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THE COVID STATES PROJECT: A 50-STATE COVID-19 SURVEY

REPORT #86: MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND COVID-19 VACCINES

USA, April 2022

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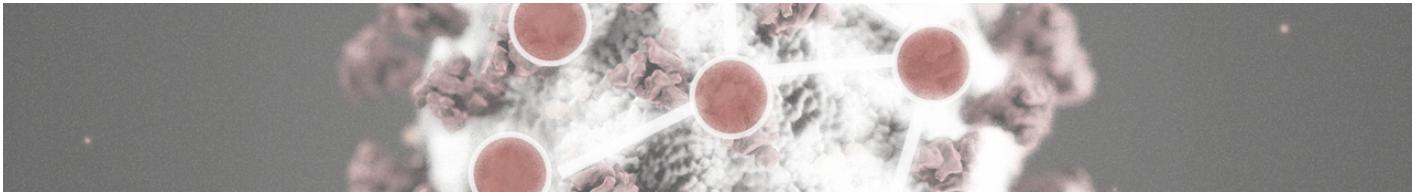
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Report of April 22, 2022, v.1

The COVID States Project

From: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States

A joint project of:

Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

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COVER MEMO

Summary Memo — April 22, 2022

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Note on methods:

Between March 2, 2022, and April 4, 2022, we surveyed 22,234 individuals across all 50 states plus the District of Columbia. The survey was conducted by PureSpectrum via an online, nonprobability sample, with state-level representative quotas for race/ethnicity, age, and gender (for methodological details on the other waves, see covidstates.org). In addition to balancing on these dimensions, we reweighted our data using demographic characteristics to match the U.S. population with respect to race/ethnicity, age, gender, education, and living in urban, suburban, or rural areas. This was the latest in a series of surveys we have been conducting since April 2020, examining attitudes and behaviors regarding COVID-19 in the United States.

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Misperceptions about the War in Ukraine and COVID-19 Vaccines

For the past two years, the United States has endured what the World Health Organization has termed an [infodemic](#) of misinformation involving [COVID-19 in general](#), and the COVID-19 [vaccination](#) in particular. We reviewed the current breadth and depth of the COVID misinformation problem in a [recent report](#) [#82]. In that report (based on our January 2022 survey), we found that about one in six respondents (16%) believed at least one out of four false claims about COVID-19 vaccines, while a little over 1/3 (37%) were unsure about at least one false claim. As we discuss below, those percentages have remained stable in our latest survey.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has once again thrust the misinformation problem to the center of public policy discourse. News reports feature alleged Russian [false flag](#) operations aimed at providing rationales for the invasion of Ukraine. Media also report on numerous [false stories](#) designed to shift blame for the conflict to the United States and its allies while [preventing Russian citizens](#) from learning the truth about the war and its consequences.

In this report, we review the extent of Americans' acceptance of false claims about COVID-19 and the conflict in Ukraine. We investigate the demographic and partisan correlates of believing false claims about Ukraine and the COVID-19 vaccine, as well as the confluence of these two overlapping misinformation crises. In particular, we explore whether and to what extent acceptance of COVID-19 misinformation is associated with accepting misinformation relating to the current conflict in Ukraine. Are people who are inclined to believe false claims about COVID-19 more likely to also believe false claims about the conflict in Ukraine?

KEY FINDINGS

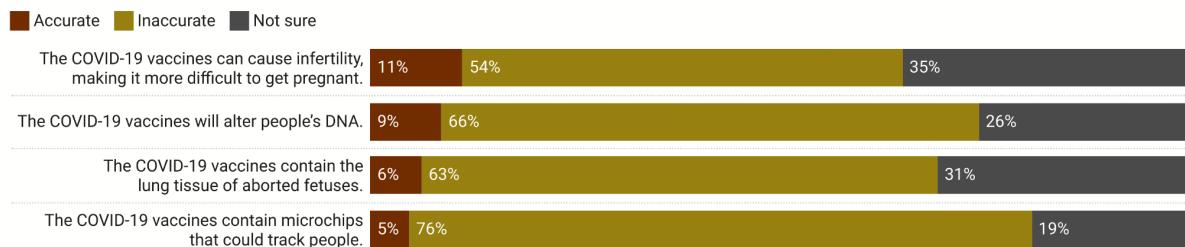
- Relatively few Americans (14%) believe false claims about Ukraine – fewer than those who believe false claims about COVID-19 vaccines (18%). Still, as many as 50% of our respondents report being uncertain about the veracity of at least one false claim regarding Ukraine.
- Misperceptions about COVID-19 are by far the strongest overall predictor we have identified of holding misperceptions about Ukraine. Nearly half (45%) of respondents who hold at least one misperception about Ukraine also hold misperceptions about COVID vaccines. In contrast, fewer than one in ten (8%) of those who marked all false Ukraine claims as inaccurate believed any false vaccine claims.
- Republicans are 5 percentage points more likely than Democrats to believe false claims about Ukraine; the partisan gap is three times larger (15 points) for COVID-19 vaccine-related false claims.
- The most widely-used source of news about Ukraine is social media, cited by 37% of respondents. Of these respondents, 16% hold at least one misperception about Ukraine. In comparison, 25% of respondents cite social media as a source of news about COVID-19. Twenty percent of these respondents hold at least one COVID vaccine-related misperception.
- Americans feel much warmer toward Ukraine than toward Russia, by an average of 60 degrees on a 100-point feeling thermometer (77 vs. 17 degrees). The gap is considerably smaller (+37) among respondents who hold at least one misperception about Ukraine (64 vs. 27 degrees). The gap is also notably smaller for Republicans (+59 degrees warmer for Ukraine) and Independents (+56) than for Democrats (+69).

