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DOI

[10.1016/j.electstud.2025.103003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2025.103003)

Publication date

2025

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Electoral Studies

License

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

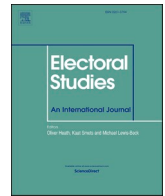
Daxecker, U., & Prasad, N. (2025). Preaching to the converted: Misinformation and voter preferences in election campaigns. *Electoral Studies*, 98, Article 103003. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2025.103003>

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Preaching to the converted: Misinformation and voter preferences in election campaigns[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Politicians frequently sponsor misinformation during election campaigns, but its effectiveness in shifting voters' policy preferences and beliefs remains unclear. We argue that the efficacy of campaign misinformation depends on whether it latches onto partisan or non-partisan identities. Misinformation that primes non-partisan but politically relevant social identities could appeal to voters sharing these social identities, potentially moving supporters and non-supporters closer to the issue position of the sponsor of misinformation. If, on the other hand, misinformation is processed along partisan lines, it appeals only to existing supporters. Our empirical analysis is based on a pre-registered vignette experiment embedded in a representative post-election survey in India. Our design mimics the opposition's use of campaign misinformation to polarize voters' preferences and beliefs on issues of religion. We find that misinformation was only partly effective. While some co-partisans increased their support of the policy position advocated by the misinformers, messages failed to persuade non-supporters, and were easily corrected among co-partisans. We demonstrate the broader relevance of these results with a replication of campaign misinformation in the United States.

1. Introduction

Politicians and parties frequently sponsor misinformation, but is it effective in shifting voters' policy preferences and beliefs during election campaigns?¹ An expansive research program explores the spread and consumption of misinformation (for recent reviews, see Tucker et al., 2018; Jerit and Zhao, 2020; Weeks and Gil de Zuniga, 2019); however, scholarship has largely assumed rather than demonstrated its effectiveness as a campaign strategy. Centering our argument around politicians' incentives to use misinformation in campaigns, we explore its effects on voters' policy preferences and beliefs on a salient issue.

Our main argument is that the effectiveness of misinformation as a campaign strategy is conditional on whether it latches onto partisan or social identities. In democracies around the world, including India and the United States as the two largest, non-partisan social identities such as ethnicity, religion, race, caste, or class are politically relevant but do not

coincide perfectly with partisan identities.² We argue that overlapping social and partisan identities have important yet underappreciated implications for how misinformation is processed by voters. If misinformation is processed along social identities, it can shift the policy preferences of supporters and non-supporters of the party sponsoring misinformation, moving them closer to the misinformers and increasing issue polarization. If, on the other hand, misinformation messages are processed along partisan identities, they appeal only to voters already supporting the misinformers. While such misinformation could move some co-partisans closer to the issue position of the misinformers, it will fail to expand the electoral appeal of the party sponsoring misinformation. In the context of election campaigns, we expect that politicians often spread false claims that simultaneously primes social *and* partisan identities. That is, overlapping social and partisan identities make it difficult to anticipate *ex ante* whether messages will travel along one or the other identity dimension (Westwood and Peterson, 2022).

^{*} Author ordering is alphabetical. Project funded by European Research Council (ERC) grant #852439 and a grant by the Global Digital Cultures research priority area of the University of Amsterdam. Project approved by Ethics Review Board (ERB) #2021-AISSR-13397. The project was preregistered and the pre-analysis plan is available at <https://osf.io/g62nr>. We thank Kartikeya Batra, Bernd Beber, Simon Chauchard, Rajeshwari Majumdar, Alex Scacco, and Gijs Schumacher for comments. Earlier versions were presented at the Digital Misinformation in the Global South Workshop (DIMIS) in March 2022 and the Political Economy of Development (MoPED) Workshop in Berlin in June 2022. We are grateful to workshop participants for feedback.

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¹ The pre-registration plan includes hypotheses, independent and dependent variables, sampling strategy and sample size, experimental designs, and estimation techniques.

² Canonical models of partisanship view partisan identity as distinct from, but influenced by, other social identities such as ethnicity, religion, or class (Mason, 2018; Westwood and Peterson, 2022).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2025.103003>

Received 17 May 2024; Received in revised form 7 October 2025; Accepted 8 October 2025

Available online 16 October 2025

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We test our argument using a representative, in-person survey conducted after the 2021 elections in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal.³ In this election, opposition parties—especially the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—spread false claims alleging government favoritism toward religious out-groups, aiming to sway voters towards the in-group (Nath and Ray, 2022; Palshikar et al., 2021). We mimic the opposition's strategy in a pre-registered vignette experiment embedded in our survey, exposing respondents to false claims alleging that the incumbent is favoring groups on the basis of religion.⁴ Debates on the relationship between state and religion are highly salient in Indian politics today, and parties such as the BJP—the national incumbent but in opposition in West Bengal—have aimed to mobilize voters around this issue (Jaffrelet, 2021). Our findings for policy preferences and beliefs show that misinformation was only partly successful, increasing support for Hindu majoritarianism among BJP supporters but failing to persuade other voters. We suggest that this is because allegations of government favoritism toward Muslims simultaneously primed religious identity and voters' attachment to the incumbent, leading voters to prioritize partisan rather than religious identity attachments. Hence, misinformation failed to shift the preferences and beliefs of potential swing voters, in particular Hindu voters with weak attachments to the state incumbent party Trinamool Congress (TMC). In addition, false allegations of government favoritism were easily corrected, even among voters initially swayed by misinformation. Extending our findings beyond India, we demonstrate the applicability of our argument in the United States, a context in which partisan attachments are stronger. We re-analyze data from Nyhan et al. (2020), an influential study that explored voter responses to misinformation sponsored by former President Trump during the 2016 election campaign. Mirroring our results in India, we show that misinformation that primed partisan and racial identities persuaded only a subset of Republican voters.

We highlight two contributions: First, we integrate work on misinformation with the literature on electoral campaigns and issue entrepreneurs. Our argument is centered around politicians' incentives to produce misinformation and how they interact with citizens' response to it. Consistent with work on issue entrepreneurs (Riker, 1996; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020), we suggest that political parties—especially those in the opposition or incumbents concerned about losing—try to use misinformation around social identities to polarize the electorate on politically dormant but pre-existing social cleavages. Yet as our results for India and the United States show, election campaigns make it challenging to pander exclusively to social identities, limiting its effectiveness to co-partisans. Second, we expand scholarship on misinformation in the Global South. Research on social media use and misinformation in the Global South, including South Asia, has expanded only recently (Daxecker et al., 2024; Badrinathan, 2021; Badrinathan and Simon, 2023; Mir et al., 2023). While partisan identities are often assumed to be weaker and less stable in the Global South (Auerbach et al., 2022), we find that misinformation affects voter preferences along partisan rather than social identities. These findings contribute to other works on the importance of partisanship for beliefs in misinformation (Badrinathan, 2021; Batista Pereira et al., 2022), conspiracy theories (Siddiqui, 2020), and rumors (Schon, 2021).

