Is Truth-Seeking but Imbalanced Reporting Credible? The Objectivity Dilemma in Correcting Misinformation

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Abstract

When journalists perceive more misinformation from one side of the political spectrum, they face a normative challenge: should they prioritize truth by disproportionately correcting one political party, or maintain balance to avoid perceptions of bias? This paper demonstrates that the core challenge stems from a disconnect between journalists' and audiences' perceptions of information environments. Using fact-check datasets, I find that journalists have corrected Republican misstatements more frequently than Democratic ones. However, two national surveys reveal a divergence: many in the public—approximately half of Republicans and one-fourth of Democrats—blame both parties equally for misinformation, highlighting a gap between journalistic assessments and audience perceptions. Preregistered experiments show that asymmetric corrections reduce perceived news credibility when they deviate from individuals' perceptions of reality. Those who attribute misinformation to both parties are critical of imbalanced coverage, even when it favors their own party. Conversely, individuals who blame misinformation on the opposing party find heavier corrections of the opposing party as credible as balanced coverage but view asymmetric corrections of their own party as less credible. These results underscore the reputational risks for news outlets addressing uneven distributions of misinformation while trying to maintain public trust. By extending the scholarly debate around false balance to multi-issue contexts, this study highlights the 'truth-balance dilemma' in how journalism strives for objectivity, revealing broader implications for media trust, democratic accountability, and the evolving norms of journalism. While journalists' truth-seeking motivations may align with evidence, public expectations for balance remain a critical factor influencing perceptions of news credibility in polarized media environments.

Keywords: journalistic norm, misinformation, news credibility, objectivity, polarization

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Author Notes

- The experiments were preregistered prior to data collection and were approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the University of Michigan and Dartmouth College. The preregistrations for this study are available at: https://aspredicted.org/8T6_2BJ (Study 1), https://aspredicted.org/XFV_VPG (Study 2).

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The journalistic understanding of what constitutes unbiased and fair reporting has evolved in response to shifting media environments, including the prevalence of misinformation (Hayes et al. 2007; Graves 2016). Notably, journalism has increasingly embraced truth-seeking but imbalanced coverage of political parties as objective and, at times, necessary. The mission statement of PolitiFact, a fact-checking organization that led journalistic fact-checking movements in the U.S. (Graves 2017), suggests that imbalanced coverage is occasionally necessary for truth-seeking: "We try to select facts to check from both Democrats and Republicans. At the same time, we more often fact-check the party that holds power or people who repeatedly make attention-getting or misleading statements" (Holan 2018).[1]

The tension between balance and truth-seeking is reflected in the emergence of two competing notions of journalistic objectivity. The traditional norm of "procedural objectivity" prioritizes balanced coverage of both sides,[2] whereas a more recent concept, "substantive objectivity," dictates that balanced coverage should be avoided when one side clearly lacks evidence (Lawrence & Schafer 2012). The competing norms of objectivity reflect "the thorny problem of how to accurately cover [...] false claims while also avoiding accusations of bias" (Thorson 2024, p.3). While journalistic efforts to correct misinformation are driven by truth-seeking motivation (Mena 2019), if their coverage is not balanced across parties, will the audiences find it credible?

To understand why truth-seeking and balance are often at odds in journalistic endeavors, it is crucial to recognize that audiences' views on who produces misinformation may not align with those of journalists. For instance, during the presidential election debate on September

[1]The mission statement of Washington Post Fact Checker expresses a similar sentiment: "We will strive to be dispassionate and nonpartisan, drawing attention to [...] both left and right. [...] When one political party controls [the government], it is only natural that the fact checks might appear too heavily focused on one side of the political spectrum." (Kessler 2017)

[2]For instance, the Fairness Doctrine, established by the Federal Communications Commission in 1949, required broadcasters to cover "both sides" of controversial issues (Hemmer 2017).

10, 2024, Lindsay Davis and David Muir, the ABC News journalists who moderated the debate, fact-checked Trump on multiple topics—including abortion, immigration, crime, and the 2020 presidential election—but not Harris (Flood 2024). Conservatives criticized ABC News, arguing that their "lopsided fact-checking" was biased and undermined the network's credibility (Ngo et al. 2024), whereas Muir stated that his moderation was guided by his "duty" as a journalist (Rutz 2024). This instance illustrates that imbalanced corrections, which reflect journalists' perceived reality and truth-seeking motivations, may undermine news credibility among audiences who perceive reality differently or expect balanced reporting. Identity-protective motivation (e.g., disliking imbalanced coverage that disfavors one's own party; Kahan 2015) is one factor driving this dilemma. However, I highlight another facet of the story: the violation of audience expectations. People tend to expect two-sided or balanced coverage from credible sources rather than one-sided coverage (Mayweg-Paus & Jucks 2018; Wallace et al. 2020). While journalists have gradually embraced imbalanced coverage for truth-seeking purposes (Lawrence & Schafer 2012), audiences may not share this perspective and often expect balance in journalism.

This paper extends scholarly debates about the tension between truth-seeking and balance to multi-issue contexts. So far, prior research has focused on 'false balance' within single issues where expert consensus exists (e.g., climate change, death panels, vaccines, voter fraud; Dixon & Clarke 2013; Hiles & Hinnant 2014; Lawrence & Schafer 2012; Jenkins & Gomez 2024; Thomas et al. 2017). However, findings from single-issue studies may be topic-specific and have limited generalizability to broader political contexts. To synthesize findings across studies and examine misinformation coverage across various policy domains, I expand the discussion of false balance to multi-issue contexts, where news outlets cover and correct misinformation on a range of political topics. It is important to note, however, that assessing the truth about the distribution of partisan misinformation may be even more challenging in a multi-issue context than in a single-issue context. While I provide observational evidence on the distribution of partisan misinformation across topics as an approximation of the truth

(e.g., Table 1), a more important mechanism is how journalists and the public 'perceive' the information environments and how those dynamics shape public trust in news sources.

This inquiry deepens our understanding of how journalistic decisions for news coverage influence media trust and public opinion. Misinformation coverage impacts public trust in the news media at large (Thorson 2024). This paper demonstrates that misinformation coverage also affects trust in individual news outlets. The credibility of individual news outlets has important consequences for public opinion, because we are living in a high-choice media environment where people can select which news sources to consume and avoid sources that they distrust (Garrett & Stroud 2014; Levendusky 2013). News credibility, in turn, can lead to continued use of trusted news sources (Taneja & Yaeger 2019), determines the effectiveness of journalistic efforts to correct misperceptions (Ecker & Antonio 2021; Liu et al. 2023), and shapes political beliefs and preferences (von Hohenberg & Guess 2022). If uneven corrections of partisan misinformation undermine broad-based trust in news sources, but balanced coverage defies reality, the truth-balance dilemma will harm democratic accountability by limiting the media's ability to correct misperceptions and hold political figures accountable.

