“You are Fake News!”: Ideological (A)symmetries in Perceptions of Media Legitimacy

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Open Science Practices

All analyses reported in this paper were pre-registered (<https://osf.io/4w9t2/registrations>).

Open materials and anonymized data from all three studies are available for download from <https://osf.io/r8uv9/>.

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Abstract

The concept of ‘fake news’ has exploded into the public’s consciousness since the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in late 2016. However, this concept has received surprisingly little attention within the social psychological literature. We present three studies ($N = 2,275$) exploring whether liberal and conservative partisans are motivated to believe fake news (Study 1; $n = 722$) or dismiss true news that contradicts their position as being fake (Study 2; $n = 570$). We found support for both of these hypotheses. These effects were asymmetrically moderated by collective narcissism, need for cognition, and faith in intuition (Study 3; $n = 983$). These findings suggest that partisans across the political spectrum engage with the ‘fake news’ label in a motivated manner, though these motivations appear to differ between-groups. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed. A preprint of this paper is available at <https://psyarxiv.com/ym6t5/>.

Keywords: fake news, ideological symmetry hypothesis, motivated cognition, post-truth, political ideology

“You are Fake News!”: Ideological (A)symmetries in Perceptions of Media Legitimacy

Breaking into the political landscape in 2016, and being popularized in 2017, the use of the term “fake news” has risen by around 365% since the beginning of the 2016 US Presidential election cycle (Collins Dictionary, 2017). This memefication has led to a wealth of social discussion about its meaning and effects on political discourse (for a visual depiction of interest in the concept of ‘fake news’ in the past decade, see Figure 1), but the psychological study of this phenomenon is still in its infancy. This paper presents three studies to understand whether the reception of fake news (and the ascription of this label to real news) is motivated to some degree by the perceiver’s ideological or political position.

Figure 1. Search traffic volume (from 0 – no data, to 100 – height of popularity) for “fake news” (data sourced from Google Trends)

Defining the ‘fake news’ problem

One problem inherent in the empirical study of ‘fake news’ is that there exists no universally-accepted operational definition of what this phrase truly means. For instance, Ball (2017)

defines fake news as “easily shareable and discussable stories, posted to social media for jokes, for ideology, for political reasons connected to foreign nations, such as Russia, or – most commonly – to make a bit of money” (p. 1). In contrast to this predominantly economic definition, Harvard political scientist David Lazar defines the term as “information regarding the state of the world that’s constructed with disregard of the facts and invokes the symbols of existing truth-tellers. It misinforms by appealing to the very worst of human nature, and undermines truth-tellers at the same time” (as quoted by Callahan, 2017). Most recently, Pennycook, Cannon, and Rand (2018) have suggested that ‘fake news’ be defined as “news stories that were fabricated (but presented as if from legitimate sources) and promoted on social media in order to deceive the public for ideological and/or financial gain”. It is this definition that we adopt within this paper.

How big a problem is ‘fake news’? The scale of fake news has become a topic of increasing importance. In perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of fake news consumption in the lead up to the 2016 vote, Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler et al. (2018) reported that slightly more than one in four Americans (27.4%) visited a website devoted to fake news at least once in the month before the vote. In total, fake news story reads made up less than 3% of total news media consumption about the 2016 presidential election, but the majority (60%) of these visits were made by a small group of people with ultra-conservative “online media diets” (p. 1). Consistent with emerging social stereotypes, Guess et al. (2018) found that supporters of Trump were significantly more likely to have engaged with fake news than Clinton supporters. However, the proportion of fake news articles read by supporters of either candidate was small in relation to their total engagement with news in the month before election day ($M_{\text{Clinton}} = 0.8\%$; $M_{\text{Trump}} = 6.1\%$), with Trump supporters only consuming an average of around five articles during the month-long analysis. In spite of this effect of

conservatism predicting fake news engagement, it was also reported that both Trump and Clinton supporters were significantly more likely to share fake news in favor of their candidate than those who supported their opponents (see also Grinberg, Joseph, Friedland, Swire-Thompson, & Lazer, 2019). This indicates some degree of interaction between ideological or political position and the tendency to engage with politically-consistent news stories. However, there is mixed evidence as to whether this tendency represents an actively motivated approach to seeking-out political information (and avoiding ideologically-inconsistent information; e.g., Barberà, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015; Frimer, Skitka, & Motyl, 2017), or if these trends represent more passive echo-chamber effects (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015).

Motivated social cognition in the political domain

Although there is very little psychological evidence about the nature of fake news dissemination and consumption, some application of established psychological constructs to make sense of people's tendencies to consume news that is politically-consistent with their own views. For example, Pennycook and Rand (2019) found that deliberative (vs. intuitive) thinking styles were associated with an increased ability to discern real news from fake news (see also Bronstein, Pennycook, Bear, Rand, & Cannon, 2019). However, these effects were not consistently associated with either the political affiliation of participants or the political valence of the stories themselves. Further, the authors only focused on the interpretation of headlines (presented in a 'Facebook format', as this is becoming the public's favored method of news consumption; Pew Research Center, 2015), limiting the extent to which the results can be generalized to the interpretation of whole fake news stories. This focus on cognitive reflection (or cognitive style) is particularly important in light of Kahan's (2013; 2017) identity-protection model of motivated reasoning. This framework asserts that higher levels

of critical thinking or cognitive sophistication can act in a way to bolster tribally-related decision-making, with available cognitive energy and ability being directed to search for identity-strengthening evidence (see also Kahan, Peters, Dawson, & Slovic, 2017).

Classic work on the confirmation bias suggests that we are motivated to seek out and believe information that concurs with our pre-existing attitudes and beliefs, and to disbelieve, shun, and degrade that which does not (for a review, see Nickerson, 1998). Similarly, believing something that is untrue about a political opponent might help to alleviate feelings of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) about their possible strengths and virtues. There is emerging evidence that the alleviation of feelings of cognitive dissonance in political news engagement, with Frimer et al. (2017) reporting how partisans' motivations to avoid politically-opposing views were mediated by anticipations of increased cognitive dissonance or doubt about the righteousness of one's own political views. In this sense, believing ideologically-consistent news stories (and disbelieving ideologically-inconsistent stores) can be couched within established theoretical paradigms in social identity research. That is, sources aligned to one's ingroup are intuitively trusted to a higher degree than those associated with outgroups (Kenworthy & Jones, 2009; Williams, 2001). This is because privileging the views of an ingroup member has the potential to lead to higher levels of cognitive closure and epistemic security (see Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006).

