Misinformation Sharing by U.S. Political Elites

Kevin T. Greene*

Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, Princeton University

April 21, 2023

Abstract

How often do political elites in the U.S. share misinformation? Are there differences between the parties? While past work has investigated misinformation sharing by individuals, there are few large-scale analyses of the quality of information shared by political elites. As individuals rely on elite cues to inform their decision-making, officials sharing low-quality sites may increase polarization while providing legitimacy to low-quality outlets. We fill this gap by collecting more than 300,000 links shared on Facebook by U.S. members of Congress and measuring how often each party shares information from known misinformation spreaders. We find that members of Congress share more links to low-quality sites than the public, that Republican members share considerably more than Democrats, and that this gap has increased over time. Finally, we investigate the potential mechanisms underlying this partisan gap and find that only Republicans receive increased engagement when sharing low-quality sites, suggesting asymmetric incentives to share misinformation.

Keywords: misinformation, social media, political elites, digital communication

*Associate Research Scholar, Empirical Studies of Conflict, Princeton University, kg2082@princeton.edu

1 Introduction

How often do political elites in the U.S. share misinformation? Does sharing misinformation vary across political parties? There are well-publicized examples of elites sharing misinformation related to the 2020 election (Lytvynenko and Silverman 2020b, 2020a; Funke et al. 2020). However, we have little systematic understanding of the scale or characteristics of misinformation sharing by political elites, a gap noted by Tucker et al. 2018. Given past findings on the importance of elite cues (Zaller et al. 1992; Watts et al. 1999) and evidence that elite misinformation can undermine democratic institutions and public health (Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, and Da Mata 2020; Berlinski et al. 2021), a better understanding of the scope of elite misinformation sharing and potential partisan motivations are important.

We fill this gap by collecting and analyzing the Facebook posts of U.S. members of Congress. Facebook is among the most popular social media sites (Auxier and Anderson 2021), is used by almost all members of Congress (Van Kessel et al. 2020) and is a news source for most Americans (Shearer and Gottfried 2018). We measure the amount of misinformation by extracting the links to external sites from posts shared by members and identifying known misinformation spreading domains, consistent with previous work (Lazer et al. 2018; Grinberg et al. 2019).[1] Our dataset contains more than 300,000 links and covers the years 2016 to 2021. To ensure our results are robust, we use eight different measures of low-quality sites.

We find that sharing low-quality sites is overwhelmingly carried out by Republican members of Congress. In 2021, depending on the measure, 65-85% of Republican members shared a link to a low-quality domain. This is considerably higher than what was shared by Democrats (5%-23%) or by the public (9%) (Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019). Second, we find that since 2018 the amount of low-quality links shared by Republicans has increased considerably. These differences endure after controlling for other relevant political variables

1. Previous studies use several terms to describe unreliable sources of information (e.g., fake news, misinformation). We use the term low-quality to encompass sites that have been identified as misinformation spreaders.

and are robust across seven lists of low-quality domains and a continuous measure of media quality.

Finally, we investigate two potential macro-level explanations for the partisan gap in sharing low-quality domains: a larger supply of right-leaning low-quality sites, and greater demand for low-quality content from Republican supporters. One might argue that the partisan gap is a simple reflection of the difference in the supply of low-quality sites. While there are roughly eight times as many right-leaning low-quality sites, Republican officials share thirteen times as many links to low-quality sites. An alternative explanation is greater demand for low-quality outlets from Republican supporters. We find that Republican officials, but not Democratic ones, receive more engagement when sharing links to low-quality sites. These results cast doubt that a simple supply-driven effect fully explains the gap in sharing links to low-quality sites. Instead, it suggests demand effects, where Republican officials are incentivized to share low-quality sites to gain attention.

This research has several implications. Given the importance of elite cues (Zaller et al. 1992; Watts et al. 1999), members of Congress sharing low-quality sites may serve as a social endorsement of the site, leading individuals to ignore warnings about the quality of the domain (Messing and Westwood 2014). These social endorsements may serve to further bolster the perceived legitimacy of low-quality sites, by pulling them more into the mainstream and increasing their agenda-setting abilities (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Kaiser, Rauchfleisch, and Bourassa 2020). Second, while previous work has not found strong evidence for the formation of echo chambers (Guess 2021), we see an increasing partisan gap in the quality of domains shared by the two parties. A majority of Republican members now share at least some links to low-quality sites. The increasingly different information sources shared by the two parties may increase the disconnect between supporters of the two parties. Third, by linking to low-quality outlets, members of Congress are directing their supporters to visit these sites, which drives ad revenues. In effect members of Congress who link to low-quality sites are supporting these ventures financially, even if only indirectly. Finally, as

low-quality posts shared by Republican members of Congress receive more engagement this demonstrates that elite-driven misinformation is permeating the broader public. This underscores potential incentives for Republican officials to share links from questionable sources to gain increased attention, consistent with the findings of Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018.

2 Misinformation Sharing by Political Elites

Previous work suggests that the content of low-quality sites is different from reputable media outlets and that these differences may be useful to partisans. Sites that spread misinformation tend to be more extreme and partisan (Acerbi 2019). NewsGuard, a media rating platform widely used in academic and industry research (e.g. Aslett et al. 2022; Edelson et al. 2021; Guess et al. 2021), rates sites as being unreliable if they publish false content, do not correct factual errors, and do not effectively separate news from opinion (NewsGuard 2021). These differences in standards allow low-quality domains to be used to promote narratives that are less likely to be supported by reputable media outlets. For example, politicians on the political right who suggest that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump, are likely to find only lukewarm support for these claims, even in conservative friendly mainstream outlets (Barr 2020). In contrast, *The Epoch Times*, a site rated as not credible by NewsGuard, posted numerous stories indicating that mail-in ballots or voting irregularities cost Donald Trump the 2020 election (Stieber 2020; Natelson 2021; Vadum 2021).

Further, the lack of journalistic standards means that low-quality sites are better able to use selective reporting and falsehoods to attack the opposing party. Past work has found that one of the primary motivations for sharing low-quality sites is to attack political rivals (Osmundsen et al. 2021). As affective partisanship has increased over the years (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012), the political usefulness of attacking political rivals has only increased. Conventional media outfits do offer numerous opportunities to critique political rivals. For instance, attacks on Hillary Clinton were readily available from mainstream outlets. How-

ever, extreme conspiracy theories have often been limited to low-quality outlets. Coverage of the Pizza Gate conspiracy theory illustrates the differences in journalistic standards across mainstream and low-quality media. The conspiracy claimed without evidence that the Clinton campaign was involved in a child sex ring in a DC pizza restaurant and resulted in a shooting at the restaurant (Lopez 2016). The conspiracy was heavily promoted on fake news sites (Kang 2016). However, more mainstream right-wing media platforms called Pizza Gate false and a conspiracy theory (News 2017).