1. Fewer Americans believe false claims about Ukraine than believe false claims about COVID-19, but more Americans are uncertain about Ukraine-related false claims

For the four COVID-19 vaccine-related false claims, the percentage of respondents believing the claims to be true ranged from a low of 5% who believed the claim that "the COVID-19 vaccine contains microchips that could track people" to a high of 11% who believed that "the COVID-19 vaccine can cause infertility making it more difficult to get pregnant". Between 24% and 46% of respondents either believed or were uncertain about false claims regarding the vaccine (Figure 1).

Misperceptions about COVID-19 vaccines among Americans

[Percent respondents who believe each false statement is accurate, inaccurate, or say they are not sure]



National sample, N = 14,430, Time period: 03/02/2022-04/04/2022

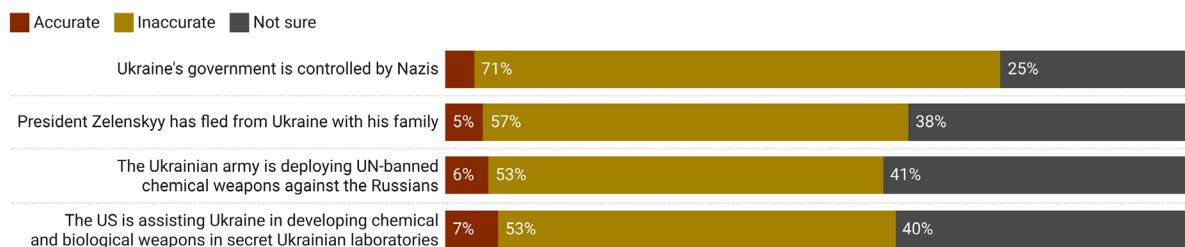
Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 1: Misperceptions about COVID-19 vaccines among Americans

The percentage of Americans believing the four Ukraine-related false claims is somewhat lower (Figure 2), ranging from 4% who believe that "Ukraine's government is controlled by Nazis" (with 25% unsure about this claim), to a high of 7% who believed that "The US is assisting Ukraine in developing chemical and biological weapons in secret Ukrainian laboratories" (with 40% unsure about this claim). Altogether, between 29% and 47% of respondents either believed or were uncertain about a false claim regarding Ukraine.

Misperceptions about the Russian invasion of Ukraine among Americans

Survey respondents were asked to identify the following four Ukraine misinformation items as either true or false. When uncertain, they also had the option of saying "Not sure".



National sample, N = 14,430, Time period: 03/02/2022-04/04/2022

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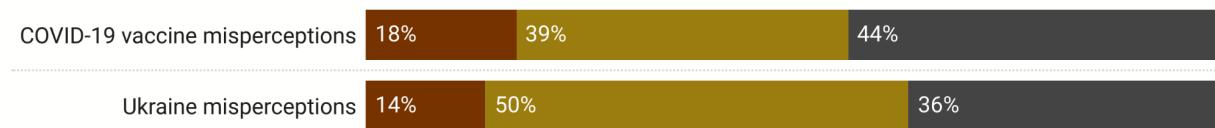
Figure 2: Misperceptions about the Russian invasion of Ukraine among Americans

Overall, about 18% of respondents believed at least one false claim about COVID-19 vaccines, compared to about 14% who believed one or more false claims about Ukraine. That said, more respondents were *uncertain* about at least one false claim about Ukraine (50%), compared to COVID-19 (39%) (Figure 3).

Misperceptions about COVID-19 vaccines and about Ukraine

Survey respondents were asked to identify four COVID-19 vaccine items and four Ukraine misinformation items as either true or false. When uncertain, they could also respond "Not sure".

- Respondents who marked at least one misinformation item as true
- Respondents who marked none as true, but at least one as "not sure"
- Respondents who correctly marked all misinformation items as false



National sample, N = 14,430, Time period: 03/02/2022-04/04/2022

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Figure 3: Misperceptions about COVID-19 vaccines and about Ukraine

2. False claims about Ukraine are much less polarizing than false claims about COVID-19

Ukraine misperceptions by political party

Survey respondents were asked to identify the following four Ukraine misinformation items as either true or false. When uncertain, they also had the option of saying "Not sure".

1. Ukraine's government is controlled by Nazis.
2. President Zelenskyy has fled from Ukraine with his family.
3. The Ukrainian army is deploying UN-banned chemical weapons against the Russians.
4. The US is assisting Ukraine in developing chemical and biological weapons in secret laboratories.

- Respondents who marked at least one misinformation item as true
- Respondents who marked none as true, but at least one as "not sure"
- Respondents who correctly marked all misinformation items as false



National sample, N = 14,430, Time period: 03/02/2022-04/04/2022

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Figure 4: Ukraine misperceptions by political party

While Republicans are more likely than Democrats to believe at least one false claim about both Ukraine and COVID-19, the partisan gap is much smaller for Ukraine.

Republicans are 5 percentage points more likely than Democrats to believe at least one false claim about Ukraine (17% vs. 12%) (Figure 4). The partisan gap for COVID-19-related false claims is three times larger, at 15 percentage points (26% among Republicans compared to 11% among Democrats).