Relatedly, motivated fake news engagement and belief may be more fundamentally linked to ideological strength or hyper-identification with a political ingroup. Collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, Eidelson, & Jayawickreme, 2009), for example, is an individual difference construct characterized by exaggerated feelings of ingroup moral superiority (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Bilewicz, 2013). It has been suggested that collective narcissism may represent a form of defense against psychological vulnerabilities or

low self-esteem (e.g., Murteira, Golec de Zavala, & Waldzus, 2017), with Cichocka (2016) reporting how collective narcissism is associated with seeking external gratification for one's ingroup, and a sensitivity to perceived threats to that group identity (see also Golec de Zavala, Peker, Guerra, & Baran, 2016) reported a series of studies in which collective narcissism predicted a sensitivity to ingroup insult (e.g., derogatory movies and jokes being made about one's country). With news media outlets exerting a significant influence on public opinion, it appears plausible that having a narcissistic approach to political ideology could lead to the derogation of outgroup-bolstering news, and the valorization of ingroup-bolstering news. This is a hypothesis that we explore in this paper.

Overview of Studies

The above review leads to a number of possible hypotheses in relation to the politically-motivated use of the fake news label. For instance, Guess et al.'s (2018) observation that a large and significant majority of fake news consumption occurs on the right-wing of the political spectrum could indicate that conservatives are more susceptible than liberals to believing fake news, or using the fake news label for stories to which they are politically opposed (the ideological asymmetry hypothesis). This hypothesis would be consistent with findings reported by Jost (2017), who has suggested that conservatives have a lower propensity for deep information processing, and a higher need for cognitive closure, than liberals.

However, other work has suggested that conservatives and liberals are equally as likely to engage in motivated social cognition about politically-salient information (the ideological symmetry hypothesis). Examples of such symmetries have been observed in relation to the expression of prejudicial viewpoints about counter-ideological groups (Brandt, 2017; Crawford, 2014), the motivated avoidance of information presented by those to which

partisans are ideologically opposed (Frimer et al., 2017), and the denial of scientific data that run counter to one's own ideological position (Washburn & Skitka, 2018). In a recent meta-analysis ($k = 51$) of partisan bias (operationalized as seeing groups or ideas in a favorable [unfavorable] light if it is consistent [inconsistent] with one's own ideological position), Ditto et al. (2019) reported a robust and consistent symmetry between liberals and conservatives across a range of outcomes and ideological issues. They stated that:

“... the tendency to evaluate politically congenial information more charitably than politically uncongenial information was found whether the study manipulated congeniality via the source of the information or its content; whether political orientation was operationalized as ideology, party affiliation, or a specific attitude about a particular political issue; whether the sample was composed of students, adults opting into an online study, or a representative sample of U.S. citizens; whether the information evaluated was scientific or nonscientific; and across several different politically charged topics.” (Ditto et al., 2019, p. 282).

In spite of this robust result, Baron and Jost (2019) critiqued Ditto et al.'s (2019) conclusions by highlighting the extent of domain-specific asymmetries between political partisans on cognitive tasks that might be associated with decision-making within the political domain. For example, conservatives are consistently reported to score lower than liberals in relation to constructs such as cognitive flexibility, uncertainty tolerance, need for cognition, and integrative complexity, but higher on dogmatism and authoritarianism (see also Jost (2017) for an extended review). These differences may highlight a difference in conclusions based upon the methods used to study ideological (a)symmetry. That is, Ditto et al.'s (2019) symmetrical findings relate to studies using partisans' responses to scenario-

based tasks, but the results highlighted by Baron and Jost (2019) relate to individual differences on stand-alone psychometric tests.

The studies reported in this paper make use of factorial experimental designs to test these competing hypotheses. Specifically, we examine: (a) the abilities of liberals and conservatives to correctly identify fake news that either conforms to or contradicts their own political positions (Study 1), and (b) their propensities to label politically-consistent or – inconsistent true news stories as fake news (Study 2). Finally, we examine some potential moderators of these effects – specifically ideological collective narcissism, need for cognition, and faith in intuition (Study 3).

Study 1: Identifying and Recognizing Fake News

Study 1 sought to establish whether participants from across the political spectrum were equally likely to trust fake news that is congruent with their view, and reject fake news that is incongruent. To do this, positive and negative fake news stories were constructed about US President Donald Trump, and his predecessor President Barack Obama for the specific purposes of this study.

Methods

Participants. The G*Power sample size calculator (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) recommended that a minimum sample size of 210 participants was necessary to have 95% power to detect medium-sized effects. In total, 794 Americans initially responded to an online experimental survey via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Over-sampling was performed in order to ensure a high number of both liberals and conservatives (approximately $n = 100$ per group) to be assigned to each experimental stimulus, and to allow us enough statistical power to detect small-to-medium effects (in line with previous research on

politically-based social judgements; e.g., Frimer et al., 2017; Washburn & Skitka, 2018). Over-sampling is also desirable when investigating interaction effects as a way to mitigate the loss of power typical in moderator analyses (McClelland & Judd, 1993; Baguley, 2012). Of these initial responders, 14 were removed as they failed the attention check (i.e., they failed to provide a single sentence synopsis of the news story they read), and 58 were removed from the dataset as they failed to indicate a specific political affiliation¹. This left a sample of 722 participants (56% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 41.58$ years, $SD = 12.75$) for analysis.

Recruitment took a systematic approach in order to ensure an approximately equal number of liberals ($n = 376$) and conservatives ($n = 346$) were represented in the sample (i.e., two tasks were created on MTurk; one available to those with a self-reported ‘liberal’ affiliation, and one available to those reporting a ‘conservative’ affiliation.² Each participant was paid US\$0.50 for completing the survey. There were no missing data points on key outcome variables, and no participants withdrew.

Measures.

Demographics. Participants were initially asked to provide information about their gender, age, completed years of formal education, and political affiliation (liberal vs. conservative vs. neither/other). A measure of political ideology was also completed at this stage. This took the form of a series of feeling thermometers (anchored from 0 to 100; very negative to very positive) being completed in relation to 15 areas of social and political life (e.g., immigration, abortion, and welfare spending; Everett, 2013).

¹ Though this exclusion criterion was not specified in the initial preregistration of Study 1, this was a necessary decision to take at this stage as our hypotheses were based around examining differences in judgements between ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives’.

² The MTurk ‘political affiliation’ options do not imply membership of an organization or party, but rather represent the binary ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’ self-identification of respondents when they sign-up to the platform.

Political party feeling thermometer. Participants were asked to provide favorability ratings for six high-profile US political figures using a feeling thermometer, anchored from 0 (very negative) to 100 (very positive), representing figures associated with the Democrats (Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi), and Republicans (Donald Trump, Mike Pence, Paul Ryan). These figures were chosen as they represented the key political figures (i.e., Presidential candidates and House leaders) within each party at the time of data collection. A favorability index was computed by averaging ratings of the Democratic and Republican figures, and then subtracting the Democratic rating from the Republican rating. This produced a scale ranging from -100 (very favorable of Democrats) to +100 (very favorable of Republicans).

