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Misinformation, Fact Checking, and Immigration Voting Preferences

by Katherine Van Shaar Manning

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

ECONOMICS

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Committee Members: T. Scott Findley, Ph.D., Todd Griffith, Ph.D.

Abstract:

Although misinformation is rampant in social media and society, there is not an extensive literature exploring the impact of misinformation and fact checks on people's political preferences relating to immigration policies in the US. The purpose of this study is to examine the impacts of misinformation and fact-checking on people's policy preferences about immigration. Using an experimental survey and a between-subject approach, we observe how anti-immigration politician's statements (ranging from false to partially true) impact participants' perceptions of hot-topic immigration issues with and without fact checks. We also study the correlation between people's political affiliation and the impact of politicians' misinformation and fact checks.

Introduction

Sensationalism has always sold well. Whether in social media, newspapers, or good, old-fashioned gossip, sources with eyebrow-raising headlines are often paid in ample attention. However, with the rise of social media as a news source and platform for politicians, misinformation is more accessible - and potentially influential - than ever. These statements, whether intentionally or unintentionally false, have earned several names including “fake news,” a term popularized by President Donald Trump.

As president, Trump was not only known for popularizing this term, but also for his strong stance and many false claims concerning immigrants and immigration policy. According to a book by Washington Post fact checkers Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo and Meg Kelly, Trump made 2,400 or more false and misleading claims about immigration and immigrants during his presidency. This accounted for more than 15% of the total 16,241 statements [they] fact checked in the first three years of Trump’s presidency” (Anderson).

With this track record and reputation, It is no wonder that misinformation, particularly on immigration, became increasingly prevalent and concerning for many following the 2016 election. The topic of immigration also became an especially divisive topic with Trump’s presidency. According to PEW research in 2022, “About nine-in-ten Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (91%) call increasing security along the U.S.-Mexico border an important goal, including 72% who say it should be a very important goal. While a majority of Democrats and Democratic leaners (59%) say border security should be at least somewhat important, just 22% view this as very important – 50 percentage points less than the share of Republicans who say this” (Oliphant and Cerda).

Years after Trump’s presidency, immigration remains a divisive issue, and misinformation on this and other topics has certainly not ended. We continue to see misinformation, and we continue to see people across the nation and even in our own circles who are swayed by these false statements and ideas. With this in mind, our research questions developed: how strong and widespread are the effects of misinformation? And perhaps equally important, what are the impacts of fact-checking? Does fact-checking have any corrective effect? Furthermore, are there certain demographics, political parties, or other groups of people who are most willing to accept misinformation and/or fact-checking?

After running an experimental survey, our data shows that misinformation, fact-checking, and facts had no significant impact on our survey group as a whole. However, results begin to emerge when observing individual political parties. We find that:

- 1) Democrats marginally increase pro-immigration voting preferences when they are shown anti-immigration misinformation with a fact check.

- 2) Republicans experience a small but significant corrective impact from fact-checking on anti-immigration misinformation.
- 3) Independents exhibit “contrarian” tendencies, meaning they change their voting preferences contrary to the information they are given, especially when comparing those given anti-immigration politicians’ statements and those given pro-immigration facts on immigration.

Related Literature

This paper adds to a large literature on misinformation that has made a major resurgence in the past several years. Major topics also include misinformation relating to COVID-19, vaccines, climate change, etc. However, little experimental work has been done to study the effects of misinformation on immigration policy preferences.

One paper that contributes to the immigration misinformation literature and provides a basis for the following survey experiment is “Facts, alternative facts, and fact checking in times of post-truth politics” by Barrera, et al. published in the *Journal of Public Economics* in 2020. This paper focuses on voting preferences for or against a controversial extreme-right and anti-immigration candidate during the 2017 French election cycle. Barrera’s experiment involves a control group and 3 treatment groups (alternative facts, facts, and fact-checking) in which participants are exposed to misinformation and/or a fact-check. The participants’ voting intentions are then elicited after exposure. Dictator games and list experiments are also used in order to show that voting intentions are not just cheap talk. However, these methods didn’t seem a reliable or direct enough method to incentivize or reveal truth-telling without other complicating factors. Because of this, we opted for the simple survey alone.

