

Conservatives more susceptible to believing falsehoods: study

June 2 2021, by Jeff Grabmeier



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Conservatives are less able to distinguish political truths from falsehoods than liberals, mainly because of a glut of right-leaning misinformation, a new national study conducted over six months shows.

Researchers found that liberals and conservatives in the United States both tended to believe claims that promoted their [political views](#), but that this more often led conservatives to accept falsehoods while rejecting truths.

One of the main drivers of the findings appeared to be the American media and information environment.

"Both liberals and conservatives tend to make errors that are influenced by what is good for their side," said Kelly Garrett, co-author of the study and professor of communication at The Ohio State University.

"But the deck is stacked against conservatives because there is so much more misinformation that supports conservative positions. As a result, conservatives are more often led astray."

Garrett conducted the study with Robert Bond, associate professor of communication at Ohio State. Their results were published today (June 2, 2021) in the journal *Science Advances*.

The study involved 1,204 American adults who participated online between January and June 2019.

Every two weeks, the researchers identified viral political news stories, 10 true and 10 false, that received high social media engagement.

The researchers then asked participants to assess a series of 20 statements that were based on these stories. Participants labeled each one as true or false and indicated how confident they were in their label.

In the end, participants had evaluated as many as 240 statements on a broad range of topics and representing many different viewpoints.

A separate group of people, recruited online, were surveyed to determine whether the claims, if true, would be better for liberals or for conservatives, or if they were neutral.

Overall, both liberals and conservatives were more likely to believe stories that favored their side—whether they were true or not.

The differences in beliefs were often stark, Garrett said.

For example, participants rated this true statement that received widespread social media engagement when it came out: "Investigators for the DHS Office of the Inspector General have identified poor conditions in several Texas migrant facilities, including extreme overcrowding and serious health risks."

Results showed that 54% of Democrats correctly said that the statement was "definitely true"—compared to only 18% of Republicans.

Another statement—a false one—was "While serving as Sec. of State, Hillary Clinton colluded with Russia, selling 20% of the U.S. uranium supply to that country in exchange for donations to the Clinton Foundation."

Here, only 2% of Democrats said this was "definitely true," but 41% of Republicans did.

"These are important factual claims, yet we see vast partisan differences in belief," Garrett said.

One of the major issues identified in the study was that these widely shared truths and falsehoods have different implications for liberals and conservatives.

Two-thirds (65%) of the high-engagement true statements were characterized as benefiting liberals, while only 10% of accurate claims were considered beneficial to conservatives. On the other side, 46% of falsehoods were rated as advantageous to conservatives, compared to 23% of false claims benefiting liberals.

"We saw that viral political falsehoods tended to benefit conservatives, while truths tended to favor liberals. That makes it a lot harder for conservatives to avoid misperceptions," Garrett said.

Although the information environment was the primary reason conservatives were susceptible to misinformation, it may not be the only one.

Results showed that even when the information environment was taken into account, conservatives were slightly more likely to hold misperceptions than were liberals.

"It is difficult to say why that is," Garrett said. "We can't explain the finding with our data alone."

Results did show further distinctions between how conservatives and liberals approached the political claims in the viral stories they evaluated.

Liberals showed greater overall sensitivity, which characterizes an individual's ability to distinguish truths and falsehoods. Conservatives and liberals were equally good at detecting truths and falsehoods when most true stories were labeled politically neutral.

But if more of the factually accurate stories were labeled political—benefiting either liberal or [conservative](#) positions—liberals became better than conservatives at distinguishing true from false

statements.

"Conservatives did not get any worse, but they did not keep up with liberals who were getting better at discerning truths and falsehoods," Garrett said.

Conservatives also showed a stronger "[truth](#) bias," meaning that they were more likely to say that all the claims they were asked about were true.

"That's a problem because some of the claims were outlandish—there should have been no ambiguity about whether they were true or not," he said.

Garrett said a strength of this study, compared to many previous ones, is that it analyzed a wide range of political claims, reflecting the diversity of the media environment that Americans are exposed to. It clearly confirms the point made by many media commentators that conservatives are awash in false statements that support what they want to believe.

"We show that the media environment is shaping people's ability to do this very basic, fundamental task. Democracy depends on people being able to tell the difference between what is true and false and it falters when people have difficulty agreeing on what's real," he said.

More information: R.K. Garrett et al., "Conservatives' susceptibility to political misperceptions," *Science Advances* (2021).
[advances.sciencemag.org/lookup1126/sciadv.abf1234](https://advances.sciencemag.org/lookup...1126/sciadv.abf1234)

Provided by The Ohio State University

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