Populist attitudes and politicians’ disinformation accusations: effects on perceptions of media and politicians

Jana Laura Egelhofer1*, Ming Boyer2, Sophie Lecheler1, Loes Aaldering3

1Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria
2Department of Government, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria
3Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

*Corresponding author: Jana Laura Egelhofer. Email: jana.laura.egelhofer@univie.ac.at

Abstract

Populist politicians increasingly accuse opposing media of spreading disinformation or “fake news.” However, empirical research on the effects of these accusations is scarce. This survey experiment (N=1,330) shows that disinformation accusations reduce audience members’ trust in the accused news outlet and perceived accuracy of the news message, while trust in the accusing politician is largely unaffected. However, only individuals with strong populist attitudes generalize disinformation accusations to the media as an institution and reduce their general media trust. The phrase “fake news” does not amplify any of these effects. These findings suggest that politicians can undermine the credibility of journalists without much repercussion—a mechanism that might also threaten other authoritative information sources in democracies such as scientists and health authorities.

Keywords: disinformation accusations, fake news, populist attitudes, media attacks, media trust, politician perceptions, accuracy perceptions

The intentional spread of disinformation and fake news is receiving massive attention by the media, politics, science, and citizens (e.g., Brummette et al., 2018; Farhall et al., 2019; Newman, 2019). Notably, communicative untruthfulness encompasses not only the actual spread of incorrect information but also its discursive construction (Hameleers & Minihold, 2020). That is, while there is legitimate concern about disinformation, it has also become a convenient discounting strategy for politicians to blame opposing media and political actors for intentionally spreading falsehood and deceiving the public (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Hameleers, 2020; Jahng et al., 2021).

Disinformation accusations are used by an increasing number of politicians around the globe, including (western) democracies, where mostly populists use them (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Hameleers, 2020; The New York Times, 2019). Politicians have considerable influence on the public’s opinion about which information (sources) to trust (Ladd, 2012; Zaller, 1992). Hence, these accusations might have critical consequences for the public perception of authoritative information sources such as media and science, possibly undermining their role in providing citizens with the information they need (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Hameleers, 2020; 2021; Van Dalen, 2021). If information from democratic institutions is not trusted by (parts of) society, this might lead to situations where facts are seen as equal to opinions and political opponents cannot agree on a shared factual reality (Van Aelst et al., 2017; Van Dalen, 2021).

Despite these potentially severe consequences, the effects of disinformation accusations have hardly been studied. The few studies on this topic focus exclusively on the U.S. context and offer an inconclusive picture of whether disinformation accusations by politicians have harmful or even positive effects on how trustworthy citizens perceive news outlets and their coverage (e.g., Anspach & Carlson, 2020; Tamul et al., 2020). Furthermore, there is evidence that not all citizens are affected in the same way (Guess et al., 2017). In light of who uses this discounting strategy most prevalently, populist attitudes are likely the missing link in these effects. Populists advocate a binary vision of truth and show a general resentment of authoritative information sources and an affinity for politicians who blame the “elite” media (Hameleers, 2020; Waisbord, 2018). Thus, disinformation accusations against the media strongly coincide with populist communication strategies.

Strikingly, whether disinformation accusations have unintended backfire effects on public perceptions of politicians who use them has not been tested at all. Furthermore, there are concerns that the phrase “fake news” in disinformation accusations could be particularly harmful, as it is connected to a broader debate on the threat of disinformation and general uncertainty about what is true and false in online news environments (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Reporters without Borders, 2017; Van Duyun & Collier, 2019). Using this salient buzzword might thus be especially effective in casting doubts about information and news media. However, whether “fake news” indeed serves as a heuristic cue that leads to stronger effects remains to be tested.

To fill these gaps, we conducted an online survey experiment (N=1,330), testing whether there are differential effects of disinformation accusations, including or excluding the word “fake news,” on individuals’ perceptions of the media, the information provided by them, and the politician who uses these accusations. For all these effects, we take into
account the moderating role of citizens’ populist attitudes. Thereby, we provide a more comprehensive picture of the consequences of the strategic utilization of the threat represented by disinformation. By setting our study in Austria, we offer a West European perspective and expand our knowledge of disinformation accusations beyond the U.S. context.

### Disinformation accusations in political elites’ media criticism

Politicians’ perceptions of news media are characterized by mistrust and cynicism (Brants et al., 2010), and there is a long history of politicians publicly criticizing them (Ladd, 2012; Smith, 2010; Watts et al., 1999). Most prominently, political elites have employed accusations of (liberal) media bias (e.g., Watts et al., 1999). Presumably, many of them use media criticism strategically to influence citizens’ media perceptions (Watts et al., 1999). Most prominently, politicians publicly criticizing them (Ladd, 2012; Smith, 2010; Watts et al., 1999). There is considerable evidence that politicians’ media attacks increase perceptions of media bias, even when there is no bias, suggesting that politicians’ media criticism provides cues that citizens use instead of evaluating news content themselves (Smith, 2010; Uscinski et al. 2016; Watts et al., 1999). These findings align with literature on the importance of elite cues for public opinion formation (Zaller, 1992). Simply put, citizens frequently rely on cues from political elites as these serve as heuristics to form attitudes without spending much time and energy.

Frequently repeated messages are processed more easily and therefore lead to stronger and longer-lasting persuasive effects (Koch & Zerback, 2013; Lecheler et al., 2015). Accordingly, frequent elite cues likely have a particular impact on citizens’ media perceptions. For example, Watts and colleagues (1999) show that increased media coverage of politicians’ bias accusations led to increased bias perceptions among audiences. Moreover, as these accusations have been predominantly made by Republican politicians (Ladd, 2012; Watts et al., 1999), Republican voters are arguably more often exposed to these cues, rendering them more susceptible to media bias cues (Smith, 2010; Uscinski et al., 2016).