Fake news story manipulation. Four fake news stories were written for the purposes of this study. For each story, a ‘TV breaking news’ image was produced (Figure 2) using the website breakyourownnews.com and free stock images from pixabay.com³, with this being accompanied by a short (approximately 300 words) written news story to supplement the image. Stories were either favorable or unfavorable about either former President Barack Obama, or current President Donald Trump. Favorable stories reported that the target had donated \$50million of their personal fortune to selected charities, while the unfavorable stories reported that the target was facing criminal charges related to voter fraud in the 2016 Presidential election. As a manipulation check, we asked participants to rate how positive the news story was about the target using a scale anchored from 0 (very negative) to 10 (very positive).

³ All images used in the studies reported in this article were downloaded from <http://pixabay.com>, and used under Creative Commons 3.0 licenses.

Figure 2. Mock TV screenshots for favorable (left images) and unfavorable (right images) Obama (top images) and Trump (bottom images) fake news stories

Story legitimacy judgements. Participants responded to six statements designed to examine how participants viewed their assigned story. The wording of these questions was as follows:

1. This story is true
2. This story is reliable
3. I do not trust this news story (reverse-scored)
4. This news outlet is probably biased (reverse-scored)
5. I believe this news story
6. This story is fake news (reverse-scored)

A 6-point Likert-style scale accompanied each item, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). After reverse-scoring the appropriate items, responses were averaged across the items to give a composite ‘story legitimacy’ outcome score (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .95$, 95% CI [.94, .96]; score range 1-6; high scores indicated greater trust in the contents of the

story). Importantly, we included the item “This story is fake news” in order to tap into this culturally-available concept.

Procedure. After responding to the study advertisement on MTurk, participants were taken to the survey landing page where information about the tasks involved in the study were presented. If happy to continue, participants indicated their informed consent by checking a box, and continued to the demographic questionnaire. After this, they completed the feeling thermometer measure, before being randomly assigned by the survey software (Qualtrics) to one of the four fake news stories. Participants finally completed the judgement items, before being provided with a full debrief.

Results⁴

Unregistered data checks. As expected, we found that self-reported liberals scored significantly lower on the political ideology measure ($M = 36.8$, $SD = 15.9$) than conservatives ($M = 73.4$, $SD = 12.5$), $t(720) = 34.21$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.56$, $M_{\text{difference}} = 36.6$, 95% CI [34.5, 38.7]. Further, and as a specific check of our experimental manipulation, a one-way between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) found that participants rated both ‘pro’ stories as being more favorable about the target than the ‘anti’ stories, with no differences between the two targets, $F(3, 718) = 1726.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_g = 0.89$ (see Table 1)⁵.

⁴ As a check of the robustness of our findings, we re-ran all analyses reported in this paper as multilevel ordinal logistic regression models with the six legitimacy ratings nested within participant. These robustness checks confirmed the results reported in this paper, and are available to view in the online supplementary material for this paper.

⁵ Here and subsequently we report generalized eta-squared (Olejnik & Algina, 2003) rather than partial eta-square. Partial eta-square is not readily comparable between different ANOVA or ANCOVA designs. Generalized eta-square estimates the proportion of sample variance explained by an effect in a between-subjects design with no other factors.

Table 1: Manipulation check data (Study 1)

Vignette	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Pro-Obama	8.90 ^{ab}	1.78
Pro-Trump	8.82 ^{cd}	1.60
Anti-Obama	0.71 ^{ac}	0.98
Anti-Trump	0.92 ^{bd}	1.54

Note: Potential score ranged from 0 (very negative) to 10 (very positive). Values that share a superscript differ significantly (all $ps < .001$).

Pre-registered analyses. A 2 (political affiliation: liberal vs. conservative) $\times$ 4 (story content: pro-Obama vs. pro-Trump vs. anti-Obama vs. anti-Trump) between-groups ANOVA identified significant main effects of political affiliation, $F(1, 714) = 21.68$, $MSE = 1.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_g = 0.03$, and story content, $F(3, 714) = 32.96$, $MSE = 1.23$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.11$, on story legitimacy judgements. Crucially, there was also a significant two-way interaction between these variables, $F(3, 714) = 34.35$, $MSE = 1.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_g = 0.12$.

Table 2: Fake news story trust judgements (Study 1), by participant political affiliation and story content

Story	<u>Liberal</u>			<u>Conservative</u>			p_{adjust}	d	$M_{difference}$ [95% CI]
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD			
Pro-Obama	97	2.90	1.30	83	2.56	1.26	.040	0.27	0.34 [0.02, 0.67]
Pro-Trump	94	1.76	0.91	86	3.28	1.39	< .001	1.29	-1.51 [-1.19, -1.84]
Anti-Obama	93	1.39	0.70	89	2.15	1.19	< .001	0.78	-0.76 [-0.44, -1.09]
Anti-Trump	92	2.14	1.01	88	1.59	0.95	< .005	0.56	0.55 [0.23, 0.87]

Note: Potential score ranged from 1 (low trust) to 6 (high trust). p_{adjust} is the adjusted p value following a Bonferroni correction.

This interaction was followed-up with simple main effects (for descriptive statistics, see Table 2). As predicted, political liberals judged the pro-Obama and anti-Trump stories as

significantly more trustworthy than political conservatives. In contrast, conservative participants judged the pro-Trump and anti-Obama as more trustworthy than did liberal participants. Of these partisan differences, only responses to the pro-Obama story were not statistically significant after applying a Bonferroni correction (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Fake news story trust judgements (Study 1), by participant political affiliation and story content. Error bars represent 95% CIs

We repeated this 2×4 ANOVA with party warmth judgements and participant years of education as covariates. Party warmth was missing for one participant and years of education for another participant. A further participant had education data excluded because the reported years of education exceeded their age. All covariates were centered prior to inclusion in the model. The interaction between political affiliation and story content was unaffected when controlling for these variables, $F(3, 709) = 33.82, p < .001, \eta^2_g = 0.12$. In

addition to this pre-registered analysis we also conducted a post-hoc analysis to consider whether party warmth provided additional explanatory power over and above political affiliation. These variables are highly correlated, $r(719) = .83$, 95% CI [.81, .85] and one might expect degree of warmth toward a particular party to provide additional explanatory power by discriminating between strength of political affiliation and perhaps also because story content relates to individuals associated with a particular party.