2. A campaign perspective on political misinformation

We define misinformation as claims that contradict or distort "common understandings of verifiable facts" (Guess and Lyons, 2020, p.10). We center our study on misinformation by politicians in election campaigns, for two reasons. First, politicians and political parties are

frequent sponsors of misinformation (Badrinathan, 2021; Hochschild and Einstein, 2015; Nyhan, 2020; Tucker et al., 2018). Second, politically relevant identities are salient during elections, making misinformation along these identities particularly impactful (Banaji and Bhat, 2019; Persily, 2017). We think of campaign misinformation as a special case of campaign messaging, with the main distinction being that messages are demonstrably false and intended to misinform and deceive, but otherwise similarly aim to prime salient identities or divisive issues for electoral benefit.⁵

2.1. Campaign misinformation and its effects on policy preferences and beliefs

Misinformation in election campaigns is often created and propagated by politicians and their allies, aiming to portray rival politicians and out-groups in a negative light (Jerit and Zhao, 2020; Tucker et al., 2018; Wittenberg and Berinsky, 2020). It is common for misinformation to accuse opponents of being corrupt, dishonest, or biased in favor of out-groups (Poonam and Samarth, 2019; Tucker et al., 2018). Moreover, misinformation messages often involve divisive issues that prime partisan, ethnic, or religious identities, which can encourage co-partisans or in-groups to accept and propagate inaccurate information (Tucker et al., 2018, pp.40-44). Misinformation thus highlights partisan and social identities; we argue that its effects on voter preferences and beliefs depend on the persuasiveness and persistence of misinformation along these identity dimensions.

Regarding persuasiveness, prior research shows that partisan and social attachments influence beliefs in misinformation. People are more likely to believe misinformation that is compatible with these identities, while rejecting or even counter-arguing misinformation that is inconsistent with pre-existing attachments (Badrinathan, 2021; Berinsky, 2017; Flynn et al., 2017; Kosloff et al., 2010; Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006). Misinformation highlighting social or partisan cleavages should thus persuade voters who share these identities to adopt the position advocated in misinformation messages. Crucial for its effectiveness as a campaign strategy, though, is whether misinformation primes partisan or non-partisan identities. Social identities such as ethnicity, religion, or class are often closely linked to partisan identities, but do not coincide perfectly (Auerbach et al., 2022; Mason, 2018; Westwood and Peterson, 2022).⁶ If voters evaluate misinformation based on their partisan but not social identities, misinformation can move co-partisans closer to the policy position advocated by the misinformer, but will fail to persuade non-voters or supporters of the rival party with whom the misinformer shares a social identity (for example, white Republican voters believing Trump's claim that Obama was born in Kenya, while white Democrats reject it). Misinformation priming salient religious, ethnic, or class cleavages, on the other hand, may

⁵ Campaign misinformation can be viewed as a policy and rhetorical strategy that allows parties to draw attention to radical issues in the hopes of garnering votes (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). De Vries and Hobolt (2020, pp. 42) identify two strategies of issue entrepreneurship: policy innovation, which refers to the mobilization of new and divisive issues; and rhetorical innovation, which involves using rhetoric that is critical of mainstream elites. Our perspective is also related to the persuasive power of issue framing, party cues, and negative messages in election campaigns (for overviews, see Lau and Ivy, 2009; Lenz, 2009; Jacobson, 2015). Compared to other campaign messaging, however, the low facticity of misinformation could make it easier for rival parties to correct it.

⁶ For example, in India, 80 % of the population are Hindu, but while many Hindus support the BJP, many others vote for different parties in national and state-level elections. Similarly, in the U.S., Republicans draw support primarily from white voters, but many white voters support the Democratic Party. We therefore treat social identities as distinct from partisan ones, but recognize that social identities inform partisan attachments, which has important consequences for voter attitudes and behavior.

³ We discuss important ethical concerns in appendix C.

⁴ In a second vignette, we vary the content and sender of the message to distinguish whether religious identity, partisanship, or underlying prejudice drive these results.

broaden a party's electoral appeal, provided it activates social identity cleavages (for example, male Republicans but also male Democrats may respond to Trump's questioning of Hillary Clinton's competence). In the context of an election campaign, parties face strong incentives to campaign on partisan and social cleavages; that is, they aim to distinguish themselves from other parties by attacking rivals with misinformation, which primes partisan identities, but also try to campaign on issues that cut across partisan dimensions in an attempt to persuade new voters. But since these identities are closely linked, it is difficult for parties to anticipate whether voters will evaluate misinformation primarily along partisan or social cleavages (Westwood and Peterson, 2022). Non-supporters of the party that is spreading misinformation, but who share the social identity dimension primed with misinformation, will be cross-pressured by competing messages.

Regarding persistence, misinformation can be successful only if voter preferences and beliefs resist correction (Porter and Wood, 2022). In a competitive campaign environment, other parties have strong incentives and ample resources to provide corrective information and counter these narratives (Berinsky, 2017).⁷ Successful corrections may be subject to motivated reasoning, similar to the persuasiveness of misinformation. Hence, core supporters of the party spreading misinformation may be most resistant to corrections. Taken together, these observations suggest that corrective information by credible and trustworthy sources about the incumbent's actual position can be successful in reducing the persuasiveness of misinformation, although we expect that core supporters of the misinformers are most resistant to corrections.

Misinformation is pernicious because motivated reasoning makes it persuasive and persistent. Voters' directional goals, however, may be shaped by social or partisan attachments. The persuasiveness and persistence of misinformation for voter preferences and beliefs therefore depends on which identities are primed more strongly.

2.2. Empirical implications

We derive three sets of pre-registered hypotheses on the effects of misinformation on two outcome variables, voters' policy preferences and beliefs.⁸ In our experiment, opposition party candidates make a false claim about the government's policy on a salient issue. First, we explore if misinformation shifts voters' policy preferences towards the position of the misinformers, exploring whether misinformation affects preferences through social or partisan identities.

H1a (Policy Preferences, Social Identity Processing): People are more (less) likely to adopt misinformation alleging favoritism toward outgroups (ingroups).