In short, politicians’ media criticism has a long tradition and affects audience perceptions of news media. When allegations of bias have long prevailed, more recently, disinformation accusations have emerged as a popular theme in politicians’ media criticism. The spread of misinformation is accompanied by a salient discussion of its democratic threat (e.g., Brummette et al., 2018; Farhall et al., 2019). Arguably, this salient debate has enabled an instrumentalization of the fears attached to these concepts. Politicians around the globe accuse media actors and political actors with opposing views of spreading falsehoods.

Notably, both misinformation and disinformation accusations state that a piece of information is incorrect. However, disinformation accusations also imply that the source of said piece of information has an intention to deceive (e.g., Hameleers, 2020). Therefore, disinformation accusations violate norms of political discussions as prescribed by deliberative democratic theory. Deliberation as a normative framework of what determines “good” democracy stresses the importance of free debate between citizens, resulting in collective decision-making. Essential norms of deliberative discourse are civility and (rational) complex arguments (e.g., Dryzek et al., 2019; Friess & Eilders, 2015; Goovaerts & Marien, 2020). Disinformation accusations violate these core criteria as they entail lying allegations which are, per definition, uncivil (Coe et al., 2014; Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Jahng et al., 2021). Furthermore, they are often fact-free, accompanied by simplistic (if any) argumentation (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Hameleers, 2020).

### Disinformation accusations as populist communication strategy

Disinformation accusations likely have a particular impact on citizens with populist attitudes for two reasons. First, there is a theoretical alignment of populist attitudes and the perception that news media spread disinformation. Second, these accusations are predominantly used by populist politicians, implying that populist voters are repeatedly exposed to this type of accusations and might thus have internalized them.

Populism emphasizes a societal divide between the “pure” people as an in-group and the “evil” elite as an out-group (Krämer, 2018; Mudde, 2004). A core element of populist communication is attributing blame for the group’s problems to the “corrupt” elite, such as the political establishment and the mainstream news media (Hameleers et al., 2018). The people, on the other hand, are portrayed as a blameless, homogeneous group that should be sovereign (Hameleers et al., 2018; Schulz et al., 2018). This binary vision also pertains to conceptualizations of “truth,” meaning that both groups hold their own version of reality (Waisbord, 2018). From this conceptualization, populist attitudes are derived as encompassing three ideas: anti-elitism (i.e., perceiving the elites as immoral, corrupt, and detached from the people), the demand for popular sovereignty (i.e., the belief that the power should emanate from the people, not the elites), and the belief in the homogeneity of the people (i.e., the perception of the people as one monolithic group, sharing the same virtues and interests; Schulz et al., 2018).

Theoretically, all three dimensions relate to believing that news media spread disinformation. First, anti-elitism encompasses the media elite, which is seen as detached and fundamentally different from the people. Populist citizens do not feel represented by them (Fawzi, 2019, 2020), suspect them of actively conspiring with the political establishment (Krämer, 2018), and see them as enemies who deceive and betray the people by spreading disinformation (Fawzi, 2020; Hameleers, 2020; Krämer, 2018). Second, populists regard the media as curtailting the people’s sovereignty (Fawzi, 2019) by ignoring the people’s truth and spreading the political elite’s lies (Hameleers, 2020, 2021; Waisbord, 2018). They are thereby maintaining existing power relations and depriving the people of the sovereignty they are entitled to. Lastly, the belief in the homogeneity of the people stands in contrast to pluralism as a central norm of journalism. That is, populists disagree with integrating diverse perspectives and values into media coverage (Fawzi, 2019) and perceive information that opposes the monolithic view of the people as disinformation (Waisbord, 2018). Against this backdrop, disinformation accusations are a specific type of populist blame attributions that accuse the media elite of distorting the truth of the homogeneous people and thereby curtail their sovereignty, integrating all three dimensions of populism (see also Hameleers, 2021). Consistently, surveys show that populist attitudes relate to negative media perceptions (Fawzi, 2019; Schulz et al., 2018) and the belief that the media are actively disseminating.
disinformation (Hameleers et al., 2021). Therefore, we expect citizens with strong populist attitudes to be susceptible to disinformation accusations. Moreover, anti-press rhetoric and harsh media criticism have been part of the standard repertoire of populist communication for years (Aalberg et al., 2017; Engesser et al., 2017; Fawzi, 2020; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Likewise, disinformation accusations are predominantly employed by populist politicians (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Farhall et al., 2019; Hameleers, 2020; Hameleers & Minihold, 2020), rendering their voters—who often have populist attitudes—frequently exposed to these accusations (Schulz et al., 2018). Like Republican voters became more susceptible to media bias cues through frequent exposure (Smith, 2010; Uscinski et al., 2016), populist voters might have become more vulnerable to disinformation accusations. Accordingly, we investigate the moderating role of populist attitudes in all effects of disinformation accusations outlined below.

The effects of disinformation accusations
While politicians’ media criticism is certainly not new, it has arguably become more prevalent through the emergence of social media (Carlson, 2016; Fawzi, 2020). Social media are a central platform for news consumption (Newman, 2019), where news messages are frequently shared along with critical comments discounting them (Carlson, 2016). In this environment, people often only read the previews of news articles instead of clicking on them to read the whole story (Bakshy et al., 2015). When these news previews are accompanied by criticism, this criticism often receives more attention than the news preview itself, influencing subsequent evaluations of said news previews (Anspach & Carlson, 2020). Thus, politicians’ disinformation accusations attached to news article previews potentially have several consequences. As they contradict the claim of the news article, news users are confronted with two conflicting pieces of information. This leads to “uncertainty within the readers, and cause[s] them to question the veracity of either piece of information” (Anspach & Carlson, 2020, p. 703). This uncertainty then likely influences how trustworthy citizens perceive (a) the source of the claim (i.e., the media), (b) the claim itself (i.e., the issue stance of the article), and (c) the source of the disinformation accusation (i.e., the politician).

