

Is Russian Propaganda Making Us More Cynical?*

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Abstract

Does exposure to foreign propaganda increase political cynicism and conspiratorial views? What effect do inoculation messages have on citizens' receptivity to propaganda? In an online survey experiment, I subject subgroups of Americans to a message from *Russia Today (RT)*, a Russian international television network, criticizing the U.S. electoral system. I vary whether individuals know the criticism comes from Russia and whether they received a warning message about Russian propaganda prior to reading the message. I find that Russian propaganda does not increase political cynicism or conspiratorial view, regardless of source awareness or exposure to an inoculation message. Moreover, warning messages about propaganda actually lower people's belief that Russia poses a threat to U.S. democracy, suggesting that warning messages may be ineffective in inoculating citizens from foreign propaganda.

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There is growing concern that technological advancements reduce the cost of spreading biased information and that propaganda from foreign countries is reaching domestic audiences (Peisakhin and Rozenas, 2018; Youmans and Powers 2012, 2150; Xie and Boyd-Barrett 2015, 68). Automatic cross-border media, some argue, has harmful effects on democratic governance, with Russian state-sponsored propaganda receiving the most attention in recent years (Gerber and Zavisca 2016; Herpen 2015; Oates 2017). Yet, many are skeptical that foreign media exerts any influence on political attitudes (Avgerinos 2009; Crabtree, Darmofal and Kern 2015). L. John Martin notes that, “the propagandist cannot control the direction or the intensity of impact of his message, if, indeed he reaches his target at all” (Martin 1971, 70). Writing about modern Russian foreign propaganda, policy analyst Leon Hadar asserts that:

You don't have to be a marketing genius to figure out that in the age of the 24/7 media environment, foreign networks face prohibitive competition from American cable news networks like CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, social media, not to mention Netflix and yes, those online porno sites. Thus the chances that a foreign news organization would be able to attract large American audiences, and have any serious impact on their political views, remain very low (Hadar 2017)

At its essence, most are concerned about: (i) whether international propaganda changes people's attitudes; (ii) which citizens are most receptive to propaganda; and (iii) how one effectively counters propaganda? In recent years, many have claimed that propaganda is fueling polarization, cynicism, and conspiratorial views (Flock 2018). Yet, there is little empirical evidence to back up these assertions. Moreover, while there are growing number of governments and private organizations launching counter-propaganda initiatives, it is unclear whether they are effective.

This paper analyzes the influence of foreign propaganda in the United States using an online survey experiment that varies whether individuals receive Russian propaganda without being aware of its source, receive Russian propaganda while being made aware of its source, or receive Russian

propaganda after being warned about Russian interference. I test whether criticism of the U.S. electoral system by the Kremlin-funded network, *Russia Today (RT)* increases political cynicism and promotes conspiratorial views – integrating scholarship on international propaganda with work on strategic and populist media (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Hameleers, Bos and Vresse 2017; Pomerantsev 2015; Vresse 2004). Unlike previous research, which measures favorability toward political actors or policies as evidence of a message’s effectiveness (Avgerinos 2009), this paper broadens how we think about “effective persuasion” (Nye 2018; Pomerantsev 2015).

Overall, I find largely null effects. Even when participants directly receive messages that criticize American democratic institutions, they do not grow more cynical or conspiratorial as claimed by some scholars. Giving people more information about Russian propaganda also does not seem to have much of an effect, and in fact, there is some evidence to suggest that younger people warned about propaganda grow more cynical and conspiratorial. Finally, contrary to expectations, inoculation messages actually lower whether people think Russia poses a threat to American democracy.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. First, I review how individuals in the U.S. may be exposed to state-sponsored propaganda. Second, I argue that previous work on propaganda may be focused on a limited set of dependent variables, emphasizing how exposure to propaganda can heighten political cynicism and increase conspiratorial thinking. Third, I review inoculation strategies against propaganda and why counter-messaging programs can actually exacerbate distrust toward government. I then discuss my research design and present the results of my study. Finally, I discuss the potential limitations of the present study, explain the normative implications of my findings, and suggest avenues for future research.

Growth of Foreign Propaganda

States have always relied on propaganda to promote their own interests and influence foreign publics.¹ *Propaganda* is “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett and O’Donnell 2014, 7). While some prefer the term *disinformation* which refers to “politically motivated messaging designed explicitly to engender public cynicism, uncertainty, apathy, distrust, and paranoia, all of which disincentivize citizen engagement and mobilization for social or political change,” this term is often conflated with explicitly false information, causing scholars to miss the vast array of propaganda strategies (Jackson 2017). In the past decade, there has been growing anxiety that new emerging technologies allow foreign actors to reach and manipulate larger audiences, thereby undermining democratic governance. Are these fear justified?

Most researchers rightly note that direct exposure to foreign propaganda is rare (Xie and Boyd-Barrett 2015, 79). Early research on propaganda claimed that external messages against a democracy are generally ineffective given the diversity of thought and absence of media centralization (Ellul 1965, 296). Unintended exposure is more likely as foreign actors use a wide variety of computational propaganda tools to micro-target specific foreign audiences and spread their political narratives. Social media allows citizens to consume foreign propaganda without even being aware they are exposed to such content (Valeriani and Vaccari 2016). This indirect exposure, in conjunction with countries’ use of bots to boost the popularity of posts, makes the likelihood of exposure to foreign propaganda larger than some previously believed (Tucker et al. 2017, 47).

¹Historically, Napoleon was adept promoting national policy by planting stories in foreign newspapers (Thomson 1999, 223). In WWII, allied forces sent mixed messages to Nazi military officials and civilians to gain military advantages (Roetter 1974). While many examples involve the use of propaganda during times of active conflict, propaganda during peace has become a regular part of government activity.

For example, in 2016, the *New York Times* reported that Russian propaganda reached over 126 million American citizens through Facebook alone, in addition to 131,000 messages on Twitter and over 1,000 videos on YouTube. The Internet Research Agency, a Russian company linked to the Kremlin, “had posted roughly 80,000 pieces of divisive content that was shown to about 29 million people between January 2015 and August 2017. Those posts were then liked, shared and followed by others, spreading the messages to tens of millions more people” (Isacc and Wakabayshi 2017). Facebook also disclosed a list of 129 events promoted by Russian-sponsored accounts that drew the attention of over 340,000 people, indicating that foreign propaganda is not only interested in changing political attitudes but also shaping political behavior.

In addition to social media, traditional news outlets occasionally pick up narratives from biased networks, thereby increasing their reach beyond those who simply select into consuming foreign media. For example, Watanabe (2017) finds that Russian narratives about the Ukraine conflict were published on popular online news sites such as Yahoo News and Huffington Post. Matt Drudge’s link-aggregation site *Drudge Report*, which received over 1.4 billion views a month during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, had multiple links to *RT* and *Sputnik* (Bump 2017). While there is little doubt that there is a proliferation of foreign state-sponsored propaganda, we still lack research on how propaganda influences individual political behavior. When actually confronted with foreign propaganda, do audiences change their attitudes in the ways predicted by policy experts?

Unpacking the Effectiveness of Foreign Propaganda

Simply because foreign propaganda appears on people’s social media feed does not mean that these messages impact people’s beliefs. Despite the growing attention to Russian propaganda and the Kremlin’s growing international influence, favorable views of Russia and Putin continue to drop (Letterman 2018). Yet, existing research often focuses on a limited set of dependent variables

when examining the effect of propaganda on political attitudes and behaviors. Most scholars working on international communication conceptualize “effective persuasion” within the framework of soft power, assessing how countries’ broadcasts increase favorability toward the communicating country or the country’s leader (Gagliardone 2013; Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2009; Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018). Some argue that an, “overreliance on the soft-power paradigm has bred analytical complacency regarding the growth of authoritarian influence” (Walker 2018, 18).