Another branch of research has pointed to the negative impacts of individual leaders spreading misinformation. Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, and Da Mata 2020 focus on speeches delivered by the Brazilian president during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period President Bolsonaro frequently downplayed the severity of the pandemic and encouraged individuals to ignore social distancing guidelines (Economist 2020; McCoy and Traiano 2020). Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, and Da Mata 2020 find that these speeches are associated with a decrease in social distancing. Another study of Brazilian behavior during the pandemic found little change for pro-government partisans but did find that opposition members increased their perceptions of risks after Bolsonaro's speeches (Calvo and Ventura 2021). Berlinski et al. 2021 assess the impact of unfounded claims of voter fraud on the public's confidence in elections. They find that when exposed to claims of voter fraud by prominent Republican officials, individuals' confidence in the election decreased significantly. In sum, this work has demonstrated the impact of elites spreading misinformation but has largely focused on individual leaders.

A growing body of literature has begun to investigate the sharing of untrustworthy information across political elites. Lasser et al. 2022 find that Republicans share more untrustworthy information on Twitter and that the amount shared has increased in recent years. However, we currently do not know if these results hold only for Twitter, a relatively small platform (Auxier and Anderson 2021), used by more ideologically extreme elites (Blum, Cormack, and Shoub 2022) or also extend to other platforms. Second, we do not know

if other political factors might explain the association between party and misinformation sharing. Past work has found that being in the opposition (Messing and Weisel 2017; Van Kessel, Hughes, and Messing 2018; Russell 2021) or more competitive races (Russell 2018) is associated with more partisan rhetoric, the same may be true for sharing misinformation.

3 The Characteristics and Impact of Misinformation Sharing by Political Elites

Building on previous work, we aim to clarify important unanswered questions regarding the characteristics and impact of misinformation sharing by political elites. Past work analyzing the sharing of misinformation by non-elites finds that a small number of individuals are responsible for sharing most of the misinformation. Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019 find that only 9% of individuals share any misinformation at all. While there have been well-documented cases of political elites sharing misinformation related to the January 6th insurrection (Lytvynenko and Silverman 2020b, 2020a; Funke et al. 2020) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Shabad 2021; Madani 2022), we currently have little information about the scale of misinformation shared by political elites. It might be that specific instances of elites making unsubstantiated claims have received considerable media attention, but overall, the practice is relatively rare. However, as elite preferences are likely to be more polarized than the general public (Bafumi and Herron 2010; Lee et al. 2021) and there may be political benefits to sharing misinformation (Fritz, Keefer, and Nyhan 2004; Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017; Van Duyn and Collier 2019; Farhall et al. 2019; Osmundsen et al. 2021), we might expect elites to share more misinformation than the public. This leads to our first research question: *How often do political elites share misinformation? (RQ1)*

Second, there are few analyses of party differences in elite misinformation sharing. There is anecdotal evidence of Republican members of Congress issuing misleading statements. Several members of Congress have been banned or suspended from online platforms for publish-

ing unsupported statements related to COVID-19 (Shabad 2021; Madani 2022). Similarly, in the aftermath of the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol, Florida Representative Matt Gaetz shared a link to a *Washington Times* article, which was later retracted, that claimed that the violence had been carried out by Antifa (Reuters 2021). In another case, Texas Senator Ted Cruz shared a link to *The Federalist* which claimed that there had been large-scale voter fraud in the 2020 election (Davidson 2021), despite numerous fact checks demonstrating otherwise (Lytvynenko and Silverman 2020b, 2020a; Funke et al. 2020). However, again we do not know if these prominent examples are representative of the overall information shared by political parties. This leads to our second research question: *Are there partisan differences in the amount of misinformation shared by political elites? (RQ2)*

Third, there are few analyses of the temporal dynamics of elite misinformation sharing. Previous work has found that polarizing rhetoric has increased in the content of Congressional members' social media posts (Ballard et al. 2022). Others have pointed out that the Republican party has changed drastically over the last few years (Mann and Ornstein 2016; Fishkin and Pozen 2018), especially since the election of Donald Trump (Harwood 2021). Again, there are anecdotal examples of changes in the Republican party in recent years. For instance, only one Republican candidate for the Pennsylvania Senate seat was willing to accept that Joe Biden had won the 2020 election (Board 2022).However, Democrats may have also increased the amount of misinformation shared. Before 2020 the Democratic party did not control the White House or have a majority in the Senate. Past work finds that being in the minority party is associated with sharing more partisan rhetoric (Messing and Weisel 2017; Van Kessel, Hughes, and Messing 2018; Russell 2021). This leads to our third research question: *Are there changes in elite misinformation sharing over time? (RQ3)*

4 Data

4.1 Shared Links on Social Media by Members of Congress

To address these research questions, we identified each member of Congress that served between 2016 and 2021. This provides a period that is sufficiently long as well as one where most members actively use Facebook. For years before 2016, there is considerably less data on members' Facebook activity. We then identify the Facebook account of each member. Facebook was selected because it is among the most popular social media sites, is used by almost all members of Congress (Van Kessel et al. 2020), and most Americans report that they get some of their news from the site (Shearer and Gottfried 2018). In total, we have Facebook account information for more than 95% of the members that served over this period. We then used CrowdTangle to collect all the Facebook posts shared by members during their terms in office. CrowdTangle is a social analytics platform owned by Facebook, which tracks the public posts issued by influential accounts and pages. As we measure misinformation at the domain level, consistent with past work (Lazer et al. 2018; Grinberg et al. 2019), we keep only posts that contain links to external sites. We also remove posts linking to sites ending in .gov as these are frequently links to a member's own statements, possibly for self-promotion (Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers 2010), or may simply reflect the party currently in power (i.e., Republicans linking to the whitehouse.com in 2017 and Democrats in 2021). In total, we have more than 300,000 posts with links to external sites.

Beyond most members actively using social media (Van Kessel et al. 2020) they also appear to care about their social media presence. It has been alleged that Texas Senator Ted Cruz was checking his Twitter mentions after his statements during the confirmation hearing of Supreme Court nominee Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson (Jones 2022). While many previous studies have focused on the content of statements released by political elites (Grimmer 2013; Russell 2018; Panda, Siddarth, and Pal 2020; Gelman and Wilson 2021; Russell 2021), few have measured the differences in the sources shared by elected officials.