Effects on media trust
First, politicians’ disinformation accusations might negatively affect media trust (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Hameleers, 2020). Media trust is essential in democracies, as citizens rely on news media to provide factual information for their decision-making (Tsfati, 2010). Media trust always entails uncertainty within news users who are unable to verify information themselves and never know journalists’ true intentions (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömhäck et al., 2020; Tsfati, 2010). It can thus be defined as citizens’ willingness to accept vulnerability to media objects while expecting satisfactory outcomes (Fawzi et al., 2021; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Strömhäck et al., 2020). One of the most essential expected outcomes is the provision of complete, balanced, and accurate information (Fawzi & Mothes, 2020). Conceptualizations of media trust should distinguish between general and specific media trust, the former relating to the journalistic institution as a whole and the latter to particular media objects such as specific news outlets (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömhäck et al., 2020).

Citizens rely on cues to legitimate their general or specific media trust (Kohring, 2019). A disinformation accusation is such a cue that makes a statement about the information itself (i.e., that it is incorrect) and about the journalists’ intention (i.e., that they intentionally lie). Therefore, it seems plausible that these accusations harm news media trust. When attached to a news story by a media outlet, people’s trust in that specific outlet could be negatively affected (Anspach & Carlson, 2020). However, these accusations are most frequently used against the media in general (Egelhofer et al., 2020, 2021; Meeks, 2020). Therefore, citizens might take these cues as highlighting a widespread problem in journalism, resulting in a spillover effect to general media trust. In this context, research has shown that politicians’ fake news accusations decrease general media trust for those who support the politician (Guess et al., 2017). This finding suggests that the impact of disinformation accusations might be conditional upon partisanship. However, in Europe’s multiparty systems, ideologies that transcend singular parties, such as populism (Mudde, 2004), are a better predictor.

We, thus, expect populist attitudes to moderate the impact of disinformation accusations on specific and general media trust in such a way that citizens with strong populist attitudes are susceptible to disinformation accusations. For citizens with weak populist attitudes, however, we foresee two possible paths: there might be no effect on specific and general media trust (contingent divergent moderation, see Holbert & Park, 2020), or there might be a boomerang effect (cleaved moderation, ibid.). That is, they might perceive these accusations as a blatant manipulation attempt and react with an increase in specific and general media trust. This could explain why The New York Times experienced a rise in subscriptions in early 2017, right after Donald Trump started accusing the outlet of spreading disinformation (Chapman, 2017).

Thus, our first set of hypotheses reads: The impact of disinformation accusations on general media trust (H1) and specific media trust (H2) is moderated by populist attitudes, in such a way that (a) stronger populist attitudes result in a negative effect and (b) weaker populist attitudes result in no effect or a positive effect.

Effects on accuracy perceptions
Citizens worldwide perceive disinformation as omnipresent and are worried about being influenced by it (Newman, 2019). Consequently, disinformation accusations that accompany news article previews on social media potentially misguide citizens’ evaluations of the accuracy of the information and lead them to disagree with the issue stance of said news story. Indeed, research suggests that when disinformation accusations accompany news messages, individuals perceive the messages as less accurate (Anspach & Carlson, 2020; Jahng et al., 2021). As discussed above, populist citizens might be more prone to believe these accusations. Thus, in RQ1, we investigate (a) whether being exposed to information that is accompanied by disinformation accusations will lead to lower accuracy perceptions, as well as (b) to what extent populist attitudes moderate these effects.

Effects on politician perceptions
Political elites’ rhetoric not only affects public opinion about issues and external actors (such as news media) but also the
The perception of the elite actors themselves (e.g., Charteris-Black, 2011). Therefore, we consider whether using disinformation accusations has consequences on how citizens perceive the accusing politician. As explained above, disinformation accusations violate social norms of political discourse, as they are uncivil, mostly ill-justified, and often factually incorrect. There are mixed findings on whether violating these norms has positive or negative effects on how people perceive a politician (e.g., Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Molders & Van Quaquebeke, 2017). Incivility, for example, has been shown to lower political trust (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). At the same time, it is argued that populists’ success in past elections is partly based on their uncivil rhetoric (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020).

An explanation for why violations of discourse norms are appreciated by some and disapproved by others is the fact that citizens who feel that the political establishment does not represent their interests, disagree with socially endorsed norms of conversation, and feel that “publicly-endorsed norms are imposed rather than freely chosen” (Hahl et al., 2018, p. 6). Thus, when a politician violates social norms, citizens who feel represented by the political establishment perceive this actor negatively, while citizens who do not feel represented evaluate him positively (Hahl et al., 2018). As citizens with populist attitudes generally do not feel represented by the establishment and the media specifically (e.g., Fawzi, 2020), they might perceive politicians who use disinformation accusations against the media “as bravely speaking a deep and otherwise suppressed truth” (Hahl et al., 2018, p. 3). Therefore, we expect a positive effect for citizens with strong populist attitudes and either no effect (contingent divergent moderation, Holbert & Park, 2020) or a negative effect (cleaved moderation, ibid.) for citizens having weak populist attitudes: The impact of disinformation accusations on the perception of the accusing politician is moderated by populist attitudes, in such a way that (a) stronger populist attitudes result in a positive effect and (b) weaker populist attitudes result in no effect or a negative effect (H3).

The role of the phrase “fake news”

The arguably most visible disinformation accusation is using the phrase “fake news” as a label to discredit news media, as done by numerous governing politicians worldwide (e.g., The New York Times, 2019). Accusing the media of spreading not only false but fake information implies intentionality (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Relying on theories that emphasize the importance of heuristics for information processing (such as priming and dual-process models), scholars have argued that “fake news” has become a highly accessible cue when citizens evaluate news media content (Jahng et al., 2021; Tamul et al., 2020; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Indeed, there is evidence that salient words (such as “conspiracy”) that require little interpretation can effectively increase related attitudes (such as conspiracy beliefs; Uscinski et al., 2016).

