

# Evaluating the Effect of Russian Propaganda: Evidence from Two Survey Experiments\*

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## Abstract

What is the micro-level effect of foreign propaganda? This paper draws on two survey experiments in the United States to test how Russian propaganda shapes Americans' political beliefs and whether warning people about propaganda moderates its effectiveness. The first experiment demonstrates that Russian propaganda can lower evaluations of the Kremlin's rivals even when individuals are made aware of the message source. The second experiment finds that young people explicitly warned about Russian propaganda become more cynical and conspiratorial – raising concerns that priming citizens to be distrustful of foreign interference has spillover effects on individuals' trust toward their own government. The findings have significant consequences for our understanding of foreign propaganda and the unintended consequences of counter-messaging programs.

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Are citizens vulnerable to international propaganda? There is growing concern that technological advancements reduce the cost of spreading biased information and that propaganda from foreign countries is reaching domestic audiences ([Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017](#); [Peisakhin and Rozenas, 2018](#); [Youmans and Powers 2012](#), 2150; [Xie and Boyd-Barrett 2015](#), 68). Autocratic 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](#)). Yet, many are skeptical that foreign media exerts any influence on people's political attitudes ([Avgerinos 2009](#); [Crabtree, Darmofal and Kern 2015](#)). In a seminal piece on international propaganda, 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](#))

The debate about the effectiveness of foreign propaganda centers around three main key questions: (1) does international propaganda cause citizens to update their beliefs; (2) which citizens are most receptive to foreign messages; (3) and how does one counter foreign propaganda? Although some claim that autocratic propaganda is fueling polarization, cynicism, and conspiratorial views, there is little theoretical or empirical evidence to back up these assertions ([Flock 2018](#); [Conor and Friedersdorf 2018](#); [Pomerantsev 2014](#)). Moreover, while there are growing number of governments and private organizations launching counter-propaganda initiatives, it is unclear how to best mitigate the influence of international propaganda.

This paper analyzes the impact of foreign propaganda on American audiences. Specifically, I test whether messages from the Kremlin-funded network, *Russia Today (RT)*, foster equivalence between rival states, increase political cynicism, and promote conspiratorial views, thereby integrating existing 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 only measures favorability toward political actors or policies as evidence of a message’s effectiveness (Avgerinos 2009), this paper assesses when propaganda influences citizens’ levels of political cynicism and conspiratorial views – reconceptualizing how we think about “effective persuasion” (Nye 2018; Pomerantsev 2015). In doing so, it complements research that assesses how different types of media impact trust in government and political efficacy (Boukes and Boomgaarden 2015; Shao and Liu 2018). Additionally, this paper draws upon research on source credibility and inoculation strategies to examine how to best mitigate the impact of foreign propaganda (Druckman 2001; McGuire 1961), highlighting the potential backlash effect to counter-messaging programs (Lazer et al. 2018; Nyhan 2017).

I find that Russian propaganda can lower evaluations of Russia’s rivals and that awareness of the message source does little to mitigate this effect, in contrast to much conventional wisdom. Most notably, I show that young people become more cynical and conspiratorial when they were actively warned about propaganda – indicating that inoculating individuals can have unintended consequences on trust toward government. In short, when it comes to international propaganda, warnings and efforts to counter foreign influence may be having unwanted effects on the population that are more influential than the propaganda itself. This is the first study, in the author’s knowledge, that estimates the micro-level impact of Russian propaganda in the United States.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. First, I review how individuals in the U.S. may be exposed to Russian 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 two studies. 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

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). States have always relied on propaganda to promote their own interests and influence foreign publics. 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 (Jowett and O’Donnell 2014, 97). In fact, there is growing anxiety that advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) allow foreign actors to reach and manipulate larger audiences, thereby undermining democratic governance. Are these fears justified?

Most researchers rightly note that direct exposure to foreign propaganda is rare (Xie and Boyd-Barrett 2015, 79).<sup>1</sup> Early research on propaganda claimed that external propaganda against a democracy is generally ineffective given the diversity of thought and absence of media centralization (Ellul 1965, 296). Unintended exposure, however, is more likely as foreign actors can now use a wide variety of computational propaganda tools to micro-target specific foreign audiences and spread their political narratives (Badawy, Ferrara and Lerman 2018). Viral political posts on social

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<sup>1</sup>The Kremlin claims that the Russian government-funded network *RT* is available to over 700 million people in more than 100 countries. However, the veracity of these figures is disputed.

media let citizens 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 disinformation larger than some previously believed (Tucker et al. 2017, 47).

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 foreign media impacts individual political behavior and what determines audiences' receptivity to international propaganda.

## 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. 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). Yet, 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).

However, extant studies often limit themselves to the types of dependent variables they test when assessing the effect of propaganda on political attitudes and behaviors. Most scholars working on international communication continue to think of "effective persuasion" within the framework of soft power, assessing how countries' broadcasts increase favorability toward the communicating country or support for specific policies (Gagliardone 2013; Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2009; Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018), 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; Oates 2017, 58; Shao and Liu 2018, 15).

Nondemocratic states in particular often try to project international influence by emphasizing hypocrisies of rival states, and contesting democratic ideas and norms. 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. Yet, “overreliance on the soft-power paradigm has bred analytical complacency regarding the growth of authoritarian influence” (Walker 2018, 18). Consequently, we should consider a broader range of political behaviors and political outcomes when considers the scope of autocratic influence in democratic countries.

I argue that rather than trying to improve an autocrats’ international 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).<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, exposure to propaganda may have effects that extend beyond specific issues. Close observers of Russian foreign propaganda 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 liter-

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<sup>2</sup>As noted by content analysis of *RT* and *Sputnik*, Russian propaganda focuses its coverage predominately on rival countries in order to portray the West in a bad light (Escher et al. 2018).

ature (Agger, Goldstein and Peal 1961). 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).<sup>3</sup> 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. However, is there any theoretical basis for the claim that exposure to foreign propaganda causes political cynicism and conspiratorial views as some claim? Why would exposure to Russian propaganda promote distrust in political institutions?