4.2 Measuring Low-Quality Domains

To measure misinformation shared by members of Congress we rely on existing lists of low-quality domains. Consistent with past efforts, we measure the credibility of information at the publisher level, rather than at the story level (Lazer et al. 2018; Grinberg et al. 2019). To ensure that our results are not driven by any specific criteria of low-quality sites, we use seven measures of the quality of information. The first set of measures is drawn from the academic literature. They include sets of domains complied by Pennycook and Rand 2019; Hounsel et al. 2020; Chen et al. 2021. We also include two measures from outside of academia. The first is from fact-checking site Media Bias/Fact Check, which identifies sites that are unreliable or promote conspiracy theories. The second is from NewsGuard, an organization that evaluates the reliability of a wide range of popular media organizations. Finally, we create two additional measures. First, we consider a site to be low-quality if it has been identified by any of the previous studies or fact-checkers. Second, we consider a site to be low-quality if it has been identified by more than one of the previous studies or fact-checkers.

5 Results

5.1 Sharing Low-Quality Sites by Political Parties

To address Research Question 1, we first take all the links shared by members of Congress between April and November 2016, and calculate the proportion of members that shared at least one link to a low-quality domain. This time frame is selected for a more direct comparison to the results presented in Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019. For Republican members, depending on the measure, 43%-70% shared a link to a low-quality domain during the 2016 election period. This is higher than the 18% of Republican individuals that shared low-quality information in Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019's study. Turning to Democratic

members, depending on the measure, between 5% and 13% shared a link to a low-quality domain during the same period. This is higher than the 3.5% of Democratic individuals that shared low-quality information in Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019's study. We also present the same results for 2021, the last year in our data. In 2021 between 64% and 84% of Republican members linked to a low-quality domain. For Democratic members, this range was between 5% and 23%. Overall, we see a large partisan gap in sharing links to low-quality domains. In fact, in 2021 a Republican member of Congress that did not link to a low-quality domain (e.g., Mitt Romney, Lisa Murkowski) would be in the minority. These results are summarized in Table 1. Interestingly we also find that it is not simply a few links being shared by Republican members, we observe over 7000 unique links to over 100 low-quality sites. In the Supplemental Materials, we include a Lorenz curve to show the distribution of shared low-quality links across members.

Year	Party	Penn	Chen	MBFC	NG	Houn	Multi	Any
2016	Republican	0.43	0.47	0.46	0.44	0.64	0.59	0.70
2016	Democrat	0.05	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.06	0.08	0.13
2021	Republican	0.64	0.66	0.72	0.76	0.80	0.74	0.84
2021	Democrat	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.17	0.07	0.10	0.23

Table 1: The proportion of members of Congress sharing at least one link to a low-quality domain in 2016 and 2021. The last seven columns each represent a different measure of low-quality domains.

To further investigate the relationship between ideology and sharing low-quality domains (Research Question 2), we use the DW-NOMINATE scores (Poole and Rosenthal 1985; Poole 2005). For each member of Congress, we have an ideology score ranging from -1 (liberal) to 1 (conservative). For each member of Congress, we also calculate the proportion of their posts with links to low-quality domains. Due to space constraints, we present only the results where we consider a site to be low-quality if it is included in multiple lists of low-quality domains. The results for each of the individual lists can be found in the Supplemental Materials (2.4). Figure 1 presents a scatterplot of the relationship between ideology and

sharing low-quality domains. The portion of the plot less than 0 on the x-axis represents more liberal members of Congress. In general, more liberal members share few links to low-quality domains. A partial exception is Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. He is represented by the largest point on the left side of the plot. Around 4% of his total links led to low-quality domains. While this is higher than other Democrats, more than 100 Republicans shared a higher proportion of low-quality domains. In contrast, more conservative members appear more likely to share low-quality domains. Here again, we see a clear partisan gap in the sharing of links to low-quality sources. This pattern is observed across each distinct measure of low-quality domains. These results are included in the Supplemental Materials (2.4).