We argue that “fake news” might be such an easily accessible word. Since 2016, “fake news” has been ubiquitously used in public discourse and news coverage to report on the threat of political disinformation, flaws in journalism, and anything false (Brummette et al., 2018; Egelhofer et al., 2020; Farhall et al., 2019). The salience of the term might have contributed to a “perceived consumption” of fake news, that is, an exaggerated estimation of how much false information oneself and others are exposed to (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2021). Thus, “fake news” likely has become a particularly noticeable cue indicating that a given message is not true (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Jahng et al., 2021; Tamul et al., 2020; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). We thus expect stronger effects of disinformation accusations when the phrase “fake news” is applied: The effects of disinformation accusations on (a) media trust and (b) politician perceptions are stronger for disinformation accusations including “fake news” compared to disinformation accusations excluding “fake news.” (H4)

Moreover, we investigate whether the effect of disinformation accusations on accuracy perceptions is stronger for disinformation accusations including “fake news” compared to disinformation accusations without the phrase. (RQ2)

**Method**

**Design, sample, and procedure**

Our study is set in Austria, a country with a strong populist party, that is, the right-wing Freedom Party of Austria (FPO), whose members frequently have used disinformation accusations against news media (Reporters without Borders, 2018). In our between-subjects online survey experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental groups or a control group. All groups were exposed to a fictional politician’s Twitter page. In the two experimental conditions, the tweets on this page contained disinformation accusations: in one condition, the tweets included the phrase “fake news.” In the other condition, tweets communicated that information is factually incorrect and deliberately so, without using this cue. Thus, both experimental conditions included disinformation accusations, but only one included the fake news cue. They will henceforth be labeled fake news cue condition and no fake news cue condition (see Figure 1). In the control condition, the tweets did not include disinformation accusations. Prior to data collection in June 2020, we pre-registered the hypotheses, method, and planned analyses on the Open Science Framework (OSF) and obtained the university’s institutional review board approval. We deviate from

![Figure 1. Overview conditions.](https://academic.oup.com/joc/advance-article/doi/10.1093/joc/jqac031/6770019)
this pre-registration in some points as explained in Online Appendix A.4

A varied sample of Austrian citizens (aged 18 and older; 
\(M = 41.4\), \(SD = 15.1\); 46.3\% female, 53.3\% male, 0.4\% other) was recruited by the panel agency Dynata. Randomization checks revealed successful randomization of age (\(F (2, 1327) = .30, p = .74\), gender (\(X^2 (4, 1330) = 4.5247, p = .34\)), political ideology (\(F (2, 1327) = .29, p = .75\)), and populist attitudes (\(F (2, 1327) = .18, p = .84\)). The total sample size was \(N = 1,330^5\) (fake news cue: 480, no fake news cue: 403, control: 447). After reading and signing an informed consent form, participants first answered questions about their socio-demographic information and populist attitudes. Then, they were exposed to the stimulus Twitter page and answered questions measuring the dependent variables. At the end of the survey, respondents were thoroughly debriefed.

Stimulus material

We used constructed Twitter pages of a fictive politician in an Austrian municipality. Using fictive politicians in experiments makes it possible to isolate the effects of the message from partisan or ideological predispositions. This is especially relevant in multi-party systems, such as Austria. Therefore, using fictive actors is a common strategy in research on the effects of politicians’ rhetoric (e.g., Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019).

The Twitter page contained eight tweets: two presented a preview of a news article by the mid-range newspaper Kleine Zeitung, one of the oldest daily published newspapers in Austria with no perceived partisan affiliation (e.g., Seethaler & Melischek, 2006). The topic of these articles was the link between the weed killer glyphosate and heightened cancer risk. One article also suggested that the usage of glyphosate should be prohibited in Austria. This topic was not salient or politicized in Austria, with the majority of the population being in favor of banning glyphosate (OTS, 2020). Thereby, we attempted to avoid overly clear association with a particular party or politician. Four tweets gave some additional information about this topic; the other two tweets were unrelated to the topic (e.g., “Happy weekend”).

In the experimental groups, three tweets contained disinformation accusations, that is, allegations that the information in the news stories is (a) incorrect and (b) deliberately so. As outlined above, the phrase “fake news” inherently communicates that content is intentionally fabricated. Therefore, in the fake news cue condition, “fake news” was used as a disinformation accusation. For example, tweets said “excellent example of fake news!” and “What the fake news media do not report . . .” In the no fake news cue condition, disinformation accusations without “fake news” were used. Instead, tweets expressed that news coverage was false and deliberately so, using phrases that are not widely used in Austrian discourse (compared to “fake news”). For example, tweets in this condition stated, “excellent example of faulty reporting!,” “What the lying media do not report . . .”6

Manipulation check

Respondents were asked to indicate on an 11-point scale how much they agree with two statements about the tweets they were exposed to: “The word ‘fake news’ was mentioned” and “The media were accused of lying.” The manipulation check showed successful manipulation, participants in the fake news cue condition were more certain that the term “fake news” was present (\(M = 8.22, SD = 2.39\)) than those in the no fake news cue condition (\(M = 4.97, SD = 2.94\)) or control condition (\(M = 3.97, SD = 2.65\)), F(2, 1327) = 326.55, \(p < .001\). Post hoc comparisons indicated that the differences between all three conditions were significant. Similarly, participants in the fake news cue condition (\(M = 7.26, SD = 2.51\)) and no fake news cue condition (\(M = 7.19, SD = 2.39\)) were more certain that the media were accused of lying compared to the control condition (\(M = 5.01, SD = 2.53\)), F(2, 1327) = 118.79, \(p < .001\). Post hoc analyses indicated that the disinformation accusation conditions significantly differed from the control condition but not from each other.

Measures

All items were measured on 11-point scales. Exact question wordings can be found in Online Appendix C.1.

Media trust

We distinguished general media trust and specific trust in the accused outlet (Kleine Zeitung). There is no agreed-upon operationalization of media trust (Engelke et al., 2019; Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Van Dalen, 2019). However, as discussed above, a crucial factor of trust is citizens’ expectation that the media provide complete, balanced, and accurate information. Therefore, our measurement asked respondents how suitable the characteristics “fair, accurate, unbiased, taking into account all facts, and trustworthy”7 are to describe the coverage of Austrian news media (Cronbach’s \(\alpha = .90, M = 5.0, SD = 0.05\)) and of the “Kleine Zeitung” (Cronbach’s \(\alpha = .93, M = 4.93, SD = 0.05\); based on Strömbäck et al., 2020 and Tsfati, 2010).