Propaganda, however, can impact a wide range of political attitudes and behaviors (Ellul 1965). Stanley Cunningham (2002) argues that “propaganda manifests itself not simply in the content of particular beliefs or skewed attitudes but more radically in the impairment of the mind...the public no longer cares to distinguish between reality and television-induced pseudoreality” (108). Moving beyond a framework where propaganda is used to manufacture consent (Herman and Chomsky 1988), we should also pay attention to how propagandists may be sowing confusion, apathy, and cynicism in individuals (Huang 2018, 1034; Shao and Liu 2018, 15).

I argue that rather than trying to improve an autocrat’s reputation, international propaganda may be more effective in fostering the perception of equivalence between democratic and autocratic states – highlighting rival states’ shortcomings to demonstrate that nominally democratic states look as dysfunctional, if not more so, than less competitive regimes (Rawnsley 2015, 275). This may be an effective strategy since negative coverage of opponents can decrease affect for the target of the message (Lau, Sigelman and Rovner 2007, 1182). Through the use of international propaganda networks, autocrats denigrate democratic institutions and exploit existing divisions within countries to increase polarization and break down democratic consensus. Close observers of Russian foreign propaganda in particular contend that the Kremlin tries to increase political cynicism and conspiratorial thinking, while lessening support for liberal democracy. Soviet-born British journalist Peter Pomerantsev best explains this perspective on Russian propaganda:

The underlying goal of the Kremlin’s propaganda is to engender cynicism in the population. Cynicism is useful to the state: When people stop trusting any institutions

or having any firmly held values, they can easily accept a conspiratorial vision of the world. In showing that democracy is so easily manipulated, that everyone and everything is for sale, the Kremlin is dashing people's hopes for the possibility of an alternative politics while simultaneously insisting that the West is just as corrupt as Russia (Pomerantsev 2015, 42).

Political cynicism is a concept that has taken varied meaning across the political science literature. While some emphasize a disconnect from politics, others claim cynicism lies in distrust in politicians, low confidence in government, or a general belief that institutions are “hypocritical, soulless, or otherwise devoid of the beliefs that once animated them” (Mazella 2007, 6). Because trust in government to do the right thing most of the time is a cornerstone for democratic legitimacy, political cynicism has become an important topic of research, with implications for political participation, support for extremist parties, and civic engagement (Rijkhoff 2015).

Yet, despite all the claims that Russian propaganda has sowed discord, undermined democratic norms, and created more cynical citizens, there is neither strong empirical evidence nor clear theoretical link between exposure to Russian propaganda and political cynicism. Why would exposure to Russian propaganda cause individuals distrust their government? What is it about the narratives present in Russian propaganda targeted at American audiences that would increase cynicism?

It is possible that international propaganda can have these effects through the use of strategic and populist news frames. Scholars have noted that some political coverage may inadvertently be disillusioning individuals about politics and demobilizing citizens (Robinson 1976). The spiral of cynicism hypothesis states that when the media reports largely negatively about politics, it erodes civic engagement, increases political cynicism, and depresses political participation (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Vresse 2004; Jackson 2011). Individuals exposed to messages that emphasize the hypocritical nature of politics may not change their attitudes on specific issues or countries, but they can become more cynical (Pomerantsev 2015). Content analysis reveals that Russian state-funded media networks emphasize faults in democratic systems to intensify existing rifts between

social and political groups (Farkas and Bastos, 2018; Yablokov, 2015). Their coverage of American politics does not just focus on racial tensions and social divisions, but it also emphasizes the undemocratic aspects of America's two-party system. When individuals are confronted by information about democratic deficiencies in their political system, they can become more cynical.

H₁: Individuals exposed to Russian propaganda will become more cynical.

In addition, both *RT* and *Sputnik* amplify extremist views, portraying politics as inherently corrupt with elite conspiracies around every corner (Pomerantsev 2015). These themes are typical of populist media outlets (Roodujin et al. 2017). These populist messages can not only shape blame perceptions, but they can also increase conspiratorial attitudes, especially among individuals with existing aversion to prevailing political institutions (Hameleers, Bos and Vresse 2017, 870). Given the centrality of populist frames and conspiracy theories in Russian media, it is reasonable to assume that exposure to Russian state-sponsored propaganda promote a more conspiratorial view of the world (Yablokov 2015).

H₂: Individuals exposed to Russian propaganda will become more conspiratorial.

Countering Propaganda

Since many have already assumed that propaganda influences citizens' political attitudes, governments and private organizations have promoted initiatives to make people more cognizant about the source of the political information they are consuming. They argue that shining a light on the threat of foreign propaganda and exposing biased networks will mitigate its impact because audiences are more likely to discount disinformation when they are aware of the bias of a message source (Prior 2013, 108; Taber and Lodge 2006, 756). Many contend that "national regulators certainly can do more to inform media audiences about the ownership of external media – for example, the fact that *RT* is owned by *TV-Novosti* and hence the Russian state" (Surowiec 2017,

26). By telling audiences a message comes from an autocratic state, policy makers believe they can mitigate the influence of international propaganda (Avgerinos 2009, 126).

This is because foreign criticism is often perceived as uncredible (Marinov 2018). Many find that messages from foreign countries are ineffective or even counter-productive (Crabtree, Darmofal and Kern 2015; Kern and Hainmueller 2009). Noting an in-group bias to political persuasion, some argue that foreign messages will either be dismissed or provoke backlash effects (Ashmore et al. 1979, 132; Page, Shapiro and Dempsey 1987, 32).² Learning that foreign entities are trying to manipulate their political behavior, individuals may become more reactant and less likely to accept messages posed by foreign critics. Put simply, criticism of political institutions from a non-credible source may fall on deaf ears.

H₃: Individuals exposed to Russian propaganda will not become more cynical or conspiratorial if they are told the source of the information.

Simply informing people about the message source may not be enough and individuals may need more information about the intentions and actions of the propagandists. Inoculation strategies are meant to heighten threat perceptions in order to make counter-attitudinal messages less convincing (Compton 2009). This is the general logic behind making people more aware of the presence of foreign interference in their information spaces.

H₄: Individuals warned about Russian propaganda will not become more cynical and conspiratorial.

However, inoculation programs may have unintended consequences. Priming individuals to think about the threat of propaganda can elicit feelings of distrust toward their own governments

²Yet, some studies demonstrate that foreign messages can move domestic public opinion, even in the face of competing domestic cues (DellaVigna et al., 2014; Dragojlovic 2015, 73; Hayes and Guardino 2011, 83).

(Nyhan 2017). A long literature on unintended communication effects highlights the difficulties in countering misinformation (Berinsky 2015; Ecker, Lewandowsky and Tang 2010; Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Specifically, alerting citizens to the threat of foreign propaganda can make people more likely to perceive politics as a game of elites trying to manipulate the people's will, generating more cynical and conspiratorial attitudes (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). By responding to foreign propaganda, government officials may simply be drawing more attention to these foreign networks and inadvertently creating the impression that all media is propagandistic – feeding into existing distrust toward democratic institutions.

H₅: Individuals warned about Russian propaganda will become more cynical and conspiratorial.

