CueAnon: The (not so) Strategic Endorsement of QAnon *

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May 20, 2022

Abstract

One prominent conspiracy theory has recently permeated American politics: QAnon. In 2020 alone, the theory was endorsed by former President Trump and nearly 100 congressional candidates, two of whom took office. While most research investigates why the public embraces conspiracy theories, few studies empirically examine how Americans evaluate politicians who do so. We argued that politicians who endorse QAnon will garner negative mainstream media attention, which could increase name recognition and favorability among voters with low trust in media. Although we find that QAnon-endorsing candidates receive more negative media coverage, a nationally representative vignette experiment reveals little support for the evaluation component of the argument. Next, we conduct a conjoint experiment, varying whether the candidate endorsed QAnon. We find QAnon endorsement decreases support even among seemingly-sympathetic sub-populations. This paper is one of the first to highlight the electoral costs of conspiracy endorsement and complicates the popular narrative about QAnon.

*We thank the Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government, and Public Policy for providing support for this project through The American Social Survey (TASS). We thank Nick Anspach, Ted Enamorado, Hans Hassell, Jonathan Green, Christopher Lucas, Jacob Montgomery, Will Nomikos, Mike Olson, Keith Schnakenberg, Betsy Sinclair, and Carly Wayne for helpful feedback on this manuscript. We thank audiences at MPSA 2021 and Florida State University for feedback. We thank Maggie O'Connor, Taylor Degitz, and Oliver Rosand for research assistance.

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On August 11, 2020, the *New York Times* published an article headlined "Marjorie Taylor Greene, a QAnon Supporter, Wins House Primary in Georgia" (Rosenberg, Herndon and Corasaniti 2020). Given the controversy surrounding the conspiracy theory, other candidates might have tried to distance themselves from the article's claims. But not Greene. She doubled down, tweeting racist and antisemitic conspiracy theories while framing negative coverage of her campaign as evidence of having "made the right enemies." Whether because of, or despite, these tactics, Greene won her race. She continued to court controversy while in office and has become a cause célèbre on the right. Her spokesperson has said she is a "direct reflection of the grassroots across the country" and one Republican operative recently claimed "If you can't get Donald Trump [to endorse you], you are going to want to have MTG in your back pocket" (Asawi and Brodey 2022). Although Greene may be the highest profile supporter of QAnon in Congress, she was not the only one to endorse the conspiracy theory on the 2020 campaign trail. Media Matters, a left-leaning media watchdog, identified 97 congressional candidates in 2020, and 60 (to date) in the lead up to the 2022 midterms, who had done the same (Kaplan 2020, 2021). But how do Americans evaluate candidates who endorse conspiracy theories like QAnon? Does conspiracy theory endorsement cue positive attributes about the candidate, or do these candidates sometimes win despite, rather than due to, their controversial actions?

Conspiracy theories have long played a role in American political behavior (Uscinski and Parent 2014), and research has tended to focus on the underlying predispositions and beliefs that lead some in the mass public to embrace them (e.g., Enders et al. 2022; Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016; Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski 2018). However, the recent movement of conspiracy theory belief into Congress, mayoral offices, and state legislatures raises new concerns as those with power propagate misinformation "from positions that offer a measure of credibility to delusional beliefs" (Bergengruen 2021). Yet we know little about why politicians endorse conspiracy theories and how Ameri-

cans evaluate those who do (but see Arceneaux and Truex N.d.). It is puzzling that elites would embrace QAnon specifically, given its low public support (Enders et al. 2022) and links to extremist violence like the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol (Paresky et al. 2021). As such, endorsement may reflect non-strategic behavior stemming from true beliefs. Alternatively, elites may be acting strategically, taking positions they expect to yield electoral benefit (Mayhew 1974) or commercial gain. Consistent with this logic, some suggest (but do not formally test) the proposition that candidates endorse conspiracy theories to appeal to anti-establishment and disaffected voters (Douglas et al. 2019; Hahl, Kim and Zuckerman Sivan 2018; Uscinski et al. 2021).

We address this gap in the literature by investigating how Americans evaluate candidates who endorse conspiracy theories—QAnon in particular—through a series of pre-registered experiments and observational studies.[1] We focus on QAnon given its relevance to the 2020 cycle and continuing role in the 2022 contests. Given that public support for QAnon is low (Enders et al. 2022), we begin our investigation with a theory about indirect electoral benefits of QAnon endorsement that operate through mainstream media coverage. We hypothesize that supporting QAnon could attract mainstream media attention (Amsalem et al. 2020; Helfer and Aelst 2016) and increase a candidate's name recognition (Kam and Zechmeister 2013). And while we expect this media attention to be negative (Uscinski and Parent 2014), it could counter-intuitively increase candidate evaluations among voters with low trust in media through a backfire effect (Christenson, Kreps and Kriner 2020; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Thorson 2016). To test this theory, we compare all available local and national newspaper coverage of 2020 congressional candidates who endorsed QAnon to a matched sample of candidates who did not. We find no evidence that endorsers earned more coverage, but consistent with expectations, coverage of endorsers is more negative on average. Using those stories as a template, we conduct two waves of a nationally-representative vignette experiment in which we ran-

[1]We pre-registered our pre-analysis plans at [link removed for peer review]. We included anonymized copies with our submission. All studies involving human subjects were IRB approved.

domly assign respondents to read a mock news story about a hypothetical candidate who did or did not endorse QAnon. We also vary the tone of these stories to isolate the effect of negative coverage distinct from the QAnon endorsement. Here, we find that QAnon endorsement does not lead to an increase in candidate favorability or name recognition, even among those with low trust in mainstream media. However, we do find some evidence that endorsers are perceived as more ideologically conservative.

Following practices encouraged by Ryan and Krupnikov (2021), we reconsidered our theory and conducted a pre-registered conjoint experiment to investigate the direct effects of QAnon endorsement as compared to party identification, demographics, and policy positions. Given what we learned from our original study, we theorized that QAnon support might be less a feature and more a bug, even among those theoretically most likely to be influenced by the endorsement. Consistent with this hypothesis, we found that respondents were less likely to vote for a candidate who supported QAnon. This result holds across several theoretically relevant sub-populations including: Republicans, strong conservatives, those with low trust in media, and those with anti-establishment beliefs (Uscinski et al. 2021). Self-identified QAnon supporters ($N = 27$ in our sample) were the only group more likely to vote for candidates who endorsed QAnon. We replicate our finding that endorsement is a strong signal of ideological conservatism, similar in magnitude to supporting a border wall or advocating for low taxes. We suggest that this result may be related to the evolving meaning of "conservatism" and the concept's growing association with former President Trump (Hopkins and Noel 2022).

Our article is one of the first to move beyond the question of why some in the mass public embrace conspiracy theories, investigating the increasingly relevant question of how Americans evaluate politicians who do the same (see also Arceneaux and Truex N.d.). Across a series of rigorous, pre-registered studies, we provide evidence that Americans do not evaluate QAnon-endorsing candidates favorably. Respondents, even those with low trust in media and anti-establishment beliefs (Uscinski et al. 2021), consistently

rate endorsers no more favorably than non-endorsing candidates. And even as endorsement increases perceptions of ideological conservatism, we find little evidence that QAnon support helps candidates win office among conservatives. Instead, we return to a common theme of American politics: party identification over everything. Even if endorsing a conspiracy theory like QAnon is not necessarily helpful to one's candidacy, it is not disqualifying.