Accuracy perception

To measure perceptions of accuracy of the information in the news message, we asked participants how much they agreed or disagreed with the main claim regarding the issue in the news articles that were tweeted about, that is, agreement with the general issue stance: “Glyphosate causes cancer” (\(M = 7.28, SD = 0.07\)).

Politician perceptions

We focused on two perceptions of the accusing politician, that is, perceived trustworthiness and the perception to what extent the politician tried to manipulate the participants (i.e., manipulative intent). Respondents were asked to indicate how trustworthy they perceived the politician (\(M = 4.10, SD = 0.07\)). To measure perceived manipulative intent, we asked them how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “The politician tried to manipulate me” (\(M = 5.27, SD = 0.08\)).

Populist attitudes

Populist attitudes were measured before exposure to the stimulus material, based on a selection of six items from the three-dimensional scale by Schulz et al. (2018); two items with the highest factor loadings per dimension, that is, anti-elitism, belief in the homogeneity of the people, demand for popular sovereignty; Cronbach’s \(\alpha = 0.74; M = 6.53, SD = 0.05\)).8
Results

In the following, we first analyze the effects of disinformation accusations in general. That is, to test H1–H3 and RQ1, we pool both disinformation accusation conditions (the fake news cue condition and the no fake news cue condition) and compare them with the control condition. In the next step, to test H4 and RQ2, we compare the fake news cue condition and the no fake news cue condition with each other (see also Figure 1).

Effects on media trust

We expected that the impact of disinformation accusations on general media trust (H1) and specific media trust (H2) is moderated by populist attitudes in such a way that (a) stronger populist attitudes result in a negative effect and (b) weaker populist attitudes result in no effect or a positive effect. Table 1 presents the results and shows that there is no main effect of disinformation accusations on general media trust ($b = -0.18, SE = 0.11, p = .11$, Model 1). That is, individuals in the disinformation accusation conditions ($M = 4.94, SD = 0.07$) did not report significantly different levels of general media trust than individuals in the control condition ($M = 5.12, SD = 0.09$; Cohen’s $d = -0.10$). Model 2 of Table 1 shows that there is a significant interaction effect of these accusations and populist attitudes on general media trust ($b = -0.16, SE = 0.07, p = .02$). Figure 2 plots the marginal effects and shows that the impact of disinformation accusations on general media trust is only significant for citizens with strong populist attitudes: these citizens show significantly less general media trust after being exposed to disinformation accusations. These results support H1: As expected, disinformation accusations only decrease general media trust for citizens with strong populist attitudes, while there is no effect for people with weak populist attitudes, indicating a contingent divergent negative moderation (Holbert & Park, 2020).

Second, we test the impact of disinformation accusations on trust in the accused media outlet. Model 3 of Table 1 shows a significant negative main effect of a disinformation accusation ($b = -0.41, SE = 0.14, p < .001$). Individuals exposed to a disinformation accusation reported lower levels of outlet trust ($M = 4.79, SD = 0.08$) than individuals in the control group ($M = 5.19, SD = 0.11$; Cohen’s $d = .17$). Model 4 includes the interaction between the disinformation accusation conditions and populist attitudes and shows that this interaction effect is not significant ($b = -0.00, SE = .09, p = .59$; see also Figure 2). The effects of the disinformation accusations on specific media trust do not significantly differ between people with strong and weak populist attitudes. Therefore, we find no support for H2.

Effects on accuracy perceptions

Next, we investigated (a) whether exposure to information accompanied by disinformation accusations will lead to less agreement with the news stories’ issue stance and (b) whether populist attitudes moderate this effect (RQ1). As can be seen in Table 1, individuals exposed to these accusations ($M = 7.18, SD = 0.08$) perceive the main claim significantly less accurate compared to participants in the control group ($M = 7.49, SD = 0.11$; Cohen’s $d = .13$), $b = -0.33, SE = .14, p = .02$ (model 5). However, we find no interaction effect between the disinformation accusations and populist attitudes for accuracy perceptions ($b = -0.09, SE = .09, p = .32$, model 6; see also Figure 3). This indicates no significant difference in the effects of disinformation accusations on accuracy perceptions between people with strong and weak populist attitudes. However, Figure 3 indicates that the negative main effect of model 5 is only significant for people with moderate to strong populist attitudes.

Effects on politician perceptions

We predicted that the disinformation accusation’s effect on the politician’s perceptions is moderated by populist attitudes in such a way that (a) stronger populist attitudes result in a positive effect and (b) weaker populist attitudes result in no effect or a negative effect (H3). More specifically, we tested the effects of these accusations on the politician’s perceived trustworthiness and manipulative intent. As can be seen in Table 1, there is no main effect of disinformation accusations on trustworthiness ($b = -0.20, SE = .15, p = .19$, model 7). Trustworthiness ratings did not significantly differ between the disinformation accusation conditions ($M = 4.04, SD = 0.09$) and the control condition ($M = 4.22, SD = 0.12$; Cohen’s $d = .07$). However, there is a significant positive main effect of the accusations on manipulative intent ($b = .42, SE = .16, p = .01$, model 9). Participants exposed to disinformation accusations ($M = 5.41, SD = 0.09$) perceived the politician’s manipulative intent significantly higher than individuals in the control condition ($M = 5.0, SD = 0.13$; Cohen’s $d = -.15$). Thus, our results show that disinformation accusations lead people to feel that the politician wants to manipulate them, but do not affect how much they trust the politician. As shown in Figure 4, we do not find any interaction effects between the accusations and populist attitudes on trustworthiness ($b = -0.01, SE = .09, p = .93$; model 8), or manipulative intent ($b = .02, SE = .10, p = .86$; model 10). Thus, we find no support for H3.

