Truth-seeking vs. Balance: The Credibility Dilemma in Correcting Political Misinformation

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Abstract

When journalists perceive more misinformation from one side of the political spectrum, they face a normative dilemma: disproportionately correcting one party in pursuit of truth can undermine credibility, while maintaining balance to preserve credibility can be misleading. This paper shows that this challenge stems from a disconnect between journalists' and audiences' perceptions of the information environment. Using fact-checking datasets, I find that journalists have corrected Republican misstatements more often than Democratic ones. Yet, two national surveys reveal a divergence: many in the public—around four in ten 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 the asymmetry contradicts individuals' views of reality. Those who blame both parties for misinformation find asymmetric corrections less credible than balanced ones, even when the asymmetry favors their own party. Meanwhile, individuals who blame the opposing party for misinformation find heavier corrections of that party as credible as balanced corrections but view heavier corrections of their own party as less credible. These findings underscore the reputational risks that news outlets face when addressing asymmetric polarization around misinformation. By extending false balance to multi-issue contexts, this study introduces the 'truth-balance dilemma,' showing how violating audience expectations can erode credibility across parties. Even when journalists' truth-seeking aligns with evidence, public expectations for balance remain a key factor shaping perceptions of news credibility in polarized 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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1 Introduction

"Symmetrical coverage in situations of asymmetrical polarization—where only one party has turned against fundamental democratic rules or is misleading the public systematically about basic facts—turns into distortion." (Müller 2021, p.123)

"An obvious hallmark of a post-truth world is that it empowers people to choose their own reality." (Lewandowsky et al. 2017, p.361)

During the presidential election debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump on September 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 did not fact-check Harris (Flood 2024). Conservatives criticized ABC News, arguing that its "lopsided fact-checking" was biased, overlooked Harris's misstatements, and undermined the network's credibility (Ngo et al. 2024), whereas Muir stated that he moderated the debate following his "duty" as a journalist (Rutz 2024). Muir's statement resonates with the mission statement of PolitiFact, a major U.S. fact-checking organization (Graves 2017), which highlights how the journalistic mission of truth-seeking sometimes necessitates imbalanced corrections: "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 journalistic understanding of what constitutes unbiased and fair reporting has evolved in response to shifting media environments, including the prevalence of misinforma-

[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)

tion (Hayes et al. 2007; Graves 2016). Notably, the need to correct political misinformation in news coverage has generated a tension between "balance" and "truth-seeking" as two competing values in achieving 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). These 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).[3] Professional journalism has increasingly embraced truth-seeking but imbalanced coverage of political parties as objective and, at times, necessary (Fahy 2017). However, even if journalistic efforts to correct misinformation are driven by truth-seeking motivation, if their coverage is not balanced across parties, will the audiences find the news source credible?

Journalists face a normative challenge in news coverage decisions when they perceive misinformation as more prevalent on one side of the political spectrum. Under such perceptions, truth-seeking journalists produce asymmetric corrections, where one party is corrected more frequently for misstatements. However, this asymmetry may threaten a news outlet's reputation as a credible source. When Meta ended its third-party fact-checking program in January 2025, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg stated, "the fact-checkers have just been too politically biased and have destroyed more trust than they've created" (Jingnan et al. 2025). Given that major U.S. fact-checkers have corrected Republicans more often than Democrats

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

[3]Despite the growing journalistic consensus toward substantive objectivity (truth-seeking), procedural objectivity (balance) remains an ideal that journalists strive for when possible. Full Fact, a U.K.-based fact-checking outlet, touts its impartiality by citing a Twitter post: "What I ADORE about Fullfact.org is that they don't ONLY fact-check right-wing claims. They check equally." (Full Fact nd). Although uncommon, some fact-checking journalists have even strived for "statistical balance" by "setting explicit targets by party or investigating every claim in a speech or debate" (Graves 2018, p.625).

on social media (Shin & Thorson 2017; Ferracioli et al. 2022), Zuckerberg's remark suggests that truth-seeking journalism may have harmed its credibility due to imbalanced corrections. An alternative approach is to pursue balance, where both parties are corrected at a similar rate for misstatements. Yet such balance can be artificial and mislead the public in "situations of asymmetrical polarization," where one political party disproportionately produces more misleading claims (Müller 2021, p.123). I examine whether the trade-off between truth-seeking and balance—which I call the 'truth-balance dilemma'—exists in journalists' pursuit of objectivity by forcing news outlets to sacrifice either accuracy or credibility.

To understand why truth-seeking and balance are often at odds in journalistic endeavors, it is crucial to recognize that audiences' views of reality may not align with those of journalists. While identity-protective motivation (e.g., partisan motivated reasoning; Kahan 2015) is one factor driving source credibility assessments, this study highlights another facet of the story: the violation of audience expectations. When people expect two-sided or balanced coverage from news sources, they discount the credibility of the source that provides one-sided coverage (Allen 1991; Mayweg-Paus & Jucks 2018; Wallace et al. 2020). While journalists have gradually embraced imbalanced coverage for truth-seeking purposes (Lawrence & Schafer 2012) and have sought to reform norms and practices, as exemplified by the fact-checking movement (Graves 2016), not everyone in the audience may share this perspective and expects balance in journalism. If audiences continue to equate objectivity with balance or hold differing views on what constitutes truth, truth-seeking yet imbalanced coverage risks being perceived as lacking credibility. Thus, a key factor shaping public trust in news outlets is how journalists and the public perceive objectivity and the information environment, as well as whether those perceptions align.