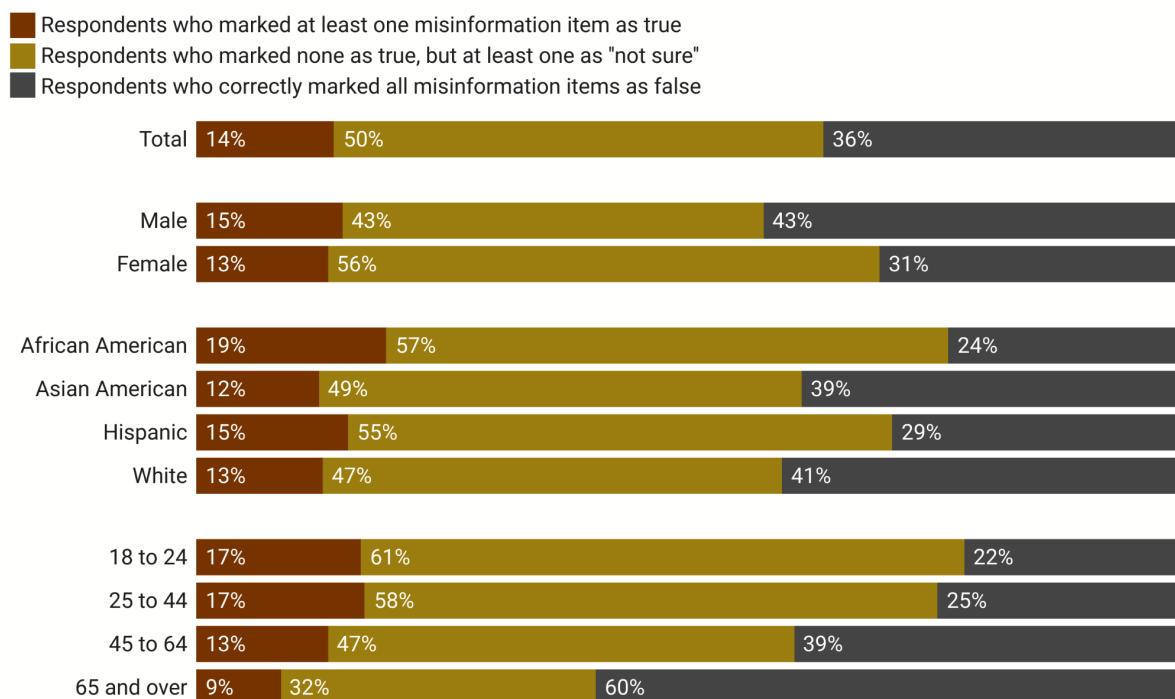
The uncertainty gaps are similar in magnitude between Ukraine and COVID-19 false claims. Republicans are 7 points more likely than Democrats to be uncertain about at least one Ukraine-related false claim (50% vs. 43%) and 13 points more likely to be uncertain about at least one COVID-19 false claim (42% vs. 29%).

3. Modest demographic differences in belief in Ukraine-related false claims; larger differences in uncertainty

Ukraine misperceptions by gender, race/ethnicity, and age

Survey respondents were asked to identify the following four Ukraine misinformation items as either true or false. When uncertain, they also had the option of saying "Not sure".

1. Ukraine's government is controlled by Nazis.
2. President Zelenskyy has fled from Ukraine with his family.
3. The Ukrainian army is deploying UN-banned chemical weapons against the Russians.
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Figure 5: Ukraine misperceptions by gender, race/ethnicity, and age

We find mostly modest differences in believing Ukraine misinformation across demographic groups. In Figure 5, which compares gender, race/ethnicity, and age groups, the largest gap emerges between the youngest and oldest respondents, from a low of 9% among those age 65 or older to a high of 17% among respondents age 18 to 44. In turn, Figure 6, which compares across education and income levels, as well as urban-suburban-rural residence, shows similarly modest gaps. Those gaps range from a high of 6 percentage points across education groups (11% for respondents with a graduate degree, compared to 17% among their counterparts with a high school education or less) to a low of 4 points between suburban (13%) and rural residents (17%).

The uncertainty gaps are much larger, with Gen Z respondents (ages 18-24) 29 percentage points more likely to be uncertain about at least one Ukraine-related false claim than their counterparts age 65 or older (61% vs. 32%). Further, the least-educated respondents are 25 points more likely to be uncertain about at least one Ukraine false claim than the most highly educated respondents (60% vs. 35%).

Ukraine misperceptions by education, income, and urbanicity

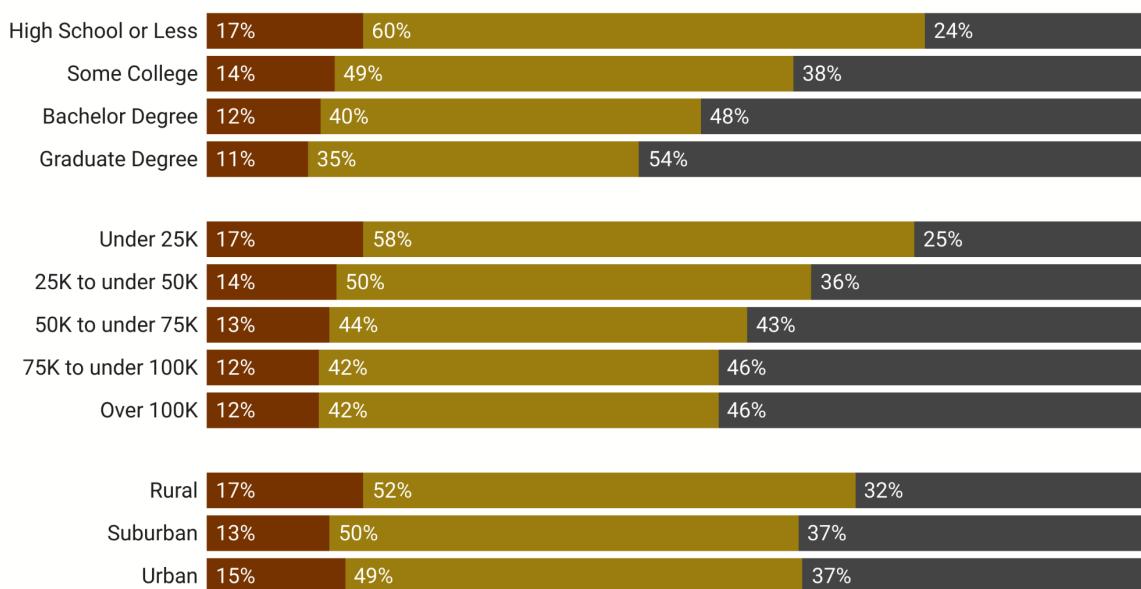
Survey respondents were asked to identify the following four Ukraine misinformation items as either true or false. When uncertain, they also had the option of saying "Not sure".