People also may react unfavorably to actors' attempts to educate them about the threat of international propaganda because they view such efforts as scaremongering (Roese and Sande 1993). Research in social psychology emphasizes that people react in unexpected ways to warnings, often becoming more likely to engage in the behavior warned against or adopting attitudes antithetical to the warning (Brehm and Brehm 2013). When Facebook tried to flag fake stories, “users who wanted to believe the false stories had their fevers ignited and they actually shared the hoaxes more” (Constone 2018). Research on media coverage of terrorism has noted that excessive warnings about an international threat can lead to greater cynicism and a boomerang effect (Whitaker 2012, 70). Therefore, it is essential to understand the direct effect of foreign propaganda, as well as the unintended consequences of counter-messaging programs.

Research Design

I examine the impact of Russian propaganda using an online survey experiment in the United States. Several studies have relied on quasi-experimental designs to demonstrate how the availability of propaganda shapes political behavior, but they are unable to demonstrate the effect of direct

consumption (Adena et al. 2015; Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018; Yanagizawa-Drott 2014). While forced exposure designs might overestimate media effects, online propaganda can reach citizens who are not actively seeking out this type of content (Anspach and Carlson 2018, 10).

I recruited participants through *TurkPrime*, a popular crowd-sourcing website for enlisting participants to perform particular tasks (Litman, Robinson and Abberbock 2017). 1,000 participants completed the study in February 2018. The final sample was 52% female and had a mean age of 38. The sample is more liberal than a the representative population with, 54% supporting the Democratic Party (including leaners), 33% the Republican party, and 12% identifying as Independents with no preference. The sample is also more educated with over 54% having at least a college degree. Although *MTurk* samples are not representative of the general population, “*MTurk* respondents do not appear to differ fundamentally from population-based respondents in unmeasurable ways” (Levay, Freese and Druckman 2016, 1). Therefore, there is little reason to believe that the impact of the treatments would vary in a more representative sample (Mullinix, Leeper and Druckman 2015). *MTurk* samples also overrepresent people with internet connections, but this is particularly the population that is more likely to be exposed to Russian narratives.

After completing some standard demographic questions, I randomly assigned participants to: (1) a **Control** group, where individuals simply completed the post-treatment survey; (2) an **Information** group, where individuals read an article with Russia’s criticism of the two-party system from *Russia Today* (*RT*) without information on the source; (3) a **Source** group, where individuals are explicitly told the message source; or (4) an **Inoculation** group where individuals were warned about the threat of *RT* before reading the same article with source information.

Table 1: Treatments in Study #2

Treatment	Description
<i>Control</i>	Completed post-treatment survey
<i>Information</i>	Article on Russia’s interference in U.S. election
<i>Source</i>	Source cue + article on Russia’s interference in U.S. election
<i>Inoculation</i>	Inoculation + article on Russia’s interference in U.S. election

The article is presented in the form of an interview between an *RT* journalist and a British intelligence officer on the subject of Russia's relationship to the United States. The Kremlin often relies on Western hosts and guests to boost the credibility of their coverage among American audiences (Xie and Boyd-Barrett 2015). The article involved a common theme of Russian propaganda, the unrepresentative and corrupt nature of America's two party system. While most research focuses on disinformation, it is useful to evaluate how foreign criticism is received by audiences since states use a mixture of fact and fiction in their propaganda (Carter and Carter 2018).

Treatment Text: Below is a short excerpt from a media interview with Annie Machon, a former intelligence officer for MI5, the security service in the United Kingdom. The topic is the threat Russia poses to American democracy.

For source and inoculation groups only: The interview is brought to you by the Russian media network, Russia Today (RT).³

Interviewer: FBI Director James Comey described Russia as “the greatest threat” to US democracy. What are your thoughts about that?

Machon: I think that in America some of the greatest threats to their democracy is, first of all, the two-party system which is actually a sham in a sense that it doesn't matter who you vote for, the same government administration will get in.

And the fact that most of the candidates who are put up for election to president in the US tend to be very heavily backed by big lobby organizations, by Wall Street. So, vested interests tend to be running a very corporatist state in America.

The inoculation explains how *RT* is a tool of the Russian propaganda machine, priming individuals to think about the threat of Russian interference. I keep the source of the inoculation vague

³An RT logo was also included on the page.

in order to not trigger partisan motivated reasoning, but future would do well to vary the source of the warning since this can influence its persuasiveness ([Banas and Rains 2010](#)).

Inoculation: According to several news sources, Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik are simply tools of a sophisticated Russian propaganda machine, created by the Kremlin to push its foreign policy, defend its aggression in Ukraine and undermine confidence in democracy, NATO and the world as we have known it.

Many experimenters are concerned that participants are not reading treatment materials or flip-pantly answering survey questions, introducing noise and decreasing the validity of their results ([Oppenheimer, Meyvis and Davidenko 2009](#)). Excluding participants who fail reading check or screening individuals by the least amount of time needed to finish the survey are potential solutions to this problem ([Chen 2018](#), 7), but they also can lead to post-treatment bias ([Mongomery, Nyhan and Torres 2018](#)). Consequently, I present the results of the full sample in the main text, but I also provide robustness checks in limited samples based on reading checks and time taken to complete the survey in the online appendix. Results are nearly identical across these different samples.

After individuals are assigned to on the treatment groups, they are presented with the post-treatment survey. I test whether exposure to propaganda increases people's beliefs that the two party system is a sham, a statement explicitly made in article. Responses range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). I then create a measure of political cynicism using principle component factor analysis to extract a single dimension based on agreement to four statements that gauge general political cynicism rather than trust in specific politicians or institutions ([Jackson 2011](#), 78). It is often difficult to measure levels of political cynicism and trust when it is fashionable to denigrate politicians and politics, while expressing optimism can make one seem naive. Consequently, many surveys may be capturing citizens who are "verbalizing a causal and ritual negativism rather than an enduring sense of estrangement that influences their beliefs and actions" ([Eisinger 1999](#), 46). Because of this, I include several more strongly worded questions that help create graduation

in the responses and weed out the truly cynical. Statements include: (1) “Elections give voters a real choice among candidates with different positions” (2) “Politicians genuinely try to keep their campaign promises” (3) “Politicians lose touch quickly with the public after they are elected”; (4) “I’m disgusted with politics”; (5) “The government is immoral”; and (6) “I am cynical about government” (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.81$). However, I also test the effect of the treatments on each individual question in the Online Appendix.

I use a measure of conspiratorial predisposition that does not ask belief in any particular conspiracy theory (Uscinski, Klofstad and Atkinson 2016, 61). Statements include: (1) “Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places,” (2) “Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things anyway,” (3) “The people who really ‘run’ the country, are not known to the voters,” and (4) “Big events like wars, the current recession, and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us” (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.88$). All variables are normalized to range from 0 to 1.

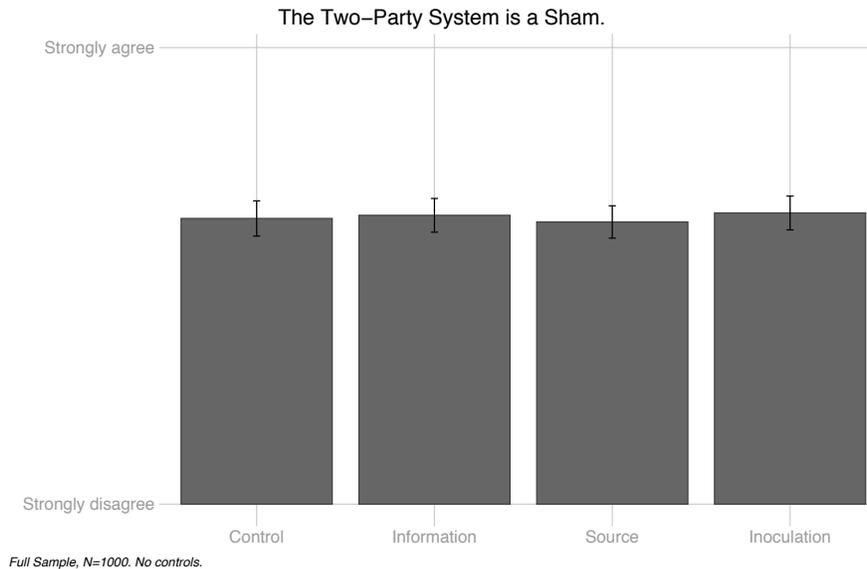
Finally, I ask respondents whether they consider Russia to be a *major*, *minor*, or *no threat* to U.S. democracy. I also ask whether they believe Congress should investigate Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential election. Participants were given three options: *should investigate*; *should not investigate*; and *don’t know enough*. These questions were meant to assess how exposure to international propaganda shapes individuals’ attitudes towards specific issues related to the 2016 Presidential election. Importantly, many emphasize that making citizens aware of the threat of Russian propaganda is critical for mitigating future foreign interventions (Jamieson 2018).

