

CueAnon: The (not so) Strategic Endorsement of Political Conspiracy Theories *

Benjamin S. Noble[†] Taylor N. Carlson[‡]

January 14, 2022

Abstract

Why do politicians endorse conspiracy theories? Where existing research has focused on conspiracy theory belief among the mass public, there is little research into the costs and benefits to candidates who support them. We test two theories: that candidate conspiracy endorsement could provoke negative media coverage and support among voters with low trust in media or that such behavior is counterproductive to candidates' electoral prospects. Our observational and experimental studies, which focus on candidate support for QAnon, find no positive effects of endorsement. This holds for several sub-populations of interest such as Republicans, conservatives, those with low trust in media, and those with anti-establishment beliefs. Ultimately, we find that if voters support candidates who endorse QAnon, they do so despite the endorsement. Our research complicates popular narratives about conspiracy theories and candidate choice and indicates the importance of causally testing theories about public support for conspiracy theories.

*We thank the Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government, and Public Policy for providing support for this project through The American Social Survey (TASS). We thank Nick Anspach, Ted Enamorado, Jonathan Green, Christopher Lucas, Jacob Montgomery, Will Nomikos, Mike Olson, Keith Schnakenberg, and Carly Wayne for helpful feedback on this manuscript. We thank Maggie O'Connor, Taylor Degitz, and Oliver Rosand for research assistance.

[†]Washington University in Saint Louis, Department of Political Science, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis, MO 63130; bsnoble@wustl.edu, <http://benjaminoble.org>.

[‡]Washington University in Saint Louis, Department of Political Science, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis, MO 63130; tncarlson@wustl.edu, <http://sites.wustl.edu/tncarlson>.

On August 11, 2020, the *New York Times* published an article headlined “Marjorie Taylor Greene, a QAnon Supporter, Wins House Primary in Georgia.” Given the controversy surrounding the conspiracy theory, other congressional candidates might have tried to distance themselves from the article’s claims, but not Greene. She doubled down, tweeting out other racist and antisemitic conspiracy theories while framing negative coverage of her campaign as evidence of having “made the right enemies.” Although Greene may be the highest-profile supporter of QAnon in Congress, she was far from the only one promoting the conspiracy theory on the 2020 campaign trail. Media Matters, a left-leaning media watchdog, identified 97 congressional candidates who had engaged in similar behavior (Kaplan 2020). Twenty-seven won their primaries, and two—Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) and Lauren Boebert (R-CO)—took office on January 3, 2021.

Previous research into conspiracy theory belief has tended to focus on the predispositions and attitudes that lead members of the mass public to embrace them (e.g., Uscinski 2018; Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016; Oliver and Wood 2014). However, their movement from the mass public into Congress, state legislatures, and the mayor’s office raises new concerns as those “with the power to shape policies that directly affect the lives of millions of Americans” propagate misinformation “from positions that offer a measure of credibility to delusional beliefs” (Bergengruen 2021). But why do politicians promote and embrace conspiracy theories? If conspiracy theories are for losers (Uscinski and Parent 2014), why would political elites engage in the kind of rhetoric that would undermine the governmental institutions *they* control (Bräuninger and Marinov N.d.; Einstein and Glick 2015; Invernizzi and Mohamed N.d.; Jolley and Douglas 2014; Jolley and Paterson 2020)? One explanation may simply be that these candidates are true believers engaging in non-strategic and personally damaging behavior or, perhaps, seeking attention for personal or professional gain. Alternatively, these candidates may be strategic actors (Mayhew 1974) taking a position with the expectation of an electoral benefit. Indeed, recent studies entertain the idea that politicians like Donald Trump endorse conspiracy theories to appeal

to anti-establishment and disaffected voters (Douglas et al. 2019; Hahl, Kim and Zuckerman Sivan 2018; Uscinski et al. 2021). However, these studies do not provide causal evidence for these claims (but see Arceneaux and Truex N.d.). These questions—why politicians endorse conspiracy theories like QAnon, how do Americans evaluate these candidates—remain open.

In this paper, we attempt to adjudicate between these explanations with a series of observational studies and preregistered experiments designed to isolate the potential costs and benefits of endorsing a conspiracy theory like QAnon and the strategic—or not so strategic—logic behind it. First, we take up the hypothesis that QAnon-endorsement could provide a strategic benefit to candidates. We theorized that publicly supporting QAnon may not provide immediate direct benefits to candidates, but could attract media attention (Amsalem et al. 2020; Helfer and Aelst 2016) and increase a candidate’s name recognition (Kam and Zechmeister 2013). Although this increased coverage would likely be negative (Uscinski and Parent 2014), it could, ironically, increase a candidate’s favorability among those with low political and media trust. To test this theory, we analyze all local and national mainstream news coverage of 2020 congressional candidates who endorsed QAnon and a matched sample of otherwise similar candidates who did not. Although coverage of the endorsing group was more negative, we find no evidence that endorsement produced more coverage. In two nationally representative vignette experiments, we presented respondents with a news story about a hypothetical congressional candidate who either did or did not endorse QAnon, and we further varied whether the tone of the article was neutral or negative. Here, we find that neither QAnon endorsement nor endorsement paired with negative mainstream coverage increased a candidate’s appeal. We find QAnon endorsement causes a 30-point decline in favorability among those who express trust in the mainstream media, an effect in the expected direction but large for a one-sentence manipulation. Surprisingly, we also find that those with the lowest levels of trust in media *decrease* their support for QAnon-endorsing candidates irrespective

of tone.

The results from these analyses were not consistent with the theory that media coverage is a mechanism through which candidates gain indirect benefits from QAnon endorsement. Following practices encouraged by (Ryan and Krupnikov 2021), we reconsidered our theory and conducted a final, pre-registered conjoint experiment in which we tested the direct effects of QAnon endorsement against policy positions and party identification. Given that our first set of results pointed toward negative effects of QAnon endorsement even among Republicans, strong conservatives, and those with low trust in media, we theorized that QAnon endorsement is more a bug than a feature for most voters. That is, when people vote for candidates who support QAnon, they do so *despite*, not because, of such support. Consistent with this expectation, we found that QAnon support decreases a candidate's probability of winning an election. This result is consistent across the full sample as well as several sub-populations including: Republicans, conservatives, those with low trust in media, those with anti-establishment attitudes (Uscinski et al. 2021), and when we paired two Republican candidates against each other as in a primary context. However, we also find that QAnon endorsement is a strong signal of ideological conservatism, on par with supporting a border wall and low taxes, which suggests one potential (although ineffective) motivating factor behind this candidate behavior.

The main contribution of our article is to complicate the narrative about QAnon, and broader conspiracy theory support, among political elites and the mass public. Across our observational and experimental analyses, we find no evidence that endorsing QAnon provides a strategic benefit to congressional candidates—not even among those with low media trust or anti-establishment beliefs (Uscinski et al. 2021). We speculate that our results differ from others that find positive effects of media corrections on then-President Trump's popularity (Christenson, Kreps and Kriner 2020) and claims of voter fraud in the 2020 election (Arceneaux and Truex N.d.) due to their association with the former president and his influence on the meaning of "conservatism" (Hopkins and Noel N.d.).

Although many rightly worry about the deleterious effects of conspiracy theories within the halls of government, we find no evidence that actively endorsing conspiracy theories makes a candidate more likely to win office. Instead, we return to a common theme of American politics—party identification over everything. Even if endorsing a conspiracy theory like QAnon is not necessarily helpful to one’s candidacy, it is not disqualifying.

What are conspiracy theories and why do we care about them?

A conspiracy is “a secret plot by two or more powerful actors...to usurp political or economic power, violate rights, infringe upon established agreements, withhold vital secrets, or alter bedrock institutions,” and conspiracy theories attempt to explain the causes of events via such secret plots (Douglas et al. 2019, 4). The vast majority of research on this topic has focused on who is most likely to hold these beliefs. For example, Miller, Saunders and Farhart (2016) argue that the politically knowledgeable, ideologically extreme, and the mistrustful are more prone to believe ideologically consistent conspiracy theories. Oliver and Wood (2014) and Uscinski and Parent (2014) point to various underlying predispositions toward conspiratorial thinking. Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka (2016) argue that existential, epistemic, and social psychological motives drive people to believe conspiracy theories. Much of this research further emphasizes that conspiracy theories are not a new force among the American mass public (e.g., Atkinson and DeWitt 2018), and they may appeal to a second dimension of American identity focused on anti-establishment orientations orthogonal to classic left-right conflict (Uscinski et al. 2021).

Scholars, journalists, and members of the public have expressed concern about the growing infusion of conspiracy theories into political rhetoric, a worrying trend that can erode democratic trust. For example, Einstein and Glick (2015) find that misinformation can lower trust in government services and institutions, and Jolley and Douglas (2014) find that political conspiracy theories increase skepticism toward mainstream me-

dia sources, leading to decreasing political trust and efficacy. Rosenblum and Muirhead (2019) also discuss the growth of “conspiracy theories without the theory,” a “new conspiracism” validated by repetition rather than evidence. By delegitimizing political institutions, this new conspiracism makes it harder for voters to sort fact from fiction.¹

Understanding the microfoundations and consequences of conspiracy theory belief among the mass public is important, but does not fully capture the role conspiracy theories play in politics. This work largely ignores the ways in which elites propagate conspiracy theories, much less the strategic incentives and electoral consequences of public position-taking on specific conspiracy theories. In their review of the political conspiracy theory literature, Douglas et al. (2019, 6) write that “we are leaving aside from this discussion that some people spread conspiracy theories for profit (e.g., Alex Jones), political gain (e.g., Donald Trump), or as a foreign relations tactic (see e.g., Watanabe N.d.) and therefore may have reason to transmit them other than to merely express their true beliefs.” When highlighting directions for future research, they continue, “As political leaders such as Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán increasingly use conspiracy theories to discredit the opposition and win votes, these questions have never been more important” (23). We suspect that this research agenda has been difficult to pursue given that the pool of conspiracy theory–endorsing candidates, has been relatively small. That changed during the 2020 cycle when an unusually large cohort of candidates expressed positive support for the QAnon conspiracy theory—two of whom took office in January 2021.

Some existing research has theorized why elites might promote conspiracy theories. For example, Atkinson and DeWitt (2018) argue that conspiracy theories allow elites to provide a narrative that will galvanize potential supporters and spur collective action. Bräuninger and Marinov (N.d.) develop a formal model in which political elites endorse conspiracy theories to create distrust in the information environment, which preserves the status quo and thwarts unwanted policy change. Radnitz (2018) suggests that elites

¹See Walker (2019) for a critique of this work, available at <https://reason.com/2019/05/08/theres-nothing-new-about-the-new-conspiracism/>.

in weak states, who inhabit a world of weak institutions and corruption, can use conspiracy theories to frame opposition to their rule as stemming from shadowy forces. Yet, strong political institutions and Republican electoral competitiveness make these theories a poor fit for the current U.S. context. Moreover, these explanations do not focus on the electoral incentives of conspiracy theory endorsement, yet the canon of scholarship on elite political behavior in the United States rests upon the electoral connection. We seek to address these theoretical and empirical gaps in the literature, and in so doing, offer a nuanced theory about the electoral consequences of conspiracy theory endorsement.

Direct and Indirect Electoral Benefits of Conspiracy Theory Endorsement

If candidates endorse conspiracy theories on the campaign trail, are they doing so strategically? On the one hand, conspiracy theories are generally unpopular among the mass public, the media, and other political elites (Uscinski and Parent 2014). In this paper, we focus on QAnon, a salient conspiracy theory in the 2020 electoral cycle that claims Democrats are engaged in nefarious illicit behavior. Nationally representative survey data (Pew Research Center 2020), as well as our own data in this paper, suggests that most Americans have not heard of QAnon, and those that do, hold it in low regard—including Republicans. Although awareness of the theory is growing, it seems to be an unusual electoral strategy to openly support something that is unknown to most Americans and viewed negatively by those who are aware of it. This fact-pattern suggests that some candidates are not behaving strategically and instead endorse conspiracy theories like QAnon as a natural outgrowth of their true beliefs, or alternatively, as part of a non-electoral attention-seeking mechanism.