To compare the impact of party warmth we fitted two further ANCOVA models for comparison. The first additional model replaced the political affiliation by story content interaction with a party warmth by story content interaction. Both models included political affiliation, party warmth and education as covariates thus allowing us to directly compare the impact of the two interaction terms (in terms of R^2). The model with political affiliation by story content accounted for 24.7% of the sample variance. Replacing this with a party warmth by story content interaction accounted for 32.3% of the sample variance. The second model included both interaction terms and therefore assesses the additional contribution of political affiliation or party warmth. This confirmed that the party warmth by story content interaction provided additional explanatory power relative to the model with only political by story content interaction, $F(3, 706) = 4.56$, $p < .005$, $\Delta R^2 = .012$. Thus, the re-analyses with party warmth suggest that strength of party affiliation, participant responses to the individuals in the news story, or both, influence fake news trust judgements.

Discussion

Study 1 sought to examine the extent to which judgements of fake news are motivated by an interaction between participants' personal political grouping, and the content of the news stories themselves. Consistent with the ideological symmetry hypothesis, participants rated fake news stories that were consistent with their political 'side' as more legitimate (and less

fake) than stories that were inconsistent. In spite of the significant motivated reasoning findings within both partisan groups, this difference does appear to be larger among conservatives (see Figure 3). These differences held even when controlling for party warmth judgements and years of completed education, and were even more pronounced when replacing binary party affiliation with the continuous measure of party warmth.

It is worth noting that the mean legitimacy score across the four stories (when collapsing liberals and conservatives into one group) was 2.21 ($SD = 1.26$). This is below the midpoint of the scale (3.50). As such, our participants were (in general) able to discern these stories as fake news. While this is encouraging in emerging times of ‘post-truth’ media coverage (Ball, 2017), we did find evidence to suggest that there is a temptation to believe fake stories when they concur with an existing viewpoint, and reject stories that run counter to them. This effect was largest for conservatives, who demonstrated the highest perceived legitimacy rating for the pro-Trump story. This specific finding could be the result of a compound effect of motivated reasoning (conservatives judging a pro-ingroup story more favorably) added to the possibly more plausible nature of this specific story.

The observed main effect of political affiliation (with conservatives judging stories as more legitimate, on average, than liberals) is consistent with previous research suggesting a conservative susceptibility for gullibility (e.g., Sterling, Jost, & Pennycook, 2016). However, past studies have used politically-salient topics to test for gullibility. Here, we have demonstrated that altering the topic of a fake news story can also prompt evidence of some degree of motivated gullibility in liberals (albeit to a lesser extent than conservatives). What is unclear from Study 1, though, is whether these effects are limited to the ‘fake news’ context. That is, is the apparent motivated *belief* in fake news mirrored in a motivated *disbelief* of true news stories when content disagrees with one’s political viewpoint?

Study 2: Politically-Motivated Use of the Fake News Label

Study 2 presented true stories about ‘Brexit’ (the UK’s exit of the European Union) to British participants who supported the campaigns to either remain in the EU (‘Remainers’), or to leave it (‘Leavers’). In line with Study 1, it was predicted that participants would be more likely to doubt the legitimacy of politically-opposed real news stories (i.e., to think of them as ‘fake news’), as compared to politically-consistent alternatives.

Methods

Participants. Over-sampling was conducted for the same reasons as outlined in Study 1, based on the same benchmarks. We requested 600 complete responses from British participants through the crowdsourcing platform *Prolific*. In total, 736 participants expressed an interest in the study through the Prolific website, of which 692 entries provided full data. We removed 108 duplicate entries, as these demonstrated the same participants completing the survey multiple times. Further, we removed 14 participants as they did not disclose how they voted in the British referendum on EU membership in June 2016. The final analysis sample thus consisted of 570 Britons (52% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.4$ years, $SD = 16.2$; 287 Remainers, 283 Leavers). All participants were reimbursed £0.75 for participation. There were no missing data points, and no participants withdrew.

Measures.

Demographics. Participants were initially asked to provide information about their gender, age, EU referendum vote (remain vs. leave⁶), and the number of years of education that they had completed.

⁶ Only those who expressed a vote in the 2016 British EU referendum were eligible to take part in Study 2. As such, the study advertisement was not presented to those in Prolific’s participant pool who had not indicated an option for this question in their comprehensive prescreening questionnaire.

News story manipulation. Two news stories were selected for the purposes of this study (one ‘pro-Remain’; one ‘pro-Leave’). These stories were selected as they had been rated as truthful using the independent UK-based fact-checking service *FullFact.com*. The ‘pro-Remain’ story described how the British economy has fallen from the fastest-growing in the G7 group prior to the Brexit vote, to the slowest-growing in the time since the vote. The ‘pro-Leave’ story described how the UK, upon its vote to leave the EU, has the opportunity to (re-) negotiate trade deals and form new trading relationships with the various countries of the world. As in Study 1, a ‘TV breaking news’ image was produced for each story (Figure 4) and was accompanied by a short (approximately 300 words) written summary of the news story to supplement the image. This approach was taken in order to blind participants from the original sources of the stories, and thus to control for pre-existing biases either for or against these sources. As a manipulation check, participants were asked to rate how favorable towards Brexit the new story was, rated from 0 (very negative) to 10 (very positive).

Figure 4: Mock TV screenshots for the ‘pro-Remain’ (left) and ‘pro-Leave’ (right) news stories

Story legitimacy judgements. After reading their assigned story, participants responded to the same six judgement items as were used in Study 1, ($\alpha = .93$, 95% CI [.92, .94]).

Procedure. Eligible participants saw the study advertisement on Prolific. If interested in taking part, these individuals could click on a link which directed them to the study webpage. Information about the general tasks involved in the study were presented here, and participants indicated their consent to take part by checking a box on the screen. From here participants completed the demographic questions, before being randomly assigned to one of the two news stories by the survey software. After reading the story, they provided their judgements, before being fully debriefed.

Results

Unregistered data check. As expected, those participants who read the pro-Leave story rated the story as being more positive about Brexit ($M = 7.13$, $SD = 2.00$) than those participants who read the pro-Remain story ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 2.35$), $t(568) = 27.09$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.27$, 95% $CI_{(\text{difference})}$ [2.06, 2.48].