Findings from this study underscore the reality of the truth-balance dilemma. I first show that journalists have corrected Republican misstatements more often than Democratic ones by analyzing fact-check datasets. The analyses focus on FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and Washington Post Fact Checker, the three major U.S. fact-checking sites. Next, through two

national surveys, I demonstrate that large segments of the public—approximately 95% of Republicans and 40% of Democrats—do not perceive the Republican-leaning asymmetry in the supply of misinformation. Around four in ten Republicans (38–47%) and about one-fourth of Democrats (22–28%) blame both parties equally for misinformation. These results indicate a discrepancy between journalistic assessments and public perceptions of misinformation and information environments. Finally, using two preregistered experiments, I find that asymmetric corrections of one party undermine perceived news credibility compared to balanced corrections—a pattern observed in both studies and among both Democrats and Republicans. In the second study, I further find that individuals discount the credibility of a news source when its asymmetric corrections deviate from their perception of which party generates more misinformation. Individuals who blame both parties for misinformation perceive asymmetric corrections as less credible, even when the coverage, in principle, favors their own party. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that partisans diverge in their news credibility assessments, many individuals across the partisan divide—especially those who perceive misinformation as coming from both sides—value balance when evaluating a news source.

This study contributes to the literature on journalistic norms by extending the discussion of 'false balance'—the practice of providing balanced coverage of all sides even when one side lacks evidence—to multi-issue contexts. To date, studies have examined false balance within single-issue contexts (e.g., climate change, death panels, vaccines, voter fraud; Hiles & Hinnant 2014; Lawrence & Schafer 2012; Jenkins & Gomez 2024; Thomas et al. 2017). However, the findings from these studies may be topic-specific and have limited generalizability to broader contexts, especially if single issue studies only involve cases where Republicans make more misinformed statements than Democrats. In reality, individuals do not consume news stories on a single topic in isolation; instead, they engage with news across multiple topics and form opinions about a news source (Searles & Feezell 2023). Moreover, in multi-issue contexts, the tension between truth-seeking and balance may become even more intricate,

because assessing the truth about the distribution of partisan misinformation across topics can be more challenging than in single-issue contexts.

The truth-balance dilemma poses a serious concern for democracies facing the threats of misinformation and democratic backsliding. Partisan asymmetry in misinformation is not unique to two-party democracies like the U.S.; the asymmetry also appears in fact-checking coverage in multi-party democracies, such as Brazil and Italy (e.g., more misstatements from opposition parties than incumbent party; Ferracioli et al. 2022). Thus, journalists in multi-party countries may also face a trade-off between truth-seeking and balance when they perceive the asymmetry of misinformation along incumbent-opposition or conservative-liberal cleavages. Moreover, in many countries facing democratic backsliding, polarization has been asymmetric regarding misinformation. A recent study of 26 countries illustrates this asymmetry, showing that radical-right populist parties are significantly more likely than others to spread misinformation (Törnberg & Chueri 2025). When authoritarian leaders or right-wing populist parties spread more conspiracy theories, it leaves journalists grappling with how to report objectively while avoiding accusations of bias (Müller 2021). If uneven corrections of misinformation undermine broad-based trust in news sources, but balanced coverage defies reality, the truth-balance dilemma poses a threat to democratic accountability by limiting the media's ability to inform the public and citizens' ability to hold political figures accountable.

The study has important implications for practitioners in the news industry and for misinformation regulation. The results suggest that media outlets committed to correcting asymmetric misinformation may face substantial reputational costs. In recent decades, Republican misstatements have been fact-checked or more frequently resulted in suspensions than Democratic ones on social media (Ferracioli et al. 2022; Shin & Thorson 2017; Haimson et al. 2021; Mosleh et al. 2024). While these efforts are motivated by truth-seeking, Mosleh et al. (2024) suggest that attempts to regulate online misinformation "face a fundamental tradeoff between reducing the spread of misinformation and being politically balanced

in their enforcement" (Mosleh et al. 2024, p.7). The current study supports this concern, suggesting that asymmetric corrections likely harm media outlets' credibility among large segments of the public who perceive the information environment differently. Finding a way out of the truth-balance dilemma is a difficult task, given the fact that we are now living in the 'post-truth' era, which "empowers people to choose their own reality" (Lewandowsky et al. 2017, p.361). Still, by unveiling the dilemma and the mechanism underlying it, this study allows us to make informed speculations about potential ways to address the dilemma, which I will discuss at the end of this paper.

2 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, especially the spread of misinformation. However, even if journalists revise their understanding of objectivity, their assumption that credibility can be taken for granted is at risk if this reconfigured norm 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 affilia-

tions 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 and interpretive, 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-seeking over balance and provides 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). The current 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).

3 Source Credibility and Asymmetric Corrections of Misinformation

As a precondition of learning, persuasion, and belief formation, source 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 polarize public opinion and obstruct productive democratic discourses (Arceneaux & Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013). Thus, if people find a news source not credible, the news source is likely to fail in correcting misperceptions held by the public. Because the absence of a bipartisan foundation for facts can undermine citizens' ability to make informed decisions, coordinate and reach compromise, and hold politicians accountable, I examine the potential obstacles that asymmetric corrections of misinformation may pose to a news source's credibility.

This inquiry deepens our understanding of how journalistic decisions for news coverage influence media trust and public opinion. Misinformation coverage affects public trust in the news media as a whole (Thorson 2024). I further explore whether media coverage of misinformation also impacts trust in individual news outlets. The credibility of individual news sources plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, especially in a high-choice media environment where individuals can selectively consume news and avoid sources 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).

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

misinformation.

3.1 Source Credibility and Identity-protective Reasoning

When a news source heavily 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; Kahan 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). Identity-protective motivation can also 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). Identity-protective reasoning can also manifest as hostile media bias, which refers to partisans' tendency to perceive neutral media reports as biased against their group (Gunther & Schmitt 2004; Vallone et al. 1985). When news content is slanted against one's party, a "relative" hostile media perception emerges, causing partisans to perceive even greater bias in the source. (Coe et al. 2008; Gunther & Chia 2001). Drawing on theories of identity-protective reasoning and hostile media bias, when a news source corrects misstatements from one's own party more frequently, partisans are likely to perceive such coverage as a threat to their party and discount the credibility of the news source.

H1: Asymmetric corrections of one's own party ("uncongenial asymmetry") will reduce perceived source credibility, compared to balanced corrections.