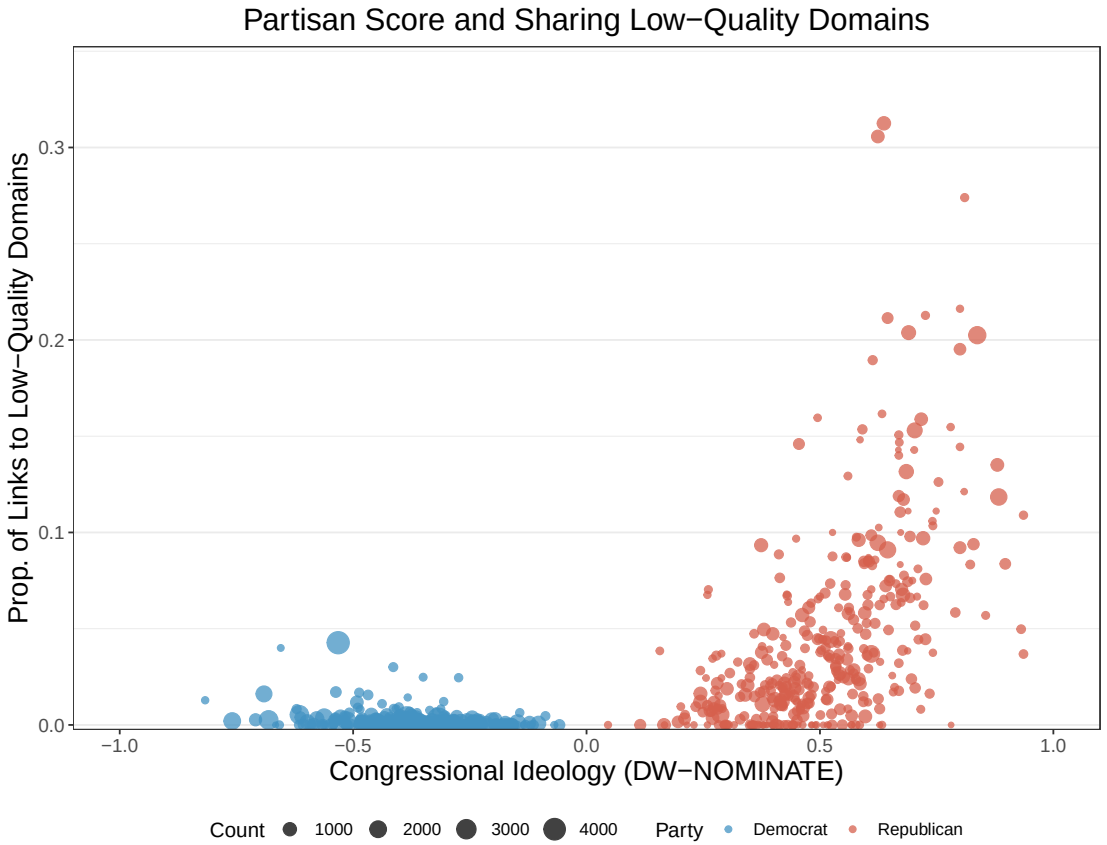

Figure 1: The relationship between ideology and low-quality information sharing. Each point represents a member of Congress. Their position on the y-axis is based on the proportion of their links in Facebook posts that lead to low-quality domains. The x-axis is that member's ideological position based on the first dimension of DW-NOMINATE. The size of the points represents the total amount of links shared.

5.2 Sharing Low-Quality Sites by Political Parties Over Time

Our results thus far paint a clear picture, Congressional Republicans share more links to low-quality sites than Congressional Democrats. To evaluate Research Question 3, we present the yearly proportion of links that lead to low-quality sites for each party. For space considerations, we present only the results for domains that appear in at least two of the lists of low-quality domains. The results using each of the lists produce consistent results and are presented in the Supplemental Materials (2.4). As the lists identifying low-quality domains were generally compiled between 2016 and 2018, they may omit more recently popularized low-quality sites. This is addressed through additional analyses in the Supplemental Materials using more contemporary lists.

Figure 2 presents the over time levels of low-quality domains shared across the two parties. We again see a clear distinction in the amount of low-quality domains shared by the two parties. While these numbers are small in absolute terms, they indicate that in 2021 roughly 1 in 15 links shared by Republican members of Congress led to a low-quality domain. Second, we find that after 2018 the amount of low-quality domains shared by Republicans increased considerably.

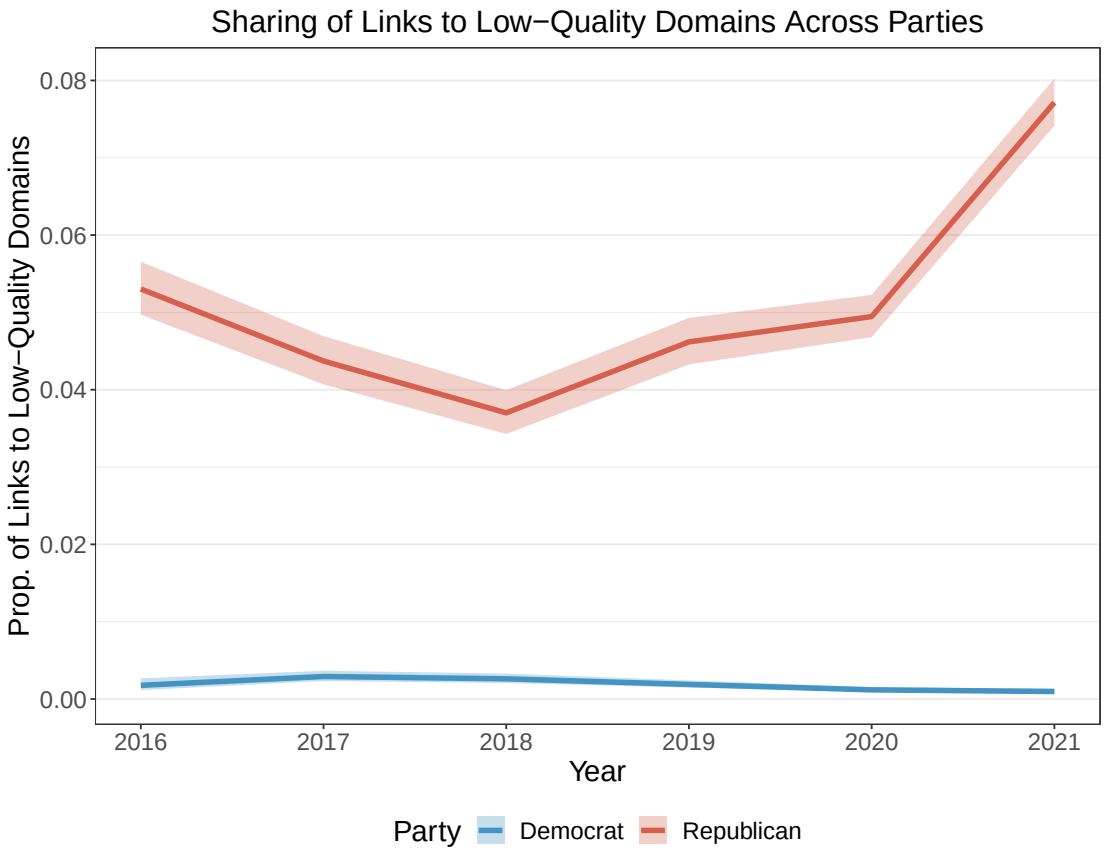

Figure 2: The proportion of shares to low-quality domains across parties over time. Each estimate includes the corresponding 95% confidence interval.

5.3 Sharing Low-Quality Sites by Political Parties: Regression Results

To further evaluate our findings of partisan differences in sharing misinformation we estimate a linear regression of the proportion of member posts that lead to low-quality domains on political party, controlling for other candidate and political factors. The unit of analysis is the Representative year. To account for unobserved between unit heterogeneity we use state and year fixed effects. The substantive results are similar without using fixed effects, this analysis is presented in the Supplemental Materials (2.11).

The dependent variable for our analyses is the proportion of a representative's shared links that lead to low-quality domains. We use the proportion because there may be differences

in the total number of links shared by the two parties. However, in the Supplemental Materials (2.2), we conduct analyses using a count of the number of low-quality links and find consistent results. As mentioned previously, we use seven different measures of low-quality outlets. Each column in Table 2 uses a different measure of low-quality domains.

The primary independent variable is a binary indicator that equals 1 if a Representative is a member of the Republican party and 0 otherwise. We also control for other relevant characteristics of the Representatives. Previous work finds that the gender of candidates influences the likelihood they engage in negative messaging (Evans and Clark 2016). As low-quality sites tend to be more partisan, this is an important control. Similarly, previous work (Ragusa 2016) finds that the year members of Congress were elected also correlates with their partisanship.