How do Americans evaluate candidates who embrace QAnon?

Broadly, a conspiracy is "a secret plot by two or more powerful actors...to usurp political or economic power, violate rights, infringe upon established agreements, withhold vital secrets, or alter bedrock institutions," and conspiracy theories attempt to explain the causes of events via such secret plots (Douglas et al. 2019, 4). Both political (e.g. JFK Assassination) and non-political (e.g. Flat Earth) conspiracy theories have long circulated among Americans, and over the past decade, political scientists have made great strides in understanding the attributes that make some in the mass public more susceptible to conspiracy theory belief. For example, Miller, Saunders and Farhart (2016) argue that the politically knowledgeable, ideologically extreme, and the mistrustful are more prone to believe ideologically consistent conspiracy theories. Oliver and Wood (2014) and Uscinski and Parent (2014) point to various underlying predispositions toward conspiratorial thinking. Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka (2016) argue that existential, epistemic, and social psychological motives drive people to believe conspiracy theories. Much of this research further emphasizes that conspiracy theories are not a new force among the American mass public (e.g., Atkinson and DeWitt 2018), and they may appeal to a second dimension of American identity focused on anti-establishment orientations orthogonal to classic left-right conflict (Uscinski et al. 2021).

Understanding the microfoundations and consequences of conspiracy theory belief

among the mass public is important, but these theories do not fully capture the role conspiracy theories play in American politics—where politicians propagate them and members of the public evaluate, and vote for, these candidates. In their review of the political conspiracy theory literature, Douglas et al. (2019, 23) note that "As political leaders such as Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán increasingly use conspiracy theories to discredit the opposition and win votes, these questions have never been more important." Recent research suggests that politicians may promote conspiracy theories to spur collective action when out of power (Atkinson and DeWitt 2018), create distrust to preserve the status quo (Bräuninger and Marinov N.d.), or attack the opposition in weak states (Radnitz 2018; Douglas et al. 2019) but the question remains open. From a candidate evaluation perspective, Arceneaux and Truex (N.d.) experimentally show that Republican candidates who claim Donald Trump won the election see a boost in their chances of winning an election, but it is not clear if this finding holds for other high-profile conspiracy theories.

One conspiracy theory in particular, QAnon, has garnered widespread attention and media coverage in the past several years.[2] QAnon reflects an intricate web of conspiracy theories all pointing to the (unsupported) claim that satanic pedophiles have infiltrated Washington D.C., Hollywood, and the media—but Donald Trump will bring the guilty to justice. According to the most recent available information on the theory, QAnon began in the shadows of a fringe social media platform called 4chan in 2017. The original poster identified him or herself as "Q" and alleged to be a government official with access to classified information. Q maintained anonymity, posting unsubstantiated claims about the satanic cabal conspiring against Donald Trump. The theory gained traction and moved offline, with people showing support for Q at rallies throughout 2018 and onward. In 2019, the FBI designated QAnon a domestic terrorist threat,[3] and since then, it has been linked to several instances of political violence, including most notably the Capitol Riot

[2]For more information on QAnon, see https://www.usatoday.com/web-stories/what-is-qanon/

[3]https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/local-fbi-field-office-warns-conspiracy-theory-driven-domestic-extremists-n1038441

on January 6, 2021.[4]

Despite the negative valence, some political candidates have embraced QAnon. At multiple points during the 2020 campaign, former President Trump spoke approvingly of the conspiracy theory and its adherents.[5] Some, such as Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert, have supported the conspiracy theory, particularly on Twitter, but have since backtracked on some of their past remarks.[6] Others have been quieter in their support, using subtle cues, retracting statements, or waffling on whether they believe. All in all, nearly 100 congressional candidates indicated support for the conspiracy theory in 2020 (Kaplan 2020) and 60 candidates have done the same in the run up to the 2022 midterms (Kaplan 2021), including the recent winner of the Republican primary for Pennsylvania Governor.[7] While politicians embracing conspiracy theories is not necessarily new, we know little about how voters evaluate such candidates.

In this paper, we investigate how Americans evaluate candidates who embrace conspiracy theories, specifically QAnon. On the one hand, we might suspect that candidates would be cautious in broadcasting support for a conspiracy theory with ties to extremism, violence, and the disruption of democratic transitions, as well as one with low public support (Enders et al. 2022). As such, candidates could endorse QAnon non-strategically, stemming from true beliefs in the underlying conspiracy theory. Yet candidates are often modeled as strategic actors who take positions carefully in an effort to appeal to voters (Mayhew 1974). If a cohort of politicians saw fit to take a position on QAnon, then perhaps they did so to appeal to a certain type of voter with the expectation of electoral benefit. Regardless of whether this behavior is strategically motivated, Americans may still learn about it and evaluate these candidates in that context. We theorize about those

[4] https://abcnews.go.com/US/qanon-emerges-recurring-theme-criminal-cases-tied-us/story?id=75347445

[5] https://apnews.com/535e145ee67dd757660157be39d05d3f

[6] https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackbrewster/2021/02/04/rep-majorie-taylor-greene-i-stopped-believing-qanon-in-2018-media-is-just-as-guilty/?sh=5dca69bc25a4

[7] https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/16-gop-primaries-to-watch-in-north-carolina-pennsylvania-idaho-and-oregon/

evaluations in the next section.

Direct and Indirect Effects of Conspiracy Theory Endorsement

The benefits (or costs) of QAnon endorsement could be direct or indirect. At the time of our research, most Americans had not heard of QAnon, and those who had tended to have negative impressions of it (Pew Research Center 2020). As such, individuals might not feel more favorable toward candidates because they endorse QAnon. Yet, endorsing QAnon might draw other benefits that lead to support, such as cueing anti-establishment or conservative values, drawing media attention, or provoking the left. In this case, there is no direct benefit of endorsing QAnon, but Americans might still reward candidates who do as a consequence of the downstream effects of endorsement. Alternatively, and more simply, there could be direct benefits to a candidate for endorsing QAnon. Americans might prefer candidates who embrace QAnon over candidates who do not. Much like candidates can be rewarded for taking a position on gun control, candidates can take a position on QAnon and be rewarded or punished for it.

In this paper, we investigate both types of effects. First, we present our initial theory involving indirect benefits that operate through mainstream media coverage. As previewed, the results of this analysis offer little support for the expectations that QAnon endorsement can increase media coverage or that negative mainstream media coverage increases candidate favorability among those with low trust in media. Our results were more consistent with the idea that endorsing QAnon produced either no benefits, or even costs, to the candidate. As such, we tested the direct effects of QAnon endorsement on vote choice in a pre-registered conjoint experiment. Here, we find evidence consistent with the hypothesis that QAnon-endorsement is costly to the endorsing candidate in terms of vote choice and favorability.

Indirect Effects via Media Coverage

Voters pay little attention to politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Zaller 1992) and rely on heuristics like partisanship, incumbency, or name recognition to make electoral decisions (Downs 1957; Kam and Zechmeister 2013; Popkin 1991; Schaffner and Streb 2002). Candidates, especially challengers running in low salience races, may struggle to break through—unless they find a way to become the subject of a "good story" (Hamilton 2011). From the media's perspective, that means a story with conflict, competition, and negative information (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Groeling 2010; Helfer and Aelst 2016). Politicians can take advantage of market incentives and make themselves more newsworthy by exhibiting less agreeable personality traits (Amsalem et al. 2020) or taking ideologically extreme positions (Wagner and Gruszczynski 2018). We argue that endorsing QAnon would similarly increase candidate news coverage (**Hypothesis 1**). Given the nature of QAnon as a conspiracy theory—an unpopular one with ties to extremism and violence—we hypothesize that coverage of those candidates would be more negative (**Hypothesis 2**).

