Thank you to my committee. To Alex, thank you for all the opportunities you gave me. Everything from TAing for your class to co-authoring to attending conferences together has been some of the biggest highlights of my graduate career. Thank you for always encouraging me to be the best I can be but also for being there when I fell short. To Teenie, it has been a wild ride. Your lab was the first lab I ever joined as an undergraduate, and my love of research was born there. Our conversations over the years were always such a pleasure, and you always made me feel like home, especially at times when I didn't feel like I belonged. Thank you for always supporting me.

Lastly, and most importantly, thank you to Steve, my chair, my advisor, and my mentor. I can truly and honestly say that this could not have been possible without you. From day 1 of graduate school, you have been the strongest pillar of support that never wavered and never failed. Through all of my anxiety, uncertainty, imposter syndrome and the rest, you never stopped encouraging me. All the things I am most proud of in my career is thanks to you and our work together. You have taught me to be a better researcher than I ever thought possible. Thank you for nurturing all of my crazy ideas and question. For all of the long talks. To me, our meetings are always like a shot of whiskey. I leave excited and reminded of why I fell in love with research in the first place. Thank you for being patient with me. For always being kind, caring, and understanding. Thank you for putting your students before yourself and always worrying about our careers first. I can't say I was the easiest student, but I can say that you are the best advisor I could have ever asked for. I feel so lucky to have been able to work with you throughout these years, and I can only hope for it to continue well into the future.

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## PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS

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Linguistic Complexity, Information Processing, and Public Acceptance of Supreme Court Decisions. *Political Psychology*. (2018) Forthcoming (with Thomas Hansford)

The Nature of Party Categories in Two Party and Multiparty Systems. *Advances in Political Psychology* 39, no. S1 (2018): 279-304. (with Stephen P. Nicholson, Christopher J. Carman, Aidan Feeney, Balzs Fehr, Brett K. Hayes, Christopher Kam, Jeffrey A. Karp, Gergo Vaczi, and Evan Heit.)

The Physiology of Framing Effects: Threat Sensitivity and the Persuasiveness of Political Arguments. *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 4 (2017): 1465-1468. (with Kayla Canelo, Kau Vue, Matthew Hibbing, Stephen P. Nicholson)

Monster Wildfires and Metaphor in Risk Communication. *Metaphor and Symbol* 32, no. 4 (2017): 250-261. (with Teenie Matlock, Anthony Westerling)

The Politics of Beauty: The Effects of Partisan Bias on Physical Attractiveness. *Political Behavior*. 38, no. 4 (2016): 883-898. (with Stephen P. Nicholson, Jason Emory, and Anna Song)

## OTHER PUBLICATIONS

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The Way Trump Talks in Debates is Contagious.  
Opinion Editorial for Wired.com

## WORKING PAPERS

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Fake News, Misinformation, and Decision Making. In *Oxford Encyclopedia of Political Decision Making* (with Stephen P. Nicholson)

Express Yourself: Language and Decision-Making on the Supreme Court. *Submitted* (with Kristin Renberg)

Party Categories of the Mind: How Parties, Coalitions, and Ideology Shape Political Thinking in Sweden. *Submitted* (with Stephen P. Nicholson, Johan Martinsson, and Evan Heit)

Party Personified: How the Partisan Public Exemplifies Party Traits *Submitted* (with Stephen P. Nicholson)

Sequential Dependencies in News Consumption: Exploring the Contagion Effects of Fake News (with David W. Vinson)

Political Psychophysiology: A Primer for Interested Researchers and Consumers. (with Jamie E. Settle, Nick Anspach, Kevin Arceneaux, Taylor N. Carlson, Edward Hernandez, Matthew Hibbing, John Peterson, John Stuart)

Matching Red and Blue: Partisan Intensity, Composition and Potential Outcomes. (with Kayla Canelo, Alexander Theodoridis, Stephen Goggin, & John Henderson)

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Source Cues and Fake News *Western Political Science Association* San Francisco, CA. March 2018.

Setting Boundaries: How Categorical Perception Sets Political Parties Apart From Each Other in Crowded Multiparty Systems *Midwest Political Science Association* Chicago, IL. April 2016. (with Stephen Nicholson & Evan Heit)

Matching Red and Blue: Partisan Intensity, Composition and Potential Outcomes. *Midwest Political Science Association* Chicago, IL. April 2016. (with Kayla Canelo, Alexander Theodoridis, Stephen Goggin, & John Henderson)

Linguistic Complexity, Information Processing, and Public Acceptance of Supreme Court Decisions. *UC Consortium on Social Science and Law* Irvine, CA. October 2015. (with Thomas Hansford)

Matching Red and Blue: Partisan Intensity, Composition and Potential Outcomes. *Society for Political Methodology Summer Methods Meeting* Rochester, NY. July 2015. (with Kayla Canelo & Alexander Theodoridis)

How Sticks and Stones Metaphorically Break Bones in Presidential Elections. *37th Annual Cognitive Science and Society Meeting* Pasadena, CA. July 2015. (with Teenie Matlock & Till Bergmann)

Threatening Stimuli: How Biological Traits Condition Citizens' Responses to Issue Framing. *International Society of Political Psychology Annual Meeting* San Diego, CA. July 2015. (with Kayla Canelo, Stephen Nicholson, Matthew Hibbing, & Kau Vue)

The Power of Metaphor in Communicating Risk in Climate Messages. *13th Conference on Communication and Environment* Boulder, CO. June 2015. (with Teenie Matlock, Till Bergmann, & Timothy Gann)

Threatening Stimuli: How Biological Traits Condition Citizens' Responses to Issue Framing. *Psychology, Biology, and Political Attitudes*. Lincoln, Nebraska. April 2015. (with Kayla Canelo, Stephen Nicholson, Matthew Hibbing, & Kau Vue)

How Sticks and Stones Metaphorically Break Bones in Presidential Elections. *Conceptual Structure, Discourse, and Language*. Santa Barbara, CA. November 2014. (with Teenie Matlock)

Can Party Identification Make You Virtuous?. *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*. Washington, D.C.. August 2014. (with Stephen Nicholson)

Linguistic Complexity, Legalistic Complexity, and Public Acceptance of Supreme Court Decisions. *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*. Washington, D.C.. August 2014. (with Thomas Hansford)

How Sticks and Stones Metaphorically Break Bones in Presidential Elections. *Embodied Situated Language Processing*. Rotterdam, Netherlands. August 2014. (with Bodo Winter & Teenie Matlock)

ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphors in current politics. *2nd Cognition and Language Workshop*. Santa Barbara, CA. September 2013. (with Bodo Winter, Teenie Matlock, & Nathan Monroe)

ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphors in current politics. *12th International Cognitive Linguistics Conference*. Edmonton, Canada. July 2013. (with Bodo Winter)

How motion metaphors drive political races. *The 12th International Cognitive Linguistics Conference*. Edmonton, Canada. July 2013. (with Teenie Matlock, Marcus Perlman, & Morgan Fleming)

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<i>The Changing Scope of Political Science</i> Cognitive and Information Sciences Department. University of California, Merced.	October 2015
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POL 005 *Introduction to International Relations* (Fall 2014)  
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POL 010 *Understanding Political Controversy* (Fall 2013)

## AWARDS

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SSHA Dean's Research Award	2018
Faculty Mentorship Program Nomination	2015-2016
PolMeth XXXII Acceptable Award	2015
National Science Foundation, Political Methodology Scholarship	2015
Nina Dolores Wack Family Fellowship	2015
Elections, Public Opinion, and Voting Behavior Graduate Student Travel Grant	2014
Cognitive & Information Sciences Undergraduate Travel Award	2013
Willer/BUR Scholarship	2012 - 2013

## **MEDIA**

---

Grad Student Researches Biology Behind Political Views (UC Merced Newsroom)	2017
How Your Political Views Affect Who You Think is Attractive (Washington Post)	2016
Grad Student Crosses Discipline (Merced SunStar)	2015

## Chapter 1: Introduction

With the rise of social media and fast-paced news, the American electorate was inundated with information in the 2016 election. Rather than receiving their information solely from the television or from the newspapers, people instead receive election information on multiple applications across multiple devices. Social media now propagates the quick and efficient spreading of information. Although having an abundance of easily available news information has the potential to create a better-informed public, it also has the potential to misinform. One consequence of the changed media environment that I examine is the proliferation of fake news.

### Change in Media

Twenty years ago, the majority of Americans received their news from either the television, newspaper, or radio. Today, there is not only an increase in the amount of news stations and publications, there is also an increase in news mediums. The list of devices has expanded from just television and radio to including tablets, laptops, smartphones, and more. According to the ANES, only 24% of households had access to the Internet in 1996. By 2008, 70% of households had access to the Internet (a 46% increase).<sup>1</sup>

How does the increase in Internet availability change the way people receive political information? With regards to political media, ANES data shows that there is a significant increase from the 6% that saw election campaign information on the Internet in 1996 to 2004 where 41% of people said they did. When it comes to getting the news on older forms of media, those that used to watch national TV news everyday declined from 26% in 1984 to 15% in 2008 (ANES). This is also largely generational where the older age groups who grew up on television and radio are more likely to be the ones to still watch TV news, while the younger generation is adopting new forms of news like social media.

The increase in the types of devices also changes the speed at which information can reach a person. Just within a four-year time span (between 2012 to 2016), the percentage of people that owned smartphones grew by 34% (ANES).<sup>2</sup> As our devices become smarter, faster and more compact, we're essentially capable of accessing all of the nation's, if not the world's, news organizations in our pockets. People are now notified by their favorite news entities and can receive a neatly packaged collection of news channels with their morning coffee on their tablet instead of relying on one newspaper.

Despite this enormous shift in how people receive the news, the public's interest in, and consumption of, political news has not changed over time. The

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<sup>1</sup> The percentage of households that have Internet has probably increased by 2018, but the last time the question is asked in the ANES is in 2008.

<sup>2</sup> In 2012, 34% of people said they had a smartphone in comparison to 2016 where 78% of people said they had a smartphone.



ANES shows that people in 2016 are just as interested, if not more interested in politics as they were in 2000.<sup>3</sup> The difference is in how people receive this information.

This year, two-thirds of Americans (66%) will receive news from social media (Pew Research 2018). In 2016, Pew Research reported that out of the 67% that use Facebook, 44% received news from it. Individuals can use these social media platforms to get information not only from their favorite news sources but also from their friends and family. People can have these applications downloaded to their phone and implement a setting that gives them notifications when news, that's tailored to their interest, is available.

In the 2016 ANES, 40% of respondents reported that they used social media every single day to learn about the Presidential election. While many social media users will stumble upon news, this figure suggests that many use social media to actively search for political information when needed. In fact, the 2017 Pew Research reports 25% of adults had received news from two or more different social media sites.

*Social media* according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos).”<sup>4</sup> Information is no longer a one-way road where the daily news trickles down from well-established news organizations to the public. Social media has made information a collaborative environment that allows for the back and forth between people, media, and government. The distance between each persons has never been smaller.

The proliferation of news sources has made it easy for many types of news organizations to flourish including websites, blogs, YouTube channels, Facebook pages, and much more. As technology has advanced, these changes have dramatically altered the news environment. While easier and quicker access to information should be a good thing for democracy, it is not without its challenges and sacrifices. This dissertation is about one of the major challenges that has been introduced with the new information age: fake news.

## **Social Media and Fake News**

Social media has undoubtedly changed the way the public receives and engages with their news. In 2016, the Internet was the number one way people got information about the 2016 campaign, in comparison to television, radio, and

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<sup>3</sup> The ANES has a question about people's interest in political campaigns ranging on a 3pt scale from “not much interested” to “very much interested.” The interest has been steadily increasing where in 2000 those who responded as “very much interested” was 29%. In 2008, it was 23% and in 2016, it was 52%.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout the rest of this dissertation, social media will refer to any place where information is shared between people via Internet.

newspaper (ANES).<sup>5</sup> But it's not merely the Internet that changed the way people receive information, it's the new platforms within the Internet.

The expansion of information that has come from social media has not been without consequences. The most painful and pressing consequence, particularly in the world of politics, is the rise of fake news. For this dissertation, I use the definition outlined created by 16 scholars who authored the interdisciplinary piece titled, "The science of fake news." The authors define fake news as "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent" (Lazer et al. 2018).<sup>6</sup> Not all fake news articles are completely fabricated, some may have some truth or be grounded in some event that actually occurred. If it wasn't apparent to everyone prior to the 2016 presidential election that the Internet is full of falsities, it is now. The rise of the Internet and blogs means that more information is conveniently accessible to people without any sort of vetting for factual basis.

There are some types of fake news that the majority of people agree is fake due to its content. For example, a story about Hillary Clinton plotting an alien invasion to win the US election is one of them. The credibility of other fake news stories is harder to discern. This is why a number of fact checking sources like Politifact or Snopes exist. The sole purpose of these organizations is to fact check the factual accuracy of news stories. Some articles may be grounded in truth but contain a lot of falsities. Others may contain a lot of fabricated content but is packaged in a way that makes them seem more credible. All of these variations of fake news make it difficult to identify which are fake and which are real.

The accuracy of news falls along a continuum. There have been attempts to categorize the different gradations of falsities/truth in news. For example, the Deception Detection for News at the University of Western Ontario categorized five types of fake news ranging from "intentionally deceptive" to "slanted reporting of real facts." First Draft News identifies seven types of fake news giving it a broader definition that ranges from "satire" to "manipulated content" to "fabricated content." For the purposes of this research, fake news will be defined as news stories that have no factual basis but are presented as credible news. While the intention and purpose behind the fake news is important, it's difficult to differentiate and pinpoint the origins of fake news websites.

More recently, "fake news" has also become a term used to impugn credible news sources. As a result, the meaning of fake news has become murkier as President Trump, the most prominent user of this political tactic, calls mainstream news sources such as CNN "fake news" when they report stories that are critical of his administration. In Trump's first press conference, for

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<sup>5</sup> In the 2016 ANES, 38% of respondents said they went to the Internet "a good many of times" to get info about the 2016 presidential campaign. This is in comparison with the TV (24%), radio (18%), and newspaper (18%).

<sup>6</sup> The authors concede that this definition largely focuses on the processes of the publisher and the intent rather than the individual news stories.

example, he pointed at CNN's Senior White House Correspondent, Jim Costa, as being a part of a fake news organization. Now there is precedent to call sites that express views opposite of your beliefs or ideologies as fake news. While this take on "fake news" is substantively very interesting and should be further studied, this use of the term will remain outside the scope of this dissertation.

The concept of fake news, as defined here, is nothing new. Prior to the Internet, there were false news and conspiracy theories sent in pamphlets and through the mail. The *National Enquirer*, a newsstand tabloid that began in 1926, is well known for its exaggerated and sometimes blatantly false articles. In the early days of the Internet, e-mail chain mails were laden with fake information. Today, there are myriad fake news websites disguised as real news with seemingly credible domain names. While someone may know the *National Enquirer* to be a publication that is not credible, there usually is not an easy way to know the credibility of the thousands of online publications out there, some churning out blatantly false headlines daily.

### **Trust in Media and Fake News**

One of the consequences of fake news seems to be the diminishing credibility of the media and increasing distrust with it. As it becomes harder and harder to discern reliable information, the backlash may be to become skeptical of any and all information. The majority of Americans say fake news has left them confused about basic facts (Pew Research Center 2016), and consumers of news claim that they expect much of the information to be largely inaccurate (Pew Research Center 2018). Furthermore, inaccuracy is still the highest concern for people with social media (Pew Research Center 2018). The concern of something being too biased or political comes second to inaccuracy (Pew Research Center 2018).

A 2016 report by Pew Research Center claims that 1/3 of Americans say they often see made-up political news online while 51% say they see inaccurate news. However, Americans express a fair amount of confidence in their own ability to detect fake news (84% feeling somewhat or very confident). Some respondents (23%) in this report even admitted to having shared a made-up news story (14% say they shared a story they knew that was fake while 16% only found out later).

In a 2016 report by Gallop, trust in mass media hit an all-time low at 32% compared to 53% in 1997. The largest decrease is among Republicans at 14% compared to 41% in 1997. Democrats seem to be more stable with 51% compared to 64% in 1997. The decline of trust in media over time can also be explained generationally. Gallup found that trust has declined mainly among the younger generation. This makes sense as it's the younger generation that presumably is more exposed to the changes in the media information environment including fake news.

There also is a partisan divide on perceptions of the accuracy of social media. As shown in the Gallup poll where Republicans are particularly lacking in

trust in media, they are also more likely than Democrats to believe that the news on social media is largely inaccurate (Pew Research Center 2018). Alternatively, Democrats are more likely to say that social media has helped them understand current events than Republicans (Pew Research Center 2018). Republicans are also much more likely than Democrats to say that media does not keep political leaders accountable, that national news organizations are not trustworthy, and that national news media does a good job at keeping the public informed (Pew Research Center 2018). Some of these questions go all the way back to 1985 suggesting that this divide has never been wider.