An additional set of variables accounts for other political characteristics. First, previous work has found that incumbents tend to be especially partisan (Evans, Cordova, and Sipole 2014). We include a binary measure equal to 1 if a member is an incumbent and 0 otherwise. Others note that being in the minority also leads to more partisan rhetoric (Messing and Weisel 2017; Van Kessel, Hughes, and Messing 2018; Russell 2021). We include an indicator equal to 1 if a member is in the same party as the President and 0 otherwise. Consistent with Russell 2018 we also include an indicator for how secure a member's seat is. This variable measures the margin of victory for a representative's previous election. Members in safer seats may share more low-quality information as they are less concerned with potential reputational costs. Finally, others have found high polarization in the House of Representatives (Andris et al. 2015). We include a binary indicator equal to 1 if a member is in the House of Representatives and 0 otherwise.

We use OLS regression to estimate our models and present our results in Table 2. Across all seven measures of low-quality domains, we see evidence that Republican members of Congress share a higher proportion of links to low-quality domains, even after controlling for other relevant factors. Interestingly, in four out of seven models being in the opposition

is negativity associated with sharing low-quality domains. In two out of the seven models, we find female candidates are likely to share a smaller proportion of links to low-quality domains. While previous work has found that women engage in more attack tweets (Evans and Clark 2016; Gervais, Evans, and Russell 2020), they appear to be less likely to link to low-quality information. In two out of seven models, the Representative's vote share in the previous election is positively associated with how often they share links to low-quality domains. Thus, it appears low-quality links are being shared more often by members in safer seats. The remaining variables are not consistently associated with the amount of low-quality links shared by members of Congress.

	Dependent variable:						
	NG	PC	Chen	Houn	MBFC	Multi	Any
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Republican	0.021***	0.018***	0.019***	0.046***	0.023***	0.033***	0.063***
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.005)
Female	−0.001	−0.003*	−0.002	−0.005*	−0.002	−0.004	−0.006
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)
Elect Year	0.00004	0.0002*	0.0001*	0.0002	0.0001	0.0002	0.0003
	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0002)
House	0.001	0.001	0.001	−0.001	0.001	0.002	−0.001
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.005)
Incumbent	0.001	−0.0001	−0.001	0.003	0.003	0.002	−0.0002
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.004)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.005)
Vote Share	0.010	0.012	0.016**	0.012	0.012	0.025*	0.022
	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.015)	(0.008)	(0.010)	(0.018)
Oppo.	0.0001	−0.004**	−0.006***	−0.003	−0.001	−0.006**	−0.006*
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
State FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2,085	2,085	2,085	2,085	2,085	2,085	2,085

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Standard errors clustered on the member of Congress

Table 2: Political Party and Links to Low-Quality Sites, Regression Estimates

6 Assessing Mechanisms for the Partisan Gap in Sharing Low-Quality Outlets: Supply and Demand

The present study has demonstrated that Republican members of Congress share more links to low-quality outlets than Democrats. However, the underlying mechanism for this difference remains uncertain. To shed light on this issue, we evaluate the evidence for two potential macro-level explanations. First, we examine the possibility that the results are driven by there being more right-leaning low-quality sites, relative to left-leaning sites. Second, we evaluate if there is greater demand for links to low-quality sites among Republican supporters, incentivizing Republican leaders to share low-quality information. While the present study is unable to establish causality, it is useful to evaluate the evidence for and against these potential explanations.

One explanation for the gap in sharing low-quality sources is that there is simply a much larger supply of right-leaning low-quality sites relative to left-leaning low-quality sites. We utilize NewsGuard's measure of the political alignment of news sites to evaluate this explanation. The political orientation of low-quality sites serves as a proxy for the supply of partisan low-quality sites available to each party. There are roughly eight times as many right-leaning low-quality outlets as left-leaning low-quality outlets (Table 3). However, we also observe that Republicans share roughly thirteen times as many links to unreliable sites (Table 4). This suggests the gap in sharing links to low-quality outlets is not driven strictly by differences in the supply of low-quality websites. Furthermore, individuals and elected officials are subject to the same supply of information. However, Republican individuals share roughly five times as many links as Democratic individuals (Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019), while Republican officials share thirteen times more, further suggesting the differences are not just about supply.

Leaning	LQ Sites
None	1430
Right	1062
Left	130

Table 3: The Number of Low-Quality Sites by Political Leaning.

Party	% Low-Quality
Democrat	.34%
Republican	4.51%

Table 4: The Percent of Shared Links Leading to Low-Quality Outlets for Each Party.

Another supply-side explanation is that Republicans may share more low-quality outlets because they have few other outlets that align with their political agenda. However, the sharing patterns of Republicans are not consistent with this explanation. First, the most highly cited outlet by Republicans is *Fox News*, and it currently makes up a larger proportion of the Republican party's total shares than at any point since 2016. Further, it is not the case that Republicans have been pushed out of legacy media, leading to sharing more links to low-quality sites. Popular media sites such as *CNN*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* were never highly cited sources by members of the Republican party. The increased sharing of *Fox News* and consistent sharing of other mainstream outlets fail to explain the increase in sharing links to low-quality sites, particularly since 2018.[2] Further, it does not appear that the difference between the parties is due to an increase in the supply of right-leaning low-quality sites (or the shuttering of left-leaning low-quality sites). In additional analyses presented in the Supplemental Materials (2.2), we re-estimate our main results using only low-quality sites active in 2016, finding consistent results. While these are preliminary analyses, they cast doubts that the difference in sharing links to low-quality sites is driven solely by the supply of available information.

Another explanation is that there is different demand for information from low-quality sources for Republican supporters relative to Democratic supporters. Past work has consistently found that Republicans consume (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2018; Mosleh and Rand 2021) and share (Grinberg et al. 2019; Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019; Osmundsen et al. 2021) more links to low-quality outlets. Increased demand could help explain the large difference in linking to low-quality outlets, as Republican officials share the content that

2. Another analysis, in the Supplemental Materials (2.8), suggests that more recently elected members and former Tea Party members are especially likely to share low-quality links.

is more popular with their audience. One means of testing this proposition is to measure engagement with content shared by members of Congress. If there is greater demand for low-quality information among the Republican base, we would expect that when Republican officials share links to low-quality outlets, they receive more engagement.

