

Political Disinformation and Voting Behavior: Fake News and Motivated Reasoning

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Abstract: The paper intends to focus on the influence of the disinformation passed on via social media and the web on voters, that is, on the impact of fake news on elections. On the basis of a critical reflection on research in media studies and in cognitive science, meant to assess whether, and how far, fake news can switch voting behavior, I shall argue that the effect of fake news in this respect is much less than usually assumed. The danger of fake news for democratic politics that rather lies in the increase of political polarization and hostile attitudes in the public sphere as well as the blurring of truth and falsity in public discourse that has caused a widespread mistrust of politics and of experts in general. In the first section, I shall discuss the disinformation induced by fake news. I shall set apart political fake news from other kinds of fake news, for, in the first case, the influence of social media information seems to run along partisan affiliations, either reinforcing preexistent beliefs in the case of favorable content or being dismissed as fake in the case of adverse content. In the second section, I shall examine what I take to be the main source of distorted political information, namely motivated reasoning, and more specifically that form of motivated reasoning induced by ideological beliefs and partisan affiliations. In the third section, I shall consider the variations in the susceptibility to political fake news in partisans and non-partisans alike. I shall conclude by stating that, even if fake news does not especially affect electoral turnout, the pollution of the public sphere seems to be the most worrying effect of fake news and future research should focus on these aspects specifically.

Keywords: Fake news, Political disinformation, Automated cognitive mechanisms, Motivated reasoning, Partisan affiliations, Ideology.

Introduction

In the growing literature on fake news, it is commonly assumed that fake news has a negative impact on democratic politics and, more specifically, on election turnouts.

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The Brexit referendum and the American Presidential election of 2016 are typically cited as illustrations of this worry, though the actual evidence of such an impact only concerns the rise of fake news spreading through the new and the old media, and the high speed of its dissemination during the two campaigns. By contrast, there is no research supporting the view that the Brexit victory and the Trump election are to be ascribed to the fake news effect on voting behavior. This paper intends precisely to focus on the influence of the disinformation passed on via social media and the web on voters, that is to say, on the impact of fake news on elections. My argument will be a critical reflection on research in media studies and in cognitive science to assess whether, and how far, fake news can switch voting behavior. I shall argue that the effect of fake news in this respect is much less than usually assumed. Yet, fake news represents a danger for democratic politics, given that it induces an increase of political polarization and hostile attitudes in the public sphere as well as the blurring of truth and falsity in public discourse that has caused a widespread mistrust of politics and of experts in general.

In the first section, I shall discuss the disinformation induced by fake news. Can fake news distort public attitudes and political behavior? Can it, in other words, induce a change in electoral behavior, by changing political beliefs and turning the electoral result upside down? The empirical findings on these matters are ambiguous. They mostly concern the speed of dissemination of fake news, via reposting; but reposting is not the same as believing the content of the message. Yet, many researches seem to imply that all users of social media tend to be victims of fake news in general (Levy, 2017). When political information is the issue, however, the influence of social media information seems to run along partisan affiliations, either reinforcing preexistent beliefs in the case of favorable content or being dismissed as fake in the case of adverse content. In brief, the fake news effect seems to lie mainly in the dimension of dissemination and among large audiences, while disinformation guiding political behavior seems to have an (at least partly) independent explanation.

In the second section, I shall examine what I take to be the main source of distorted political information, namely motivated reasoning, and more specifically that form of motivated reasoning induced by ideological beliefs and partisan affiliations. Many studies focused on the difficulty of debunking and on the persistence of erroneous beliefs have traced the problem not to the nature of fake news or in the media of transmission, but rather to the motivated reasoning of media users. More specifically, the backfire effect of debunking, when the content is adverse political information, appears to be linked to the effect of ideology or partisanship. Hence, I claim that the inquiry into political disinformation must be focused more on how partisan affiliations and their related identities interact with cognition than on the magnifying effect of social media. In other words, the alarm surrounding fake news and social media, with reference to twisting political behavior, may after all turn out largely misplaced.

In the third section, I shall consider the variations in the susceptibility to political fake news in partisans and non-partisans alike. For, if fake news tends to be believed according to partisan affiliations, not all citizens with a partisan affiliation are victims of motivated reasoning when coming across fake news; besides there are also citizens

without partisan identities. In that case, citizens may fall prey to the automated cognitive distortions elicited by the platform design. Confronting this risk, empirical research has provided some clues suggesting lines of intervention to contrast cognitive distortions, whether motivated or unmotivated. Beside possible corrections, there is evidence pointing to a diminished circulation of fake news in the Mid-Term American election in 2018, as well as to a growing awareness of the public about the dangers of fake news in politics. In a word, there are reasons to put the risk of fake news on the voting behavior of non-partisans or weak-partisans in perspective.

I shall conclude by stating that, even if fake news does not especially affect electoral turnout, nevertheless the dangers it presents for democracy are considerable; they especially concern the increase of political polarization, the opacity of the news sources, breaking up reciprocity between citizens, and the blurring of truths, falsehoods and “bullshits” in public discourse. The overall result of the cacophony and the confusion of information is a growing public mistrust not only for traditional information and media, but also for politics, politicians and experts, with serious detrimental effects on democratic debate. In sum, the pollution of the public sphere seems to be the most worrying effect of fake news and future research should focus on these aspects instead of citizen’s induced false beliefs twisting voting behavior.