On the other hand, the literature on candidate entry and campaigning often begins from the presumption that candidates are strategic actors who enter races and take posi-

tions in an effort win elections (Mayhew 1974). This strategic logic is purported to hold even for long-shot candidates who compete against incumbents precisely because doing so provides the best chance at victory (Banks and Kiewiet 1989; Canon 1993). Politicians have the strategic flexibility to endorse popular positions that align with their true beliefs while avoiding unpopular positions they privately support (see also Canes-Wrone 2006). It seems sensible to conclude, then, that candidates might choose to promote their QAnon beliefs in order to benefit electorally.

The benefits of conspiracy endorsement might be direct or indirect. A direct electoral benefit would imply that voters support a candidate because that candidate endorses the conspiracy theory. Similar to voting for a candidate because they support one's preferred policy position, some voters might support a candidate because they, too, believe the conspiracy theory and want to be represented by someone who agrees with them on that issue. In contrast, endorsing conspiracy theories could have indirect benefits. Voters might not support candidates specifically because they endorse a conspiracy theory, but rather because endorsing a conspiracy theory cues something else that the voters value. We expect that candidates do not endorse conspiracy theories because they expect to be directly rewarded for that position (as they might for taking a position on gun control or environmental policy). Instead, endorsing a conspiracy theory like QAnon provides indirect electoral benefits by cueing something about the candidates ideology or values.

In this paper, we investigate both types of effects. First, we present our initial theory involving the potential indirect benefits of media coverage as a consequence of conspiracy theory endorsement. As previewed in the introduction, the results of this analysis offer little support for the hypotheses that QAnon endorsement can increase media coverage or that negative media coverage increases candidate favorability among low trust sub-groups. These results were more consistent with the idea that endorsing QAnon produced either no benefits, or even costs, to the candidate. As such, we tested the direct effects of QAnon endorsement on vote choice in a pre-registered conjoint experiment.

Here, we find evidence consistent with the hypothesis that QAnon-endorsement provides no direct (or indirect) benefit to the endorsing candidate in terms of vote choice or favorability.

Indirect Benefits via Media Coverage

Voters pay little attention to politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Zaller 1992) and rely on heuristics like partisanship, incumbency, or name recognition to make electoral decisions (Downs 1957; Kam and Zechmeister 2013; Popkin 1991; Schaffner and Streb 2002). Candidates, especially challengers running in low salience races, may struggle to break through—unless they find a way to become the subject of a “good story” (Hamilton 2011). From the media’s perspective, that means a story with conflict, competition, and negative information (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Groeling 2010; Helfer and Aelst 2016). Politicians can take advantage of market incentives and make themselves more newsworthy by exhibiting less agreeable personality traits or (Amsalem et al. 2020) or taking ideologically extreme positions (Wagner and Gruszczynski 2018). We argue that another way to attract media attention is by embracing and promoting conspiracy theories. Doing so offers the mainstream media novelty and scandal. And while the coverage may be negative (Uscinski and Parent 2014), the benefits of negative coverage may outweigh the cost (see e.g., Burden 2002). Therefore, we expect that candidates who endorse QAnon will receive more news coverage than comparable candidates who do not endorse QAnon (**Hypothesis 1**), and coverage of QAnon-endorsing candidates will be more negative than coverage of non-endorsing candidates (**Hypothesis 2**).

However, we argue that this negative coverage may not uniformly decrease evaluations of the endorsing candidate. Beyond increasing name recognition (Burden 2002; Kam and Zechmeister 2013), in a more partisan and polarized media environment (see Prior 2013, for a review), media consumers may view the coverage through a partisan lens depending on the source (Baum and Gussin 2008; Smith and Searles 2014). If the main-

stream media covers a candidate negatively, as they would if she endorses a conspiracy theory, those with low trust in media may dismiss the tone of reporting that seems hostile to “their side” (Arceneaux, Johnson and Murphy 2012; Arceneaux and Johnson 2015; Coe et al. 2008; Vallone, Ross and Lepper 1985), while still learning valuable information about the candidate. This outcome would be similar to the “backfire effect” (Christenson, Kreps and Kriner 2020; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Thorson 2016; but see Wood and Porter 2019) in which corrections of false information can inadvertently reinforce the original belief.

We argue that by endorsing a conspiracy theory with partisan valence, like QAnon which primarily targets Democrats, might lead voters to make accurate inferences about candidate attributes.² Beyond this cueing effect, we also theorize that negative media coverage *itself* is a signal. By attracting the ire of the establishment, a candidate effectively ties her hands; she forecloses future opportunities to cozy up to elites and credibly signals her commitment to an anti-establishment representational style (see also Hahl, Kim and Zuckerman Sivan 2018; Kartik and Van Weelden 2019). This tactic might even be more effective than taking an extreme ideological position as doing so can activate an orthogonal dimensions of political identity grounded in anti-establishment beliefs (Uscinski et al. 2021).

Broadly speaking, our theory suggests that individuals with low trust in media might view negative coverage, on its own, as signaling positive information about a candidate. Thus, we hypothesize that negative coverage of a candidate might increase her favorability among those with low trust in media as compared to those with high trust in media (**Hypothesis 3a**). Similarly, we suspect that those with low trust in media will be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016; Oliver and Wood 2014) and will feel warmer toward a candidate who endorses a conspiracy theory

²The potential for these inferences is in contrast to negative coverage resulting from corruption or sex scandals that lack an ideological component and are more evenly distributed among the parties (Basinger 2013).

and receives negative media coverage, compared to one covered neutrally (**Hypothesis 3b**) or one covered negatively but who did not endorse a conspiracy theory (**Hypothesis 3c**). Given QAnon's partisan valence, we have analogous expectations for Republicans as compared to Democrats (**Hypothesis 4a-c**). In terms of cueing, we hypothesize that negative coverage will increase candidate name recognition, and even more so when the candidate endorses a conspiracy theory, given its novelty (**Hypothesis 5a-c**). Given perceptions of conservative bias in the mainstream media, we expect that candidates who receive negative coverage will be viewed as more ideologically conservative (**Hypothesis 6a**) and given QAnon's partisan valence, we suspect endorsers will be perceived as more ideologically conservative than neutrally-covered non-endorsers (**Hypothesis 6b**) and negatively-covered non-endorsers (**Hypothesis 6c**)

Observational Evidence: Quantity and Tone of Candidate Coverage

Our objective in this section is to test Hypotheses 1 and 2 to determine whether candidates who endorse QAnon receive more media coverage and whether that coverage is more negative.

Data and Methods

We begin by examining variation in news coverage of QAnon-endorsing candidates and their non-QAnon endorsing peers. To do so, we collected data on 3,632 candidates identified by [Ballotpedia.com](https://ballotpedia.com) as having run in either a congressional House or Senate primary in 2020. Along with their name and the office they were running for, we also captured information about their sex, whether they had previously held elected office at either the state or federal level, their party, the state (and if applicable, the district) in which they were running, whether they won their primary race, and their social media account information. We supplemented this data with an indicator for whether the candidate had ever endorsed QAnon, as identified by Media Matters (Kaplan 2020), as well

as the Cook Partisan Voting Index of the state and/or district, a statistic that captures the partisan lean of a constituency relative to the nation.

Candidates who endorse QAnon are different from their non-endorsing peers, which we show in the left half of Table 1. For example, QAnon-endorsing candidates are significantly more likely to be female and less likely to be incumbents. We also find that QAnon-endorsing candidates run in districts that are about 5.5 points more Democratic on average than non-endorsers, which provides some evidence that these candidates are not entering races in overwhelmingly Democratic districts expecting to lose. The differences we've highlighted are likely correlated with media coverage in important ways. To address this concern and achieve balance across groups, we constructed a matched set of QAnon-endorsers and otherwise similar candidates who did not endorse QAnon based on the covariates we collected. Following Darr, Hitt and Dunaway (2018), we created the matched set through the use of Genetic Matching (Diamond and Sekhon 2013), a method that achieves covariate balance by iteratively constructing optimal weights for each covariate. The genetic matching yielded a sample with 275 unique (unweighted) candidates. In the right half of Table 1, we present covariate balance and p -values from bootstrapped Kogorov-Smirnov tests. The smallest p -value is 0.76, indicating that the distribution of each covariate is statistically similar between groups.

After creating this matched subset, we collected all newspaper coverage of each candidate in our sample between January 1 and November 2, 2020 (just before Election Day). We manually searched Nexis Uni to collect all newspaper articles—national and local—that referenced each candidate at least once.³ Ultimately, we collected 2,016 articles from a variety of national sources, like the the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, as well as local sources like *Alaska Dispatch News* (AK) and the *Pueblo Chiefton* (CO).⁴ From

³Please see Appendix A.1 for full data collection criteria. In summary, we searched each candidate's first and last name, set the time frame to January 1-November 2, 2020, we set the publication type to newspapers, and the language to English. Each article was then manually screened to ensure it was about the candidate, rather than someone with the same name.

⁴This approach limits our data collection to the Nexis Uni database. Although Nexis Uni is widely used by researchers, it can over-represent national news sources, which might lead us to underestimate

Table 1: Matching Balance

	Before Matching			After Matching		
	QAnon Endorser	Non-Endorser	Boostrapped KS Test	QAnon Endorser	Non-Endorser	Boostrapped KS Test
	mean	mean	p-value	mean	mean	p-value
% Female	0.39	0.25	0.01	0.39	0.39	1.00
% Previous Officeholder	0.03	0.18	0.00	0.03	0.03	1.00
% Senate Bid	0.09	0.14	0.13	0.09	0.09	1.00
% In General Election	0.33	0.38	0.36	0.33	0.32	0.76
% Incumbent	0.00	0.12	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00
Party						
% Republican	0.94	0.41	0.00	0.94	0.94	1.00
% Democrat	0.01	0.40	0.00	0.01	0.01	1.00
% Independent	0.03	0.08	0.01	0.03	0.03	1.00
% Other	0.02	0.11	0.00	0.02	0.02	1.00
Constituency						
% Open Seat	0.16	0.21	0.15	0.16	0.16	1.00
Population Density	2487.4	2303.8	0.00	2487.4	2445.3	0.98
Cook PVI (R)	-6.26	0.73	0.00	-6.26	-6.08	0.99
Median Age	38.77	38.66	0.35	38.77	38.85	1.00
% White	0.66	0.73	0.00	0.66	0.66	1.00
% Black	0.15	0.12	0.05	0.15	0.15	0.97
% Some College	0.62	0.62	0.56	0.62	0.62	1.00
Median Household Income	69.14	68.34	0.35	69.14	69.36	0.99

this large set, we randomly sampled 300 articles and assigned an independent research assistant to determine whether those articles referenced the candidate using a negative or non-negative tone. We asked another independent RA to validate a subsample of these codings and we found that the research assistants chose the same coding label 86% of the time.⁵ Table A1 in the supplemental appendix shows example statements from news articles that the research assistants coded as negative (and non-negative) for both QAnon-endorsing and non-endorsing candidates in our dataset.

Recognizing that many of these articles were not solely about the referenced candidate, we split each article into paragraphs and kept any paragraph referencing the candidate, as well as the preceding and succeeding paragraphs for context.⁶ We used all 300 labeled articles⁷ and set aside 40 (15%) labeled articles—10 from each possible combination of QAnon endorsement and tone—as our test set, and we used the remaining text as a training set. We then trained several candidate models—including SVM, Boosted Logit, Random Forest, *k*-nearest neighbor, and penalized regression—to predict the sentiment of the unlabeled data using the `caretEnsemble` package in R (Deane-Mayer and Knowles 2019). We weighted each candidate model by its in-sample accuracy, and the resulting ensemble model’s in-sample accuracy was 0.89, and 0.75 out-of-sample.⁸ We used

candidates’ overall media coverage. However, Hassell (2021) finds that publication in a national newspaper does not, in and of itself, lead a story to be perceived as more newsworthy by journalists. The matching procedure used should ensure that media coverage of both conspiracy theory-endorsing and non-endorsing candidates are equally underestimated.

⁵Please see Appendix A.2 for details on the coding instructions.

⁶To preprocess the text, we created a document frequency matrix of unigrams after removing stop words, symbols, numbers, and punctuation; stemming words; removing words with two or fewer characters as well as those that appeared fewer than 5 times across all documents. We also removed the following words from all documents: QAnon, conspiracy, theory, theorist, theories, and Trump, which we suspected could bias our algorithm toward over-predicting negative articles among QAnon endorsers and under-predicting among non-endorsers. We weighted our document term matrix by term frequency-inverse document frequency.