The study also has important implications for the news industry: the findings suggest that media outlets may face substantial reputational costs for perceiving and reporting on asymmetric misinformation. . A growing body of evidence suggests that Republican-leaning misinformation has been more prevalent than Democratic-leaning misinformation in recent decades (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow 2017; Berinsky 2023; Garrett & Bond 2021; Mosleh & Rand 2022). News outlets and social media companies have reacted by more heavily correcting Republican misstatements than Democratic ones (e.g., Ferracioli et al. 2022; Shin & Thorson 2017; Haimson et al. 2021; Mosleh et al. 2024). The current study implies that these asymmetric corrections likely harm these outlets' reputation among large segments of the public. It is because many people—roughly half of Democrats and most Republicans—do not perceive the Republican-leaning asymmetry in the prevalence of misinformation. Even if media organizations identify more misleading claims from one side of the political spectrum,

uneven corrections of misinformation may undermine the credibility of news sources when audience perceptions differ from those of journalists. However, correcting both parties at the same rate undermines truth-seeking if such balance is inaccurate, creating a tension between credibility and accuracy.

Misinformation and Journalistic Norm of Objectivity

The profession of journalism has long envisioned the norm of objectivity as encompassing the following traits: "impartial, neutral, objective, fair and (thus) credible" (Deuze 2005, p.447). This notion of objectivity reflects journalists' aspiration that their pursuit of objectivity will enhance their credibility. However, the idealized norm in journalism may fail to function as intended if it is "only valued by certain actors" and "not tailored to contexts" (Zelizer et al. 2021, pp.51, 61). Below, I describe how journalists have updated their understanding of objectivity to adapt to changing contexts, namely the spread of misinformation. It is important to note, however, that even if journalists revise their understanding of objectivity, their assumption that credibility can be taken for granted is at risk if this updated understanding is not valued by other actors, particularly the public.

The traditional norm of objectivity that prioritizes balance, even in the presence of misinformation from one side, is conceptualized as procedural objectivity (Lawrence & Schafer 2012). Ever since the partisan press of the 19th century was displaced by the objective journalism in the 20th century, the objectivity norm has cast journalists as independent of politics and as a "passive mirror" of society (Graves et al. 2016; Hamilton 2006; Kovach & Rosenstiel 2014). The independent media, dominant in the U.S. in the 1990s, was characterized by the practice of giving equal weights on all sides and "he said, she said" reporting (Hiles & Hinnant 2014; Graves et al. 2016). To appeal to readers of diverse political affiliations and thereby increase profits, U.S. newspapers increasingly abandoned party affiliations and claimed a nonpartisan stance by covering public affairs in a balanced manner (Hamilton 2006). Under this norm, the broadcast media were governed by "equal time" requirement to dedicate similar amount of airtime to Democrats and Republicans (D'Alessio & Allen 2000).

The alternative objectivity norm that prioritizes accuracy, even if it sacrifices balance, is termed substantive objectivity (Lawrence & Schafer 2012). As the news environment has become increasingly polarized and diversified, it has become clear that balanced coverage may obscure facts and hinder political accountability when one side of a political debate clearly lacks evidence (Corbett & Durfee 2004; Lawrence & Schafer 2012). Starting in the late 1990s, the objectivity norm has increasingly become more analytic, prompting reporters to take a "weight of evidence" approach and offer contexts and interpretations (Barnhurst 2014; Fink & Schudson 2014; Hiles & Hinnant 2014). Studies have increasingly highlighted that 'false balance' (i.e., balanced coverage when one side lacks evidence) can mislead the public (Dixon & Clarke 2013; Fahy 2017). As a reformative movement, fact-checking emerged in the early 2000s as a genre of reporting that prioritizes truth over balance and allows reporters to provide judgments on which side is true or false (e.g., FactCheck.org in 2003; PolitiFact, Washington Post Fact Checker in 2007; Graves 2016; Pingree et al. 2014).

Although the conceptual distinction between procedural and substantive objectivity may appear clear-cut, its practical implementation is complicated by the ambiguous nature of misinformation. Misperception is typically defined as "factual beliefs that are false or contradict the best available evidence" (Flynn et al. 2017, p.128). However, the boundaries between accurate and inaccurate information can be unclear because "best expert evidence" is subject to change or may not exist (Vraga & Bode 2020, p.136). For this reason, the epistemology of fact-checking has been under intense debate, questioning whether verifiable facts exist in politics and whether fact-checkers have objective criteria for accuracy judgments (Amazeen 2015; Uscinski 2015). Despite these limitations, this study examines the consequences of journalistic efforts to identify and correct "settled misinformation" (i.e., the set of misinformation where both expert consensus and concrete evidence exist; Vraga & Bode 2020). While the nature of misinformation remains muddy, it is crucial to identify better ways to communicate facts and counter rumors and conspiracy theories that lack evidence yet undermine public trust in democratic institutions and threaten social well-being.

Uneven Information Ecosystem: Asymmetric Political Misinformation

How pressing is the truth-balance dilemma in the contemporary information environment? This question hinges on whether the distribution of misinformation is actually uneven across political parties. When reporting misinformation across various political topics, the threat of false balance exists when misinformation is unevenly distributed across parties. If politicians of both parties make false claims at a similar rate, news outlets can pursue balanced coverage and achieve both types of objectivity: balance (procedural objectivity) and truth (substantive objectivity). However, if misinformation is more prevalent on one side of the political spectrum, news outlets face a dilemma, in which they must sacrifice either balance or truth. Balanced coverage obscures the truth, whereas uneven coverage undermines balance.

Substantial research underscores the reality of the dilemma, presenting evidence that misinformation has been unevenly distributed across political parties in the U.S. in recent decades. Table 1 summarizes prior studies that provide observational evidence on the asymmetry in the information environment, with more Republican-leaning than Democrat-leaning misinformation. A growing consensus among scholars is that "the political reality of the information ecosystem in the present day" is that "there are simply more rumors in circulation on the right than there are on the left" (Berinsky 2023, p.7).