Yet research does not suggest that Republicans or conservatives use social media any less than Democrats. Both partisan groups show a similar likelihood to engage in content on social media (Pew Research Center 2016). In fact, a question in the 2016 ANES asked respondents how many numbers of days in the week that was used on social media to learn about Presidential debates, and the data show that there is virtually no difference between Democrats ( $M = 3.7$  days,  $SD = 3.40$ ) and Republicans ( $M = 3.7$  days,  $SD = 3.34$ ),  $t(3667) = -1.52$ ,  $p = n.s.$  The 2016 ANES also asked about the respondent's usage of Facebook where 58% of Republicans and 57% Democrats claimed to have used Facebook in the past month. The culmination of this data suggests that although Republicans and Democrats seem to use social media similarly, their feelings towards the media are vastly different. Later, I will argue that the way partisans process information from social media differs as well.

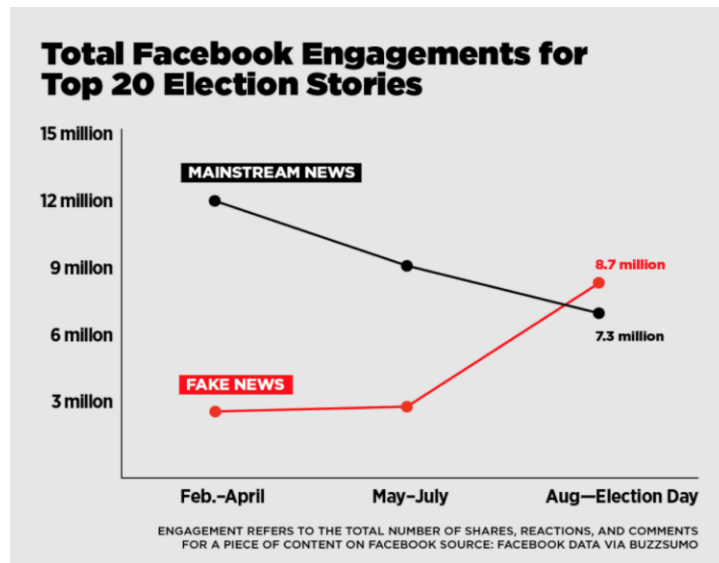
## **Fake News and the 2016 Election**

While fake news has been around for decades, it became a much discussed phenomenon in the 2016 election. Fake news in the past year has taken on a new meaning. During the 2016 election, there were multiple fake news sites that disguised themselves as reliable news sources. These fake news sites created articles that had no factual basis but found a welcoming audience among readers with compatible ideological and partisan world views. These articles were then spread throughout the Internet and social media. The goal of these websites is most likely to increase traffic and therefore, increase revenue for the owners. Multiple journalists attempted to track down the origin and creators of the fake news websites. WIRED published a piece on a small town called Veles in Macedonia where people made a living off of writing fake news articles. Prior to the election, the people of Veles would create websites that featured false headlines on topics like diets, cars, and sports. However, with the 2016 election this group of people found politics to be a particularly lucrative topic. One man told *WIRED* that he earned almost \$16,000 in four months on two pro-Trump websites. Another fake news site based out of Los Angeles told NPR that he made between \$10,000 to \$30,000 a month. And another based in the country, Georgia, told the New York Times that his pro-Trump fake news sites that contained a mixture of real to fake news were a "gold mine". Needless

to say, the fake news business can be lucrative.

Craig Silverman, a journalist who often reports on false information and media errors, did a report using Facebook data showing the change in news engagement in the three months leading up to the election. As shown in Figure 1, his analysis found that the number of fake news articles that were garnering attention skyrocketed in the three months before the election. One of the stories published by a Macedonian fake news site falsely claims that Clinton was about to be indicted just 4 days before the election and claimed a spot in the top 10 most popular stories on Facebook.

Figure 1. Total Facebook Engagement for Top 20 Election Stories



Source: Facebook Data via BuzzFeedNews

The main concern about fake news in the 2016 election was whether it had any impact on the outcome. Did it change people's vote? Allcott and Gentzkow (2018) did an analysis of the articles leading up to the election and found that Pro-Trump fake news articles were shared over 3 times more than Pro-Clinton fake news articles. However, they find that it's improbable that social media and fake news had a substantial effect on the outcome of the 2016 election. Allcott and Gentzkow (2018) find that even if fake news had the same effect as a TV campaign ad, the change in vote shares would still be much smaller than Trump's margin of victory. Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler (2018) found that 1 and 4 Americans visited a fake news website between October 7<sup>th</sup> and November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016. However, they also found it was mostly driven by a small group of frequent visitors. These studies suggest that it's unlikely that the exposure and consumption of fake news was a deciding factor in the 2016 election. Nevertheless, fake news may have had other important consequences, some of which I will explore here.

## Big Data and Fake News

Following the 2016 election, much of the research surrounding fake news relied on big data. The questions became more about figuring out just how prominent fake news is in the information environment. One of the ways that fake news is able to propagate so quickly online is through the use of automated accounts or better known as bots. In 2016, a staggering 9-15% of all active Twitter accounts were actually bots (Varol et al. 2017). Shao et al. (2018) analyzed 14 million Twitter messages that were spreading 400 thousand fake news articles during 2016 to see the effect of bots on the spread of fake news. The authors found that bots participate early on in the start of spreading fake news articles as well as target influential people (i.e. those with a high number of followers). Twitter accounts that spread these fake news articles are significantly more likely to be bots than real humans (Shao et al. 2018).

Big data is also used to explore the prominence of “echo chambers” on social media. The same study from Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler (2018) mentioned previously found that many of those that consume fake news are among a small group of people on social media that create these “echo chambers”. Studying hundreds of thousands of Facebook users, researchers find that users can be highly polarized creating “echo chambers” that are difficult to penetrate, especially in a political context (Quattrociocchi, Scala, and Sunstein 2016). What’s more is that false news diffuses faster into the information environment than factual news (Vogoushi, Roy, and Aral 2018). In a massive study by Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) looking at 126,000 rumors spread by over 3 million people between 2006 to 2017 they found that people were more likely to share and spread fake news over news coming from a credible source.

### *The Believability of Fake News*

Recent research provides ample evidence that fake news is now a common form of media woven into the fabric of our information environment. The purpose of this dissertation is to take a different approach to studying fake news. Rather than the top-down approach, I set out to start from the bottom. I look at the susceptibility and motivation to believing fake news starting from an individual level. In Chapter 2, I pose two rival theories on the motivation behind believing in fake news. Are people motivated by accuracy or their own biases? In Chapter 3, I take a deeper dive in exploring the role of partisanship and its effects on the believability of fake news. In Chapter 4, I explore different individual characteristics that may moderate one’s susceptibility to fake news. Lastly, in Chapter 5, I discuss my results and its implications as well as provide a roadmap for future work.

## **Chapter 2: Motivated Reasoning and Fake News**

All reasoning is motivated (Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006). Psychologists and political scientists have both identified that there are two ways in which reasoning is motivated. People can be motivated by accuracy where their goal is to reach a conclusion that is accurate, or at least the best possible (Baumeister and Newman 1994; Fiske and Taylor 1991). Alternatively, people can be directionally motivated where the goal is to rationalize or reason in defense of their own priors or biases (Kruglanski and Webster 1996; Taber and Lodge 2006). The latter, in a partisan context, is also known as partisan motivated reasoning.

According to Lodge and Taber (2000), people go through stages, largely unconsciously, of combining a spontaneous affective response with past information to produce an evaluation. Keeping that in mind, often times when people are faced with a news article it usually contains new information. Considering that the news is about current events and continually changing, people process it differently based on their goals.

### **Accuracy Motivated Reasoning**

When people are motivated to be accurate, people look at relevant information more deeply and use more energy and effort to reason (Kunda 1990). Rather than searching for information that confirms one's beliefs, people look at information that is issue-related and could potentially use more complex ways of processing in order to decide their beliefs or make a decision. In fact, when the goal to be accurate is strong enough, it can overcome potential biases and shortcuts. For example, justices can overcome their own personal biases in order to achieve "legal accuracy" when deciding cases (Baum 1999; Braman and Nelson 2007).

Processing information quickly can lead to a number of errors and biases (Kunda 1990). People usually rely on information shortcuts when there is not much at stake and can come to a resolution quickly. However, there are instances that show that these shortcuts can lead to mistakes. Dancy and Sheagley (2013) show that people who rely on party cues to know the way their senator votes often times get the vote choice wrong when senators vote against their party. We know throughout the course of our daily experiences of decision making that we can judge things incorrectly and often because we did not pay close enough attention.

Research that studies motivated reasoning have come up with various ways to motivate accuracy. Respondents in experiments where they are learning new information have been told that they must "view information in an evenhanded way so that they could explain the issue to other students" (Taber and Lodge 2006, 759) or to consider different perspectives because they will have to justify their reasons later (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014) as ways of inducing motivated reasoning. When the goal is accuracy, results show that

respondents are significantly more likely to spend more time on assessing the information, more likely to ignore cues, and less likely to give confirming information more weight (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Chaiken and Eagly 1989; Kunda 1990; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Taber and Lodge 2006).

### **Directional/Partisan Motivated Reasoning**

By default, people tend to be motivated by their biases and want to safeguard their views. People want to reinforce their existing feelings rather than revisiting new information (Redlawsk 2002). It's not the case that people want to be irrational or incorrect but that they draw conclusions that are desirable for themselves (Kunda 1990). Even when people can agree on a set of facts, the takeaway or the processing of those facts depend on their predispositions. For example, a survey asking about the British national economy found that British citizens agreed that economic conditions had worsened between 2004 to 2010 but the reasoning and the level of responsibility of the government varied by the respondent's feelings about the party in power (Bisgaard 2015).

Often times, directional reasoning is the easier way of processing information. People's beliefs and predispositions can become helpful and easily identifiable cues in the attitude creating and decision-making process. Uninformed individuals use heuristics to understand political concepts and events that they may find too complicated or uninteresting. Cognitive heuristics and cues are found time and time again to be beneficial in many situations where decision making may be challenging (e.g., Lau and Redlawsk 2001). In Chaiken's (1980) model of information processing, heuristics are used when people are exerting minimal energy in making a decision. The default is to use heuristic processing since its rather efficient and can get often get people to an outcome that resembles one that would have been arrived at had she engaged the subject matter (Lupia 1994). Often times, the types of heuristics that are used for this processing are ones that are biased.

In political science, the motivation is often a partisan bias. Even with a decision as important as voting, we often lean on our partisanship to tell us who and what to vote for (Bartels 2000). In numerous cases, respondents have been shown to be more likely to believe a frame or story because it was promoted by their party (Goren, Frederico, and Kittilson 2009; Kam 2005; Nicholson 2011, 2012; Slothuus and de Vreese 2009). Whether it be a lack of effortful thinking or a strong bias, the majority of decisions that are made rely on our predispositions.

### **Information Processing in the Evaluation of News**

People use heuristics and cues everyday as a tool to efficiently navigate different information environments, especially ones that they are uncertain about.



In politics, cues are often relied upon to help us form attitudes about things like policies (Mondak 1993; Nicholson 2011, 2012) and also to shape our decisions like vote choice (Dancey & Sheagley 2013). Reading the news is no different. We rely on simple shortcuts, like knowing the name of the news organization, to quickly decide what materials to expose ourselves to. With the increase in not only fake news, but news in general, it's become even more daunting to choose the right information.

Many studies have been conducted to identify what situations evoke different information processes and types of reasoning. For example, Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook (2014) expose respondents to energy policies, most of which people have not heard of. In their experiment, they find that left to their own devices, people will engage in motivated reasoning and find cues (when available) that signal whether or not this information is something that fits in their original set of already believed convictions. However, when they told respondents that they will need to explain this information later on, inducing the accuracy motivation, respondents did not rely on partisan cues for their evaluation and did not engage in motivated reasoning (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014). Similarly, an experimental study by Peterson, Skov, Serritzlew, and Ramsøy (2012) looks specifically at party cues to see if people are processing it heuristically or through motivational processes. Using response latency as the measure, they find that when people are forming opinions, they are not using party cues as a quick heuristic to get by but as a tool for more effortful motivated reasoning (Peterson et al. 2012). These studies provide some insight on how the outcome is entirely dependent on the motivation.

In evaluating new information, it's not so much whether people are engaging in heuristic processing or not but the motivation behind what cues to use. Based on the information processing literature, people will use different cues depending whether they are motivated by being accurate or by their own biases.

When exposed to fake news, people will have to make the decision on whether or not to believe this information. I suggest two alternative theories in the believability of fake news. Presumably, if someone was motivated by accuracy, people will be aware of the cues that signal whether or not the information is credible. Alternatively, those who are motivated by their biases will simply believe or not believe the article depending on whether or not it aligns with their beliefs.

## **Motivated Reasoning and Fake News**

### *Accuracy Motivated Reasoning and the Believability of Fake News*

Being that most people are not pundits, the use of heuristics is ubiquitous in politics. Many people form political opinions or make political decisions

despite having little to no political knowledge. Much of political science research has put heuristics in a positive light for helping people making decisions that are aligned with their preferences even though they are largely uninformed about the substance (Boudreau 2009; Downs 1957; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Popkin 1991; Sniderman 2000; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). But heuristics are not 100% full proof; they can cause problems as well. Some heuristics can be misleading or turn out to be wrong, leading to bad decisions (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000; Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Dancey & Sheagley 2012; Nicholson 2012).

When it comes to media and heuristics, the decisions that need to be made are typically whether to read an article and then whether to believe it. In the past, someone could potentially sift through all the media options available and make an informed decision on what to read and believe but now, that is impossible. Today, there are exponentially more options and outlets. Now, people are unintentionally exposed to multiple news articles through social media and need shortcuts to decide what is relevant and trustworthy. There are numerous cues that are available in a news article, particularly online, that can help inform this decision. These cues include, but are not limited to, news organization source cue (e.g. Turner 2007), partisan cue (e.g. Goren, Federico, and Kittilson 2009; Nicholson 2012), time/date cue (e.g. Winter & Kramer 2014), number of circulations cue (e.g. Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwisck & Hastall 2006), or social media cue (e.g. Westerman, Spence, Van Der Heide 2014). All of these cues provide quick bits of information that can help people assess whether the article is worth reading and whether it's worth believing.

### *Source Cues*

The source of information is among the most commonly used type of cue. Source cue, widely defined, simply tells you where information comes from - what the source of the information is. In political science, source cue often means "the political actor behind the issue" (Nicholson 2011). This can be a type of person, group of people, specific person, organization, political party, news organization, etc. Political scientists have shown time and again that source cues are instrumental to shaping public opinion (Arceneaux 2008; Arceneaux and Kolodny 2009; Boudreau 2009; Bowler and Donovan 1998; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Clark and Kestellec 2015; Druckman 2001a; Goren, Federico, and Kittilson 2009; Kam 2005; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Lupia 1994; Mondak 1993a, 1993b; Nicholson 2011, 2012; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). For example, Mondak (1993) finds that when President Reagan is included as a source cue in a question about a policy, the response of the participant is guided by their feelings towards him.

With media research, source cues can mean something different. For the purposes of this dissertation, source cues refer to the source or the publication that the news article is from. Media studies usually focus on the credibility of the source (Druckman 2011). In social psychology and communication, credibility has long been perceived as an attribute of the source that can influence the

reader's response to the message (Kioussis & Dimitrova 2006; Tormala, Briñol, and Petty 2007).

The credibility of a source cue can affect the selection of news sites and whether the news they report is to be believed. On selective exposure, Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, Hastall (2007) found that participants had a greater likelihood of clicking an article if it was attached to a reputable source. Content that is relevant (Pirolli & Card 1999) and consistent with a person's attitudes (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng 2009) play a role in information seeking as well, but when content is held constant, articles from reputable sources are shown to be "selected more frequently, read for longer, and selected earlier" (Winter & Krämer 2014). Other research also suggests that cues about the reputation of a source are important when processing information (Pornpitakpan 2004) and that credibility is necessary for a person to make any use of the information (Wathen and Burkell 2002).