H1b (Policy Preferences, Partisan Identity Processing): People are more likely to adopt misinformation spread by their own political party.

Second, we explore if misinformation affects voters' factual beliefs on the policy in question, rather than just their preferences. That is, we examine if exposure to misinformation makes respondents less or more knowledgeable about government policy on a salient issue.

H2 (Policy Beliefs): Exposure to misinformation makes respondents less knowledgeable of government policy.

Third, we test the efficacy of correcting political misinformation for policy preferences and beliefs.

H3a (Policy Preference Correction): Correction of political

⁷ The incentives and capacity of rival parties likely exceed that of fact checkers and media platforms. Among rival parties, incumbents should be especially capable of correcting misinformation.

⁸ For the complete pre-registered pre-analysis plan, see Appendix I. Note that we made some very minor adaptations to these hypotheses. One is order; in the pre-analysis plan, H1a corresponded to H3, H1b to H4, H2 to H1, H3a to H5, and H3b to H2. We also changed "believe" to "adopt" in H1a&b. We had one additional pre-registered hypothesis pertaining to misinformation's effects on polarization, which we state and test in Appendix G.

misinformation is less effective when the misinformation is spread by one's own political party.

H3b (Policy Belief Correction): Exposure to correction makes respondents more knowledgeable of government policy as compared to those who are only exposed to misinformation but less knowledgeable as compared to those who are never exposed to misinformation.

3. Empirical context: misinformation in the 2021 elections in West Bengal

We test the empirical implications of our arguments in West Bengal, India.⁹ We conduct a representative in-person survey of 2,885 voters after the 2021 state elections in West Bengal.¹⁰ In this election, the main competitors were the state incumbent party, the All India Trinamool Congress (TMC), a left-leaning, populist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing nationalist party, and several smaller parties, such as the Indian Secular Front.¹¹ While the BJP governs at the national level, it has never held office in West Bengal and has been mounting an increasingly aggressive campaign to dislodge the TMC from power. Across India, the BJP has promoted Hindu nationalism and majoritarianism, challenging the *Nehruvian* consensus governing India since 1950 and aiming to polarize the electorate on questions of religion (Bulutgil and Prasad, 2023; Chatterji et al., 2019; Daxecker and Prasad, 2025; Jaffrelot, 2021, pp. 93–95). In the 2021 elections, the BJP attempted to replicate this strategy in West Bengal. The issue of secularism had not been politicized prior to the BJP's arrival in West Bengal, suggesting that the party could polarize voters on this socially important but politically nascent issue. A major component of the BJP's strategy was to spread allegations that the incumbent party TMC favored Muslims and neglected Hindus. The BJP's goal was to divide voters into two blocks — those in support of status quo secularism and those supporting a Hindu majoritarian state — expecting that the party would emerge as the natural choice for Hindu voters. Hence, Hindu voters of rival parties are the primary demographic group that the BJP hoped to mobilize through allegations of Muslim appeasement. Our experiment explores if misinformation on issues of religion is successful in shifting voter preferences.

4. The experiment: Using misinformation to Champion majoritarianism

4.1. The vignettes

Vignette Design: The vignette design mimics parties' use of misinformation during the campaign, which was designed to portray the incumbent party as pro-Muslim and anti-Hindu (Ghosh, 2020; Nath and Ray, 2022).¹² Our vignettes rely on misinformation about the government's handling of coinciding religious processions. Processions by

⁹ West Bengal is India's fourth largest state with an estimated population of around 100 million.

¹⁰ Conducting surveys on misinformation raises important ethical concerns, which we discuss in detail in appendix C. The survey was administered in Bengali or Hindi depending on respondent preference. 94 % of respondent completed the survey in Bengali, with the remaining six percent choosing Hindi. For more details on the survey, including response rate, please see Appendix B.1.

¹¹ The ISF is a secular party in name only, and party leader Abbas Siddiqui tried to galvanize Muslim support by complaining of Hindu appeasement and Muslim deprivation by the incumbent government. Approximately 27 % of the population in West Bengal are Muslim, and uneven geographic distribution means that some districts have large or even majority Muslim populations.

¹² Visuals of the vignette are shown in Appendix A. For the full text of the vignettes see Table I.

Hindus and Muslims can be highly contentious, especially if they coincide in date and time, such as the *Dashami* processions of *Durga Pooja*, a Hindu festival, and the *Tajia* processions of *Muharram*, a sacred Muslim event.¹³ To minimize the risk of conflict, the High Court of West Bengal ordered the state government to plan the processional routes to avoid overlap. The incumbent government implemented the Court's order. Nevertheless, the BJP made false allegations about the government's handling of processions during the campaign, claiming that the incumbent had permitted Muslim but not Hindu processions. For example, Ghosh (2020) mentions that headlines such as "Mamata's Police did not allow Durga Pooja" were common. Vignettes designed around coinciding processions are suitable for our purposes since false claims by parties linked to Hindu and Muslim communities are credible in this context. They also appropriately reflect a campaign context in which both the BJP and ISF lobbied false accusations of out-group favoritism against the incumbent party (Ghosh, 2020; Nath and Ray, 2022).

Bundling Partisan and Social Dimensions: Our vignettes contain messages from BJP and ISF party leaders who make false allegations of out-group favoritism by the incumbent; i.e., they bundle partisan and social appeals. Although we could have constructed treatments that disaggregate partisan and religious appeals, such an approach would poorly reflect how parties can use misinformation in the real world. In campaign contexts, misinformation mischaracterizes political opponents and scaffolds on issues of social importance. In our experimental setting (explained in detail below), we disentangle partisan and social identity-based reasoning by examining heterogeneity in responses. To do so, we constructed two treatments, one alleging Muslim appeasement, while the other alleging Hindu appeasement. In addition, treatments are delivered from two different political parties and by leaders of two different religious groups. Our empirical analysis explores heterogeneous treatment effects on the basis of respondent's reported partisan and religious identity, allowing us to distinguish whether misinformation shifts the preferences of co-partisans or co-ethnics.