⁷We train the same ensemble model and present results using only the smaller subsample of articles which both research assistants coded, excluding all articles on which they disagreed. Although our model is less accurate given the smaller training set, we arrive at substantively similar conclusions as shown in Table A4 of the supplemental appendix

⁸When the model misclassified articles out-of-sample, the direction of the error was biased toward coding true negatives as positive. Therefore, we expect any systematic bias in the predictions to be biased against our hypothesis.

this ensemble model to predict the tone of the remaining unlabeled newspaper articles. The results of our text analysis resulted in a sample of 1,203 non-negative and 43 negative articles among non-endorsers and 372 negative and 398 non-negative articles among QAnon-endorsers.

Results: QAnon-Endorsing Candidates Receive More Negative Coverage

Overall, the mean number of articles-per-candidate in our dataset is 8.7, but because a small number of candidates received extensive news coverage, the mean is highly skewed.⁹ We find that 49 QAnon-endorsing and 89 non-endorsing candidates received coverage during the sample period. Comparing candidates who did and did not endorse QAnon, those who endorsed QAnon were referenced in 8.0 news articles, while those who did not endorse QAnon were referenced in 9.4 on average. However this difference is not statistically different from 0.¹⁰ We present these results in Table A3 of the supplemental appendix. Ultimately, we find no evidence that QAnon-endorsing candidates receive any more coverage than their non-endorsing twins, meaning that we do not find evidence in support of our expectation in Hypothesis 1.

Of the matched sample, which includes 275 unique candidates, we find that roughly half, 133, received any news coverage at all. As the quantity of interest is the proportion of negative coverage candidates receive as a result of endorsing QAnon, we drop the 142 candidates who received no coverage at all and for whom we cannot construct proportions. We then re-conduct the same genetic matching procedure described above on this subset.¹¹ With this smaller matched subset, we estimate the proportion of negative cover-

⁹For example, QAnon-endorser Marjorie Taylor Greene received 301 articles respectively, while a non-endorsing candidate, Carlos Giménez, received 525.

¹⁰In the analysis step, we discovered one miscoded non-endorsing candidate in our matched sample, a sitting member of the House running for Senate. This candidate had a larger number of articles than other non-endorsers. Nonetheless, their inclusion should bias against our hypotheses as they inflate the number of articles written about non-endorsing candidates and also present more opportunities for negative coverage.

¹¹Balance statistics for this subset are presented in Table A2 of the supplemental appendix.

age received as a consequence of QAnon endorsement among those receiving any news coverage at all. As presented in Table A3 of the supplemental appendix, we find that endorsing QAnon is associated with a 20 percentage point increase in overall negative news coverage. These differences are statistically distinguishable at the 95% level, meaning that we find evidence to support our expectation in Hypothesis 2.

Candidates who endorse the QAnon conspiracy theory receive the same amount of coverage as their non-endorsing counterparts, on average. However, the tone of that coverage varies significantly. The coverage of the average QAnon-endorsing candidate is roughly 20 percentage points more negative than the comparable candidate who never endorsed QAnon. To the extent that these candidates are seeking negative coverage, endorsing a trending conspiracy theory appears to do the trick.¹²

Experimental Evidence: News Tone, Name Recognition, and Candidate Favorability

We have provided some evidence that when congressional candidates endorse conspiracy theories, they receive more negative news coverage in mainstream national and local newspapers. Here, we turn to the second part of our theory—that negative mainstream media coverage provokes differential evaluations of candidates among those with high and low trust in the mainstream media. The experiment described below follows the pre-analysis plan we pre-registered.

Experimental Design

Our experiments were fielded on the November 2020 and March 2021 waves of the American Social Survey (TASS), which draws a nationally representative cross sectional

¹²Another approach would be to look at within-candidate variation, comparing coverage before and after each candidate endorsed QAnon. However, we were not able to identify concrete dates for all candidate endorsements. Moreover, some candidates endorsed before formally announcing their candidacy. We regret that a difference-in-differences approach is not feasible in this context.

sample of respondents from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. A total of 1,962 individuals participated in our experiment, 978 in the first wave and 984 in the second.¹³ First, respondents in our study answered a series of questions measuring their political attitudes and preferences. We obtained pre-treatment measures of trust in media as well as their impression of the QAnon conspiracy theory. In both waves, many respondents were unfamiliar with QAnon—55% in the first wave and 52% in the second. Among those who provided an evaluation, just 11% of respondents expressed positive sentiments, indicating just how unpopular QAnon is among the general public. In addition, we obtained pre-treatment demographic information for each respondent from NORC. These variables included perceived importance of following the news, party identification, ideology, age, education, income, gender, and race.¹⁴

Moderators: In addition to indicators for each experimental condition, we conducted our analysis with a moderator, measured pre-treatment, for a respondent’s trust in the mainstream media.¹⁵ We asked respondents the following question: “In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media—such as newspapers, TV, and radio—when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?” Response options include: A great deal, a fair amount, not very much, none at all. Across both waves, we found that 145 respondents (8%) had a great deal of trust in the mainstream media, 829 (42%) had a fair amount, 746 (38%) had not very much confidence, and 238 (13%) had none at all. As anticipated, trust in media was lower among Republicans and Republican leaners, with 74 percent saying “not very much” or “not at all” versus 35 percent expressing lower trust among Democrats, Democratic leaners, and Independents.

Experimental Conditions: After answering unrelated questions, respondents in our

¹³We pool both waves in this analysis but analyze each wave separately in Section B of the supplemental appendix.

¹⁴All covariates are balanced with the exception of Latino and Asian identifying respondents. In Section B of the supplemental appendix we control for all covariates and find substantively similar results.

¹⁵We preregistered a second moderator variable, party identification, which we measured on a 7-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican. Results for this analysis are presented in Section B.2 the supplemental appendix.

experiment were asked to read a short headline and paragraph about a hypothetical congressional candidate, which we noted could have appeared in a mainstream newspaper. Respondents were randomly assigned into one of three conditions with equal probability. Across all three conditions, respondents read about a fictional state representative who lost a bid for a seat in the House of Representatives in the November 2020 election.¹⁶ In the control condition, which we call the *Neutral* condition, we described John Smith as having run a well-organized but unsuccessful campaign. The full text of each treatment is presented in Table 2.

Our goal was to analyze the effects of negative newspaper coverage both unrelated to, and as a consequence of, conspiracy theory endorsement. Accordingly, we created two treatment conditions to disentangle these effects. In the *Negative* condition, respondents read the same headline and a similar paragraph about John Smith, but we described his campaign as poorly organized and wildly unsuccessful, and we replaced a positive constituent quote with a negative one. The *Conspiracy* condition was identical to the *Negative* condition except we noted in the headline that John Smith was a QAnon supporter and informed readers in the article text that he was a “vocal supporter of the convoluted QAnon conspiracy theory.”¹⁷

Dependent Variables: To determine how the treatments influenced respondents’ attitudes toward the candidate, we asked respondents to tell us how they felt about John Smith on a 101-point feeling thermometer.¹⁸ In Wave 2, we also asked for respondents’

¹⁶In Wave 1, the candidate’s name was John Smith. In Wave 2, we changed the candidate’s name to John Cunningham. Pilot tests fielded on Mechanical Turk did not reveal variation in evaluations based on the candidate’s name.

¹⁷To ensure our articles were perceived as neutral and negative, we conducted a pilot study. On a seven point scale where 0 was extremely negative, 3 was neutral, and 6 was extremely positive, respondents rated both the *Conspiracy* and *Negative* treatments as negative (mean 2.11 and 2.06 respectively). The *Neutral* treatment was rated as neutral (mean 3.08) and was statistically distinguishable from the negative articles. N=250, Tested on Mechanical Turk on September 24, 2020.

¹⁸The question wording for the feeling thermometer question was: “How warm or cold do you feel toward the candidate in the article? Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the candidate. Ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don’t feel favorable toward the candidate and that you don’t care too much for him. You would rate him at the 50 degree mark if you don’t feel particularly warm or cold toward the candidate.”

Table 2: News Article Treatments

Treatment	Text
Control	<p>Statehouse Representative Loses Congressional Bid</p> <p>John Smith, a two-term state representative, recently ran for an open seat in the House of Representatives. Mr. Smith won his last election to the statehouse, but his latest bid for Congress has proven to be unsuccessful. He lost the congressional election by a wide margin, but his campaign was well organized. Constituents had mixed feelings about the election outcome. One constituent tweeted “Smith’s bid for Congress was a joke, So glad the people have spoken: Smith is a loser.” Yet, another commented “Smith ran a strong campaign and advanced a lot of great ideas for our district. I hope he gets the chance to run again.” He pledged to bring fresh ideas to Washington and ensure his constituents had their voices heard, but he will have to wait to try again in 2022.</p>
Negative	<p>Statehouse Representative Loses Congressional Bid</p> <p>John Smith, a two-term state representative, recently ran for an open seat in the House of Representatives. Mr. Smith barely won his last election to the statehouse, and his latest bid for Congress has proven to be wildly unsuccessful. He lost the congressional election in a landslide, and his campaign was poorly organized. Constituents had good feelings about the election outcome. One constituent tweeted “Smith’s bid for Congress was a joke. So glad the people have spoken: Smith is a loser.” Another commented “Smith ran a weak campaign and advanced a lot of terrible ideas for our district. I hope he never gets the chance to run again.” He pledged to bring fresh ideas to Washington and ensure his constituents had their voices heard, but he will have to wait to try again in 2022.</p>
Conspiracy	<p>Statehouse Representative, QAnon Supporter, Loses Congressional Bid</p> <p>John Smith, a two-term state representative, recently ran for an open seat in the House of Representatives. Mr. Smith is a vocal supporter of the convoluted QAnon conspiracy theory. Mr. Smith barely won his last election to the statehouse, and his latest bid for Congress has proven to be wildly unsuccessful. He lost the congressional election in a landslide, and his campaign was poorly organized. Constituents had good feelings about the election outcome. One constituent tweeted “Smith’s bid for Congress was a joke. So glad the people have spoken: Smith is a loser.” Another commented “Smith ran a weak campaign and advanced a lot of terrible ideas for our district. I hope he never gets the chance to run again.” He pledged to bring fresh ideas to Washington and ensure his constituents had their voices heard, but he will have to wait to try again in 2022.</p>

perceptions of the candidate’s ideology on a 7-point scale ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative.

Later in the survey, after respondents answered unrelated questions, we presented a text box and asked if they could remember the candidate's name. To measure whether respondents accurately recalled the candidate's name, we subtracted 1 from the Jaro-Winkler string distance between their response and the candidate's name (John Smith in Wave 1 and John Cunningham in Wave 2). This dependent variable ranges from 0 (no match) to 1 (perfect match).¹⁹

Results: Trust in Media Moderates the Effect of Media Coverage on Candidate Favorability, But No One Likes QAnon Candidates

If our hypotheses concerning trust in media are correct, we would expect respondents with high trust in media to feel cooler toward the candidate in either treatment condition as compared to the *Neutral* condition. Further, we expect these respondents to feel cooler toward the candidate in the *Conspiracy* condition as compared to the candidate in the *Negative* condition. We have the opposite expectations for those with low trust in media. We expect these respondents to feel warmer toward the candidate in either treatment condition as compared to the *Neutral* condition and warmer toward the *Conspiracy* candidate than the *Negative* candidate.

To investigate these hypotheses, we pool both survey waves and estimate all effects at the individual level using ordinary least squares. Below, in Figure 1, we present the average marginal effects of particular treatment comparisons for each level of trust in media. We include the regression table for our model, as well as analyses that include a series of controls and weights as well as each wave separately, in Section B of the supplemental appendix.

In Figure 1, black squares represent the point estimate of the difference in candidate evaluation for respondents assigned to the *Negative* condition as compared to the *Neutral*

¹⁹For robustness, we created an alternative measure of name recognition where respondents whose response included either the candidate's first or last name were coded as 1, and 0 otherwise. These methods were flexible to account for misspelling or instances where respondents only entered the candidate's last name.