In the abstract, candidates might want to avoid negative news coverage. However, we argue that in this case, negative coverage may not uniformly decrease candidate evaluations. Coverage, irrespective of tone, can increase name recognition (Burden 2002; Kam and Zechmeister 2013) and in a more partisan and polarized media environment (see Prior 2013, for a review), media consumers may view the coverage through a partisan lens (Baum and Gussin 2008; Smith and Searles 2014). Those with low trust in media may view negative mainstream coverage as a cue of candidate quality through a mechanism like the hostile media effect (Arceneaux, Johnson and Murphy 2012; Arceneaux and Johnson 2015; Coe et al. 2008; Vallone, Ross and Lepper 1985) or backfire effect (Christenson, Kreps and Kriner 2020; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Thorson 2016; but see Wood and Porter 2019). Indeed, some Republican operatives have recently suggested that provoking mainstream media outlets is a good strategy for Republican candidates to gain credibility with

primary voters (Asawi and Brodey 2022; Cramer 2021; Swan and Markay 2022).

Broadly speaking, this theory suggests that individuals with low trust in media will be more likely to favor candidates who garner negative coverage than those with high trust in media (**Hypothesis 3a**). Similarly, we suspect that those with low trust in media will be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016; Oliver and Wood 2014) and will feel warmer toward a candidate who endorses a conspiracy theory and receives negative media coverage, compared to one covered neutrally (**Hypothesis 3b**) or one covered negatively but who did not endorse a conspiracy theory (**Hypothesis 3c**). Given QAnon's partisan valence, we have analogous expectations for Republicans as compared to Democrats (**Hypothesis 4a-c**) which we discuss in the appendix. We also suspect that negative coverage and conspiracy endorsement will increase candidate name recognition (**Hypothesis 5**). And finally, given our expectations about ideological cues, we hypothesize that negative coverage and QAnon endorsement will increase perceptions of ideological conservatism (**Hypothesis 6**).

Indirect Effects of Conspiracy Theory Endorsement

Before investigating how Americans evaluate candidates who endorse QAnon, we first establish whether QAnon-endorsing candidates earn more media coverage and whether that media coverage is more negative on average. If QAnon-endorsing candidates received less coverage than non-endorsing candidates, or their coverage was not negative, our experiment would lack external validity. However, the primary purpose of this article is to understand *evaluations* of conspiracy theory-endorsing candidates. As such, we summarize this observational research before discussing our experiment in more detail. We refer readers interested in more details about the observational analysis to Appendix A.

Observational Evidence: Quantity and Tone of Candidate Coverage

Our objective was to test two hypotheses: that QAnon-endorsing candidates would garner more, and more negative, mainstream news coverage than candidates who chose not to endorse QAnon. To do so, we scraped data on 3,632 House and Senate candidates from `Ballotpedia.com` who ran in congressional primaries in 2020. We supplemented this data with an indicator for whether the candidate had ever endorsed QAnon, as identified by Media Matters (Kaplan 2020). However, endorsing and non-endorsing candidates differ in important ways. To address this concern and achieve balance across groups, we constructed a matched set of QAnon-endorsers and otherwise similar candidates who did not endorse QAnon based on the covariates we collected. Following Darr, Hitt and Dunaway (2018), we created the matched set through the use of Genetic Matching (Diamond and Sekhon 2013), which yielded a sample with 275 unique (unweighted) candidates.

Next, we collected all newspaper coverage of each candidate in our sample between January 1 and November 2, 2020 from Nexis Uni. Overall, the mean number of articles-per-candidate in our dataset is 8.7, but because a small number of candidates received extensive news coverage, the mean is highly skewed.[8] To determine whether endorsing candidates received more coverage, we regressed the total number of articles on an indicator for QAnon endorsement using a negative binomial model. Results are shown in Appendix Table A3. When we estimate the predicted effect of endorsement on the predictor scale, we find, contrary to Hypothesis 1, that endorsing candidates received 1.32 fewer articles on average. However this difference is not statistically different from 0. Two research assistants then read a random sample of 300 articles and coded each news story as either negative or non-negative. We trained an ensemble classifier to code the remaining articles in the same way. As presented in Appendix Table A3, we find that endorsing QAnon is associated with a statistically significant increase in overall nega-

[8]For example, QAnon-endorser Marjorie Taylor Greene received 301 articles, and a non-endorsing candidate, Carlos Giménez, received 525.

tive news coverage—3.67 additional negative articles on average, meaning that we find evidence to support Hypothesis 2. Candidates who endorse QAnon receive the same amount of coverage as their non-endorsing counterparts, on average. However, the tone of that coverage is more likely to be negative for endorsers.[9]

Experimental Evidence: Favorability, Name Recognition, and Ideological Perceptions

We have provided some evidence that when congressional candidates endorse QAnon, they receive more negative news coverage in mainstream national and local newspapers. Here, we investigate whether this coverage provokes differential evaluations of candidates among those with high and low trust in mainstream media.

Experimental Design

Our pre-registered experiments were fielded on the November 2020 and March 2021 waves of the American Social Survey (TASS), which draws a nationally representative cross sectional sample of respondents from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. A total of 1,962 individuals participated in our experiment, 978 in the first wave and 984 in the second.[10] First, respondents in our study answered a series of questions measuring their political attitudes and preferences. We obtained pre-treatment measures of trust in media as well as their impression of the QAnon conspiracy theory. In both waves, many respondents were unfamiliar with QAnon—55% in the first wave and 52% in the second. Among those who provided an evaluation, just 11% of respondents expressed positive sentiments, indicating just how unpopular QAnon is among the general public (see also Enders et al. 2022). In addition, we obtained pre-

[9] Another approach would be to look at within-candidate variation, comparing coverage before and after each candidate endorsed QAnon. However, we were not able to identify concrete dates for all candidate endorsements. Moreover, some candidates endorsed before formally announcing their candidacy. A difference-in-differences approach is not feasible in this context.

[10] We pool both waves in this analysis but analyze each wave separately in Appendix B.1-B.2.

treatment demographic information for each respondent from NORC. These variables included perceived importance of following the news, party identification, ideology, age, education, income, gender, and race.[11]

In addition to indicators for each experimental condition, we conducted our analysis with a pre-treatment moderator: trust in the mainstream media.[12] We asked respondents the following question: "In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media—such as newspapers, TV, and radio—when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?" Across both waves, we found that 145 respondents (8%) had a great deal of trust in the mainstream media, 829 (42%) had a fair amount, 746 (38%) had not very much, and 238 (13%) had none at all. As anticipated, trust in media was lower among Republicans and Republican leaners, with 74 percent saying "not very much" or "none at all" versus 35 percent of Democrats, Democratic leaners, and Independents expressing lower trust.

After answering unrelated questions, respondents in our experiment were asked to read a short headline and paragraph about a hypothetical congressional candidate, which we noted could have appeared in a mainstream newspaper. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions with equal probability. Across all three conditions, respondents read about a fictional state representative who lost a bid for a seat in the House of Representatives in the November 2020 election.[13] In the control condition, which we call *Neutral*, we described John Smith as having run a well-organized but unsuccessful campaign. The full text of each treatment is presented in Table 1.