The high consistency across multiple studies in Table 1 provides strong evidence for the partisan asymmetry of misinformation; however, these studies are imperfect approximations of the true distribution of misinformation. First, they primarily examine the circulation of misinformation on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. While these platforms offer valuable insights, they do not comprehensively capture the full range of information environments that citizens encounter, including offline news sources (e.g., television, radio, and conversations with friends and family), direct interactions with online news sources (e.g., news aggregator sites and newspaper websites), and other social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and alt-social platforms). Second, many of these studies rely on third-party fact-checkers, involve a wide range of topics, which may include not only 'settlted' misinformation

Table 1: Observational evidence on the partisan asymmetry of misinformation

Study	Year	Platform	Observed Asymmetry
Allcott & Gentzkow (2017)	2016	Facebook	• 115 Pro-Trump fake stories, shared 30 million times • 41 pro-Clinton fake stories, shared 7.6 million times
Badawy et al. (2018)	2016	Twitter	• Conservatives produced 36 times more tweets on Russian trolls than liberals
DeVerna et al. (2024)	2013, 2019	Twitter	Conservatives spread rumors more than liberals: • Pre-correction: Twice more often • Post-correction: 8-10 times more often
Lasser et al. (2022)	2016-2022	Twitter	Among members of the US Congress, • Republicans share misinformation 9.1 times more than Democrats • From 2016-18 to 2020-22, misinformation sharing doubled among Republicans (2.4% to 5.5%) but unchanged among Democrats (0.4% to 0.4%)
Garrett & Bond (2021)	2019	Facebook	Among high-engagement fake news, • 46% benefited Republicans; 23% benefited Democrats
Mosleh et al. (2024)	2016-2022	Twitter	• As of July 2021, 19.5% of Republican users and 4.5% of Democratic users were suspended • Users who share #Trump2020 hashtag were 4.4 times more likely to be suspended than #VoteBidenHarris2024 sharers
Mosleh & Rand (2022)	2007-2020	Twitter	• Conservatives follow politicians with high falsity score (i.e., proclivity to make false claims) more than liberals

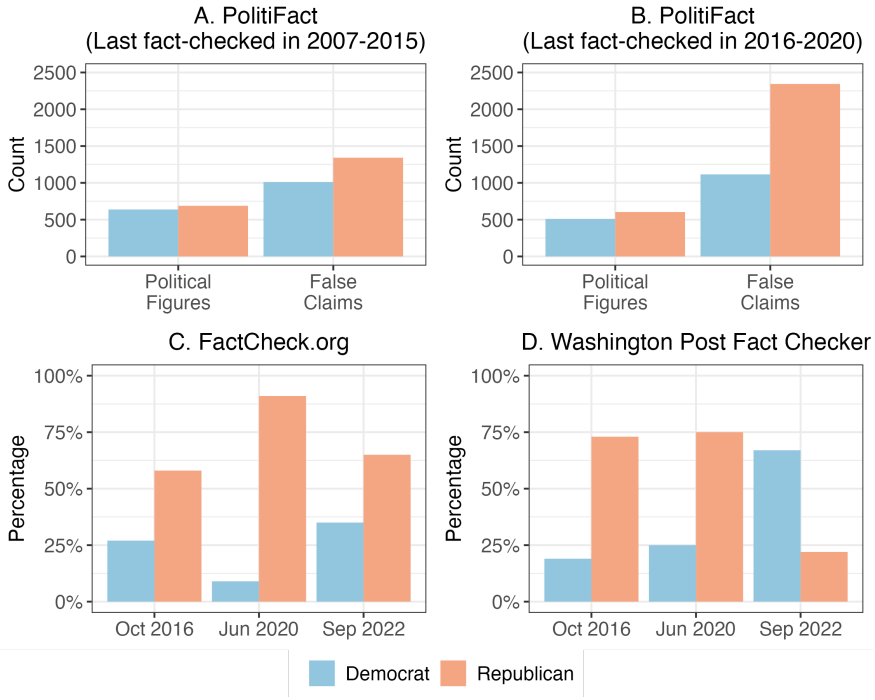
but also 'evolving' or 'controversial' misinformation that lacks expert consensus or concrete evidence (Vraga & Bode 2020). Despite these limitations, the substantial overlap across studies offers valuable insights into the contemporary information landscape surrounding misinformation.

Then, do news producers perceive the Republican-leaning asymmetry in the proliferation of misinformation? To answer this question, I analyze misinformation coverage by professional fact-checking sites. Fact-checking is a genre of reporting that has gained traction since early 2000s, specializing in monitoring and correcting misinformation (Graves 2016). Given its commitment to nonpartisanship, transparent sources and methodology, (e.g., The International Fact-Checking Network's Code of Principles; Holan 2018), fact-checking coverage reflects how news producers dedicated to addressing misinformation perceive the reality of partisan misinformation.

As shown in Figure 1, misinformation coverage by major U.S. fact-checking sites has been asymmetric, having reported a greater number of Republican misstatements than Democratic misstatements. Figures 1A and 1B are based on the comprehensive database of fact-checks

by PolitiFact, since its inception in 2007 until 2020 (n=2,436). I subset the data into two periods, before and after 2016, the year when the concepts of 'post-truth' era and 'fake news' gained traction (Lewandowsky et al. 2017). In both periods, PolitiFact fact-checked a similar number of Democratic and Republican figures ("Political Figures": Pre-2016: 638 Democrats, 688 Republicans; Post-2016: 509 Democrats, 604 Republicans). Yet PolitiFact identified a greater number of false claims from Republicans than Democrats. The asymmetry has become exacerbated since 2016. Among the political figures last fact-checked in 2007-2015, PolitiFact identified approximately 1.3 times as many Republican misstatements as Democratic ones. Among those last fact-checked in 2016-2020, PolitiFact reported almost twice as many Republican misstatements as Democratic ones. ("False Claims": Pre-2016: 1,011 Democrat, 1,342 Republican; Post-2016: 1,115 Democrat, 2,344 Republican).

Figure 1: Misinformation Coverage by Political Party: Major U.S. Fact-checking Sites



Note: In Panels A and B, "Political Figures" indicate the number of Democratic and Republican figures whose claims were fact-checked by PolitiFact at least once during the given time period. For those political figures, "False Claims" indicate the number of claims that PolitiFact rated as false ("Mostly False," "False," "Pants on Fire"). In Panels C and D, each bar indicates the percentage of fact-checks that rated Democratic or Republican claims to be false in each month. Percentages may not sum up to 100% due to additional categories (e.g., true claims). Table S9 presents the full results in tabular form.

I also collected month-level datasets of fact-checks by FactCheck.org and Washington Post Fact Checker during October 2016, June 2020, and September 2022.[3]. Because it would be difficult for news consumers to keep track of the asymmetry in coverage over multiple years, the purpose of month-level data was to understand whether people would likely encounter uneven misinformation coverage on these websites or social media.[4] As shown in Figures 1C and 1D, more than half of FactCheck.org's coverage corrected Republican misstatements during all three months. Washington Post Fact Checker similarly leaned toward correcting more Republican misstatements in October 2016 and June 2020. Yet in September 2022, under the Democratic presidency, Washington Post Fact Checker corrected more Democratic misstatements (67%) than Republican ones (22%). This finding shows that news reporters do not inherently lean toward correcting more Republican misstatements, but may cover more Democratic misstatements depending on contexts.