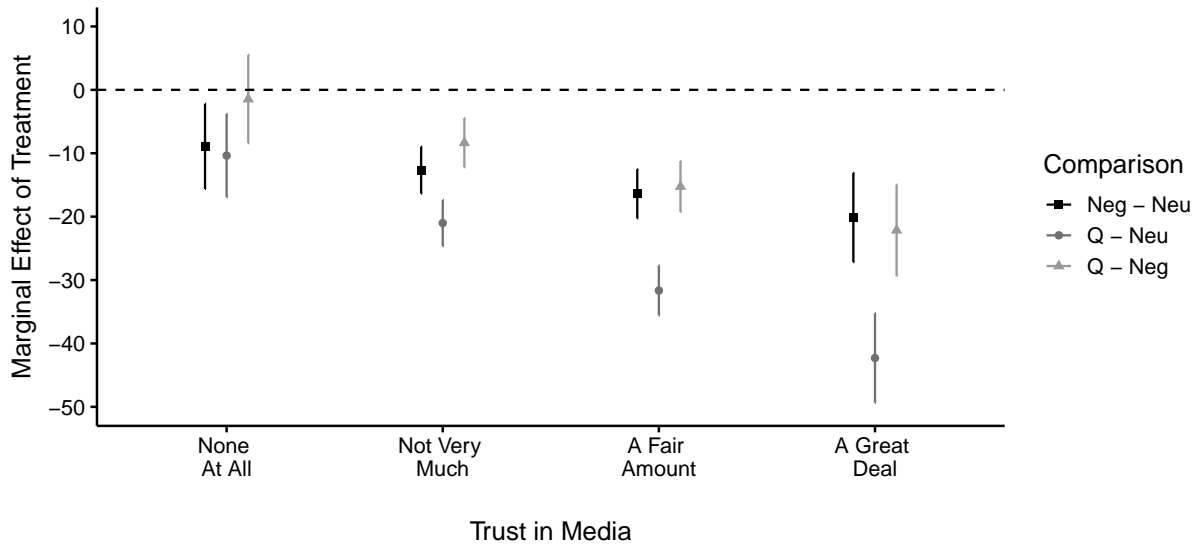


Figure 1: Average marginal effects of each treatment comparison for varying levels of trust in media. Consistent with our expectations, those with higher trust in media feel cooler toward the *Negative* candidate and even cooler toward the *Conspiracy* candidate. In contrast to our expectations, those with low trust in media feel cooler toward the candidate in both treatments as compared to the *Neutral* candidate. However, low trust respondents feel significantly less cool toward either treated candidate than those with high trust.

condition. The error bars (and all error bars in Figure 1) are estimated at the Bonferroni corrected level for 12 tests ($\alpha = 0.004$) to account for multiple hypothesis testing. The general trend as one becomes more trusting in media is negative, as expected. In fact, we find that the difference between those with the highest and lowest amount of trust are statistically distinguishable at the 0.95 level.²⁰ The marginal effect of treatment for those with higher levels of trust is negative as expected, however, it is also negative and statistically significant for those with lower levels of trust in media, which runs counter to our expectations. Thus, we find evidence in favor of Hypothesis 3d, but we fail to support Hypothesis 3a.

The results are similar across the remaining comparisons. Dark gray circles represent

²⁰To determine within-treatment differences, we conduct 1000 bootstraps of the marginal effects and calculated the 95% quantile.

the difference in evaluations between the *Conspiracy* and *Neutral* conditions. In line with Hypothesis 3e, the highest trust respondents feel a full 42 points cooler toward a QAnon-endorsing candidate. In contrast to our expectations in Hypothesis 3b, however, we find evidence that those with low trust feel more negatively toward a QAnon-endorsing candidate as well. However, the difference between those with the lowest and highest levels of trust in media are, again, statistically distinguishable.

Light gray triangles examine differences in candidate evaluations between those in the *Negative* condition as compared to the *Conspiracy* condition. Here, we find evidence that those with high trust in media feel roughly 22 points cooler toward the QAnon endorsing candidate in line with Hypothesis 3f. We find that there is no statistically significant increase in evaluations, even among those with the lowest amount of trust in media, in contrast to our expectations in Hypothesis 3c.

Finally, we investigate whether candidates who received negative coverage were more easily recalled by respondents. In Section B.3 of the supplemental appendix, we present results from regressions in which the dependent variable is the Jaro Winkler string similarity score, a measure of how similar two strings are based on the number of mismatched characters between them. We regress this variable on the treatment indicators using ordinary least squares. In contrast to our Hypotheses 5a-5c—that we would find positive and statistically significant effects of treatment—we do not find evidence of any effect of treatment on name recognition.

To summarize our findings, the experimental results provide evidence in favor of three of our sub-hypotheses. Those with high trust in media feel cooler toward a candidate receiving negative coverage and even cooler toward a candidate who endorses a conspiracy theory. Yet, we do not find evidence that those with lower trust in media feel *warmer* toward negatively covered candidates, relative to neutrally covered candidates.²¹ We also

²¹In Section B of the supplemental appendix, we also present results of these regressions holding seven-point party identification and seven-point ideology at their means (as well as several other covariates). As we come to substantively similar results, we conclude that these effects are not simply driven by the correlation between trust in media, ideology, and party identification.

considered possible issues with the vignettes that could have led to small negative, rather than positive, evaluations. For example, the candidate was described as recently losing the election, which might have led people to decrease their evaluations. We tested this possibility using a brief follow-up experiment on Mechanical Turk where the candidate was described as winning the election, but we find the same results. We also considered whether the use of constituent quotes might have obscured our intention to signal that the mainstream news outlet was responsible for the negativity. We tested this in another follow-up experiment on Mechanical Turk by modifying the vignettes to exclude commentary from constituents. We still observe the same effects. As with any vignette experiment, there are a myriad of other features we could have changed that could have led to the effects we did (or did not) observe. Our results are robust to some of these potential modifications to the vignette itself, but future work could continue to probe theory-driven extensions of our work here.

Electoral Benefits - at all?

To this point, our results do not suggest that candidates benefit from endorsing QAnon. Although trust in media moderates the effect of QAnon endorsement on favorability as we expected, respondents with low media trust never *increased* their evaluation of the candidate. Candidates who endorse QAnon receive a 30 point drop in favorability among people who trust the mainstream media and people who distrust the media are, at best, indifferent toward them. Indifference does not win elections. These findings led us to reconsider just how strategic QAnon endorsement is. The results seemed much more consistent with a theory in which there are not any electoral benefits to endorsing QAnon and people vote for QAnon candidates *despite* this endorsement.

Decades of research on American political behavior hold that voters rely primarily on partisanship when making electoral decisions (Campbell et al. 1960). For many vot-

ers, then, it's possible that conspiracy theory endorsement has either no effect on vote choice, or as suggested by our experimental results, a negative effect. To this end, we pre-registered two additional hypotheses: first, that a candidate's support for QAnon will not cause respondents to increase their likelihood of voting for that candidate (**Hypothesis 7**). Relatedly, we expect that a candidate's support for QAnon will not cause respondents to increase their favorability toward the candidate (**Hypothesis 8**). We expect these hypotheses to hold among relevant subgroups such as Republicans, those with low trust in media, and those with anti-establishment beliefs (Uscinski et al. 2021). However, given the literature on position-taking and cueing (Popkin 1991; Zaller 1992), we suspect that QAnon might lead voters to draw inferences about a candidate's ideology—that the candidate is more conservative—even if they view the endorsement itself negatively (**Hypothesis 9**).

Data and Methods

To examine whether there are any direct electoral benefits of QAnon endorsement or indirect benefits of cueing conservatism, we conducted a conjoint experiment (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014). A conjoint experiment is uniquely suited to our purposes because it allows us to simultaneously test the independent, causal effect of QAnon support on vote choice against other candidate characteristics, such as policy positions and past political experience.

We recruited a sample of 350 Republicans and 350 Democrats who live in the United States from the survey platform Prolific (Palan and Schitter 2018).²² We balanced our sample on gender, but our sample is not nationally representative. Participants opted in to take surveys on Prolific and opted in to completing our specific survey, conditional on our screening criteria (US residents, Republicans, Democrats, balance on gender). We included a pre-treatment attention check and removed from the analysis participants who

²²Our power analyses indicated that we needed a minimum sample size of 628, 314 of each partisan subgroup.

failed the attention check.

We presented participants with two side-by-side profiles of hypothetical congressional candidates who vary independently across eight attributes. Participants were asked to report which candidate they would vote for to represent them in Congress, repeating the task a total of ten times, viewing a total of twenty unique candidate profiles. After reporting which candidate they would vote for, half of the respondents were randomly assigned to rate each candidate on a 7-point favorability scale, while the other half of the respondents rated each candidate's ideology on a 7-point scale.

Table 3 summarizes the profiles shown to participants and the attribute levels. All levels within each attribute were randomized independently and uniformly within each profile. We block randomized the order in which attributes appeared at the respondent level. We randomized the order of the four policy positions (i.e. impeachment, immigration, economics, infrastructure), and the four non-policy attributes (i.e., gender, party, QAnon, prior political experience), then randomized which block (i.e., policy, non-policy) respondents saw first. The order was then fixed across the ten choice tasks for each respondent.

We chose to present eight attributes overall in an effort to obfuscate the key covariate of interest: QAnon endorsement. However, we chose attributes that would provide sufficient variation about the types of candidates voters could choose from. Party identification was of course key to our hypotheses and gender is a standard attribute included in conjoint experiments. We also included past political experience as a way to assess preferences for non-incumbents. In terms of policy, we chose impeachment to disentangle the direct effects of Trump-support on candidate choice (Arceneaux and Truex N.d.) unrelated to conspiracy belief. The border wall attribute is a proxy for Trump-conservatism (Hopkins and Noel N.d.), whereas tax policy provides long-standing distinctions between liberal and conservative candidates. Finally, support for the infrastructure provides an indication of the candidate's bipartisan tendencies.

Table 3: Attributes and levels in the conjoint experiment.

Attribute	Level
Party	Republican Democrat
Gender	Male Female
QAnon	Publicly Supported QAnon Has Not Publicly Supported QAnon
Prior Political Experience	State Representative U.S. Senator No prior political experience
Position on Trump’s Second Impeachment	Supported Impeachment Opposed Impeachment
Position on U.S.-Mexico Immigration Policy	Supports Building a Border Wall Opposes Building a Border Wall
Position on Economic Policy	Lower taxes, but fewer government services Higher taxes, but more government services
Position on Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill	Supports Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill Opposes Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill

Our primary dependent variable of interest (i.e. Hypothesis 7) is the binary vote choice measure. We analyze our data at the candidate-profile level, meaning that there are twenty rows for each respondent in our data. For each candidate profile, the dependent variable takes the value of 1 if the respondent voted for that candidate and 0 otherwise. For Hypothesis 8, we are interested in the favorability rating on a seven-point scale. For each candidate profile, the dependent variable for Hypothesis 8 takes a value between 1 (definitely would NOT want this type of candidate to represent [me] in the U.S. Congress) and 7 (definitely would want this type of candidate to represent [me] in the U.S. Congress). Similarly, for Hypothesis 9, the dependent variable is a value that ranges from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative), as respondents rated the ideology of each candidate. To test our hypotheses, we compute the Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) by regressing each dependent variable on all eight attributes using or-

dinary least squares with standard errors clustered at the respondent level (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014).

Results: Once Again, Nobody Likes QAnon Endorsers

We begin the discussion of our results with the binary vote choice measure. In Figure 2, we plot the AMCEs of each attribute on candidate choice for the full sample in black circles. Here, we see that supporting QAnon, holding party and other relevant attributes fixed, causes a 20 percentage point decline in the probability of choosing that candidate profile in a hypothetical election. Republicans and supporters of the bipartisan infrastructure bill, are more likely to be selected, whereas those who support the construction of a border wall are less likely to be selected. However, the magnitudes of these effects pale in comparison to the negative penalty for QAnon-endorsement.

As the above analysis pools Democrats and Republicans, there may well be heterogeneous treatment effects. These results could be consistent with a story in which Republicans mildly support, but Democrats strongly oppose, candidates who endorse QAnon. To investigate this possibility, we decompose our sample into Republican and Democratic identifiers and plot the AMCEs for partisan groups separately—Democrats in blue triangles and Republicans in red squares. Here, we find that Democrats do impose a large, negative penalty on endorsers, reducing their probability of voting for those candidates by 28 percentage points. However, we find that Republicans also exact a smaller, but negative and statistically significant, penalty on these same candidates. Given that other AMCEs, such as being a Republican, supporting a border wall, and favoring lower taxes causes Republican respondents to increase their probability of voting for a candidate, we have further confidence that our sample of Republicans is not somehow unorthodox in their political views.

