

Political fake news: They might be a liar but they're my liar

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An international collaboration has investigated how people perceive politicians when they spread misinformation. The research found supporters of the politicians reduced their belief in misinformation once corrected, yet their feelings towards the political figure remained unchanged if misinformation was presented alongside an equal number of facts.

Following the 2016 [presidential election](#), 88 percent of Americans reported that [fake news](#) had caused confusion about basic facts regarding current events. The study of political [misinformation](#), between the University of Bristol, Northeastern University, University of Western Australia and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), is published in the journal *Political Psychology*.

In previous research, the team found that even if people acknowledge that misinformation is incorrect after a correction has been presented, their feelings towards the source of the misinformation can remain unchanged. The current study extended this research to explore whether disproportionately more false than true statements changed people's feelings towards either Republican or Democratic politicians.

The researchers presented US participants false

and true statements from either Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders. Participants then received fact-checks as to whether items were true or false, and rerated both their belief in the statements as well as their feelings towards the candidate.

The study found:

- Both Trump and Sanders conditions revealed similar trends.
- Supporters of both politicians were worse at evaluating which statements were true and which were false than non-supporters.
- If misinformation was presented alongside an equal number of facts, supporters of the politicians substantially reduced their belief in misinformation once corrected, yet they did not reduce their feelings towards the politicians.
- However, if there was considerably more misinformation retracted than factual statements affirmed, feelings towards both Republican and Democratic figures were very slightly reduced.
- These outcomes differ from a similar study conducted by the team in Australia. The Australian study found a substantial reduction in feelings towards right and left-wing politicians when presented with disproportionately more false than true statements.
- The importance of honesty in politics is therefore culturally embedded and differs considerably between countries.

Professor Stephan Lewandowsky, chair in cognitive psychology in the School of Psychological Science at the University of Bristol, said: "People may perceive their preferred candidate's false statements as unintentional errors rather than a deliberate intent to deceive. It is possible that being perceived as inaccurate is less costly than being perceived to be inauthentic."

The team suggest [future research](#) should investigate how inaccurate claims impact professionals that are considered more trustworthy along with the possibility that the link between misinformation correction and source evaluation is culturally dependent.

More information: Briony Swire?Thompson et al. They Might Be a Liar But They're My Liar: Source Evaluation and the Prevalence of Misinformation, *Political Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/pops.12586](#)

Provided by University of Bristol

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