The role of the fake news cue

Next, we investigate whether the effects on media trust and politician trust (H4) as well as accuracy perceptions (RQ2) are stronger for the disinformation accusation, including the phrase “fake news,” compared to the disinformation accusation not mentioning it. To test this, we ran the analyses from H1 to H3 and RQ1 again. However, instead of contrasting the pooled disinformation accusation conditions to the control condition, we compare the fake news cue condition to the no fake news cue condition (see Figure 1). Thus, the following analyses are based on a comparison of the two experimental groups ($n = 883$). As seen in Table 2, there are no main effects of the type of disinformation accusation on general media trust (fake news cue condition: $M = 5.00, SD = 0.09$; no fake news cue condition: $M = 4.87, SD = 0.10$; Cohen’s $d = -.07$; $b = .14, SE = 0.13, p = .28$, model 1) or trust in the news outlet (fake news cue condition: $M = 4.77, SD = 0.11$; no fake news cue condition: $M = 4.81, SD = 0.12$; Cohen’s $d = .01$; $b = -.03, SE = 0.16, p = .85$, model 3). Moreover, the interaction effect of the type of disinformation accusation and populist attitudes was not significant either for general media trust ($b = -0.00, SE = 0.08, p = .97$, model 2), or trust in the news outlet ($b = -0.01, SE = 0.10, p = .91$, model 4). The presence of the fake news cue thus does not determine the impact on general and specific media trust.

Similarly, we did not find differences between the two groups for the accuracy perceptions (fake news cue condition: $M = 7.06, SD = 0.11$; no fake news cue condition: $M = 7.31, SD = 0.12$; Cohen’s $d = .11$; main effect: $b = -.27, SE = .16, p = .10$, model 5; interaction with populism: $b = .07, SE = .10, p = .51$, model 6). Finally, there were also no
Table 1. OLS regression models predicting citizens’ perceptions of news media, issues, and politicians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Media trust</th>
<th>Accuracy perception</th>
<th>Politician perceptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General media trust</td>
<td>Trust in outlet</td>
<td>“Glyphosate causes cancer”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disinformation accusation (vs. no accusation)</td>
<td>−.18 (.11)</td>
<td>.88† (.46)</td>
<td>−.41** (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populist attitudes</td>
<td>−.10** (.03)</td>
<td>.02 (.06)</td>
<td>−.05 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populist attitudes × Disinformation accusation</td>
<td>−.16 (.07)</td>
<td>−.01 (.09)</td>
<td>.05 (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male politician</td>
<td>−.22† (.13)</td>
<td>−.23† (.13)</td>
<td>−.20 (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female politician</td>
<td>−.29† (.13)</td>
<td>−.30† (.13)</td>
<td>−.51** (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>5.93*** (.24)</td>
<td>5.21*** (.39)</td>
<td>5.75*** (.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† p < .1, †† p < .05, ††† p < .01, †††† p < .001, N = 1,330.
differences for perceptions of the politician, that is, trustworthiness (fake news cue condition: \( M = 4.06, SD = 0.11 \); no fake news cue condition: \( M = 4.02, SD = 0.13 \); Cohen’s \( d = 0.02 \); main effect: \( b = 0.04, SE = 0.17, p = 0.81, \) model 7; interaction with populism: \( b = 0.07, SE = 0.10, p = 0.51, \) model 8), or manipulative intent (fake news cue condition: \( M = 5.46, SD = 0.12 \); no fake news cue condition: \( M = 5.34, SD = 0.15, \) Cohen’s \( d = 0.04 \); main effect: \( b = 0.12, SE = 0.19, p = 0.54, \) model 9; interaction with populism: \( b = 0.07, SE = 0.11, p = 0.55, \) model 10). The fake news cue is not decisive for the impact on perceptions of the accusing politician.

All in all, our results lend no support for H4 and indicate that the phrase “fake news” is not a driving force in any effects of disinformation accusations on the outcomes.

Discussion
Disinformation accusations as a political strategy to discredit news media and factual information are on the rise, and worries about their consequences are increasing (e.g., Reporters without Borders, 2017). A growing body of literature points to a strong affinity between this strategy and populism (e.g., Hameleers, 2020). However, thus far, only a few studies have considered the effects of these accusations (e.g., Guess et al., 2017), and no research has taken into account the role of populist attitudes.

Our results show that when politicians accuse news stories of disinformation, it negatively affects how accurate citizens perceive the information in said stories. It furthermore harms their trust in the specific media outlet that published them. Of course, the effect sizes are small, and our models only explain between 1% and 3% of the variance in the outcomes across groups. This is consistent with what previous experiments on the effects of media criticism by politicians suggest (e.g., Smith, 2010; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Yet, it is important to keep in mind that these effects are triggered by a single exposure. Considering that media criticism of politicians is omnipresent on social media (some even say the default context of news consumption, e.g., Carlson, 2016), these effects are likely to accumulate over time (Koch & Arendt, 2017). This implies that repeated exposure to these accusations could present a threat to journalists’ role as providers of factual information, a crucial area for future research.

Contrary to our expectations, populist attitudes did not moderate these effects. However, we find a moderation effect of populist attitudes on general media trust. Exposure to disinformation accusations significantly decreased general media trust for populist citizens but not for citizens with weak populist attitudes. The strategic instrumentalization of the disinformation threat thus represents an effective tool to alter perceptions of specific sources and messages of the public in general. However, only populist citizens generalize these accusations to the media as a whole.

What are possible explanations for these differential effects? First, concern about being exposed to incorrect information in online news environments is widespread among citizens worldwide (Newman 2019), and a high share of people have doubts about their ability to recognize misleading
information (Santhanam, 2020). Given this heightened uncertainty, it only seems logical that when confronted with disinformation cues, citizens quickly develop doubts about the trustworthiness of specific messages or news sources online, independent of their populist views. However, general media trust is known to be a relatively stable attitude (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Therefore, for most citizens, there is no spillover effect of one negative experience with a specific outlet to the media in general. However, as outlined above, individuals with strong populist views hold an antagonistic view of elite institutions and perceive the media as part of this general elite (Fawzi, 2020), distorting the truth of the homogenous group of honest people (Hameleers, 2021). Thus, they tend to distrust the media as a whole (Fawzi, 2019; Schulz et al., 2020) and regard them as one source of disinformation (Hameleers et al., 2021). Moreover, they are likely regularly exposed to populist attacks that primarily target the media in general, not specific outlets (Meeks, 2020; Schulz et al., 2020). Thus, individuals with populist attitudes might not differentiate between specific media outlets and instead believe that all mainstream media lie (Schulz et al., 2020). Along these lines, disinformation accusations potentially amplify the existing polarization of trust in established media between populist and non-populist citizens (Fawzi, 2020; Van Dalen, 2021).