Pre-registered analyses. A 2 (EU Vote: Remain vs. Leave) $\times$ 2 (News Story: Pro-Leave vs. Pro-Remain) between-groups ANOVA found a main effect for neither EU Vote, $F(1, 566) = 0.29$, $p = .59$, $\eta^2_g < .01$, nor News Story, $F(1, 566) = 0.04$, $p = .85$, $\eta^2_g < .01$, in media legitimacy judgements. However, there was a large and statistically significant interaction between these variables, $F(1, 566) = 92.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_g = .14$. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. News story legitimacy judgements (Study 2), by EU vote group and story content

<i>Story</i>	<u>Remainers</u>			<u>Leavers</u>			<i>p_{adjust}</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>M_{difference}</i> [95% CI]
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Pro-Leave	139	3.25	0.91	141	4.02	0.99	< .001	0.81	-0.78 [-1.02, -0.54]
Pro-Remain	148	4.08	0.98	142	3.22	1.18	< .001	0.79	0.87 [0.63, 1.10]

Note: Potential score ranged from 1 (low trust) to 6 (high trust). *p_{adjust}* is the adjusted *p* value following a Bonferroni correction.

This interaction was interrogated using tests of simple main effects with Bonferroni-corrected *p* values for multiple comparisons. Consistent with our prediction, Remainers viewed the pro-Remain story as being more legitimate than Leavers, and Leavers judged the pro-Leave story to be significantly more legitimate than Remainers. These findings are presented graphically in Figure 5.

We also ran the above ANOVA with participants' self-reported years of completed education as a covariate, with all effects remaining consistent.

Figure 5. News story legitimacy judgements (Study 2), by EU vote group and story content. Error bars represent 95% CI for the mean.

Discussion

Study 2 sought to extend the findings of Study 1 by investigating judgements of factually-based news. Britons who voted to remain in the EU judged an ostensibly pro-Leave news story as being less legitimate (i.e., less trustworthy) than a story that was framed in a way that appeared pro-Remain. Voters who voted to leave the EU demonstrated the opposite trend, with these effects holding after controlling years of completed education. These data are consistent with our hypotheses.

Collectively, these results lead to two important conclusions about perceptions of news media legitimacy. First, we are more inclined to believe (at least partially, in the case of actual fake news) stories that concur with our political beliefs. Second, we have a propensity

to doubt the legitimacy of true news stories that contradict our points of view. With the invention of the meme of ‘fake news’, we can not only disagree with an opposing news story, but we also have a highly-available and emotive term for delegitimizing its source. We argue that these motivated approaches to media (and broader viewpoint) consumption not only contribute to a purification of one’s own views by limiting personal levels of experienced cognitive dissonance, but also facilitate political polarization at the societal level by dividing various media organizations into ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ teams (Crawford, 2014; Frimer et al., 2017).

Study 3: Psychological Moderators of Media Legitimacy Judgements

The results of Studies 1 and 2 indicate a symmetry between liberals and conservatives in the exaggerated tendency to view politically-consistent news stories as being legitimate, and to label politically-inconsistent stories as ‘fake news’. Study 3 sought to examine the psychological constructs that may be driving these effects. In line with prior research in the area of motivated political cognition (Jost, 2017) we identified three potential moderators of motivation media legitimacy judgements: collective narcissism, need for cognition, and faith in intuition.

Methods

Participants. As in Study 2, 210 participants was the minimum desired sample size for our planned factorial ANOVA to have 95% power to detect medium-sized effects with our planned regression analyses requiring a minimum of 119 participants. For reasons previously stated over-sampling was carried out to achieve a large sample of liberals and conservatives (approximately $n = 250$ per group) being assigned to each experimental stimulus. To this end, we requested 1,000 responses for an online survey via MTurk, with 1,045 individuals starting

the survey. Of these, 44 withdrew mid-way through the survey, and a further 18 were removed from the dataset for failing an attention check about the content of the survey. An additional 79 participants were removed as they failed to provide their political affiliation, or identified as something other than ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’. The sample for this study thus consisted of 906 US-based participants (58.2% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 41.04$ years, $SD = 24.2$). These participants were recruited via MTurk in the same manner as Study 1, such as to obtain data from participants spread across the political spectrum and were paid US\$0.75 for completing the survey. There were no missing data points in relation to the key outcome variables, or our measured psychological variables, and no participants withdrew their data retrospectively.

Measures.

Demographics and feeling thermometer ratings. Participants were asked to provide the same demographic and political feeling thermometer ratings as in Study 1.

Rational-Experiential Inventory (REI). Pacini and Epstein’s (1999) Rational-Experiential Inventory (REI) was used in order to examine participants’ cognitive style. The REI is a 40-item scale measuring two distinct constructs: Need for Cognition (NFC; e.g., ‘I have a logical mind’), and Faith in Intuition (FI; e.g., ‘I often go by my instincts when deciding on a course of action’). These are types of information processing described in Epstein’s (2003) cognitive-experiential self-theory, which is a dual-process framework describing different approaches to cognition (for a review, see Kahneman, 2011).

Each item on the REI was rated on a five-point Likert-style scale, ranging from 1 (‘definitely not true of myself’) to 6 (‘definitely true of myself’), with 20 items per subscale. Composite scores for each subscale were calculated by averaging responses across the items.

Internal consistency for both subscales was high, NFC $\alpha = .95$, 95% CI [.945, .954]; FI $\alpha = .94$, 95% CI [.934, .945].

Modified Collective Narcissism Scale. Golec de Zavala et al.'s (2009) nine-item Collective Narcissism Scale was used to examine participants' investment in, and perceived superiority of, their political views. Traditionally, items on this measure are framed in relation to "my group", needing respondents to be separately primed as to what reference group they should consider. In Study 3, participants were asked to respond statements about the perceived moral superiority of people who shared their political views. They responded to items (e.g., "If people with my political views had a major say in the world, the world would be a much better place") using a six-point Likert-style scale, anchored from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree). A mean collective narcissism score was calculated using responses to each item (resulting in a potential scoring range 1-6), with higher scores indicating exaggerated collective narcissism. The scale demonstrated reasonable internal consistency, $\alpha = .83$, 95% CI [.814, .845].

News story manipulation. Two (real) news stories about Donald Trump and his presidency to date (one favorable and one unfavorable) were selected for the purposes of this study. These stories were selected as they had been rated as at least 'mainly true' by the independent fact-checking service *PolitiFact.com*. The 'pro-Trump' story described how employment rates had increased since the beginning of Donald Trump's presidency. The 'anti-Trump' story described how Trump's apparent plans for tax reform would benefit himself and other very wealthy individuals. As in the previous studies, a 'TV breaking news' image was produced for each story (Figure 6) accompanied by a short (approximately 300 words) written summary.

Figure 6. Mock TV screenshots for the ‘pro-Trump’ (left) and ‘anti-Trump’ (right) news stories

Story legitimacy judgements. After reading their assigned story, participants responded to the same six judgement items as in the previous two studies, $\alpha = .944$, 95% CI [.939, .950].