4.2. Pre-treatment preferences

Before administering the treatment, we asked an unobtrusive question aimed at assessing respondents' attitudes on the role of government in matters pertaining to religion. Responses to this question allow us to compare pre-treatment preferences on state-religion relations in the abstract with post-treatment preferences on a specific instance of government involvement in issues of religion.¹⁴ The pre-treatment question was asked in a general manner and did not link to a real-world incident or issue. This was to avoid pre-treating our respondents with information linked to the experimental design. We find that a super-majority, approximately 89.5 % of all respondents, prefer equal treatment of all religions (secularism), while only 4.9 % prefer Hindu majoritarianism. Furthermore, 91 % of all Hindus and 85.4 % of all Muslims prefer a secular government. Finally, among TMC voters, 90.7 % support secularism and 3.4 % prefer Hindu majoritarianism; and among BJP voters, 83.8 % support secularism and 11.2 % prefer Hindu majoritarianism. Thus, in the absence of any misinformation, respondents overwhelmingly prefer the equal treatment of Hindus and Muslims.

¹³ If processions by the two communities intersect, conflict and rioting can ensue. For example, coinciding processions turned violent in 2017 in several states.

¹⁴ We asked: "What should be the role of the state in matters pertaining to religion?" Respondents could choose between the state playing no role, catering to the majority religion, catering to the minority religion, or supporting all religions. We interpret no role or support all religions as consistent with support for equal treatment of all religions.

Table 1

Vignette text and experimental conditions.

I. Control Sometimes, Muharram and Durga Pooja processions overlap.	III. Misinformation Treatment ISF Sometimes, Muharram and Durga Pooja processions overlap. On this issue, please see the following newspaper clip: Siddiqui: Why Durga Pooja, not Muharram? On Tuesday, Indian Secular Front leader Abbas Siddiqui said that "Mamata allows Ram Navami and Durga pooja processions but not Muharram. This government creates obstacles for Muslim festivals as well."
II. Misinformation Treatment BJP Sometimes, Muharram and Durga Pooja processions overlap. On this issue, please see the following newspaper clip: Yogi: Why Muharram, not Durga Pooja? On Tuesday, BJP leader Yogi Adityanath said that "Mamata allows Muharram processions but not Durga Pooja. This government creates obstacles for Saraswati Pooja and Janmashthami as well."	V. Misinformation ISF with Correction Sometimes, Muharram and Durga Pooja processions overlap. On this issue, please see the following newspaper clip: Siddiqui: Why Durga Pooja, not Muharram? On Tuesday, Indian Secular Front leader Abbas Siddiqui said that "Mamata allows Ram Navami and Durga pooja processions but not Muharram. This government creates obstacles for Muslim festivals as well." However, an independent investigation reveals that this allegation is false. The Government allowed both processions, Durga Pooja and Muharram.
IV. Misinformation BJP with Correction Sometimes, Muharram and Durga Pooja processions overlap. On this issue, please see the following newspaper clip: Yogi: Why Muharram, not Durga Pooja? On Tuesday, BJP leader Yogi Adityanath said that "Mamata allows Muharram processions but not Durga Pooja. This government creates obstacles for Saraswati Pooja and Janmashthami as well." However, an independent investigation reveals that this allegation is false. The Government allowed both processions, Durga Pooja and Muharram.	

4.3. Control group

We retained 20 % of our sample as a control group. The control group (and all other respondents) received a reminder that *Dashami* (=Hindu) and *Tajia* (=Muslim) processions sometimes coincide. Specifically, they were told that "*sometimes, Muharram and Durga Pooja processions overlap*".¹⁵ Reminding respondents in the control group about the coincidence of processions by the two communities means that we can meaningfully compare responses to the treatments to a control group that is also asked about their policy preferences. Hence, we can compare the effect of misinformation to a control group that did not receive false information in addition to examining the effect of corrections vis-à-vis misinformation.¹⁶ Note that we preface all treatments groups with the same text as the control (see Table 1 for the vignette text).

4.4. Misinformation treatments

We designed two misinformation treatments to examine the persuasiveness of misinformation.

Misinformation Treatment BJP: In the 2021 election, the BJP spread false information on the incumbent's response to the overlap between Hindu and Muslim processions. The first treatment replicates a senior BJP leader's campaign speech (Treatment BJP).¹⁷ The BJP leader, Yogi Adityanath (the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh), who also is a Hindu priest, falsely claimed that the incumbent Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, prevented Hindus from celebrating Durga

¹⁵ See Figure A.1 in Appendix A.

¹⁶ Most prior work lacks a pure control group and is thus unable to explore the effect of receiving misinformation versus not receiving it.

¹⁷ The respondents were read the text and shown a visual containing the text with the political leader's photo. See Figure A.2 in Appendix A.

Table 2
Preference after exposure to campaign misinformation.

Dependent Variable:	Policy Preferences		
	M1	M2	M3
Misinformation BJP (alleging Muslim appeasement)	0.018 (0.017)	-0.024 (0.039)	-0.030 (0.016)
Misinformation ISF (alleging Hindu appeasement)	0.019 (0.018)	-0.029 (0.040)	-0.007 (0.018)
Hindu	0.114*** (0.018)	0.074* (0.032)	0.111*** (0.018)
BJP Voter	0.181*** (0.023)	0.179*** (0.023)	0.049 (0.033)
Misinformation BJP × Hindu		0.057 (0.043)	
Misinformation ISF × Hindu		0.065 (0.045)	
Misinformation BJP × BJP Voter			0.242*** (0.055)
Misinformation ISF × BJP Voter			0.137** (0.051)
Constant	-0.088*** (0.019)	-0.058 (0.030)	-0.061** (0.019)
Adj R-squared	0.097	0.097	0.112
N	1666	1666	1666
	Marginal Effects (95 % CI in Parenthesis)		
Misinformation BJP × Hindu or BJP Voter		0.033 (-0.001, 0.069)	0.212*** (0.108, 0.314)
Misinformation ISF × Hindu or BJP Voter		0.036 (-0.003, 0.074)	0.130** (0.036, 0.224)

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Models report OLS estimates. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. The dependent variable (DV) measures policy preference. Respondents were asked “If there were to be an overlap between Muharram and Durga Pooja, what should the government do?” The DV is coded as 1 for a reported preference for Hindu favoritism, 0 for equal treatment of Hindus and Muslims, and -1 for a reported preference for Muslim favoritism. Marginal effects reported for interaction terms of treatment and Hindu/BJP voter. The reference group consists of respondents in the control group (no misinformation).

Pooja, but allowed Muslims to observe Muharram.¹⁸ To maximize plausibility and minimize deception, we repeat this part of his speech verbatim. This treatment is designed to assess whether respondents switch preferences from secularism to majoritarianism. Furthermore, we examine whether those switching preferences are copartisans (BJP supporters), coethnics (Hindus), both copartisans and coethnics (Hindu BJP voters), or if there are no heterogeneous treatments effects.