Results

I first plot the effect of the treatments on individuals’ beliefs that the two party system is sham since the article makes this claim explicit. As the figure below makes clear, none of treatments have any significant effect. Individuals already have a strongly rooted sense whether they trust the

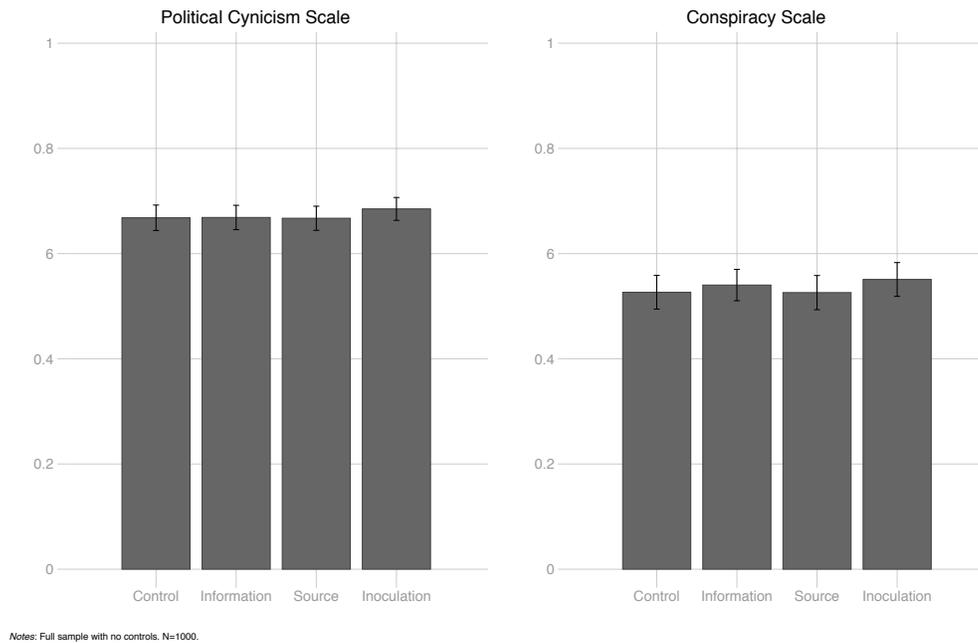
two-party system, with Independents and young people expressing greater distaste toward the two political parties.

Figure 1: Treatment Effects on Belief that Two-Party System is a Sham



Next, I assess whether Russian propaganda is fostering more cynical or conspiratorial views. Once again, despite what some scholars claim, there is little evidence to suggest that direct exposure to Russian propaganda is creating a more cynical and conspiratorial citizenry (Flock 2018; Conor and Friedersdorf 2018). These results are robust to samples where individuals did and did not pass reading checks as well as models with pre-treatment controls. Of course, a null finding should not signify that propaganda has no effect, since different messages may generate different effects. However, given the topic of the article, a direct criticism of U.S. two party system, it is surprising that this message has no effect on cynicism or conspiratorial views. Future work might also try alternative measures of political cynicism since recent work has suggested that individuals may have different feelings towards different levels of government, with potentially different effects for political participation and democratic governance (Rijkhoff 2015).

Figure 2: Treatment Effects on Conspiracy Scale



I do consider whether the null findings are masking some heterogeneous treatment effects. In the online appendix, I assess whether there are differential effects by generational cohorts and partisanship. Previous work on cynicism and conspiratorial views suggests that that strategic narratives are more likely to impact younger individuals (Valentino, Beckmann and Buhr 2001; Adriaansen, van Praag and Vresse 2010; Elenbaas and Vresse 2008). Young people, in particular, tend to have less stable political orientations than those who are older and more experienced with politics (Lau and Redlawsk 2008), making them more likely to be influenced by strategic and populist media content (Jackson 2011). Young people are also more likely to emphasize flaws and deficits in the current political system, making strategic and populist frames more salient to their existing world views (Bennett 1997, 434).

I find that young people become more cynical and conspiratorial not when they are exposed to Russian propaganda, but *when they are warned about the threat of Russian propaganda*. The inoculation treatment increases cynicism by approximately 7% and heightens conspiratorial atti-

tudes by 8% in individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 – suggesting that warning people about the threat of foreign propaganda can backfire on domestic governments as predicted by H_5 . I do not find consistent significant interactions with partisanship and results vary depending on whether one counts “leaners” as partisans. Although the issue of Russia has become increasingly polarized, with Republicans growing more favorable toward Russia while Democrats becoming more hostile, there are no indications that exposure to Russian criticism of the U.S. electoral system has consistent differential effects on Democrats, Republicans, or Independent. However, I interpret some of the results cautiously since *MTurk* under-represents older citizens and conservatives, meaning the estimates of the treatment effects for these groups is less precise.

Moreover, looking for heterogenous treatment effect covariate-by-covariate scan lead to false discoveries (Gelman and Loken 2014; Hill 2011). Based off recent recommendations by social scientists, I also conduct a “holistic analysis of treatment effect heterogeneity using a method that considers all measured moderators in a single model” (Guess and Coppock 2018, 13). Bayesian Additive Regression Trees (BART) is a sum-of-trees model that can automatically detecting treatment effect heterogeneity and predict the conditional mean of the outcome variable while minimizing overfitting. According to Guess and Coppock (2018), “a principal benefit of using BART over other machine learning algorithms is that it is robust to the choice of tuning parameters” (Guess and Coppock 2018, 13). While heterogenous treatment effects cannot be summarized by looking at the coefficients on interaction terms like in OLS, one can plot the estimated treatment effect of each individuals’ covariate profile along with 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 3: Bart Estimated Treatment Effects