Before getting started, a methodological caveat is here in order: this work is located at the crossroads between cognitive research – from experimental psychology, neuroscience and communication theory – and normative epistemology and political theory. I see it as a problem that these disciplines proceed along their own separate paths, each largely ignoring the findings of the others. For example, the normative theory of democracy is supplemented by a normative theory of the good epistemic agent, a theory that, in a way, articulates the epistemic assumptions used to justify democracy and making it feasible. The ideal model of the agent is however deeply at odds with the findings of experimental psychology, communication theory, cognitive psychology and neuroscience. Empirical research into patterns of thought and behavior shows that human rationality is limited (and this is hardly a surprise) by systematic forms of distortion of knowledge (cognitive biases), by the usual recourse to heuristics for time saving and easy response, and by the emotional and affective interplay with cognition. In different ways, all these elements interfere with epistemic rationality on a regular basis, and usually they are unconscious and outside the direct control of agents. Epistemic rationality is therefore a highly idealized model, hardly found in how people think in real life circumstances. Normative theories are obviously independent in their normative claims from descriptions of reality. The point is however that if the premises and the assumptions are empirically problematic, then normative theory can hardly apply to the real world, hence losing its relevance or is filed away as a form of utopic thinking. There is nothing new about my methodological concern. Rousseau stated that he wanted to take “men as they are and institutions as they should be”, and, more recently, John Rawls affirmed his intention to present a realistic utopia, built on the actual analysis of social and political reality to which appropriate normative principles and values should apply in accord with considerations of justice. In my research, I would like to bring the findings of the cognitive sciences – pointing out

how humans think and behave – to the attention of the normative theory of democracy. That descriptive-empirical theories and normative theories should dialogue and take each other seriously in order to enrich our knowledge and potentially improve our social and political reality looks like a platitude. If one works at the interstices of different theories and theoretical approaches, however, one immediately sees that the exchange is basically non-existent. The problem is not only of normative theories that ignore relevant empirical findings undermining their premises. In fact, the problem invests empirical-descriptive theories as well that often generalize certain human traits from lab experiments, without considering that a complex social environment as well as normative arguments and reasons may affect and change those very traits. After all, human minds are at least partly plastic, and can be molded and enhanced by education, discipline and experiences. Thus, patterns of reasoning and acting should be taken as constraints to be considered and bypassed rather than unmodifiable traits of human nature.

1. How Fake News Works on Receivers

1.1. Fake news is a controversial term both in common and technical usages. Its widespread presence in political discourse covers different meanings and intentions. Fake news is very often the polemical label that politicians and media reporting their statements apply to unfavorable political information as an easy way to criticize and reject criticisms, without getting into the merits of the accusation. Whatever negative information comes about in the public forum relative to any politician or party, it is now commonly rejected as “fake news”, as an intentionally planted falsehood to discredit him or her, apparently without engaging with the allegation. This partisan and symmetrical use of fake news to reject critical information about oneself or one’s party, made especially popular by Donald Trump’s tweets, has the effect of wrapping political discourse in a fog where truths and fabrications are mixed together, leading some commentators to speak about the present as a regime of post-truth (Manjoo, 2008). Because of this widespread tendentious usage of the expression, some researchers reject the term altogether in analytical work, preferring instead to use “false information” or disinformation through social media (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Other scholars instead maintain that although political disinformation, propaganda, manipulation and deception have always been present in the political realm from classical antiquity on, fake news presents some specific features that set it apart from traditional disinformation (Gelfert, 2018; Galeotti, 2018b). A certain amount of work has been done recently among philosophers to provide a rigorous definition of fake news, able to capture its specificity and to embrace actual variations (Rini, 2017; Gelfert, 2018; Jaster and Lanius, 2018; Croce and Piazza, 2021), but no agreement has been reached yet on the necessary and sufficient conditions for the expression. Since the focus of this paper is not on a philosophically rigorous definition of fake news, but rather on the effects of its spreading on democratic politics, I shall assume the general meaning prevalent in media studies since 2015, as a working basis for the

discussion on fake news effects. Until approximately 2015, fake news meant a kind of communication blurring the boundaries between fiction and the real world, and yet not intended to spread false information – such as political satire or parody (Holbert, 2005). Now, after the wide spreading of fake news in the political domain in the last few years, the term has come to mean:

- a) (typically) *false* stories,
- b) describing events in the real world by *mimicking the forms of traditional media reportages*,
- c) fabricated and/or promoted on *social media* for various reasons, for example, for financial gain, but also for political propaganda,
- d) and meant for *large audiences*. (Rubin et al., 2015; Silverman, 2016; Mustafaraj-Panagiotis, 2017; Alcott-Gentzkow, 2017; Rini, 2017; Jang-Kim, 2018).

Many points in this very general definition are currently discussed in the ongoing conceptual analysis. They concern, for example, whether: a) the content of fake news is actually false or misleading or even, accidentally, true; b) the intention of the producer is to deceive people into believing the fake content or whether the deception is brought about as a byproduct; c) fake news *is just meant for* large audiences or *must actually reach* large audiences. Without further revolving this discussion, we can single out some specific differences of fake news from traditional political propaganda, manipulation and spin. They refer to the following features: 1) the way in which (typically) false or misleading information is fabricated, posted and disseminated through social media. 2) The dimension of the disinformation, due to the size of the affected audiences and to the speed of the dissemination compared with traditional forms. 3) The platforms' design, which systematically exploits cognitive features of social media users. 4) The powerful effect on agenda setting in the political discourse of a society. All such features are linked to the favorite media of transmission of fake news, namely social media and web platforms. Fake news travels also on traditional media, in politicians' speeches and announcements, but only social media make it viral, while traditional media often simply reproduces the fake news from social media.

1.2. I intend now to understand whether the proliferation of fake news significantly affects citizens' political beliefs and consequently their political behavior, in ways that were not accessible to traditional propaganda and spin. I shall argue that thanks to certain features of the web platform, exploiting human cognitive mechanisms, fake news travels fast and has a good chance to influence people's beliefs. Recent research has proved that false information is more intensely spread by social network users, and that users' reposting behavior is prompted by cognitive features, which web platforms exploit. The very same cognitive features priming dissemination are likely to induce belief in the content of fake news as well.