Misinformation Treatment ISF: Similarly, the Indian Secular Front (ISF), aimed to galvanize Muslim support by alleging that the incumbent government engages in Hindu appeasement. We exposed a second subset of respondents to misinformation by Abbas Siddiqui, the ISF’s party leader who is also a Muslim preacher (Treatment ISF).¹⁹ To maintain symmetry with the first treatment, we adapted the text from Yogi’s speech, with Siddiqui claiming that Mamata Banerjee allows only Durga Pooja and created obstacles for Muharram and other Muslim festivals. While we changed the wording of Siddiqui’s speech to maintain comparability across the two treatments, we did not create or spread new misinformation. This is because Abbas made these very same claims.²⁰ The ISF is a small party with a very localized support base in and around Howrah & Kolkata. The goal of this treatment is not to test its salience among Muslims or ISF copartisans. Rather, it allows us to adjudicate between three underlying dimensions: the substantive content of the misinformation, the partisan and religious identity of the misinformer, and the respondent partisan and religious identity.

4.5. Misinformation with correction treatments

To examine the persistence of misinformation, we administer a correction treatment.²¹ Following both misinformation treatments, respondents are read the following: “However, an independent investigation reveals that this allegation is false. The Government allowed both processions,

¹⁸ The precise misinformation claim presented in our vignette comes from a speech given during the 2019 elections. We chose a misinformation claim that really happened since we do not want to produce and spread new misinformation. We relied on an incident from an earlier election to avoid our respondents being pre-treated. For the news item containing false claims, see Times of India, February 5, 2019. For fact checking establishing this claim as misleading, see Logically: Fact Check Library, accessed July 17, 2023.

¹⁹ See Figure A.4 in Appendix A.

²⁰ See for example: Times of India, January 27, 2021.

²¹ See Figures A.3 in Appendix A.

Durga Pooja and Muharram”.

4.6. Measuring outcomes

After being exposed to one of the five treatments, we present respondents with two outcomes variables. First, to explore policy preferences, we ask: “If there were to be an overlap between Muharram and Durga Pooja, what should the government do?”²² Respondents could select *help the majority group (Hindus)*, *help both Hindus and Muslims*, *do nothing*, or *help the minority group (Muslims)*. We interpret *help Hindus* as support for majoritarianism, *help Muslims* as support for minorities, and we map *help both or help neither* to equal treatment of Hindus and Muslims, meaning secularism. Accordingly, we code a preference for equal treatment of Hindus and Muslims as 0 (secularism), Muslim favoritism as -1, and Hindu favoritism as +1 (majoritarianism).

Second, we ask respondents about their factual beliefs on government policy. We ask respondents what the government does when there is actual an overlap between *Muharram* and *Durga Pooja*. Our answer choices span facilitate only Hindus, only Muslims, both Hindus and Muslims, and neither. In reality, the government facilitates processions for both Hindus and Muslims, and other responses indicate a lack of awareness of actual government policy.

5. Campaign misinformation and policy preferences

Table 2 reports results for misinformation treatments and policy preferences. *Misinformation Treatment BJP* mimics campaign misinformation spread by senior BJP leaders, where they deliberately misrepresented government policy to bolster their claim that the incumbent has an anti-Hindu and pro-Muslim disposition. *Misinformation Treatment ISF* misrepresents the exact same policy but alleges the opposite, that the incumbent is anti-Muslim and pro-Hindu. The outcome variable measures policy preference, indicating support for equal treatment of Hindus and Muslims, favoritism toward Hindus, or favoritism toward Muslims.

Column M1 of Table 2 shows that exposure to campaign misinformation has no effect on voter preferences. In the control group, 93 % of the respondents favor secularism, 5 % support majoritarianism, and 2 %

²² Additionally, to test their perception of the incumbent, we also ask respondents: “When there is an overlap between Muharram and Durga Pooja, what does the government do?”

Table 3
Preference after exposure to misinformation and correction information.

Dependent Variable:	Policy Preferences		
	M1	M2	M3
Misinformation BJP & Correction	-0.026 (0.016)	0.048 (0.041)	0.023 (0.017)
Misinformation ISF & Correction	-0.030* (0.015)	0.037 (0.032)	0.005 (0.014)
Hindu	0.099*** (0.016)	0.141*** (0.021)	0.096*** (0.016)
BJP Voter	0.154*** (0.019)	0.153*** (0.019)	0.243*** (0.030)
Misinformation BJP & Correction × Hindu		-0.096* (0.044)	
Misinformation ISF & Correction × Hindu		-0.089* (0.036)	
Misinformation BJP & Correction × BJP Voter			-0.214*** (0.046)
Misinformation ISF & Correction × BJP Voter			-0.155*** (0.045)
Constant	-0.052*** (0.015)	-0.083*** (0.019)	-0.070*** (0.015)
Adj R-squared	0.076	0.079	0.092
N	2113	2113	2113
	Marginal Effects (95 % CI in Parenthesis)		
Misinformation BJP & Correction × Hindu or BJP Voter		-0.048** (-0.082, -0.014)	-0.191*** (-0.274, -0.108)
Misinformation ISF & Correction × Hindu or BJP Voter		-0.051** (-0.083, -0.019)	-0.150** (-0.234, -0.066)

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Models report OLS estimates. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. The dependent variable (DV) measures policy preference. Respondents were asked “If there were to be an overlap between Muharram and Durga Pooja, what should the government do” The DV is coded as 1 for a reported preference for Hindu favoritism, 0 for equal treatment of Hindus and Muslims, and -1 for a reported preference for Muslim favoritism. Marginal effects reported for interaction terms of treatment and Hindu/BJP voter. The reference group consists of respondents who have been exposed to misinformation.

support minority (Muslim) favoritism. In the *Misinformation Treatment BJP* group, 89 % of the respondents favor secularism, 8 % support majoritarianism, and 3 % support minority (Muslim) favoritism. And, in the *Misinformation Treatment ISF* group, 88 % of the respondents favor secularism, 9 % support majoritarianism and 3 % support minority (Muslim) favoritism.²³ The difference between voter preferences in the control and either of the treatment groups is not statistically significant.

Since the BJP’s campaign messaging is mostly directed towards Hindus, it is relevant to examine how campaign misinformation influences Hindu voters, as hypothesized in H1a. In Column M2 of *Table 2*, we disaggregate treatment effects by religion. As a group, Hindus are more likely than Muslims to support majoritarianism.²⁴ However, we do not find any evidence to suggest that preferences of Hindus or Muslims are influenced by exposure to misinformation.