The observed asymmetries in information environments suggest that the traditional objectivity norm that prioritizes balance may fail to accurately reflect the distribution of partisan misinformation. Yet many journalists hesitate to deviate from balanced coverage or provide truth assessments even when a politician's claim clearly lacks evidence, because they fear such approach will harm public perceptions of their objectivity (Dobbs 2012; Lawrence & Schafer 2012; Thorson 2018). In contrast, other journalists, for instance those who espouse the fact-checking approach, prioritize identifying falsehoods (Pingree et al. 2014; Thorson 2018) and allow themselves to deviate from balanced coverage. Consistent with my findings, studies show that FactCheck.org and PolitiFact have fact-checked Republican claims at a

[3]Google Trends data show peaks of public interest in fact-checking during presidential election months (Figure S1). October 2016 is the month prior to the 2016 presidential election. June 2020 is when Study 1 design was finalized and COVID-19 pandemic was on the rise. I originally selected October 2022 as an election month under the Biden administration. It was adjusted to September 2022, because Washington Post Fact Checker published only three fact-checks in October 2022, which was too few to examine distributions.

[4]These sites also publish fact-checks as social media posts (Shin & Thorson 2017).

greater rate than Democratic claims in 2012 and from 2017-2019 (Ferracioli et al. 2022; Shin & Thorson 2017). The asymmetric reality presents social media companies with the truth-balance dilemma. In regulating accounts that spread misinformation, social media companies "face a fundamental tradeoff between reducing the spread of misinformation and being politically balanced in their enforcement" (Mosleh et al. 2024, p.7).

Source Credibility and Asymmetric Misinformation Coverage

One potential consequence of misinformation coverage that heavily corrects one side of the political spectrum is the diminished credibility of news sources. As a precondition of learning, persuasion, and belief formation, credibility perceptions determine whether individuals would accept or reject the information provided by the communicator (Berinsky 2017; Druckman & McGrath 2019; Lupia & McCubbins 1998). When partisans diverge on trusted news sources, it can further polarize public opinion and obstruct productive democratic discourses (Arceneaux & Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013). Thus, if people find a news source's misinformation coverage not credible, then the news source will likely fail to correct misperceptions. Because a lack of bipartisan foundation of facts can undermine citizens' ability to make informed decisions and hold politicians accountable, I assess potential obstacles that misinformation coverage poses to a news source's credibility.

To theorize how citizens assess the credibility of news sources, I consider two factors: 1) whether the asymmetry in misinformation coverage favors one's political party, and 2) whether the coverage aligns with individuals' perceptions of the information environment, particularly regarding which party is primarily responsible for misinformation.

Source Credibility and Identity-protective Reasoning

When a news source heavily covers and corrects misinformation from one's own party ("uncongenial asymmetry"), identity-protective reasoning can undermine perceived source credibility. Partisan motivated reasoning refers to the tendencies to selectively reject uncongenial information to protect one's partisan identity or beliefs (Druckman & McGrath 2019; Ka-

han 2015). This tendency persists even when the source of information is an expert on a given issue (Kahan et al. 2011; Nisbet et al. 2015) and can reinforce partisans' selective use of and trust in likeminded news sources (Stroud 2011). This tendency can drive partisans to avoid and distrust news outlets and contents that challenge their own group or views (Bakshy et al. 2015; Garrett & Stroud 2014; Peterson & Iyengar 2021). Another type of identity-protective reasoning that may matter in this context is the hostile media bias. It refers to partisans' tendency to perceive neutral media reports to be biased against their group (Gunther & Schmitt 2004; Vallone et al. 1985). When news content is slanted against one's party, "relative" hostile media perception emerges, causing partisans to perceive even greater bias in the source (Coe et al. 2008; Gunther & Chia 2001). Based on both theories, when misinformation coverage corrects misstatements from one's own party at a higher rate, partisans are likely to perceive this coverage as a potential threat to their own party and discount the credibility of the news source.

H1: Misinformation coverage that heavily covers one's own party ("uncongenial asymmetry") will reduce perceived source credibility, compared to balanced coverage.

Partisan differences may exist in the extent to which uncongenial asymmetry reduces perceived source credibility. In studies on personality traits, conservatives have been found to be more resistant to aversive experience and less tolerant of opposing views than liberals (Farwell & Weiner 2000; Jost et al. 2003; Oxley et al. 2008). Other studies on information processing have found that Republicans tend to be more resistant to uncongenial news and facts than Democrats (Garrett & Stroud 2014; Nyhan & Reifler 2010; Shook & Fazio 2009). Because prior studies suggest Republicans tend to be more resistant to uncongenial news coverage, I hypothesize that Republicans will discount the credibility of uncongenial asymmetry in misinformation coverage more than Democrats.

H2: Uncongenial asymmetric coverage will decrease perceived source credibility to a greater extent among Republicans, compared to Democrats.

When a news source more heavily covers misinformation from the opposing party ("congenial asymmetry"), credibility assessments can be affected in two possible ways. A first possibility is that congenial asymmetry would improve the perceived credibility of a news source. Due to ingroup-favoritism, individuals prefer and trust likeminded news and sources (Stroud 2011; Peterson & Iyengar 2021), and enjoy reading negative news about out-group (Ouwerkerk et al. 2018). A second possibility is that, the asymmetry itself—even if it disfavors the opposing party—may lower perceived credibility. People tend to find two-sided or balanced sources more credible than one-sided sources (Allen 1991; Mayweg-Paus & Jucks 2018). Perceiving a source as favoring a particular group can lower its credibility, even if the source is considered honest and expert (Wallace et al. 2020). Another consideration is whether a source meets audience expectations. The discounting hypothesis suggests that people discount the credibility of the source that fails to meet audience expectations (Allen 1991). In a context where the audience expects non-partisan reporting (e.g., online encyclopedia), one-sided coverage can be seen as an indicator of persuasive intent, violate audience expectations, and decrease perceived credibility of the source (Flanagin et al. 2020). The expectation violation heuristic is especially powerful when assessing relatively unfamiliar sources (Flanagin et al. 2020). In reality, people often encounter unfamiliar news sources (Pennycook & Rand 2019) including the ones that correct misperceptions such as fact-checking sites (Nyhan & Reifler 2016; Guess et al. 2020).[5]

H3: Misinformation coverage that heavily covers the opposing party ("congenial asymmetry") will reduce perceived source credibility, compared to balanced coverage.

Source Credibility and Perceived Information Environments

While identity-protective reasoning matters, it is worth noting that observational reality may condition how people assess a news source based on its misinformation coverage. If

[5]Given two potential theoretical expectations, in Study 1 preregistration, I hypothesized the effects in both directions. In Study 2 preregistration, I presented a directional hypothesis that predicted the second possibility.

people are indeed exposed to more Republican-leaning misinformation as studies suggest (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow 2017; DeVerna et al. 2024), they may negatively assess a news source that heavily correct Democratic misstatements, but not the one that heavily covers Republican misstatements. Because people may not necessarily perceive the Republican-leaning asymmetry, I examine individuals' perceptions of which party is primarily responsible for misinformation. Attributions of responsibility matter for democratic outcomes such as vote choices, policy preferences, and political participation (Levin et al. 2016; Marsh & Tilley 2010), yet their implications for news credibility have received little scholarly attention. While considerable effort has been devoted to understanding various sources of misinformation (e.g., politicians, foreign influences, bots; Badawy et al. 2018; Ferracioli et al. 2022; Vosoughi et al. 2018), less is known about how people blame different political parties for misinformation.