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, I hypothesize that Republicans will discount the credibility of uncongenial asymmetry in misinformation corrections more than Democrats.

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

When a news source more heavily corrects misinformation from the opposing party ("congenial asymmetry"), credibility assessments can be affected in two possible ways. The first possibility is that congenial asymmetry—heavier corrections of the opposing party, which is, in principle, favorable to one's own party—enhances the perceived credibility of a news source. Due to ingroup favoritism, individuals prefer and trust likeminded news sources (Stroud 2011; Peterson & Iyengar 2021) and enjoy reading negative news about the out-group (Ouwerkerk et al. 2018). The second possibility is that 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 ones (Allen 1991; Mayweg-Paus & Jucks 2018), particularly when they expect the source to provide unbiased information, such as online encyclopedias (Flanagin et al. 2020). Furthermore, perceiving a source as favoring a particular group can reduce its credibility, even if the source is considered honest and expert (Wallace et al. 2020).[4]

RQ1: Does asymmetric corrections of the opposing party ("congenial asymmetry") reduce perceived source credibility, compared to balanced corrections?

3.2 Source Credibility and Perceived Information Environments

While identity-protective reasoning matters, individuals' perceptions of the information environment also shape news credibility assessments. When news coverage violates audience

[4]In Study 2 preregistration, I presented a directional hypothesis predicting a decrease in perceived credibility.

expectations, it can undermine a source's perceived credibility (Allen 1991; Flanagin et al. 2020). The expectations for news coverage may vary based on how individuals perceive the information environment.

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. One possibility is that large segments of the public blame Republicans for generating misinformation. Given the growing body of research on the prevalence of Republican-leaning misinformation (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow 2017; DeVerna et al. 2024), individuals may have been exposed to a heavy dose of Republican-leaning misinformation, either directly (via social media) or indirectly (through news coverage) (Thorson 2024). However, the notion that Republicans produce more misinformation may create cognitive dissonance for some Republicans because it casts their party in a negative light (Metzger et al. 2020). To resolve this tension, Republicans might instead attribute misinformation to Democrats. Another possibility is that individuals perceive both parties as similarly responsible for misinformation. This expectation aligns with prior findings suggesting that Americans' news diet is quite balanced (Budak et al. 2016) and that that misinformation exposure is less prevalent than commonly assumed (Guess et al. 2020). A third possibility is that, given the existence of non-partisan sources of misinformation, such as foreign sources or bots (Badawy

et al. 2018; Vosoughi et al. 2018), some people may attribute misinformation primarily to non-partisan sources. To assess public perceptions of the information environment, I examine individuals' views on which party is primarily responsible for misinformation.

RQ2a: Which political party do individuals primarily blame for generating misinformation?

Individual perceptions of which party is responsible for misinformation can be shaped by media environments that are increasingly emotion-laden and partisan (Cheng et al. 2024; Guess et al. 2021). Emotions play a significant role in how individuals consume news and how susceptible they are to partisan misinformation. Anger increases the tendency to believe misstatements favorable to one's own party and reduces exposure to counter-attitudinal news (Song 2017; Weeks 2015). In contrast, anxiety reduces the tendency for partisan selection of news, but can increase news avoidance (Toff & Nielsen 2022; Weeks 2015). Because anger likely leads to a greater exposure to news and information favorable to one's own party, whereas anxiety likely promotes balanced news exposure, I examine whether anger increases blame directed at the opposing party as the source of misinformation, while anxiety fosters blame for both parties. I do so by examining the emotions individuals feel specifically toward misinformation.

Media diets can also influence how individuals perceive the information environment. Discussions of 'echo chambers' reflect concerns that individuals may be exposed to only news or misinformation that favors their own party and maligns the opposing party (Guess et al. 2020). Likeminded partisan media reinforce negative views of the opposing party (Arceneaux & Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013), whereas cross-cutting exposure to partisan media that favor the opposing party is associated with greater tolerance and understanding of opposing viewpoints (Mutz 2002; Price et al. 2002). Thus, the use of likeminded media likely fosters greater blame on the opposing party for misinformation, whereas the use of cross-cutting media leads to blame for both parties. To better understand the factors that shape public perceptions of information environments, I examine a post-hoc exploratory research ques-

tion (i.e., not preregistered) about how blame attribution for misinformation correlates with emotions toward misinformation and partisan media usage.

RQ2b: Are individuals who are angry about misinformation or use likeminded media more likely to blame the opposing party for misinformation?

RQ2c: Are individuals who are worried about misinformation or use crosscutting media more likely to blame both parties for misinformation?

A key underlying mechanism in source credibility assessments is whether audience expectations are met. The discounting hypothesis suggests that individuals discount the credibility of sources that fail to meet audience expectations (Allen 1991). In contexts where audiences expect nonpartisan reporting, one-sided coverage can be perceived as an indicator of persuasive intent, violating audience expectations and decreasing the source's perceived credibility (Flanagin et al. 2020). The expectation violation heuristic is especially influential when assessing relatively unfamiliar sources (Flanagin et al. 2020).[5]

Thus, when assessing a news source that corrects misinformation, individuals are likely to discount its credibility if its asymmetric corrections do not align with their perception of the information environment. If individuals believe the opposing party is primarily responsible for misinformation, they will perceive asymmetric corrections of the opposing party as accurately reflecting reality. However, if individuals attribute misinformation to both parties, they will view asymmetric corrections as inaccurate or biased and discount the credibility of a news source that disproportionately corrects one side's misinformation. Given the limited prior research on this topic, I examine how the effects of asymmetric corrections on a news source's perceived credibility vary based on perceived blame attribution for misinformation.

RQ3: Do the effects of asymmetric corrections on perceived source credibility vary depending on which party individuals blame for misinformation?

[5]In reality, individuals frequently encounter unfamiliar news sources (Pennycook & Rand 2019), including those that correct misperceptions, such as fact-checking sites (Nyhan & Reifler 2016; Guess et al. 2020).