Current research has successfully shown the platform's algorithms allow producers to find the people likely to disseminate the false news, and that the dissemination is parasitic on cognitive features of users. Thus, fake news producers exploit the technological possibilities of the platforms to reach potentially sensitive users (Mustafaraj-Panagiotis, 2017), while clickbait headlines exploit the proneness to

attention grabbing cues of human minds (Chen, Conroy, Rubin, 2015). In general, cognitive traps and heuristics are more easily triggered in social media contexts (Levy, 2017), indirectly inducing the spread of falsehoods in social media users. In fact, the results of recent research on Facebook (Silverman, 2016) and Twitter (Vosoughi et al., 2018) have proved that false information tends to propagate at a higher speed, more broadly and in a deeper way than true information. Such works actually concern the diffusion of news on social media, while not advancing any claims about beliefs. Retweeting or reposting is not equivalent to endorsing and believing the information one is transmitting. Yet, a precondition for a piece of news to be believed is to reach out to people, and, in that sense, the broader and faster spreading of fake news increases the probability of its being believed. The hypothetical correlation between news diffusion and corresponding beliefs must however be analyzed more closely.

Actually, the cue priming retweeting has to do with the novelty of the message and the surprising, and occasionally disgusting, nature of the transmitted news (Vosoughi et al., 2018), hence not with the truth credentials of the news. In this respect, it would seem that believing fake news and spreading it have no special correspondence. Here is however the juncture where cognitive traps of human reasoning are triggered, in such a way that spreading the news makes it easier to come to believe it. Two different cognitive mechanisms can be activated by spreading the news leading to believing its content. The first is predicted by perception theory, and that is the tendency to infer belief from behavior, or, to put it differently, to use behavior as a sign of the correspondent belief, justifying the behavior *ex post* (Bem, 1967; Bem et al., 1970). In this sense, retweeting may be taken by the agent as the sign of the correspondent belief, *ex post* justifying the action of spreading the message. This tendency is especially present if the agent is unclear or confused about what to believe, hence infers belief from behavior. The second mechanism consists in the effect on fluency processing of information, so that a more easily retrievable stimulus affects what people come to believe (Alter, 2007; Rapp et al., 2014). The fluency effect strikes automatically, even if, originally, one had doubts about that piece of information, and it may be activated by the salience and simplicity of the message, as well as by repetition and familiarity. It may seem that novelty, the cue priming retweeting, and familiarity, activating fluency, are going in opposite directions concerning their effect on belief, and that the one should limit the effect of the other. In fact, in the dissemination of fake news, the two, apparently opposite, cues are likely to work in the same direction. The novelty arouses attention and surprise, which make the message salient and the subjects prone to suggestibility, so as to induce reposting (Eslík, Fazio, Marsh, 2011). Then, reposting is a repetition of the piece of information, which is likely to be only the first of many, for the message can reach the user through other cascades and from traditional media commenting on it. Repetition increases familiarity, which favors fluency processing ending up in believing the message. Repetition, moreover, activates another cognitive mechanism, which kicks in with the perception that the information is shared and held by others, reinforcing the belief in it being true. The larger the number of people believing that P affects the tendency to acquire and share the belief that P. Now it is unclear whether the influence of a popular view on our doxastic system belongs to the

same kind of automated mechanisms above described or not, for the fact that a belief is shared among other people is often a reasonable corroboration of its truth (Schwarz et al., 2016). If however other grounds justifying the belief are lacking, accepting a belief as true because it is largely popular may be a display of conformity bias. Clearly, the multiplying effect of social media largely amplifies this tendency, contributing to making falsehoods being believed as true facts. In sum, web platforms take advantage of a series of cognitive mechanisms to induce dissemination and, indirectly, also beliefs in false or misleading information. Some of these cognitive mechanisms properly embody cognitive mistakes, as in the case of self-perception, which is a distorted form of self-attribution of beliefs *ex-post* based on actual behavior¹. Others are instead heuristics, such as fluency, belonging to the automated pre-reflexive way of reasoning, which speed up our cognitive process through bypassing epistemic rules, and, under the appropriate circumstances, may well produce reliable judgments open to epistemic justification (Reber, Unkelbach, 2014). Yet, heuristics can as well lead to wrong conclusions in unfavorable circumstances. Beside heuristics, also cognitive biases, that is systematic prejudices distorting the acquisition of knowledge, such as the conformity bias and more importantly the confirmation and disconfirmation biases, are triggered in the process contributing to the belief in false information. Thus, research in communication science seems to support the view that fake news represents a danger of disinformation of high proportions in our society, given the multiplying effect of the web and of social media.

Many studies have focused on a number of factors that seem to corroborate the hypothesis of the influence of fake news on political behavior. Such factors comprise: a) the mass of false political information, spread hugely through the web; b) the number of people relying on social networks or on fake news sites instead of traditional media; c) the quantity of fake news disseminated in the campaigns; d) the persistence of false beliefs even after successful debunking; e) the backfire effect of debunking even among cultivated people. Research in the area of communication of new media is still novel and the experimental results are often ambiguous and indeterminate (Pennycook, Rand, 2019a). Yet, in general, it seems to suggest the grim conclusion that we are all victims of fake news, no matter how cultivated and intelligent (Levy, 2017), and that no special weapon against believing disinformation is available, apart from censorious intervention on the very platforms, either by their managers or by governments. Such a solution from above, so to speak, is however seen by most as at least as problematic as fake news.

Before subscribing to this conclusion, however, I would like to stress that: a) none of the factors listed above prove that people's beliefs have been twisted by fake news; b) the association of retweeting or reposting and believing the content of the piece of news is only hypothetical. Some scholars actually question this association and instead attribute the tendency to disseminate contents without actually believing them to a form of "bullshitting"² or to an affective tendency "to participate in the game" (Croce and Piazza, 2021). Therefore, if fake news can certainly facilitate the diffusion of distorted beliefs, its effect on the epistemic condition of the public, for example twisting citizens' voting behavior, is far from settled and probably not as threatening as assumed.

Focusing specifically on political fake news and its effect on political attitudes

and voting behavior, another relevant element should be considered with reference to the cause of political disinformation among citizens. As the studies on political polarization show, fake news with political content is mainly believed according to the partisan identification of platforms' users. This fact has suggested that what prompted belief in political fake news is especially the effect of partisan identities. In this case, however, firstly, political fake news reinforces rather than twists political behavior; secondly, believing fake news according to partisanship points to motivated reasoning as the main culprit of political disinformation. This phenomenon, which I am going to explore in detail in a moment, tends to support the thesis that the distortion of political beliefs, though facilitated by fake news, has a largely independent explanation in motivated reasoning fueled by partisanship.