One possibility is that international propaganda has 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 strategically about politics, it erodes civic engagement, increases political cynicism, and depresses political participation (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Vresse 2004; Jackson 2011). If individuals are exposed to foreign messages that emphasize the hypocritical nature of politics, they may not change their attitudes on specific issues or countries, they can become more cynical in the ways emphasized by scholars of Russian propaganda (Pomerantsev 2015).

Content analysis reveals that Russian state-funded media networks use anti-American rhetoric and emphasize faults in democratic systems to intensify existing rifts between social and political groups (Farkas and Bastos, 2018; Kim et al., 2018; Yablokov, 2015). *RT* and *Sputnik* amplify extremist views, portraying politics as inherently corrupt with elite conspiracies around every corner (Pomerantsev 2015). These populist messages can not only shape blame perceptions, but they

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<sup>3</sup>Political cynicism moves beyond the notion of discontent which is a normal part of the democratic process. Rather, it is a state of being where citizens believe that “throwing the rascals out” will have little influence (Miller 1974, 951).

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 can not only increase political cynicism, but also promote a more conspiratorial view of the world (Yablokov 2015).<sup>4</sup>

Are certain individuals more vulnerable to the influence of foreign propaganda and the type of content these network propagate? Previous work suggests that that strategic narratives are more likely to impact younger individuals, and conspiratorial views are often more prevalent among millennials (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). Finally, young people are 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). Consequently, assessing how young people's vulnerability to propaganda is especially important, given that they are most likely to be exposed to foreign disinformation online and may be the most receptive (Kshetri and Voas 2017, 4; Tomlinson 2016, 8).

Political priors always play a role in how people interpret information. Leveraging quasi-random variation in the reception of spillover Russian analog television signal across the border into Ukraine, Peisakhin and Rozenas (2018) find that Russian media has positive effects on voters pre-disposed to have favorable views on Russia while lowering support for Russia among individuals with negative attitudes, thereby fueling polarization over the conflict. Dragojlovic (2015) finds that, amongst citizens with more internationalist world views can find credible foreign messengers

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<sup>4</sup>This is troubling since a conspiratorial mindset can foster distrust in political institutions, increase susceptibility to nationalist rhetoric, and enable political violence (Radnitz and Underwood 2017, 113).

to be more persuasive than comparable domestic cues (73). Finally, consistent with Bayesian models on belief updating, most assert that foreign propaganda's impact is contingent not only on prior views but also on audiences' political sophistication (Zaller 1992). Therefore, assessing how age, political ideology, and education moderate receptivity to foreign propaganda is necessary to obtain a broader understanding of propaganda effects.

## 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 shining a light on the threat of foreign propaganda and exposing biased networks will mitigate their 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 impact of international propaganda (Avgerinos 2009, 126; Hayes and Guardino 2011, 832).<sup>5</sup>

Yet, these counter-messaging initiatives may have unintended consequences. Priming individuals to think about the threat of propaganda can elicit feelings of distrust toward their own governments (Nyhan 2017). A long literature on unintended communication effects highlights the

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<sup>5</sup>In response, propagandists try to disguise their source to bolster their credibility among target audiences. For instance, the government-sponsored broadcasting network *Russia Today* changed its name to *RT* in order to disassociate itself from the Russian government (Yablokov 2015, 5). Russian broadcasting networks also hire Western hosts to boost their credibility and bring on local elites as talking heads on their shows (Xie and Boyd-Barrett 2015, 77).

difficulties in countering misinformation (Berinsky 2015; Ecker, Lewandowsky and Tang 2010; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Swire et al. 2017). 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. 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.

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 the an international threat can lead to greater cynicism and a boomerang effect (Whitaker 2012, 70). Additionally, political priors and political awareness can moderate the effectiveness of counter-propaganda, making inoculation strategies effective for some but counter-productive for other (Geddes and Zaller 1989). Therefore, it is essential understand the direct impacts of foreign propaganda, as well as the unintended consequences of counter-messaging programs.

## **Research Design**

I examine the impact of Russian propaganda using two online survey experiment in the United States. While several notable studies have relied on quasi-experimental designs to demonstrate how the availability of propaganda shapes political behavior, they are unable to demonstrate the effect of direct consumption (Adena et al. 2015; Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018; Yanagizawa-Drott

2014). In my two studies, I randomly expose participants to actual articles from *Russia Today* (*RT*) on a foreign and domestic policy issue. I recruited participants through *TurkPrime*, a popular crowd-sourcing website for enlisting participants to perform particular tasks (Litman, Robinson and Abberbock 2017). In the first study, which was completed on October, 2016, 896 participants were recruited. The sample for the first experiment was 55% female and had a mean age of 38. In the second study, 1,000 participants completed the study. The final sample was 52% female and had a mean age of 38. This study was completed in February, 2018.

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” (Levy, 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).<sup>6</sup> To ensure that participants were attentive and actually received the treatment, I included reading checks and removed participants who failed these tasks (Oppenheimer, Meyvis and Davidenko 2009). However, to ensure that my results are not affected by post-treatment bias, I include the results with the full sample in the Online Appendix (Montgomery, Nyhan and Torres 2018).<sup>7</sup>

## **Study #1: Russia’s Coverage of the Ukraine Conflict**

In the first study, I test whether exposure to Russian media decreases support for Russia’s rivals. Many have emphasized that the Kremlin’s propaganda is not actually meant to improve views of Russia but rather denigrate rival countries and promote moral equivalence. Additionally, I assess

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<sup>6</sup>Because *MTurk* samples are more liberal, younger, whiter, and more educated, I control for these demographic differences in the Online Appendix (Buhrmester, Kwang and Gosling 2011). *MTurk* samples also overrepresent people with internet connections, but this is particularly the population that is more likely to be exposed to Russian narratives.