When it comes to believing the information, source cues can also be integral. In communication literature, a credible source cue can trigger something called the authority heuristic (Sundar 2008). The authority heuristic is the belief that reputable and credible sources have correct information (Sundar 2008). Furthermore, sources that are seen as trustworthy are generally more likely to persuade readers (Pornpitakpan 2004). There are also a few papers in political science that have similar findings. Druckman (2001a) replicates the foundational framing study by Nelson et al. (1997a) about the KKK rally but also adds the source to the stimuli, which was not included in the original study. Source credibility in Druckman's paper (2001a) is treated as moderating variable for framing effects with the hypothesis being that a frame is only successful if the speaker is credible. The article is about a Ku Klux Klan's request to hold a rally, and the article's perspective is either a free speech perspective or a public safety perspective. Respondents see that these articles either come from the *New York Times* (credible source) or *The National Enquirer* (noncredible source). Druckman (2001a) found that those who saw the article from *The National Enquirer* showed no difference between the two frames, but respondents who received the *New York Times* treatment were swayed by the stories. This finding, and many others, suggests that sources play a role in whether the news is to be believed.

### *Directional/Partisan Motivated Reasoning and the Believability of Fake News*

When people are told something, their default is to believe that it is true. If after leaving a restaurant a person you do not know tells you that you left your wallet at the restaurant, the default is to believe them. Recognizing or suspecting something to be false takes attention and effort (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). The natural and, most importantly, easier option (in the immediate) is to believe. The ability to recognize information as false is cognitively taxing. It takes an active mind and relative interest to be suspicious. Information that is consistent with

your views and beliefs should then be easy to accept (and information that is inconsistent easy to reject).

This “cognitive-consistency” perspective (Wyer 1974; Festinger 1957) posits that compatibility with your viewpoints increases chances of acceptance while incompatibility decreases it. The motivation and cognitive resources necessary to carefully assess compatibility is also greater than accepting it on the spot (Lewandosky et al. 2012). Furthermore, the incompatibility between a piece of information and your worldview can elicit negative emotional responses (Festinger 1957). The culmination of all of this provides some insight into why it might be easy to fall into the trap of believing in fake news.

People perceive the world in different ways, but often times, it’s perceived in a way that’s reaffirms their beliefs. Researchers have time and time again shown that partisans weigh information consistent with their existing beliefs heavier than contradictory information (e.g. Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2013). Partisanship provides a directional goal for reasoning and furthermore, can serve as a “more general motivational mechanism that guides processing that is consistent” with political attitudes (Strickland, Taber, and Lodge 2011). Even when partisans agree on a fact, when given an outcome like opinion formation or candidate evaluation, they will still find a way to allow their biases to shine through (Bisgaard 2015; Gaines 2007).

The partisan nature of fake news lends itself to people’s emotions, and the reason why partisan motivated reasoning works so well is the deeply ingrained, emotional attachment to parties (Leeper and Slothuus 2014; Theodoridis 2017). People want to align with their party. It’s easier, and it feels better. The acceptance of conflicting information requires an update to prior beliefs, which requires a lot of effort.

Information environments have a large role to play in this as well and are known to affect the way people politically learn (e.g. Barabas and Jerit 2009; Nicholson 2003). With the Internet and social media and the proliferation of fake news, the information environment has changed. People are being inundated with more information, especially mistruths, and the ability to be accurate may be getting harder. Even brief exposure to a variety of news articles from Internet searches (e.g. Google Search) signaled to people to engage in motivated reasoning (Knobloch-Westerwick, Johnson, and Westerwick 2015).

The Internet and social media have also created “echo chambers” for like-minded partisans to gather and be reaffirm their political views and values (Sunstein 2001a, b, 2007; Pariser 2011). One study found that Facebook users can be highly polarized and that these political echo chambers are particularly difficult to penetrate (Quattrociocchi, Scala & Sunstein 2016). Even though people may not know each other in real life, in the social media world they are sorting themselves by primarily talking to those with similar ideological preferences (Barbera, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, and Bonneau 2015). This is the kind of information environment that partisans are in and is arguably contributing to the polarization of the masses (Settle 2018).

## Source Cues, Party Cues, and Fake News

### *Source Cues and Fake News*

How persuasive are source cues? There are a variety of outcome or dependent variables used to test the influence of source cues such as believability, trustworthiness, or change in attitude; but conceptually, it boils down to persuasion. As shown above, research suggests that a credible source cue can be very persuasive. A staggering number of communication articles found that a highly credible source is significantly more persuasive in changing attitudes than a low credibility source (Horai, Naccari, & Fatoullah 1974; Johnson & Izzett 1969; Johnson, Torvicia, & Poprick 1968; Lirtzman & Shuv-Ami 1986; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Maddux & Rogers, 1980; Miller & Baseheart, 1969; Ross 1973; Schulman & Worrall 1970; Warren 1969; Watts & McGuire 1964; Whittaker & Meade 1968). Alternatively, when participants are told that the source should not be trusted, persuasion is inhibited (Petty and Cacioppo 1979).

In looking at the media, the trustworthiness of the source goes hand in hand with the credibility of the source. Across multiple mediums (television, radio, newspaper), a trustworthy source is found to be more persuasive than the untrustworthy source (Andreoli and Worchel 1978; Worchel, Andreoli and Eason 1975). In some cases, the persuasion of the source cue can be even larger than the content itself. Chaiken and Maheswaran (1994) find that as respondents read product messages, they were influenced not by the message but solely by the source credibility.

When it comes to fake news, sources can be split into two groups: familiar sources and unfamiliar sources. Sources that are familiar are usually part of the mainstream media and are generally viewed as credible (Pornpitakpan 2004). Aside from the select few exceptions (such as *Breitbart* or *National Enquirer*), the majority of well-known media names are reputable sources. Going back to Lazer et al's. (2018) definition of fake news, these fabricated news sources don't have an organizational process with editors and fact checkers that go through the content of their articles.

Unfamiliar sources are where there is more confusion. It's possible for credible and reputable news sources to be incorrectly categorized with fake news sites. While source cues can be informative, there is often no way of knowing whether the unknown source is a fake news site or a credible site. Therefore, there is always an inherent risk to the reader that the article can contain false information if it's coming from an unfamiliar news source. In this circumstance, a reader would have to use other cues to determine the credibility of the story.

One of the things that comes with the territory of being a mainstream news site is that it's very difficult to be perceived as unbiased. The majority of mainstream media can be seen as being more sympathetic towards one ideology versus another depending on who you ask. With unfamiliar news sources, there are no preconceived notions unless the unfamiliar news source contains a party cue. Often times, depending on the type of fake news site, many of the names

will contain a clue (sometimes glaringly obvious) which way a fake news site leans ideologically. In situations where party or ideological cues are available, the political leanings of the news site become salient. To my knowledge, this is the first study exploring the effect of source cues with unfamiliar fake news, some of which embed clues to the political leanings of the source. This leads me to the following prediction.

*Accuracy Motivation Hypothesis:* Individuals who are motivated by accuracy will be more likely to find stories coming from familiar sources as more believable than stories coming from sources that are unknown

*Accuracy Motivation Hypothesis (B):* Among stories whose source is unfamiliar, individuals who are motivated by accuracy will be more likely to find stories coming from a nonpartisan unfamiliar source to be more believable than stories coming from partisan unfamiliar sources.

It's important to note that I expect these hypotheses to be moderated by partisanship. A survey experiment found that Fox News and CNN contain an ideological cue simply in the name itself and that these signals are most pronounced among ideologues (Turner 2007). The ideological leaning of a news source is somewhat subjective in that some may find some sources unbiased while other find it biased. A partisan or ideological cue embedded in the name of the news source provides insight into the politics of the source and, for partisans, whether the news is believable or not. For example, in this context, a Democrat might find Fox News the least credible news source out there in comparison to any other news sources, familiar or unfamiliar.

### *Partisan Motivated Reasoning and Fake News*

On the other hand, partisan biases are very persuasive as well. There are numerous instances where in comparison to other cues, partisan cues tend to outweigh all else (e.g. Hansford and Coe 2018; Cohen 2003; Popkin 1991; Rahn 1993; Zaller 1992). When people are exposed to news articles, especially on social media, it's most likely the case that they simply see a headline, the source of the article, a picture, and perhaps one or two sentences giving the gist of what you might find the article. The person motivated by their biases would ignore any signals about the credibility of the article and instead rely on any information in the headline or text that give them an understanding of whether or not this article aligns with their viewpoints.

A recent study found that 59% of all links shared on social media aren't actually being read by those who are sharing it (Gabelkov, Ramachandran, Chaintreau, and Legout (2016). People are just reading the headlines and sharing the article based on what they find in the headline. Multiple news sources tested this in their own ways by creating articles with enticing headlines and content that had nothing to do with the headline itself. Many of these articles found that they were able to garner thousands of likes and shares on social media platforms. To share something would insinuate that a person may believe the information that's being presented in a headline to be credible. Furthermore, people are more likely to like and share headlines that are attune with their predispositions hence the exasperated problem of echo chambers. This leads me to the alternative following predictions.

*Partisan Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis:* Individuals who are motivated by their own biases will rely on any partisan cues in the headline (and other text) to determine the believability of the article.

It's expected that Republicans and Democrats who are exposed to the same story would have opposite reactions to the believability of the article. In comparison to the accuracy motivation hypotheses, those motivated by their biases would ignore source cues and base their judgment of the article solely on their partisanship.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

A nationally representative sample of U.S. adults in July 2018 completed an online questionnaire ( $N = 1220$ ). The sample was obtained from Survey Sample International (SSI) which recruits and maintains a survey panel of more than 600,000 Internet users. Participants were chosen from a sample frame that closely mirror U.S. census data. Descriptive statistics showed respondents were 73% White, 14% Black, 12% Hispanic, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% Native American/Other. The average age of respondents was 47.34 years ( $SD = 15.78$ ) and 55% are female and 45% are male. All of these statistics are from self-reported data. SSI also had this information for respondent and screening.

Partisanship is measured using a standard branching question from the larger survey to measure party identification, which first asks participants whether they identify as Republican, Democratic, or Independent. If participants answered "Independent," a follow up question is asked, "Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic Party or the Republican Party?" If participants answered "Republican or Democrat," a follow up question is asked: "Do you think of yourself as a Strong Democrat/Republican or a Not so Strong Democrat/Republican?" Respondents who selected Democrat or Republican to the follow up question for Independents are then labeled as a leaner partisans

since they are shown to be attitudinally similar to partisans (Keith et al. 1992). In the sample, there are 164 Independents (13%), 581 Democrats (48%), and 475 Republicans (39%).

### *Design*

The study begins with a survey experiment.<sup>7</sup> The experiment consists of nine news stories and seven news sources. Each participant receives all nine news stories and for each news story, there is one of seven news sources that might be included through random assignment. While each participant only sees each news story once, he or she will see a few news sources more than once. The news sources range in type. There are two mainstream partisan news sources (Fox and CNN), one well known partisan fake news source (Breitbart)<sup>8</sup>, two fake news sources that contain partisan cues (Conservative Frontline and Liberal American), one fake news (and unfamiliar) source with no partisan apparent partisan or ideological cue (USANews365), and one of the legacy, mainstream news sources intended as a baseline (ABC News). The randomization in this research design is two-fold. First, participants are randomly assigned to the order in which they see each news story. Second, within each news story, participants are randomly assigned to what news source the story is coming from. For every story, there are about 164-185 respondents that saw it with each source.<sup>9</sup> Figure 2 shows an example of what participants saw on their screens. The stimuli mimics what one would see in a Facebook feed. As is shown in Figure 2, the source cue is shown twice, once at the top with the logo and once at the bottom with the name of the link. There is a blurb at the top above the picture and then there is a headline with a short snippet of information. For each story, there are essentially 7 versions of the stimuli where the only difference is the source.

Figure 2. Example of Experimental Stimuli

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<sup>7</sup> A series of questions that identify individual traits follow the survey experiment and will be addressed in the next chapter.

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, there is no equivalent of Breitbart on the Democratic side. Breitbart has notoriety and is considered a source that churns many fake news stories according to Snopes and Politifact. While there are many liberal fake news sites, they are not well known and therefore, cannot be a direct counterpart to Breitbart.

<sup>9</sup> One out of the nine stories is split into two stories. They are the same story with two opposing views. One headline reads "Trump Speaks to Empty Seats in Charlotte, NC" and the other headline reads "Trump Speaks to Filled Seats in Charlotte, NC." For this condition, respondents are randomly assigned into one of the two stories and the sample is split in half.



A pair of lawmakers have introduced bipartisan legislation aimed at accelerating the permitting process for infrastructure projects.



### Lawmakers introduce bipartisan bill to speed up infrastructure permitting

This bill would allow railroads and public utilities the permanent ability to fund permitting reviews for some projects in an effort to fast-track the process.

BREITBART.COM

Note: This is one of the stories that was shown to respondents. This was designed to be the nonpolitical headline.

### Sources

Respondents were also asked (after the experiment) about their familiarity and their perceived credibility of these news sources. Prior to the study, I asked respondents to report which news sources they were familiar with. I clarified that they do not have to be a subscriber or an avid reader of the source, just familiar.

Table 1. Familiarity of News Sources by Partisanship

	Total	Democrat	Independent	Republican
CNN	78%	81%	74%	76%
ABC News	77%	80%	72%	76%
Fox News	77%	72%	75%	82%
The New York Times	69%	71%	70%	65%
MSNBC	64%	66%	60%	62%
NPR	44%	46%	43%	40%
The Sean Hannity Show	41%	36%	36%	50%
The Rachel Maddow Show	38%	44%	30%	34%
Breitbart	30%	30%	26%	32%

Note: Percentages are a combination of responses of those who responded saying “Very Familiar” and “Somewhat Familiar”

Table 1 shows respondent’s familiarity with news sources.<sup>10</sup> Unsurprisingly, CNN, ABC News, and Fox News are the top 3 most familiar news sources across all partisan groups.<sup>11</sup> 30% of respondents reported they were familiar with Breitbart, an increase from 2015 where awareness was at 15% (Pew Research Center 2015). Interestingly, there is a noticeable difference between Democrats and Republicans even in familiarity for lesser known, more partisan sources. Democrats are more familiar of the Rachel Maddow show by 10% while Republicans are more familiar with The Sean Hannity Show by 14%. Republicans and Democrats also are more familiar with the majority of news sources in comparison to Independents.

In a follow up question, respondents were asked about the credibility of a subset of new sources, ones they had claimed to be familiar with. On a four-point likert scale, respondents were asked to rate from 1 (Not Credible) to 4 (Credible) the credibility of 8 news sources. If respondents were unfamiliar with all eight of these sources, they did not see this question. Table 2 shows the top 2 scores (Credible and Somewhat Credible) for the eight news sources. The stark difference between partisans and their rating of source credibility is apparent. Democrats found Republican news sources less credible than Republicans found Democratic news sources. In other words, the range across sources for Democrats is wider. The smallest difference between Democrat and Republican

<sup>10</sup> The full list of sources and familiarity ratings can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>11</sup> I also included the fake news sites that were included in the survey experiment. Less than 5% of respondents claimed to know the fake news sources used in the study (Liberal American, Conservative Frontline, USANews365).

is with NPR, a 27% difference. The largest difference is with The Rachel Maddow show where 59% more Democrats thought it was credible than Republicans. This is greater than the 48% difference with Breitbart. Focusing on CNN and Fox News, both news sources included in the survey experiment, around 45% are seen as “credible” or “somewhat credible” from respondents of the opposing party.

Table 2. Credibility of News Sources by Partisanship

	Total	Democrat	Independent	Republican
NPR	78%	91%	68%	64%
CNN	72%	94%	60%	47%
ThinkProgress	64%	82%	67%	33%
Rachel Maddow	63%	87%	51%	28%
Fox News	61%	42%	62%	82%
Glenn Beck	44%	19%	45%	64%
Breitbart	37%	17%	14%	65%
Info Wars	31%	18%	31%	46%

Note: Percentages are a combination of responses of those who responded saying “Credible” and “Somewhat Credible”.

All proportional differences between Democrats and Republicans are statistically significant at the  $p < .01$  level.

The data in Table 2 suggest that the believability of news will be shaped by party identification. Since there are large partisan differences in the credibility of news sources, it is likely that we see these differences inform the believability of news stories. The lack of familiarity on the unknown news sources should be a cue that their information may not be credible, but the distrust and dislike of the mainstream news source that is biased towards your values could overwhelm such considerations.

Each respondent saw a total of nine headlines. The majority of headlines are inspired by fake news articles except for one that is intended as a baseline titled, “Lawmakers introduce bipartisan bill to speed up infrastructure permitting.” As anticipated, respondents rated this story as the most believable ( $M = 5.02$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ). There are two stories that are fake and not overtly political. One is about

a conspiracy behind the Vegas shooting and the other is about the flu shot causing a flu epidemic. The remaining stories are political containing topics that range from Mexico agreeing to pay for the border wall to Barack Obama overseeing the separation of 89,000 immigrant children during his presidency. All headlines can be found in the Appendix A.