Procedure. Eligible participants responded to study advertisements on MTurk by clicking on a web link, which directed them to the study landing page. As in the previous studies, this presented an overview of the study, and an option to indicate consent to participate. Those who were happy to continue first completed the demographic questions, followed by the political feeling thermometer, REI, and collective narcissism scales. The completion order of these measures was randomized between participants. Participants were then randomly assigned one of the news stories to read by the survey software, and provided their judgements. All participants received a comprehensive debrief.

Results

Unregistered data checks. As expected, self-reported liberals scored significantly lower on the political ideology measure ($M = 37.9$, $SD = 15.5$) than conservatives ($M = 72.8$, $SD = 12.1$), $t(904) = 37.74$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.55$, 95% CI_(difference) [2.37, 2.73]. Further, the ‘pro-Trump’ story was rated significantly more positive towards Trump ($M = 9.0$, $SD = 1.4$) than

the anti-Trump story ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 2.1$), $t(981) = 57.4$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.81$, 95% $CI_{(\text{difference})}$ [3.59, 4.03].

Pre-registered analyses 1a and 1b: Between-groups differences. To confirm the findings of the previous two studies, we conducted a 2 (Political Affiliation: Liberal vs. Conservative) $\times$ 2 (News Story: Pro-Trump vs. Anti-Trump) between-groups ANOVA, with news legitimacy judgements as the dependent variable (Model 1a). This analysis revealed no main effect of Political Affiliation, $F(1, 902) = 1.66$, $MSE = 1.11$, $p = .200$, $\eta^2_g = .001$, but a significant main effect of News Story, $F(1, 902) = 33.39$, $MSE = 1.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_g = .02$, with the anti-Trump story being perceived as more legitimate than the pro-Trump story, $M_{\text{difference}} = .40$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.27, 0.54]. Crucially, there was a large and significant interaction between these independent variables, $F(1, 902) = 503.39$, $MSE = 1.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_g = .37$). Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: News story legitimacy judgements (Study 3), by Political Affiliation story content

Story	<u>Liberals</u>			<u>Conservatives</u>			d [95% CI]
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD	
Pro-Trump	233	2.81	1.17	221	4.51	1.02	1.55 [1.51, 1.90]
Anti-Trump	234	4.82	0.89	218	3.30	1.12	1.51 [1.33, 1.72]

Note: Potential score ranged from 1 (low legitimacy) to 6 (high legitimacy).

Figure 7. News legitimacy judgements (Study 3), by political affiliation and story content. Error bars represent 95% CI for the mean

This interaction was interrogated using tests of simple main effects, with p values adjusted using a Bonferroni correction. Consistent with the previous two studies, Liberals viewed the anti-Trump story as being more legitimate than the pro-Trump story, $M_{\text{difference}} = 2.02$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.83, 2.21]. Conservatives demonstrated the opposite trend in news legitimacy judgements, $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.21$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.01, 1.41]. These findings are presented graphically in Figure 7.

We repeated the above analysis with participants' self-reported years of completed education as a covariate (Model 1b). The results in this analysis were almost identical to Model 1a.

Pre-registered moderation analyses 2 and 3: We conducted a series of moderation analyses starting with a main effects model including political affiliation and story as factors and education, collective narcissism, faith in intuition and need for cognition as covariates (Model 2), adding political affiliation by covariate interactions for collective narcissism (Model 2a), faith in intuition (Model 2b) and need for cognition (Model 2c) and culminating in a model with all three interaction terms (Model 3). Correlations between all measured variables are presented in Table 5.

Unless otherwise noted all factors were effect coded and all covariates were centered for analysis. Separate analyses for the pro-Trump and anti-Trump stories are reported in Table 6, which also includes a model with only education and political affiliation as a baseline for comparison. Model 3 is the preferred model, being the most informative in terms of Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and accounting for a modest but statistically significant increase in explained variance. For the anti-Trump story, Model 3 provides explains a greater proportion of variance than either Model 2, $F(3,443) = 6.17, p < .001, \Delta R^2 = .034$, or Model 1a, $F(6,444) = 4.23, p < .001, \Delta R^2 = .025$. Likewise, for the pro-Trump story Model 3 provides explains a greater proportion of variance than both Model 2, $F(3,444) = 4.38, p < .001, \Delta R^2 = .018$, and Model 1a, $F(6,444) = 2.53, p = .02, \Delta R^2 = .021$.

Table 5. Zero-order correlations between measured variables (Study 3)

	Measure					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Education	-					
2. News legitimacy judgements	-.06 [-.12, .01]	-				
3. Political ideology	-.15** [-.21, -.09]	.04 [-.03, .10]	-			
4. Collective narcissism	-.04 [-.11, .02]	.06 [.00, .13]	.07* [.01, .13]	-		
5. Need for cognition	.14** [.08, .20]	-.04 [-.11, .02]	-.17** [-.23, -.11]	-.04 [-.10, .02]	-	
6. Faith in intuition	-.06 [-.12, .01]	.02 [-.04, .09]	.21** [.15, .27]	.06 [.00, .13]	-.09* [-.15, -.03]	-

Note: Data in square parentheses represent 95% CIs.

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$

Table 6. Summaries of moderation models for the anti-Trump and pro-Trump stories

<i>Model</i>	<u>Anti-Trump story</u>					<u>Pro-Trump story</u>				
	<i>df</i>	ΔF	AIC	ΔAIC	R^2	<i>df</i>	ΔF	AIC	ΔAIC	R^2
1a: PA + E	2, 449	.	1291.9	.	.37	2, 450	.	1377.8	.	.38
2: PA + CN + NFC + E	5, 446	2.3	1291.2	- 0.7	.37	5, 447	0.7	1381.7	+ 0.8	.38
2a: PA + CN + PA x N + E	6, 445	2.3	1291.0	- 0.9	.38	6, 446	3.5	1380.3	+ 2.5	.38
2b: PA+ CN + PA x FI + E	6, 445	5.2	1288.1	- 3.8	.48	6, 446	5.3	1378.4	+ 0.6	.39
2c: PA + CN + PA $\times$ NFC + E	6, 445	10.7	1282.7	-9.3	.39	6, 446	3.6	1380.1	+ 0.7	.38
3: PA $\times$ (CN, FI, NFC) + E	8, 443	6.2	1278.7	-13.2	.40	8, 444	4.4	1374.5	- 3.2	.40

Note: All p values are nested tests of ΔF (and hence change in R^2) relative to the preceding reference (Model 1a, 2, or 3; highlighted in bold).

Change in AIC is relative to Model 1a (lower AIC indicates a more informative model). Factors: PA = Political Affiliation, S= Story. Covariates: E = Education, CN = Collective Narcissism, FI = Faith in Intuition, NFC = Need for Cognition.