<sup>7</sup>Vignettes, reading checks, and summary statistics are all available in the Online Appendix.

whether revealing the message source changes receptivity to Russian state-controlled media since many counter-propaganda initiatives believe that by exposing propaganda they can attenuate its effectiveness. I use a real *RT* story about Ukrainian human right violations since it is a critical narrative in the Kremlin’s foreign propaganda campaign (Hutchings and Szostek 2015). This article is also representative of a popular strategy of portraying enemy governments “of acting brutally toward innocent civilians” during conflict (Honig and Reichard 2018, 298).<sup>8</sup>

**Table 1:** Treatments in Study #1

<b>Treatment</b>	<b>Description</b>
<i>Control</i>	Completed post-treatment survey
<i>Information</i>	Article on Ukrainian human rights violations
<i>Source</i>	Source cue + article on Ukrainian human rights violations
<i>Negative</i>	Negative cue + article on Ukrainian human rights violations

I randomly assigned participants to: (1) a **Control** group, where individuals only completed the post-treatment survey; (2) an **Information** group, where individuals read a short article on Ukrainian human rights violations from *Russia Today (RT)* without revealing the source of the information; (3) a **Source** group, where individuals read the same article and were told the message source; or (4) a **Negative Source** group where individuals read the same article and were told that *RT’s* goal is to “spread a pro-Russian message to Western audiences.”

I examine four dependent variables: (1) favorability toward Ukraine; (2) favorability toward Russia; (3) support for economic sanctions on Russia, and (4) support for arming the Ukrainian

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<sup>8</sup>While Ukraine is a relatively low-salience issue in the United States (~35% thought it was a somewhat/very important issue), it is a main topic of Russian propaganda. Additionally, this is a substantively important issue as the conflict drags on into its fifth year, claiming over 10,000 lives. Consequently, the Kremlin’s ability to limit international attention and sympathy toward the Ukrainian government greatly impacts citizens in the region, making it an important case of how foreign governments use propaganda to undermine support for rival nations.

military. The dependent variables range from 1 (very unfavorable) to 5 (very favorable).<sup>9</sup> I test two main hypotheses:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Compared to individuals in the control, participants exposed to Russian propaganda will:*

1. *Have less favorable attitudes toward Ukraine.*
2. *Have more favorable attitudes toward Russia.*
3. *Will be less likely to support increasing sanctions on Russia.*
4. *Will be less likely to favor arming the Ukrainian government.*

*H<sub>2</sub>: Individuals who are made aware that the news article comes from Russia government will not exhibit different attitudes than the control group.*

## **Results**

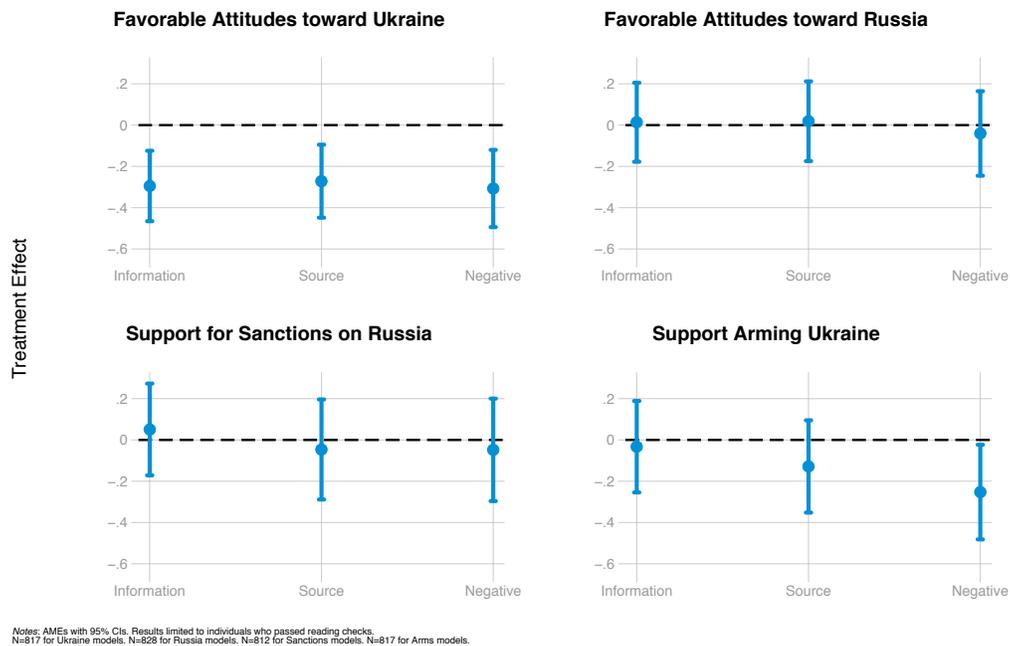
I plot the average marginal effects (AMEs) of the treatments in the figures below. To test whether providing the source has different effects than the no source treatment, I obtain the pairwise differences of the mean of the dependent variables across the levels of the treatments and adjust the p-values and confidence intervals for multiple comparisons using Tukey's Honest Significant Difference test (HSD). I find that all the treatment significantly lower attitudes toward Ukraine. Exposure to a single *RT* treatment lowers favorability in Ukraine by about 10% or one-third a standard deviation (see **Figure 1**). Most importantly, I find no significant difference in the magnitude of the effect among the different treatment groups, indicating that revealing the message source and providing information about the foreign network does not moderate its influence.

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<sup>9</sup>While it may be too much to expect that a single article on human rights violations Ukraine would be enough to move individuals' attitudes toward Russia and imposing international sanction – given that people need enough political awareness to understand that Ukraine and Russia are engaged in an international conflict – I test these other dependent variables to examine the potential downstream consequences of Russian messages.

Almost none of the treatments have a statistically significant effect on Russian favorability, support for increasing sanctions on Russia, or providing arms to the Ukrainian government. The only exception is that individuals in the negative source group are *less* likely to support arming the Ukrainian government. While exposure to Russian propaganda can foster less favorable attitudes toward Russia’s rivals, it does not seem to improve views of Russia itself – highlighting how “sharp power” differs from “soft power” (Nye 2018).