### *Dependent Variable*

The primary dependent variable is believability and is measured with the following question: “How believable do you find this story?”.<sup>12</sup> Participants can respond on a scale of 1 (Extremely Unbelievable (Not Believable)) to 7 (Extremely believable). In line with the *Accuracy Motivation Hypotheses*, news stories that come from ABC News, CNN, and Fox News will be more believable than those that come from the other news sources. According to the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Accuracy Motivation Hypothesis (B)*, the nonpartisan unfamiliar fake news source (USANews 365) will be more believable than those that come from partisan unfamiliar fake news sources (Conservative Frontline and Liberal American). All of this should be moderated by partisanship. For Breitbart, the believability rating should depend on partisanship and knowledge of Breitbart as a news source. Those that are familiar and identify as a Democrat may find Breitbart to be even less believable than Fox News. The *Partisan Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis* posits that those who are motivated by their biases will ignore any source cues and only be swayed by the information that is shown in the headlines and text. Respondents are not swayed to engage in directional or accuracy motivated reasoning. The experiment is designed to test which occurs without any incentives towards one way or another.

### *Stories*

As a reminder, each respondent sees a total of nine headlines. Table 3 includes the headlines and the average believability ratings for *Total Average*, *ABC News*, and *First Story*. The average believability ratings range from 2.4 to 5 (on a 1 to 7 point scale). Some of the stories are clearly Republican or Democrat leaning. Two stories like the Las Vegas mass shooting story and the story about the flu vaccinations are fake news stories that aren’t necessarily political. Lastly, the story about the bipartisan bill is designed to be a political story that is not biased towards one party or the other and can act as a sort of a control.

Table 3. Stimuli Story Headlines with Average Believability Ratings for Total, ABC News, and First Stimuli

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<sup>12</sup> In a pre-test version of this experiment, two questions were tested for the dependent variable. Participants were asked either “How believable is this story?” or “How credible is this story?” Results showed that, overall, asking about credibility garnered a tougher evaluation than believability.

Headline	Total Sample Average	ABC News	First Story
Mexico Agrees to Pay For Wall - Offering Emergency Deal to Close NAFTA Tariff Loophole	2.38	2.32	2.41
Putin Bombshell: \$400 Million from Russia to Hillary Campaign	3.52	3.70	3.52
Barack Obama Oversaw the Separation of 89,000 Children from their Parents During His Presidency	3.92	3.90	4.21
Vegas shooting cover-up stories are collapsing. Are we closer to finding the truth?	3.93	4.02	4.26
Experts Say Flu Shot Potentially Caused the Flu Epidemic	4.10	4.20	4.30
Justice Kennedy Announces Retirement after Donald Trump Made Him an Offer He Couldn't Refuse	4.20	4.29	4.18
Trump Speaks to Empty Seats in Charlotte, NC	4.37	4.60	4.34
Trump Speaks to Filled Seats in Charlotte, NC	4.77	4.90	4.88
Trump lied about meeting with Russian officials during campaign	5.00	5.09	4.88
Lawmakers introduce bipartisan bill to speed up infrastructure permitting	5.02	5.06	5.30

Note: Stimuli includes more text than the headline. Full text is included in Appendix A

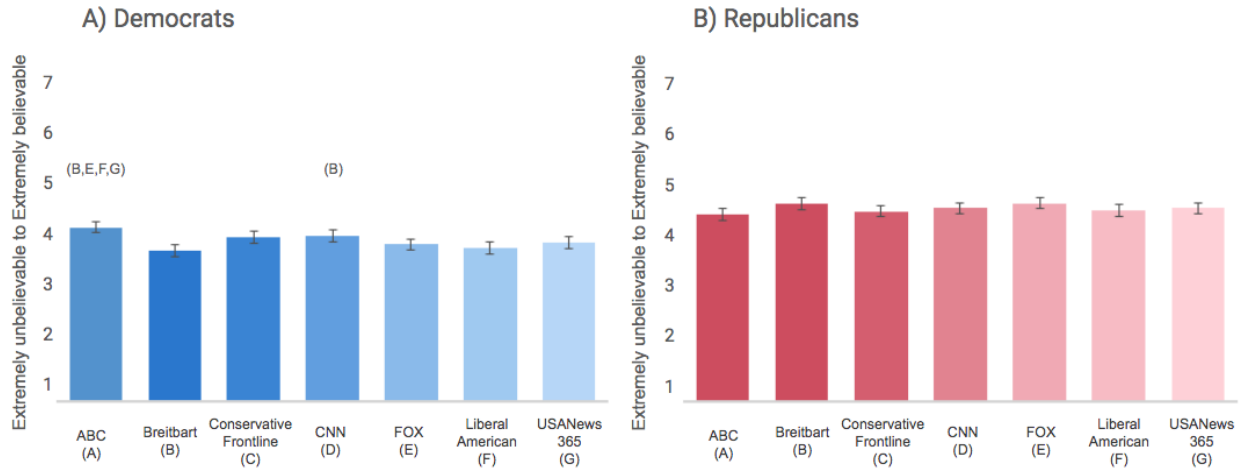
In Table 3, the Total Column shows the average ratings across each story. The most believable story is, as intended, the nonpartisan story. The next column is the average ratings for those who saw the story coming from ABC News. The Total column and the ABC News column ratings are very similar and shows that ABC News can be considered a baseline that is similar to the total average. Lastly, the last column consists of the average ratings for all those who saw that story first. One of the shortcomings of this study is that it is a within subjects design. Treating each story and rating as an independent observation is a SUTVA violation. In the models later on in this dissertation, I control for possible ordering effects, but in this table, I also show the average rating for those who saw the story first. The differences between the average rating for those who saw the story first and the total are not very different. Overall, there is a small increase in believability when the story is shown first but that difference is only statistically significant for the story about the Las Vegas mass shooting where those who saw the story first ( $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 2.03$ ) were more likely to believe the story than those who saw it after ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ),  $t(1218) = -1.97$   $p < .05$ .

## Results

This experiment is designed to identify whether people are more likely to be persuaded by the source cue or the content of the article. The *Accuracy Motivation Hypothesis* expects there to be minimal differences between the baseline (ABC News) and the other mainstream sources when congruent with partisan preferences (e.g., FOX News for Republicans and CNN for Democrats). Recall that this hypothesis also expects that content coming from familiar sources will be found more believable than from unfamiliar sources. Within the unknown sources, *Accuracy Motivation Hypothesis (B)* posits that information from the nonpartisan unknown fake source (USANews365) would be more believable than in the unknown sources with partisan cues (Liberal American and Conservative Frontline). The *Partisan Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis* would suggest that there are minimal source cue effects and that the believability of the article is dependent on the article content.

The analyses are divided by political party because the ratings, much like the credibility in news sources, show stark differences between Democrats and Republicans. The first set of results in Figure 3 show the average believability ratings between the sources for all of the fake news stories (8 stories not including the control story about the bipartisan bill). Figure 3B shows that there are no differences in believability across the various sources for Republicans. Figure 3A shows that there are minimal differences in believability across the sources for Democrats. Both CNN ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 2.27$ ) and ABC News ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 2.26$ ) have significantly higher believability ratings than Breitbart ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 2.27$ ). ABC News ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 2.26$ ) is also higher in believability ratings in comparison to Fox News ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 2.25$ ), Liberal American ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 2.27$ ), and USANews365 ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 2.22$ ). The results for Republicans show no evidence for the *Accuracy Motivation Hypothesis* since believability scores remained constant across the different sources. For Democrats, there is a little evidence for the *Accuracy Motivation Hypothesis* that expects familiar sources to be more believable than unfamiliar sources where ABC News is more believable than Breitbart, Fox News, Liberal American, and USANews365. However, for both parties, there is no evidence that unfamiliar sources with partisan cues are less believable than unfamiliar sources without partisan cues.

Figure 3. Average Believability Ratings for Fake News Articles Between Different Sources

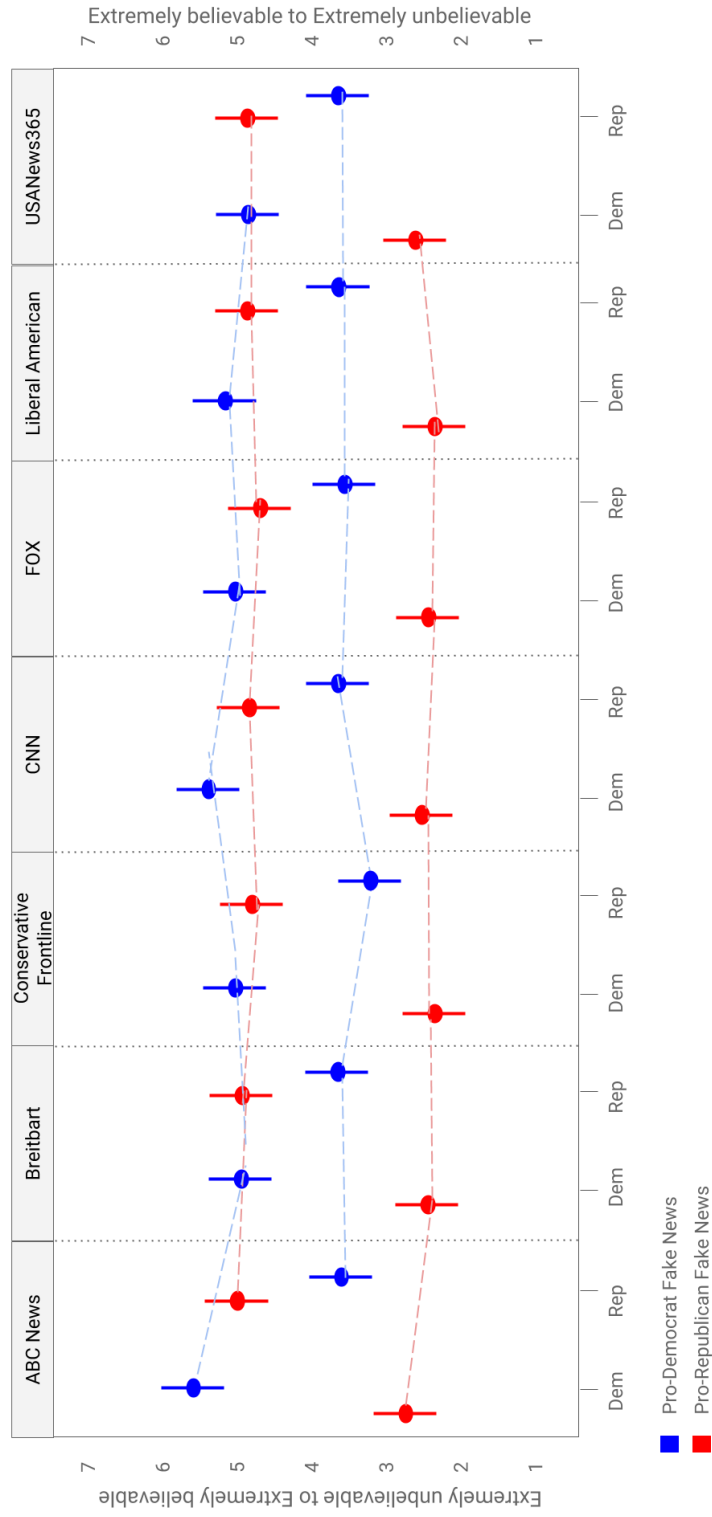


Note: All stories are included except the control story about the bipartisan bill.  
 N = 1220

The analysis in Figure 3 ignores the content of the headlines but aggregating all of the fake news stories together. However, the *Partisan Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis* suggests that the stories are what is most important in gauging believability, not the sources. Figure 4 represents the analysis that tests both alternative hypotheses together. For the analysis in Figure 4, fake news stories were split into two groups: Pro-Republican stories and Pro-Democrat stories. On the x-axis of Figure 4 are the partisan identifications of the respondent.

Starting with testing the *Accuracy Motivation Hypothesis*, the dotted lines in Figure 4 show the variation in believability ratings across different sources. For example, the top blue line is the average believability ratings for Democrats reviewing Pro-Democrat stories and the top red line is the average believability ratings for Republicans reviewing Pro-Republican stories. These lines are relatively flat, particularly for Republicans. There are no statistically significant differences between sources for Republicans when looking at congruent fake news. For Democrats, the results are very similar. The only difference for Democrats that is reliable is where ABC News ( $M = 5.49$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ) and CNN ( $M = 5.48$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ) have significantly greater believability ratings than Breitbart ( $M = 4.96$ ,  $SD = 2.16$ ).

Figure 4. Believability of Pro-Democrat and Pro-Republican Fake News Stories by Partisanship and Source



Note: The x-axis represents the party identification of the respondents. The y-axis is the dependent variable of believability. The blue color is for the Pro-Democrat fake news articles, and the red color is for the Pro-Republican fake news articles. N = 1220



Similarly, looking at the bottom two lines where partisans are evaluating fake news articles with incongruent information, I find similar results. In this case, both Democrats and Republicans show no statistically significant differences in believability depending on the source. Even when stories are split by partisan leaning where source cue effects should become more apparent, there are no differences between sources. Figure 4 shows no evidence of the *Accuracy Motivation Hypothesis*.

The *Partisan Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis* posits that people would ignore source cues when faced with partisan fake news and evaluate the believability of the articles depending on how congruent or incongruent the content is to their beliefs. Figure 4 shows evidence for this hypothesis. While the believability ratings are rather consistent across source cues, they are vastly different depending on the type of story and the partisanship of the respondent. Looking at just the blue dots that are the Pro-Democrat fake news stories, there is a significant difference in the believability ratings between Democrats and Republicans regardless of the source cue. With the Pro-Republican fake news stories, the believability ratings are, on average, about a 2pt difference between Democrats and Republicans.

## Discussion

Previous research on source cues would suggest that the source of the information would change the way the article story is processed. In this design, there are two new elements in comparison to previous source cue research. For one, there are sources that are unfamiliar to people. The expectation was that the unfamiliarity of these sources would be a cue in itself that the information may not be reliable. Secondly, the stories themselves were less believable than the average story. Many of them were also partisan. The expectation was that there would be an interaction between the content of the stories and the different types of sources, some containing partisan cues and some not. The results of this study provide no evidence for source cue effects. This suggests that when people are left to their own devices in evaluating news stories, they do not have accuracy in mind.

Instead, respondents showed that their believability ratings were heavily influenced by the content of the information and how aligned it was with their priors. There is evidence in the analysis in this chapter for the *Partisan Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis*. No matter what source the story was connected with, the overarching drive for whether or not something was determined as believable was whether or not the story itself coincided with the respondent's beliefs.

This finding implies that people may not be checking the sources on these articles as much as we thought when it comes to posts on social media, especially when they are being unintentionally exposed. The stimuli are easy to process, similar to how the same information would be presented on a social

media platform. Headlines could be the exact amount of information that someone would not mind reading and using as a tool to evaluate the news.

Furthermore, the sensational aspect of these news stories combined with the political climate make for a partisan environment. In order to mimic fake news stories, the majority of the stories in the experiment were sensationalized. I expected respondents to react to these headlines with disbelief, but instead, they were largely driven by partisan motivated reasoning. Even in the stories that were less outlandish and more believable, there were minimal source effects signaling that the content far outweighed the source.

The implications of this on fake news and believability seems grim. The unfamiliar fake sources in combination with fake headlines did not seem to signal untrustworthiness more than other sources. Ideally, the unfamiliarity of the source would signal to people to take a closer look at the content, but this doesn't seem to be the case. People seem largely motivated by their beliefs and are willing to believe a story that comes from an unfamiliar source if the information in it is congruent with their partisanship. I take a deeper look at this in the next chapter.

## Chapter 3: Partisan Bias in News Evaluation

Since *The American Voter*, party identification has been thought of as a type of psychological attachment (Campbell et al. 1960). In recent years, party identification has also been conceptualized as a social identity (Greene 1999, 2000, 2004; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Nicholson 2012; Nicholson et al. 2016; Theodoridis 2017). In both theories (which are not mutually exclusive), it's easy to see how partisanship can be an important lens by which to view things. In terms of media, there are studies that show partisan differences in almost every aspect from types of media, media seeking behaviors, media exposure, and media evaluation.

### Partisan Bias and Media

There are multiple facets of research in partisan bias and the media. One avenue has found that partisans differ on how they view different news types and sources as credible or trustworthy. As shown in Chapter 2, there were minimal differences between partisans on what sources they were familiar with but there were significant differences in their perceptions of credibility of the sources (Table 3). Similarly, Settle (2018) found a clear perceived ideological bias over a range of news sources and this perception differed depending on whether the respondent was conservative or liberal. In fact, only 7.8% of those respondents thought that none of the thirty-six news sources had a bias (Settle 2018).