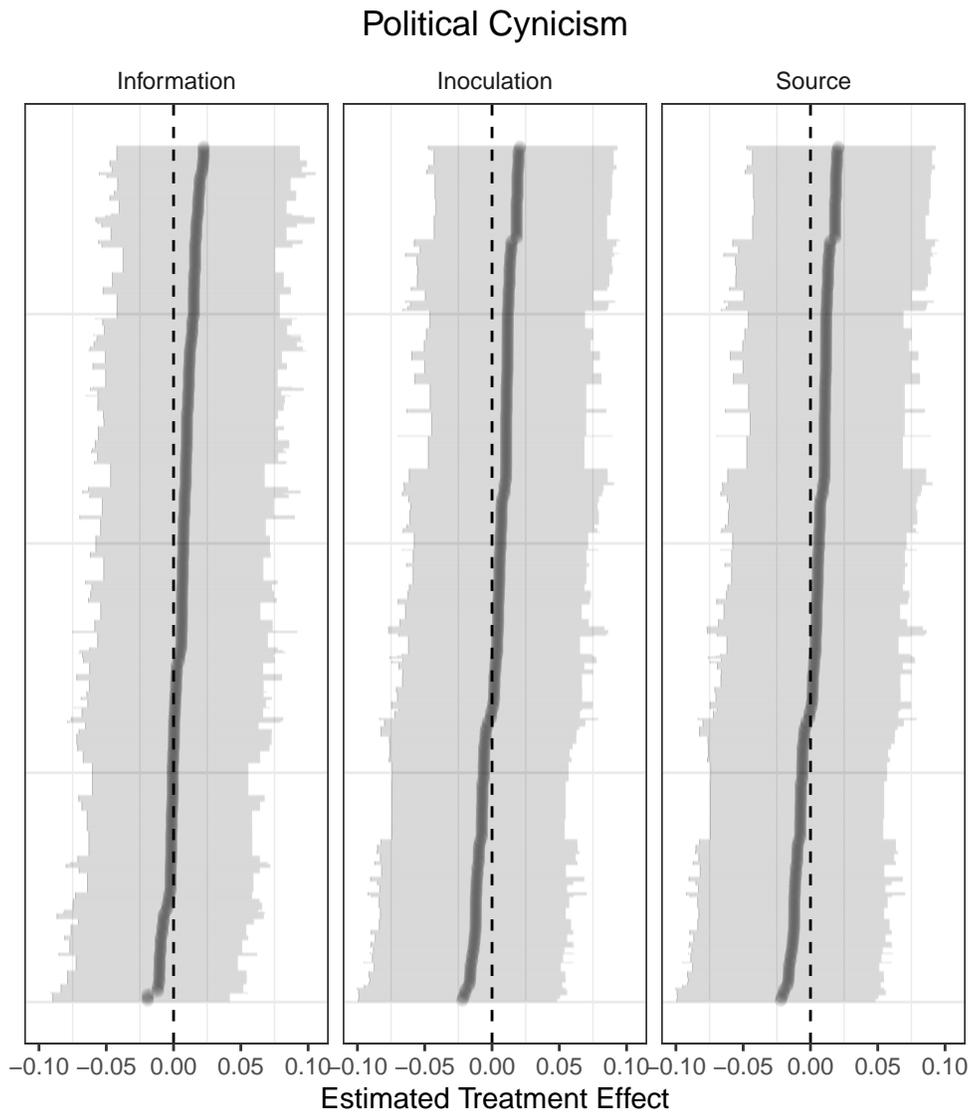
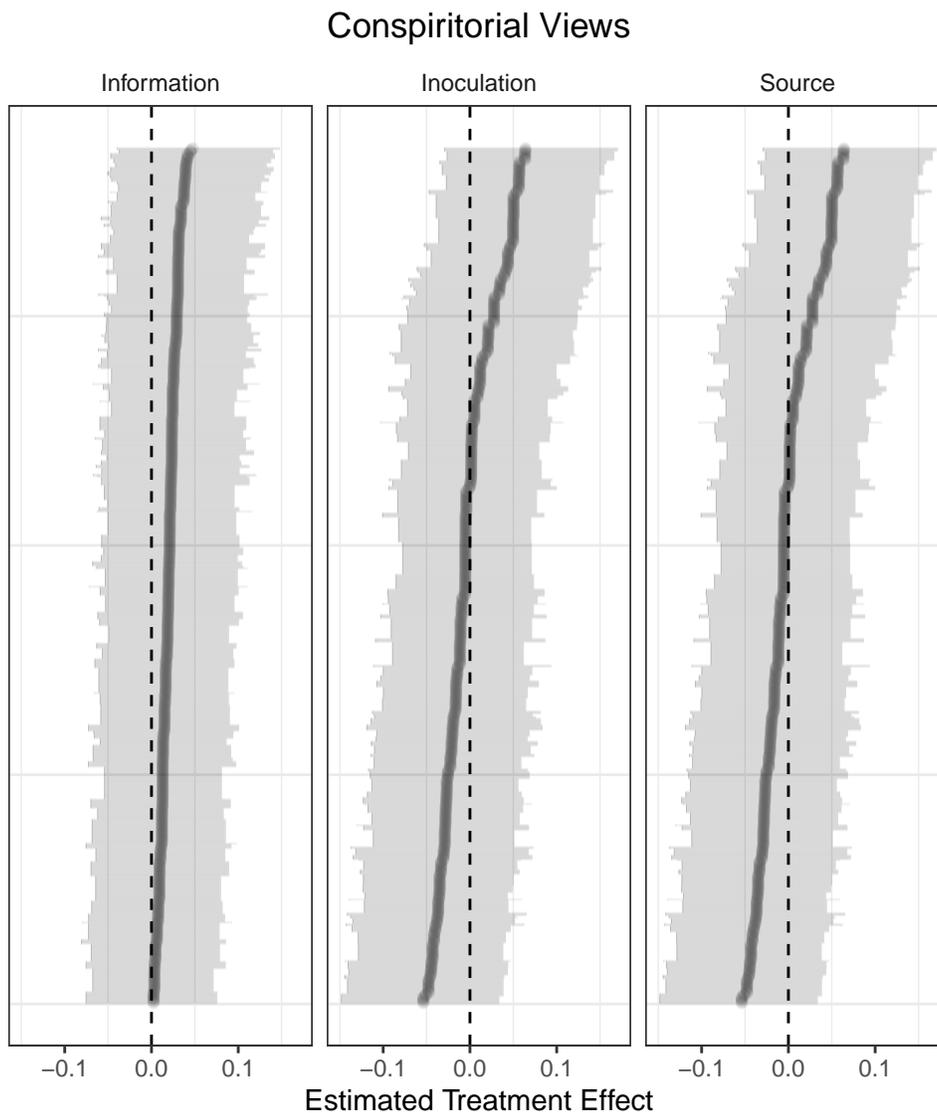


Figure 4: Bart Estimated Treatment Effects

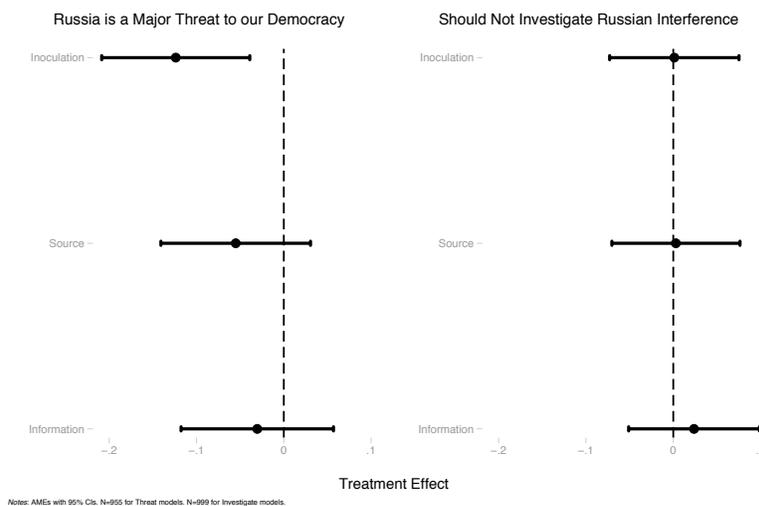


As one can see in the graphs, while the treatments do tend to have heterogeneous effects (especially on conspiritorial view) the effects are not statistically significant. However, more research with larger and more representative samples will be necessary to assess the full extent of heterogeneous treatment effects, especially since strategic information campaigns are highly adept at micro targeting specific groups to maximize their narratives' effectiveness.

