CSE 291/DSC 291
Information Manipulation: Trustworthiness of Information in Cyberspace

Molly Roberts & Stefan Savage, Winter 2023

Elites
Elite signaling

- Who are the political elite?
- Why does it matter what the elite think?
- Remember Converse (1964) and others – U.S. public is largely uninformed
- Large subsequent literature on opinion formation: elites provide signals to the public that create shortcuts to opinion formation (Zaller 1992)
- Not to mention elites control a lot of the political process – (Marty Cohen, Larry Bartels)
What do we mean by democratic norms?

- McClosky: “the ‘fundamental values’ or ‘rules of the game’ considered essential for constitutional government”
- Levitsky and Ziblatt: *How Democracies Die*
- Erosion in democratic norms, especially 1) mutual toleration 2) forbearance, by political elite leads to **democratic backsliding**
- Erosion driven by affective polarization
Clayton et al.

- How did Trump’s unwillingness to accept the outcome of the 2020 election change the public’s belief in democratic norms?

- Treatment: Trump’s norm-violating rhetoric

- Research questions:
  - Does the treatment influence the perceptions of democratic norms?
  - Does norm violation “spill over”? To other elections, norms unrelated to elections?
  - Does norm violation impact the acceptance of political violence?
  - Desensitization: lower emotional reactivity when hearing about political violence
Clayton et al.

- Four wave panel survey – what does that mean?
- Block randomization, what is that?
- Four conditions:
  - Election-related vs. not election related
  - Norm violating vs. not norm violating
- Outcome measures: factor scores
  - Trust and confidence in elections
  - Respect for electoral norms
  - Support for political violence
  - Support for democracy
  - Past practices
  - Emotional reactions
# Example Tweets

| 2 | Non-election placebo (all groups) | One of the many great things about our just signed giant Trade Deal with China is that it will bring both the USA & China closer together in so many other ways. Terrific working with President Xi, a man who truly loves his country. Much more to come! |
| 2 | Election placebo | Chris Jacobs will be a great Congressman who will always fight for the people of New York. He supports our #MAGA Agenda, will continue to Secure Our Border, Loves our Military, Vets, and is Strong on the #2A. Chris has my Complete Endorsement for the Special Election on 4/28! |
| 2 | General norm violations | Does anybody really believe that Roger Stone, a man whose house was raided early in the morning by 29 gun toting FBI Agents (with Fake News @CNN closely in toe), was treated fairly. How about the jury forewoman with her unannounced hatred & bias. Same scammeras as General Flynn! |
| 2 | Election norm violations | So in California, the Democrats, who fought like crazy to get all mail in only ballots, and succeeded, have just opened a voting booth in the most Democrat area in the State. They are trying to steal another election. It's all rigged out there. These votes must not count. SCAM! |
What do they find?

- No direct effect (note FDR)
- Heterogeneous effects
  - Trump’s norm-defying tweets decreased trust in elections among Trump supporters
  - But increased trust in elections among Trump non-supporters
- Does not seem to effect support for political violence or democracy
Fig. 1. Marginal effects on trust and confidence in elections by Trump approval: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.005$ (two-sided; adjusted to control the FDR per ref. 26 with $\alpha = 0.05$). Outcome measures are factor scores combining responses to questions asking whether respondents trust election (seven-point scale) and are confident that votes nationwide will be counted as intended and that election officials will manage counting fairly (four-point scales). Bars represent $95\%$ CIs (not shown if CI is smaller than circle indicating the point estimate; note that these intervals do not incorporate the FDR correction and so significance cannot be assessed visually). See SI Appendix, Table 57 for exact wording and full results.
What are some of the limitations that they note in the paper?

- Abstract questions vs. actual behavior may be different
- In a survey, not actually on Twitter
- Small numbers of people who are very affected might be important
- Social desirability bias
On measuring support for political violence

Current research overstates American support for political violence

Sean J. Westwood\textsuperscript{1}, Justin Grimmer\textsuperscript{1,2}, Matthew Tyler\textsuperscript{3,4}, and Clayton Nail\textsuperscript{1}  
Edited by Anthony Fowler, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL; received September 15, 2021; accepted February 7, 2022 by Editorial Board Member Margaret Levi