Electoral campaigns can try to mobilize existing supporters or aim to attract new supporters. In Column M3 of *Table 2* we disaggregate treatment effects by partisan affiliation. We find that exposure to campaign misinformation has a substantial impact on BJP voters. In the control group, 9.5 % of the BJP voters support majoritarianism. On exposure to campaign misinformation, support for majoritarianism among BJP voters increases to 31.2 % of those exposed to BJP’s misinformation and 22.2 % of those exposed to ISF’s misinformation.

Thus, we find that exposure to campaign misinformation does not have population-level effects on policy preference. Furthermore, as a group, neither Hindus nor Muslims are susceptible to misinformation treatments. Yet, BJP partisans respond to both treatments bundles by professing more support for Hindu majoritarianism and less for secularism. Thus, our findings are consistent with Hypothesis 1b (partisan identity processing) but not with Hypothesis 1a (social identity processing).

5.1. Exposure to corrective information

During campaigns, political rivals also make counterclaims and refute misinformation. Thus, to be effective, misinformation should not only convince voters, but should also be able to withstand corrective

information from rival parties with strong interests and resources for refuting misinformation.

In *Table 3*, we compare those exposed to *misinformation & correction* with those exposed only to *misinformation*.²⁵ Our findings are mixed. In column M1 of *Table 3*, we find that corrective information refuting claims of Hindu appeasement by a Muslim leader is effective (*misinformation ISF & correction*), but the same corrective information refuting claims of Muslim appeasement by a Hindu leader is ineffective (*misinformation BJP & correction*) in influencing voter preferences.

Next, we examine the effect of corrections among groups identified as more susceptible to misinformation. Previously, we observed that Hindus and BJP voters are most likely to support majoritarianism; but of the two groups, only BJP voters change their policy preference on being exposed to campaign misinformation. In Column M2 of *Table 3*, we find statistically significant effect of corrections on preferences of Hindu respondents. But given that we do not find any significant effect of exposure to misinformation on Hindus specifically (see Column M2 of *Table 2*), and there are large overlaps between voters who are Hindus and BJP voters, it is likely that correction effects are driven by BJP voters who are mostly Hindu. In this direction, in Column M3 of *Table 3*, we disaggregate the effects of correction treatment by partisanship.

Among supporters of the BJP, we find that corrective information remedies the misinformation effect (see Column M3 of *Table 3*). Specifically, when exposed to the misinformation from the BJP campaign, the percentage of BJP voters who express a preference for majoritarianism increases from 9.5 % in the control group to 31.2 % in the treatment group receiving only misinformation and reduces to 9.4 % in the treatment group receiving corrective information. Likewise, when exposed to the misinformation from the ISF campaign, the percentage of BJP voters who express a preference for majoritarianism increases from 9.5 % in the control group to 22.2 % in the treatment group receiving only misinformation and reduces to 12.3 % in the treatment group receiving corrective information. These findings go against Hypothesis 3a (Preference Correction), wherein we had a pre-registered expectation that BJP voters will resist corrections to misinformation spread by the BJP. Instead, we find that a correction to BJP’s misinformation causes BJP partisans to revert to their pre-misinformation preferences.

²³ For underlying data see Figure E.1 in Appendix E.

²⁴ In the control group, among Hindus, 0 % support Muslim favoritism, 94.4 % favor secularism, and 5.6 % prefer Hindu favoritism; whereas among Muslims, 8.3 % support Muslim favoritism, 89.4 % favor secularism, and 2.3 % prefer Hindu favoritism.

²⁵ In Table E.1, we replicate *Table 3* with the control group as the base category, implying comparison of *misinformation & correction* and *misinformation* only groups with the control group.

Table 4
Beliefs after to exposure to campaign misinformation.

Dependent Variable:	Belief that Government is not Secular		
	M1	M2	M3
Misinformation BJP	0.016 (0.019)	0.010 (0.034)	-0.010 (0.020)
Misinformation ISF	0.043* (0.021)	0.008 (0.035)	0.007 (0.021)
Hindu	0.028 (0.017)	0.010 (0.029)	0.025 (0.017)
BJP Voter	0.177*** (0.026)	0.176*** (0.026)	0.073 (0.040)
Misinformation BJP × Hindu		0.009 (0.041)	
Misinformation ISF × Hindu		0.047 (0.043)	
Misinformation BJP × BJP Voter			0.132* (0.059)
Misinformation ISF × BJP Voter			0.173*** (0.061)
Constant	0.056** (0.018)	0.069** (0.030)	0.078*** (0.019)
Adj R-squared	0.051	0.051	0.058
N	1611	1611	1611
	Marginal Effects (95 % CI in Parenthesis)		
Misinformation BJP × Hindu or BJP Voter		0.018 (-0.028, 0.064)	0.121* (0.012, 0.232)
Misinformation ISF × Hindu or BJP Voter		0.055* (0.006, 0.103)	0.181** (0.068, 0.293)

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Models report OLS estimates. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. The dependent variable (DV) measures beliefs about government policy. Respondents were asked “When there is an overlap between Muharram and Durga Pooja, what does the government do?” DV = 1 when respondent reports that government facilitates only Hindus or only Muslims; and 0 otherwise. Marginal effects reported for interaction terms of treatment and Hindu/BJP voter. The reference group consists of respondents in the control group (no misinformation).

Table 5
Beliefs after to exposure to misinformation and correction.

Dependent Variable:	Policy Preferences		
	M1	M2	M3
Misinformation BJP & Correction	-0.007 (0.019)	0.071 (0.041)	0.030 (0.020)
Misinformation ISF & Correction	-0.025 (0.018)	-0.019 (0.031)	-0.007 (0.018)
Hindu	0.014 (0.016)	0.040 (0.021)	0.011 (0.016)
BJP Voter	0.170*** (0.022)	0.168*** (0.022)	0.230*** (0.032)
Misinformation BJP & Correction × Hindu		-0.101* (0.046)	
Misinformation ISF & Correction × Hindu		-0.010 (0.038)	
Misinformation BJP & Correction × BJP Voter			-0.161** (0.052)
Misinformation ISF & Correction × BJP Voter			-0.081 (0.054)
Constant	0.097*** (0.015)	0.079*** (0.017)	0.086*** (0.015)
Adj R-squared	0.043	0.045	0.049
N	2027	2027	2027
	Marginal Effects (95 % CI in Parenthesis)		
Misinformation BJP & Correction × Hindu or BJP Voter		-0.030 (-0.072, -0.012)	-0.131** (-0.224, -0.038)
Misinformation ISF & Correction × Hindu or BJP Voter		-0.028 (-0.071, 0.014)	-0.088 (-0.188, 0.012)

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Models report OLS estimates. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. The dependent variable (DV) measures beliefs about government policy. Respondents were asked “When there is an overlap between Muharram and Durga Pooja, what does the government do?” DV = 1 when respondent reports that government facilitates only Hindus or only Muslims; and 0 otherwise. Marginal effects reported for interaction terms of treatment and Hindu/BJP voter. The reference group consists of respondents who have been exposed to misinformation.