Our goal was to analyze the effects of negative coverage both unrelated to, and as

[11] All covariates are balanced with the exception of Latino and Asian identifying respondents (Appendix Table B1). Appendix B.1-B.2 shows substantively similar results when we control for all covariates and find substantively similar results.

[12] We preregistered a second moderator variable, party identification, which we measured on a 7-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican. Results for this analysis are presented in Appendix B.2.

[13] In Wave 1, the candidate's name was John Smith. In Wave 2, we changed the candidate's name to John Cunningham. Pilot tests fielded on Mechanical Turk did not reveal variation in evaluations based on the candidate's name.

a consequence of, QAnon endorsement. We created two treatment conditions to disentangle these effects. In the *Negative* condition, respondents read the same headline and a similar paragraph about John Smith, but we described his campaign as poorly organized and wildly unsuccessful; we replaced a positive constituent quote with a negative one. The *QAnon* condition was identical to the *Negative* condition except we noted in the headline that John Smith was a QAnon supporter and informed readers in the article text that he was a "vocal supporter of the convoluted QAnon conspiracy theory."[14]

To determine how the treatments influenced respondents' attitudes toward the candidate, we asked respondents to tell us how they felt about John Smith on a 101-point feeling thermometer.[15] In Wave 2, we also asked for respondents' perceptions of the candidate's ideology on a 7-point scale ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative.

Later in the survey, after respondents answered unrelated questions, we presented a text box and asked if they could remember the candidate's name. To measure whether respondents accurately recalled the candidate's name, we subtracted 1 from the Jaro-Winkler string distance between their response and the candidate's name (John Smith in Wave 1 and John Cunningham in Wave 2). This dependent variable ranges from 0 (no match) to 1 (perfect match).[16]

[14]To ensure our articles were perceived as neutral and negative, we conducted a pilot study. On a seven point scale where 0 was extremely negative, 3 was neutral, and 6 was extremely positive, respondents rated both the *Conspiracy* and *Negative* treatments as negative (mean 2.11 and 2.06 respectively). The *Neutral* treatment was rated as neutral (mean 3.08) and was statistically distinguishable from the negative articles. N=250, Tested on Mechanical Turk on September 24, 2020.

[15]The question wording for the feeling thermometer question was: "How warm or cold do you feel toward the candidate in the article? Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the candidate. Ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the candidate and that you don't care too much for him. You would rate him at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the candidate."

[16]For robustness, we created an alternative measure of name recognition where respondents whose response included either the candidate's first or last name were coded as 1, and 0 otherwise. These methods were flexible to account for misspelling or instances where respondents only entered the candidate's last name.

Table 1: News Article Treatments

Treatment	Text
Neutral	**Statehouse Representative Loses Congressional Bid** John Smith, a two-term state representative, recently ran for an open seat in the House of Representatives. Mr. Smith won his last election to the statehouse, but his latest bid for Congress has proven to be unsuccessful. He lost the congressional election by a wide margin, but his campaign was well organized. Constituents had mixed feelings about the election outcome. One constituent tweeted "Smith's bid for Congress was a joke, So glad the people have spoken: Smith is a loser." Yet, another commented "Smith ran a strong campaign and advanced a lot of great ideas for our district. I hope he gets the chance to run again." He pledged to bring fresh ideas to Washington and ensure his constituents had their voices heard, but he will have to wait to try again in 2022.
Negative	**Statehouse Representative Loses Congressional Bid** John Smith, a two-term state representative, recently ran for an open seat in the House of Representatives. Mr. Smith barely won his last election to the statehouse, and his latest bid for Congress has proven to be wildly unsuccessful. He lost the congressional election in a landslide, and his campaign was poorly organized. Constituents had good feelings about the election outcome. One constituent tweeted "Smith's bid for Congress was a joke. So glad the people have spoken: Smith is a loser." Another commented "Smith ran a weak campaign and advanced a lot of terrible ideas for our district. I hope he never gets the chance to run again." He pledged to bring fresh ideas to Washington and ensure his constituents had their voices heard, but he will have to wait to try again in 2022.
QAnon	**Statehouse Representative, QAnon Supporter, Loses Congressional Bid** John Smith, a two-term state representative, recently ran for an open seat in the House of Representatives. Mr. Smith is a vocal supporter of the convoluted QAnon conspiracy theory. Mr. Smith barely won his last election to the statehouse, and his latest bid for Congress has proven to be wildly unsuccessful. He lost the congressional election in a landslide, and his campaign was poorly organized. Constituents had good feelings about the election outcome. One constituent tweeted "Smith's bid for Congress was a joke. So glad the people have spoken: Smith is a loser." Another commented "Smith ran a weak campaign and advanced a lot of terrible ideas for our district. I hope he never gets the chance to run again." He pledged to bring fresh ideas to Washington and ensure his constituents had their voices heard, but he will have to wait to try again in 2022.

Results: Trust in Media Moderates the Effect of Media Coverage on Candidate Favorability, But No One Likes QAnon Candidates

If our hypotheses concerning trust in media are correct, we would expect respondents

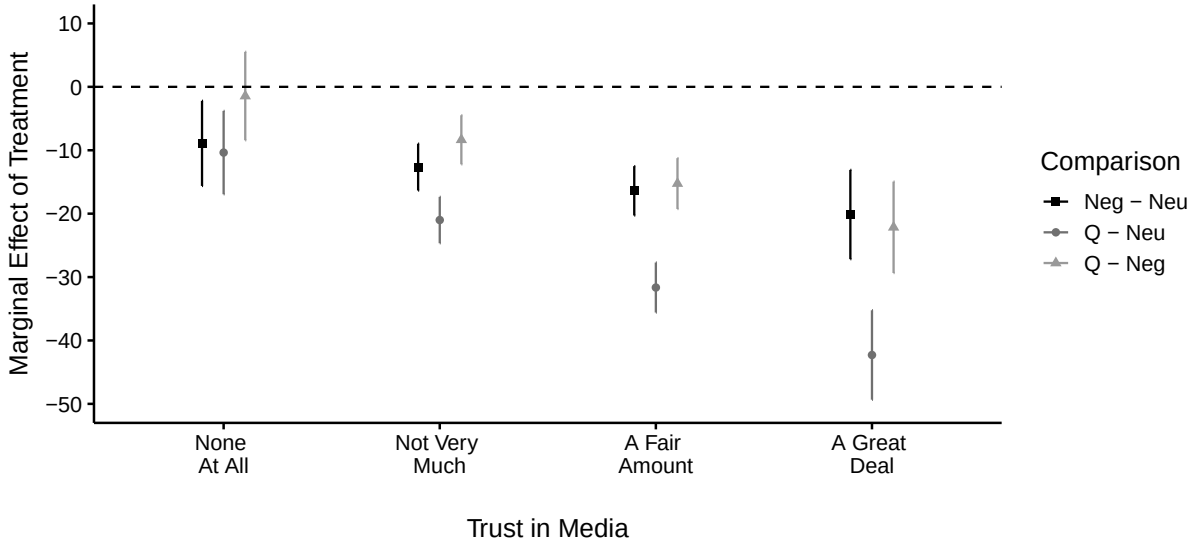

Figure 1: Average marginal effects of each treatment comparison for varying levels of trust in media. Consistent with our expectations, those with higher trust in media feel cooler toward the *Negative* candidate and even cooler toward the *QAnon* candidate. In contrast to our expectations, those with low trust in media feel cooler toward the candidate in both treatments as compared to the *Neutral* candidate. However, low trust respondents feel significantly warmer toward either treated candidate than those with high trust.

with low trust in media to feel warmer toward the candidate in the *Negative* condition as compared to the *Neutral* condition. We also expect low trust respondents to feel warmer toward the candidate in *QAnon* condition relative to the other two conditions. We expect the opposite results for those with high trust in media. To investigate these hypotheses, we pool both survey waves and estimate all effects at the individual level using ordinary least squares. Below, in Figure 1, we present the average marginal effects of particular treatment comparisons for each level of trust in media. We include the regression table for our model, as well as analyses that include a series of controls and weights, as well as each wave separately, in Appendix B.1-B.2.