**Figure 1: Study 1 - Treatment Effects**



I consider whether people are reacting in heterogeneous ways to Russian propaganda since prior work has emphasized how political sophistication and political priors moderate the impact of foreign cues (Dragojlovic 2015). Specifically, I assess whether there are differential effects by: (1) generational cohorts, since young people are predicted to be more receptive to propaganda, (2) partisanship, given the growing polarized stances toward Russia in the United States during this time; and (3) education, which I use a proxy for political awareness (Enten and Asher 2016; Vice

2017).<sup>10</sup> I interpret the results cautiously given potential problems with underpowered treatments. Specifically, since *MTurk* underrepresent older citizens and conservatives, the estimates of the treatment effects for these groups is less precise. Nevertheless, assessing whether there are differential effects is vital for understanding how propaganda can promote political polarization.

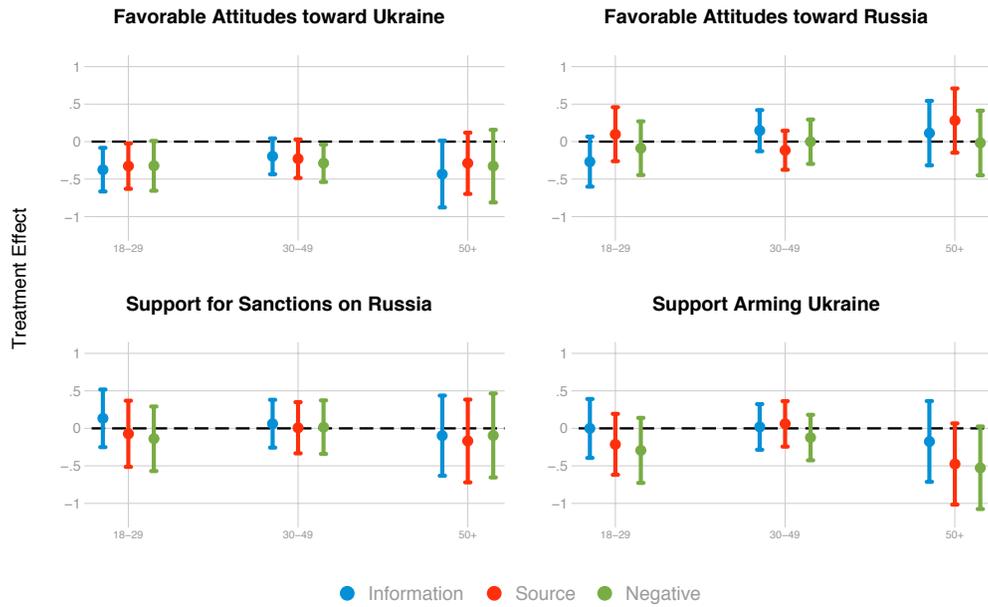
Despite the fact that young people tend to be more pro-Russian and are predicted to be vulnerable to foreign propaganda, I do not find significantly heterogeneous impacts of the message by age cohorts (see **Figure 2**). I find that strong liberals are more likely to adopt negative views of Ukraine after exposure to *RT* articles. This is most likely a consequence of the topic of the article, which features human rights violations. Knowledge that the Ukrainian government is violating human rights can lessen support for Ukraine in more liberal voters since liberals tend to be more sensitive to the use of force in foreign policy than conservatives (Kertzer and Brutger 2016, 235). This is important since the Kremlin is adept at micro-targeting specific populations with messages that resonate with them, leading to more efficient propaganda.

I also find that strong liberals exhibit a shift to more negative views of Russia after exposure to the *RT* treatment, which seems to indicate a backlash effect. However, these results are only significant for the *information group* which seems inconsistent with the notion that voters are reacting adversely to Russia after learning that they are exposed to Russian propaganda (see **Figure 3**). Finally, I find fairly homogeneous effects by education for all the DVs except for support for arming the Ukrainian government (see **Figure 4**). Individuals with lower educations are less likely to support arming the Ukrainian government after exposure to Russian propaganda.

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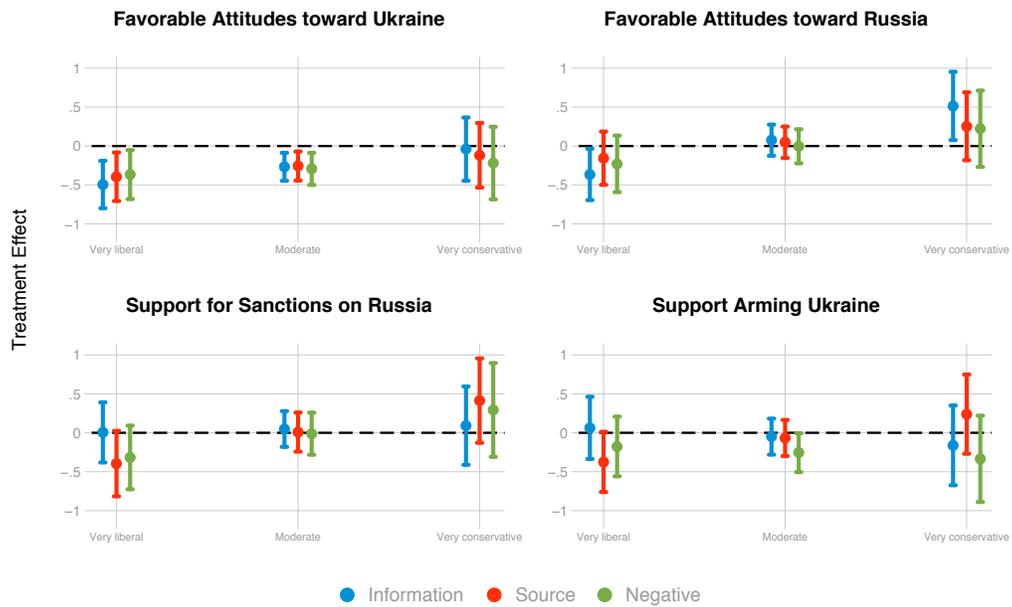
<sup>10</sup>Unfortunately, I did not measure political awareness which can be independent from education, although the two tend to be highly correlated. Because *MTurk* samples tend to be more educated than a more representative population, there are few respondents who only completed high school in the sample. Consequently, I combined individuals with only high school and some college in the lower education category and individuals with college and postgraduate degrees in the higher education category.