Perceptions of bias in the news has been shown to have little to do with factual or objective content and more about how political elites frame different news sources (Watts et al. 1999). Furthermore, this has grown into a general expectation of news sources and media to be bias (Baum and Gussin 2007; D'Alessio 2003; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Turner 2007). The *hostile media effect* is a theory about partisans who see the same exact news coverage on an issue yet find it to be biased in favor of the other side (Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998; Gunther and Schmitt 2004; Vallone, Ross, and Lepper 1985). For example, in a study by Coe et al. (2008), they randomly assigned respondents to watch liberal-leaning or conservative-leaning cable news programs and found that conservatives perceived more bias in liberal programs than liberals did and vice versa. Similarly, the hostile media effect posits that partisans also fail to recognize bias when news actually is bias (Feldman 2011).

There is also *oppositional media hostility* that blames ideologically biased news programs for increasing distrust and suspicion in the public towards media outlets (Arceneaux, Johnson, and Murphy 2012). This, in conjunction with the increase in news outlets and news mediums, are some of the mechanisms that underlie selective exposure.

People have been selectively exposing themselves to different media messages as long as there were options (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). Now as

media options continuously increase, people have a tendency to choose ideologically congruent news (Stroud 2008; Arceneuax and Johnson 2013).

Selective exposure is happening not only at the level of cable news and television but with the Internet and social media as well. The echo chambers, that have been discussed in the previous chapters, are a product of people consistently self-selecting into ideologically congruent news on social media (Sunstein 2001a, b, 2007; Pariser 2011). In a clever design by Henderson and Theodoridis (2017), they had respondents engaging in what looked like a YouTube type platform where they were shown campaign ads from the 2012 presidential election. Respondents were then able to skip if they did not want to see the campaign ad. Henderson and Theodoridis (2017) found that partisans skip ads that are of the out-party showing evidence for selective exposure even at the online advertisement level.

Out of all of this research, the most important factor to consider is partisanship. Partisanship plays a significant role in one's assessment of bias in the media (Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998; Vallone, Ross, and Lepper 1985). Partisanship is also a key driver in selectivity of media (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Henderson and Theodoridis 2017). The reason for this is that partisans are seeing the world through their lenses. This partisan perceptual bias is way in which partisans evaluate parties, candidates, and news (Campbell et al. 1960; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Theodoridis 2017). People can interpret the same piece of fact or evidence to be different based on their party identification (Bisgaard 2015; Gerber and Green 1999; Goggin and Theodoridis 2018).

## **Partisan Bias and Fake News**

This is all in line with the partisan motivated reasoning literature. Partisans are evaluating the news and selecting the news based on whether or not it aligns with their beliefs. The previous chapter showed that people's partisanship was first in line for consideration when evaluating fake news. The stories included in the analysis had a clear alignment with Democrats or Republicans, but they were not similar to each other in content or language. In this next analysis, I intend on taking a deeper dive into the role partisanship plays in the evaluation of fake news when more is kept constant.

I am also looking for evidence of the *Accuracy Motivation Hypothesis* (individuals who are motivated by accuracy will be more likely to find stories coming from familiar sources as more believable than stories coming from sources that are unknown) in this chapter. With the stories being less politically charged than the other headlines, it could be the case that source cues become more relevant.

As described in the last chapter, *Partisan Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis* posits that those who are motivated by their biases will ignore any source cues and only be swayed by the information that is shown in the headlines and text. The same hypothesis remains for this chapter. A secondary

expectation is that Democrats and Republicans will evaluate the believability of fake news to a significant extent.

Table 4. Believability of News Stories by Party Identification

Headline	Democrat	Republican	Difference	<i>p</i> < .01
Mexico Agrees to Pay For Wall - Offering Emergency Deal to Close NAFTA Tariff Loophole	1.929	2.983	-1.054	Y
Putin Bombshell: \$400 Million from Russia to Hillary Campaign	2.685	4.495	-1.81	Y
Barack Obama Oversaw the Separation of 89,000 Children from their Parents During His Presidency	2.58	5.44	-2.86	Y
Vegas shooting cover-up stories are collapsing. Are we closer to finding the truth?	3.683	4.257	-0.574	Y
Experts Say Flu Shot Potentially Caused the Flu Epidemic	3.723	4.446	-0.723	Y
Justice Kennedy Announces Retirement after Donald Trump Made Him an Offer; He Couldn't Refuse	4.608	3.714	0.894	Y
Trump Speaks to Empty Seats in Charlotte, NC	5.139	3.427	1.712	Y
Trump Speaks to Filled Seats in Charlotte, NC	3.937	5.788	-1.851	Y
Trump lied about meeting with Russian officials during campaign	4.857	3.061	1.796	Y
Lawmakers introduce bipartisan bill to speed up infrastructure permitting	4.974	5.097	-0.123	N

Note: "Y" means yes, the difference between Democrats and Republicans is statistically significant and "N" means the different is not statistically significant

Table 4 shows a within story analysis and displays that there is a statistically significant difference between Democrats and Republicans for each story except for the control story about the bipartisan bill. This table provides evidence for a strong partisan bias effect. The story about the Mexico paying for the border wall is rated as the least believable for both partisan groups and was indeed intended to be the quintessential fake news story that should sound alarm bells for how far-fetched it is.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Republicans ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ) found this story to be more believable than Democrats by a whole point ( $M = 1.93$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ) providing support for partisan motivated reasoning,  $t(1054) = -8.97$ ,  $p < .01$ . Although the story is rated low in believability by both parties

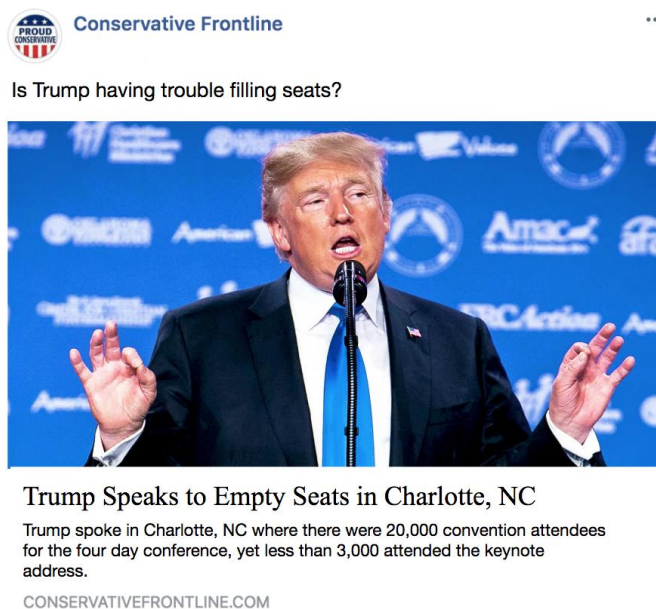
<sup>13</sup> This story comes from a "real" fake news story from the Conservative Tree House and was reposted on Twitter and Reddit. It was shared over 6,000 times on Facebook. (Link: <https://theconservativetreehouse.com/2018/04/17/breaking-mexico-agrees-to-pay-for-wall-offering-emergency-deal-to-close-nafta-tariff-loophole/>)

(under 4), the headline stating an outcome that would be positive for conservatives is enough for some Republicans to find it more believable than Democrats. This particular story highlights a situation where a fake news article is enticing because it is aligned with political identity and beliefs. Generally, the differences between Democrats and Republicans are in the direction that is expected from reading the headlines.

### Empty or Filled?

The titles in Table 4 show that these headlines are motivated by partisanship. To examine the role of partisanship in the believability in fake news headlines, I examined the story about Trump speaking to filled/empty seats.<sup>14</sup> As is shown in Figure 5, the stories are identical except one headline says that Trump spoke to *empty* seats while the other says he spoke to *filled* seats. Compared to some of the other headlines, this story is less sensationalized and yet these stories clearly display how strong the partisan differences are.

Figure 5: Stimuli Example of Empty vs Filled Headlines



<sup>14</sup> Neither of these stories were included in the analysis in Chapter 2, Figure 4.



Trump has no trouble filling seats.



### Trump Speaks to Filled Seats in Charlotte, NC

Trump spoke in Charlotte, NC where there were over 20,000 convention attendees for the four day conference and filled every seat including standing room for the keynote.

CONSERVATIVEFRONTLINE.COM

Note: Respondents only saw one of the stimuli: empty or filled. The source was randomized between the seven sources.

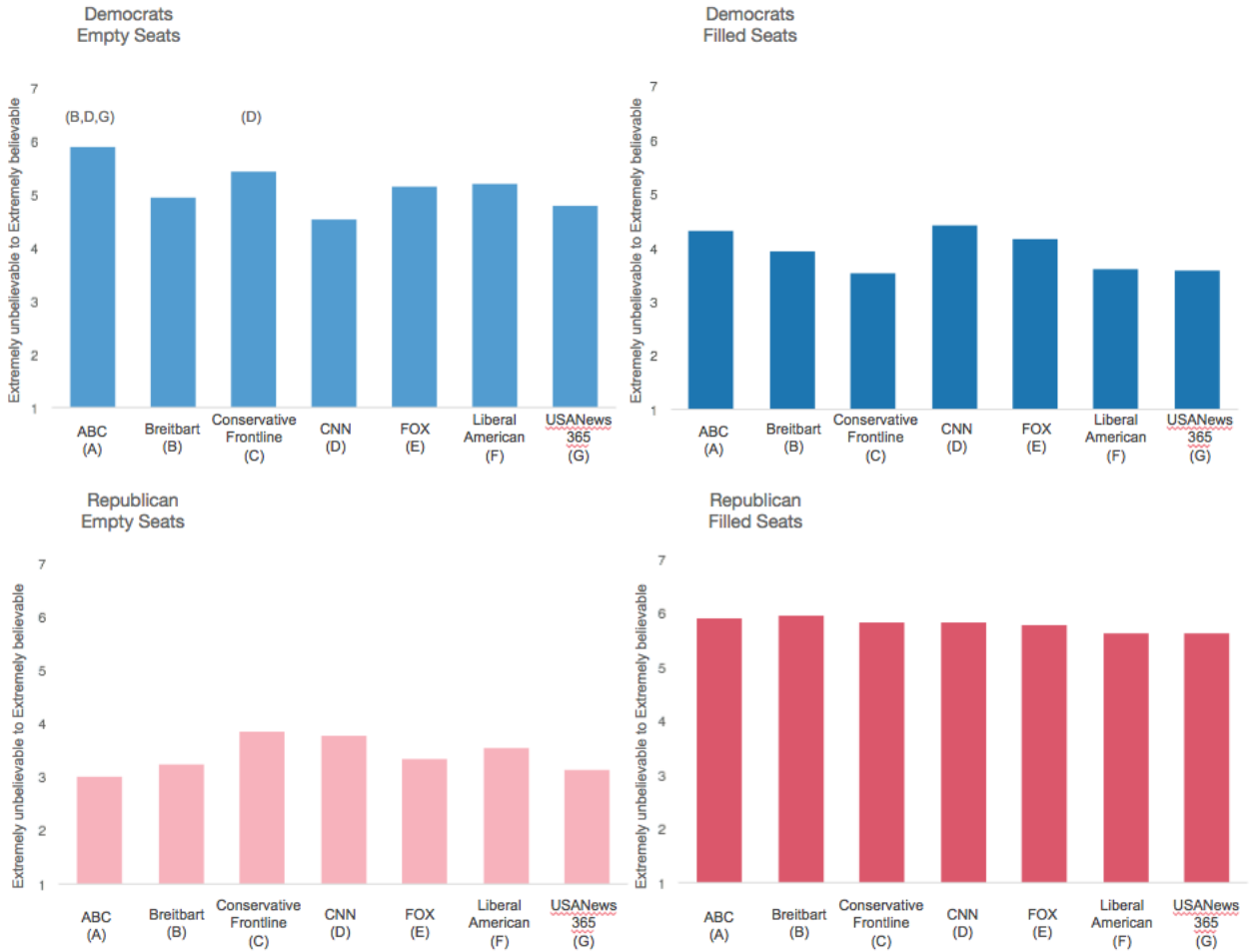
The purpose of this analysis is to see the effects of partisan bias while holding everything else constant. While the analyses previously looking at pro-Republican and pro-Democrat fake news are similar, there are no two articles that are as similar to each other. In sum, I created these news stories to eliminate as much noise as possible.

## Results

For these results, I take a deeper dive into partisanship and look at believability of these two similar yet opposing headlines. Figure 6 displays average believability ratings by story, between Democrats and Republicans, by sources. The only significant difference between news sources per condition is when Democrats are faced with the story of Trump speaking to empty seats. CNN ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ), while not the lowest believability rating, is significantly lower than ABC News ( $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ) and Conservative Frontline ( $M = 5.43$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ). The increase in believability rating for Conservative Frontline could be attributed to the article containing favorable information from an unlikely source. However, there was not much evidence of this in the previous chapter. ABC News ( $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ) is also significantly higher in believability than Breitbart ( $M = 4.94$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ ) and USANews365 ( $M = 4.77$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ). For the opposite story on Trump speaking to filled seats, Democrats show no differences in believability between sources. Republicans, similar to previous analyses, seem immune to any source cue effects for either stories. This suggests that for the most part news source cues, fake or otherwise,

are not meaningful to respondents. In contrast, party identification explains a great deal of what news people find believable, even if it is fake.

Figure 6. Difference Between News Source Cues by Party and Story



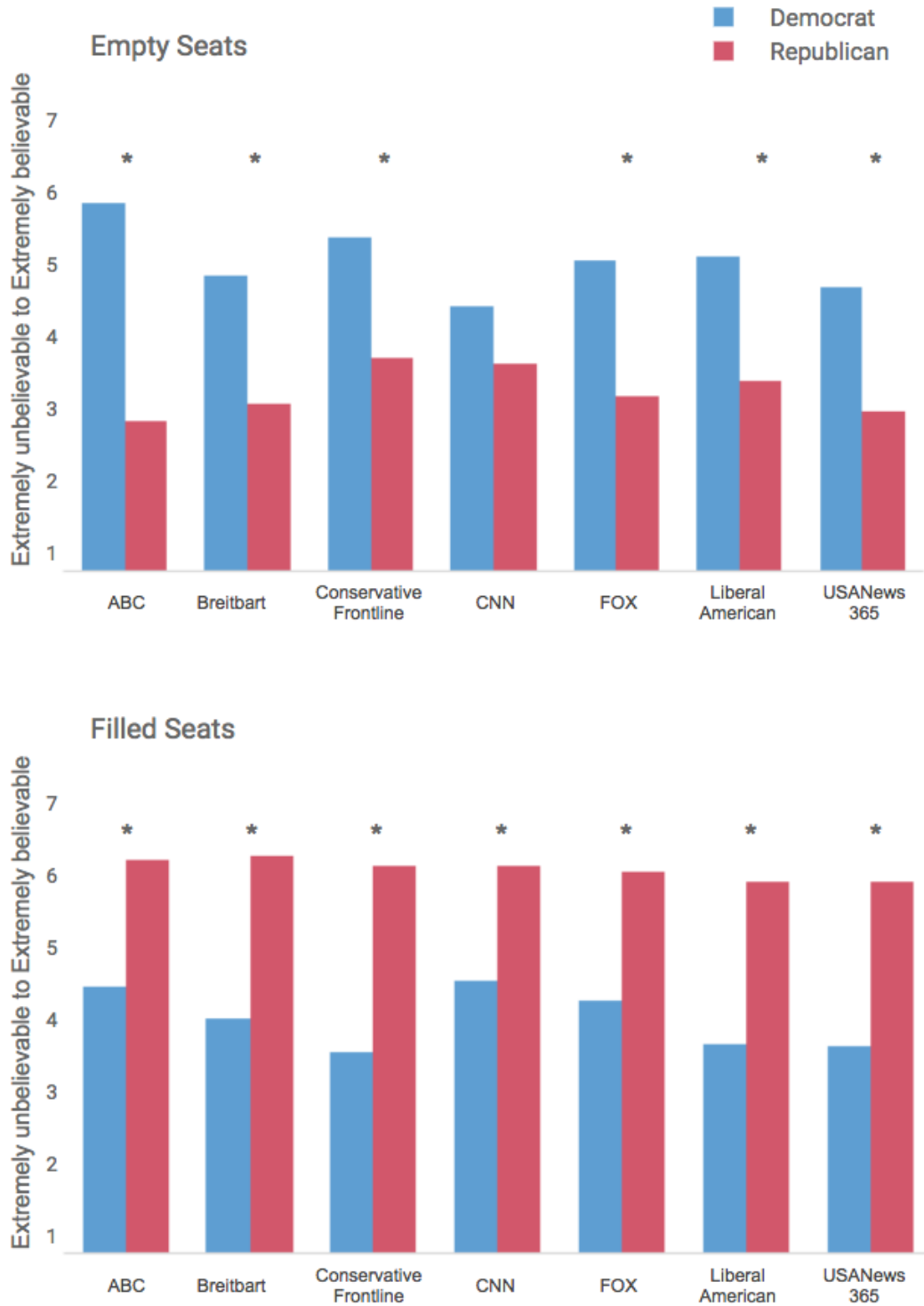
Note: Each source corresponds with a letter. If the source has a letter above the bar, the source of the bar is significantly greater in believability than the source that corresponds with the letter above the bar ( $p < .05$ )