4 Journalists' Assessments of Information Environments

How pressing is the truth-balance dilemma in the contemporary information environment? This question hinges on whether journalists perceive the distribution of misinformation to be uneven across political parties. If journalists perceive a similar amount of misstatements from both parties, news outlets can achieve both types of objectivity through balanced (procedural objectivity) and truth-seeking (substantive objectivity) coverage. However, if journalists perceive misinformation to be more prevalent on one side of the political spectrum, news outlets face a dilemma between truth-seeking and balance. Balanced coverage may be misleading, whereas uneven coverage may undermine credibility.

A growing body of research presents evidence that misinformation has been unevenly distributed across political parties in the U.S. in recent decades. Prior studies in Table 1 have reported observational evidence on the greater prevalence of Republican-leaning than Democrat-leaning misinformation. Although the list of studies in Table 1 is not meant to be exhaustive, it reflects 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).

Despite the high consistency across multiple studies in Table 1, these findings are imperfect approximations of the true distribution of misinformation. First, these studies primarily examine misinformation on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which do not comprehensively capture the full range of information environments that citizens encounter, including other sources of information both offline (e.g., television, friends and family) and online (e.g., news aggregator sites, newspaper websites), as well as other social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, YouTube). Second, the measurement of misinformation in these studies is a useful but imperfect approximation of reality. Some of these studies use the quality or trustworthiness of news sources as a proxy for the accuracy of individual claims or news stories (e.g., Grinberg et al. 2019; Lasser et al. 2022). This method is employed when it is not feasible to assess articles individually, but it remains a coarse measure because some articles

Table 1: Observational evidence on the partisan asymmetry of misinformation

Study	Year	Platform	Measurement Level and Reference	Observed Asymmetry
Allcott & Gentzkow (2017)	2016	Facebook	Claim; BuzzFeed, PolitiFact, Snopes	• 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	Source; U.S. Congress	• Conservatives produced 36 times more tweets on Russian trolls than liberals
DeVerna et al. (2024)	2013, 2019	Twitter	Source; Grinberg et al. (2019)*	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	Source; NewsGuard	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	Claim; Research team**	Among high-engagement fake news, • 46% benefited Republicans; 23% benefited Democrats
Mosleh et al. (2024)	2016-2022	Twitter	Source; 8 professional fact-checkers and 970 laypeople	• 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	Claim; PolitiFact	• Conservatives follow politicians with high falsity score (i.e., proclivity to make false claims) more than liberals

Note: Misinformation was identified either at the level of individual claims, stories, or articles ("Claim") or at the source level ("Source"). "Reference" indicates the sources each paper relied on to assess the accuracy/falsity of claims, stories, articles, or news sources.
*Grinberg et al. (2019) constructed the list of fake news sites based on BuzzFeed, FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and Snopes.
**Garrett & Bond (2021) assessed individual claims by referring to source domain, other news coverage, fact-checks, and expert scholars (p.8).

from untrustworthy sources may be accurate, while some from trustworthy sources could be inaccurate or misleading (Mosleh et al. 2024). Even when individual claims are assessed, debates persist regarding the subjectivity of the unit of assessment (e.g., how to partition a politician's claim) or the degree of falsity (e.g., what distinguishes 'false' from 'half-true'

ratings) (Uscinski 2015). Finally, the corpus of misinformation may include not only "settled" misinformation but also "evolving" or "controversial" misinformation that lacks either expert consensus or concrete evidence (Vraga & Bode 2020).

Then, do journalists' news coverage decisions reflect the Republican-leaning asymmetry in the proliferation of misinformation, consistent with prior research? To answer this question, I analyze news coverage data of 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 nonpartisan corrections of misinformation (Holan 2018), fact-checking coverage reflects how journalists dedicated to objectively correcting misinformation perceive the information environment.

4.1 Data and Methods

I analyze fact-checking coverage data of FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and Washington Post Fact Checker, the three major fact-checking sites in the U.S. (Graves 2016). While prior research has examined fact-checking posts on social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter; Ferracioli et al. 2022; Shin & Thorson 2017), I examine fact-checking articles directly published on fact-checking sites, which more comprehensively capture the full range of fact-checks including the ones that do not get posted on social media.

For PolitiFact, I use the comprehensive database of fact-checks since 2007, when PolitiFact was established, through 2020. The dataset includes the names of individuals and organizations that were fact-checked by PolitiFact,[6] their partisan affiliations, and the number of fact-check ratings that each political figure received across six categories ("True," "Mostly True," "Half True," "Mostly False," "False," "Pants on Fire"). I analyzed political figures whose partisan affiliation was identified as "Democrat" or "Republican" (n=2,435). The number of false claims for each figure was counted as the number of claims that Politi-

[6]Mosleh & Rand (2022) used the same original dataset, but their analysis was constrained to political figures who had been fact-checked at least three times.

Fact rated as "Mostly False," "False," or "Pants on Fire." I compare trends during the two periods before and after 2016, the year when the concepts of the 'post-truth' era and 'fake news' gained traction (Lewandowsky et al. 2017).

I collected month-level coverage data from FactCheck.org and The Washington Post Fact Checker for October 2016, June 2020, and September 2022—three points in time when public interest in fact-checking spiked or rose, according to Google Trends data (Figure S1).[7] While the unit of PolitiFact dataset was political figures, I collected data for FactCheck.org and Washington Post at the article level (details in Tables S3-5). Because multiple political figures may be fact-checked within a single article, each article was categorized into six categories: 1) correct Democrat, 2) correct Republican, 3) correct both parties, 4) validate Democrat, 5) validate Republican, 6) validate both parties. The first two categories comprised almost all of the articles and were used to count the number of false claims that FactCheck.org and Washington Post Fact Checker identified for each party.