Furthermore, our results indicate that while citizens feel that politicians who use disinformation accusations want to manipulate them, this does not affect how trustworthy they perceive the accusing politicians. This might indicate that politicians can use these accusations without fearing backlashes on how the electorate perceives them. Similarly, previous research shows that participants do not change their perceptions of a politician who disseminated misinformation even when they acknowledge that said information is indeed incorrect (e.g., Swire-Thompson et al., 2020). While these studies investigated the effects of politicians’ use of disinformation, we studied the effects of politicians’ use of accusations of disinformation. Taken together, however, these results provide a pessimistic view of the role of truth in politicians’ rhetoric: They seem to suggest that in an era of post-factual relativism (Van Aelst et al., 2017), politicians’ actual use of disinformation and their accusations of disinformation have become normalized for modern political communication strategies to a degree where they do not affect politicians’ images. This is in line with Higgins’ (2017, p. 9) observation that “public tolerance of inaccurate and undefended allegations . . . and outright denials of facts is shockingly high.”

Importantly, our study provides some clarity regarding the consequences of the specific phrase “fake news.” We do not find any differences for any of our tested dependent variables between the condition that mentioned the term “fake news” and the condition that did not. Consequently, politicians’ accusations that the media deliberately mislead the public are efficient in damaging citizens’ perceptions of news media and the information provided by them, while the phrase “fake news” is not necessarily the driving factor for these effects. There are several possible explanations for this finding. First, it might be the case that the emergence of “fake news” in 2016 has marked the start of the disinformation debate, but, by now, falsehood, in general, is so prevalent that it does not require a heuristic cue to trigger uncertainty in news users. Another possibility is that while “fake news” is frequently used in European discourses (Egelhofer et al., 2020), this debate might not be as politicized as in the U.S., where citizens have formed strong mental associations of “fake news” with opposing news brands (Van der Linden et al., 2020). Austrian citizens may simply not have these associations activated by the phrase. Third, the term could also be so strongly associated with certain politicians that they have issue-ownership, so to speak, over “fake news” accusations.

Our study does not come without limitations, which provides opportunities for future research. First, we only tested the effects of a one-time exposure to disinformation accusations. Our setting thus does not allow for statements about the duration of effects. Furthermore, studies should gather evidence on the effects of repeated exposure to disinformation accusations, considering that these are abundant in current political discourses (Hameleers, 2020; Waibsord, 2018). Second, the experimental method always comes with a reduction of complexity, arguably reducing our findings’ ecological validity. For example, we could only use a limited number of
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Media trust</th>
<th>Accuracy perceptions</th>
<th>Politician perceptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General media trust</td>
<td>Trust in outlet</td>
<td>“Glyphosate causes cancer”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b (SE) Model 1</td>
<td>b (SE) Model 2</td>
<td>b (SE) Model 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake news cue (vs. no fake news cue)</td>
<td>.14 (.13)</td>
<td>.16 (.53)</td>
<td>-.03 (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populist attitudes</td>
<td>-.15** (.04)</td>
<td>-.15* (.06)</td>
<td>-.05 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populist attitudes × Fake news cue (vs. No fake news cue)</td>
<td>-.00 (.08)</td>
<td>-.00 (.10)</td>
<td>-.01 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male politician</td>
<td>-.21 (.16)</td>
<td>-.21 (.16)</td>
<td>-.11 (.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female politician</td>
<td>-.36** (.16)</td>
<td>-.36** (.16)</td>
<td>-.48*** (.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>6.03*** (.29)</td>
<td>6.02*** (.41)</td>
<td>5.31*** (.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .1  
* * * p < .01,  
* * * * p < .001,  
N = 883.
messages on one topic (i.e., glyphosate in agriculture) and did not include a party cue which is somewhat unrealistic in natural settings. However, this manipulation enabled us to isolate the effects of disinformation accusations and prevent partisanship from influencing the outcomes. Of course, looking forward, further research is needed to understand whether disinformation accusations have different effects on issues more saliently connected to partisan divisions and identity. For example, studies could test the effects of topics that prevail in disinformation agendas, such as immigration (Humprecht, 2019). A fruitful approach to study the role of real-world politicians and partisanship in multi-party systems could be factorial surveys that make it possible to manipulate various factors simultaneously (Wallander, 2009). Studies using this design could even intertwine partisanship and populist attitudes. Furthermore, experimental research could be complemented with observational studies, in which we see how disinformation accusations by politicians play out in reality. Notably, the differential effects on general vs. specific media trust point to the need to further explore the structure of different levels of media trust.

Lastly, while our findings suggest that including the phrase “fake news” in disinformation accusations does not lead to different attitudinal outcomes, we did not test the cognitive mode of processing. Thus, we cannot be certain whether the phrase “fake news” has become an effective prime or heuristic cue processed unconsciously (e.g., Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Furthermore, we cannot exclude the possibility that other phrases in our manipulation (such as “lying”) are similar cues or primes. Future studies manipulating the processing mode may provide further insights into the persuasive process of these accusations.