1. Ukraine's government is controlled by Nazis.
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3. The Ukrainian army is deploying UN-banned chemical weapons against the Russians.
4. The US is assisting Ukraine in developing chemical and biological weapons in secret laboratories.


 Respondents who marked at least one misinformation item as true

 Respondents who marked none as true, but at least one as "not sure"

 Respondents who correctly marked all misinformation items as false



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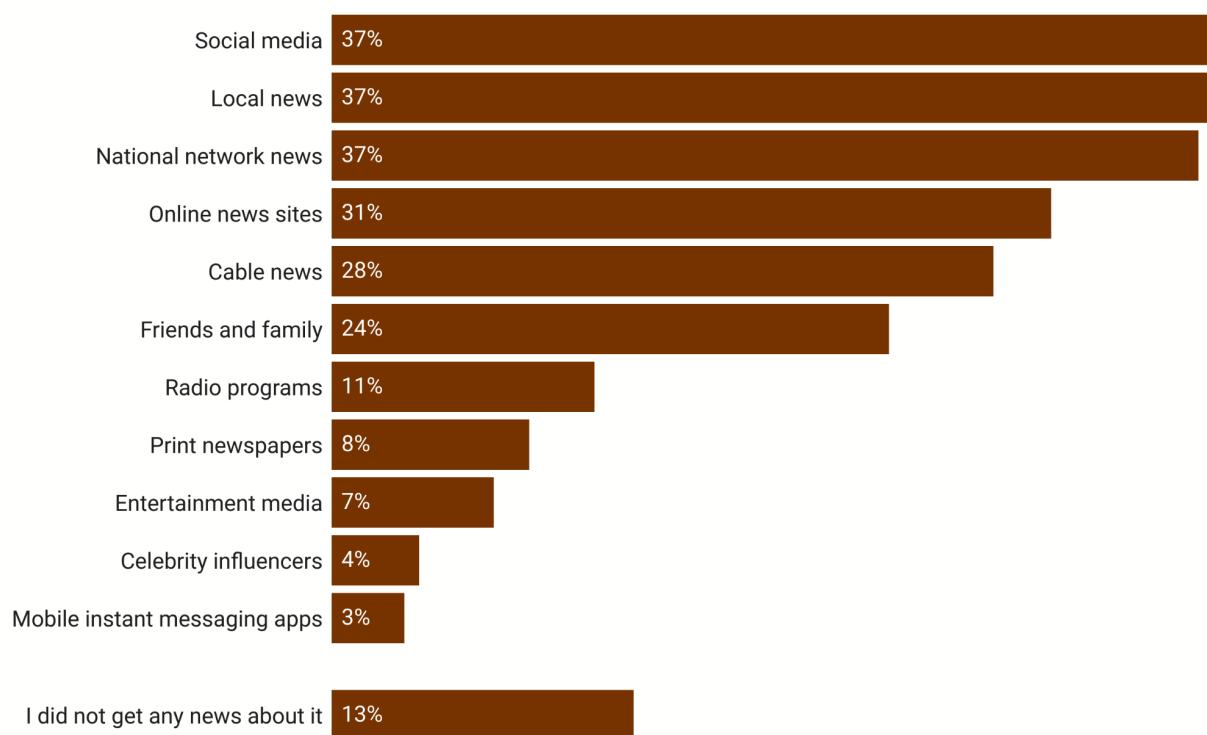
Figure 6: Ukraine misperceptions by education, income and urbanicity

4. Where people get their news about Ukraine influences their likelihood of believing false claims

Only 3% of respondents say they get Ukraine-related news from instant messaging apps (Figure 7). Yet among these respondents, one in five believe at least one false claim about Ukraine, while over half (53%) are uncertain about at least one false claim (Figure 8). These represent the highest totals among consumers of the various information sources we investigated. At the opposite extreme, only 9% of respondents who indicated that they get news about Ukraine from print newspapers – a source of Ukraine news among 8% of respondents – believed at least one false claim about the conflict. The most widely cited sources of news about Ukraine are social media and local news (37% of respondents in each case). Among social media users, 16% believe at least one false claim and another 49% are uncertain about at least one false claim. In comparison, among local news consumers, 14% believe at least one false claim and another 42% are uncertain about at least one false claim.