**Figure 2: Study 1 - Treatment Effects by Age**



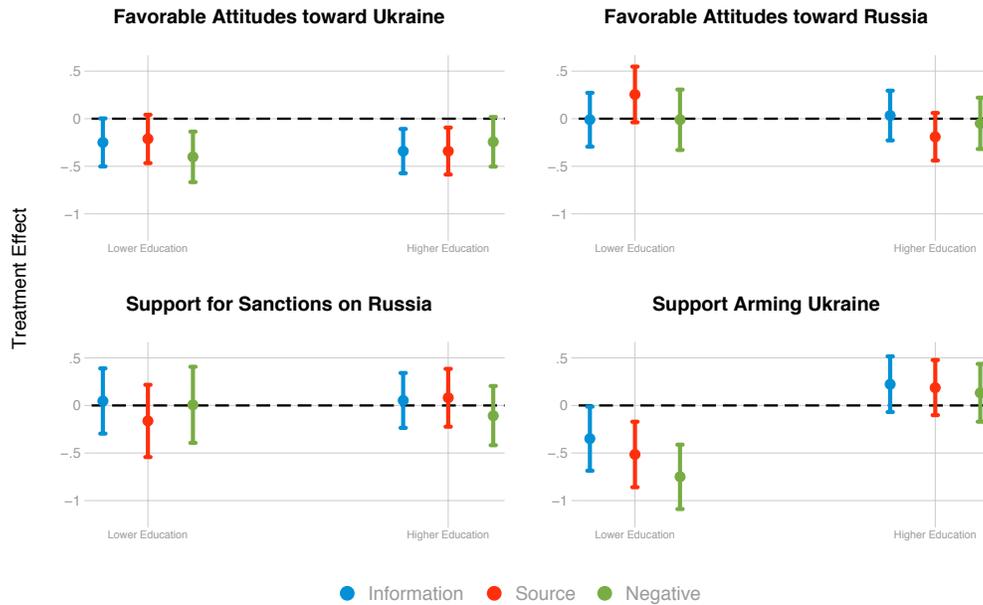
Notes: AMEs with 95% CIs. Results limited to individuals who passed reading checks. N=817 for Ukraine models, N=828 for Russia models, N=812 for Sanctions models, N=817 for Arms models.

**Figure 3: Study 1 - Treatment Effects by Ideology**



Notes: AMEs with 95% CIs. Results limited to individuals who passed reading checks. N=814 for Ukraine models, N=829 for Russia models, N=809 for Sanctions models, N=814 for Arms models.

**Figure 4: Study 1 - Treatment Effects by Education**



Notes: AMEs with 95% CIs. Results limited to individuals who passed reading checks. N=814 for Ukraine models. N=825 for Russia models. N=809 for Sanctions models. N=814 for Arms models.

In short, this study’s main value is demonstrating that Russian propaganda’s main effect is lowering favorability toward rival countries and that revealing the message source has little influence on audiences’ receptivity to Russian messages. Contrary to popular belief, drawing attention to propaganda networks does little to attenuate their effectiveness (Farwell 2018, 42). However, this first study does not include questions gauging levels of political cynicism, conspiratorial views, and support for democracy. It also does not test how a stronger inoculation, like explicitly warning individuals about the threat of Russian propaganda, shapes attitudes. Consequently, the next study addresses these issues in more detail.

## **Study #2: Russia’s Interference in the U.S. Election**

In the second study, I randomly expose some individuals to a Russian article that deflects blame for Russia’s interference in the 2016 Presidential elections to democratic deficits engrained in the

U.S. two-party system.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the previous study, it addresses an issue of higher salience in American public opinion.<sup>12</sup> I also test whether providing individuals an explicit warning about Russian propaganda changes audiences' acceptance of Russian messages.

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 on Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. election from *Russia Today (RT)* without revealing the source of the information; (3) a **Source** group, where individuals read the same article and were told the message source; and (4) an **Inoculation** group where individuals were warned about the threat of *RT* before reading the same article with the source.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 2:** Treatments in Study #2

<b>Treatment</b>	<b>Description</b>
<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

After the treatments, 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 re-

<sup>11</sup>I picked an *RT* article which includes an interview with a British intelligence officer about threats to U.S. Democracy since the Kremlin often invites "experts" to echo their political narratives.

<sup>12</sup>Just several months prior, 47% agreed that Russia was a major threat to the security of the United States: see Marist Poll, April 11-12, 2017.

<sup>13</sup>I keep the source of the inoculation vague in order to not trigger partisan motivated reasoning, but future would do well to vary the source of the warning.

lated 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). Given that both questions produce nominal outcome variables, I estimate these models using multinomial logistic regression.

I 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 (Foley 2015, 10).<sup>14</sup> However, I also test the effect of the treatments on each individual question in the Online Appendix. Drawing on previous work, I use a measure of conspiratorial predisposition that does not ask belief in any particular conspiracy theory (Uscinski, Klofstad and Atkinson 2016, 61).<sup>15</sup> I predict that:

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<sup>14</sup>Statements include: (1) “Politicians lose touch quickly with the public after they are elected”; (2) “I’m disgusted with politics”; (3) “The government is immoral”; and (4) “I am cynical about government” (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.82$ ).

<sup>15</sup>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.

*H<sub>3</sub>: Compared to individuals in the control, participants exposed to Russian propaganda will:*