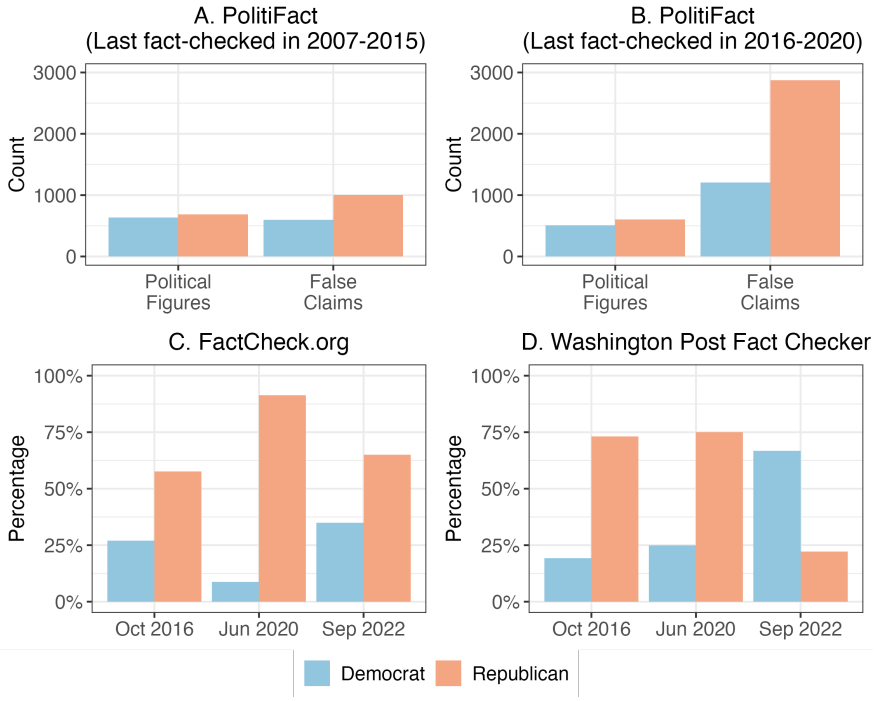
4.2 Results

As shown in Figure 1, misinformation corrections by major U.S. fact-checking sites have been asymmetric, having corrected a greater number of Republican misstatements than Democratic misstatements. Figures 1A and 1B indicate that, both before and after 2016, PolitiFact fact-checked a similar number of Democratic and Republican figures ("Political Figures": Pre-2016: 637 Democrats, 687 Republicans; Post-2016: 508 Democrats, 603 Republicans; Table S1). Yet PolitiFact corrected a greater number of false claims from Republicans than Democrats. The asymmetry has become exacerbated since 2016. Among the political figures

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

last fact-checked between 2007 and 2015, PolitiFact corrected approximately 1.7 times as many Republican misstatements as Democratic ones. Among those last fact-checked between 2016 and 2020, PolitiFact corrected almost 2.4 times as many Republican misstatements as Democratic ones ("False Claims": Pre-2016: 595 Democrat, 1,004 Republican; Post-2016: 1,205 Democrat, 2,874 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 represents the percentage of articles that corrected Democratic or Republican misstatements each month. Percentages may not sum up to 100% due to additional categories not displayed in this figure (e.g., validating a party). Tables S1 and S2 present the full results in tabular form.

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 truth-seeking journalists do not inherently lean toward correcting more Republican misstatements, but may correct more Democratic misstatements depending on contexts.

5 Public Perceptions of Information Environments and News Credibility

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

5.1 Research Design

5.1.1 Materials and Methods

To examine how the public assesses the information environments and asymmetric corrections of misinformation, I conducted two preregistered survey experiments: Study 1 (n=540) on August 10, 2020 and Study 2 (n=1,200) from April 29-30, 2024.[8] Participants were recruited through Prolific, an online 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.[9] To maximize statistical power under budgetary constraints and because asymmetric corrections have the most theoretical relevance to partisans, the experiments focused on partisans and excluded independents. I preregistered my hypotheses and analysis plan on AsPredicted.org prior to data collection.[10]

[8]Study 1 results were used to conduct power analysis for Study 2 (Table S32).

[9]In both studies, respondents indicated their partisan identity using the typical two-step questionnaire (ANES 2020), prior to the experimental treatment.

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

Prior to Study 2, I collected pilot study data through a nationally representative survey (n=1,000) conducted by Verasight between April 10–15, 2024.[11] Respondents were recruited from the Verasight Community, while matching basic demographics and population benchmarks of partisanship and 2020 presidential vote from the February 2024 Current Population Survey (Verasight 2024a). The purpose of this pilot study was to examine whether perceptions of blame attribution for misinformation varied among Democrats, Republicans, and independents and to inform the design of Study 2. Demographic distributions (age, gender, education, partisanship) of Study 1, Study 2, and Study 2 pilot are presented in Tables S24-S26.

5.1.2 Experimental Design

In this section, I detail the design of two preregistered survey experiments. Both Studies 1 and 2 employed a three-condition between-subjects design: 1) balanced, 2) uncongenial, and 3) congenial corrections of political parties for misstatements, examining heterogeneous treatment effects by partisan identity (Studies 1 and 2) and perceived blame of political parties for misinformation (Study 2). In both studies, participants were told they would be presented with a list of headlines from a news source. After reading the headlines, respondents assessed the credibility of the news source.

The headlines presented during the experiment corrected partisan misstatements, as shown in Table 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.[12] Topics of bipartisan misperceptions for Study 1 were selected

[11] I submitted the perceived blame attribution question to Verasight's 2024 MPSA Survey, an omnibus survey that included questions from conference attendees (Verasight 2024b).

[12] Although the headlines address bipartisan misperceptions, balanced corrections do not necessarily reflect reality better or are inherently more truthful than asymmetric corrections. A politician from one party may repeat a misleading claim more frequently, or more politicians from one party may make misstatements on a given topic.

based on Wood & Porter (2019) and those for Study 2 were based on FactCheck.org's articles (details in Table S13).[13] The headline wordings were designed to explicitly correct partisan figures for misleading claims, as news coverage that corrects misperceptions typically corrects or criticizes, rather than validates or endorses, misstatements (e.g., example headlines in Tables S3-S7; Ferracioli et al. 2022; Pingree et al. 2014). To ensure that the results do not hinge on specific topic-party associations, the topic-party associations were randomized. 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

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions: 1) Symmetric corrections (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-

[13]In Study 1, participants received two additional headlines that were neutral to political parties (health, business; Table S8).

leaning asymmetry: five correcting Republican misperceptions, one correcting Democratic misperception.[14] 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). The results from the manipulation check asked at the end of each survey (Hauser et al. 2018) indicate that the key experimental manipulation—asymmetric corrections of political parties—was effectively conveyed in both Studies 1 and 2 (Tables S16, S17). Further details of experimental design are presented in Tables S8-S15.