Political scientists, pundits, and citizens worry that America is entering a new period of violent partisan conflict. Provocative survey data show that a large share of Americans (between 8% and 40%) support politically motivated violence. Yet, despite media attention, political violence is rare, amounting to a little more than 1% of violent hate crimes in the United States. We reconcile these seemingly conflicting facts with four large survey experiments ($n = 4,904$), demonstrating that self-reported attitudes on political violence are biased upward because of respondent disengagement and survey questions that allow multiple interpretations of political violence. Addressing question wording and respondent disengagement, we find that the median of existing estimates of support for partisan violence is nearly 6 times larger than the median of our estimates (18.5% versus 2.9%). Critically, we show the prior estimates overstate

\textit{Update:} Since this article published, we’ve received new polling data that strongly suggests the trend is not as large as originally thought. On the question of justifying violence, new data from the same source as the 2017 to 2019 trend suggests there has not been a significant shift in attitudes since December 2019, though there is still a notable increase from 2017. On the question of justifying violence in the event of losing a presidential race, there has been a small increase but not as large as the one we originally described. We’re reviewing the new data and will update further.
Mildenberger and Tingley: Second-Order Opinions

▪ What is a second-order opinion?
▪ Why might second-order opinions matter for first-order opinions?
▪ Collective action and coordination – key components of politics
▪ ‘community of fate’: a group of voters or political elites who share a common understanding of a political challenge and a shared commitment to forging a solution
▪ What issue do Mildenberger and Tingley study?
▪ Why is climate change an extreme form of the problem of collective action?
Second-order beliefs: cognitive psychology

- **Simulation view**: individuals use their own beliefs as a heuristic to impute the beliefs of others (Nickerson)
  - Individuals overestimate that people hold beliefs similar to themselves.

- **False consensus effect**, which documents how individuals overestimate the homogeneity of group beliefs

- ‘**Pluralistic ignorance effect**’ where most individuals hold some belief but mistakenly assume that others do not
  - False polarization

- Lots of research: beliefs about beliefs shape individuals own beliefs and actions

- Why does it matter what elites belief the public thinks? Why does it matter what elites belief publics in other countries think?
Five surveys

- One on SSRI in the U.S.
- One on Mechanical Turk in the U.S.
- One TRIP survey of scholars of International Relations/policymakers
- One survey of legislative staffers
- One on SSRI in China

Questions:
- Individual beliefs that climate change is occurring
- Proportion of population in U.S./China who believe that climate change is occurring
Results: U.S. beliefs about U.S. population

Fig. 1. Estimates by US citizens of US population agreement with statements about climate change.
Results: China beliefs about China population

Fig. 2. Estimates by Chinese citizens of Chinese population agreement with statements about climate change, conditional on a respondent’s reported personal beliefs.
Results: Elite opinion shows the same biases

Fig. 7. Estimates by US congressional staffers of national agreement that the US should regulate carbon dioxide (the primary greenhouse gas) as a pollutant
Conclusion

▪ Providing information on second-order beliefs shifts first-order beliefs.

▪ Casting doubt on scientific consensus – does this impact second-order beliefs more than first order beliefs?

▪ What are the limitations of this study?
Some concluding thoughts

▪ What a person believes impacted about what they think others believe
  - Elite beliefs
  - Second-order beliefs

▪ Are these informational “short-cuts” good or bad for the information environment?

▪ How might the media/polling on belief in misinformation affect views?
Optional readings

Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Society

**Elite Cues and the Rapid Decline in Trust in Science Agencies on COVID-19**

*Lawrence C. Hamilton and Thomas G. Safford*

**Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been marked by political divisions in U.S. public trust of scientists. Such divisions are well known on other topics, but regarding COVID-19 they arose suddenly, with disastrous results. Distrust of scientists elsewhere has been variously explained in terms of belief systems, cognitive factors, peer influences, or elite cues. Three surveys conducted from March to July 2020 in the state of New Hampshire observed rapid change, providing a test of explanations in this case. Trust in science agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) fell dramatically among Republicans, while views among Democrats and Independents changed little; the Democrat–Republican gap grew from 10 to 64 points. This rapid change coincided with a reversal of views toward the CDC expressed by President Donald Trump and amplified by conservative media. People expressing lower trust in scientists also report less compliance with science-based behavioral recommendations and less support for scientifically informed policies.
Optional readings

**Figure 4.** Percentage who trust science agencies such as Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for coronavirus information, by survey month and respondent political party.