6. Campaign misinformation, correction, & Policy Beliefs

Both treatment bundles make false claims about the incumbent’s actual policy for religious processions. Thus, in addition to changes in preferences, it is pertinent to examine whether exposure to campaign misinformation induces a change in beliefs about the incumbent’s policy. In the absence of misinformation, that is, in the control group, a super majority comprising 88.9 % of the group believe that the incumbent is secular in its actions, while 5.9 % and 5.2 % report that the government favors Muslims and Hindus, respectively.

Table 4 examines whether exposure to misinformation causes respondents to report that the government is not secular.²⁶ Once again, our findings are mixed. We do not find any statistically or substantially

significant effect of exposure to *misinformation BJP*. Although we find a treatment effect with exposure to *misinformation ISF*, we note that the effect size is small and the substantive content of the misinformation does not always align with the substantive content of the expressed beliefs: Among those exposed to *misinformation ISF*, which claims that the incumbent favors Hindus, 83.82 % express that the government is secular, 7.51 % claim that the incumbent favors Hindus, while 8.67 % claim the opposite, that the government favors Muslims. Thus, we conclude that our pre-registered hypothesis H2 (Factual Beliefs) is not strongly supported by empirical evidence. We did not preregister heterogeneous effects on beliefs by subgroups for Hindu or BJP voters, but present some exploratory results in Columns M2 and M3 of Table 4. As with our results on preferences, we do not find an effect for Hindus specifically (Column M2, Table 4). Among BJP partisans, we see that the percentage of respondents reporting that the incumbent is not secular decreases from 82.7 % in the control group to 70.3 % among those exposed to BJP’s campaign misinformation and 64.5 % among those exposed to ISF’s campaign misinformation (Column M3, Table 4).

In Table 5, we examine whether exposure to corrections improves

²⁶ Although both treatment bundles claim that the incumbent does not treat Hindus and Muslims equally, substantively their claims are the opposite: The incumbent is pro-Muslim according to the BJP and pro-Hindu according to the ISF.

knowledge of government policy.²⁷ In Column M1, we do not observe any statistical difference between those exposed to *misinformation and correction* and those exposed to *misinformation* only.

However, as previously stated, the efficacy of correction is most relevant in populations that are susceptible to misinformation in the first place. Column M2 of Table 5 disaggregates by religion. We do not find any correction effects. Column M3, however, shows that corrections work only among BJP partisans exposed to misinformation BJP & corrections: Among BJP participants, 16 % of those in the Control, 26 % of those exposed to misinformation BJP, and 18 % of those to misinformation BJP & correction are likely to believe that the incumbent is not secular. We did not pre-register heterogeneous treatment effects for exposure to correction information.

7. Discussion and Generalizability

7.1. Effectiveness of misinformation in campaign settings

What do these results tell us about the effectiveness of misinformation for shifting voter preferences and beliefs? We define effectiveness in ways closely linked to the misinformation message; that is, we examine if misinformation on a salient issue persuades voters to adopt this issue position and shifts their beliefs about the government's policy on the issue. It is possible—but challenging to establish empirically—that misinformation priming social and religious attitudes has more diffuse effects on these attitudes, indirectly increasing prejudice and polarization (Daxecker et al., 2024). Still, it would be puzzling if these diffuse effects would materialize in the absence of direct effects on policy positions or beliefs, and it would also raise questions about the political efficacy of misinformation. In our empirical context, the BJP supports Hindu majoritarianism and spreads false claims about the incumbent to shift prospective voters' in the direction of this policy (Chatterji et al., 2019). Misinformation—as defined above—is thus effective if those exposed become more supportive of Hindu majoritarianism over secularism, or shift their beliefs about the incumbent's policy. Our evidence does not show such effectiveness, as summarized below. First, exposure to misinformation fails to have population-level effects on policy preferences or beliefs. Second, anticipating that misinformation may not aim to persuade all voters, we hypothesized and explored whether it persuades new voters. As a party establishing a foothold, the BJP has to attract new voters, especially Hindu voters of other parties who might respond to pro-Hindu messages. However, Hindus who do not vote for the BJP do not change their preferences or beliefs after exposure to misinformation. Third, while we establish treatment effects for BJP voters, these effects are limited. Even among BJP voters, a majority continues to prefer secularism over majoritarianism. Moreover, misinformation is easily corrected. Misinformation may have more limited benefits, such as helping parties “turn out” the base in the short-term. But as we explore in appendix G, even this strategy comes with risks, since misinformation aimed at a party's base could split party supporters in two camps with distinct policy preferences. Finally, the substantive content of misinformation and the religion or partisanship of the misinformer appear to be irrelevant. Compared to the control group, BJP voters more often state that the incumbent is pro-Muslim and express support for Hindu majoritarianism; but this effect is observed regardless of whether respondents are exposed to a Hindu BJP leader claiming that the incumbent is pro-Muslim or a Muslim non-BJP leader claiming that the incumbent is pro-Hindu. Therefore, it seems that misinformation merely activates an innate preference for majoritarianism among BJP voters. We therefore conclude that in a context where parties need to grow their support base, such as in West Bengal, this strategy is

²⁷ In Table F.1, we replicate Table 5 with the control group as the base category, implying comparison of *misinformation & correction* and *misinformation* only groups with the control group.

insufficient for expanding support.

7.2. Extension: Replicating a U.S. Based study as a test case

We next explore if our findings hold in the United States, a case that has experienced substantial misinformation and polarization. Since partisan identities are stronger in the U.S., we speculate that even more than in India, voters will interpret misinformation along partisan rather than social identities. To test this expectation, we use data from Nyhan et al. (2020)'s study based on misinformation by Donald Trump during a speech in the 2016 election campaign.²⁸ Misinformation mirrors our experimental design in containing partisan and social cues; in the speech, Trump alleged that America was dealing with a massive crime wave, simultaneously making a partisan and racial appeal by highlighting a cleavage priming both (Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000; Stephens-Dougan, 2021; Westwood and Peterson, 2022). We examine if Trump's misinformation on crime influences the preferences of copartisans or if it also convinces non-copartisans sharing a social identity with Trump; that is, white Americans who do not already support Trump.