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 (2008-2012) (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 fact-checking coverage that sometimes presents subjective assessments (Uscinski & Butler 2013, examples in Table S7). 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 S9-S11), Study 2 diversified these associations in the baseline condition, fully randomized them in treatment conditions (Table S15), and fully randomized the order of headlines.

[14]Study 1 included a fourth condition, balanced corrections with neutral headline 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 S27-S28 and Figure S5 present relevant results.

5.1.3 Measures

Source credibility has been theorized as having multiple underlying dimensions (e.g., shared interest, expertise) and has been measured in various contexts (e.g., persuasion, news trust) (Lupia & McCubbins 1998; Gaziano & McGrath 1986). 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).[15]

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 onto the same underlying dimension in the factor analysis (Tables S30, S31) and demonstrated 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).

Study 2 included pre-treatment variables for exploratory purposes. First, 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. Second, to measure *partisan media*

[15]The findings on the two dimensions of source credibility—shared interest and expertise (Lupia & McCubbins 1998; Jensen 2008)—are presented in Figure S2 and Table S23. Considering that bias perception plays an important role in source credibility perceptions (Wallace et al. 2020), I also present results on perceived source bias in Figures S3 and S4.

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"). A binary variable for partisan media usage was created for each outlet, coded as 1 if a respondent visited the outlet at least once in the past week, and 0 otherwise.

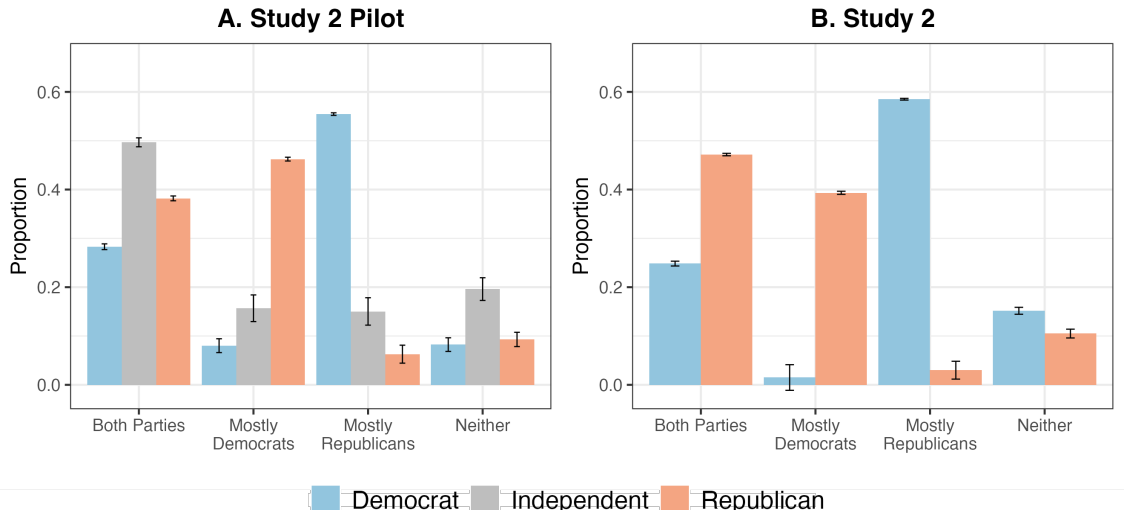
5.2 Descriptive Results

I first examine the American public's views on which party is primarily responsible for misinformation (RQ2a), using two sets of surveys (Study 2 pilot, Study 2). As shown in Figure 2, public perceptions are quite divergent. Across the pilot study and Study 2, more than half of Democrats (55-58%) believe Republicans are primarily responsible for misinformation, consistent with prior research on the prevalence of conservative-leaning misinformation (e.g., Berinsky 2023; Ferracioli et al. 2022). Yet around one-fourth of Democrats (22-28%) put equal blame on both parties. Only a small minority of Republicans (3-6%) attribute misinformation to Republicans. Instead, Republicans are more evenly split between blaming Democrats (40-45%) or both parties (38-48%) for misinformation. Compared to partisans, independents, only recruited in Study 2 pilot (Figure 2A), were more likely to blame both parties (50%) for misinformation and much less likely to blame one specific party (blame Democrats: 16%; blame Republicans: 15%). The fact that substantial segments of the population blame both parties for misinformation runs counter the conventional wisdom that partisans blame the opposing party for social problems (Bisgaard 2015) including misinformation (Lima et al. 2022). It is noteworthy that large segments of the public—almost 95% of Republicans and 40% of Democrats—do not recognize the Republican-leaning asymmetry in misinformation.

I next analyze how blame attribution for misinformation is correlated with emotions toward misinformation and partisan media usage (RQ2b, RQ2c).[16] As shown in Figure 3, in Study 2, partisans who are more angry about misinformation are more likely to attribute

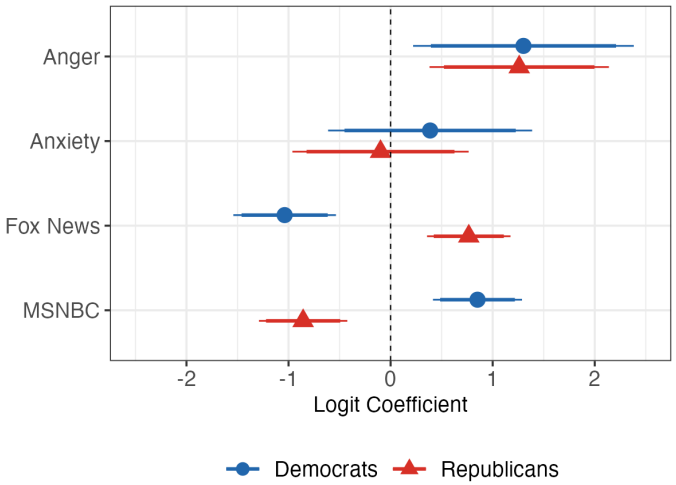
[16]The results based on multinomial logit, including respondents who blame one's own party or neither party, are presented in Table S29.