A conventional wisdom is that partisans tend to blame the opposing party for social problems or poor policy performance (Bisgaard 2015; Tilley & Hobolt 2011), but blame attribution for misinformation might be more divergent. A study suggests that people tend to blame the opposing party for misinformation, but this finding is based on individuals who mention 'political bias' as a problem for online misinformation (Lima et al. 2022), requiring further investigation. Given the observational evidence on the prevalence of right-leaning misinformation (see Table 1), one possibility is that large segments of the population have been exposed to Republican-leaning misinformation, either directly (social media) or indirectly (news coverage) (Thorson 2024). Then these people would think Republicans are primarily responsible for misinformation. However, the idea that Republicans produce more misinformation can cause cognitive dissonance for some Republicans because it portrays their party in a negative light (Metzger et al. 2020). To resolve cognitive dissonance, Republicans might instead blame Democrats for misinformation. Another possibility is that people's news diet is quite balanced (Budak et al. 2016) and exposure to misinformation is not as prevalent as commonly believed (Guess et al. 2020). Then people may believe both parties are similarly responsible for misinformation. Lastly, because there are non-partisan sources

of misinformation, such as foreign sources or bots (Badawy et al. 2018; Vosoughi et al. 2018), some people may think misinformation is primarily generated by non-partisan entities.

RQ1: Which political party do people find primarily responsible for generating political misinformation?

If partisans think the opposing party is responsible for misinformation, they will consider asymmetric coverage that more heavily corrects the opposing party to be accurately depicting the reality. However, if they attribute misinformation to both parties, then they would find asymmetric coverage as inaccurate and discount the credibility a news source that heavily cover one side's misinformation. Thus, people are likely to discount the credibility of a news source for asymmetric misinformation coverage if the asymmetry mismatches their perception of the information environment. Because there is limited prior research on this inquiry, I explore the heterogeneous effects of asymmetric coverage on perceived credibility of a news source, conditional on perceived blame attribution for misinformation.

RQ2: Do asymmetric coverage effects on perceived source credibility vary by the party that individuals find primarily responsible for misinformation?

Study Design

To assess the relationship between misinformation coverage and credibility perceptions, I collected and analysed three sets of survey data. Two of these surveys included preregistered experiments that tested the effects of asymmetric misinformation coverage on perceived credibility of a news source.

Materials and Methods

To examine the effects of uneven misinformation coverage on news credibility perceptions, I conducted two survey experiments: Study 1 (n=540) on August 10, 2020 and Study 2 (n=1,200) from April 29-30, 2024.[6] Participants were recruited through Prolific, an online

[6]Study 1 results were used to conduct power analysis for Study 2 (Table S26).

crowdsourcing platform that has been found to provide higher quality data compared to alternative platforms in terms of attention check performance, honest behavior, and reproducibility (Palan & Schitter 2018; Peer et al. 2017). Using Prolific's prescreening data, I recruited an equal number of Democrats and Republicans. I preregistered my hypotheses and analysis plan on AsPredicted.org prior to data collection.[7] Prior to Study 2, I collected pilot study data from a nationally representative survey (n=1,000) conducted by Verasight between April 10-15, 2024.

Experimental Design

In Studies 1 and 2, participants were told they would be presented with a list of headlines from a news source. The headlines covered partisan misstatements as shown in Table 2. The use of headlines, not the text of articles, as experimental stimuli reflects the recent trends in how people consume news. The advent of "scrollable" news feeds on online platforms has led more people to consume news in "headline-only" format (Searles & Feezell 2023) and makes it externally valid to use a set of headlines to test how people react to different types of news coverage (Thorson 2024).

Table 2: Experimental Stimuli: Headlines on Political Misinformation

Study 1	Study 2
What [Democrats/Republicans] have wrong about the pregnancy rate among black teenagers	A House [Democrat/Republican] Misleads on Gun Bills and Gun Violence
[Democratic/Republican] Senator misleads on which president signed the Wall Street bailout into law	A [Democratic/Republican] Senator Distorts CBO's Estimate of Americans without Health Insurance
What [Democrats/Republicans] get incorrect about the number of abortions over time	A [Democratic/Republican] Governor's Inaccurate Claim about the New Voting Law
[Democratic/Republican] Party takes the wrong path to the policy on gun homicide	[Democrats/Republicans] Spin the Bureau of Labor Statistics on Job Growth
[Democratic/Republican] governor mischaracterizes the causes of US debt	[Democrats'/Republicans'] Baseless Claim about Domestic Oil Production
[Democratic/Republican] National Committee pursues a policy for the worse on the deportation of illegal immigrants	[Democrats/Republicans] Wrong on Illegal Immigration Statistics on Unaccompanied Children

[7]The preregistrations are available at: https://aspredicted.org/8T6_2BJ (Study 1), https://aspredicted.org/XFV_VPG (Study 2).

For the headline content, I selected topics on which political figures from both parties have made misstatements, so that it was plausible to attribute either party as the source of misinformation. Topics of bipartisan misperceptions for Study 1 were selected based on Wood & Porter (2019) and those for Study 2 were based on FactCheck.org's articles (details in Table S13).[8] The headline wordings were designed to explicitly challenge partisan targets for misleading claims or incorrect beliefs, because news coverage on misinformation tends to correct or criticize, rather than validate or endorse (Ferracioli et al. 2022; Pingree et al. 2014, Table S1). To ensure that the results do not hinge on specific topic-party associations, the topic-party associations were randomized.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions: 1) Balanced coverage (baseline condition): three headlines correcting Democratic misperceptions, three correcting Republican misperceptions; 2) Democrat-leaning asymmetry: five correcting Democratic misperceptions, one correcting Republican misperception; 3) Republican-leaning asymmetry: five correcting Republican misperceptions, one correcting Democratic misperception.[9] To manipulate coverage asymmetry, the bracketed part (i.e., [Democratic/Republican]) in Table 2 was set to be either "Democratic" or "Republican." Participants were considered as being assigned to "uncongenial asymmetry" treatment if five headlines corrected in-group (e.g., a Democrat assigned to Democrat-leaning asymmetry), whereas they were considered as assigned to "congenial asymmetry" treatment if five headlines corrected out-group (e.g., a Democrat assigned to Republican-leaning asymmetry).