To evaluate demand effects, we again turn to our Facebook data which records the links shared by members of Congress. While CrowdTangle does not provide information on the number of views for a particular post, it does provide other post-level engagement information. First, we measure demand as the number of times a post was shared on Facebook. This captures instances where individuals are broadcasting an elected official's post to their social network, increasing its reach. Second, we measure demand as the number of shares and likes a post receives. This captures the overall engagement with an official's posts. Each of our dependent variables is logged. To evaluate the difference in demand for low-quality outlets across parties, we interact an indicator recording if a post links to a low-quality domain with another that measures if a post was shared by a Republican member of Congress. We control for several factors such as an official's year of election, gender, chamber of Congress, and number of Facebook followers.

We use OLS regression to estimate our models and present our results in Table 5. Our results are consistent when using Poisson regression. We see in columns 1 and 2 that after controlling for other relevant factors when Republicans share domains from low-quality sources, they are reshared more often. In substantive terms, when a Republican posts a link to a low-quality site it is associated with an increase of between 142 (model 2) and 211 (model 1) additional shares. In the Supplemental Materials (2.6) we use DW-NOMINATE's measure of partisanship instead of a binary party measure and find comparable results.

However, resharing may not necessarily indicate endorsement, rather engagement might be driven by members of the opposing party criticizing the post. We address this first by using an alternative dependent variable that captures total engagements (shares and likes). As this dependent variable captures favorable engagement with posts (likes) it is less likely

to be driven by out-party attacks. Using this alternative dependent variable (columns 3 and 4), we observe similar results; when Republicans share links to low-quality outlets, the posts receive more engagement. To further address the potential for out-party influence on our results, in the Supplemental Materials (2.7), we evaluate if the increased engagement is driven by posts that are being "ratioed". Ratioing occurs when a social media post has considerably more comments than likes or shares, often indicating the post is being criticized (O'Neil 2017; Merriam-Webster 2017). Our analyses find that links to low-quality outlets shared by Republicans are no more likely to be ratioed and do not have a higher ratio of comments to shares and likes.

	Dependent variable:			
	FB Shares		FB Interactions	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Rep	0.007	0.065***	0.005	0.070***
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.006)	(0.007)
Rep X LQ	1.136***	0.882***	1.006***	0.684***
	(0.079)	(0.075)	(0.069)	(0.066)
LQ Site	−0.012	0.157*	−0.094	0.121
	(0.076)	(0.072)	(0.067)	(0.063)
Elect Year	−0.018***	−0.013***	−0.006***	−0.004***
	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0003)	(0.0003)
Female	−0.173***	−0.075***	−0.142***	−0.101***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.006)
House	−0.827***	−0.916***	−1.015***	−1.065***
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.007)
# Followers	0.064***	0.099***	0.054***	0.092***
	(0.0003)	(0.001)	(0.0003)	(0.001)
State FE		✓		✓
Year FE		✓		✓
Observations	245,218	245,218	245,218	245,218
Note:				*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 5: Low-Quality Sites and Engagement on Facebook, Regression Estimates

To be clear, we are not able to identify that this increased sharing is caused by sharing

links to low-quality outlets, only that increased sharing is associated with posts that contain links to low-quality outlets. However, this does provide support for the notion that there is increased demand for this type of content from Republicans. These results may also suggest the possibility of feedback loops where members of Congress who share more extreme content get more attention, leading other members to follow suit. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018 documented a similar effect in the right-wing media ecosystem in the lead-up to the 2016 election.

7 Discussion

How often do political elites in the U.S. share misinformation? Are there differences between the parties? This study uses external links shared on Facebook by members of Congress and multiple measures of low-quality domains to address these questions. We find clear evidence that the sharing of low-quality sites is overwhelmingly carried out by Republicans. Further, the amount of links to low-quality sites by Republicans has increased since 2018. In 2021 between 64% and 84% of Republican members linked to a low-quality domain. Finally, we find that posts shared by Republicans that contain links to low-quality sites receive more engagement and are shared more widely, possibly incentivizing sharing this type of content. Overall, these results have important implications for how we understand political communication in the United States. We find clear evidence that sharing misinformation is not a "both sides" issue but rather is carried out overwhelmingly by Republicans. This appears to be an additional asymmetry between the two parties (Theriault 2013; Skocpol and Williamson 2016; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016).

Political leaders sharing information from suspect sources have broader implications. Past work has found that individuals rely on elite cues to inform their decision-making (Zaller et al. 1992; Watts et al. 1999). Members of Congress sharing low-quality sites may serve as a social endorsement of the site. These social endorsements may serve to further bolster

the perceived legitimacy of low-quality sites, by pulling them more into the mainstream and increasing their agenda-setting abilities (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Kaiser, Rauchfleisch, and Bourassa 2020). The proliferation of these sites may increase polarization and out-party animus. Further, other work has found that political leaders publicly supporting falsehoods can impact the behavior of supporters (Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, and Da Mata 2020; Berlinski et al. 2021; Calvo and Ventura 2021; Pink et al. 2021). While more direct testing is needed, links shared by political leaders may operate similarly.

This research also suggests several potential steps for future efforts. First, the data on the sites shared by members of Congress could allow for additional means of clustering members of Congress. The types of domains shared by members may reveal distinct clusters that might not be apparent from DW-NOMINATE scores. Second, CrowdTangle can also be used to collect the text of the posts sent along with the shared article link. This information can be used to better understand the issues on which Republicans deploy low-quality sources to support their positions. Finally, this work should be extended to other platforms and other groups of political elites. One particularly interesting area would be comparing the links shared by political leaders on Facebook/Twitter and other alt-social platforms. Further, work on misinformation has overwhelmingly focused on the United States, however, the challenges associated with misinformation are global (Calvo and Ventura 2021; Pereira and Nunes 2021) and the work here should be extended to include political elites in locations outside the West.

8 Data Availability Statement

The data required to reproduce the results will be hosted on Dataverse upon acceptance.

References

Acerbi, Alberto. 2019. *Cultural evolution in the digital age.* Oxford University Press.

Ajzenman, Nicolás, Tiago Cavalcanti, and Daniel Da Mata. 2020. "More than words: Leaders' speech and risky behavior during a pandemic." *Available at SSRN 3582908.*

Andris, Clio, David Lee, Marcus J Hamilton, Mauro Martino, Christian E Gunning, and John Armistead Selden. 2015. "The rise of partisanship and super-cooperators in the US House of Representatives." *PloS one* 10 (4): e0123507.

Aslett, Kevin, Andrew M Guess, Richard Bonneau, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua A Tucker. 2022. "News credibility labels have limited average effects on news diet quality and fail to reduce misperceptions." *Science advances* 8 (18): eabl3844.