2. Motivated Reasoning, Partisanship and Ideology

2.1. We have seen above that certain automated cognitive mechanisms are triggered by the web platform, making it easier to believe in fake news. Such cognitive mechanisms are “cold”, being independent of motivation and affect, and, besides, they strike everyone, independently of ideological and partisan affiliations. Whether the piece of information is favorable or not to Trump should not affect how fluency and familiarity strike in Trump's supporters as well as in his opponents. The fact, however, that Trump's supporters accepted as true the infamous “pizzagate” news spread during the last US presidential campaign against Hillary Clinton, concerning the use of a pizza parlor's basement in Washington for pedophile activities (Cush, 2016), and persisted in their belief even after the allegation was proved absolutely groundless, while Democrats did not, needs explaining. Such information was new, surprising and attention grabbing: such features may contribute to making it salient, and, in turn, salience may trigger fluency processing. This kind of news arouses attention and emotional responses of both surprise and disgust, as reported by Vosoughi's research, and sticks in one's memory much more than mundane pieces of fact. Partisan misinformation through social media is especially apt to elicit such cognitive responses. As said, however, fluency should strike indiscriminately either conservatives or liberals, Republicans as well as Democrats. The fact that it does not leads me to consider the motivational component as crucial for accepting or rejecting political (dis)information. Trump's supporters *wanted* to believe in Clinton's involvement in pedophile activities, actively contributed to the news propagation, and resisted debunking, no matter how outrageously unlikely the news appeared. Hence, this instance supports the view that motivated reasoning was here at work.

Motivated reasoning is the tendency to look for reasons to justify an opinion or a belief that the agent is eager to uphold (Kunda, 1987; Kruglanski, 1996; Mercier-Sperber, 2011; Kahan, 2013; Kahan et al., 2016; Sinatra et al., 2014; Weeks, 2015). When motivated, the reasoning is not driven by accuracy goals, but by the goal of confirming previous beliefs or opinions or disconfirming evidence contrary to one's doxastic set. Different kinds of motivation can interfere and distort reasoning, but

in general all motivations have to do with the defense of the self and its identity – from the wish to be in the right to the rejection of information threatening one’s family, friends and associates. Apparently hardwired in the evolution of our mind, motivated reasoning is served by two crucial biases: confirmation and disconfirmation biases. When people meet with information in line with their previous beliefs, they are ready to accept it without much ado, while when faced with adverse information, they engage in sophisticated counterarguments to reject it. The argumentative theory of reasoning (Mercier-Sperber, 2011) provides an explanation of the asymmetry in accepting consonant and countering adverse evidence: if the reasoning function is to persuade others, then it is the adverse information that represents a challenge, and not the favorable. The complex rationalizations against counter-evidence provide reasons to rebut the thesis that disinformation would originate in poor thinking (Pennicock, Rand, 2019b), for the more sophisticated the reasoners, the better they are at producing counterarguments and at defending their viewpoints even against the evidence (Kahan et al., 2016). The analysis of motivated reasoning in cognitive psychology corresponds to the studies on motivated irrationality in the area of epistemology and philosophy of mind. Though developed largely independent from one another, the empirical findings of experimental psychology and neuroscience appear to corroborate the philosophical theses of motivated irrationality, which, on their parts, provide a wider and persuasive interpretive framework for it, and especially of the two most common instances, i.e., wishful-thinking and self-deception, as we shall see in a while³.

2.2. If motivated reasoning pushes agents to believe what is in line with their set of beliefs and values, then people’s worldviews are crucial for selecting which information to accept or to reject. And people’s worldviews are precisely ideological convictions. Sharing the same ideology traces the boundary of a social group and of a collective identity which, in the appropriate circumstances, triggers the in-group/out-group attitudes and the disposition to act accordingly (Tajfel, Turner, 1979). People’s ideology often mirrors political parties’ positions: at this point, ideology joins forces with partisanship, insofar as it provides a political identity for members; the identification with the in-group may vary in intensity between individuals and according to social contexts, but, in any case, it affects the sense of self in proportion to the intensity of partisanship. I shall come back to the controversial connection between ideology, partisanship and political identity. At present, I would like to stress that there are two potentially motivational distortive mechanisms of belief formation working in the same direction. One is the motivated reasoning prompted by the motivation to have one’s ideology confirmed; in this case, ideology works as an epistemic selector to accept or reject news, according to its fitting/not fitting into one’s ideological landscape. The other is the motivated reasoning prompted by defending one’s group affiliation, filtering information on an affective basis, according to whether it is favorable or unfavorable to one’s group. The two types of motivation for processing political information may work jointly to enhance and protect both the ideological outlook and the group identity. Both the ideological stability and the sense of belonging provided by partisan affiliation contribute to confirming a positive sense

of self and “people go to great lengths to view the world in a way that maintains a sense of well-being. We are masterly spin-doctors, rationalizers, justifiers of threatening information” (Wilson, 2000, p. 49).