In Figure 1, black squares represent the point estimate of the difference in candidate evaluations for respondents assigned to the *Negative* condition as compared to the *Neutral*

condition. The error bars (and all error bars in Figure 1) are estimated at the Bonferroni corrected level for 12 tests ($\alpha = 0.004$). The general trend as one becomes more trusting in media is negative, as expected. We find that the difference between those with the highest and lowest amount of trust are statistically distinguishable at the 0.95 level.[17] The marginal effect of the treatment for those with higher levels of trust is negative as expected, however, it is also negative and statistically significant for those with lower levels of trust in media, which runs counter to our expectations. Thus, we fail to support Hypothesis 3a.

The results are similar across the remaining comparisons. Dark gray circles represent the difference in evaluations between the *QAnon* and *Neutral* conditions. Consistent with our expectations, the highest trust respondents feel a full 42 points cooler toward a QAnon-endorsing candidate. In contrast to our expectations in Hypothesis 3b, however, we find evidence that those with low trust feel more negatively toward a QAnon-endorsing candidate as well. However, the difference between those with the lowest and highest levels of trust in media are, again, statistically distinguishable.

Light gray triangles examine differences in candidate evaluations between those in the *Negative* condition as compared to the *QAnon* condition. Here, we find evidence that those with high trust in media feel roughly 22 points cooler toward the QAnon endorsing candidate. In contrast to our expectations in Hypothesis 3c, we conclude that, for those with low trust in media, learning a candidate endorses QAnon does nothing to increase or decrease evaluations relative to seeing a candidate garner negative coverage.

Next, we investigate whether candidates who received negative coverage were more easily recalled by respondents. In Appendix B.3, we present results from regressions in which the dependent variable is the Jaro-Winkler string similarly score, a measure of how similar two strings are based on the number of mismatched characters between them. We regress this variable on the treatment indicators using ordinary least squares. In

[17] To determine within-treatment differences, we conduct 1000 bootstraps of the marginal effects and calculated the 95% quantile.

Table 2: Endorsing QAnon causes respondents to believe a candidate is more ideologically conservative

	All Respondents	Republicans	Low Trust in Media
Negative	0.10	−0.31	0.14
	(0.10)	(0.16)	(0.14)
QAnon	1.04***	0.34*	0.79***
	(0.10)	(0.16)	(0.13)
Constant	4.06***	4.17***	4.02***
	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.09)
R^2	0.11	0.04	0.07
Adj. R^2	0.11	0.04	0.07
Num. obs.	977	398	506

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

contrast to Hypotheses 5—that we would find positive and statistically significant effects of treatment on name recall—we do not find any evidence of effect.

Finally, in Table 2, we use wave 2 data to investigate the effects of negative coverage and QAnon endorsement on perceptions that the candidate is ideologically conservative. In the first column, we use ordinary least squares to regress the seven-point rating of ideology on the two treatment conditions among all respondents. Here, we find that the *Negative* treatment alone does not have a detectable effect on beliefs that the candidate is ideologically conservative. However, we do find that endorsing QAnon increases perceptions of ideological conservatism by a full point. However, this effect could be driven primarily by Democrats, who were more likely to know about QAnon at the time of our survey (Pew Research Center 2020). To investigate this possibility, we estimate the same model among Republican identifiers in column 2, and those with low trust in media (responded either "none at all" or "not very much" trust in media) in column 3. Although the effect sizes are attenuated in both cases, we see that when a candidate endorses QAnon, he is perceived as more conservative among electorally relevant sub-populations.

To summarize our findings: those with high trust in media feel cooler toward a candidate receiving negative coverage and even cooler toward a candidate who endorses

QAnon. Yet, we do not find evidence that those with lower trust in media feel *warmer* toward negatively covered candidates or negatively covered QAnon-endorsers, relative to neutrally covered candidates.[18] Further, we find no evidence that either negative coverage or QAnon endorsement causes an increase in name recall. However, we find that QAnon endorsement causes respondents to believe the candidate is more ideologically conservative.

We also considered possible issues with the vignettes that could have led to small negative, rather than positive, evaluations. For example, the candidate was described as recently losing the election, which might have led people to decrease their evaluations. We tested this possibility using a brief follow-up experiment on Mechanical Turk where the candidate was described as winning the election, but we find the same results. We also considered whether the use of constituent quotes might have obscured our intention to signal that the mainstream news outlet was responsible for the negativity. We tested this in another follow-up experiment on Mechanical Turk by modifying the vignettes to exclude commentary from constituents. We still observe the same effects. As with any vignette experiment, there are myriad other features that could have led to the effects we did (or did not) observe. Our results are robust to some of these potential modifications to the vignette itself, but future work could continue to probe theory-driven extensions. We present these results in Appendix B.4.

Direct Effects of QAnon Endorsement

To this point, our results do not suggest that candidates indirectly benefit from endorsing QAnon. Although trust in media moderates the effect of QAnon endorsement on favorability as we expected, respondents with low media trust never *increased* their evaluations of the candidate. Candidates who endorse QAnon receive a drop in favora-

[18] In Appendix B.1-B.2, we also present results of these regressions holding seven-point party identification and seven-point ideology at their means (as well as several other covariates). As we come to substantively similar results, we conclude that these effects are not simply driven by the correlation between trust in media, ideology, and party identification.

bility among people who trust the mainstream media and people who distrust the media are, at best, indifferent toward them. Indifference does not win elections. These findings led us to reconsider just how strategic QAnon endorsement is. The results seemed more consistent with a theory in which there are no electoral benefits to endorsing QAnon and people vote for QAnon candidates *despite* their endorsement.

Decades of research on American political behavior hold that voters rely primarily on partisanship when making electoral decisions (Campbell et al. 1960). For many voters, then, it is possible that QAnon endorsement has either no effect on vote choice, or as suggested by our experimental results, a negative effect. To this end, we pre-registered three additional hypotheses: first, that a candidate's support for QAnon will not cause respondents to increase their likelihood of voting for that candidate **(Hypothesis 7)**. Relatedly, we expect that a candidate's support for QAnon will not cause respondents to increase their favorability toward the candidate **(Hypothesis 8)**. We expect these hypotheses to hold among relevant subgroups such as Republicans, those with low trust in media, and those with anti-establishment beliefs (Uscinski et al. 2021). However, given the literature on position-taking and cueing (Popkin 1991; Zaller 1992), we suspect that QAnon might lead voters to draw inferences about a candidate's ideology—that the candidate is more conservative—even if they view the endorsement itself negatively **(Hypothesis 9)**.