N = 1220

In Figure 7, the analysis is between party by story, further testing the *Partisan Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis*. Figure 7 shows the difference between the average believability ratings of Democrats and Republicans. Within the *empty seats* story, Democrats are significantly more likely to believe this story than Republicans for all sources except for CNN. Democrats still show higher believability ratings than Republicans for the *empty seats* story but not significantly so. It could be the case that Republicans find the headline about *empty seats* to be more believable coming from CNN since it's an unlikely source



Figure 7. Between Party Analysis of Empty Seats and Filled Seats, Separately

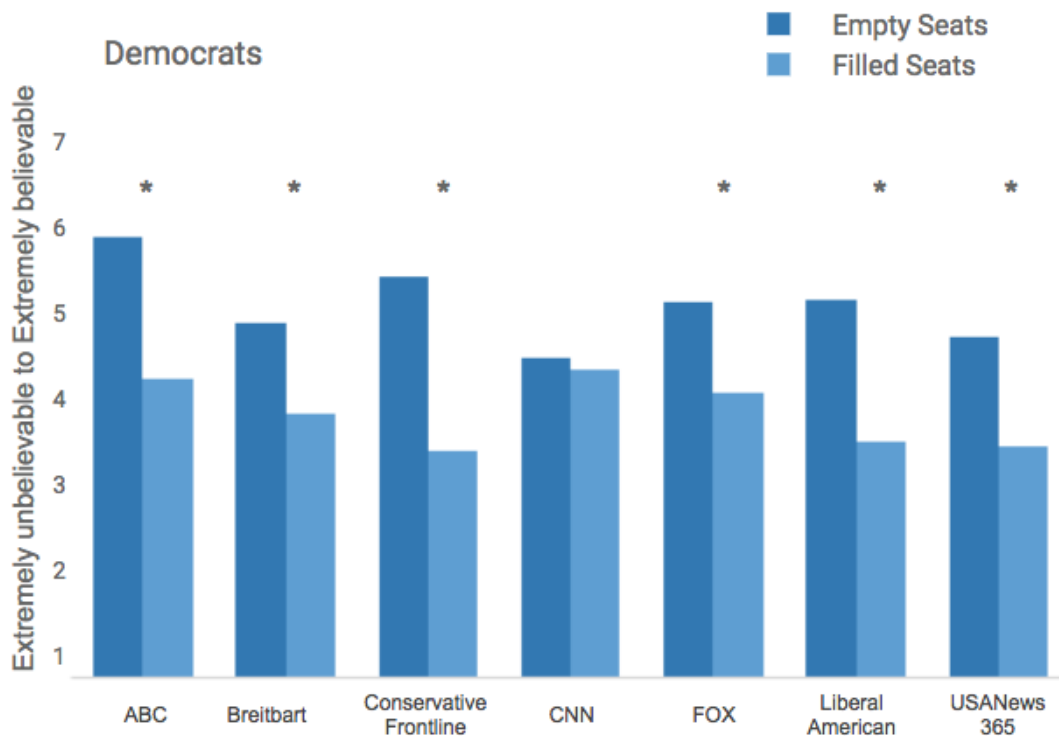


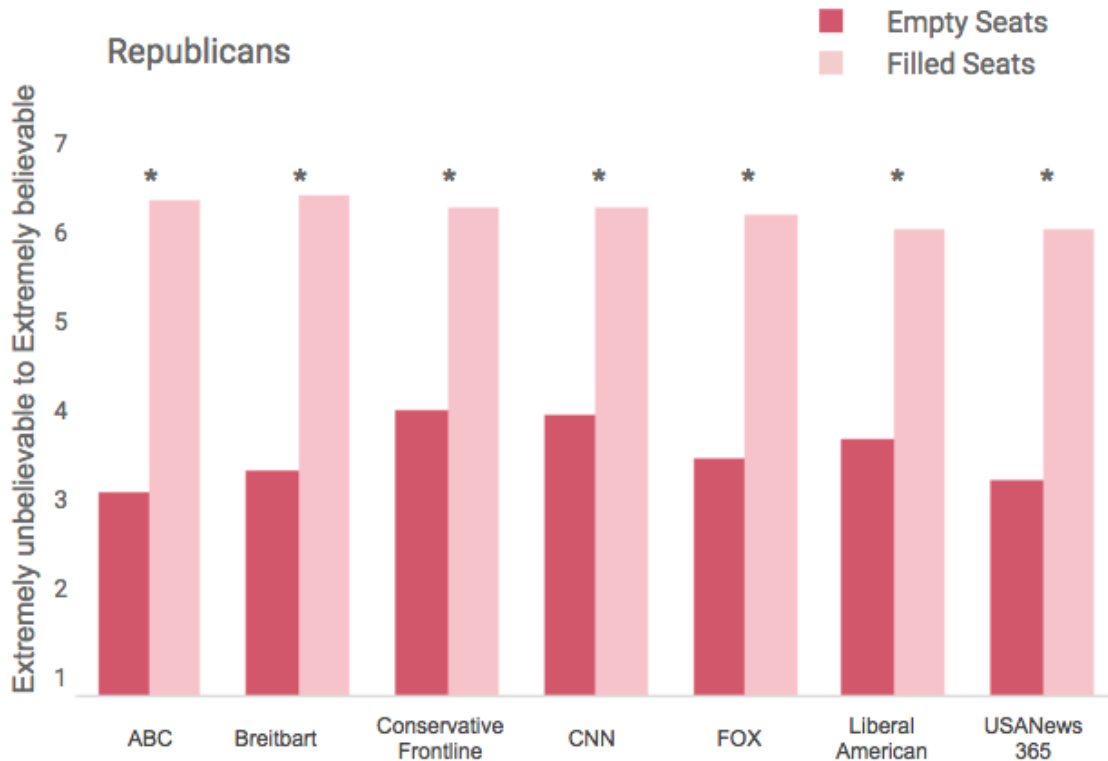
Note: Star (\*) signifies significance at  $p < .05$  level between parties within stories.  
 N = 1220

to be reporting this type of headline, but I do not see similar effects for Liberal American or ABC News. The story about *filled* seats shows that Republicans are significantly more likely to believe the story than Democrats regardless of source. In both stories, there is one party that is well above average in believability of a story while the opposite party shows below average ratings. This is further evidence for the *Partisan Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis*. Not only are source cues largely ignored and partisans behaving accordingly to their partisanship, but Republicans, on average, find the headline about *empty* seats unbelievable (below 4) ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 2.14$ ) while Democrats find the headline about *filled* seats unbelievable ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 2.09$ ).

For a comparison between stimuli by party, I turn to Figure 8. For Democrats, every source except CNN showed that the story about Trump speaking to empty seats is more believable than the story about Trump speaking to filled seats. Similarly, regardless of the source, Trump speaking to filled seats is significantly more believable to Republicans than the story about Trump

Figure 8. Between Stimuli (Empty vs Filled), Within Party Analysis





Note: Star (\*) signifies significance at  $p < .05$  level between parties within stories.

speaking to empty seats. On average, Republicans have over a two-point difference between those who see the *empty* story and the *filled* story. Democrats, on the other hand, vary more between sources but show, on average, about a one-point difference. It's clear that within each party there is a consistent reaction towards each story consistent with their party prerogatives.

These results highlight how prominent partisanship is be when accepting information. I did not anticipate such a stark partisan response considering the stakes were rather low, politically speaking. The headline merely talks about an instance where Trump spoke to either empty seats or filled seats, yet it's clear that the implications of an empty or filled auditorium is important to Republicans and Democrats. The believability of these stories clearly exhibits partisan motivated reasoning.

## Discussion

Partisans use motivated reasoning to form opinions and make decisions (e.g. Nicholson 2012; Redlawsk 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006; Theodoridis 2017) and evaluating news stories is no different. In this design, respondents were faced with almost identical news stories where the only difference is whether it was something positive or negative about Donald Trump. Some respondents were randomly assigned to the stimuli with an unfamiliar or incongruent source

but still did not waiver on whether the article was believable or unbelievable. Rather, partisans relied heavily on their biases to dictate the evaluation of this news story. Republicans also showed that they were particularly consistent in their ratings.

Partisan motivated reasoning exerts a large effect in all of the stories with the exception of the control study about the bipartisan bill that, by design, was not intended to be partisan. There were clear partisan effects even in the two stories that were not meant to be political (Vegas Shootings and Flu Vaccination). Partisanship overshadows news source cue effects suggesting that accuracy is not much of a motivation when pitted against rooting for your side or against the opposition.

On one hand, the results in the last two chapters have suggested that people may be reading and paying a bit more attention than simply relying on source cues. Yet it's clear that the sole motivation when evaluating fake news is whether or not it aligns with one's prior beliefs. In the case of fake news, paying more attention to source cues could be valuable in identifying stories that may be coming from a non-credible source. In this latest experiment, the headlines about Trump speaking to *empty* or *filled* seats were not designed to elicit as strong of a partisan screen than the other headlines yet the results show clearly that party rules over all other cues. Sadly, this harbors a hospitable environment for fake news to flourish.

## **Chapter 4: Who Believes Fake News? Individual Characteristics that Make People Susceptible to Fake News**

Partisanship is arguably the most important individual characteristic that predicts who believes political fake news, but other traits can play an important role too. Researchers study the moderating role of other individual traits, that are not partisanship, in media use and evaluation. For example, those who are higher in political knowledge are more likely to engage in partisan selective exposure (Stroud 2008). There are no studies that I am aware of that looks at different individual determinants on the evaluation of fake news and minimal research on the individual determinants on evaluation of news in general. For this chapter, I intend to explore what individual characteristics, aside from partisanship, help explain why people believe fake news. Some of these traits are deeply ingrained political predispositions or personality traits exogenous to politics that are likely to predispose people to believe in fake news.

### **Political Knowledge and Fake News**

Political knowledge is an individual characteristic that is commonly used in looking at different types of motivated reasoning. In Taber and Lodge's (2006) research on motivated skepticism, they found that those who are politically knowledgeable are more susceptible to motivated bias because they know more. The people who know more show a greater ability to discount counterargument and incongruent facts. In another study on motivated reasoning, researchers found that the more knowledgeable are more likely to engage in motivated reasoning because they feel more strongly about their biases (Strickland, Taber, and Lodge 2011).

Research has also shown that high political knowledge is often correlated with political interest and strength in partisanship (Carpini and Keeter 1996; Lodge and Hamill 1986). Presumably, in terms of news and media, many of those high in political knowledge read, watch or listen to the news in some shape or form. It's difficult to say which trait precedes the other. It's most likely the case that there is a cyclical relationship between political knowledge, interest, and engagement. Political knowledge is particularly interesting in terms of fake news because the motivated reasoning literature would suggest that those higher in political knowledge are more likely to be biased. However, if they're higher in political knowledge, one could also assume that they have the wherewithal to know when something does not look credible.

### **Media and Fake News**

As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, trust in media has been declining since the 1990s, and this decline is especially pronounced among Republicans (Gallop 2016). There have also been a number of findings that show that conservatives and Republicans show more distrust in the media than their liberal and Democratic counterparts (Jones 2004; Lee 2010). Jones (2004) suggests

that the distrust in the media is more of a perception of liberal bias than an overall distrust. Many of the talk radio shows or conservative outlets often warn against mainstream or liberal media calling for its viewers to be diligent in believing any of the information that comes from it. I expect that those who have higher distrust in media are less likely to believe in fake news.

There is also the sheer use of social media that could play a role in the susceptibility of believing in fake news. One study found that those who spend more time consuming media on social media have a more accurate sense and belief about news (Allcott and Gentzkow 2018). Presumably, more time spent on social media would mean more possibilities of exposure to different types of news. I would expect the same to be the case in this study where a higher level of social media use would predict lower susceptibility to fake news.

## **Nonpolitical Traits and Fake News**

### *Personality*

Political psychologists often look at nonpolitical traits to see if they are predictive of political outcomes. One of the more common nonpolitical traits that have been studied in political science is personality traits. The Big 5 personality consists of five traits: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability (or sometimes known as neuroticism), and openness to new experience (see Gerber, Huber, Doherty, and Dowling 2011). There has been a consistent association with conscientiousness and conservatism and openness to new experiences and liberalism (Alford & Hibbing 2007; Carney et al. 2008; Gerber et al. 2010c; Gosling et al. 2003; Jost et al. 2003; McCrae 1996; Mondak 2010; Mondak & Halperin 2008; Riemann et al. 1993; Van Hiel et al. 2000; Van Hiel & Mervielde 2004). Extraversion has also been predictive of higher levels of political participation (Mondak 2010; Mondak et al. 2010), and agreeableness has been predictive of lower levels of political participation (Gerber et al. 2011b; Mondak & Halperin 2008).

More in line with this research, studies have shown that those high in openness to experience are more likely to be interested and knowledgeable in politics (Gerber et al. 2011a; Mondak 2010; Mondak & Halperin 2008). They are also more likely to try to convince others to vote for a particular candidate and are more outspoken (Mondak et al. 2010). The same studies also show that those high in openness to experience and extraversion have larger social networks especially in comparison to those that are high in conscientiousness and emotional stability (Mondak 2010; Mondak et al. 2010). The networks in the study did not look at social media networks, but it's quite likely that the findings would be similar. With its increased use over the years, it's become rather customary for it to be included as controls in models predicting political behaviors and is also included in the latest ANES. For this reason, I include these traits as possible predictors of susceptibility to believing in fake news. I expect that the same traits that increase political participation, interest, and social networks like

openness to experience and extraversion are possible predictors of believing in fake news.

### *Self-Monitoring*

Self-monitoring is an individual-level trait known to identify those that may be more susceptible to social desirability bias (Snyder 1974, 1979; Snyder & Gangestad 1986; Klar, Weber, and Krupnikov 2016). Those higher in self-monitoring show that they are more likely to respond and comply to socially desirable expectations. For example, Klar et al. (2016) show that those higher in self-monitoring scores are significantly correlated with expressing lower support for Trump presumably since expressing support for Trump is socially undesirable.

Self-monitoring is an interesting individual trait in the context fake news because there is no clear socially desirable response. One hypothesis is that those high in self-monitoring may be less likely to say they believe in a fake news story because they don't want to look naive or uninformed. On the other hand, a more socially desirable answer may be to agree or express belief so as not to be perceived as difficult.

### *Magical Thinking*

Magical thinking can be defined as believing that one event happens as a result of another without a plausible link of causation (Oliver and Wood 2018). While not the same as susceptibility of believing in fake news, the susceptibility of believing in a conspiracy theory is predicted by magical thinking. Recent research has found that those high in magical thinking are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Oliver and Wood 2018). In the 2016 presidential election, those high in magical thinking were more drawn to Trump and his campaign due to his rhetoric and beliefs in conspiracy theories (Oliver and Wood 2018).

There is no prior study that I know of that looks at magical thinking as a predictor for susceptibility of fake news, but I expect the direction of the moderating effect to be similar to conspiracy theories. I hypothesize that those higher in magical thinking would be more likely to be susceptible to fake news.

## **Methods**

Following the survey experiment (outlined in Chapter 2), there were a series of items intended to identify who is most susceptible to believing fake news. These items not only included demographics and partisanship but also trust in media, Big 5 personality traits, self-monitoring, magical thinking, political knowledge, and social media use.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Each of these sets of questions were put into blocks, and these blocks were randomized so that each respondent saw them in a different order. The only block that

The dependent variable is the same: believability. Again, this is measured on a 7pt scale of “Not at all believable” to “Extremely Believable”.

### *Explanatory Variables*

I include demographics in the analysis for control. Age is measured as a categorical variable where respondents had to choose one out of five responses for how old they are ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ). Gender is measured as a binary variable coded as 0 for male and 1 for female ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ).<sup>16</sup> For race, respondents were allowed to select multiple responses out of five race categories for ones they consider themselves to be. I turned this variable into a binary variable where 0 is coded for nonwhite and 1 is white ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ).

**Political Knowledge:** Political knowledge is measured using four questions about current politics borrowed from the 2016 ANES. The measure is an additive scale where the lowest possible level is zero, where a respondent did not get any questions correct, to four, where the respondent got all four questions correct.

**Perceived Political Knowledge:** Respondents were asked to consider how informed they are on current events. This six-point scale ranged from “Extremely informed” to “Definitely not informed.”

**Social Media Use:** For social media use, respondents were asked how often they use social media. This five-point scale ranged from “daily” to “never”.

**Trust in Media:** Trust in media is measured using the same question as in the ANES where respondents are asked how much of the time they can trust certain groups to do what is right. In this survey, I asked respondents about the federal government, media, and people in general. Because the study is about believability in news, I only used the responses from “the media.” The responses are on a four-point scale from “Almost never” to “Almost always.”