Finally, I assess whether exposure to propaganda shapes people's views on Russia's threat to

U.S. democracy and their attitudes toward a Congressional investigation. Given that both questions produce nominal outcome variables, I estimate these models using multinomial logistic regression. I find little effect of propaganda (with or without the source) on perceptions of Russia’s threat or views on the need for a Congressional investigation. Interestingly, I find evidence that warning individuals about Russian propaganda actually *lowers* the perception of Russian threat. Approximately 40% of individuals thought that Russia was a major threat in the control group compared to 28% in the inoculation group. Conversely, I find no effect of the inoculation on individuals’ attitudes toward the Congressional investigation into Russian interference (see **Figure 5**). While Russian propaganda (on its own) appears to have little effect on specific policy issues, warning individuals about Russian propaganda makes them *less* likely to consider Russia to be a major threat - which should be concerning to those who are investing time, energy and resources trying to warn the American public about foreign interference in U.S. elections. Traditionally, inoculation messages are meant to heighten individuals’ threat perceptions in order to make them more likely to rebuke future counter-attitudinal information (Banas and Rains 2010, 285). Yet, in this case the inoculation message can decrease threat perceptions, making it necessary to further explore characteristics of inoculation strategies that heighten or lessen feelings of threat (Compton 2009).

Figure 5: Treatment Effects on Perception of Russian Threat and Views on Investigation



Discussion, Limitations and Future Research

These findings reinforce the notion that foreign propaganda may not be as effective as is currently claimed, and that countering propaganda is a more nuanced process than previously believed. Some of the results complement research on fake news, which finds that “efforts to promote greater skepticism toward false news can also promote increased distrust toward legitimate news and information” (Nyhan 2017, 2). In this study, warning young citizens about the threat of Russian propaganda can actually make them more cynical and conspiratorial about politics.

While the results of this analysis are important, this study is not without its limitations. First, in online survey experiments, participants are forced into reading articles and being exposed to the inoculation or other experimental messages. Given that these people likely have very different priors about the issues described and a different interest in the provided information, it is not clear if we could expect similar results in a typical news consumption setting. Yet, having participants complete the surveys from the comfort of their own home or work place increases “the mundane realism of the experiment and the generalizability of the results” as individuals are most likely to be exposed to such messages while browsing social media (Huang and Yeh 2017, 292).⁴

Second, it is noteworthy that knowledge of the message source has little influence on receptivity since most counter-propaganda initiatives focus on raising awareness as an inoculation strategy. Nevertheless, this current study does not assess whether exposure to information about the

⁴Designs that exploit natural variation in signal strength of media networks to examine mass communication effects are extremely valuable in demonstrating how the availability of particulate media shapes political behavior, but these designs often cannot tell use about direct exposure nor can they assess how knowledge of the message source shapes receptivity to messages (Crabtree, Darmofal and Kern 2015; Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018). However, survey experiments afford clear causal inferences that alternative designs cannot offer, making them important complements to existing work on propaganda effects (Barabas and Jerit 2010, 226).

source caused individuals to update their beliefs about *RT* itself. Future work should explicitly test whether subjects exposed to information about the source thought that the *RT* articles involved were propaganda, public diplomacy, disinformation or legitimate news. This would provide insight into the mechanisms driving the null effect of revealing the message source and whether individuals are updating their beliefs about the content of foreign networks when they are given additional information. However, my presentation of the source material in the experiment – explicitly stating the source and offering descriptions of the Russian network – mirrors current counter-propaganda strategies.

Third, the most counterintuitive finding from the studies is that warning people about propaganda decreases the perception that Russia is threatening and can increase cynicism and foster conspiratorial views in younger citizens. While more research should be done to assess the robustness of this finding, it does reinforce research that finds that fact-checking and counter-propaganda can have inadvertent consequences on public opinion (Lazer et al. 2018). Yet, one limitation of this study is that it does not definitively explain *why* we are witnessing these backlash effects. Participants are exposed to a warning that *RT* is propaganda and that it is dangerous, but it is not clear if the warning has an inoculating effect on the way consumers interpret the news article or a direct effect on consumers' beliefs. It is possible that the warning can change participants' priors about the importance of the foreign propaganda, but once they read the actual news article, they might not find the propaganda that threatening.

In a study of Soviet messages in the United States, Smith found that Americans exposed to Radio Moscow's broadcasts adopted more pro-Russian views. He claimed, "conditions in our own society had led the audience to hold unrealistic negative images which, upon actual exposure, were clearly refuted for many of the listeners" (Smith 1970, 550). In other words, individuals warned about Russian propaganda may become primed to expect strong propaganda. When they are actually exposed to Russian narratives and find them to be relatively tame, they begin to consider that

Russia is less of a threat to U.S. democracy.⁵

The results may also depend on the particular article or type of propaganda that we show to individuals. Future work would do well to randomize consumer priors (e.g. warnings) and the strength of propaganda (e.g. article content). It will also be useful to assess how different types of inoculations (sourced to different political actors) shapes receptivity to foreign propaganda (Szybillo and Heslin 1973, 397). Relatedly, testing propaganda effects based on individuals' levels of political sophistication and awareness is a necessary area of research (Chen 2018).

Finally, critics might wonder if the timing of the experiments is an issue. Because the paper addresses a salient topic, it is possible that the results of the experiments would change as Russia comes in and out of the news (Einstein and Glick 2015, 682). In future research, assessing how the same propaganda message shapes audiences' attitudes overtime (as issues become more or less salient) is critical in evaluating how political awareness and prior exposure to information moderates the influence of foreign messages (Slothuss 2016). Specifically, as the topic of Russia interference becomes more politically polarized, people's survey answers may reflect partisan signaling rather than honest attitudes about their assessment of Russian threat.

⁵One other possibility is that some citizens are skeptical about the instructions they get in a survey or about being educated on politics in general, which is consistent with the heterogeneous treatment effects across younger participants. Gauging individuals' attitudes concerning authority prior to treatment could be a way to test whether rejection of authority and inoculations are driving some of the results in the second study. This would be consistent with some research in social psychology that finds personality traits moderate the impact of warning messages on individuals' attitudes and behaviors (Nestler and Egloff 2010). Unpacking the backlash effect to inoculation should be a central area of future research (Ivanov et al. 2017).

Conclusion

With growing concern that citizens are exposed to international propaganda, many assume that individuals are extremely vulnerable to foreign influence. This paper tests whether exposure to propaganda, which relies heavily on strategic news coverage and populist frames, increase political cynicism and promote conspiratorial views and what influence knowledge of the message source and warnings about international propaganda have in mitigating propaganda's influence.

I find no direct effects of Russian propaganda on political cynicism or conspiratorial attitudes, indicating that even when individuals are forced to view Russian narratives, few people are affected in any significant way. There is some evidence, that explicitly warning young people about the threat of foreign propaganda increases political cynicism and promotes conspiratorial views – suggest that counter-propaganda initiatives may be exacerbating the influence of foreign messages by repeating their frames and portraying politics as a game over the hearts and minds of ordinary citizens. However, future work should reassess the robustness of these findings since they have important implications for countering propaganda. As noted by some, counter-propaganda “might also have the unintended consequence of reducing the perceived credibility of real-news outlets” (Lazer et al. 2018, 1095).

Notably, the findings presented in the paper are largely statistically insignificant but they demonstrate the importance of avoiding the file-drawer problem by analyzing and presenting null results (Franco, Malhotra and Simonovits 2015). These studies also contribute to the literature on propaganda in a number of ways. First, while the influence of state-sponsored media aimed at domestic audiences is a thoroughly studied topic (Adena et al. 2015; Yanagizawa-Drott 2014), the effect on foreign audiences is less developed. This becomes critical as globalization has integrated communication networks and made foreign disinformation a more salient threat in the 21st century (Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018).