I made several design improvements in Study 2 compared to Study 1. First, Study 2 involved bipartisan misperceptions from more recent years (2017-2022) than Study 1 (2008-

[8]In Study 1, participants received two additional headlines that were neutral to political parties (health, business; Table S7).

[9]Study 1 included a fourth condition, balanced coverage with neutral language. Study 1 recruited 720 respondents, of whom 540 were assigned to the main experimental conditions. The preregistration indicated that this condition was exploratory and would be excluded from main analysis. Tables S28-29 and Figure S5 present relevant results.

2012) (Table S13). Second, headline languages in Study 2 were strictly factual, whereas Study 1 had two headlines with subjective language. In Study 1, I intended to reflect misinformation coverage that sometimes presents subjective assessments (Uscinski & Butler 2013, examples in Table S6). But in Study 2, I excluded subjective language to keep the tone factual and similar across headlines. Third, while Study 1 had two randomized versions of topic-party associations per condition (Tables S8-S10), Study 2 diversified these associations in the baseline condition, fully randomized them in treatment conditions (Table S14), and fully randomized the order of headlines.

Measures

Source credibility has been theorized as having multiple underlying dimensions (e.g., shared interest, expertise, bias; Lupia & McCubbins 1998; Wallace et al. 2020) and has been measured in various contexts (e.g., persuasion, news sources). Given the context of this study, I focus on the perceived credibility of a news source, which has been conceptualized and measured as the qualities that people expect from credible news, such as fairness, accuracy, impartiality (Gaziano & McGrath 1986; Tsfati et al. 2020; Meyer 1988; Tsfati et al. 2020).[10]

In Studies 1 and 2, to measure *perceived news credibility*, after reading the headlines, participants indicated the degree to which they thought the news source could be described as: "is fair," "is accurate," "is unbiased," "tells the whole story," and "can be trusted," on a five-point scale from "not at all" to "extremely" (Meyer 1988; Tsfati 2010; Pingree et al. 2013). The five items loaded on a single underlying construct in factor analysis (Tables S24-S25) and had acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha_{Study1} = .92$, $\alpha_{Study2} = .92$).

In Study 2 and its pilot study, *perceived blame attribution for misinformation* was measured by asking respondents to indicate whether the majority of misinformation in U.S. politics in the last 10 years was produced by (1) Democrats, (2) Republicans (3) roughly equally by Democrats and Republicans, or (4) neither (non-political entities).

[10]I also present the findings on the two dimensions of source credibility—shared interest and expertise (Lupia & McCubbins 1998; Jensen 2008)—in Tables S28-S29 and Figure S5.

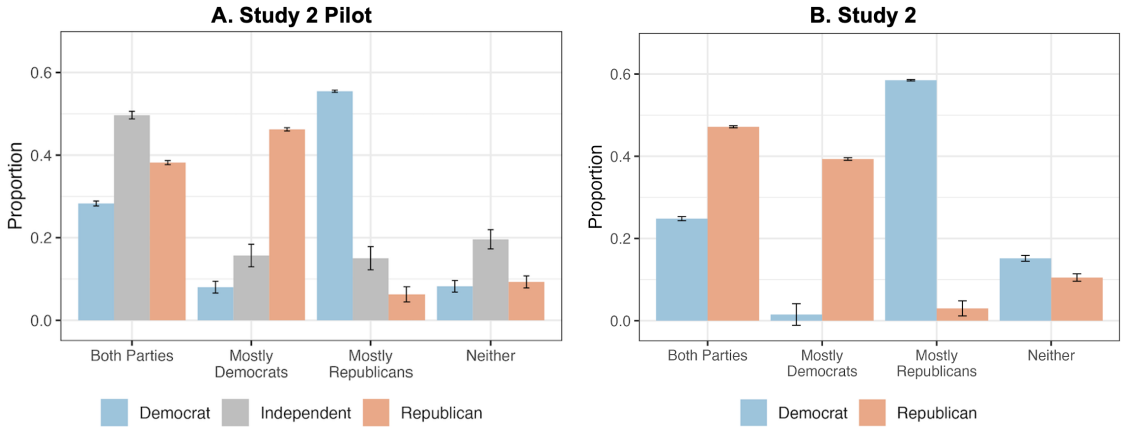
Study 2 included pre-treatment variables for exploratory purposes. To measure how people feel about misinformation, respondents indicated the degree to which they felt "afraid," "worried," "nervous," "outraged," "angry," "irritated" (adopted from ANES 2020) when thinking about misinformation in U.S. politics on a five-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "extremely." The first three items constituted *anxiety* ($\alpha = .89$), and the latter three composed *anger* ($\alpha = .89$) toward misinformation. To measure *partisan media usage*, respondents indicated how often they visited Fox News and MSNBC to get political information in the past week, on a four-point scale ("never," "once," "several times," "every day").

Descriptive Results: Blame Attribution for Political Misinformation

I first examine the American public's views on which party is primarily responsible for misinformation (RQ1), using two sets of survey (Study 2 pilot, Study 2). As shown in Figure 2, public perceptions are quite divergent. More than half of Democrats (55-58%) believe Republicans are primarily responsible for misinformation, consistent with the observed asymmetry of more conservative-leaning falsehoods (e.g., Berinsky 2023; Ferracioli et al. 2022). Yet more than two out of ten Democrats (22-28%) put equal blame on both parties. Only a small minority of Republicans, less than 8%, recognize the observed right-leaning asymmetry in the information environment. Instead, Republicans are more evenly split between blaming Democrats (40-45%) or both parties (38-48%) for misinformation. Independents, only recruited in Study 2 pilot (Figure 2A), were more likely to blame both parties and much less likely to blame one specific party compared to Democrats and Republicans. The fact that substantial segments of the population blame both parties runs counter the conventional wisdom that partisans blame the opposing party for social problems (Bisgaard 2015) including misinformation (Lima et al. 2022).