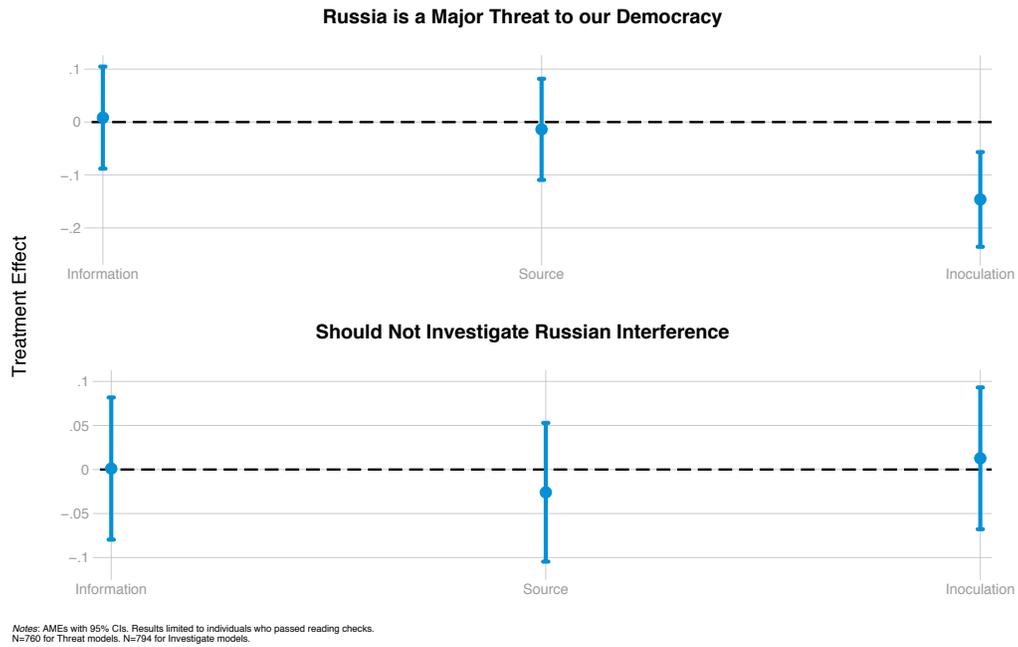
- 1. Be more likely to think that Russia is a major threat to U.S. democracy.*
- 2. Be more likely to think that Congress should investigate Russian interference.*
- 3. Exhibit higher levels of political cynicism.*
- 4. Adopt more conspiratorial views.*

I make no specific predictions about the influence of the inoculation since there is evidence that warning can successfully inoculate against propaganda, but also that certain inoculations can induce backlash effect and heighten political cynicism (Banas and Miller 2013; Cook, Lewandowsky and Ecker 2017; Linden et al. 2017; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Wood and Porter 2018). Specifically, counter-propaganda can induce individuals to think about the role of propaganda when evaluating their own government (Chen 2018, 4).

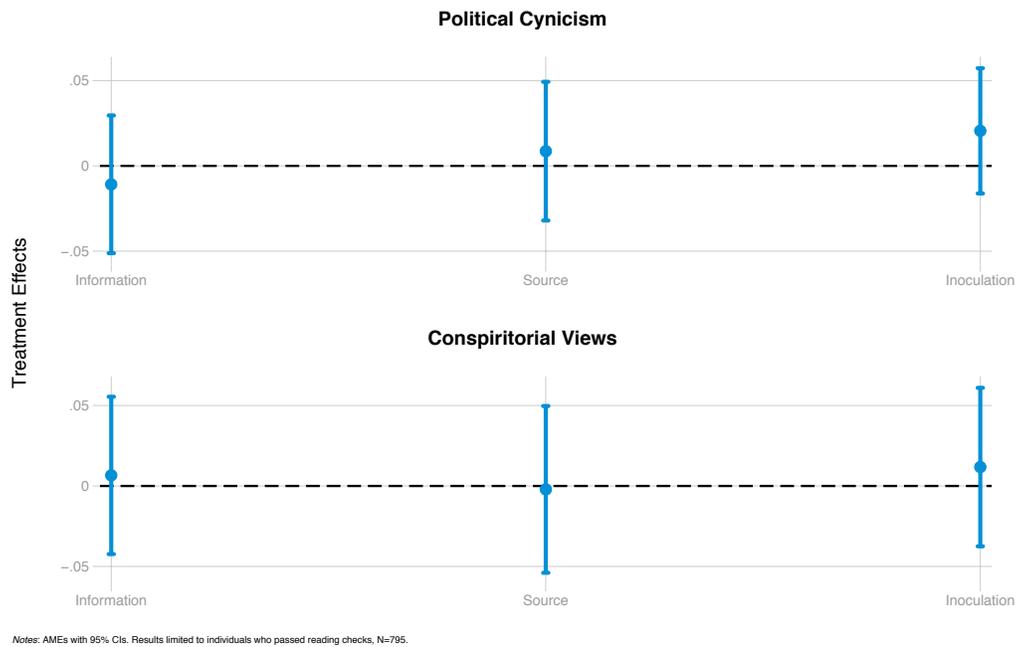
## **Results**

Contrary to my expectation, 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 26% in the inoculation group. Conversely, I find no effect of Russian messages 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. Previous work in social psychology emphasizes that warning messages can backfire, engraining attitudes the communicator did not intend (Nestler and Egloff 2010). As I discuss in more detail below, this could be a consequence of individuals finding the *RT* message relatively tame compared to the warning, which may over-inflate the threat of Russian propaganda (Smith 1970).