At this point, I think a little digression to clear what I hold to be a confusion in the literature on partisan social identity *versus* ideology, and the consequences of such a confusion on democratic theory, is in order. The study of the in-group/out-group psychology through Teifel’s experiment, back in the seventies, has shown that people tend to categorize similarities and differences with others in groups, and that groups are useful cognitive tools to navigate the social world. Besides, and more importantly, interindividual similarities lead to swift group identification, and membership in the group brings with it a sense of belonging, bonding and emotional significance. Social identities are thus formed, becoming part of the individual’s self-concept and positively contributing to her sense of worth. The two relevant findings of Teifel’s experiments are that the group-identification can take place with reference to the most casual and extrinsic characteristics, such as preferring Klee over Kandisky, and that, even in such cases, it engenders the in-group attitude of loyalty and trust, as well as the feelings of strangeness, competition and potential hostility with members of the out-group. The in-group/out-group attitudes easily translate into favoritism for one’s group members and discrimination against other groups. From this study a theory of social identity has developed (Huddy, 2001), which, once applied to politics, has been used to make sense of partisanship, not on the basis of a shared vision, values and interests but on the basis of the gut-feeling identification with a group (Iyengan, 2012; Mason, 2016; Huddy et al., 2015). Race, gender, ethnicity, regional origin, and the like, can give rise to political identities; in turn leaders and spokespeople of such groups influence the political choices and behavior of members. Thus, political partisanship seems to have no cognitive grounds in beliefs and opinions and to resemble more the affiliation to a soccer team than sharing a political ideology (Achen, Barry, 2016). In this case, the normative grounds of democracy seem to tremble, for citizens’ choices would be neither informed nor rational. Though the social identity theory can throw light on how people can join political groups based on certain similarities instead of shared ideas and values, I also believe that its application to politics should be properly reshuffled. On the one hand, no matter how much hardwired in human evolution the in-group/out-group distinction is, in our society social identities are multiple, and dynamic, sometimes overlapping and sometimes conflicting; moreover individuals happen to move from one to another, so that in-group attitudes cannot be taken as the ultimate determinant of political behavior. On the other, if groups are selected on the basis of interindividual similarities, firstly, sharing an ideology, possibly represented by a party, is one significant political similarity providing strong identity and bonding. Secondly, even though sorted by race or gender, religion or otherwise, groups, as a rule, bring along ideas, positions and political agendas, for example, for fighting racism and sexism, and against discrimination and for social justice. Even if the affiliation has been triggered by a common sense of belonging and, for example, of some shared experience of injustice, then the group develops positions on antidiscrimination and justice from their privileged perspective (Young,

2000; Mansbridge, 1999; Lapoutre, 2020). We can say that there are two paths to partisanship: the first going from ideology to identification with like-minded people, often represented by a party, which provides the political identity, and the second going from the identification with a group sharing same salient traits, such as ethnical origin, religion, sex orientation, to the political positions put forward by the group. In other words, political identities usually comprise both the affective and the cognitive dimension of group identification, whose relative strength may change over individuals and over time, occasionally giving rise to the phenomenon recorded in a few researches of following the group's leader predicaments even against the traditional values and positions of the group (Achen, Barry, 2016). Yet, there are no two alternative explanations of partisanship, ideology versus identity, for the two are typically intertwined and both provide motivation for the swift acceptance of favorable information and for the resistance to adverse news.

2.3. Coming back to the (usually) joint effect of ideology and partisan affiliation on information processing, I would like to point out that sorting out news according to one's affiliations is not always outright unreasonable. Regina Rini (2017), for example, has extensively argued for the reasonable component of referring to partisan views. If someone shares a certain view of politics and society with a group, and is genuinely convinced it is true, she has reason to trust her group. As much as one rightly trusts the testimony of a trustworthy friend, similarly, one tends to trust information coming from one's party or group, for their commonality makes them trustworthy. In that respect, believing information coming from the party or group that one trusts is in general subjectively reasonable, at least if the content of the news fits with what one knows about the world and is consistent with one's other beliefs. In a complex information environment, where news is abundant and costly to evaluate properly, referring to one's party position may be a reasonable strategy, a shorthand for getting informed. Yet, the reasonable component is only a part, and a minor part for all that, of the story. More commonly, partisan affiliation tends to trigger motivated reasoning when processing information. Especially in cases where partisan affiliation predominantly depends on identity traits, trusting partisan information has little reasonable component and may lead to believing favorable fake news even in cases where the content of the news is outrageous and striking and not easily compatible with general knowledge, and is believed just under the influence of the affective motivation. That is not to say that all people with a partisan affiliation are always victims of belief distortion. We shall see that motivated reasoning is triggered under specific circumstances and that the intensity of partisanship as well as the content of partisan ideologies affect the reliance of one's party/group's position vis-à-vis accuracy.

To recap on motivated reasoning in a polarized environment: when agents meet with news confirming their partisan position, they tend to believe it without much check on the trustworthiness of the source and of the truthfulness of the content. In the opposite case of meeting with adverse information, the same motivation blocks out the negative news. This is how partisan fake news is likely to be believed by partisans and rejected by opposing groups, and such a motivational epistemic shortcut is quite

independent from the nature of fake news, though the volume of disinformation is much higher in the era of social media and web platforms. The motivation to keep one's political identity stable triggers the confirmation bias, producing the favorable belief or, in contrast, the disconfirmation bias, blocking out the adverse information. This is precisely what, in the motivated irrationality literature, has been analyzed as wishful thinking where a wish, a motivation directly induces the corresponding belief, under the appropriate circumstances, or with denial, when the adverse belief is blocked out. It must be noted, that the motivated mistrust of adverse news may well induce partisans to discard false information; yet, even if the outcome is epistemically correct, the process by which the outcome is produced is still driven by extra-epistemic motivation.

Some researchers object to the motivational impact of ideological affiliation on beliefs and attribute such an effect to the “consistency push” (Schwarz et al., 2016). According to this alternative view, if one firmly holds a worldview, one is inclined to believe any news consistent and fitting into that view. The “consistency push” is neither irrational nor motivational: actually, among the criteria for evaluating whether a belief can be accepted as true, one is precisely its consistency with the other beliefs one holds, and another is the coherence of the content of the information. However, as we have seen, in the case of fake news with partisan content, partisan information is widely believed along partisan lines, even when the news is incoherent and does not fit with what is known about the world. Moreover, partisan fake news often has no ideological content to be fitted into one's ideological outlook, but advances only negative and aggressive portrayals of the adversary. Preposterous news, such as pizzagate and Hilary Clinton, has nothing to do with ideology and policy, and, besides, is incoherent; thus, what makes people believe it, and especially what makes people resist correction, cannot be the consistency push, while the motivated reasoning interpretation fares much better.