A second potential concern with our results could be that by randomizing candidate attributes uniformly, we have introduced bias into our analysis by generating some un-

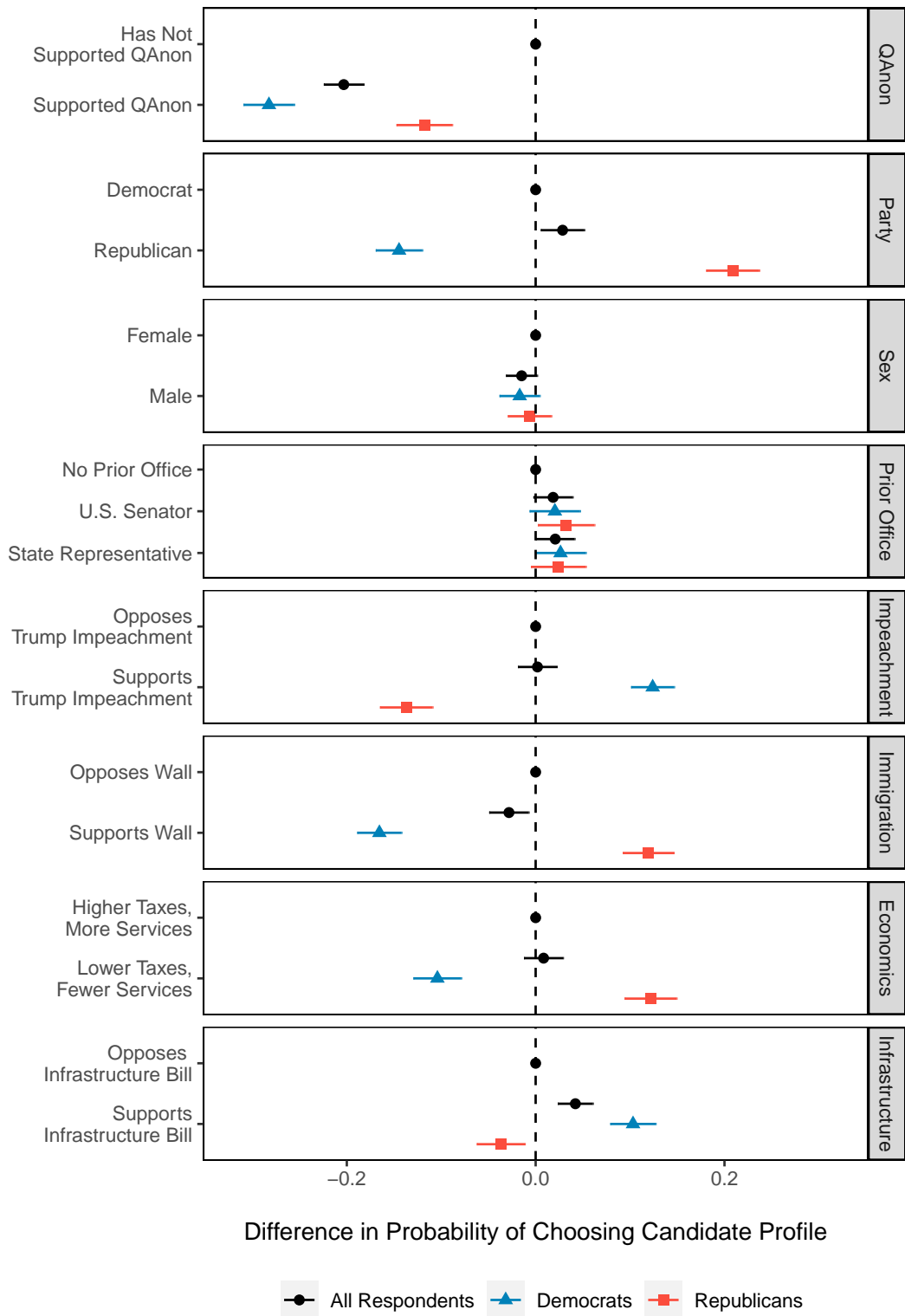


Figure 2: AMCE of each attribute on candidate choice. QAnon endorsement produces a negative decline in the probability of vote choice among Democrats and Republicans.

realistic profiles in which Democrats endorsed QAnon (de la Cuesta, Egami and Imai 2021). To address this concern, in Figure C.1 of the supplemental appendix, we present an AMCE plot in which we restrict our attention to the 864 comparisons in which two Republican candidates were paired and a Republican respondent made a vote choice, simulating a Republican primary environment. Indeed, if Republicans are voting for the most extreme candidate in the race, this is precisely where we would expect to find positive effects of QAnon-endorsement (e.g., Hall 2015). Yet, even here, we find that endorsing QAnon is associated with a statistically significant 14 percentage point decline in the probability of choosing that candidate.

In Figure C.2 of the supplemental appendix, we also present a similar AMCE plot in which the dependent variable is a 7-point favorability scale. Among Democrats, QAnon endorsement decreases favorability by 1.14 points, whereas among Republicans, support for QAnon causes favorability to decrease by 0.49 percentage points—roughly the same magnitude of the decrease in favorability from supporting President Trump’s second impeachment. These results are both statistically significant.

Finally, we present evidence consistent with our third hypothesis, that QAnon support increases perceptions that the candidate is conservative in Figure 3. Among Democrats, QAnon supporting candidates are perceived to be 0.64 points more conservative—similar to identifying as a Republican and supporting a border wall. Among Republicans, the effect is still positive and statistically significant, but much smaller: 0.14 points. After accounting for other variables like party identification and the impeachment vote, QAnon support adds only a small positive increase in perceived conservatism. This large gap between perceptions is consistent with the fact that Democrats consistently report higher levels of awareness of QAnon (Pew Research Center 2020).

Ultimately, these results provide support for all three of our hypotheses. QAnon support causes respondents of both parties to reduce their probability of voting for, and their favorability toward, a candidate. Although QAnon does consistently increase percep-

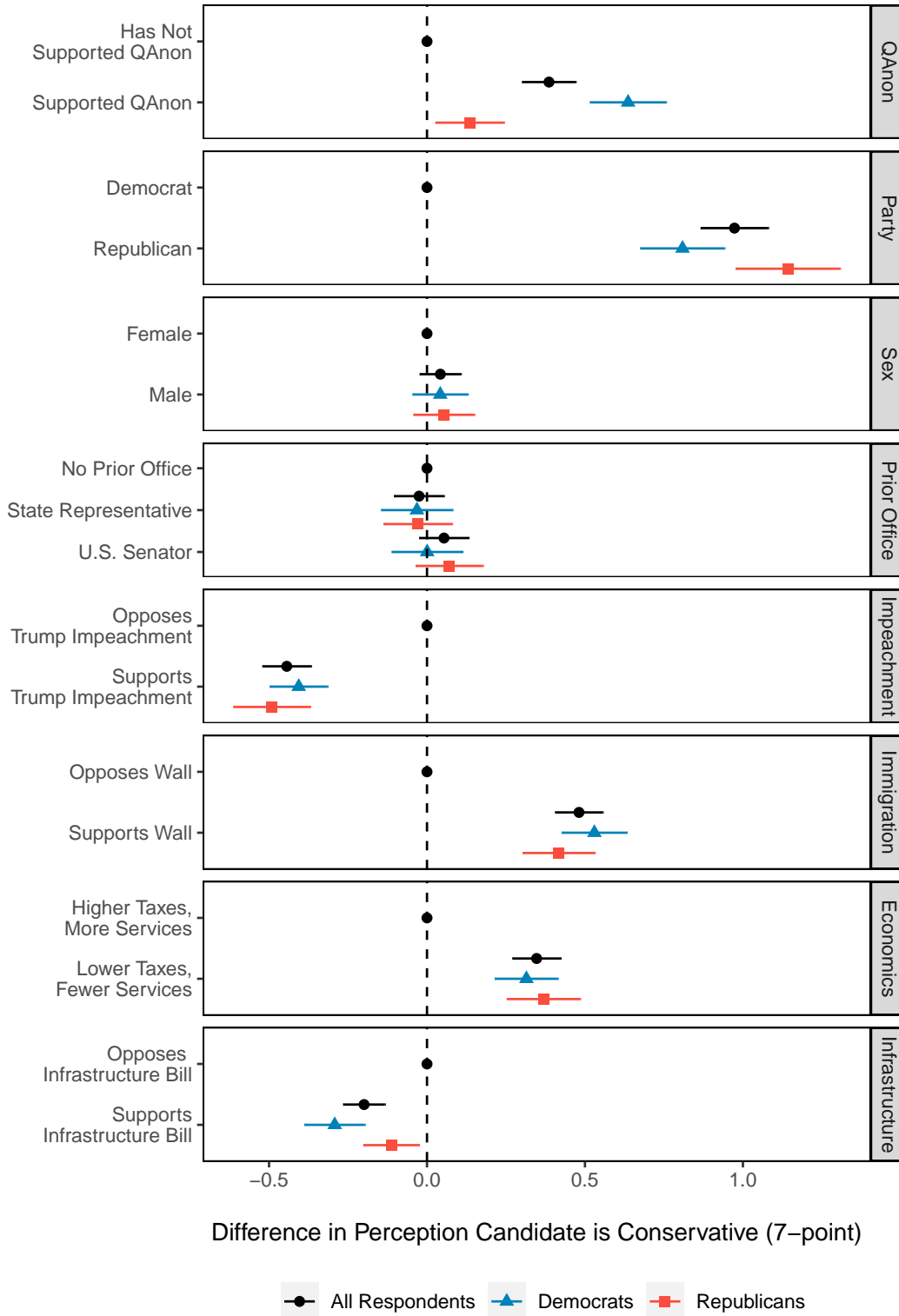


Figure 3: AMCE of each attribute on perceptions candidate is a conservative. QAnon endorsement causes respondents to think the candidate is more conservative, however, this effect is larger among Democrats than Republicans.

tions of conservatism, this effect is small among Republican identifiers—the very group most QAnon endorsers are allegedly targeting.

Discussion

Why do candidates publicly endorse political conspiracy theories? In this paper, we introduced and tested two theories: first, politicians could endorse conspiracy theories to generate negative media coverage and earn favor among people who distrust the mainstream media. Our observational and experimental analyses provided mixed evidence, raising important questions about whether there are any electoral benefits to endorsing QAnon. We therefore tested the theory that QAnon-endorsement produced no electoral benefits in a second pre-registered experiment and found that even individuals who should be most positively inclined toward QAnon are at most indifferent toward candidates who endorse.

In testing our theory of indirect media effects, our observational analysis demonstrated that congressional candidates who endorsed QAnon did not receive *more* news coverage than otherwise similar, but non-endorsing, candidates. However, we found that the tone of coverage was 20 percentage points more negative for those who endorsed QAnon. Our related vignette experiments showed that, in contrast to our expectations, even those with the lowest levels of trust in media decreased their approval of the QAnon-endorsing candidate over that of a candidate who received neutral coverage. Nonetheless, we do find that those with low trust in media punish a QAnon endorsing candidate much less than respondents with high trust in media.

These results were inconsistent with our theoretical story, and as such, led us to take a step back and consider whether conspiracy theory endorsement was strategically motivated. Before fielding our experiment, these hypotheses seem eminently plausible given popular narratives about candidates taking extreme and unconventional positions for

electoral gain. After analyzing the data however, we suspected that conspiracy endorsement might actually be a net-negative for candidates even after accounting for potential cueing or signaling benefits. Our second experiment, then, took on the idea that there are actually no electoral benefits to endorsing QAnon. The results from our conjoint experiment are largely consistent with this idea. We find that endorsing QAnon causes a decline in vote choice probability for those candidates, even while increasing perceptions of their ideological conservatism.

We argue that these results are important as a corrective to the conventional wisdom that conspiracy theory endorsement is electorally beneficial. Nonetheless, we emphasize that these behaviors can be damaging to civic discourse and democratic performance even in the absence of electoral benefit to the candidates themselves. We also speculate that this research points to an important difference between conspiracy theory endorsement generally and proxies for support of President Trump. Using a similar experimental design, Arceneaux and Truex (N.d.) find that when candidates claim the former president actually won the 2020 election, Republicans are more likely to vote for them. We speculate that this result, similar to our impeachment result in Figure 2, proxies for Trump support, which is increasingly associated with different definitions of conservatism (Hopkins and Noel N.d.), whereas QAnon endorsement is qualitatively different—and not nearly as appealing—in the eyes of voters.