Data and Methods

To test these hypotheses, we conducted a pre-registered conjoint experiment (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014) in November 2021. A conjoint experiment is uniquely suited to our purposes because it allows us to simultaneously test the independent, causal effect of QAnon support on vote choice compared to other candidate characteristics, such as policy positions and past political experience.

We recruited a sample of 350 Republicans and 350 Democrats who live in the United

States from the survey platform Prolific (Palan and Schitter 2018).[19] We balanced our sample on gender, but our sample is not nationally representative. Participants opted in to take surveys on Prolific and opted in to completing our specific survey, conditional on our screening criteria (US residents, Republicans, Democrats, balance on gender). We present our available sample demographics in Appendix Table C1. We included a pre-treatment attention check and removed failing participants from the analysis.[20]

In the experiment, we presented participants with two side-by-side profiles of hypothetical congressional candidates who vary independently across eight attributes. Participants were asked to report which candidate they would vote for to represent them in Congress, repeating the task a total of ten times and viewing a total of twenty unique candidate profiles. After reporting which candidate they would vote for, half of the respondents were randomly assigned to rate each candidate on a 7-point favorability scale while the other half rated each candidate's ideology on a 7-point scale.

Table 3 summarizes the profiles shown to participants and the attribute levels. All levels within each attribute were randomized independently and uniformly within each profile. We block randomized the order in which attributes appeared at the respondent level. We randomized the order of the four policy attributes (i.e. impeachment, immigration, economics, infrastructure), and the four non-policy attributes (i.e., gender, party, QAnon, prior political experience), then randomized which block (i.e., policy, non-policy) respondents saw first. The order was then fixed across the ten choice tasks for each respondent.

We chose to present eight attributes in an effort to obfuscate the key covariate of interest: QAnon endorsement. However, we chose attributes that would provide sufficient variation about the types of candidates from which voters could choose. Party identification was key to our hypotheses and gender is a standard attribute included in conjoint

[19] Power analyses indicated that we needed a minimum sample size of 314 of each partisan subgroup.

[20] In the analysis stage, we also discovered that four independents had taken our survey. We exclude them from the analysis, but this choice does not materially affect our results.

Table 3: Attributes and levels in the conjoint experiment.

Attribute	Level
Party	Republican Democrat
Gender	Male Female
QAnon	Publicly Supported QAnon Has Not Publicly Supported QAnon
Prior Political Experience	State Representative U.S. Senator No prior political experience
Position on Trump's Second Impeachment	Supported Impeachment Opposed Impeachment
Position on U.S.-Mexico Immigration Policy	Supports Building a Border Wall Opposes Building a Border Wall
Position on Economic Policy	Lower taxes, but fewer government services Higher taxes, but more government services
Position on Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill	Supports Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill Opposes Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill

experiments. We also included past political experience as a way to assess preferences for political outsiders. In terms of policy, we chose impeachment to disentangle the direct effects of Trump-support on candidate choice (Arceneaux and Truex N.d.) unrelated to conspiracy belief. The border wall attribute is a proxy for Trump-conservatism (Hopkins and Noel 2022), whereas tax policy provides long-standing distinctions between liberal and conservative candidates. Finally, support for the infrastructure bill provides an indication of the candidate's bipartisan tendencies.

Our primary dependent variable of interest (i.e. Hypothesis 7) is the binary vote choice measure. We analyze our data at the candidate-profile level, meaning that there are twenty rows for each respondent in our data. For each candidate profile, the dependent variable takes the value of 1 if the respondent selects that candidate and 0 otherwise. For Hypothesis 8, we are interested in the favorability rating on a seven-point scale where

1 indicates that a respondent "definitely would NOT want this type of candidate to represent [me] in the U.S. Congress" and 7 is "definitely would want this type of candidate to represent [me] in the U.S. Congress." Similarly, for Hypothesis 9, the dependent variable is a value that ranges from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative). To test our hypotheses, we compute the Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) by regressing each dependent variable on all eight attributes using ordinary least squares with standard errors clustered at the respondent level (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014).[21]

Results: Once Again, Nobody Likes QAnon Endorsers

We begin the discussion of our results with the binary vote choice measure. In Figure 2, we plot the AMCEs of each attribute on candidate choice for the full sample in black triangles. Here, we see that supporting QAnon, holding party and other relevant attributes fixed, causes a 20 percentage point decline in the probability of choosing that candidate profile in a hypothetical election. Republicans and supporters of the bipartisan infrastructure bill, are more likely to be selected, whereas those who support the construction of a border wall are less likely to be selected. However, the magnitudes of these effects pale in comparison to the negative penalty for QAnon-endorsement.

As the above analysis pools Democrats and Republicans, there may well be heterogeneous treatment effects. These results could be consistent with a story in which Republicans mildly support, but Democrats strongly oppose, candidates who endorse QAnon. To investigate this possibility, we decompose our sample into Republican and Democratic identifiers and plot the AMCEs for partisan sub-groups separately—Democrats in light gray circles and Republicans in dark gray squares. Here, we find that Democrats

[21] We acknowledge that comparisons between subgroup AMCEs are sensitive to the reference category (Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley 2020), however, with the exception of prior experience, our attributes are dichotomous, meaning the AMCEs should not be susceptible to baseline effects (Carey et al. 2022). We present the same plots using marginal means in Appendix C.