Figure 2: Perceived Blame Attribution for Political Misinformation



Note: Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Table S18 presents these results in tabular form.

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 S19 presents these results in tabular form.

misinformation to the opposing party, rather than both parties. Anxiety was not meaningfully correlated with perceived blame attribution for misinformation. Regarding media usage, individuals who consume likeminded partisan media (MSNBC for Democrats; Fox News for

Republicans) were more likely to blame the opposing party, whereas those who use counter-attitudinal partisan media (Fox News for Democrats; MSNBC for Republicans) were more likely to blame both parties for misinformation.

5.3 Experimental Results

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

Consistent with H1, uncongenial asymmetry in misinformation corrections reduced perceived news credibility compared to balanced corrections. 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, $p < .01$).[17] When a news source heavily corrects misinformation from one's own party, both Democrats and Republicans discount the credibility of the source compared to balanced corrections.

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. 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, $p = .78$).[18] The extent to which uncongenial asymmetry reduces credibility was similar across partisan groups.

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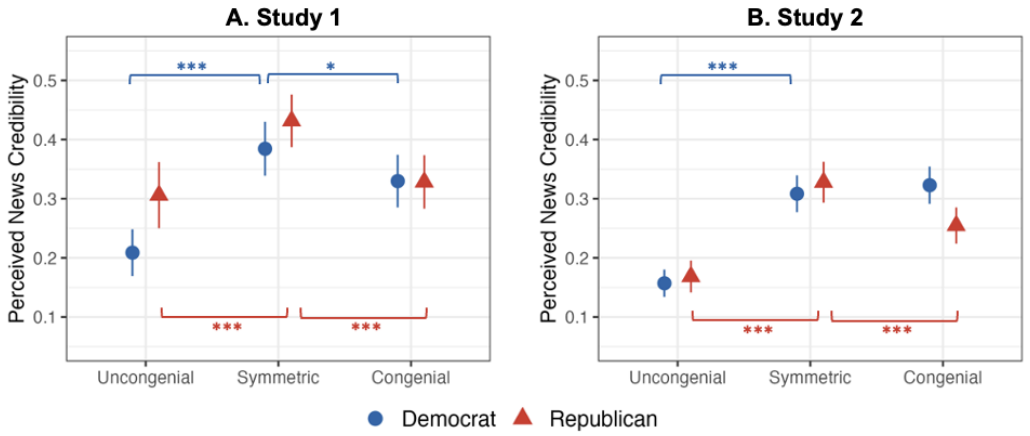
[17]Treatment effects are calculated from Table S20. For instance, the treatment effect of uncongenial asymmetry compared to balanced corrections is the coefficient estimates for *[Uncongenial]* for Democrats and *[Uncongenial + Uncongenial×Rep]* for Republicans. The subgroup analysis provides the same estimates of conditional treatment effects (Table S21).

[18]Interaction terms in Table S20 capture the partisan difference (Republican - Democrat) in treatment effects.

Figure 4: Asymmetric Correction Effects on Perceived News Credibility

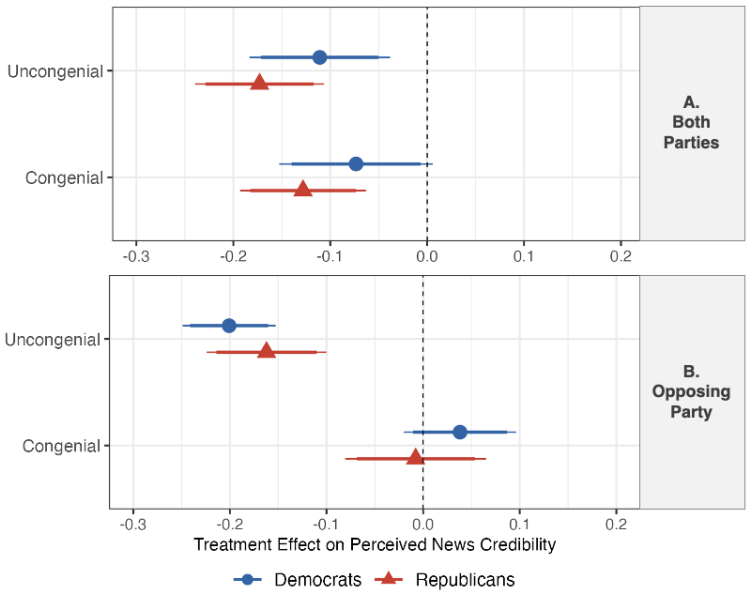


Note: Means and 95% confidence intervals by experimental conditions. *Uncongenial:* Asymmetric corrections heavily covering in-group misinformation; *Symmetric:* Balanced corrections (baseline); *Congenial:* Asymmetric corrections heavily covering out-group misinformation. Perceived news credibility 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 S20 presents these results in tabular form.

In line with RQ1, the effects of congenial asymmetry on perceived news credibility 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 news credibility among Republicans (–0.07, $p < .01$), but not among Democrats (0.01, $p = .50$). The results suggest the asymmetry in misinformation corrections—even when the asymmetry 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 corrections of Republican misstatements) and the substantial negative effect of congenial asymmetry among Republicans indicate that different perceptions of the information environment likely matter in credibility perceptions.