**Figure 5: Study 2 - Perception of Russian Threat and Views on Investigation**



**Figure 6: Study 2 - Treatment Effects**

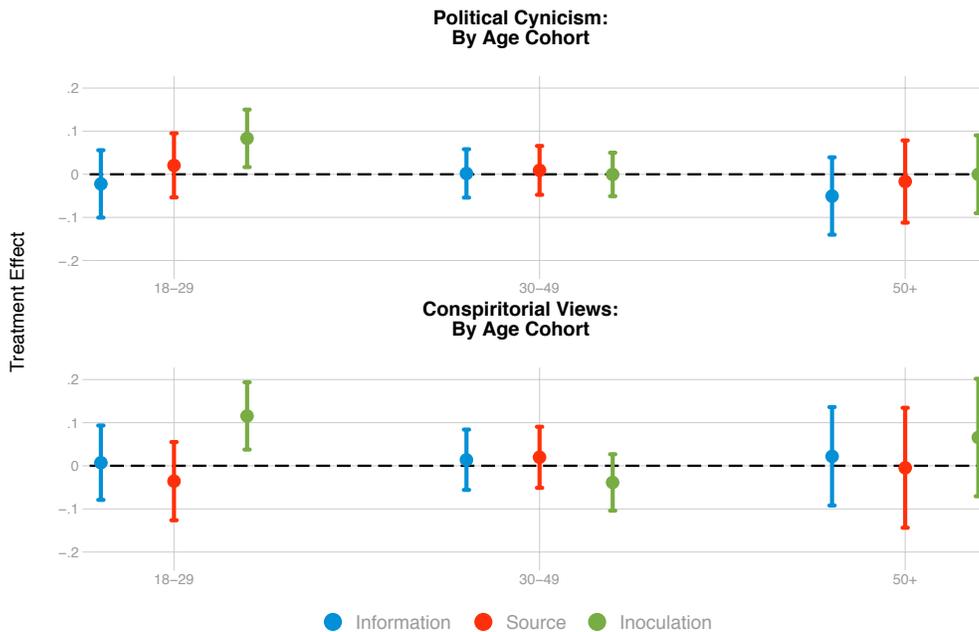


Second, I find no direct effect on cynicism or conspiratorial views (see **Figure 6**). Despite what some scholars claim, there is little evidence to suggest that direct exposure to Russian propaganda is creating a more cynical and conspiratorial citizenry ([Flock 2018](#); [Conor and Friedersdorf 2018](#); [Pomerantsev 2014](#)). Of course, a null finding should not signify that propaganda has no effect, since different messages may generate different effect. 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.

As before, I test whether the null findings are masking heterogeneous treatment effects. Notably, young people become more cynical and conspiratorial *when they are warned about the threat of Russian propaganda*. The inoculation treatment increases cynicism by approximately 12% (one-half a standard deviation) and heightens conspiratorial attitudes by 19% (one-half a standard deviation) in individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 – suggesting that warning people about the threat of foreign propaganda can backfire on domestic governments (see **Figure 6**). Assessing how younger people respond to foreign propaganda is critical as early socialization with politics has lasting impacts ([Jennings and Niemi 1978](#)). These citizens, who are coming of age politically when there is constant media attention on foreign interference in democratic elections, may have a drastically different view of their political system. Just as Watergate had a profound influence on American citizens' perception of their government, so may reports of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election have a lasting influence on young people ([Miller 1974](#), 971).

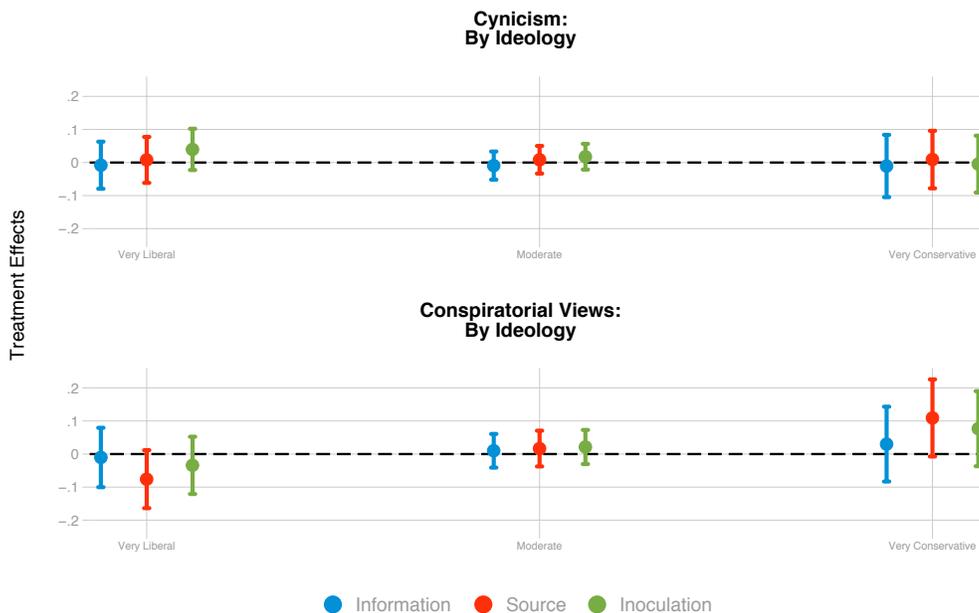
However, I do find not significant interactions with partisanship or political ideology, which is surprising given the growing levels of polarization over Russian interference in the 2016 election in the United States (see **Figure 7**). Finally, there is also some evidence that the inoculation boosts conspiratorial views among those with lower levels of education (see **Figure 9**).

**Figure 7: Study 2 - Treatment Effect by Age Cohort**



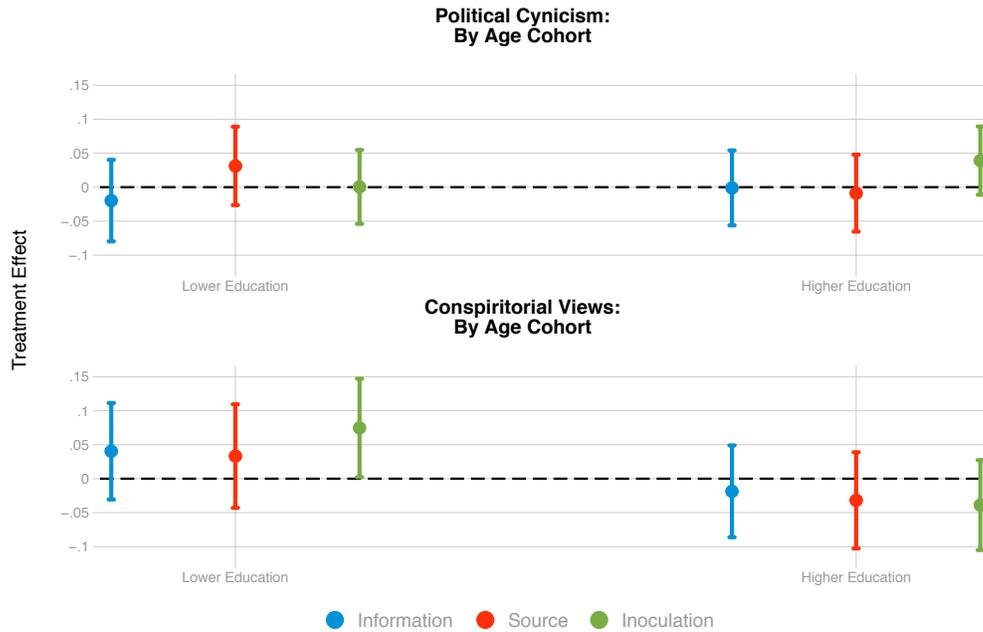
Notes: AMEs with 95% CIs. Results limited to individuals who passed reading checks, N=795.