Our paper contributes to the literature by studying the effects of misinformation and fact checking specifically on the topic of immigration in the United States. While other papers, like Barrera’s, have touched on immigration attitudes in other countries (e.g. France) and under different circumstances (e.g. an election cycle), our survey experiment focuses on a variety of specific immigration topics in a day-to-day environment and focuses on support for or against individual immigration issues rather than a particular candidate. This paper and the survey design intended to capture any immediate change in specific immigration preferences from anti-immigration statements and/or fact-checks as if they were viewed in the media.

Experimental Design

Our experiment was carried out over Prolific - an online surveying service - on a sample of adults in the United States of America. We used the Barrera et al. experiment as the basis for our design.

Upon opening the survey on Prolific, each participant was unknowingly and randomly assigned as part of a treatment group or the control group. From the experimenter's perspective, these treatments included: Alternative Facts, Alternative Facts with Fact-Checking, and Facts. Each participant would read through and complete the consent form briefly explaining the experiment. The consent form also included information about the \$4 payment for completing the survey or \$1 for withdrawing early. A notice was also included, reminding participants that their payment was dependent in part on a thorough completion of the survey. The experiment would then continue as follows:

Alternative Facts Group (AF):

After being randomly assigned a group and completing the consent form, those in the Alternative Facts group were shown 4 statements, which they were told were from politicians. Examples include:

- "Half of all immigrant households receive benefits from our social welfare system."
- "In 2017, illegal aliens murdered 1,800 Americans."
- (See appendix for full set of alternative facts and other experiment procedures.)

The participants in the Alternative Facts group were not shown who said the statement or whether the statement was true or false. However, these statements were chosen by experimenters because they were deemed incorrect by a third-party fact-checking source, and all carried anti-immigration leaning sentiments. After each statement, the participants were asked to evaluate how persuasive they found each statement in favor of or opposed to immigration.

Alternative Facts with Fact-Checking Group (B):

The participants in the Alternative Facts with Fact-Checking group similarly received these unattributed politicians' statements and were asked to evaluate their persuasiveness. However, after evaluating a statement's persuasiveness, they were also given a fact-check on the statement, also sourced from Politifact. They were then asked to evaluate how persuasive they found the politician's statement after reading the fact-check.

Fact Group (F):

The fact check treatment participants were given the information in the fact-checked portion of the previous treatment and were asked to evaluate its persuasiveness for or against immigration.

Control Group (C):

The control group did not receive any information prior to the final survey.

Survey:

After each treatment group completed reading and evaluating the statements given to them, they, along with the control group, completed a final survey. This survey included 7 questions to evaluate participants' voting preferences on a variety of immigration issues. These questions included:

On a scale from 1-4: (1=Not very important, 4=Very important)

1. Increasing security along the U.S.-Mexico border is a ____ goal for U.S. immigration policy.
2. Establishing a way for immigrants here illegally to stay legally is a ____ goal for U.S. immigration policy.¹
3. Taking in refugees escaping from war and violence is a ____ goal for U.S. immigration policy.²
4. Increasing deportations of those in the U.S. illegally is a ____ goal for U.S. immigration policy.

What is the likelihood you would support legislation: (1=Extremely unlikely, 6=Extremely likely)

5. Increasing immigration levels by 10%?
6. Simplifying the naturalization process for current illegal immigrants and low skilled immigrants?
7. Increasing H-1B visas and immigration opportunities for highly skilled immigrants?

After completing the voting preferences portion of the survey, participants also completed other questions to gather demographic information, personality traits, family history of immigration, political party association, etc.

Upon finishing the entire survey, those in the Alternative Facts treatment group were provided a fact-check on the politicians' statements they received to ensure a lack of any deception in the experiment. All participants who completed the survey received \$4.00 for their time in addition to the normal wages offered by Prolific. Those who withdrew before finishing the survey were given \$1.00.

Results

A total of 487 participants completed the survey experiment, with a total of 900 people opening the survey on Prolific. The majority of participants who chose to withdraw did not advance past the first page. Those who didn't complete the entire survey were dropped from the analysis to ensure completeness. Summary statistics on the survey group used in data analysis can be found in Table 1. Note that our survey sample was not a fully representative sample of the US or of political parties and therefore

¹ Note that questions 2 and 3 were rescored for data analysis purposes, so pro-immigration answers are scored higher.