Auxier, Brooke, and Monica Anderson. 2021. "Social media use in 2021." *Pew Research Center* 1:1–4.

Bafumi, Joseph, and Michael C Herron. 2010. "Leapfrog representation and extremism: A study of American voters and their members in Congress." *American Political Science Review* 104 (3): 519–542.

Ballard, Andrew O, Ryan DeTamble, Spencer Dorsey, Michael Heseltine, and Marcus Johnson. 2022. "Dynamics of polarizing rhetoric in congressional tweets." *Legislative Studies Quarterly.*

Barr, Jeremy. 2020. "Newsmax hopes conservative anger at Fox News and a few Trump tweets can boost the much smaller network." *The Washington Post.*

Benkler, Yochai, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. 2018. *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics.* Oxford University Press.

Berlinski, Nicolas, Margaret Doyle, Andrew M Guess, Gabrielle Levy, Benjamin Lyons, Jacob M Montgomery, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler. 2021. "The effects of unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud on confidence in elections." *Journal of Experimental Political Science,* 1–16.

Blum, Rachel, Lindsey Cormack, and Kelsey Shoub. 2022. "Conditional Congressional communication: how elite speech varies across medium." *Political Science Research and Methods,* 1–8.

Board, Editorial. 2022. "We wanted to endorse in Republican primaries this year. We can't." *The Philadelphia Inquirer.*

Calvo, Ernesto, and Tiago Ventura. 2021. "Will I get COVID-19? Partisanship, social media frames, and perceptions of health risk in Brazil." *Latin American politics and society* 63 (1): 1–26.

Chen, Wen, Diogo Pacheco, Kai-Cheng Yang, and Filippo Menczer. 2021. "Neutral bots probe political bias on social media." *Nature communications* 12 (1): 1–10.

Davidson, John. 2021. "Republican Lawmakers Objecting To Biden Electors Have A Point: Americans Need To Trust Elections." *The Federalist.*

Economist, The. 2020. "BolsoNero Brazil's president fiddles as a pandemic looms. it's just a sniffle, he claims." *The Economist.*

Edelson, Laura, Minh-Kha Nguyen, Ian Goldstein, Oana Goga, Damon McCoy, and Tobias Lauinger. 2021. "Understanding engagement with US (mis) information news sources on Facebook." In *Proceedings of the 21st ACM Internet Measurement Conference,* 444–463.

Evans, Heather K, and Jennifer Hayes Clark. 2016. ""You tweet like a girl!" How female candidates campaign on Twitter." *American Politics Research* 44 (2): 326–352.

Evans, Heather K, Victoria Cordova, and Savannah Sipole. 2014. "Twitter style: An analysis of how house candidates used Twitter in their 2012 campaigns." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47 (2): 454–462.

Farhall, Kate, Andrea Carson, Scott Wright, Andrew Gibbons, and William Lukamto. 2019. "Political elites' use of fake news discourse across communications platforms." *International Journal of Communication* 13.

Fishkin, Joseph, and David E Pozen. 2018. "Asymmetric constitutional hardball." *Columbia Law Review* 118 (3): 915–982.

Flynn, DJ, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler. 2017. "The nature and origins of misperceptions: Understanding false and unsupported beliefs about politics." *Political Psychology* 38:127–150.

Fritz, Ben, Bryan Keefer, and Brendan Nyhan. 2004. *All the president's spin: George W. Bush, the media, and the truth.* Simon / Schuster.

Funke, Daniel, Clara Hendrickson, Louis Jacobson, Noah Kim, and Ilana Strauss. 2020. "Fact-checking Trump's election fraud falsehoods in White House remarks." *Politifact.*

Gelman, Jeremy, and Steven Lloyd Wilson. 2021. "Measuring Congressional Partisanship and Its Consequences." *Legislative Studies Quarterly.*

Gervais, Bryan T, Heather K Evans, and Annelise Russell. 2020. "Fear and loathing on Twitter: Exploring negative rhetoric in tweets during the 2018 midterm election." In *The Roads to Congress 2018,* 31–52. Springer.

Golbeck, Jennifer, Justin M Grimes, and Anthony Rogers. 2010. "Twitter use by the US Congress." *Journal of the American society for information science and technology* 61 (8): 1612–1621.

Grimmer, Justin. 2013. *Representational style in Congress: What legislators say and why it matters.* Cambridge University Press.

Grinberg, Nir, Kenneth Joseph, Lisa Friedland, Briony Swire-Thompson, and David Lazer. 2019. "Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election." *Science* 363 (6425): 374–378.

Guess, Andrew, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua Tucker. 2019. "Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook." *Science advances* 5 (1): eaau4586.

Guess, Andrew, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler. 2018. "Selective exposure to misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 US presidential campaign." *European Research Council* 9 (3): 4.

Guess, Andrew M. 2021. "(Almost) Everything in Moderation: New Evidence on Americans' Online Media Diets." *American Journal of Political Science.*

Guess, Andy, Kevin Aslett, Joshua Tucker, Richard Bonneau, and Jonathan Nagler. 2021. "Cracking open the news feed: Exploring what us Facebook users see and share with large-scale platform data." *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media* 1.

Harwood, John. 2021. "Dismissed in 2012, this diagnosis of GOP ills has now become undeniable." *CNN.*

Hounsel, Austin, Jordan Holland, Ben Kaiser, Kevin Borgolte, Nick Feamster, and Jonathan Mayer. 2020. "Identifying disinformation websites using infrastructure features." In *10th {USENIX} Workshop on Free and Open Communications on the Internet ({FOCI} 20).*

Iyengar, Shanto, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes. 2012. "Affect, not ideology a social identity perspective on polarization." *Public opinion quarterly* 76 (3): 405–431.

Jones, Ja'han. 2022. "Ted Cruz's social media obsession is a problem for us all." *MSNBC.*

Kaiser, Jonas, Adrian Rauchfleisch, and Nikki Bourassa. 2020. "Connecting the (far-) right dots: A topic modeling and hyperlink analysis of (far-) right media coverage during the US elections 2016." *Digital Journalism* 8 (3): 422–441.

Kang, Cecilia. 2016. "Fake News Onslaught Targets Pizzeria as Nest of Child-Trafficking." *New York Time.*

Lasser, Jana, Segun Taofeek Aroyehun, Almog Simchon, Fabio Carrella, David Garcia, and Stephan Lewandowsky. 2022. "Social media sharing by political elites: An asymmetric American exceptionalism." *arXiv preprint arXiv:2207.06313.*

Lazer, David MJ, Matthew A Baum, Yochai Benkler, Adam J Berinsky, Kelly M Greenhill, Filippo Menczer, Miriam J Metzger, Brendan Nyhan, Gordon Pennycook, David Rothschild, et al. 2018. "The science of fake news." *Science* 359 (6380): 1094–1096.