Second, the preoccupation with measurable effects has caused scholars to focus on dependent

variables like favorability toward actors or approval of policies while neglecting earlier scholarship on propaganda that emphasizes the corrosive effects of disinformation and propaganda on human cognition. Put differently, persuasion-based processes are complex and multifaceted, meaning that more attention should be placed on assessing unintended and subtle influence of political communication. In particular, assessing when propaganda fuels political cynicism, conspiratorial views, and distrust in traditional democratic institutions is a necessary area of research (Shao and Liu 2018).

Finally, we have to consider the possible backlash effects to counter-messaging programs, and take seriously the notion that overreaction to the threat of foreign propaganda may be more influential than the messages themselves - which may only be reaching and influencing a small population. Warning citizens about international propaganda may not only have direct effects on citizens' receptivity to foreign messages but it can also cause individuals to overestimate the impact of mass communication on public opinion (Davison 1983).

I urge future studies to examine the impact of Russian messages across different policy issues to determine if foreign propaganda is more effective on certain issues than others. Second, it will be necessary to directly measure individuals' prior attitudes toward foreign countries explicitly to determine whether individuals with more favorable views of the propagandist may react in heterogeneous ways to international messages. Third, it is necessary to theorize and test precisely *why* some people become more cynical and conspiratorial when warned about propaganda. Is this a result of individuals reacting adversely to being told what to think, or do current inoculation initiatives overinflate the threat of foreign influence, leading to more cynicism and less trust in democratic processes? Overall, I contend that greater attention to the micro-level effect of foreign messages can help us reach a broader understanding of international propaganda and the unintended influence of inoculation strategies.

Appendix A: Regression Tables

Below, I include the regression tables that replicate Figure 1, 2 and 5. Other than a significant effect of the inoculation on Russia's threat to U.S. democracy, all the treatments have a null effect.

Table 2: Regression Table for Figure 1 and 2

	Party Sham		Cynicism		Conspiracy	
	β	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>SE</i>
Information	0.04	(0.16)	0.00	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)
Source	-0.05	(0.16)	-0.00	(0.02)	-0.00	(0.02)
Inoculation	0.07	(0.16)	0.02	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)
Constant	4.75*	(0.11)	0.67*	(0.01)	0.53*	(0.02)
Observations	1000		1000		1000	
R-Squared	.00062		.0015		.0017	

Standard errors in parentheses

Note: Put your notes here.

* $p < 0.05$

Table 3: Study #2 - Effect of Russian Propaganda on Policy Positions

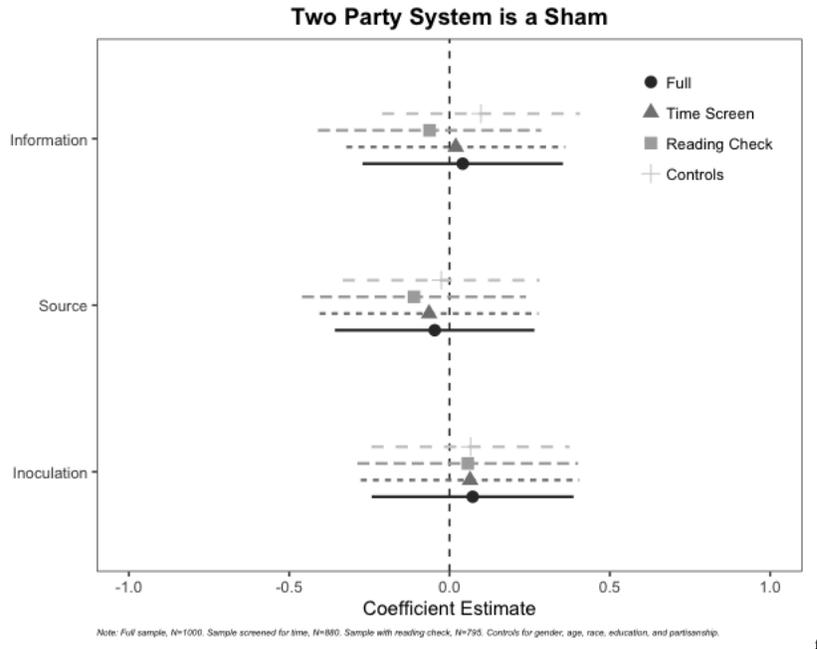
	Russia Threat to American Democracy				Investigate Russian Interference			
	No Threat at All		Major threat		Should Not investigate		Don't know enough	
	β	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>SE</i>
Information	-0.07	(0.28)	-0.14	(0.20)	0.14	(0.21)	0.10	(0.31)
Source	-0.51	(0.29)	-0.33	(0.20)	0.03	(0.21)	0.14	(0.30)
Inoculation	-0.20	(0.28)	-0.60*	(0.21)	0.06	(0.22)	0.35	(0.29)
Constant	-1.18*	(0.20)	-0.12	(0.14)	-1.08*	(0.15)	-1.96*	(0.22)
Observations	955				999			

* *Note: Models estimated with multinomial logit. * $p < 0.05$*

Appendix B: Robustness with Manipulation Checks

I present the effect of the treatments across different samples (with controls, those who passed reading checks, those who took the limited amount of time to complete the survey.)