Sources of news about Russia's invasion of Ukraine

In the last 24 hours, did you get any news or information about Russia's invasion of Ukraine from the following sources? (Please select all that apply).
[Percent respondents who selected each news source]



National sample, N = 14,430, Time period: 03/02/2022-04/04/2022

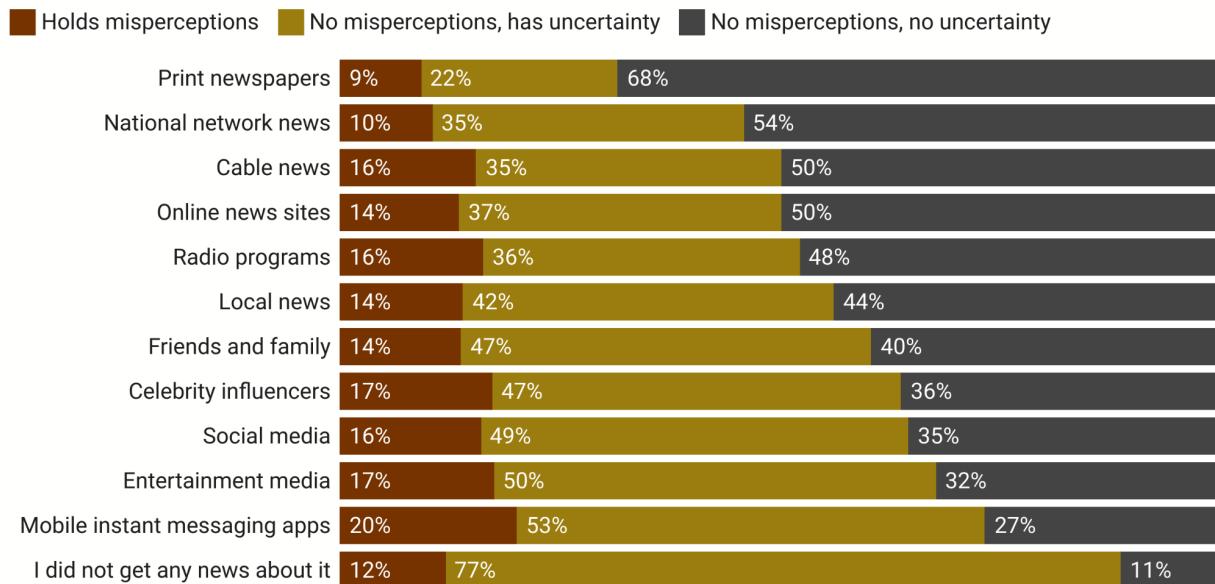
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Figure 7: Sources of news about Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Ukraine misperceptions by news source

In the last 24 hours, did you get any news or information about Russia's invasion of Ukraine from the following sources? (Please select all that apply).

[Respondents who hold misperceptions about Ukraine among the media source consumers]



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Figure 8: Ukraine misperceptions by news source

5. Compared with Ukraine news sources, we find more varied associations between sources of news about COVID-19 vaccines and belief in false claims about the vaccine

We find a wider variance in the association between sources of news about COVID-19 and the likelihood of holding misperceptions about the COVID vaccine.

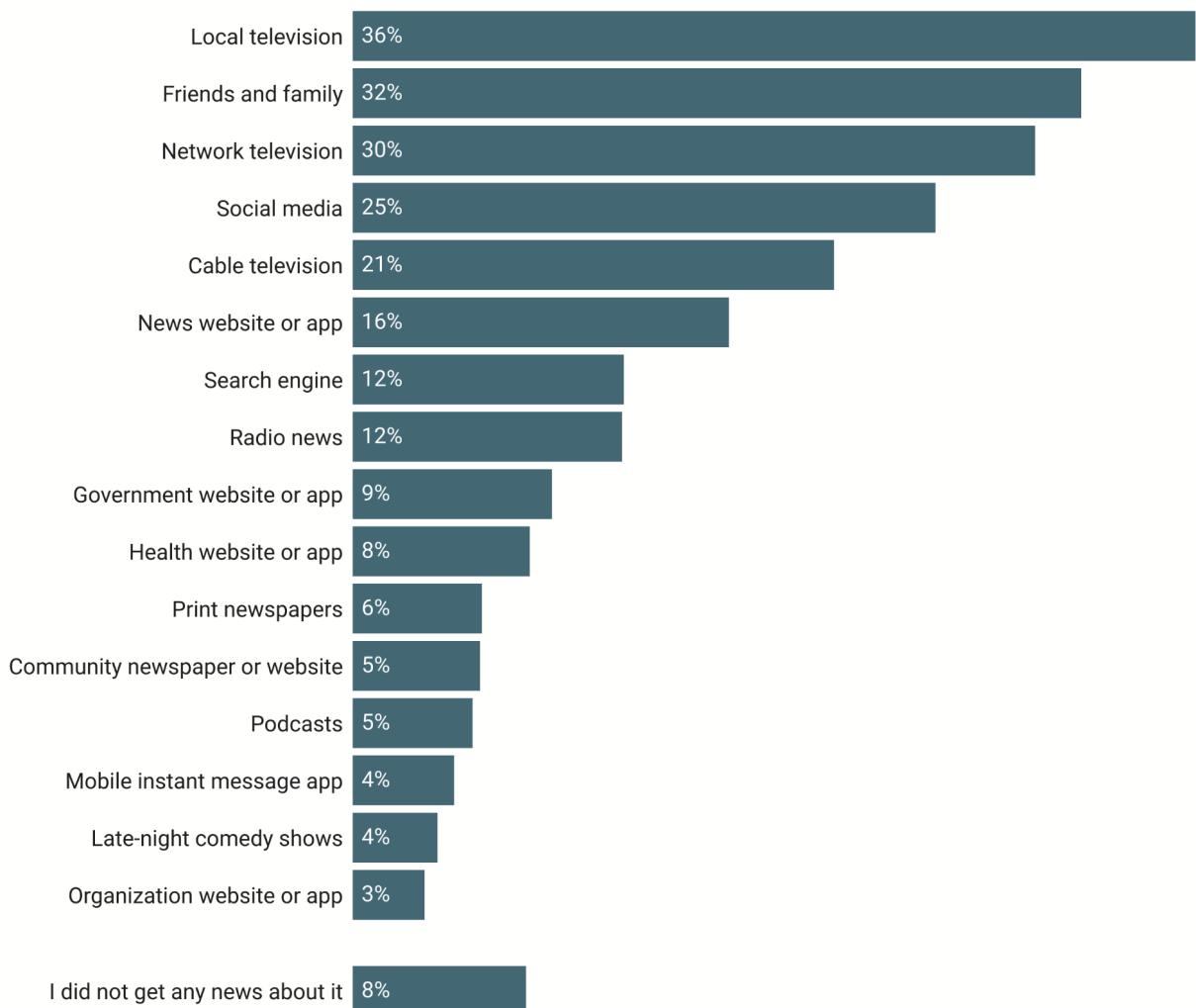
People who got COVID-related news from podcasts were most likely to believe false vaccine claims. Overall, 5% of our respondents cited podcasts as a source of COVID news (Figure 9); nearly a third (31%) of them held vaccine misperceptions (Figure 10). They were closely followed by the 4% of respondents who got COVID news from mobile instant messenger (MIM) apps, among whom 29% believed at least one false claim – roughly one-third more than for Ukraine.