Finally, we acknowledge that our results are not without their limitations and we encourage readers to interpret our results as some of the the first, rather than last, words when it comes to the electoral consequences of conspiracy endorsement. Perhaps the biggest threat to generalizability is our focus on one conspiracy theory, QAnon. We made this choice given the extensive coverage of QAnon in the mainstream media as well as the large number of Republican candidates who endorsed the conspiracy theory at the time of data collection. Nonetheless, we believe that our theory would extend to candidate evaluations on the left, consistent with Ryan and Aziz (2021), which finds no asymme-

try in political rumor endorsement across the two parties. Although there are asymmetries between Republicans and Democrats in media trust—the key heterogeneous treatment effect underlying the indirect media effects theory—anti-establishment orientations are orthogonal to the left-right dimension (Uscinski et al. 2021), and popular Democratic politicians like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez also attack the mainstream media.²³ In our conjoint experiment, we present respondents with a limited subset of characteristics. Although our choices were grounded in theory, we could have chosen many possible attributes to manipulate and the results need to be interpreted within the context of the attributes we chose. However, we suspect that subtracting, rather than adding, information could shed light on other underlying mechanisms. In a low-information contest, it is unclear how much - if any - of this information voters would learn and what sorts of inferences they would draw from QAnon endorsement in the absence of over important attributes. Finally, it is possible that there are other indirect effects, such as obtaining positive news coverage on fringe media sources or attention on fringe social media platforms.

Conclusion

That politicians are now faced with the decision of whether to endorse a conspiracy theory is troubling in and of itself, but troubling in a way that merits additional research. This paper is among the first to examine the electoral incentives that candidates face when they decide whether to stake out a position on a conspiracy theory. In so doing, we build upon two important strands of research. We build on the political conspiracy theories

²³For some examples, see Greve, Joan E. 2019. “Are Bernie Sanders’ Attacks on the Media Fair – or Trumpian?” the Guardian. <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/27/bernie-sanders-attacks-media-press-fair-or-trump-2020-democrats> (July 23, 2021). and Farhi, Paul. 2019. “When It Comes to Calling out the News Media, Ocasio-Cortez Has Some Things in Common with Trump.” Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/when-it-comes-to-calling-out-the-news-media-ocasio-cortez-has-some-things-in-common-with-trump/2019/02/13/5f7eef7e-1ffe-11e9-9145-3f74070bbdb9_story.html (July 23, 2021).

literature by moving beyond questions of “who believes conspiracy theories?” to questions about the interactions between elite endorsement and public evaluations. We build broadly on the media effects literature, by examining the consequences (or lack thereof) of negative media coverage.

Collectively, we present observational and experimental evidence that candidates who endorse QAnon are not viewed favorably by Americans. We have answered a call for future research to examine the electoral benefits of conspiracy theory endorsement (e.g., Douglas et al. 2019) and found little evidence that there are any. Even people with characteristics that make them more likely to believe conspiracy theories or like candidates who engage with conspiratorial rhetoric do not actually vote for QAnon endorsing candidates. Although this finding contradicts part of our original theory, we see it as normatively good for democracy. We do not find evidence that endorsing a conspiracy theory - and receiving negative media coverage for it - leads to overwhelming support, nor does it lead to increased name recognition. Moreover, only two of the 77 candidates who endorsed QAnon in 2020 won their general elections. While some may still be troubled by their success, it does not seem that endorsing conspiracy theories is a sure-fire way to win elections.

In terms of contributions to the literature, these results suggest that previous research on conspiracy theories in American politics might overstate the extent to which elite conspiratorial rhetoric is electorally strategic. Although Uscinski et al. (2021) suggests that the anti-establishment dimension to American political attitudes is correlated with support for conspiratorial candidates, our evidence suggests that even people with strong anti-establishment preferences are not likely to support candidates who endorse QAnon. Moreover, if there are no electoral benefits that we can detect, our initial question still remains: Why do politicians endorse conspiracy theories?

Unfortunately, we suspect that there may well be opportunities for such research in the near future. Political conspiracy theories do not seem to be going away, and political elites

continue to embrace them. As of July 27, 2021, Media Matters has identified 42 congressional candidates running for office in 2022 who have embraced QAnon (Kaplan 2021). That political conspiracy theories and misinformation run rampant in American politics is normatively troubling. By better understanding the consequences for public perceptions of candidates who endorse conspiracy theories linked to dangerous outcomes, such as the January 6 riots at the Capitol, we hope to shed light on the importance of addressing this problem more broadly.

References

- Amsalem, Eran, Alon Zoizner, Tamir Sheafer, Stefaan Walgrave and Peter John Loewen. 2020. "The effect of politicians' personality on their media visibility." *Communication Research* 47(7):1079–1102.
- Arceneaux, Kevin and Martin Johnson. 2015. "How Does Media Choice Affect Hostile Media Perceptions? Evidence from Participant Preference Experiments." *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 2(1):12–25.
- Arceneaux, Kevin, Martin Johnson and Chad Murphy. 2012. "Polarized Political Communication, Oppositional Media Hostility, and Selective Exposure." *The Journal of Politics* 74(1):174–186.
- Arceneaux, Kevin and Rory Truex. N.d. "Donald Trump and the Lie." . Forthcoming.
URL: <https://osf.io/e89ym>
- Atkinson, Matthew D and Darin DeWitt. 2018. *The Politics of Disruption: Social Choice Theory and Conspiracy Theory Politics*. Oxford University Press p. 122–134.
- Banks, Jeffrey S. and D. Roderick Kiewiet. 1989. "Explaining Patterns of Candidate Competition in Congressional Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 33(4):997–1015.
- Basinger, Scott J. 2013. "Scandals and Congressional Elections in the Post-Watergate Era." *Political Research Quarterly* 66(2):385–398.
- Baum, Matthew A. and Phil Gussin. 2008. "In the Eye of the Beholder: How Information Shortcuts Shape Individual Perceptions of Bias in the Media." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 3(1):1–38.
- Bergengruen, Vera. 2021. "QAnon Candidates Are Winning Local Elections. Can They Be Stopped?" *Time* .
URL: <https://time.com/5955248/qanon-local-elections/>
- Bräuninger, Thomas and Nikolay Marinov. N.d. "Political Elites and the 'War on Truth'." . Forthcoming.
- Burden, Barry C. 2002. "When Bad Press is Good News: The Surprising Benefits of Negative Campaign Coverage." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 7(3):76–89.
- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Canes-Wrone, Brandice. 2006. *Who Leads Whom?: Presidents, Policy, and the Public*. University of Chicago Press.
- Canon, David T. 1993. "Sacrificial Lambs or Strategic Politicians? Political Amateurs in U.S. House Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 37(4):1119.

- Cappella, Joseph N and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. 1997. *Spiral of cynicism: The press and the public good*. Oxford University Press.
- Christenson, Dino P., Sarah E. Kreps and Douglas L. Kriner. 2020. "Contemporary Presidency: Going Public in an Era of Social Media: Tweets, Corrections, and Public Opinion." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* .
- Coe, Kevin, David Tewksbury, Bradley J. Bond, Kristin L. Drogos, Robert W. Porter, Ashley Yahn and Yuanyuan Zhang. 2008. "Hostile News: Partisan Use and Perceptions of Cable News Programming." *Journal of Communication* 58(2):201–219.
- Darr, Joshua P, Matthew P Hitt and Johanna L Dunaway. 2018. "Newspaper Closures Polarize Voting Behavior." *Journal of Communication* 68(6):1007–1028.
- de la Cuesta, Brandon, Naoki Egami and Kosuke Imai. 2021. "Improving the External Validity of Conjoint Analysis: The Essential Role of Profile Distribution." *Political Analysis* p. 1–27.
- Deane-Mayer, Zachary A. and Jared E. Knowles. 2019. "caretEnsemble Package." *R Package Version 2.0.1*.
- Delli Carpini, Michael X. and Scott Keeter. 1997. *What Americans Know about Politics and why It Matters*. Yale University Press.
- Diamond, Alexis and Jasjeet S. Sekhon. 2013. "Genetic Matching for Estimating Causal Effects: A General Multivariate Matching Method for Achieving Balance in Observational Studies." *Review of Economics and Statistics* 95(3):932–945.
- Douglas, Karen M., Joseph E. Uscinski, Robbie M. Sutton, Aleksandra Cichocka, Turkey Nefes, Chee Siang Ang and Farzin Deravi. 2019. "Understanding Conspiracy Theories." *Political Psychology* 40(S1):3–35.
- Douglas, Karen M, Robbie M Sutton and Aleksandra Cichocka. 2016. "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories." 26(6):538–542.
- Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. Harper and Brothers.
- Einstein, Katherine Levine and David M. Glick. 2015. "Do I Think BLS Data are BS? The Consequences of Conspiracy Theories." *Political Behavior* 37(3):679–701.
- Groeling, Tim. 2010. *When Politicians Attack: Party Cohesion in the Media*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hahl, Oliver, Minjae Kim and Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan. 2018. "The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue: Proclaiming the Deeper Truth about Political Illegitimacy." *American Sociological Review* 83(1):1–33.
- Hainmueller, Jens, Daniel J. Hopkins and Teppei Yamamoto. 2014. "Causal Inference in Conjoint Analysis: Understanding Multidimensional Choices via Stated Preference Experiments." *Political Analysis* 22(1):1–30.

- Hall, Andrew B. 2015. "What Happens When Extremists Win Primaries?" *American Political Science Review* 109(01):18–42.
- Hamilton, James T. 2011. *All the news that's fit to sell*. Princeton University Press.
- Hassell, Hans J. G. 2021. "What Makes News Newsworthy: An Experimental Test of Where a News Story Is Published (or Not) and Its Perceived Newsworthiness." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26(3).
- Helfer, Luzia and Peter Van Aelst. 2016. "What makes party messages fit for reporting? An experimental study of journalistic news selection." *Political Communication* 33(1):59–77.
- Hopkins, Daniel J and Hans Noel. N.d. "Trump and the Shifting Meaning of "Conservative": Using Activists' Pairwise Comparisons to Measure Politicians' Perceived Ideologies." . Forthcoming.
- Invernizzi, Giovanna and Ahmed Ezzeldin Mohamed. N.d. "Trust Nobody: How Voters React To Conspiracy Theories." . Forthcoming.
URL: <https://preprints.apsanet.org/engage/apsa/article-details/5f6cf460e9593d0018fef94a>
- Jolley, Daniel and Jenny L. Paterson. 2020. "Pylons ablaze: Examining the role of 5G COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and support for violence." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 59(3):628–640.
- Jolley, Daniel and Karen M. Douglas. 2014. "The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one's carbon footprint." *British Journal of Psychology* 105(1):35–56.
- Kam, Cindy D. and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister. 2013. "Name Recognition and Candidate Support." *American Journal of Political Science* 57(4):971–986.
- Kaplan, Alex. 2020. "Here are the QAnon supporters running for Congress in 2020."
URL: <https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/here-are-qanon-supporters-running-congress-2020>
- Kaplan, Alex. 2021. "Here are the QAnon supporters running for Congress in 2022."
URL: <https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/here-are-qanon-supporters-running-congress-2022>
- Kartik, Navin and Richard Van Weelden. 2019. "Informative Cheap Talk in Elections." *The Review of Economic Studies* 86(2):755–784.
- Mayhew, David R. 1974. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. Yale University Press.
- Miller, Joanne M., Kyle L. Saunders and Christina E. Farhart. 2016. "Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust." *American Journal of Political Science* 60(4):824–844.