The dependent variable measures whether respondents perceive that crime has increased, stayed the same, or decreased over the last ten years. To maintain consistency with the preceding analysis, we recode Nyhan et al. (2020)' dependent variable; we map crime has *gone up* to +1, *remained the same* to 0, and *decreased* to -1; and we also collapse different treatment groups into control, misinformed and misinformed + corrected. In Column M1 of Table H.1, we observe that exposure to Trump's misinformation has no population level effects on perceptions of change in crime. In Column M2 of Table H.1, we disaggregate by race, and find that exposure to misinformation does not have a statistically significant influence on White or non-White respondents. In Column M3 of Table H.1, we disaggregate by partisanship, and find that exposure to Trump's misinformation is associated with more Trump supporters reporting that crime has gone up. Specifically, the percentage of Trump supporters saying that crime has gone up increases from 64.6 % in the control group to 71.2 % in the treatment group exposed to Trump's misinformation. We next disaggregate effects by partisanship and race: In Column M4 of Table H.1, we find that exposure to Trump's misinformation seems to resonate only with white voters who already support Trump. More importantly, it has no influence on white voters who do not support Trump (see Fig. 1), nor does it influence non-white voters who do support Trump. Thus, it appears that Trump's messaging intensifies support among white respondents who already vote for Trump; but this risks alienating white non-supporters and is met with indifference from non-white supporters. Mirroring our findings for India, then, misinformation is processed along partisan and not social identities; persuading co-partisans but failing to influence co-ethnics.

As a final step, we examine the effect of corrective information.²⁹ We find that corrections work (see Column M1 of Table H.2). However, these effects are driven by non-White respondents (Columns M2 and M4 of Table H.2) and non-Trump supporters (Columns M3 and M4 of Table H.2). We therefore observe that Trump supporters resist corrections.

²⁸ Nyhan et al. (2020) explore the effect of misinformation and various correction conditions. The experimental design contained five groups, with the control group reading a dummy newspaper article on bird-watching, while the four treatment groups read articles which i) summarized Trump's claims, ii) offered a fact-check, iii) offered a fact-check with a denial from Trump's campaign manager, and iv) offered a fact-check, denial, and denigration of the fact-check. We re-analyze the data to assess sub-group differences and the effect of corrections.

²⁹ While the original study had three different correction treatments, we pool the corrections. This is because we are less interested in efficacy of different correction treatments and more concerned with the aggregate effect of corrections on perceptions of crime.

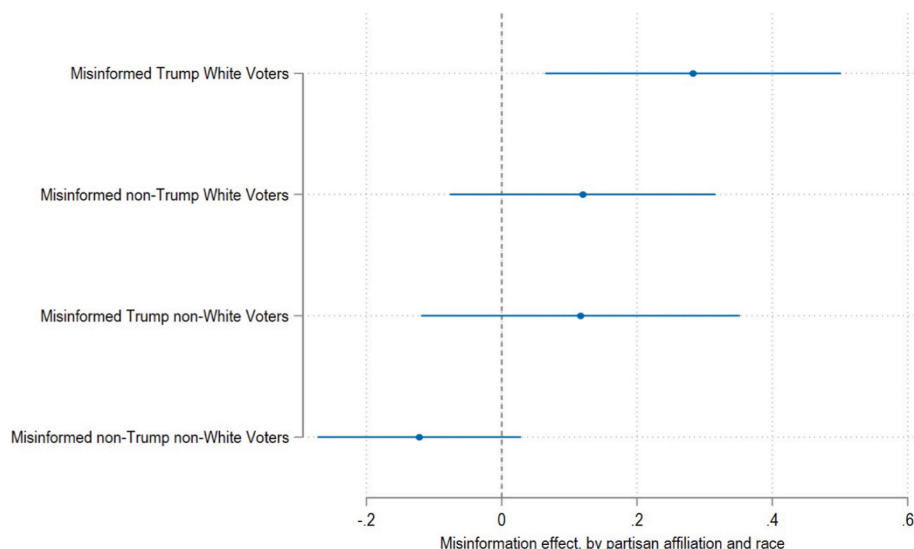


Fig. 1. Misinformation Effect, by partisan affiliation and race
Treatment effects and 95 % confidence intervals estimated from Model M4 of Table H.1.

While these findings diverge from our results in India, one might expect that stronger partisan identities in the U.S. increase resistance to corrections.

8. Conclusion

Our study explores the effectiveness of misinformation for shifting policy preferences and beliefs in election campaigns. We argue that from a campaign perspective, misinformation is most effective if processed along supporters' social identities, thereby persuading non-voters or weak supporters of rival parties to adopt the position advocated by the misinformers. Conversely, misinformation will be less effective if it convinces only copartisans. Our findings from a pre-registered survey experiment fielded in West Bengal show that the BJP's misinformation campaign was only partly effective. First, misinformation only persuaded those already voting for the BJP, failing to convince Hindu non-BJP voters to adopt majoritarianism as a policy position. The BJP's misinformation alleged that the incumbent party was favoring Muslims, thus highlighting both partisan and social identities. Hence, Hindu TMC supporters were cross-pressured with claims about an out-group that they might dislike, but also about an incumbent that they supported. Second, we show that the effects of misinformation on preferences and beliefs — at least in a context with weak partisan commitments — are easily corrected. In competitive elections, citizens will be exposed to claims and counter-claims, and the TMC aggressively challenged the BJP's misinformation campaign. Evidence from a re-analysis of a misinformation study in the United States largely mirror these results, although we find greater resistance to corrections, likely stemming from stronger partisan identities.

Our study has important implications for academic and policy debates on the risks posed by misinformation. We find that misinformation can shift co-partisans' policy preferences and beliefs, but fails to move non-supporters' views. This means that misinformation could damage democracy by making co-partisans' views more extreme and increasing interparty polarization, at least in the short-term, but would seem unattractive for parties that want to construct majorities, which is presumably the aim of political parties in democracies. However, for parties willing to abandon democracy altogether — as is increasingly the case with the Republican Party in the United States (Bartels, 2020; Bartels and Carnes, 2023) — self-interested reasons against misinformation no longer apply, and we therefore ought to remain concerned about the spread of campaign misinformation.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ursula Daxecker: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Neeraj Prasad:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2025.103003>.

Data availability

We will share the data on a public / journal data repository

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