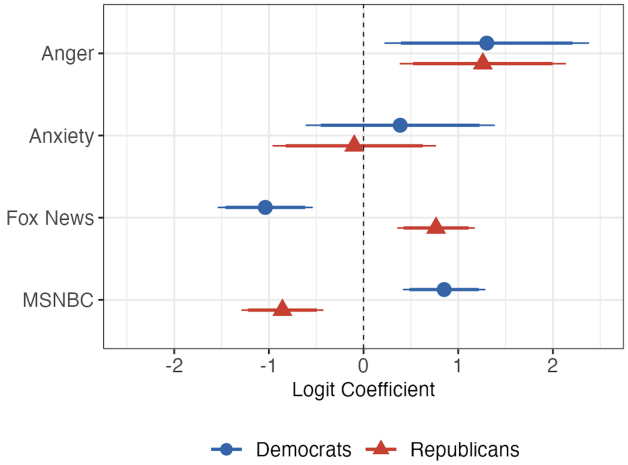
Then what can explain these divergent public perceptions? Because the media environments are increasingly becoming more emotion-laden (Cheng et al. 2024; Wahl-Jorgensen 2018) and partisan (Guess et al. 2021), I conducted post-hoc analyses (i.e., not preregistered) on how blame attribution for misinformation is correlated with emotions toward

Figure 2: Perceived Blame Attribution for Political Misinformation



Note: Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 3: Correlates of Blaming Opposing Party over Both Parties for Misinformation



Note: Estimates are logistic regression coefficients, with 90% (thick) and 95% (thin) confidence intervals, indicating the difference in log odds (equivalent to log-transformed odds ratio) of attributing misinformation to opposing party (1) over both parties (0) given one unit increase in independent variables. *Anger* and *Anxiety* toward misinformation were measured on a 5-pt scale ("not at all"-"extremely"). *Fox News* and *MSNBC* are binary variables, 1 if a respondent visited the outlet at least once in the past week, 0 otherwise. All variables were coded to range from 0 to 1. Table S17 presents these results in tabular form.

misinformation and partisan media usage.[11] As shown in Figure 3, partisans who are angry about misinformation are more likely to attribute misinformation to the opposing party, rather than both parties. This result is consistent with prior findings that anger increases resistance to opposing views and triggers punitive actions (Arpan & Nabi 2011; Valentino et al.

[11]I present the results based on multinomial logit, including respondents who blame one's own party or neither party, in Table S27.

2011). Anxiety, although it is known to prompt more balanced information seeking (Gadarian & Albertson 2014), was not meaningfully correlated with perceived blame attribution for misinformation. Regarding partisan media, individuals who use likeminded partisan media (e.g., MSNBC for Democrats) were more likely to blame the opposing party, whereas those who use counter-attitudinal partisan media (e.g., Fox News for Democrats) were more likely to blame both parties for misinformation. These findings cohere with prior studies that show the consumption of likeminded partisan media increases the negative views of the opposing party (Arceneaux & Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013).

Experimental Results: Asymmetric Coverage and News Credibility

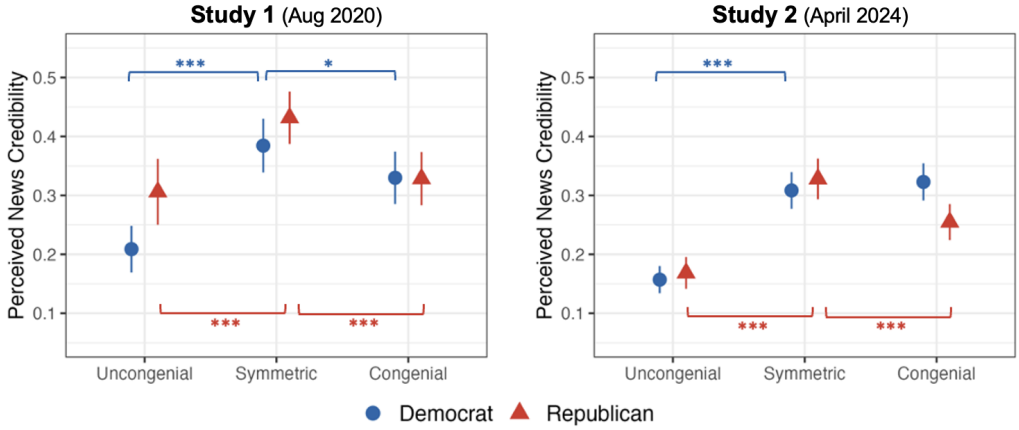
Having established divergent public perceptions of which party is primarily responsible for misinformation, I next turn to whether the asymmetry in misinformation coverage affects the perceived credibility of a news source. I used the preregistered model specification that estimated the effects of asymmetric coverage (uncongenial, congenial) compared to balanced coverage while allowing for the treatment effects to vary by partisan identity, using ordinary least squares (OLS) with robust standard errors.

Consistent with H1, uncongenial asymmetry in misinformation coverage reduced perceived news credibility compared to balanced coverage. As illustrated in Figure 4, this negative impact was statistically significant in both studies among both partisan groups (Study 1: Democrats: –0.18, $p < .01$, Republicans: –0.13, $p < .01$; Study 2: Democrats: –0.15, $p < .01$, Republicans: –0.16, $p < .01$).[12] When a news source heavily covers misinformation from one's own party, both Democrats and Republicans discount the credibility of the source compared to balanced coverage.

While I hypothesized uncongenial asymmetry to reduce perceived credibility to a greater extent among Republicans than Democrats (H2), the results did not support this hypothesis.

[12]Treatment effects are calculated from Table S18. For instance, the treatment effect of uncongenial asymmetry compared to balanced coverage is the coefficient estimates for *[Uncongenial]* for Democrats and *[Uncongenial + Uncongenial×Rep]* for Republicans. The subgroup analysis provides the same estimates of conditional treatment effects (Table S19).

Figure 4: Asymmetric Coverage Effects on Perceived News Credibility



Note: Means and 95% confidence intervals by experimental conditions. *Uncongenial:* Asymmetric coverage heavily covering in-group misinformation; *Symmetric:* Balanced coverage (baseline); *Congenial:* Asymmetric coverage heavily covering out-group misinformation. Perceived news credibility was coded to range from 0 to 1. Asterisks indicate statistically significant treatment effects compared to the baseline condition; *$p < .10$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$. Table S18 presents these results in tabular form.

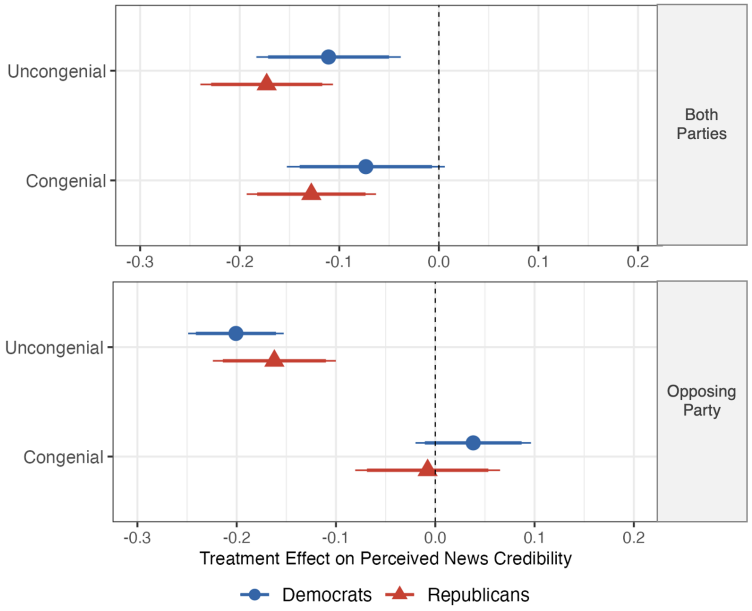
The partisan differences in treatment effects of uncongenial asymmetry were statistically insignificant in both studies (Study 1: 0.05, $p = .29$; Study 2: –0.01, $p = 78$).[13] The extent to which uncongenial asymmetry reduces credibility was similar across partisan groups.