Table 7 shows the coefficients and tests of individual effects Model 3 separately for each story. To aid interpretation a cell means parameterization was adopted, meaning that this model has no intercept, allowing adjusted means for both liberal and conservative political affiliation to be estimated for each story. As before all covariates were centered before computing interaction effects.

Table 7 reveals several clear patterns. First the adjusted means for political affiliation show a similar pattern to the raw means in Table 4 even after adjusting for differences in covariates. Second, there is evidence of covariate by political affiliation interactions for collective narcissism, faith in intuition, and need for cognition across both stories (though this is more marked for the anti-Trump story). Supporting our predictions, the direction of the effect of the (1) political affiliation $\times$ collective narcissism and (2) political affiliation $\times$ need for cognition interactions reverse between the two stories (Figures 8 and 9). However, against our pre-registered hypothesis, the political affiliation $\times$ faith in intuition interaction is consistent across both stories (Figure 10).

To conduct formal tests of the differences in these coefficients we carried out a combined analysis of both stories adding the three-way news story by political affiliation by covariate interactions for each of the moderator analyses in Table 7 (and including the necessary lower order terms to test these interactions). There were significant differences in both the political affiliation $\times$ collective narcissism effect, $F(1,888) = 8.02$, $MSE = 1.08$, $p = .005$, and the political affiliation $\times$ need for cognition between stories, $F(1,888) = 12.81$, $MSE = 1.08$, $p < .001$, but not the political affiliation $\times$ faith in intuition effect, $F(1,888) = 0.18$, $MSE = 1.08$, $p = .680$.

Table 7. Coefficients and tests of moderator effects for the anti-Trump and pro-Trump stories

<i>Effect</i>	Anti-Trump					Pro-Trump				
	<i>Estimate</i>	95% CI	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2_g	<i>Estimate</i>	95% CI	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2_g
PA			279.1	< .01	.37			248.8	< .01	.35
<i>Conservative</i>	3.25	3.12, 3.39				4.89	4.34, 4.63			
<i>Liberal</i>	4.82	4.67, 4.95				2.82	2.68, 2.97			
CN	0.20	0.05, 0.35	2.8	.10	< .01	-0.03	-0.20, 0.14	1.9	.17	< .01
FI	-0.02	-0.16, 0.12	3.5	.06	< .01	-0.13	-0.28, 0.03	0.2	.65	< .01
NFC	0.17	0.02, 0.33	< 0.1	.93	< .01	-0.17	-0.34, -0.01	0.9	.34	< .01
E	-0.02	-0.04, 0.01	1.8	.18	< .01	-0.00	-0.03, 0.03	.01	.92	< .01
PA × CN	-0.22	-0.44, -0.01	4.3	.04	.01	0.23	0.01, 0.47	3.7	.06	.01
PA × FI	0.24	0.02, 0.45	4.7	.03	.01	0.31	0.07, 0.55	6.3	.01	.01
PA × NFC	-0.35	-0.57, -0.13	9.8	< .01	.01	0.24	0.00, 0.47	3.9	.05	.01
Overall model	$F(8,443) = 37.16, p < .001, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .391$					$F(8,444) = 36.54, p < .001, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .386$				

Note: Factor: PA = Political Affiliation. Covariates: E = Education, CN = Narcissism, FI = Faith in Intuition, NFC = Need for Cognition.

Estimates for PA are adjusted means. All tests are *F* tests with Type II sums of squares. Overall model fit is reported relative to an intercept only model. Statistically significant ($p < .05$) test statistics are highlighted in bold typeface.

Figure 8. Three-way interaction between story, political affiliation, and collective narcissism in judgements of story legitimacy

Figure 9. Three-way interaction between story, political affiliation, and need for cognition in judgements of story legitimacy

Figure 10. Three-way interaction between story, political affiliation, and faith in intuition in judgements of story legitimacy

Discussion

In Study 3 we found similar trends in news legitimacy judgements as reported in the two previous studies. Liberals judged the anti-Trump story as being significantly more legitimate than the pro-Trump story, with conservatives demonstrating the opposite trend. However, in this study we went further to examine moderators of these effects. As expected, increased levels of collective narcissism led to exaggerated legitimacy judgements among liberals [conservatives] presented with the anti-Trump [pro-Trump] story.

In relation to thinking styles, liberals and conservatives did not differ from each other in their judgements of either story at low levels of need for cognition. However, as need for cognition increased, perceptions of the legitimacy of politically-inconsistent news stories decreased, while legitimacy judgments of politically-consistent stories increased. These trends were slightly more exaggerated in liberals than conservatives, and in relation to politically-inconsistent stories. Nonetheless these data indicated symmetry between liberals and conservatives, consistent with emerging research on the similarities in political cognition in these groups (e.g., Crawford, 2014; Frimer et al., 2017; Washburn & Skitka, 2018).

There was no difference in the trends of the interaction between faith in intuition and political leaning in relation to legitimacy judgements of either news story. Instead, increased faith in intuition consistently led to higher perceptions of story legitimacy among conservatives (but not liberals), irrespective of the content of the story. This indicates an asymmetry between the two political groups, consistent with Jost (2017).

General Discussion

In this paper we have reported three studies suggesting that partisan liberals and conservatives similarly judge news stories that are consistent with their political views as being more legitimate (and as less representative of ‘fake news’) than news stories that are

inconsistent with their political opinions. These data conform to emerging work suggesting that political liberals and conservatives operate in a symmetrical manner when making judgements of politically-salient stimuli (e.g., Crawford, 2014; Frimer et al., 2017; Washburn & Skitka, 2018). We also reported how these effects may be motivated by ideological positioning, given that they were more pronounced when replacing binary party preferences with party warmth judgements (Study 1). When examining potential psychological moderators of these effects, our data suggest that although the ideological symmetry hypothesis is supported in aggregate media legitimacy judgements, their underpinning motivations may be asymmetric.

A belief and emotional investment in the moral righteousness of a particular political position (i.e., collective narcissism) contributes to exaggerated legitimacy judgements for news stories that support the perceiver's worldview. The finding that collective narcissism predicted liberals' exaggerated legitimacy judgements for a politically-consistent news story is particularly interesting from a theoretical perspective, in that they suggest that collective narcissism can play a role in judgements of outgroup derogation even under conditions of no threat, and that its effects can be observed in political groups from across the ideological spectrum as well as the right-wing nationalist groups in which it is usually studied (e.g., Golec de Zavala et al., 2009, 2013, 2016; Murteira et al., 2017). This suggests that collective narcissism predicts outgroup derogation even under conditions where there is no perceived insult (which can be conceived of as a proxy for ingroup threat). In Study 3, the anti-Trump story did not represent a threat to self-identifying liberals, but judgements of its legitimacy were still predicted by collective narcissism in this group. This predictive effect of collective narcissism was not statistically present for conservatives under the same conditions (though the slope did trend in this direction). These data are thus inconsistent with prior research on collective narcissism, which frames this construct as being particularly important in right-

wing and nationalist populist movements (Cichocka, 2016). This result is indicative of the idea that self-expressed liberals can be collectively narcissistic, with this construct being just as important for judgements made by those on the political left as it had been found to be among those on the political right in previous studies (e.g., Golec de Zavala et al., 2009).