² See above.

our findings should not be misconstrued as applying broadly to the entire country or entire political parties.

In our data, we found 109 people were in the control group, 131 in the alternative facts treatment, 127 in the alternative facts with fact-checking treatment, and 120 were in the fact treatment. A large majority of participants claimed to be Democrats and Independents during the first round of surveys, with relatively few Republicans. For a well-balanced sample, a second second round of surveys were run on Prolific for only those who had self-identified as Republicans in the Prolific database. With both sessions, the data included 176 Democrats (36.14%), 143 Republicans (29.36%), 137 Independents (28.13%) and 31 people who claimed “Something Else” (6.37%).

Using a Mann-Whittney-Wilcoxon two-tailed test, we tested significance between treatment groups and each treatment groups’ answers on the voting preferences survey. When comparing treatments, we found no significant difference between the voting preferences for each treatment group when compared to the control. Neither misinformation, facts, or misinformation with a fact check had a significant effect on the group’s preferences toward any immigration issue. The data also showed no significant differences comparing treatment groups to each other. For example, comparing two treatment groups shown politicians’ statements, those who were also shown a fact check on the statements did not have significantly different voting preferences from those just shown politicians’ statements.

Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test with Continuity Correction
P-Values - Two-Tailed: Significance of Differences Between Treatments

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q.Avg
AF-C	0.842	0.212	0.358	0.871	0.997	0.892	0.836	0.642
F-C	0.227	0.963	0.692	0.776	0.765	0.761	0.946	0.929
B-C	0.674	0.207	0.577	0.939	0.768	0.821	0.482	0.921
B-AF	0.837	0.919	0.728	0.780	0.787	0.921	0.365	0.753
AF-F	0.319	0.232	0.622	0.885	0.758	0.852	0.798	0.760
B-F	0.443	0.248	0.864	0.648	0.974	0.933	0.537	0.959

* p < 0.1

** p < 0.05

This lack of significance is promising. It shows that despite concerns about misinformation, the population as a whole was not immediately swayed more pro- or anti-immigration when exposed to misinformation. There were also no significant effects from fact-checking, but there was no significant effect from misinformation that needs correcting. Therefore, the null effects for fact-checking are not interesting or worrisome.

However, on the political party level, small instances of significance begin to emerge between treatment groups. For those survey participants self-identifying as democrats, those shown both politicians' statements and fact checks had voting preferences up to 8% more pro-immigration on Question 1 (regarding border security) than those democrats in the control group. Democrats shown both misinformation and a fact check also voted around 8% more pro-immigration than those Democrats shown fact-checked information alone on the topic of establishing a way for illegal immigrants to stay legally. This data shows that when democrats are shown right-leaning politicians' statements and are then shown that those statements are incorrect, their policy preferences move slightly more pro-immigration. However, when democrats are only shown the same facts (without also showing them misinformation) they do not shift more pro-immigration. Therefore, facts alone don't sway Democrats pro-immigration. However, to a small extent, when democrats are aware of politicians' false statements on immigration, they have more pro-immigration voting preferences. Just the knowledge that anti-immigration misinformation is circulating can push democrats further pro-immigration.

Democrats - Average Voting Preference Differences Between Treatments

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q.Avg
AF-C	0.010	0.022	0.072	-0.002	0.026	0.018	0.029	0.025
F-C	0.038	-0.017	0.053	-0.023	0.018	-0.013	0.025	0.012
B-C	*0.083	0.065	0.070	0.033	0.037	0.037	0.004	0.047
B-AF	0.073	0.044	-0.002	0.034	0.011	0.018	-0.025	0.022
AF-F	-0.028	0.038	0.019	0.021	0.008	0.031	0.004	0.013
B-F	0.045	*0.082	0.017	0.055	0.020	0.050	-0.022	0.035

* p < 0.1

** p < 0.05

Republicans on the other hand, show significant differences between the alternative facts (AF) treatment and those shown both alternative facts with fact-checking (B). Our data shows that when two groups of republicans are given anti-immigration statements from politicians, those who are also given a fact check on that information vote up to 10.7% more pro-immigration on the issue of simplifying the naturalization process and up to 7.2% more pro-immigration on the issue of increasing deportations. This shows that fact-checking does have at least a small corrective impact for republicans shown anti-immigration misinformation. Our data also shows significant differences between republicans shown anti-immigration misinformation and republicans exclusively shown fact-checked material. Those republicans who were shown misinformation had voting preferences up to 11% more anti-immigration than those shown only facts on immigration. While it is unreasonable in the real world to expect republicans to only see facts and never see misinformation (simply due to the nature of social media algorithms), it is noteworthy that when given facts, Republicans do tend to update their voting preferences. They are not completely unchanged by new information.