**Personality:** The Big 5 personality traits are measured through the TIPI, a ten-item personality measure (Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann 2003). Half of these traits are reverse coded and then there are five sets of two questions that are added together to create five personality traits:

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was not randomized was the magical thinking block. In the pre-test, many respondents noted that the magical thinking questions were alarming and made it difficult to concentrate on the questions that followed so the magical thinking items are anchored to the end of the survey.

<sup>16</sup> 2 respondents replied as “other” or “prefer not to say” and were excluded from the analysis.



extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to new experiences. The range of these personality variables are 1 to 7 where 7 means that the respondent exhibits the highest level of the trait.

**Self-Monitoring:** The self-monitoring scale is created with three questions. Two of the questions are on a five-point scale and one question is on a four-point scale. All responses are standardized from 0 to 1. A higher response means higher self-monitoring. All three measures are then added together to create one self-monitoring scale that ranges from 0 (lowest in self-monitoring) to 3 (highest in self-monitoring).

**Magical Thinking:** Magical thinking is measured using six questions that are randomly ordered (Oliver and Wood 2018). Respondents had to pick one of two response options for each question. To create this scale, respondents only received a point for each question on one response. The range for this index is 0 to 6 where 6 is the highest level of magical thinking.

All of these questions and their indexes can be found in the Appendix B

### *Individual Traits by Party*

Before diving into the analyses, I wanted to see the relationship with party identification and each of these individual traits. Being that partisanship plays such a big and important role in the believability of fake news, it's important to see if there are any partisan differences within these traits. Table 5 shows the average believability rating between Democrats and Republicans per trait. The last column in Table 5 shows whether or not these differences are statistically significant.

For the majority of these traits, there are no statistically significant differences between Democrats and Republicans. In fact, many are indistinguishable. The only ones that show a difference are the media questions where Democrats are more likely to use social media and trust in media. This is in line with multiple opinion polls gaging trust in media (Pew Research 2018; Gallup Poll 2016). With the Big 5 personality traits, Republicans are more likely to

Table 5. Individual Traits by Party

	Democrats (Average Rating)	Republicans (Average Rating)	Difference	<i>p</i> < .05
Political Knowledge (PK)	2.76	2.82	-0.06	N
Perceived PK	2.44	2.37	0.07	N
Self Monitoring	.79	.76	0.03	N
Magical Thinking	3.09	3.09	0	N
Social Media Use	.47	.39	0.08	Y
Trust in Media	2.53	1.81	0.72	Y
Extraversion	3.63	3.75	-0.12	N
Agreeableness	5.34	.535	4.805	N
Conscientiousness	5.53	5.68	-0.15	Y
Emotional/Neuroticism	4.70	4.97	-0.27	N
Openness to Experiences	5.01	4.78	0.23	Y

Note: “Y” means yes, the difference between Democrats and Republicans is statistically significant and “N” means the different is not statistically significant

be conscientious and Democrats are more likely to be open to new experiences just as previous findings have shown (Mondak 2010).

## Results

There are a variety of expectations on how and whether these different individual traits would be predictors of susceptibility to fake news. Table 6 shows two models that predict believability of fake news. Model 1 includes all fake news stories, which include eight stories except for the control story about the bipartisan bill. Model 2 includes the three least believable stories, which is about Mexico agreeing to pay for the wall, Russia contributing to Clinton’s campaign, and Obama overseeing separation of children at the border (respectively). Model 2 is testing the scenario where the average person in the sample believes these headlines to be fake.

Party identification and ideology are included. They are reverse coded for certain stories in a way where the higher number is consistent with ideological leaning of the article. For the models in Table 6, partisan identification and ideology were reverse coded for pro-Democrat articles. Table 7 presents the results of both OLS regression models predicting the believability of fake news stories presented with unstandardized beta coefficients.

Table 6. OLS Model Predicting the Believability of Fake News Stories

	Model 1 (All Fake News 8 Stories)		Model 2 (3 least believable Fake News Stories)	
	B	Std. Error	B	Std. Error
Political Knowledge (PK)	<b>-0.311 *</b>	0.02	<b>-0.378 *</b>	0.032
Perceived Political Knowledge	<b>-0.098 *</b>	0.022	<b>-0.199 *</b>	0.036
Self Monitoring (SM)	<b>0.491 *</b>	0.04	<b>0.625 *</b>	0.064
Magical Thinking	<b>0.039 *</b>	0.015	<b>0.058 *</b>	0.025
Social Media Use	<b>0.136 *</b>	0.044	0.034	0.071
Trust in Media	<b>-0.098 *</b>	0.024	<b>-0.555 *</b>	0.039
Extraversion	-0.007	0.015	0.01	0.024
Agreeableness	-0.012	0.019	-0.05	0.031
Conscientiousness	<b>-0.052 *</b>	0.02	<b>-0.086 *</b>	0.032
Emotional/Neuroticism	-0.014	0.017	0.007	0.027
Openness to New Experiences	-0.026	0.018	<b>-0.141 *</b>	0.03
PID Consistent (InParty)	<b>0.129 *</b>	0.009	<b>0.016 *</b>	0.015
Ideology Consistent (InParty)	<b>0.200*</b>	0.011	<b>0.044*</b>	0.011
Adjusted R Squared	0.208		0.335	

Note: Model controls for age, gender, and race. Fixed effects included for source and story. For full model with control and fixed effects, see Appendix C.

For political knowledge, there were two rival hypotheses. On one hand, the motivating reasoning literature would posit that those who are higher in political knowledge are more likely to believe in fake news because they are more likely to be motivated by their biases. On the other hand, those high in political knowledge may be more likely to be able to spot fake news, be suspicious of it, and be less likely to believe it. In both Model 1 and 2, I find that the latter is the case for both political knowledge and perceived political knowledge. Those that are low in (perceived) political knowledge are more likely to believe in fake news.<sup>17</sup>

Similar to political knowledge, I had rival expectations for self-monitoring. Those higher in self-monitoring could be more likely to believe in fake news to be appealing or they could be less likely to believe in fake news because it's socially undesirable to believe in fake news. The results in Model 1 and 2 show that those higher in self-monitoring are more likely to believe in fake news. The effects are the largest in both models and becomes larger for Model 2. The results suggest that saying something is not believable may be considered as something socially undesirable.

<sup>17</sup> For an in-depth analysis on political knowledge and the credibility of sources, see Appendix D.

The next trait is magical thinking. In line with its moderating role in belief in conspiracy theories, the expectation is that those higher in magical thinking are more likely to believe in fake news. Model 1 and 2 provide evidence for this hypothesis. In Model 2, as the fake news stories are more solidified and unbelievable, the effect grows a bit stronger. The results suggest that the same mechanisms by which magical thinking predicts belief in conspiracy theories, it also predicts belief in fake news. As fake news becomes “more fake”, this effect only grows stronger.

The expectation for social media use is that those higher in use would be less likely to believe in fake news. For both models, the coefficient is positive insinuating that those higher in social media use is more likely to believe in fake news. However, the coefficient is only positive in Model 1. In the aggregate of all the fake news stories where some are rated as more believable than others, the familiarity of these types of sensational stories to those who have high usage in social media may not have sounded any alarms of fake news. When the fake news stories are less reliable to the average person, the effect diminishes.

As expected, distrust in media should make an individual less likely to believe in fake news. For those that have a low level of trust in media, the range of believability may be capped at a lower place than those who have high levels of trust. The less credible the fake news articles seem, the more predictive power that distrust in media has on the believability of that article.

For the Big 5 personality traits, there was expectations for traits that predict political participation and interest to positive influence believability of fake news. This is not the case particularly in Model 2 where those lower in openness to new experiences are more likely to believe in fake news. The only trait significant in both models is conscientiousness. In Model 1 and 2, those who are lower in conscientiousness are more likely to believe in fake news articles.

Partisanship and ideology are significant predictors of believability in Model 1 and 2 as expected. Having the partisanship and ideology be congenial with the ideological leaning of the article increases the likelihood that the article is believable. However, the effects in Model 2 diminish quite a bit compared to Model 1. For all other individual traits, the effects grow stronger in Model 2 but this isn't the case for partisanship and ideology. This would suggest that as fake news stories become less believable to the average reader, there are other individual traits that become stronger predictors of believability over ideological congruence with the article.<sup>18</sup>

## Discussion

This chapter exemplified that there are many other individual traits that alter the susceptibility to believing in fake news. Other predispositions, including nonpolitical ones, can be strong predictors of whether or not someone believes in

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<sup>18</sup> In Appendix E, I present a similar set of analyses with the nonpartisan headlines.

fake news. The results paint a picture of the type of person that would be likely to believe in fake news. This person would be reading a fake news article that contained content that was congruent with their beliefs. They would also be low in perceived and measured political knowledge. They would have high trust in media. This person who is more susceptible into believing in fake news would also be high in self-monitoring and magical thinking.

It's likely the case that there are interactions between these individual traits, but the takeaway for this analysis is to show that individual traits that may seem unrelated can be important pieces in understanding why people believe in fake news. It's not only the case that the information fits what I want to hear. I may just be more likely because I don't know that much about politics or I believe a lot of things I hear in the media. The importance of this is heightened when thinking about solutions on how to safeguard people from fake news. The solutions will differ depending on the reasons why individuals fall for any fake news in the first place.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future Work**

Why do people believe in fake news? This dissertation is just a start into answering that question. My results suggest that people are not motivated by accuracy in the slightest. Even when stories seem outlandish or sensationalized and even when the sources are unfamiliar, people will still believe in stories that fit their worldview. The majority of political fake news is partisan and when there is an ideological leaning to the story, partisan motivated reasoning is activated. Even in the stories where there was less stake or a less clear ideological bias to the headline, partisans reacted strongly and divisively on their judgment of the article. The dependent variable was not whether partisans agreed or disagreed with the article but whether or not they believed in the article. Yet it seems that partisan respondents were unable to distinguish the two showing that when an article is incongruent with their beliefs, it must be less believable than another story that is congruent with their beliefs.

The results on individual characteristics showed that there are other predispositions aside from partisanship that play a role in the susceptibility to believing in fake news. While political knowledge can be encouraging of partisan motivated reasoning leading to bad decision making, it turns out to be a positive influence on believing in fake news. Those who are higher in political knowledge (and perceived political knowledge) are less susceptible to fake news. A person's relationship to media can also dictate how easily they fall for fake news. Using too much social media may make someone more likely to believe in fake news. Alternatively, those who have a high distrust in media, in general, are less likely to believe in fake news. Lastly, there are nonpolitical traits that moderate the susceptibility to believe. Those who are high in self-monitoring and magical thinking are more likely to believe in fake news. The finding on magical thinking is in line with those who are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.

### **Implications**

The overpowering effect of partisanship on the believability of fake news suggests that motivating accuracy may not be easy. While the effect of partisanship is not surprising, the consistent ignoring of source cues is. I had previously expected that source cues would be one way for people to differentiate fake news with credible news sources. The results of these studies show that source cues are not a strong indicator for people to determine how believable a story is. Unfortunately, there aren't many other cues to use when people are exposed to an article on social media. The stimuli used in this experiment mimicked what an individual would see on their own Facebook news feed. One cue that could be used to assess the credibility of an article is social media engagement. However, the level of engagement is something that is created through users and therefore, could be easily biased by bots or social

engineering. There is currently no other cue or information created by the social media platform that would signal the credibility of an article.

The strength of partisanship in the assessment of the articles implies a few things. One, politics is divisive and fake news can highlight that. Partisanship may be a stronger motivator in reasoning when signaled by fake news versus credible news. Fake news articles and website creators seem to inadvertently know this as political fake news has been a huge source of revenue in the last couple of years. The political and sensational aspect of fake news is perhaps bringing out someone's attachment to their party even more. Secondly, social media and the Internet could be creating a hostile news environment for the public. The strong partisan motivated reasoning and ignoring of any source cues suggests that people may be immediately on guard when evaluating the news. Partisan are defensive and rather than thinking rationally, are thinking with their interests in mind.

The implications for the review on different individual traits and its effects on the susceptibility of fake news shines light on the fact that there is no one smoking gun that will explain why some people believe in fake news and why some do not. As with everything, it's a combination of predispositions that will make an individual more or less susceptible to believing in fake news. As social media platforms continually collect information on their users, it's not unlikely that they will be able to figure out some of these other traits. Facebook is already able to categorize their users into an accurate political ideology even without this information being given to them (New York Times). With the Cambridge Analytica scandal (see New York Times), researchers were able to figure out people's religion, personality, and other individual traits. This data was then used to target people better with ads. It's not unlikely that a fake news website or a social bot would be able to figure out those who are low in political knowledge or high in magical thinking and then target those people more heavily than those who are not.

On the other hand, these findings about individual traits can help individualize solutions to this fake news problem. My findings suggest that telling people to take note of the source cue or to use their intuition may not work for everyone. Some people may have high trust in media who could use some help in growing some healthy skepticism of the news. Some people are more likely believe in conspiracies and be high in magical thinking and gaining more political knowledge could be helpful. Self-monitorers could learn that it's not socially desirable or good to be agreeable when it comes to believing in fake news.

## **Future Work**

There is a large amount of work that still needs to be done in researching more about fake news. While there has been substantial work on looking at how fake news is disseminated, there is less on what happens afterwards. This dissertation looks at the underpinnings of how people may process and evaluate fake news. One of the next steps would be to see whether people adopt it as

knowledge. Research on conspiracy theories find that after exposure, there are people who believe this new information. Similarly, there are people who say they believe in fake news but then there are people who truly believe it versus saying they believe it for partisan reasons. A way to measure this would be to look at engagement. Presumably, an individual would not share a story on social media unless they believed this to be true and worth sharing. The decision to spread the news is usually a sign of endorsement.

There are copious amounts of behavioral and linguistic data that can be extrapolated from social media that would help answer the questions on who and when people seriously endorse these fake news articles. As mentioned, sharing a news story can be informative in measuring endorsement of fake news. Similarly, the other types of engagement such as likes or follows. There is also the text that may be written when sharing a story that is rich in information. The text that is written when sharing a story can show whether or not it was shared in jest or in seriousness.

As a follow-up to the findings about self-monitoring, another way to see if there is true endorsement of certain fake news articles is to ask about their beliefs in it more overtly. This also leads to the question of whether or not people perceive what they're reading to be "fake". My results would suggest that when an article is aligned with a person's ideology, they are less likely to recognize it as fake news. This may be why those high in self-monitoring were more likely to evaluate something as believable, but what happens when the article is categorized as fake? It's most likely socially undesirable to believe in fake news, if everyone agrees that it's fake news. This exemplifies the complexity in studying fake news.

The implications of fake news on a larger scale, but looking at it from the bottom-up perspective, is also pertinent for future work. The overarching question about all of this is: how does fake news affect democracy? On the institutional side, there are questions about how fake news comes from different entities and the effects this has on our elections. On the behavioral side, and more in line with this dissertation, is the effect of fake news on the public.

The effects of fake news on the public ranges from the more obvious like distrust in media and misinformation to other grand theories like polarization. First, as outlined in the first chapter, distrust in media has been declining over the past decades and even more so for Republicans. From the results in Chapter 4, this could be beneficial in providing some skepticism about fake news, but a huge depletion of trust in media could have dire consequences for democracy. How much fake news is contributing to the declining trust in media is still an empirical question and is an important question to answer. Additionally, unpacking this distrust in media will be crucial to understanding how problematic this might be. While people have a general distrust for the media, it's likely the case that they still have certain news channels or websites that they do trust. Republicans may also be interpreting these general questions about media to be mainstream media. All of these questions are necessary to understanding the role of fake news and distrust in media.



Whether fake news leads to more misinformation is a question that has been highly discussed after the surge of fake news in the 2016 election. It's true that more people are being exposed to misinformation through fake news (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral 2018), but we do not know whether this actually leads to more misinformed individuals. The rise of fake news also came with the rise of fact checking website. However, Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler (2018) find that fact-checks of fake news rarely find its way to those who are exposed to fake news. The canonical study on misinformation by Kuklinski et al. (2000) asks people their beliefs on welfare and find that's most people are not only misinformed but confidently misinformed. This type of replication on fake news would be an interesting extension to see if the same types of wrong information is being created in the political sphere due to fake news. There are also well known wrongful information like on welfare of military spending that can be easily exacerbated by fake news.

Many of these fake news articles are highlighting stories and politicians that are hot topics at the time. They are sensationalizing an already heated topic or issue. This is why I believe that fake news is contributing to polarization. The increase of echo chambers on social media itself is an example of people self-selecting into highly polarized groups. While this ability to only see news that confirms your beliefs is surely polarizing, I believe that fake news articles itself can be polarizing for two reasons. One, the content is highly partisan. As it apparent from the findings of this study, people are strongly blinded by their partisanship. These fake news stories seem to bring out the most partisan of mindsets when evaluating new news stories.