In addition, across both partisan groups, higher need for cognition was associated with lower legitimacy judgements for politically-inconsistent stories. Prior research on thinking styles and fake news discernment has found that those who engage in a more deliberative information processing style (akin to having a high need for cognition) have a better ability to discern true news from fake news (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). However, we observed that higher need for cognition predicted lower legitimacy judgements of politically-inconsistent news stories in both liberals and conservatives. One explanation for this might be that those with a higher need for cognition not only disbelieve politically-inconsistent news stories in a tribal manner, but go further by seeking further disconfirming information, leading to exaggerated lower legitimacy judgements of politically-inconsistent stories. Such an interpretation is consistent with Haidt's (2012) view of the confirmation bias, and Kahan's (2013) identity protection account of politically-motivated decision-making. That is, when presented with political information consistent with our views, we ask "can I believe it?", and with information that runs counter to our views, we ask "must I believe it?" before seeking out examples of counter arguments. Those low in need for cognition have neither the need nor the temperamental proclivity engage in this behavior. However, those high in need for cognition are both motivated and temperamentally-inclined to engage in searches for worldview-confirming arguments. The observation that this process is not bound to one side of the ideological spectrum provides further support that motivated social cognition in the political domain is not only attributable to conservatives, as implied in Jost, Glaser,

Kruglanski, and Sulloway's (2003) seminal work, but can manifest in a symmetrical way across this spectrum.

Faith in intuition was only significantly predictive of news legitimacy judgements among conservatives. Even in this case, the effect of faith in intuition did not suggest a motivated nature underpinning these judgements, as higher levels of faith in intuition led to increased legitimacy judgements for both politically-consistent and –inconsistent stories. This finding suggests that conservatives who possess a higher faith in intuition – a trait reported to be higher in this group than among liberals (Sterling et al., 2016) – may be more susceptible to falling prey to fake news stories. However, this also points to an asymmetric moderation of the symmetrical phenomenon of engaging with 'fake news'. That is, conservatives may be more vulnerable to actual fake news because they are more likely to be exposed to such material (Guess et al., 2018), and have a higher aggregate level of faith in intuition (Jost, 2017). However, liberals' investment in the righteousness of their political viewpoints, and their higher aggregate level of need for cognition (Carraro, Castelli, & Macchiella, 2011), may lead to them invoking the 'fake news' label (as was one of our judgment scale items) to delegitimize politically-inconsistent news stories.

Theoretical and practical implications

The data reported in this paper have substantial implications for social discussions about the growing issue of 'fake news' – both in terms of partisan engagement with actual fake news stories and in relation to the motivated use of the 'fake news' label. Foremost in our data, we found evidence that partisans on both sides of the traditional left-right divide have a greater propensity to believe political news that is consistent with their 'side', and to disbelieve news that is inconsistent with it. One potential positive is that the mean legitimacy judgement across both groups for completely falsified stories (Study 1) was below the mid-point of the

scale but was above the mid-point of the scale for stories based on real data (Study 2). This suggests that most people do have some ability to discern true stories from those that are false, supporting prior findings reported by Pennycook et al. (2018).

We found some evidence of a unique gullibility towards believing actual fake news among conservatives in Study 1. This is consistent with prior work on political differences in relation to this construct (see e.g., Sterling et al., 2016), with this effect of political affiliation only being found in the study using fake news stimuli. However, there were more similarities than differences between political partisans across all three studies. Both liberals and conservatives were motivated to enhance the legitimacy of pro-ingroup stories and question that of pro-outgroup stories. This was the case for stories based around traditional political issues (e.g., Presidential voting) and more ‘opinion-based’ topics (e.g., Brexit). This symmetry points to a need to study fake news engagement in a way that is consistent with a motivated reasoning approach (Kahan, 2013, 2017; Kahan et al., 2017), as opposed to a through a purely cognitive processing lens. This has implications for how we tackle the spread of political misinformation at a societal level. That is, it may not be enough to ask people to think more critically about political news, or to ask social media websites to highlight the assessed accuracy of news articles. Indeed, our data in relation to the concept of need for cognition suggest that this may even exacerbate the use of the ‘fake news’ label to delegitimize opposing viewpoints. Instead, we might look to reduce the effects of online echo chambers (see Bakshy et al., 2015) and facilitate greater levels of communication between those with opposing political outlooks.

Limitations and future directions

A key strength of this paper is that the research replicates emerging work on political symmetries in cognitive processing of salient information (e.g., Frimer et al., 2017;

Washburn & Skitka, 2018), while also acknowledging that the psychological processes underpinning such similarities may be asymmetric (Jost, 2017). Nonetheless, the work is not without limitation. For example, the real news stories that we used were based on relatively high-profile topics, such as the UK's economic position after the 2016 EU referendum, and President Donald Trump's tax reform plans of 2017. As such, some responses to our stimuli may be related to prior exposure or familiarity. Future research might use less publicized topics in order to address this. Linked to this issue of story selection is the minimal experimental control over the content of the stories used in Studies 2 and 3. While having identical stories would have better enabled us to control for potential confounds in the stimuli, this would have led us to lose ecological validity, particularly in light of the various motivations of US/UK voters across party and ideological lines at the time of data collection (e.g., Harper & Hogue, 2019). Including a broader range of both real and fake political news stories, and adopting within-subjects research designs in order to fully explore political fake news discernment, as well as to reduce the influence of idiosyncratic features of the selected stimuli, would be a productive direction for future research on this topic.

In the present work, we used a binary 'liberal vs. conservative' (and 'leave vs. remain') conceptualization of political affiliation, such was the set-up of our experimental stimuli. Future research might investigate belief in the legitimacy of media articles about ideological topics in a manner that is less confounded by party or voting affiliation. Further, our studies were based in the US and UK - political contexts that share common approaches. Replications in a range of other cultures (e.g., mainland Europe, Asia, or South America) are necessary in order to establish the universality of the conclusions that were set out above.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have demonstrated that both liberals and conservatives have a proclivity to engage in media (de)legitimization in a symmetrical manner. However, the psychological motivations associated with these proclivities are asymmetric between the two groups.

Understanding these similarities and differences, and formulating strategies for addressing their effects, will no doubt be pivotal as we seek to reduce the growing tide of political polarization in our democratic societies.

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