Partisan motivation on reasoning appears especially remarkable in case of the resistance to accepting corrections. Even in the case of subsequent exposure to new and compelling evidence against the fake news, subjects tend to retain their false belief in line with their partisan affiliation, despite debunking. The fact that, once formed, beliefs seem immunized to new evidence and new arguments (Prior Belief Effect) is widely reported in many researches in experimental psychology and political psychology (Gilbert, Krull, Malone, 1990; Marsh, Fazio, 2006; Neylan, Reifler, 2010; Eslík, Fazio, Marsh, 2011; Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Peter, Koch, 2016). More to the point, the research on debunking has found that often subjects exposed to evidence disconfirming the previous favorable fake news show a backfire effect, reinforcing, instead of revising, the false belief (Nyhan, Reifler, 2010; Cook, Lewandowsky, 2011; Trevors et al., 2016)

Some researchers try to explain the Prior Belief Effect with reference to the working of memory and the concept of “belief echoes”. According to this interpretation, once we have formed a belief, traces of the latter persist in the memory like echoes, even after one is presented with contrary evidence, making it easier to retrieve the first false belief (Thorson, 2016). This interpretation may explain why, at a later time after the

correction, subjects retrieve the first belief, but it does not explain why people resist correction as soon as they are presented with new evidence. Other scholars interpret the persistence of prior beliefs despite the evidence as a lack of cognitive reflection when processing information (Pennycook, Rand, 2019b). According to Pennycook and Rand, the susceptibility to partisan fake news is explained by the reliance on the intuitive and fast system S1, based on heuristics and easily subject to errors (Kanheman, 2011), hence on the failure to think correctly. It is certainly true that people who resist corrections of prior beliefs are not thinking correctly; whether this failure is attributable to laziness and to reliance on S1, or whether is induced by the interference of motivation is however beyond the scope of Pennycook and Rand's research. All in all, the majority of studies on the Prior Belief Effect acknowledge the relevance of motivation in holding and keeping an unwarranted belief (Edwards, Smith, 1996; Kahan, 2013; Kahan, 2016; Ecker et al., 2014; Weeks, 2015; Trevors et al., 2016).

In fact, I think that the resistance to debunking may find a persuasive interpretive framework in the studies of motivated irrationality as an instance of self-deception. Self-deception is the case when a subject believes that P according to her wish but against available evidence. Thus, if a subject, who has formed the belief that P in line with her partisan view, is presented with evidence showing that P is false, and nevertheless persists in believing that P, she is precisely self-deceived. The irrationality displayed by subjects in the backfire effect neatly fits into the framework of self-deception. A feature of self-deception, as a distinct type of motivated irrationality, is that the self-deceiver engages the negative evidence with articulate counterarguments, so that she can end up keeping the false belief in the teeth of the evidence with no qualms. The reasoning against the evidence is faulty, but is not random or incoherent: it displays a quasi-rationality (Michel, Newen, 2010). That the backfire effect requires a certain sophistication in reasoning in order to counter the new evidence has been supported by a few researchers (Kahan, 2013). Kahan specifically advances the "identity protective cognition thesis", according to which the ideologically motivated reasoning requires good analytical thinking for defending the convictions of one's group via rationalization. Contrary to those who attribute the Prior Belief Effect to lack of thinking, Kahan actually claims that ideologically motivated reasoning is a form of expressive rationality whereas, in a highly polarized social context, it is individually rational to attend to information that is in line with the positions predominant in one's group (Kahan, 2013, p. 420). I gather that Kahan's expressive rationality is in the service of the protection of the group's position, and that it is different from epistemic rationality⁴.

Summarizing, political disinformation, passed on through old and new media, tends to be believed according to partisan affiliations. That is to say, in general, partisans tend to believe favorable information and disbelieve adverse news. Therefore, the worry about the effect of fake news on political disinformation and consequently on changing political behavior should not be exaggerated, for the effect of fake news is definitely to amplify the misinformation, but apparently not that of shifting people's positions and opinions. Relying on one's party to navigate the communication world is not in principle irrational, as neither is it irrational to believe the testimony of a trusted

source, such as one's party or group, nor to believe content consistent with one's system of beliefs. Partisanship however also provides the motivation to believe what is in line with one's political identity despite the lack of warrant and to disbelieve what is adverse in the teeth of evidence. In other words, under the appropriate circumstances, partisanship can prompt motivated irrationality, activating confirmation and disconfirmation biases, and making people immune to retraction. Lots of caveats and empirical details should be added to understand when and how precisely partisanship works in prompting motivated irrationality. In general, though, there is sufficient evidence from experimental psychology and communication theory to conclude that it is relevant in the production of political disinformation, via motivated reasoning. If this is true, the role of fake news and social media in polluting political communication is to be reassessed. Obviously, the production of disinformation through social media has widely increased and its dissemination is much faster and wider than traditional media and sources of political communication. In that sense, social media magnify the quantity of disinformation. Yet, the effect of the augmented disinformation on voting behavior is limited, given that partisan fake news tends to reinforce preexistent positions among citizens.

If the impact of fake news on electoral turnout must thus be scaled down, nevertheless other dangers must be stressed. In particular, the way in which messages are formatted, passed on and commented by many people increases the polarization and the hostility and hate shown in the cascades, with the effect of transforming the public sphere into a battlefield, instead of a civil forum for discussion and reflection. At the extreme, there is the risk of mobilizing partisans towards dangerous, destabilizing actions, such as the recent assault on Capitol Hill, induced by the fake news that the Presidential election had been stolen.