Lee, Nathan, Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, and DJ Flynn. 2021. "More accurate, but no less polarized: Comparing the factual beliefs of government officials and the public." *British Journal of Political Science* 51 (3): 1315–1322.

Lopez, German. 2016. "Pizzagate, the fake news conspiracy theory that led a gunman to DC's Comet Ping Pong, explained." *Vox.*

Lytvynenko, Jane, and Craig Silverman. 2020a. "Here's A Running List Of False And Misleading Information About The Election." *Buzzfeed News.*

———. 2020b. "Here's A Running List Of Debunked Postelection Rumors." *Buzzfeed News.*

Madani, Doha. 2022. "Twitter 'permanently suspends' Marjorie Taylor Greene's personal account." *NBC News.*

Mann, Thomas E, and Norman J Ornstein. 2016. *It's even worse than it looks: How the American constitutional system collided with the new politics of extremism.* Basic Books.

McCarty, Nolan, Keith T Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. 2016. *Polarized America: The dance of ideology and unequal riches.* mit Press.

McCoy, Terrence, and Helo'sa Traiano. 2020. "Brazil's Bolsonaro, channeling Trump, dismisses coronavirus measures—it's just "a little cold."." *The Washington Post* 25.

Merriam-Webster. 2017. "Words We're Watching: 'Ratioed'." *Merriam-Webster.*

Messing, Solomon, and Rachel Weisel. 2017. "Partisan conflict and congressional outreach." *Pew Research Center Report.*

Messing, Solomon, and Sean J Westwood. 2014. "Selective exposure in the age of social media: Endorsements trump partisan source affiliation when selecting news online." *Communication research* 41 (8): 1042–1063.

Mosleh, Mohsen, and David Rand. 2021. "Falsehood in, falsehood out: A tool for measuring exposure to elite misinformation on Twitter."

Natelson, Rob. 2021. "The Undeniable Irregularity That May Have Cost Trump the Election." *The Epoch Times.*

News, Fox. 2017. "'Pizzagate' shooter sentenced: What to know about the Comet Ping Pong conspiracies."

NewsGuard. 2021. "Fighting Misinformation with Journalism, not Algorithms."

O'Neil, Luke. 2017. "How to Know If You've Sent a Horrible Tweet." *Esquire.*

Osmundsen, Mathias, Alexander Bor, Peter Bjerregaard Vahlstrup, Anja Bechmann, and Michael Bang Petersen. 2021. "Partisan polarization is the primary psychological motivation behind political fake news sharing on Twitter." *American Political Science Review* 115 (3): 999–1015.

Panda, Anmol, Divya Siddarth, and Joyojeet Pal. 2020. "COVID, BLM, and the polarization of US politicians on Twitter." *arXiv preprint arXiv:2008.03263.*

Pennycook, Gordon, and David G Rand. 2019. "Fighting misinformation on social media using crowdsourced judgments of news source quality." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116 (7): 2521–2526.

Pereira, Frederico Batista, and Felipe Nunes. 2021. "Media choice and the polarization of public opinion about Covid-19 in Brazil." *Revista Latinoamericana de Opinión Pública,* 1–19.

Pink, Sophia L, James Chu, James N Druckman, David G Rand, and Robb Willer. 2021. "Elite party cues increase vaccination intentions among Republicans." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118 (32).

Poole, Keith T. 2005. *Spatial models of parliamentary voting.* Cambridge University Press.

Poole, Keith T, and Howard Rosenthal. 1985. "A spatial model for legislative roll call analysis." *American journal of political science,* 357–384.

Ragusa, Jordan M. 2016. "Partisan cohorts, polarization, and the Gingrich senators." *American Politics Research* 44 (2): 296–325.

Reuters. 2021. "Fact check: Facial recognition company did not identify Antifa members among Capitol mob." *Reuters.*

Russell, Annelise. 2018. "US senators on Twitter: Asymmetric party rhetoric in 140 characters." *American Politics Research* 46 (4): 695–723.

———. 2021. "Minority opposition and asymmetric parties? Senators partisan rhetoric on Twitter." *Political Research Quarterly* 74 (3): 615–627.

Shabad, Rebecca. 2021. "YouTube suspends Sen. Rand Paul over a video falsely claiming masks are ineffective." *NBC News.*

Shearer, Elisa, and Jeffrey Gottfried. 2018. *News use across social media platforms 2017. Pew Research Center, Journalism and Media.*

Skocpol, Theda, and Vanessa Williamson. 2016. *The Tea Party and the remaking of Republican conservatism.* Oxford University Press.

Stieber, Zachary. 2020. "Irregularities, Fraud Caused Trump to Lose Wisconsin: Election Commissioner." *The Epoch Times.*

Theriault, Sean M. 2013. *The Gingrich senators: The roots of partisan warfare in Congress.* Oxford University Press.

Tucker, Joshua A, Andrew Guess, Pablo Barberá, Cristian Vaccari, Alexandra Siegel, Sergey Sanovich, Denis Stukal, and Brendan Nyhan. 2018. "Social media, political polarization, and political disinformation: A review of the scientific literature." *Hewlett Foundation.*

Vadum, Matthew. 2021. "Nearly 15 Million Mail-in-Ballots Unaccounted for in 2020 Election, Report Says." *The Epoch Times.*

Van Duyn, Emily, and Jessica Collier. 2019. "Priming and fake news: The effects of elite discourse on evaluations of news media." *Mass Communication and Society* 22 (1): 29–48.

Van Kessel, Patrick, Adam Hughes, and Solomon Messing. 2018. "Taking sides on Facebook: how congressional outreach changed under President Trump." *Washington DC: Pew Research Center, July* 18.

Van Kessel, Patrick, R Widjaya, S Shah, A Smith, and A Hughes. 2020. "Congress soars to new heights on social media." *Pew Research Center, Washington, DC, July 16th.*

Watts, Mark D, David Domke, Dhavan V Shah, and David P Fan. 1999. "Elite cues and media bias in presidential campaigns: Explaining public perceptions of a liberal press." *Communication Research* 26 (2): 144–175.

Zaller, John R, et al. 1992. *The nature and origins of mass opinion.* Cambridge university press.