In line with H3, the effects of congenial asymmetry on credibility perceptions were mostly negative, except for Democrats in Study 2. In Study 1, the negative effects were observed across partisan groups (Democrats: –0.05, $p < .10$; Republicans: –0.10, $p < .01$). In Study 2, congenial asymmetry significantly decreased the perceived credibility of a news source among Republicans (–0.07, $p < .01$), but not among Democrats (0.01, $p = .50$). The results suggest the asymmetry in misinformation coverage—even when it favors one's own party—tends to harm a news source's credibility. At the same time, the negligible effect of congenial asymmetry among Democrats (i.e., heavy coverage of Republican misstatements) and the substantial negative effect among Republicans indicate that different perceptions of the information environment likely matter in credibility perceptions.

To examine whether asymmetric coverage effects vary by individuals' perceptions of the

[13]Interaction terms in Table S18 capture the partisan difference (Republican - Democrat) in treatment effects.

Figure 5: Asymmetric Coverage Effects by Perceived Blame Attribution for Misinformation (Study 2)



Note: Estimates are asymmetric coverage effects (baseline: balanced coverage), with 90% (thick) and 95% (thin) confidence intervals. The upper panel ("Both Parties") shows the treatment effects among those who attribute misinformation to both parties, whereas the lower panel ("Opposing Party") is among those who blame the opposing party for misinformation. Table S20 presents these results in tabular form.

information environment (RQ2), Figure 5 illustrates the heterogeneous treatment effects by the perceived blame attribution for misinformation. Among individuals who blame both parties for misinformation (upper panel), the asymmetry in misinformation coverage—regardless of whether it heavily corrects one's own party (uncongenial) or the other party (congenial)—significantly reduces the perceived credibility of the news source (uncongenial: ps $< .01$ for both parties; congenial: Democrat: $p < .10$, Republican: $p < .01$). These people discount the credibility of both uncongenial and congenial asymmetries, implying that they likely prioritize balance in assessing the credibility of a news source. On the other hand, among those who blame the opposing party for misinformation (lower panel), the asymmetry in misinformation coverage undermines the credibility of a news source when it heavily covers own party's misperceptions (uncongenial; ps $< .01$ for both parties), but not when it heavily covers the other party's misstatements (congenial; Democrat: $p = .20$, Republican: $p = .80$). These heterogeneous treatment effects demonstrate that the mismatch between

misinformation coverage and the perceived information environment is a driver behind negative evaluation of news credibility.

These results reveal divergent public expectations for journalistic objectivity—whether people expect balance in coverage (procedural objectivity) or accurate representation of reality despite imbalance in coverage (substantive objectivity). Those who think both parties are responsible for misinformation discount the credibility of asymmetric coverage of any type, revealing their preference for balanced coverage over asymmetric one. Those who find one party primarily responsible for misinformation find asymmetric coverage less credible when it heavily covers the party that they find less culpable for misinformation. But these people find asymmetric coverage as credible as balanced coverage if the news outlet heavily covers the party that they think is responsible for misinformation. For these people, balance is less of a concern, and whether the coverage accurately depicts the reality would be a more dominant criterion for credibility assessments.

Discussion

Can news outlets report and correct political misinformation in a way that audiences see as credible? The traditional journalistic norm of objectivity would suggest balance as a goal. Following "the strategic ritual of objectivity" (Cook 2012, p.7), reporters pursue "the ideal of even-handed news" (Lawrence & Schafer 2012, p.769) and expect that the audience would "judge objectivity based on the balance of the end product, not the [...] depth of the news gathering" (Pingree 2011, p.24). A problem, however, is that "truth [...] is not necessarily inherent in [such] objective reporting" (Lawrence & Schafer 2012, p.769).

When there is a lack of balance in the political information environment, news outlets that cover misinformation face a credibility dilemma between truth and balance. Unlike much of political communication literature that considered false balance in the coverage of a single topic, I highlight that the uneven prevalence of misinformation across various topics can pose a hurdle to broad-based trust in news outlets. For example, limited trust in fact-checking sites, despite their professional, non-partisan reporting (Brandtzaeg et al. 2018), could be

better understood if we consider how people assess news sources in the asymmetric political reality.

This study also sheds light on the ongoing debate about why journalistic corrections or interventions against misinformation are oftentimes unsuccessful. As numerous studies have pointed out, one critical obstacle lies in audiences, who are motivated to resist information that corrects their own group or beliefs (e.g., partisan motivated reasoning). Partly due to greater availability of conservative-leaning misinformation, many studies have identified Republicans as particularly more vulnerable to misinformation and resistant to corrections (e.g., Berinsky 2023; Garrett & Bond 2021). My findings indicate that a critical but overlooked part of the answer is contextual. The asymmetry in political information environment and the divergent public perceptions of reality pose a serious obstacle to journalistic efforts to cover and correct misinformation. The results show that people do not blindly want misinformation coverage that favors their own party. If they perceive misinformation to be coming from both parties, then they discount the credibility of asymmetric coverage regardless of which party is heavily corrected. If news outlets produce asymmetric coverage to reflect the imbalance in reality, they risk losing credibility unless the public also perceives the imbalance in the supply of misinformation. My findings imply substantial reputational costs for news outlets and social media companies that heavily correct and regulate misinformation from the Republican side (e.g., Ferracioli et al. 2022; Mosleh et al. 2024). Such interventions may not only risk their credibility among Republicans, but also among Democrats who blame both parties for misinformation.

Several aspects of this study may affect its generalizability. First, I designed and conducted this study in the context of two party system. Because the asymmetry in misinformation coverage is also found in multi-party systems (e.g., heavy fact-checking coverage of the incumbent party in Brazil and Italy; Ferracioli et al. 2022), countries with the multi-party system could offer a fruitful extension of the current study. Second, in designing experimental stimuli, I employed one version of asymmetric coverage, where five versus one out of six

headlines targeted either party. Future work can examine different combinations of headlines that cover partisan misstatements.

In a high-choice media environment where untrustworthy news sources proliferate, it is increasingly more important to build credibility in news sources that correct misperceptions. For meaningful policy debates to take place, it is imperative that people across party lines share a common set of trusted news sources that heed evidence. However, finding a way out of the truth-balance dilemma is not easy. Not only are we facing an uneven political information environment, but we are also living in the 'post-truth' era that "empowers people to choose their own reality" (Lewandowsky et al. 2017, p.361). By unveiling the obstacles, however, this study hopefully serves as a first step toward identifying approaches to misinformation coverage that are broadly trusted by the public.

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