A total of 22% of the respondents citing radio as a source of COVID-19 news believed at least one false claim about the vaccine (12% of Americans used radio for COVID-19 news).

Additionally, 20% of those citing social media believed at least one false claim (25% of respondents cited this source). Similarly, misperceptions were held by 20% of people who got COVID-19 news from friends and family (cited by 32% of respondents), and from organization websites or apps (cited by 3% of respondents). Interestingly, people citing local TV news and network news (two of the most frequently cited sources, selected by 36% and 30% of respondents respectively) – were *least* likely to believe a false claim about the vaccine (14%).

Sources of news about the COVID-19 pandemic

In the last 24 hours, did you get any news or information about COVID-19 from the following sources? (Please select all that apply). [Percent respondents who selected each news source]



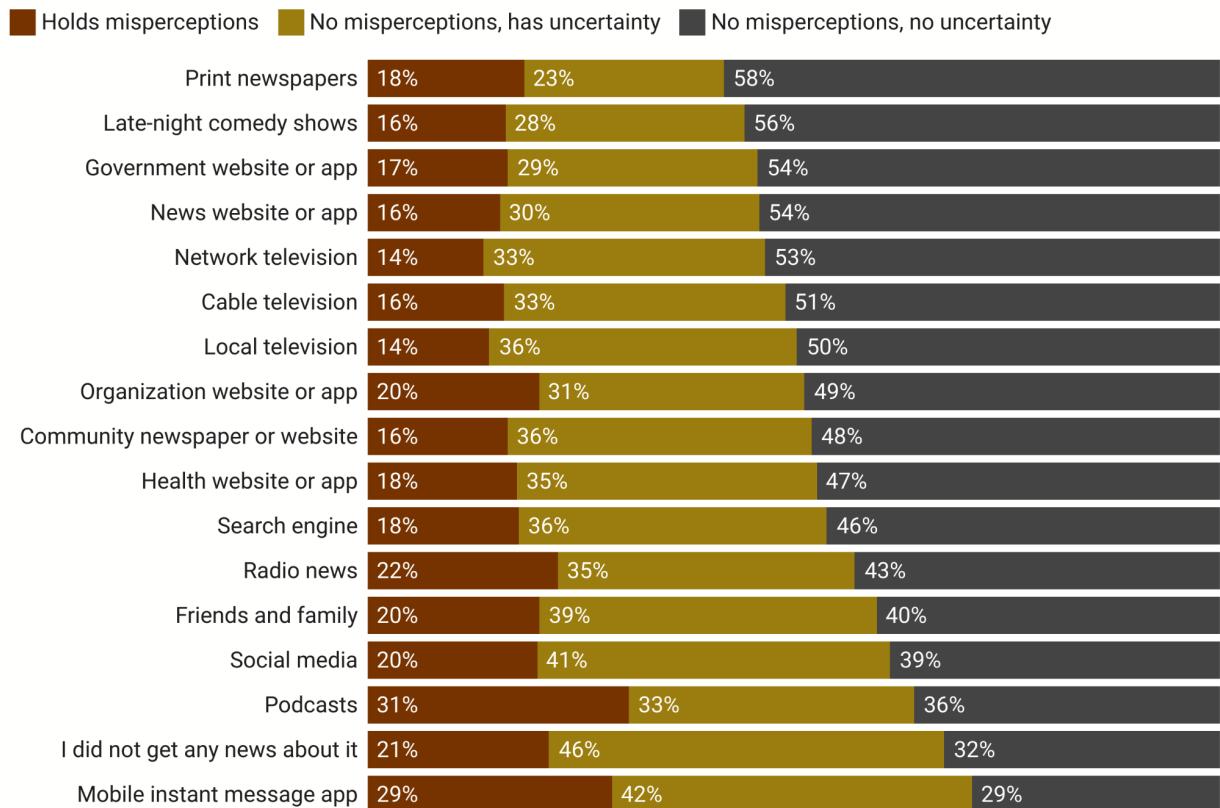
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Figure 9: Sources of news about the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 vaccine misperceptions by news source

In the last 24 hours, did you get any news or information about COVID-19 from the following sources? (Please select all that apply). [Respondents who hold misperceptions about Ukraine among the media source consumers]



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Figure 10: COVID-19 vaccine misperceptions by news source