Secondly, the way fake news stories make people feel is an entirely understudied question. Imagine a scenario where a person comes across a fake news article that is incongruent with their beliefs. This person realizes that this story is coming from a source that is not credible but finds all of these people who are endorsing this story in the likes, shares, and comments. I would hypothesize that this person feels more removed from the people who belief this content then they were before. The similar reaction could occur when coming across a fake news story that is congruent with your beliefs. People who are rebuking this story may seem more distant because of this experience. These interactions and occurrences are happening over and over in the social media environment. Social media is meant to keep us connected (and it does), but the ability to be hyperaware of the differences in beliefs can be staggering.

There are myriad extensions to this research that has yet to be done, and fake news looks like it's here to stay. As the ability to create Internet content becomes easier and more available, so will fake news websites. It's important to figure out on a larger scale what the problem looks like, but it's almost important to study what the implications of this are on an individual level. This dissertation is just a step forward into answering these questions.



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## Appendix A

The headlines and the content they came with are presented in the table below. Each respondent saw each one of these stories. The source that each story was assigned to was randomized as well.



New data show that more children were separated from their parents during the Obama administration than in the current Trump administration, which shows less than 2,000 children being separated at the border.

← Content



Barack Obama Oversaw the Separation of 89,000 Children from their Parents During His Presidency

FOXNEWS.COM

← Headline

Headline	Content
Justice Kennedy Announces Retirement after Donald Trump Made Him an Offer He Couldn't Refuse	Kennedy's retirement is the culmination of a carefully orchestrated 17-month campaign by the Trump administration to remake the Supreme Court before the 2018 midterms.
Mexico Agrees to Pay For Wall - Offering Emergency Deal to Close NAFTA Tariff Loophole	In a stunning move, the Trump Administration announced today that Mexico has agreed to pay for the wall.
Putin Bombshell: \$400 Million from Russia to Hillary Campaign	Russian President Vladimir Putin dropped a bombshell at the Helsinki Summit, accusing US intelligence operatives of funneling \$400 million from Russia to the Hillary Clinton campaign.

<p>Trump lied about meeting with Russian officials during campaign</p>	<p>Donald Trump has repeatedly claimed he had met with no Russian officials, while he was a candidate for president. However, two reports from early 2016 confirm Trump did in fact meet in person with Russian Ambassador Ivanovich Kislyak during the presidential campaign.</p>
<p>Vegas shooting cover-up stories are collapsing. Are we closer to finding the truth?</p>	<p>Inconsistencies in the Las Vegas massacre narrative have begun to surface, such as reports of multiple shooters, contradictions of the official timeline, and the disappearance of hero security guard, Jesus Campos.</p>
<p>Lawmakers introduce bipartisan bill to speed up infrastructure permitting</p>	<p>A pair of lawmakers have introduced bipartisan legislation aimed at accelerating the permitting process for infrastructure projects. This bill would allow railroads and public utilities the permanent ability to fund permitting reviews for some projects in an effort to fast-track the process.</p>
<p>Experts Say Flu Shot Potentially Caused the Flu Epidemic</p>	<p>New research shows that the flu vaccine is not only ineffective, but can also make you more susceptible to the flu and other viruses. Production of the flu shot caused the influenza virus to mutate into a more virulent strain, driving the deadly 2017-2018 flu season.</p>
<p>Barack Obama Oversaw the Separation of 89,000 Children from their Parents During His Presidency</p>	<p>New data show that more children were separated from their parents during the Obama administration than in the current Trump administration, which shows less than 2,000 children being separated at the border.</p>
<p>Trump Speaks to Empty Seats in Charlotte, NC *</p>	<p>Is Trump having trouble filling seats? Trump spoke in Charlotte, NC where there were 20,000 convention attendees for the four day conference, yet less than 3,000 attended the keynote address.</p>
<p>Trump Speaks to Filled Seats in Charlotte, NC *</p>	<p>Trump has no trouble filling seats. Trump spoke in Charlotte, NC where there were over 20,000 convention</p>

	attendees for the four day conference and filled every seat, including standing room for the keynote.
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\* Respondents were randomly assigned to only one of these stories, not both. For further explanation, refer to Chapter 3.



## **Appendix B**

### **Individual Trait Questions**

#### *Political Knowledge*

Do you happen to know what job or political office is now held by Mike Pence?

- Member of Congress
- Secretary of State
- Senator
- Vice President

How long is the term of office of a U.S. Senator?

- 2 years
- 4 years
- 6 years
- 8 years

Who is the current Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court?

- John Boehner
- William Gates
- John Roberts
- Clarence Thomas

Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not?

- The President
- The U.S. Senate
- The U.S. House of Representatives
- The Supreme Court

Source: ANES

#### *Perceived Political Knowledge*

Do you consider yourself an informed person of current events?

- Extremely informed
- Informed
- Somewhat informed
- Somewhat not informed
- Not informed
- Definitely not informed

### *Big 5 Personality*

Here are a number of personality traits that may or may not apply to you. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with that statement. You should rate the extent to which the pair of traits applies to you, even if one characteristic applies more strongly than the other.

Extraverted, enthusiastic  
Critical, quarrelsome  
Dependable, self-disciplined  
Anxious, easily upset  
Open to new experiences, complex  
Reserved, quiet  
Sympathetic, warm  
Disorganized, careless  
Calm, emotionally stable  
Conventional, uncreative

Disagree strongly  
Disagree moderately  
Disagree a little  
Neither Agree nor Disagree  
Agree a little  
Agree moderately  
Agree strongly

Source: Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann (2003)

### *Self-monitoring*

When you are with other people, how often do you put on a show to impress or entertain them?

Never  
Once in a while  
Some of the time  
Most of the time  
Always

When you are in a group of people, how often are you the center of attention?

Never  
Once in a while  
Some of the time  
Most of the time  
Always

How good or poor of an actor would you be?

Poor

Fair

Good

Excellent

Source: Klar, Weber, and Krupnikov (2016)

### *Trust in Media*

How much of the time do you think you can trust the following groups to do what is right?

The federal government in Washington D.C.

The media

People in general

Almost always

Most of the time

Some of the time

Almost never

Source: ANES

### *Magical Thinking*

Please try to go through the next set of questions as quickly as possible.

1. On the whole, would you rather . . .

A. stick your hands in a bowl of cockroaches?

B. stab a photograph of your family six times?

2. Would you rather spend the night in . . .

A. a luxurious house where a family had recently been murdered?

B. a grimy bus station?

3. Would you rather . . .

A. stand in line for three hours at the DMV?

B. secretly grind your shoe into an unmarked grave?

4. Would you rather . . .

A. ride in a speeding car without a seat belt?

B. yell "I hope I die tomorrow" six times out loud?

5. Would you rather . . .

- A. sleep in laundered pajamas once worn by Charles Manson?
- B. put a nickel in your mouth that you found on the ground?

6. Suppose you wanted to buy a ticket for a \$500- million lottery. Would you rather

buy your ticket from a nearby gas station that had . . .

- A. never sold a winning ticket but had no lines?
- B. sold two winning tickets in the past three years but had a long line?

Source: Oliver and Wood (2018)

## Appendix C

Table C. OLS Model Predicting the Believability of Fake News

	Model 1 (All Fake News 8 Stories)		Model 2 (3 least believable Fake News Stories)	
	B	Std. Error	B	Std. Error
Political Knowledge (PK)	<b>-0.311 *</b>	0.02	<b>-0.378 *</b>	0.032
Perceived Political Knowledge	<b>-0.098 *</b>	0.022	<b>-0.199 *</b>	0.036
Self Monitoring (SM)	<b>0.491 *</b>	0.04	<b>0.625 *</b>	0.064
Magical Thinking	<b>0.039 *</b>	0.015	<b>0.058 *</b>	0.025
Social Media Use	<b>0.136 *</b>	0.044	0.034	0.071
Trust in Media	<b>-0.098 *</b>	0.024	<b>-0.555 *</b>	0.039
Extraversion	-0.007	0.015	0.01	0.024
Agreeableness	-0.012	0.019	-0.05	0.031
Conscientiousness	<b>-0.052 *</b>	0.02	<b>-0.086 *</b>	0.032
Emotional/Neuroticism	-0.014	0.017	0.007	0.027
Openness to New Experiences	-0.026	0.018	<b>-0.141 *</b>	0.030
PID Consistent (InParty)	<b>0.129 *</b>	0.009	<b>0.016 *</b>	0.015
Ideology Consistent (InParty)	<b>0.200*</b>	0.011	<b>0.044*</b>	0.011
Age	-0.016	0.025	<b>-0.047 *</b>	0.041
Female	-0.034	0.045	-0.213	0.072
White	<b>0.185 *</b>	0.041	0.461	0.067
Story Fixed Effects:				
Kennedy Retirement	0.468	0.081	-	-
Mexico Paying For Wall	0.074	0.081	-	-
Russia Gives Money to Hillary Campaign	<b>-1.723 *</b>	0.081	<b>1.144*</b>	0.080
Trump Lied About Meeting with Russia	<b>-0.579 *</b>	0.081	-	-
Vegas Mass Shooting	<b>0.872 *</b>	0.081	-	-
Flu Vaccination	<b>-0.166 *</b>	0.081	-	-
Obama Children Separation at Border	<b>-0.179 *</b>	0.081	<b>1.543*</b>	0.08
Source Fixed Effects:				
Breitbart	-0.114	0.076	-0.05	0.124
CNN	-0.087	0.076	0.058	0.123
Conservative Frontline	-0.018	0.076	-0.069	0.122
FOX News	-0.075	0.076	-0.028	0.124
Liberal American	-0.128	0.076	-0.023	0.123
USANews365	-0.128	0.076	-0.026	0.124
<i>Adjusted R Squared</i>	<i>0.208</i>		<i>0.335</i>	

This is the full model from the truncated version showed in Table 6. Age is a continuous variable. Female and White are binary variables. In Model 1, being white makes a respondent more likely to believe in fake news articles. In Model 2 where the cases are limited to the least believable stories, age plays a factor where the older you are, the more likely you are to believe fake news stories. Story and source are included as fixed effects in the OLS model. As expected from the results in Chapter 2 and 3, sources have no effect on believability. Even when story is captured in the model, the individual characteristics still account for a portion of the variance.

## Appendix D

### *Sub analysis of Political Knowledge*

The motivated reasoning literature would posit that those higher in political knowledge are more likely to engage in partisan motivated reasoning. The findings in Chapter 4 find that those who are high in political knowledge are less likely to believe in fake news, regardless of party.

To take a look at this from a different angle, I use the same questions used in Chapter 2 about the familiarity and credibility of news sources and split it by those low and high in political knowledge. Political knowledge is separated into two groups by the average ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ). Just as a memory refresher, respondents were given a list of news sources and were asked to mark the ones that they were familiar with. The proportions of those who state that they are familiar with the sources are shown in Table D. It shows that those high in political knowledge are more familiar with each of the news sources listed in comparison to those with low political knowledge.

Table D. Familiarity and Credibility of News Sources by Low and High Political Knowledge

	Familiarity		Credibility	
	Low PK	High PK	Low PK	High PK
NPR	26.30%	<b>53.80% *</b>	<b>3.04</b>	3.16
Fox News	68.60%	<b>81.20% *</b>	<b>2.73</b>	2.67
Breitbart	18.00%	<b>37.30% *</b>	<b>2.29 *</b>	2.04
Glenn Beck	16.20%	<b>35.10% *</b>	<b>2.38</b>	2.22
Info Wars	12.10%	<b>21.90% *</b>	<b>2.44 *</b>	1.76
Rachel Maddow	21.50%	<b>48.20% *</b>	<b>2.81</b>	2.7
CNN	70.40%	<b>83.20% *</b>	<b>2.98</b>	2.89
ThinkProgress	2.60%	<b>8.10% *</b>	<b>2.83</b>	2.65

Note: \* signifies significance at  $p < .05$  level

The second half of Table 8 is on credibility. Respondents were asked how credible they find these news sources on four-point scale (Not Credible at All to Very Credible). It's important to note that respondents did not see this question unless they said they were familiar with the source first. For the majority of these news sources, there is no significant difference between those low and high in

political knowledge and their perception of credibility. The only significant differences are found in the two fake news sites – Breitbart and InfoWars. In both of these cases, those low in political knowledge are more likely to say that Breitbart and InfoWars is higher in credibility than those higher in political knowledge. This suggests that although those higher in political knowledge may have more biases to be motivated by, they do have the ability to tell the difference between credible news and fake news.



## Appendix E

Table E. OLS Model Predicting the Believability of Nonpartisan News

	Lawmakers agree on bipartisan bill		Flu Shot Causing Flu		Vegas Conspiracy	
	B	Std. Error	B	Std. Error	B	Std. Error
Extraversion	0.001	0.03	-0.023	0.041	-0.066	0.038
Agreeableness	0.035	0.04	-0.087	0.054	-0.046	0.05
Conscientiousness	0.016	0.041	0.034	0.055	<b>-0.099 *</b>	0.051
Emotional/Neuroticism	0.003	0.035	-0.05	0.047	0.014	0.044
Openness to New Experiences	-0.02	0.038	0.075	0.051	0.04	0.048
Social Media Use	<b>0.237 *</b>	0.09	<b>0.267 *</b>	0.122	<b>0.328 *</b>	0.114
Trust in Media	<b>0.13 *</b>	0.054	-0.082	0.073	-0.023	0.068
Self Monitoring	<b>0.386 *</b>	0.082	<b>0.564 *</b>	0.11	<b>0.485 *</b>	0.104
Political Knowledge (PK)	-0.044	0.041	<b>-0.443 *</b>	0.055	<b>-0.487 *</b>	0.051
Magical Thinking	-0.019	0.031	<b>0.099 *</b>	0.043	<b>0.101 *</b>	0.04
Perceived PK	<b>-0.138 *</b>	0.046	-0.032	0.062	<b>-0.11 *</b>	0.058
PID7	0.039	0.021	<b>0.173 *</b>	0.029	<b>0.138 *</b>	0.027
Age	-0.054	0.052	0.093	0.071	0.033	0.066
Female	-0.098	0.093	0.193	0.126	0.039	0.118
White	<b>0.173 *</b>	0.087	-0.177	0.118	-0.207	0.11
Source Fixed Effects:						
Breitbart	-0.228	0.158	-0.035	0.208	-0.092	0.2
CNN	-0.216	0.157	-0.287	0.213	-0.248	0.202
Conservative Frontline	0.004	0.159	0.2	0.209	-0.013	0.2
FOX News	0.011	0.159	0.107	0.21	-0.161	0.199
Liberal American	-0.121	0.156	-0.218	0.209	<b>-0.488 *</b>	0.202
USANews365	0.062	0.16	-0.072	0.214	-0.167	0.201

Table E shows three separate models based off of three separate stories. The first two columns are the nonpartisan control story about lawmakers agreeing on a bipartisan infrastructure bill. The second set of columns is the story about how the flu vaccinations made flus worse. Lastly, the third story is a conspiracy theory about the Las Vegas mass shooting and how it was orchestrated. All three of these stories were designed to be nonpolitical or to not have any a priori expectations about its partisan lean. Unlike in Table 6 and Table C, partisanship here is coded on the normal 7pt scale for that reason. However, in Table E, partisanship is significant for two of the fake news stories (not the control story about the bipartisan bill). Republicans are more likely to believe the flu story and the Vegas story.

For the control nonpartisan story about the bipartisan bill, I find that political knowledge has no effect on believability. However, when looking at the nonpartisan fake news stories (flu and Vegas stories), political knowledge is significant and in the direction expected. This suggests that there may be something about the sensational aspect of a story that signals the use of political knowledge. I find a similar result for magical thinking where the coefficient is not significant in the control bipartisan story but is a significant predictor in the fake news stories. Because Republicans are more likely to believe both the flu story and Vegas story, it's difficult to disentangle here whether the activation of political knowledge and magical thinking is due to the partisan nature of the stories or the "fake" aspect of the stories. This would be an empirical question for future research.

Lastly, there are two traits that are consistently significant across all of the models and that is social media use and self-monitoring. Across all three of these stories, those who are higher in social media use are more likely to believe in fake news stories. The coefficient for self-monitoring is also positive and significant meaning that those who are higher in self-monitoring are more likely to believe in fake news stories. What this suggests is that these might be baseline traits that are used when evaluating news articles in general. In comparison to Table C/Table 6, the effect of social media use is higher in these nonpartisan stories. The fake news stories have a smaller or no effect of social media use being a predictor of believability. For self-monitoring, the relationship is strong and positive no matter what the stimuli; however, the effects are larger in the fake news conditions.