

Regardless of age and politics, people who endorse lies are aware they could be made up, say researchers

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Northeastern researchers say that when confronted with "fake news," Republicans and younger people are more likely to say they believe the

false headlines than Democrats and older people.

But across the board, participants who were incorrect about news headlines being true or false had an inkling they were wrong, lead author and Northeastern professor Briony-Swire Thompson says.

The study is [published](#) in the journal *Communications Psychology* and goes against the idea that individuals who endorse misinformation strongly believe it to be true, she says.

"When people take [false information](#) to be true, they are aware that they could well be wrong," says Swire-Thompson, a [political science](#) and [psychology professor](#) who directs the Psychology of Misinformation Lab and faculty at the Network Science Institute.

Approximately 500 participants recruited from across the country and evenly divided into Republicans and Democrats, as well as younger and older adults, were presented with headlines based on the past year's news.

These included headlines such as "Fauci wins Nobel Peace Prize" and "The CDC is revealed to be a private, nonprofit corporation."

Participants were asked whether the news was true or false and how confident they were about their choice, Swire-Thompson says.

"We first looked at how well people can discern between true and false information. Older adults were better than younger adults and Republicans were worse than Democrats at teasing apart true and false information," she says.

The results from the second part of the study, which looked at participants' level of confidence in their answers, were a pleasant

surprise, she says.

"Everyone was great at what we call metacognition, awareness of one's own abilities," which in this case was the ability to tell false information from true, Swire-Thompson says.

Those who got the answer wrong expressed a lower level of confidence in their answer regardless of political party or age.

"We didn't think that people would be so great at this task," Swire-Thompson says. "People are aware they could be wrong, which is, I think, really important. It's encouraging."

"A lot of the time when we think about misinformation, we imagine people strongly endorsing these pieces of misinformation" when that is not necessarily the case, she says.

Republicans "are just a little bit worse than the Democrats" in discerning true from false information, says study co-author Jorge Morales, an assistant professor of psychology and philosophy and director of Northeastern's Subjectivity Lab.

"Republicans, however, know that they are worse at discerning the news," Morales says. "Metacognitively speaking, Democrats and Republicans are very similar."

"In general, Republicans exhibited a 'true bias' (a tendency to evaluate items as true) for pro-Republican headlines, but a 'false bias' (a tendency to evaluate items as false) for pro-Democrat headlines," Swire-Thompson says.

"By contrast, Democrats demonstrated a false bias for pro-Democrat headlines and little to no bias for Republican headlines," she says.

Older adults good at discerning false news—but they share it anyway

The study results showing that older adults are a little better at discerning false news headlines "is a really interesting finding, in part because we know that older adults tend to share more misinformation," Morales says.

Teasing out the reasons could be a whole other study, but it may be that [older adults](#) tend to share more information, Morales says. Think of the days when an older aunt or grandparent regularly sent young family members newspaper clippings.

If you share more information found on social media, "you're eventually going to share more false information as well," Morales says.

"Keep in mind that just because you share something doesn't necessarily mean that you believe it to be true," Swire-Thompson says.

Morales says the study is "good news in the sense that at least this is not something we need to fix or think about how to fix. People are already pretty good at calibrating their abilities."

"The question is, can we use that metacognitive insight for changing people's behavior in how they share or evaluate [fake news](#) or true news," he says.

In the academic arena, Northeastern professors are working with researchers in California on metacognition protocols that could help improve people's ability to assess how well they are doing a task, Morales says.

"Right now, we're working with very basic lab tasks, very simple vision and memory tasks, not related to news."

Eventually metacognition training could be expanded to other contexts, Morales says.

Improved metacognition could help students determine when they need to devote more time to studying or whether they already know so much material it's time to go out and have fun, Morales says.

More information: Mitch Dobbs et al, Democrats are better than Republicans at discerning true and false news but do not have better metacognitive awareness, *Communications Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s44271-023-00040-x](https://doi.org/10.1038/s44271-023-00040-x)

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