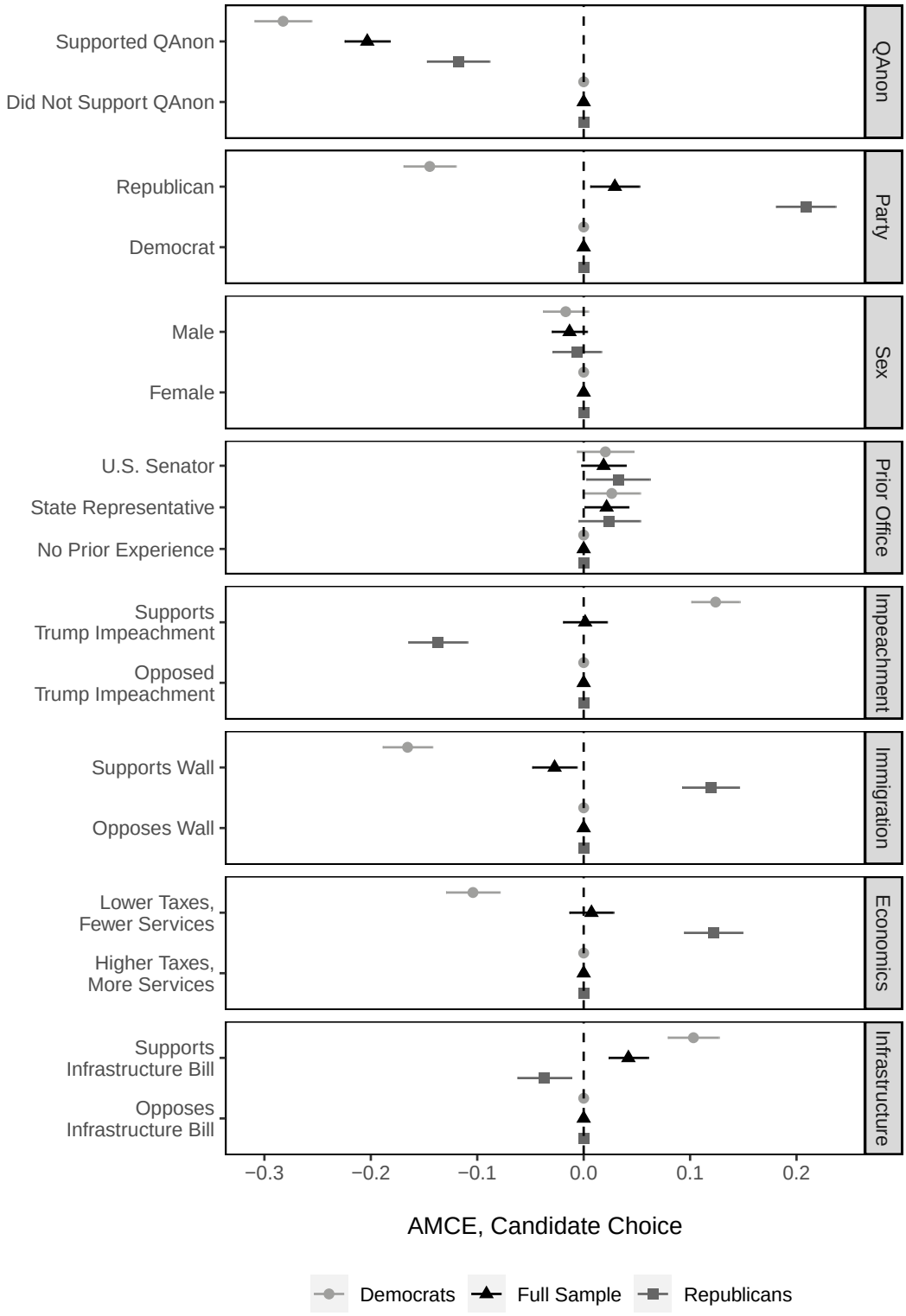

Figure 2: AMCE of each attribute on candidate choice. QAnon endorsement produces a negative decline in the probability of vote choice among Democrats and Republicans.

do impose a large, negative penalty on endorsers, reducing their probability of voting for those candidates by 28 percentage points. However, we find that Republicans also exact a smaller, but statistically significant, penalty on these same candidates. Given that other AMCEs—such as being a Republican, supporting a border wall, and favoring lower taxes—causes Republican respondents to increase their probability of voting for a candidate, we have further confidence that our sample of Republicans is not somehow unorthodox in their political views.

A second potential concern with our results could be that by randomizing candidate attributes uniformly, we have introduced bias into our analysis by generating some unrealistic profiles in which, for example, Democrats endorsed QAnon (de la Cuesta, Egami and Imai 2021). To address this concern, in Appendix Figure C2, we present an AMCE plot in which we restrict our attention to the 864 comparisons in which two Republican candidates were paired and a Republican respondent made a vote choice, simulating a Republican primary environment. Indeed, if Republicans are voting for the most extreme candidate in the race, this is precisely where we would expect to find positive effects of QAnon-endorsement (e.g., Hall 2015). Yet, even here, we find that endorsing QAnon is associated with a statistically significant 14 percentage point decline in the probability of choosing that candidate. In Appendix C, we also present results among those with low trust in media, anti-establishment beliefs (Uscinski et al. 2021), and belief in the QAnon conspiracy theory (Figure C3). For those with the lowest trust in media and strongest anti-establishment attitudes, the marginal effect of QAnon-endorsement is negative. Those with low trust in media and strong anti-establishment beliefs are more likely to select a QAnon endorsing candidate than are respondents with high trust in media and weak anti-establishment beliefs, but they are no more likely to select that candidate compared to one who does not endorse QAnon. Sensibly, however, those who agree with the statement "I am a believer in QAnon" ("agree" or "strongly agree") are more likely to select the endorsing candidate. However, these respondents comprise just 4% ($N = 27$) of our sam-

ple. Although this group is more likely to vote for the endorsing candidate, we question whether targeting true believers while alienating larger subgroups would be an electoral benefit on net.

Appendix Figure C4 shows both AMCE and marginal mean estimates where the dependent variable is a 7-point favorability scale instead of vote choice (as in Figure 2). Among Democrats (light gray circles), QAnon endorsement decreases favorability by 1.14 points, whereas among Republicans (dark gray squares), support for QAnon causes favorability to decrease by 0.49 points—roughly the same magnitude of the decrease in favorability from supporting President Trump's second impeachment. These results are both statistically significant.

Finally, we present evidence consistent with Hypothesis 9, that QAnon support increases perceptions that the candidate is conservative in Figure 3. Among Democrats, QAnon-supporting candidates are perceived to be 0.64 points more conservative—similar to identifying as a Republican or supporting a border wall. Among Republicans, the effect is still positive and statistically significant, but much smaller: 0.14 points. After accounting for other variables like party identification and the impeachment vote, QAnon support adds only a small positive increase in perceived conservatism. This large gap between perceptions could be related to findings that Democrats are more aware of QAnon (Pew Research Center 2020).

Ultimately, these results provide support for Hypotheses 7-9. QAnon support causes respondents of both parties to reduce their likelihood of voting for, and their favorability toward, a candidate. Although QAnon consistently increases perceptions of conservatism, this effect is small among Republican identifiers—the very group most QAnon endorsers are allegedly targeting.