6. Americans across groups feel “cold” toward Russia and “warm” toward Ukraine

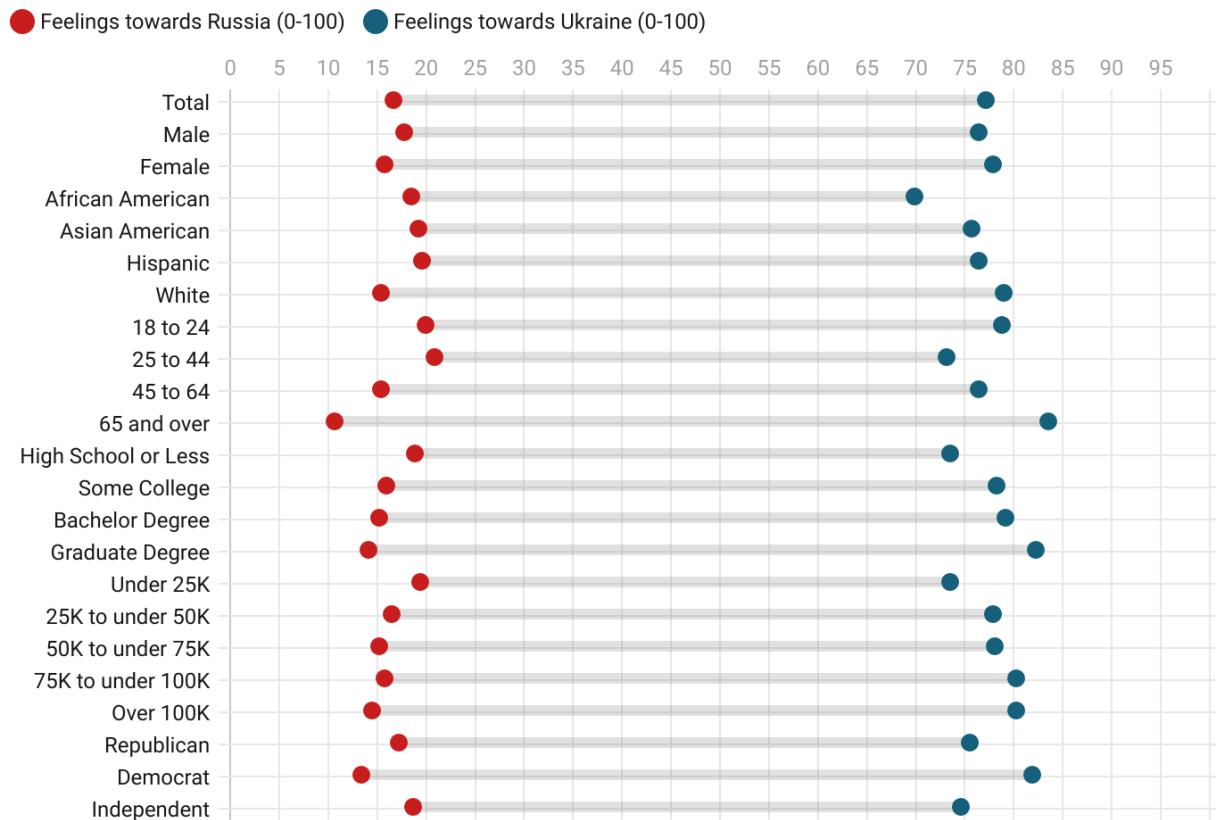
Americans are consistent across groups in their feelings toward Russia and Ukraine, as indicated on a 100-point feeling thermometer, where 0 indicates the coldest feelings and 100 the warmest (Figure 11). Respondents' feelings toward Russia ranged from lows of 11 degrees among those age 65 or older, and 13 degrees among Democrats, to highs of 20-21 degrees among respondents under age 45. At the opposite extreme, Americans have much warmer feelings toward Ukraine, with a low of 70 degrees among Black respondents and highs of 82-84 degrees among Democrats and respondents age 65 or older.

The gap between feelings toward Russia and Ukraine is notably smaller for Republicans (+58 for Ukraine) and Independents (+56 for Ukraine) than for Democrats (+69 points for Ukraine).

Additionally, the feeling gap among white respondents is larger (+64) than for other racial/ethnic groups (+52, degrees in favor of Ukraine among Black respondents, and +57 for Asian American and Hispanic respondents)

Americans' feelings towards Russia and Ukraine

Respondents were asked to rate Russia and Ukraine on a *feeling thermometer* ranging from 0 to 100. Low ratings on the scale mean the respondent feels unfavorable/cold towards the country; high ratings mean that they feel favorable/warm towards the country. A score of 50 is neutral. Points on the chart represent average group scores.



National sample, N = 14,430, Time period: 03/02/2022-04/04/2022

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Figure 11: Americans' feelings towards Russia and Ukraine

6. False beliefs about Ukraine are associated with warmer feelings toward Russia and colder feelings toward Ukraine, as well as with false beliefs regarding COVID-19

Respondents with at least one false belief about Ukraine hold warmer feelings toward Russia and colder feelings toward Ukraine (Figure 12). The gap in feelings between Ukraine and Russia is +37 degrees in favor of Ukraine among respondents holding at least one false belief (64 vs. 27 degrees), compared to +78 degrees in favor of

Ukraine among respondents with no false beliefs (87 vs. 9 degrees). Among respondents who are uncertain about at least one false belief, the gap falls in between (+54 points, 19 vs. 73 degrees).

Misperceptions and feelings towards Russia and Ukraine

Respondents were asked to rate Russia and Ukraine on a *feeling thermometer* ranging from 0 to 100. Low ratings on the scale mean the respondent feels unfavorable/cold towards the country; high ratings mean that they feel favorable/warm towards the country. A score of 50 is neutral. Points on the chart represent average scores for groups based on misperceptions about Ukraine.