**Figure 8: Study 2 - Treatment Effect by Political Ideology**



Notes: AMEs with 95% CIs. Results limited to individuals who passed reading checks, N=795.

**Figure 9: Study 2 - Treatment Effect by Education**



Notes: AMEs with 95% CIs. Results limited to individuals who passed reading checks, N=795.

## Discussion, Limitations and Future Research

These findings reinforce the notion that countering propaganda is a more nuanced process than previously believed. First, simply making people aware of the message source has little effect on receptivity. Contrary to popular belief, telling individuals that the source comes from the Russian government does not dampen the effectiveness of Russian propaganda (Surowiec 2017, 26). Second, 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). Repeating information or trying to counter disinformation can backfire and help engrain the initial information (Thorson 2016). Similarly, warning young citizens about the threat of Russian propaganda can actually make them more cynical and conspiratorial about politics if it primes them to consider all media to be propagandistic.

Yet, this study is not without its limitations. 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. While survey experiments have drawbacks, and one should always be careful about generalizing too much from just two studies, this approach has a clear advantage over alternative designs by affording clear causal inferences (Barabas and Jerit 2010, 226).<sup>16</sup>

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).<sup>17</sup> Alternative designs 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 us 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).

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. I admit that one limitation of the current studies is that it does not assess whether exposure to information about the source caused individuals to update their beliefs about *RT*. Future work should explicitly test whether subjects exposed to information about the source thought that the *RT* articles involved

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<sup>16</sup>Some might argue that these inferences are not valid to the general populace, but in many cases, convenience samples provide generalizable population inferences (Mullinix, Leeper and Druckman 2015, 126).

<sup>17</sup>One also cannot rule out that repeated exposure to propaganda may lead to greater message acceptance. However, these effects must be balanced with the more competitive information environment and less direct exposure found in the real world (Ettinger 1946, 336; Paul and Matthews 2016, 4).

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. Consequently, it is troubling that individuals express negative views toward Ukraine even when they are told the information comes from a Russian-funded foreign network.

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. This contributes to scholarship 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.

One 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).

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). While my studies finds some heterogenous treatments effects, it is possible to improve upon the measures in this paper. For instance, while attitudes toward Russia and the threat of foreign propaganda are increasingly polarized by partisan lines, it is important to explicitly measure individuals' attitudes toward foreign nations to assess whether heightened nationalism mitigates the impact of foreign messages (Dragojlovic 2015; Marinov 2018). An explicit measure of political awareness may also be more appropriate than using education as a proxy for how political knowledge interacts with propaganda (Chen 2018). 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).

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.

One final note, is warranted before moving on. The proposed hypothesis in the two studies

predicted statistically significant effects. In contrast, most of the tested effects in the paper are insignificant and Russian propaganda (by itself) appears to have minimal effect on public opinion. I firmly believe that statistically insignificant results can be both theoretically interesting and substantively important (Gerber and Malhotra 2008). Finding that direct exposure to foreign messages caused relatively few and small effect on public opinion is of critical importance given the resources, time, and energy being expended in countering foreign influence. This is not to argue Russian propaganda has no effect on political attitudes, since failure to reject the null does not prove it.<sup>18</sup> What I do argue, however, is that warning individuals about propaganda may have a greater effect than exposure to the propaganda itself, making it important to reconsider our current approach to counter-propaganda.

## Conclusion

With growing concern that citizens are exposed to international propaganda, many assume that individuals are extremely vulnerable to foreign influence. In reference to Russian propaganda, Sen. Rob Portman (R-Ohio) stated: “This propaganda and disinformation threat is real, it’s growing, and right now the U.S. government is asleep at the wheel” (Timberg 2016). Former U.S. representative to the United Nations Samantha Power has emphasized how foreign propaganda is “far more dangerous today than in the past” (Power 2017). Russian journalists Kseniya Kirillova claims that “experts increasingly acknowledge that despite all these efforts, Kremlin propaganda remains a very effective tool of information warfare” (Kirillova 2018)

This paper address three questions about the micro-level effect of foreign propaganda. First, do Russian messages undermine support for Russia’s rivals and promote equivalence between rival actors? Second, does exposure to Russian propaganda, which relies heavily on strategic news coverage and populist frames, increase political cynicism and promote conspiratorial views? Finally,

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<sup>18</sup>see: <https://liesandstats.wordpress.com/2008/10/25/you-cant-prove-the-null-by-not-rejecting-it/>

does knowledge of the message source and warnings about international propaganda mitigate the effectiveness of foreign messages or inadvertently promote more cynical and conspiratorial attitudes about politics?

I find that Russian narratives can slightly lower evaluations of Ukraine, irrespective of source awareness. 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 (Barghoorn 1964; Ellul 1965; Martin 1971; Nagorski 1971). Yet, I find that explicitly warning young people about the threat of foreign propaganda increases political cynicism and promotes conspiratorial views. These results 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. Importantly, my findings complement research on countering misinformation, which argues that, “emphasis on fake news might also have the unintended consequence of reducing the perceived credibility of real-news outlets” (Lazer et al. 2018, 1095).

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 how foreign propaganda fuels political cynicism, conspiratorial views, and distrust in traditional democratic institutions is a necessary area of research. As others

have shown, it is important to test how exposure to different types of media feeds into political cynicism (Boukes and Boomgaarden 2015; 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. Notably, the influence that people expect propaganda to have on 'others' may lead citizens to support more anti-democratic policies in order to protect 'vulnerable' voters' (Davison 1983). Anyone following the debates over Russian influence in U.S. politics after the 2016 Presidential elections can attest to the role the Russia investigation has had on political polarization on foreign policy issues among the two major parties – even though the actual influence of Russian propaganda itself may have been minimal (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017).

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 over 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 impact of foreign messages can help us reach a broader understanding of international propaganda. Importantly, we must be more cognizant about the unintended impact of inoculation strategies and whether we may be inadvertently exacerbating the effect of international propaganda.

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