Despite these limitations, this study is the first to demonstrate that disinformation accusations impact citizens’ trust in news media and their coverage in countries that, compared to the U.S., have higher levels of media trust, are less politically polarized, and have less fragmented media environments (Humprecht, et al., 2020). Amid growing concern regarding the increase of political hostility toward journalism, this paper adds to the understudied field of effects of politicians’ media criticism (Farhall et al., 2019; Fawzi, 2020). Furthermore, in showing that individuals with populist attitudes generalize disinformation accusations to the media in general, this paper advances research on populist blame attributions illustrating that these effectively enhance antagonism toward establishment institutions. While the consequences of these findings are most apparent for political communication and journalism scholars, there could also be profound implications for health and science communication. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, in which it is crucial for citizens to trust factual information, this study shows how politicians can undermine authoritative information sources and trust in democratic institutions without much repercussion. Therefore, studying the extent to which disinformation accusations undermine effective science and health communication is a crucial task for future research.

In sum, this study shows that the strategic instrumentalization of the threat represented by disinformation can be damaging to deliberative democracy. When a large part of society does not trust authoritative information sources and politicians’ outright denial of factual information is tolerated, “a shared understanding of reality which forms the basis of sound democratic debate” (Van Dalen, 2021, p. 2724) is in peril.

**Conflicts of interest:** None declared.

### Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available online at *Journal of Communication* online.

### Data availability

Data are available upon request from the corresponding author.

### Open science framework badges

- **Open Materials**
  The components of the research methodology needed to reproduce the reported procedure and analysis are publicly available for this article.
- **Preregistered**
  Research design was preregistered.

### Notes

1. For transparency, we want to clarify that we pose a research question instead of hypotheses for this set of dependent variables, as this part of our study was pre-registered as exploratory analysis, and we did not formulate hypotheses at the point of pre-registration.
2. We also manipulated the gender of the politician (female, male, and no gender indicated). However, following the pre-registration plan, we analyze the gendered difference of the impact of disinformation accusations on candidate evaluations elsewhere. Therefore, all three conditions are combined in this study, for both experimental conditions and the control group. In all analyses, we control for the gender of the politician.
3. https://osf.io/u5sdx/?view_only=7378c842b374a22b0c4369082b d0f3b. This pre-registration contains two parts, which relate to different research projects. This manuscript refers to Part 1 of the pre-registration.
4. First, the wording differs slightly from the here presented hypotheses, however, the expectations remain the same (Online Appendix A.1). Second, we pre-registered two hypotheses regarding the effects of disinformation accusations on willingness to read the accused news stories. Our analyses showed that there are no effects of our manipulations on participants’ willingness to read the news articles (Online Appendix A.2). Third, we pre-registered a number of hypotheses regarding the role of anger and enthusiasm in the effects of disinformation accusations. Our analyses showed that these emotions do not serve as a mediator in these effects, as was hypothesized (Online Appendix A.3). Fourth, we made an error in our pre-registered power analysis (as reported in Online Appendix A.4).
5. Using G*power, we calculated the sample size needed to identify small main effects ($f^2 = 0.02$). The analysis showed that a sample of 969 respondents provides a power of 0.80 to detect such effects given $\alpha = 0.05$ (two-tailed; see Online Appendix A.4). The panel agency oversampled a bit to account for the moderation effects, so that the final sample was $N = 1330$. A post-hoc sensitivity analysis (Perugini et al., 2018) shows that with a power of 0.8, an alpha of 0.05 and a sample size of 1,330, we can detect interaction effects with $f^2 = 0.006$, that is, somewhat small effects for people with strong populist attitudes ($r=0.15$) and no effects for people with weak populist attitudes (see Online Appendix A.4). Thus, with a sample size of 1,330, we are able to detect rather small interaction effects. To check whether respondents are attentive, we included an
Our moderation analyses assume linear interaction effects. To test whether this is warranted, we repeated all analyses using the interflex approach without the linearity assumption (Hainmueller et al., 2019). Most—though not all—interaction effects are indeed linear, and the analyses without linearity assumption support the conclusions reported in our results (Online Appendix B.4).

References


Engelke, K. M., Hase, V., & Bu̇chel, F. (2017). Populism and sovereignty seems to play a limited role (Online Appendix B.2).

Fawzi et al., 2021). Credibility can thus be seen as one antecedent influencing the trustworthiness of media (Engelke et al., 2019). However, to the best of our knowledge, there is currently no measurement of media trust taking into account the orientation towards the future (Van Dalen, 2019). Instead, many studies use one-item questions, which leave the meaning of trust unspecified—arguably contributing to the lack of clarity in the media trust literature (Engelke et al., 2019; Fawzi et al., 2021). Instead, following Stromback et al., 2020, p. 13), our measurement focuses “on trust in the information coming from news … adapting items used to measure the concept that comes closest, which is (perceptions of) the credibility of news.” These items are “fair, accurate, unbiased, taking into account all facts.” We additionally include an item asking for the general media trustworthiness.

Following our pre-registration, we aggregated the three dimensions into one variable. However, Wuttke et al. (2020) explain that the dimensions of populism are not compensatory. Thus, to check for robustness, we repeated all analyses with a non-compensatory measure of populist attitudes, that is, the Goertznian approach. This measure uses the minimum value of the concept subdimensions (Wuttke et al., 2020). Results remain essentially the same and can be found in Online Appendix B.1. Furthermore, as outlined above, theoretically anti-elitism, belief in the homogeneity of the people, and the demand for popular sovereignty should be associated with the belief that the media spread disinformation. However, empirical research suggests that particularly the anti-elitist dimension relates to negative media perceptions (Fawzi, 2019). Therefore, we repeated all analyses with each dimension separately. Results suggest that the anti-elitism and the homogeneity dimension are the drivers for the interaction effects with populist attitudes, while sovereignty seems to play a limited role (Online Appendix B.2).

Pooling the experimental conditions, as preregistered, is appropriate because our analyses below show that the effects of the fake news cue are null. Furthermore, the full interaction models (Online Appendix B.3) show no systematic differences between the effects of the two experimental conditions.

Our moderation analyses assume linear interaction effects. To check whether this is warranted, we repeated all analyses using the interflex approach without the linearity assumption (Hainmueller et al., 2019). Most—though not all—interaction effects are indeed linear, and the analyses without linearity assumption support the conclusions reported in our results (Online Appendix B.4).


Effects of politicians’ disinformation accusations