3. Variations in Susceptibility to Partisan Fake News

3.1. If partisan affiliation provides people with the motivation to believe favorable news, disbelieve adverse news and resist revision of prior beliefs, this fact does not imply that all people holding a partisan view or identifying with a group inevitably fall prey of wishful thinking, denial or self-deception when they meet with partisan fake news. On the one hand, the intensity of partisanship varies and with it the motivation to believe according to one's party; on the other, the political context may be more or less polarized at different moments and on different issues. Moreover, if the resistance to debunking can be interpreted as a form of self-deception, the latter is a selective process distorting belief, which does not take place all the times reality disconfirms our desires. Similarly, sharing a political identity is not sufficient to believe any favorable false news or disbelieve any adverse false news. In order to face the issue of selectivity, students of self-deception have pointed out a number of circumstances which make the distortive process more likely to start (Galeotti, 2018). I shall cite the following:

1. the belief that P fulfills a crucial motivational-element for S well-being and prospects;

2. some negative evidence $\sim E$ potentially threatening the truth of P becomes known to S ;
3. the knowledge of $\sim E$ makes P the object of S 's emotionally loaded wish that P ;
4. S is not, or perceives not to be, in a position to undo the threat; hence, the costs of inaccuracy are negligible.

Thus, emotions are a crucial factor, switching on a wish that is important for the subject's identity, and, in cases where the costs of inaccuracy are negligible or can be ignored, the thinking leading to the self-deceptive belief is likely to start. Similarly, various circumstances have been pointed out as incentives or disincentives to partisan motivated reasoning. First of all, the intensity of the partisan affiliation, corresponding to the circumstance (1) above listed. Secondly, a highly divisive and antagonistic context can be perceived as a threat to the partisan identity, fulfilling the circumstance (2). Thirdly, the accompanying emotions are important in favoring or disfavoring the partisan motivated reasoning. Some research on partisanship, emotions and misperceptions has found a correlation between anger and partisan motivated evaluation of misinformation, ending up with beliefs consistent with one's party (Weeks, 2015). On the contrary, anxiety seems to lead people with a partisan affiliation to an evaluation more dependent on the information environment and less on partisanship. The conclusion of this research is that partisanship alone does not drive motivated reasoning, but it does so in connection with attitudes tied to anger and resentment. Relative to anxiety, a low level of anxiety seems to incentivize accuracy in information gathering and processing aimed at settling the uncertainty felt by the subject. By contrast, a high level of anxiety "could make individuals more susceptible to uncorrelated false claims that reflect negatively on their own party" (Weeks, 2015, p. 704)⁵. Fourthly, citizens are not generally in a position to undo the unwelcome information by being accurate, and, in this sense, they have no inaccuracy costs, corresponding to circumstance (4) of the above list. Partisan and ideological self-deception work no differently from other kinds of self-deception, and require the same set of favorable circumstances.

3.2. Some empirical studies researching the variations concerning the reception of partisan fake news have found that the values deeply held by people, whether or not present in their ideological outlook, may make a difference. Thus, for example, it seems that people who have been educated in the values of fairness and non-discrimination appear to be more resistant to favoring in-group members and keener to a fairer consideration of the subject matter (Resnick, 2018). Similarly, people who have been trained in being more accurate in truth evaluation, such as judges, actually display a more robust exercise in accuracy than average (Mitchell, 2019). Such findings are extremely interesting not only because they explain the variations among partisans in falling for fake news, but also because they show that, no matter how hardwired we are in motivated reasoning and in-group attitudes, appropriate normative principles and training can counteract cognitive distortions and reduce the effect of affective affiliation.

Here we have found a hint for measures aimed at mitigating the effect of partisan fake news, namely moral training. I would like to stress that this hint must not be

equated to the straightforward appeal to individual responsibility for one's doxastic set and to epistemic virtues. We must take our cognitive and moral failings, hardwired in automated cognitive and affective mechanisms, very seriously; hence, moral training must be prior to the appeal to responsibility and virtues⁶. Through moral training and discipline, good habits can induce the disposition to fairness and to accuracy, by fortifying the character against the force of hardwired mechanisms. In turn, moral training calls into question the role of political institutions in education and in the distribution of equal opportunity in that respect. Given that here I am analyzing the variations in susceptibility to partisan fake news, I will not pursue these normative considerations further; I only want to point out the empirical findings that can open a line of interesting normative interventions.

3.3. Finally, we have to consider that, even in a highly polarized and divisive political environment, there are citizens with no or mild partisan affiliations. What is the effect of fake news on them? It would seem that, absent partisan affiliations, they are relatively free from motivated reasoning, but, at the same time, they may be more easily prey to fake news thanks to the cold cognitive mechanisms that we have discussed in the first section. Thus, the misleading content of fake news, if it has little effect on partisans whose positions seem to be immune to contrary information, may have an impact on non-partisans. In turn, such an impact may prove serious for democratic turnouts, given that elections are won or lost with relatively little margin of votes at the center of the political spectrum.

In support of this worry, recent research has found that, on divisive campaign issues, disguised paid ads were posted on Facebook, precisely targeting electoral districts and states with an uncertain turnout (Kim et al., 2018). What was particularly tricky did not so much concern the content of the posts, but their disguised nature: they appeared as normal posts by Facebook users, instead of propaganda ads. The analysis tracked them down to groups not even filed in the Federal Election Commission, in other words suspicious groups or even foreign entities. The deception in this case concerned first and foremost the origin of the news, given that had the source been honestly declared to users, the probability of its content being believed by the recipients would have been largely reduced. After all, people are pretty good at distinguishing advertising from news, and even if advertisement may influence consumers' choices, very few believe that a cream can miraculously cancel wrinkles or grow hair on a bald head. In this respect, the risk of the spread of political disinformation through fake news appears more linked to the source than to the content of the news.

Partly, the issue of source opacity has been taken up by the very platforms, such as Facebook, by means of the use of flags alerting about messages whose source seems suspicious. It is not clear whether this action suffices to address the issue of social media transparency, nor, to my knowledge, are there works that have analyzed whether the warning has the effect of making people more alert to the information they receive. The flags system, *ex hypothesi*, might work in the direction of creating a disfluency in the social media user. As said in the first section, a crucial automated mechanism inducing reposting at first, but then, very likely also believing fake news is fluency processing of

information: the more familiar and easily retrievable a piece of information, the more likely that fluency leads the subject to believe in it. Some researchers have hypothesized that, by blocking fluency somehow, subjects may make use of a more reflective type of reasoning (Alter et al., 2007). In fact, Alter et al. have found that when subjects experience metacognitive difficulty in activating fluency processing, they instead activate analytic forms of thinking that assess and in some cases correct the output of more intuitive forms of processing information. The flag system, and in general any disclosure about the source, should work as a disfluency device, leading to a more critical validation of the received information. This suggestion needs to be properly tested by experimental research, yet it suggests a type of measure against fake news which looks important and bypasses the quest for content censorship.