- Nyhan, Brendan and Jason Reifler. 2010. "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions." *Political Behavior* 32(2):303–330.
- Oliver, J. Eric and Thomas J. Wood. 2014. "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(4):952–966.
- Palan, Stefan and Christian Schitter. 2018. "Prolific. ac—A subject pool for online experiments." *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Finance* 17:22–27.
- Pew Research Center. 2020. "5 facts about the QAnon conspiracy theories."
URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/16/5-facts-about-the-qanon-conspiracy-theories/>
- Popkin, Samuel L. 1991. *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns*. University of Chicago Press.
- Prior, Markus. 2013. "Media and Political Polarization." *Annual Review of Political Science* 16(1):101–127.
- Radnitz, Scott. 2018. *Why the Powerful (in Weak States) Prefer Conspiracy Theories*. Oxford University Press p. 347–359.
- Rosenblum, Nancy L. and Russell Muirhead. 2019. *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*. Princeton University Press.
- Ryan, Timothy J. and Amanda R. Aziz. 2021. "Is the Political Right More Credulous? Experimental Evidence against Asymmetric Motivations to Believe False Political Information." *The Journal of Politics* .
- Ryan, Timothy J. and Yanna Krupnikov. 2021. "Split Feelings: Understanding Implicit and Explicit Political Persuasion." *American Political Science Review* p. 1–18.
- Schaffner, Brian F. and Matthew J. Streb. 2002. "The Partisan Heuristic in Low-Information Elections." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 66(4):559–581.
- Smith, Glen and Kathleen Searles. 2014. "Who Let the (Attack) Dogs Out? New Evidence for Partisan Media Effects." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 78(1):71–99.
- Thorson, Emily. 2016. "Belief Echoes: The Persistent Effects of Corrected Misinformation." *Political Communication* 33(3):460–480.
- Uscinski, Joseph E. 2018. *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*. Oxford University Press.
- Uscinski, Joseph E, Adam M Enders, Michelle I Seelig, Casey A Klofstad, John R Funchion, Caleb Everett, Stefan Wuchty, Kamal Premaratne and Manohar N Murthi. 2021. "American politics in two dimensions: Partisan and ideological identities versus anti-establishment orientations." *American Journal of Political Science* .

- Uscinski, Joseph E. and Joseph M. Parent. 2014. *American Conspiracy Theories*. Oxford University Press.
- Vallone, Robert P., Lee Ross and Mark R. Lepper. 1985. "The Hostile Media Phenomenon: Biased Perception and Perceptions of Media Bias in Coverage of the Beirut Massacre." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49(3):577–585.
- Wagner, Michael W. and Mike Gruszczyński. 2018. "Who Gets Covered? Ideological Extremity and News Coverage of Members of the U.S. Congress, 1993 to 2013." *Journalism Mass Communication Quarterly* 95(3):670–690.
- Watanabe, Kohei. N.d. "Conspiracist propaganda: How Russia promotes anti-establishment sentiment online?" . Forthcoming.
- Wood, Thomas and Ethan Porter. 2019. "The Elusive Backfire Effect: Mass Attitudes' Steadfast Factual Adherence." *Political Behavior* 41(1):135–163.
- Zaller, John R. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge University Press.

Supplementary Information

CueAnon

Contents

A	Observational Analysis: Quantity and Tone of Candidate Coverage	1
A.1	Nexis Uni Article Collection Instrucion	1
A.2	Nexis Uni Article Coding Instrucion	4
A.3	Ballotpedia Candidate Scraping and Data Collection Instrucion	7
A.4	Data and Results	10
B	Experimental Evidence: News Tone and Candidate Favorability	13
B.1	Robustness Checks for Trust in Media, H3	14
B.2	Results for Party Identification, H4	16
B.3	Results for Name Recognition, H5	18
C	Experimental Evidence: Conjoint	19

A Observational Analysis: Quantity and Tone of Candidate Coverage

A.1 Nexis Uni Article Collection Instrucion

Instructions for Nexius Uni News Articles about 2020 Candidates

1. Log on to Nexis Uni

- Visit the library's website and click on "Nexis Uni." You will be taken to a log in page where you can put in your university key to access the site.

2. Search for candidates

- Using the big search bar, enter the candidate's name from the CSV file (e.g. 'lauren witzke').
- Once you are on the results page, on the top left you should see a header that says "Results for candidate name and"Actions" in blue and a down arrow. Click on the down arrow and select the first option "Run search as terms & connectors." This will search for the full name rather than "lauren" or "witzke." The page will refresh with new results.
- On the left sidebar find "Timeline" and click it. Then enter the start date as 1/1/2020 and the end date as 11/2/2020. The page will refresh with new results.
- Then find "Publication Type" on the sidebar and select "Newspapers." The page will refresh with new results. If this option is not available, that means there are no newspaper articles about the candidate. Stop and proceed to step 3.
- Find "Language" on the sidebar and select "English".
- Now, you've subset appropriately. Because news articles may be about the candidate or possibly about other people with the same name (especially if the name is common), quickly skim each article to ensure it's about the candidate.
 - This does not need to be a long process—if the headline is about politics, then that is good enough. If that is unclear, look at the excerpt—often it will say something like "Republican candidate, Lauren Witzke..." which is sufficient to meet the criteria.
 - If the article is about the candidate, check the box next to the article. Continue for all articles that meet the filtered criteria. The checks will persist even as you go to the next results page.
 - If, in the process, you discover that the candidate goes by some other name or nickname, follow the above/below steps and include those articles as well.

3. Updating the CSV and Box

- If there are no articles, find that candidate's row and record 0 in the csv in the total_news . column. Otherwise...
- When you've checked all articles about the candidate, start downloading them. You can download the checked articles by using the download button toward the top—this is the down

arrow into a box. Note: You can only download 100 articles at a time. If the candidate has more than 100 articles, please repeat these steps in batches of 100.

- On the screen that pops up ensure you check the following options:
 - * Full documents
 - * Rich Text Format
 - * Save as individual files
 - * Rename the Filename the candidate's name where spaces are replaced by the _ key and all letters in lowercase e.g. "lauren_witzke"
- This will download a zip file. Open the zip file and add the contents of the unzipped folder to the NexisFolders321 folder in Box as in the example folder that is already there.
- Check to make sure there are no duplicates in the candidate folder—these will normally be denoted by your system by appending a (1) or (2) etc to the end of the filename. For example, you might see "Article Title" and "Article Title (1)". Put any duplicates (aka any with a numeric append) in the trash but keep the original in the folder.
- Every time you download a file, it will also download a file that simply lists the articles you downloaded called candidate_name_doclist. Delete this file as well.
- Once you've cleaned up everything, count how many files are left in the folder. If you are on mac, you can do this without manually counting anything—just select all articles in the folder and right click. Then, the first item in the menu will say "New Folder With Selection (XXX Items)". There is probably something similar on Windows. Record that number in the csv under total_news for that candidate.
 - Note: You cannot simply record the number from the checked boxes on the website as it will include duplicate articles.

A.2 Nexis Uni Article Coding Instrucion

Instructions for Coding Articles

Our ultimate goal is to determine whether the articles Nexis Uni has labeled "negative news" are *negative in tone toward the target candidate* we are interested in. That is, even if the article is negative in tone overall, does that negativity apply to the candidate of interest?

Articles and spreadsheet

In the folder `NexisFolders_1220`, you find a spreadsheet called `articles_handcode.csv`. You'll see five columns. The first column, `name` will direct you to the appropriate candidate folder where you can find the assigned article. The column `title` will tell you which article in the candidate folder to read. You can ignore the next two columns called `neg` and `qcand`. The final column `negative` is where you'll record whether the article is *negative in tone toward the target candidate*. 1 means it is negative toward the target candidate. 0 means it is not.

How to determine negativity

We are not interested in whether an article is negative overall, but rather, whether the article's negativity applies to the target candidate (the candidate whose folder the article came from). To further clarify: we want to know if the *article's author* is negative toward the candidate. We don't care if the author reports about someone else saying something negative about the candidate.

As an example, there is an article in our sample titled "Senate candidate changes story about gun claim." Nexis Uni has classified it as negative news. Reading the article, I would classify the following excerpt as negative about Peggy Hubbard:

"After spawning controversy when she said she brought a handgun to a debate at a suburban high school last month, Republican Senate hopeful Peggy Hubbard shared a different version of that tale during a televised forum Tuesday."

However, this article is in the folder for a candidate named **Robert Marshall**. The article says this about Marshall:

After asking Hubbard about the Hinsdale Central forum, Ponce asked all the candidates about gun control laws. One of them, Robert Marshall, took the opportunity to accuse Hubbard of lying about what happened at the forum. "Mrs. Hubbard has two versions of what happened, and it's all on tape," Marshall said. "So one of her versions is false."

This passage does not necessarily seem to be negative about Marshall. Rather, it just recounts his actions at the debate (which themselves might be negative or mean), but the author of the article seems to be reporting the facts of what happened without making any judgment about Marshall.

Were the target candidate Peggy Hubbard you would code this as 1 in the negative column. However, the target is Robert Marshall, so you would code this article as 0 in the negative column since it is not actually negative *about Robert Marshall*. If later in the article, the author had noted that Peggy Hubbard said "Robert Marshall was a big jerk," you *still code this as 0* because the author was not being negative toward Marshall.

Ultimately, these are subjective decisions, and another person could disagree with your label. That's fine and to be expected. Just trust your gut.

How to code articles with many references to the candidate

It is likely that these articles will mention the target candidate multiple times. Some of these references may be neutral or factual. Others may be negative. The rule of thumb here is like that saying "one bad apple spoils the whole bunch." *Any negativity toward the candidate*, even if it's just once out of five times is enough to code the article as negative. Even if the article was positive toward the candidate at one point, any negativity toward them is sufficient to code it as 1 for negative.

What this means is that you can actually save yourself some time and quit reading an article after the first negative reference to the

candidate. However, if there are no negative references, you'll have to read the whole thing through to be sure.

A.3 Ballotpedia Candidate Scraping and Data Collection Instrucion

We created an automated web scraper that went through Ballotpedia.com and tried to identify all candidates who ran in House and Senate primaries or general elections in 2020, as well as some information about those candidates. Unfortunately, the scraper isn't perfect nor is Ballotpedia, so there were several places where we were unable to capture information we are interested in.

In the excel file, you will find a list of candidates as well as columns with variables we are interested in. Each row is a candidate, and in each row, there is something missing—believe it or not, this is a small minority of all the candidates that ran.

Our hope is that you'll be able to help us fill in the NAs. Here is the process:

1. Quickly look at the candidate's name. Often, there isn't anything wrong with the name, but occasionally, the scraper grabbed something that wasn't actually a candidate. For example, in row 18, the name is "Candidate Conversation." Clearly, this was a mistake and isn't a candidate.
 - a. **Action:** Delete the entire row.
2. Quickly check the link. Ballotpedia candidate links all have a similar format and should look something like this: https://ballotpedia.org/Wendell_Crow. However, sometimes there is a mistake where we only capture part of the link. For example, in row 30, all that appears is `"/Barry_Hess"`
 - a. **Action:** If it is a candidate's name, try to visit their Ballotpedia page by adding <https://ballotpedia.org> to the front. If that works, replace the bad link with the full, working link. **Please note: If the link was broken**, there may still be information about the candidate's office, party, etc in the row. **This information will be incorrect.** Please continue to follow the process and verify/replace all missing and entered values for the remaining columns.
 - b. **Action:** If it's not a candidate at all, delete the row. If there is a candidate, but the link was broken because of capitalization issues (e.g. `/Barry_hess` instead of `/Barry_Hess`), try searching for the candidate's name within Ballotpedia. If the candidate did run in 2020, fix the link and update the information.
3. Often, the sex of the candidate is missing because Ballotpedia doesn't have any information on whether the candidate identifies as male or female.
 - a. **Action:** Do a quick google search for the candidate and see if you can find this information in any news articles where they use the candidate's pronouns. Don't spend too much time on this. If you find their pronouns, code them as M or F as appropriate. If their pronouns are neither he/his nor her/hers, then code this variable as "other." If you cannot quickly find their pronouns, just leave them as NA.
4. `Prev_off` is a variable that takes on the value of 1 when the candidate has held previous office and takes on a value of 0 if they have not.
 - a. **Action:** if the `prev_office` value is NA...

- i. If the candidate held prior office, there is often a section in the box called “prior offices.” If that section exists, then code `prev_off` as 1. If this box does not appear...
 - ii. See if the candidate is currently in office in the box on the right. If it says US House or US Senate and their “tenure” began before 2021, code as 1. Otherwise...
 - iii. Quickly read the biography text about the candidate. If it lists previous elected office at any level of government, code as 1. Otherwise code as 0.
 - b. For example, Ted Terry in row 51 is NA. On his page, we can see that there is no prior offices section in the box. We can also see in the box he began his term on the Dekalb County Commission in 2021—so this is a new office not a previous office. We can see in the biography that there is no information about any previous elected office before this one. Therefore, we would code this as 0.
5. If party is NA, that information can usually be found in the box or in the overview text about the candidate.
- a. **Action:** Enter the first letter of the party in the party column.
6. Office looks at whether the person ran for the House or the Senate in 2020. If this is missing, you can often find this information in the overview section. Often this information is missing when the candidate dropped out or lost the primary and then ran for something else.
- a. **Action:** Please enter House or Senate accordingly.
7. State and District. This information can often be found in the overview text about the candidate.
- a. **Action:** Please enter the full state name in the state column and the numeric value of the district they ran in. For example, Ballotpedia will say that someone ran for Colorado’s 2nd congressional district. You would enter Colorado and 2. If the district is an “At Large” district, please enter 1 in the district spot. If the candidate ran for Senate, please enter 99 in the district space.
8. `Ge_cand` is about whether a candidate ran in the November 3rd *general* election (meaning that they won their primary and advanced to the general).
- a. **Action:** Look at the candidate overview text. Often this will tell you if the candidate ran in a primary or general election and whether they won or lost. Mark this as 1 if the candidate competed *in a House or Senate* general election (including write ins or independent bids). Otherwise, mark it as 0. Note: If the candidate ran for the House but lost and then ran for State Senate or something, this would be coded as 0. The box on the right may have information about the candidate’s last election, **but be careful**—especially if the candidate ran for a different office than House or Senate.