Republicans - Average Voting Preference Differences Between Treatments

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q.Avg
AF-C	-0.006	0.024	0.032	-0.037	-0.035	-0.057	-0.089	-0.024
F-C	0.062	0.036	0.066	0.082	0.058	0.041	-0.031	0.045
B-C	-0.011	0.066	0.038	0.035	0.014	0.050	-0.032	0.023
B-AF	-0.005	0.041	0.006	*0.072	0.049	*0.107	0.057	0.047
AF-F	** -0.068	-0.012	-0.033	* -0.119	* -0.093	-0.098	-0.058	** -0.069
B-F	** -0.073	0.029	-0.027	-0.047	-0.044	0.009	-0.001	-0.022

* p < 0.1

** p < 0.05

For those in the Independent party, we see significant differences between those in the facts treatment vs. the control group. For independents shown the fact-checked material (which can generally be interpreted as leaning pro-immigration because it fact checks anti-immigration statements), they vote significantly more anti-immigration than those in the control group. In fact, those independents seeing facts voted 16% more anti-immigration on question 5 (increasing immigration levels by 10%) than those in the control group, and almost 9% more anti-immigration overall. We would not have expected this

reaction, considering the fact-checked information leaned more pro-immigration. Independents seem to have voting preferences contrary to the new information, although we can't be sure what their beliefs about immigration were prior to the new information.

We also see large amounts of significance when comparing independents shown only politicians' statements vs. those who only saw the facts. The magnitude of differences between these two treatments show that independents respond very differently to politicians' statements and facts. But we also see that those shown anti-immigration statements by politicians vote much more pro-immigration than those shown facts - almost 10% more pro-immigration on average. There seems to be a tendency for independents to vote contrary to the information they are being fed. Perhaps some of this could be attributed to the experimenter effect, but other ideas include that independents have a distrust in the media, politicians', have contrarian personality traits, or simply value being a "balancing force" in political issues.

Average Voting Preference Differences Between Treatments - Independents

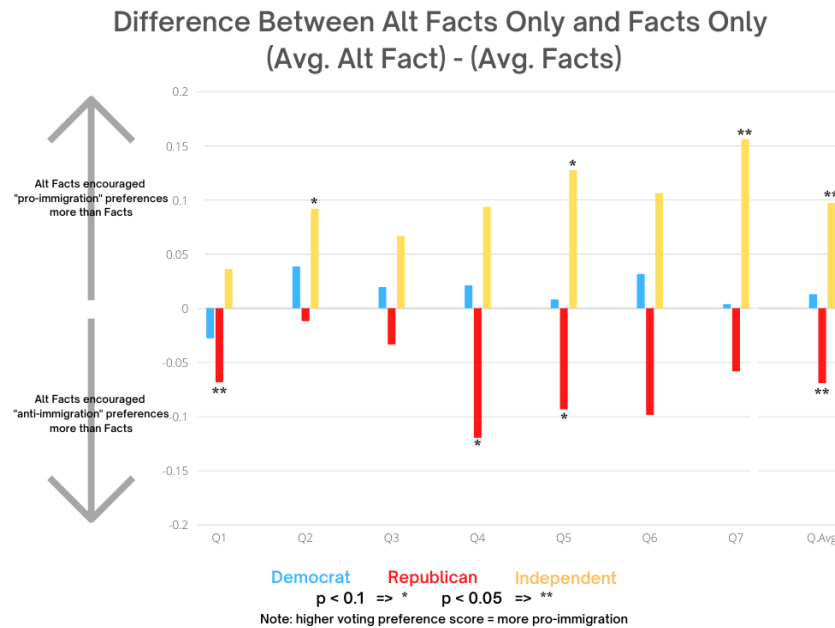
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q.Avg
AF-C	0.001	0.024	-0.006	0.027	-0.034	-0.005	0.062	0.010
F-C	-0.035	-0.068	-0.073	-0.066	** -0.161	-0.111	-0.094	* -0.087
B-C	0.016	-0.039	-0.016	-0.055	-0.036	-0.109	-0.123	0.053
B-AF	0.015	-0.063	-0.009	-0.082	-0.003	-0.105	-0.185	-0.043
AF-F	0.036	*0.091	0.066	0.093	*0.127	0.106	**0.156	**0.097
B-F	0.051	0.029	0.057	0.011	**0.124	0.001	-0.029	0.140