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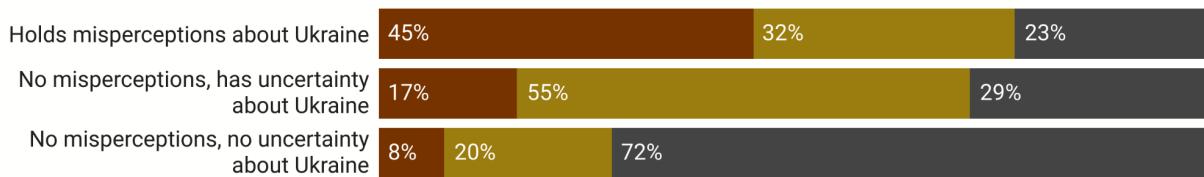
Figure 12: Misperceptions and feelings towards Russia and Ukraine

Additionally, respondents who hold false beliefs about COVID vaccination are more likely to hold false beliefs about Ukraine (Figure 13). Among respondents who hold at least one false belief about Ukraine, 45% also hold misperceptions about the COVID vaccine. In sharp contrast, only 8% of the respondents who have neither false beliefs nor uncertainty about Ukraine hold one or more false beliefs about COVID vaccines.

Misperceptions about Ukraine and about COVID-19 vaccine

The chart shows perception of respondents who hold misperceptions about COVID-19 vaccines within each misperception category for the Russia invasion of Ukraine.

- Holds misperceptions about COVID vaccines
- No misperceptions, has uncertainty about COVID vaccines
- No misperceptions, no uncertainty about COVID vaccines



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Figure 13: Misperceptions about Ukraine and about COVID-19 vaccine

Among respondents who *do* hold misperceptions about Ukraine, 23% hold neither misperceptions nor uncertainty about COVID vaccines. Conversely, 72% of those who correctly identify all false Ukraine claims as inaccurate also do so for false vaccine claims. Finally, we also see a strong association between uncertainty about false claims regarding these two issues: over half of respondents who hold no misperceptions but are uncertain about at least one Ukraine false claim also express uncertainty, but no misperceptions, about at least one Covid false claim.

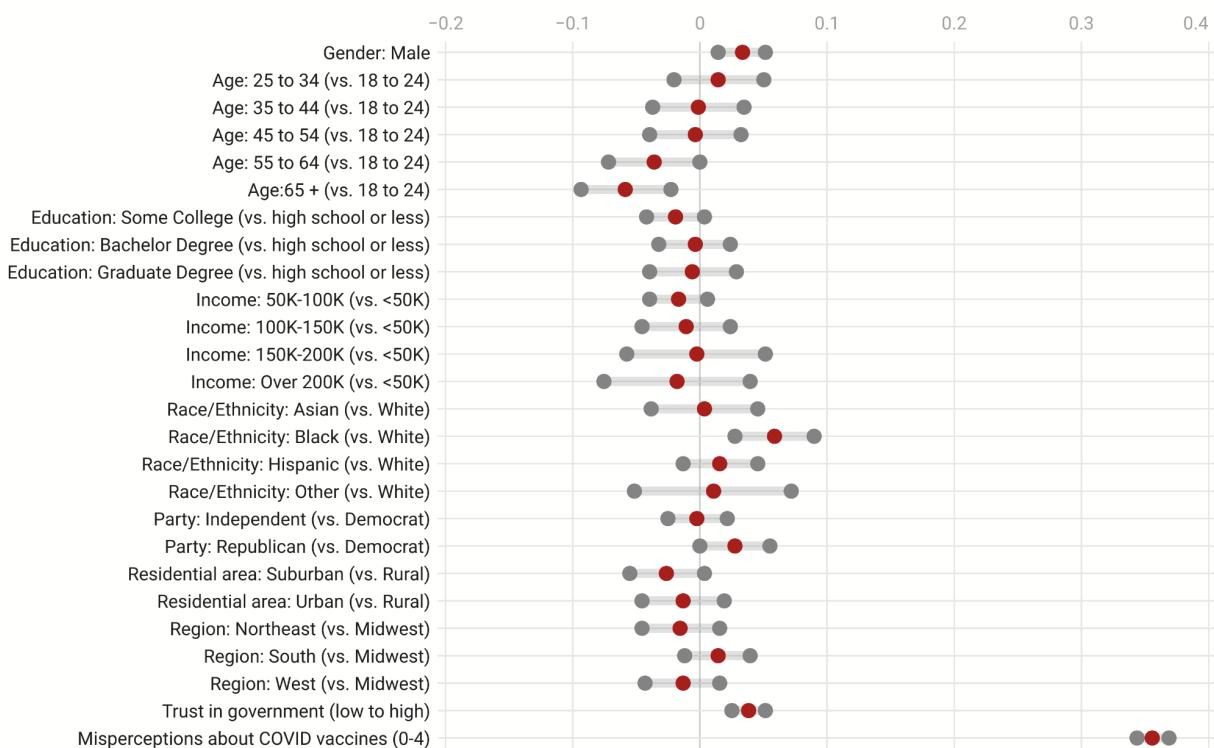
In fact, even after we account for a wide variety of socio-demographic and political identity factors that might contribute to holding false beliefs about Ukraine, **we find that belief in false claims about COVID-19 vaccines is by far the strongest predictor of believing false claims about Ukraine**, with an estimate size almost ten times larger than the next strongest predictor of false beliefs regarding Ukraine. (See Figure 14 for results of multiple regression analysis.)

Ukraine misinformation: Key predictors of holding misperceptions

The numbers are coefficients from OLS regressions. Estimates presented in red, confidence intervals in gray.

Outcome variable: respondents hold at least one of the following four Ukraine misperceptions.

1. Ukraine's government is controlled by Nazis.
2. President Zelenskyy has fled from Ukraine with his family.
3. The Ukrainian army is deploying UN-banned chemical weapons against the Russians.
4. The US is assisting Ukraine in developing chemical and biological weapons in secret laboratories.



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Figure 14: Ukraine misinformation: Key predictors of holding misperceptions