Coming back to the risk of fake news influencing the voting behavior of non-partisan citizens, some evidence seems to point to a lesser danger than it may seem. For example, during the 2018 midterm election in America, the amount of fake news in political information diminished compared to the 2016 Presidential election, and reached fewer people (Guess, 2018a; Resnick, 2018). Moreover, there has been reported a growing awareness among the public of the dangers and of the limits of social media (Graves-Cherubini, 2016; Mitchell, 2019). The awareness of the danger of fake news is the first step to exercising vigilance over the information passed on via the social media and reechoed in the old media (Chamber, 2020). In sum, the risk that fake news influences non-partisan beliefs and attitudes is real, but must be put in perspective, on the one hand, while, on the other, potential remedies to the automated cognitive distortions can be found.

Conclusions

Summarizing, concerning the effect of fake news on citizens' political attitudes and voting orientation, we have seen that fake news is mostly believed according to partisan lines, due to motivated reasoning triggered by partisan identities. Thus, with reference to citizens with a definite partisan identity, fake news may increase their disinformation, but not change their attitudes and voting behavior, which on the contrary are reinforced. Considering instead non-partisans or weak partisans, the disinformation passed on by fake news may well affect their political attitude and position by triggering automated cognitive mechanisms. However, we have seen that the growing awareness of the fake news threat by the public is a first step in the direction of keener vigilance on news. In turn, vigilance may be activated by disfluency, and the flags system, adopted by some platforms, may work in this direction, alerting users to suspicious sources. Finally, there is evidence that, despite all the psychological constraints in the way of epistemic correctness, epistemic accuracy can be enhanced by proper training and practice; this is a plan for the future and yet encouraging for viewing citizens not simply as helpless victims of disinformation.

There are, however, other reasons for alarm about the democratic public starting with the increase of polarization concerning any public issues which rightly or wrongly

come to be at the center of public debate, be it policies, vaccines, climate change and science communication. A highly polarized public sphere is an impediment to an accurate consideration of the pros and cons of the issue at hand and even the people who are not siding either way find it difficult to understand the merit of the question, and to single out dependable information and trustworthy sources. A good example of such damage is provided by the reception of the measures taken in the present pandemic crisis. All public policies to contain contagion and to fight the virus have been subjected to contestation based on fake news's disinformation and consequent emotional positions which have polarized society between no mask, no vax, no social distancing vs. science, in a moment when social cooperation is crucial.

In general, fake news contributes to make the communication environment muddy, with reference to the quality and the truth-value of the information passed on, and cacophonous, with reference to the instrumental and circular accusations of any critical opinion targeting the government or single politicians to be fake-news. Moreover, public information is overcrowded and confused, given that truth, falsity and "bullshitting" are all mixed and difficult to disentangle. In turn, this phenomenon induces citizens to lose trust in political communication, and, in general, in politics and politicians. This mistrust hits traditional media as well and also, more generally, experts and science as sources of reliable information and data. These phenomena are worrying and complex: they require both an interpretive and a normative analysis in depth, which is however outside the more limited scope of the present work. In the present communication confusion, my purpose has been to circumscribe the issue to the impact of fake news on political attitudes and voting behavior, aiming at dispelling the idea that fake news can wantonly twist electoral turnout. Interestingly the analysis has shown paths for future research. On the side of normative analysis, it has thrown light on how empirical findings can provide suggestions for normative proposals taking into account human cognitive constraints, while, on the side of a critical perspective on politics, it has pointed to the effective dangers of fake news in the public sphere to be aptly considered in a properly dedicated inquiry.

Notes

¹ Self-perception has been interpreted as a form of reduction of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

² The tendency to spread fake news as a form of bullshitting has been brought to my attention by a paper presented by Ciro De Florio and Aldo Frigerio on "What is Fake News?" (Vercelli, 23 October 2020).

³ The literature on self-deception, for example, provides a detailed analysis of the wishes and motives triggering the distorted reasoning, distinguishing stubborn beliefs from self-deceptive beliefs (Galeotti, 2018a)

⁴ Without getting here into the discussion of Kahan's thesis, I cannot but remark that, in the literature on self-deception as well, there are scholars holding that while self-deception is epistemically irrational, it is nevertheless practically rational insofar as it fulfills a goal of the subject who wishes to believe that p. I will not discuss here the dual rationality thesis; I only want to point out the similarities of Kahan's

research with the studies on self-deception. My point here is rather that, although the experimental research on the backfire effect largely ignores the literature on self-deception, actually its empirical findings correspond to the interpretive framework of self-deception, which, on its part, is able to throw new and deeper light on the Prior Belief Effect.

⁵ Such a distinction between low-level anxiety and high-level anxiety in inducing, respectively, accuracy or misperceptions corresponds to a study by Robert Jervis on political misperception (Jervis, 1975). More specifically, Jervis noted that a high level of anxiety and circumstances in which subjects are powerless induce defensive avoidance that is a typical “straight” case of self-deception where the subject falsely believes according to her wish. In Weeks’s research, notably, a high level of anxiety induces instead a “twisted” type of self-deception, where the subject falsely comes to believe what she does not want to be the case (Mele, 2001; Galeotti, 2018a)

⁶ Here I take the Aristotelian position that virtues must be thought and become habits, for without the proper education the agent falls prey to the weakness of the will. This view is convincingly articulated in the framework of the theory by George Ainslie (2000) who, however, does not develop the institutional implication concerning education.

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