* p < 0.1

** p < 0.05

The treatment comparisons that showed the most significant changes in voting preferences were when comparing the Alternative Facts treatment with the Facts treatment, particularly for independents and republicans. We would expect that these two treatments have the most varied voting preferences since the alternative facts used are anti-immigration, and the facts used lean more pro-immigration. However, as previously mentioned, we would not have expected that these treatments would have counterintuitive impacts on independents' voting preferences. Republicans' voting preferences changed more in

accordance with our expectations: Republicans shown facts voted higher (more pro-immigration) than those who were shown the anti-immigration politicians' statements.



Admittedly, this experiment took approximately 20 minutes to complete, which may not adequately simulate the ongoing, repeated effects of misinformation society experiences daily. However, it may capture the immediate effects of the information provided. Additionally, we can not guarantee that voting preferences are accurate to how participants would behave in an actual election. A well-designed incentive structure may attempt to bring results closer to reality, but we found that any existing incentives structures introduce problems and don't seem to get at true voting preferences any more accurately than simply asking participants.

Conclusion

Misinformation spread on social media often has the intention of swaying voters. With rampant “fake news” in the media, many are concerned about the social and political impacts of misinformation. However, our results showed no major or immediate effect of anti-immigration misinformation on our participants' voting preferences as a whole. Misinformation doesn't seem to sway voting preferences towards or against immigration, with or without a fact-check. However, considering politicians have extra interest in swaying median voters, our data shows interesting evidence that anti-immigration sentiments actually push median voters more pro-immigration instead of the original intent. We also show that fact-checked information encouraging immigration may actually push median voters more anti-immigration. These findings raise several new questions: does spreading misinformation fulfill its

intended purpose? Is it in the interest of a political party to encourage (or not discourage) the opposing party from spreading misinformation? Furthermore, is the average independent voter simply a contrarian, and if so, why? Do they lack trust in politicians and/or in media fact-checking? And how do people respond when they believe they might be being lied to?

Overall, the main results seem promising that misinformation (at least on the topic of immigration) has a smaller impact on society than many expect. As social media continues to change the way the nation is involved in social and political issues, there is still a need for increased media literacy and attempts to mitigate harm from misinformation, especially on a smaller scale for individuals and communities. However, on a broader scale, comfort can be found in the relatively small impacts of misinformation on the nation's political preferences as a whole.

Table 1 - Summary Statistics

<u>Gender:</u>	n	%		
Male	271	55.6%		
Female	213	43.7%		
No Information	3	0.6%		
Total:	487	100.0%		
<u>Age:</u>				
18-28	113	23.2%	Min:	18
29-38	174	35.9%	Max:	78
39-48	83	17.0%	Mean:	38.67
49-58	63	12.9%		
59-68	43	8.8%		
69-78	9	1.8%		
No Information	2	0.4%		
Total:	487	100.0%		
<u>Income:</u>				
Less than \$10,000	21	4.3%		
\$10,000 to less than \$20,000	41	8.4%		
\$20,000 to less than \$30,000	51	10.5%		
\$30,000 to less than \$40,000	43	8.8%		
\$40,000 to less than \$50,000	54	11.1%		
\$50,000 to less than \$75,000	101	20.7%		
\$75,000 to less than \$100,000	74	15.2%		
\$100,000 to less than \$150,000	67	13.8%		
\$150,000 or more	35	7.2%		
Total:	487	100.0%		
<u>Political Party:</u>				
Democrats	176	36.1%		
Republicans	143	29.4%		
Independents	137	28.1%		
Something Else	31	6.4%		
Total:	487	100.0%		
<u>Treatment:</u>				
Alternative Facts	131	26.9%		
Alternative Facts with Fact-Checking	127	26.1%		
Facts	120	24.6%		
Control	109	22.4%		
Total:	487	100.0%		

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