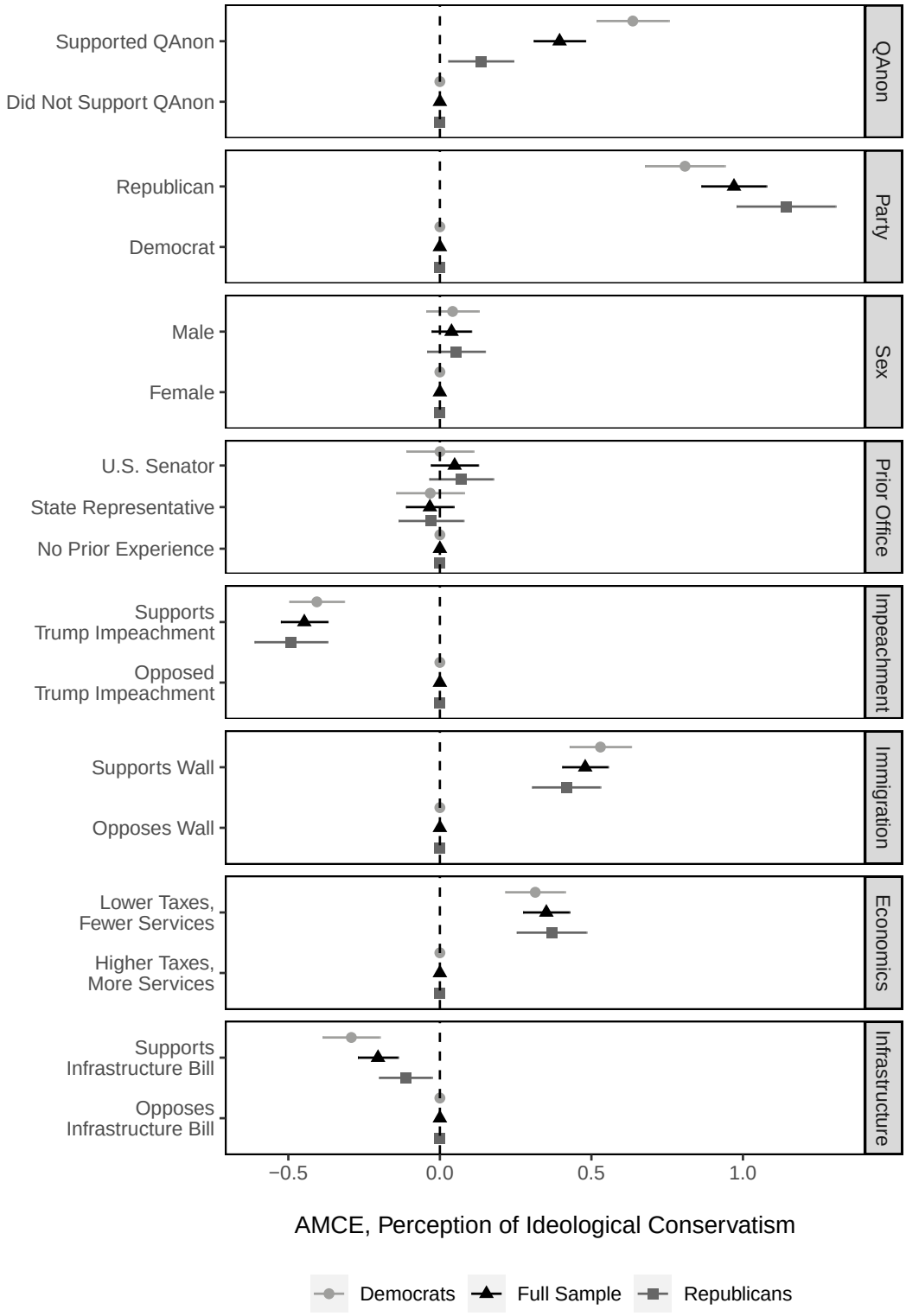

Figure 3: AMCE of each attribute on perceptions candidate is a conservative. QAnon endorsement causes respondents to think the candidate is more conservative, however, this effect is larger among Democrats than Republicans.

Discussion

How do voters evaluate candidates who endorse QAnon? In short, not favorably. In this paper, we test two potential mechanisms through which QAnon support could translate into candidate favorability: indirectly through media coverage and directly through position-taking. To test the first hypothesis, we analyzed news coverage about QAnon-endorsing candidates and a matched sample of non-endorsers. We find that endorsers earn the same volume of coverage, but that coverage is more negative on average. Our related vignette experiments revealed that even those with the lowest levels of trust in media disapprove of candidates who endorsed QAnon and received negative coverage. However, we find that those with low trust in media punish a QAnon-endorsing candidate much less than respondents with high trust in media and perceive that candidate to be more conservative. These findings contrasted with our expectations and popular media narratives surrounding QAnon. These results led us to shift our expectations and consider the possibility that, in contrast to conventional wisdom, conspiracy theory endorsement might be a net-negative for candidates, even after accounting for potential cueing or signaling benefits, even among potentially sympathetic groups. In our second experiment, we hypothesized that QAnon-endorsement could actually harm endorsing candidates, and indeed, we find that endorsing QAnon causes a decline in vote choice probability for those candidates, even while increasing perceptions of their ideological conservatism.

Our results present an important corrective to the conventional wisdom that conspiracy theory endorsement is electorally beneficial. Previous research suggests—but does not test—that politicians endorse conspiracy theories for electoral gain, and journalists, pundits, and campaign strategists make similar claims. While we cannot claim that there are *no* benefits to endorsing QAnon, our evidence suggests that individuals do not evaluate candidates who endorse QAnon more favorably than those who do not. With the exception of a very small group of self-identified true believers, these results hold under

a variety of conditions and among many groups that might make this more likely theoretically. That said, our studies come with limitations that are important to acknowledge.

First, although QAnon is an increasingly salient and important conspiracy theory in American politics, it is not the only one and it is unclear whether our results would generalize to other conspiracy theories. QAnon may be unique in its obscurity, relative to beliefs that the 2020 election was stolen, for example, and it is possible that more mainstream conspiracy theories could be rewarded with more approval from voters in ways that we did not capture here (see e.g., Arceneaux and Truex N.d.).

Second, our indirect effects analysis is limited to a hypothetical scenario, which may further limit generalizability. For ethical reasons, we chose to create vignettes about a hypothetical congressional candidate, and we made it known to respondents that the scenario was hypothetical. It is possible that real-world news coverage of real candidates, about whom individuals might have other information, could contribute to evaluations in ways that we were not able to capture here. Moreover, we used a forced exposure design, but this is a context in which media choice preferences could be crucial. Future work could extend our findings to examine whether positive coverage of QAnon-endorsing candidates on fringe media sources changes how respondents evaluate these candidates, in addition to more directly incorporating choice into the design.

Third, our conjoint experiment presented participants with a limited subset of characteristics. Although our choices were theoretically grounded, we could have chosen many possible attributes to manipulate and our results need to be interpreted within the context of the attributes we chose. However, we suspect that subtracting, rather than adding, information could shed light on other underlying mechanisms. In a low-information contest, it is unclear how much (if any) of this information voters would learn and what sorts of inferences they would draw from QAnon endorsement in the absence of other important attributes.

Finally, we reiterate that our study cannot rule out indirect effects that we did not

(or could not) test. For example, it is possible that candidates endorse QAnon to obtain positive media coverage on fringe platforms or raise funds to support their campaigns. It is also possible that elected office is not their ultimate goal: they could be positioning themselves for high-profile positions outside of politics, such as news commentary.

Conclusion

This article is among the first to investigate the electoral benefits (or lack thereof) stemming from conspiracy theory endorsement. We make three key contributions. First, we contribute to the political conspiracy theory literature by moving beyond questions of "who believes" to questions about evaluations of political figures who propagate conspiracy theories, answering recent calls to do so (e.g., Douglas et al. 2019). Our work is an important early step in this direction, and it complicates some existing narratives. For example, Uscinski et al. (2021) suggest that the anti-establishment dimension to American political attitudes is correlated with support for conspiratorial candidates, yet our evidence suggests that even people with strong anti-establishment preferences are not likely to support candidates who endorse QAnon. Our work is more consistent with, and a key extension of, Enders et al. (2022), which finds limited support for QAnon among the public.

Second, this research suggests that endorsing conspiracy theories may serve more as a *cue* about a politician's other preferences. Our results suggest that most Americans do not prefer candidates who endorse QAnon, even though they view them as more ideologically conservative. While endorsing QAnon is an effective way to cue conservative ideology, the endorsement itself is a risky choice. Future research on elite endorsement of conspiracy theories—or position-taking more broadly—ought to consider whether it is the position itself or what it signals more broadly that leads voters to choose one candidate over another.

Third, our results provide another example of the value of pre-registration. Following Ryan and Krupnikov (2021), we fully present our results and illustrate how our initial hypotheses, which were only partially supported, helped move our scholarship forward. The pre-registration for all of our studies allows researchers to track the theoretical development that led to these important conclusions.

Although some of our results contrast with our initial argument, the conclusion is, in part, a normatively good one: most Americans oppose candidates who endorse QAnon. Position-taking on QAnon may be in vogue, but our results suggest that on average, Americans react strongly and negatively to candidates who endorse it. At the same time, political conspiracy theories and the politicians who promote them are not going away. As of April 2022, Media Matters has identified 60 congressional candidates running for office in 2022 who have embraced QAnon, and in May, one won the Republican primary for Pennsylvania Governor (Kaplan 2021). As more politicians endorse conspiracy theories like QAnon, 2020 election fraud, and "the great replacement," we need to bring our understanding of "who believes" to questions of when and why those beliefs translate into electoral support, anti-democratic actions, or political violence.

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