Figure 6: Treatment Effects on Belief that Two-Party System is a Sham



f

Figure 7: Treatment Effects on Political Cynicism Scale

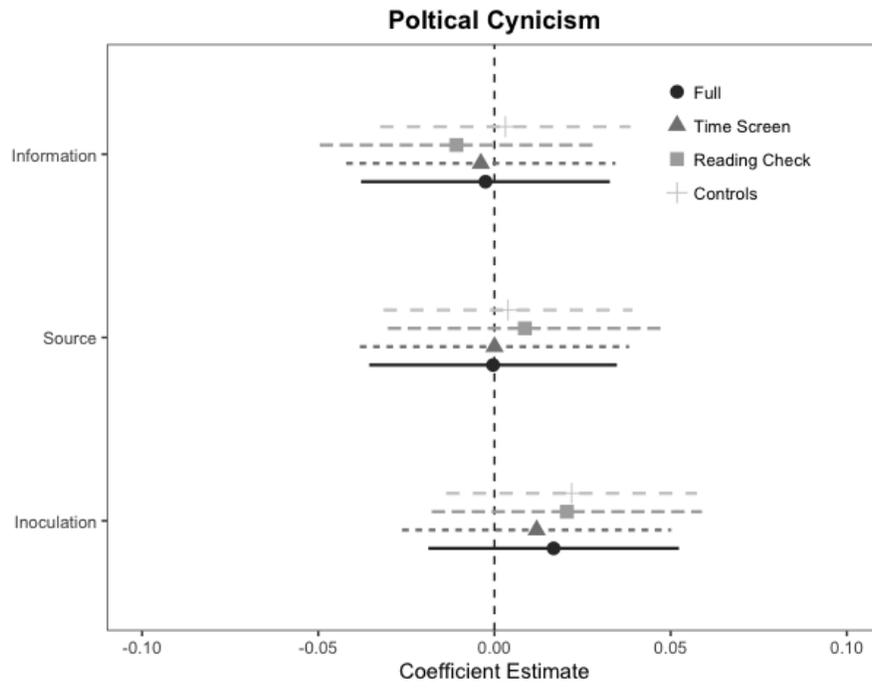
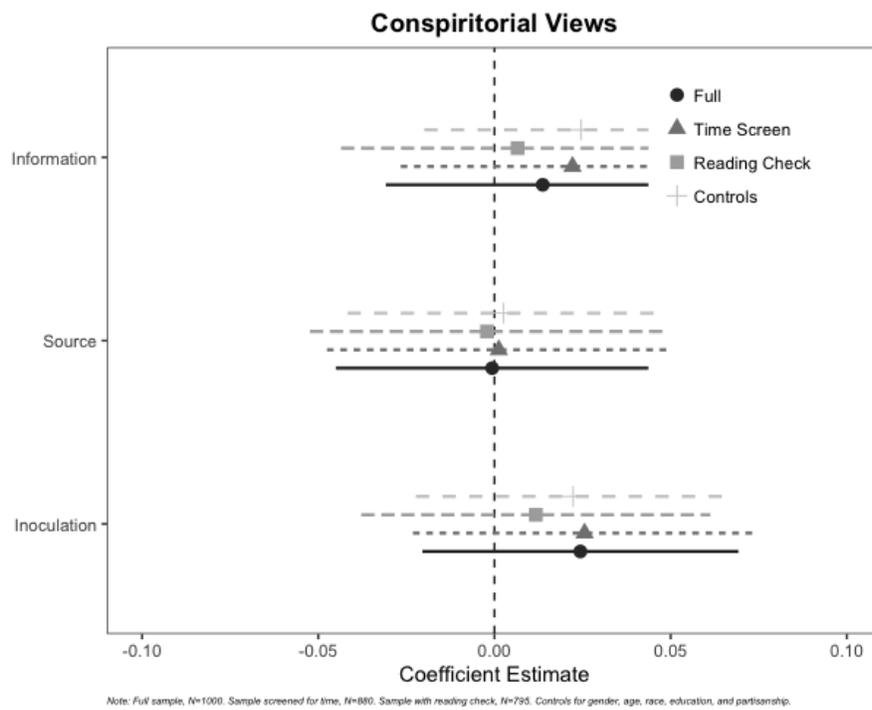
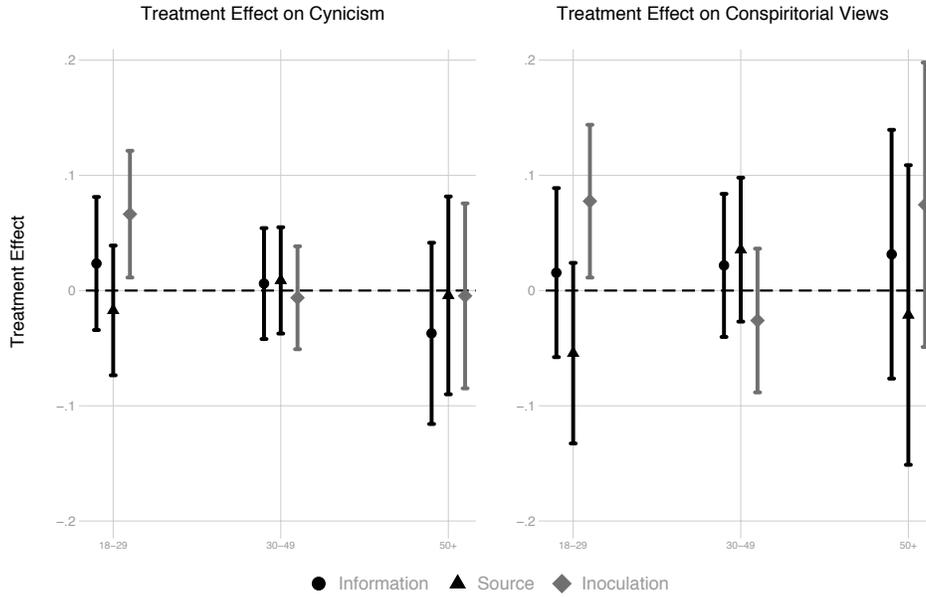


Figure 8: Treatment Effects on Conspiracy Scale



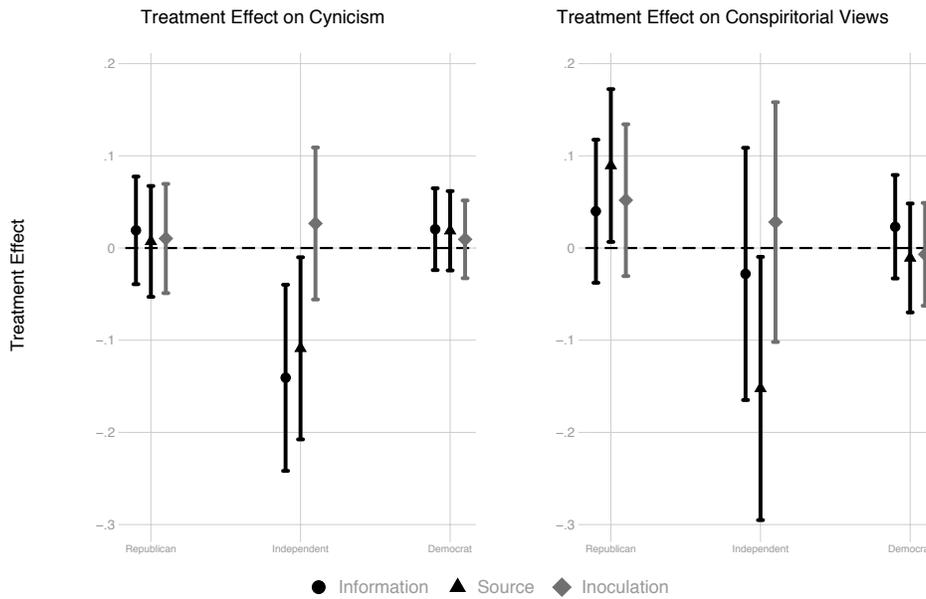
Appendix C: Heterogenous Treatment Effects

Figure 9: Treatment Effects by Age



Notes: AMEs with 95% CIs. N=997.

Figure 10: Treatment Effects by Party



Notes: AMEs with 95% CIs. N=997.

Appendix D: Individual Cynicism Questions

Table 4: Treatment Effect on Individual Cynicism Questions

	Election Choice		Promise		Lose Touch		Disgust		Immoral		Cynical	
	β	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>SE</i>
Information	-0.17	(0.15)	0.04	(0.13)	0.03	(0.12)	0.02	(0.14)	0.00	(0.15)	-0.12	(0.14)
Source	-0.10	(0.15)	0.11	(0.14)	0.07	(0.13)	-0.07	(0.14)	0.03	(0.15)	-0.03	(0.14)
Inoculation	-0.32*	(0.15)	0.07	(0.14)	0.07	(0.12)	0.15	(0.14)	0.15	(0.14)	0.03	(0.13)
Constant	3.87*	(0.11)	3.17*	(0.10)	5.46*	(0.09)	5.24*	(0.10)	4.68*	(0.11)	5.32*	(0.10)
Observations	1000		1000		1000		1000		1000		1000	
R-Squared	.0047		.00071		.00045		.0028		.0014		.0015	

Standard errors in parentheses

Note: Put your notes here.

* $p < 0.05$

Table 5: Principle Component Factor Analysis for Cynicism Questions

	Factor 1	Uniqueness
Elections give voters a real choice among candidates with different positions	-.5870422	.6553815
Politicians genuinely try to keep their campaign promises.	-.6565759	.5689081
Politicians lose touch quickly with the public after they are elected.	.7619819	.4193836
I am disgusted with politics.	.790151	.3756614
The government is immoral.	.7684088	.409548
I am cynical about government.	.7631478	.4176055

Note: Principle-component factor analysis created an index variable through a linear combination (weighted average) of a set of variables.

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