To examine whether asymmetric correction effects vary by individuals' perceptions of the information environment (RQ3), 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 corrections—regardless of whether it heavily corrects one's own party (uncongenial) or the other party

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



Note: Estimates are asymmetric correction 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 S22 presents these results in tabular form.

(congenial)—significantly reduces the perceived credibility of the news source (uncongenial: ps $< .01$ for both partisan groups; congenial: Democrat: $p < .10$, Republican: $p < .01$). These individuals 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 individuals who blame the opposing party for misinformation (lower panel), the asymmetry in misinformation corrections undermines the credibility of a news source when it heavily corrects own party's misperceptions (uncongenial; ps $< .01$ for both parties), but not when it heavily corrects the other party's misstatements (congenial; Democrat: $p = .20$, Republican: $p = .83$). These heterogeneous treatment effects demonstrate that the mismatch between a news source's misinformation corrections and the audience's 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 imbalanced but accurate coverage (substantive objectivity). Individuals who think both parties are responsible for misinformation discount the credibility of asymmetric corrections of any type, revealing their preference for balanced corrections of partisan misstatements. Those who attribute primary responsibility for misinformation to one party view asymmetric corrections as less credible when it heavily corrects the party they perceive as less culpable. But these individuals find asymmetric corrections as credible as balanced corrections if the news outlet heavily corrects the party that they think is responsible for misinformation. For these people, balance is less of a concern, and whether the coverage coheres with their perceived reality would be a more dominant criterion for credibility assessments.

6 Discussion

Although truth-seeking has increasingly taken precedence over balance in contemporary journalism, this paper shows that asymmetric corrections of partisan misstatements risk undermining public trust in news sources. However, maintaining balance for its own sake—or merely to preserve credibility—can be misleading. This tension creates a profound dilemma in how journalists pursue objectivity in the face of asymmetric misinformation: the truth-balance dilemma.

This study sheds light on why journalistic corrections or interventions against misinformation often fail to earn public trust. As numerous studies have pointed out, a critical obstacle lies in audiences who are motivated to resist information that challenges their group or beliefs (e.g., partisan motivated reasoning). However, a crucial yet overlooked factor is context and how journalists and audiences may differently perceive reality. The context of asymmetric polarization, where one party more often produces misinformation (Müller 2021), coupled with the post-truth era in which individuals choose different realities (Lewandowsky et al. 2017), creates a significant challenge for journalistic efforts to correct misinformation. The findings show that individuals do not blindly rely on partisanship when assessing news credibility, but consider whether the coverage matches their views of reality. If individuals

perceive misinformation as originating from both parties, they discount the news credibility of asymmetric corrections, regardless of which party is more heavily corrected for misstatements. When news outlets produce asymmetric corrections in the pursuit of truth, they risk losing credibility unless the public also perceives the imbalance in the supply of misinformation.

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 would be ideal if people across party lines share a common set of trusted news sources that heed evidence. Contrary to these ideals, this study highlights a substantial challenge for news outlets and social media companies that correct and regulate misinformation. Their truth-seeking motivation has led them to more heavily correct misinformation from the Republican side in recent years (e.g., Ferracioli et al. 2022; Mosleh et al. 2024). However, such interventions may not only undermine their credibility among Republicans but also among Democrats who attribute misinformation to both parties.

Several aspects of this study may affect its generalizability. First, I designed and conducted this study in the context of a two party system. Given that partisan asymmetry in news outlet misinformation corrections is also observed in multi-party systems (e.g., heavier fact-checking coverage of the incumbent party in Brazil and Italy; Ferracioli et al. 2022), countries with multi-party systems 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. Third, while the experiments focused on partisans, the pilot study for Study 2 (Figure 2A) indicates that independents are even more likely than partisans to blame both parties for misinformation, implying a preference for balanced corrections over asymmetric ones. A valuable next step is to investigate whether truth-seeking but imbalanced corrections of partisan misinformation risk

undermining news credibility among independents.

Finding a way out of the truth-balance dilemma is not easy. However, by clarifying the trade-off, this study enables informed speculation about potential approaches to correcting asymmetric misinformation while preserving news credibility. The findings suggest that the key mechanism of credibility assessment lies in the alignment between the communicator's evaluations and the audience's perceptions of reality. Thus far, journalistic efforts and scholarly attention have primarily focused on correcting individual pieces of misinformation. However, it is crucial to increase public awareness of the asymmetry in information environments as perceived by truth-seeking journalists. Increasing public awareness of the broader political landscape across multiple issues could be an area where journalists direct greater efforts in reporting and communication. Nonetheless, there is a caveat. Assessing the partisan distribution of misinformation is even more challenging than evaluating the truthfulness of individual claims. Consequently, convincing audiences of expert consensus and evidence about which party produces more misinformation may be even more challenging than correcting misperceptions on individual issues. Not only are we facing an uneven political information landscape (Berinsky 2023; Müller 2021), but we are also living in a "post-truth" era that "empowers people to choose their own reality" (Lewandowsky et al. 2017, p.361).

Perhaps a way out of this dilemma lies in rethinking objectivity, again, beyond its evolution from 'procedural' to 'substantive objectivity' (Lawrence & Schafer 2012). Zelizer et al. (2021) emphasize that journalistic norms lose their value if journalists' aspirations are disconnected from audiences, arguing that objectivity may merely serve as "abstract values that, under the veneer of fairness, have led to the rising distrust of a once venerable institution" of journalism (p. 100). Zelizer et al. (2021) further suggest setting journalism's "first allegiance" to "liberal democratic governance" (p. 95), a point echoed by (Müller 2021), who proposes that journalistic objectivity be accompanied by interpretation rooted in "democratic principles, or [...] even partisan principles, as long as everyone knows that's

what's happening" (p. 123). Ultimately, neither truth—which can be subjective and perceived differently by individuals—nor balance—which can mislead the public about the best available evidence—alone resolves this challenge. My hope is that, by unveiling the obstacle, this study serves as a first step toward identifying approaches that empower journalists and public-minded communicators to correct misinformation while maintaining public trust.

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