A.4 Data and Results

Table A1: Examples of human sentiment-coded newspaper text for both QAnon-endorsing and non-endorsing candidates.

Candidate	QAnon	Negative	Text
Marjorie Taylor Greene	Yes	Yes	At least one of them, Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, will probably join the House next year. Despite her QAnon advocacy and a history of racist and Islamophobic rants on social media, Mr. Trump hailed her as a “future Republican star.”
C. Wesley Morgan	Yes	No	As of Friday afternoon, those who have filed to run for state or federal offices in Kentucky, which has to be done through the state secretary of state’s office in Frankfort, include...Mitch McConnell of Louisville and C. Wesley Morgan of Richmond .
Peggy Hubbard	No	Yes	Hubbard drew controversy for publicly claiming she took a gun and ammunition into a suburban school for a candidate forum. Hubbard later changed her story, telling the Daily Herald she “misspoke” and actually had left the gun locked in her car.
Kim Klacik	No	No	The RNC featured a large number of speakers including, as reported by CBS, Maryland Congressional candidate Kim Klacik , Pennsylvania congressional candidate Sean Parnell and North Carolina congressional candidate Madison Cawthorn.

Table A3: Effect of QAnon endorsement on the number of news articles and proportion of negative news coverage.

	News Coverage	
	Total Number of Articles	Proportion Negative
Estimated ATT	-1.33	0.20
Abadie-Imbens Standard Error	6.81	0.07
T-Statistic	-0.19	2.75
<i>p</i> -value	0.85	0.01
No. Treated	96	49
No. Control (Unweighted)	179	56

Note: Estimated average treatment effect on the treated of QAnon endorsement. The dependent variable in column 1 is the number of news articles referencing the candidate, and in column 2, the proportion of negative news articles referencing the candidate among candidates receiving any news coverage.

Table A4: Effect of QAnon endorsement on the number of news articles and proportion of negative news coverage using smaller subsample with both RA codes.

	News Coverage	
	Total Number of Articles	Proportion Negative
Estimated ATT	-1.31	0.15
Abadie-Imbens Standard Error	6.81	0.06
T-Statistic	-0.19	2.65
<i>p</i> -value	0.85	0.01
No. Treated	96	50
No. Control (Unweighted)	179	63

Note: Estimated average treatment effect on the treated of QAnon endorsement. The dependent variable in column 1 is the number of news articles referencing the candidate among the matched sample, and in column 2, the proportion of negative news articles among those receiving any news coverage at all.

Table A2: Matching balance for smaller matched subset of candidates who received at least one article.

	Before Matching				After Matching			
	QAnon Endorser		Non-Endorser		QAnon Endorser		Non-Endorser	
	mean	p-value	mean	p-value	mean	p-value	mean	p-value
% Female	0.43	0.07	0.27	0.07	0.43	0.07	0.43	1.00
% Previous Officeholder	0.04	0.62	0.02	0.62	0.04	0.62	0.04	1.00
% Senate Bid	0.14	0.55	0.18	0.55	0.14	0.55	0.12	0.66
% In General Election	0.45	0.04	0.27	0.04	0.45	0.04	0.45	1.00
% Incumbent	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00
Party								
% Republican	0.96	0.61	0.94	0.61	0.96	0.61	0.98	0.32
% Democrat	0.02	0.32	0.00	0.32	0.02	0.32	0.00	0.32
% Independent	0.00	0.32	0.01	0.32	0.00	0.32	0.00	1.00
% Other	0.02	0.37	0.05	0.37	0.02	0.37	0.02	1.00
Constituency								
% Open Seat	0.16	0.02	0.34	0.02	0.16	0.02	0.14	0.57
Population Density	3034.9	0.04	1656.8	0.04	3034.9	0.04	3286.6	0.54
Cook PVI (R)	-8.65	0.00	0.13	0.00	-8.65	0.00	-9.47	1.00
Median Age	38.16	0.81	38.38	0.81	38.16	0.81	38.34	0.67
% White	0.65	0.16	0.71	0.16	0.65	0.16	0.65	0.99
% Black	0.16	0.63	0.14	0.63	0.16	0.63	0.15	1.00
% Some College	0.62	0.53	0.61	0.53	0.62	0.53	0.62	0.82
Median Household Income	68.26	0.64	66.64	0.64	68.26	0.64	69.05	0.56

B Experimental Evidence: News Tone and Candidate Favorability

Table B1: Balance statistics for experimental groups

	Neutral	Negative	Conspiracy	<i>F</i> -Statistic	<i>p</i> -Value
News Importance (5 point)	3.46	3.43	3.49	1.4	0.24
Party ID (7 Point)	3.85	3.72	3.86	1.5	0.22
Ideology (7 Point)	3.45	3.44	3.49	0.37	0.54
Female	0.5	0.54	0.5	1.44	0.23
Age (4 Point)	2.51	2.59	2.63	0.38	0.54
Education (5 Point)	3.16	3.03	2.95	1.27	0.26
Income (20 Point)	10.14	9.94	10.35	3.18	0.07
White	0.64	0.61	0.64	0.95	0.33
Black	0.09	0.12	0.12	0.15	0.70
Latin	0.18	0.2	0.15	6	0.01*
Asian	0.06	0.02	0.05	7.15	0.01*

B.1 Robustness Checks for Trust in Media, H3

In Table [B2](#), we re-present results from the baseline model in the main text where we regress a respondent's evaluation of the candidate on a 101-point feeling thermometer on indicators for each treatment condition, trust in media, and their interactions. We also present three alternative specifications: one with controls and weights, wave 1 only, and wave 2 only. The coefficient sizes and their statistical significance are substantively similar across models.

Table B2: Robustness checks for the effects of treatment and trust in media on candidate favorability

	Candidate Thermometer Rating			
	Main Model	Controls and Weights	Wave 1	Wave 2
Trust in Media	2.81** (1.01)	4.61*** (1.07)	3.19* (1.39)	1.02 (1.51)
Negative	-5.17 (3.65)	-3.91 (3.68)	-7.19 (5.21)	-6.47 (5.12)
Conspiracy	0.27 (3.58)	-2.62 (3.51)	1.24 (5.24)	-3.11 (4.91)
Negative × Trust	-3.74** (1.42)	-4.26** (1.43)	-3.33 (1.98)	-2.69 (2.04)
Conspiracy × Trust	-10.64*** (1.40)	-9.21*** (1.37)	-11.63*** (1.98)	-8.48*** (1.99)
News Import		-1.38** (0.52)		
Party ID (7 Point)		0.71* (0.30)		
Ideology (7 Point)		1.42*** (0.41)		
Female		2.54** (0.92)		
Age (4 Point)		-0.46 (0.44)		
Education (5 Point)		-0.46 (0.42)		
Income (20 Point)		-0.51*** (0.12)		
White		1.66 (2.32)		
Black		4.12 (2.65)		
Latin		2.15 (2.49)		
Asian		8.46** (3.16)		
Baseline	49.33*** (2.58)	46.33*** (4.30)	51.34*** (3.70)	50.46*** (3.64)
R ²	0.24	0.26	0.26	0.21
Adj. R ²	0.23	0.26	0.26	0.21
Num. obs.	1948	1931	973	975

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Note: Coefficients are all from ordinary least squares regressions where the dependent variable is a 101-point thermometer rating of the candidate.

B.2 Results for Party Identification, H4

In Figure B1, we present the marginal effects of each treatment comparison for each level of seven-point party identification. In contrast to our hypotheses, we find that Republicans *decrease* their evaluation of the candidate in the negative condition as compared to the control condition (H4a) as well as in the conspiracy condition as compared to the control condition (H4b). Finally, we find no statistical difference between evaluations comparing the two treatments (H4c). We fail to support these three hypotheses.

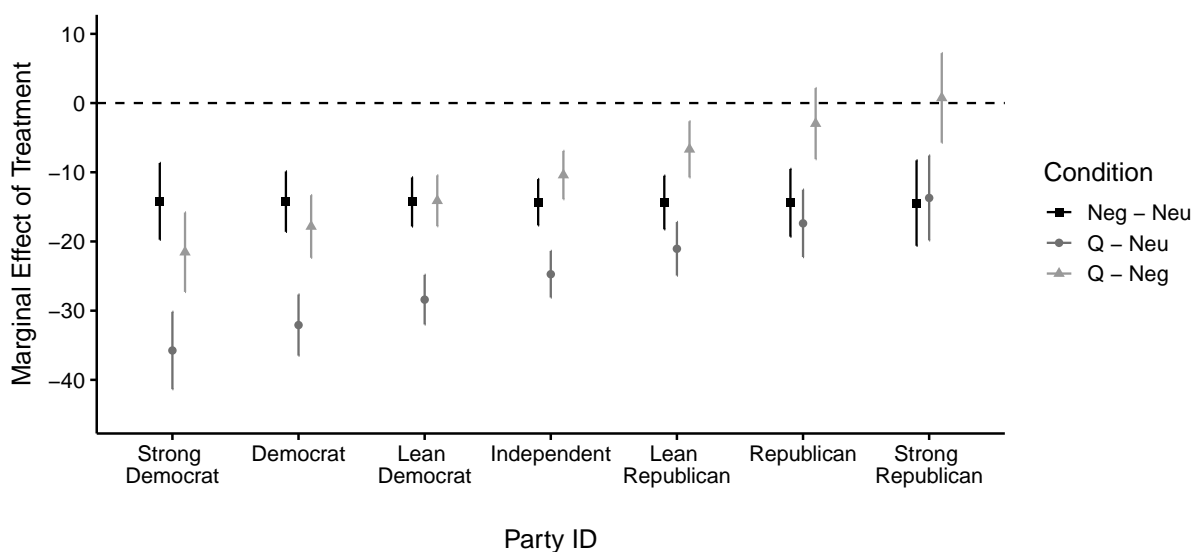


Figure B1: Average marginal effects of each treatment comparison for varying levels of party identification

In line with our hypotheses, we find that Democrats decrease their evaluations of the candidate in the negative condition as compared to the control condition (H4d), and even more so in the conspiracy condition compared to the control condition (H4e). Finally, we find that these differences are significantly distinguishable from one another (H4f). We support all three of these hypotheses.

In Table B3, we re-present results from the baseline model in the main text where we regress a respondent's evaluation of the candidate on a 101-point feeling thermometer on indicators for each treatment condition, seven-point party identification, and their interactions. We also present three alternative specifications: one with controls and weights, wave 1 only, and wave 2 only. The coefficient sizes and their statistical significance is substantively similar across models.

Table B3: Robustness checks for the effects of treatment and party ID on candidate favorability

	Candidate Thermometer Rating			
	Main Model	Controls and Weights	Wave 1	Wave 2
Party ID (7 Point)	-0.05 (0.38)	-0.63 (0.43)	0.13 (0.55)	-0.02 (0.52)
Negative	-14.16*** (2.30)	-16.27*** (2.35)	-13.92*** (3.31)	-13.90*** (3.18)
Conspiracy	-39.43*** (2.32)	-39.35*** (2.36)	-37.25*** (3.35)	-40.39*** (3.18)
Negative × Party ID	-0.04 (0.54)	0.50 (0.54)	-0.48 (0.80)	0.24 (0.72)
Conspiracy × Party ID	3.67*** (0.54)	3.71*** (0.54)	2.51** (0.79)	4.53*** (0.72)
Trust in Media (4 Point)		0.31 (0.66)		
News Importance (5 Point)		-1.27* (0.52)		
Ideology (7 Point)		1.54*** (0.41)		
Female		2.53** (0.92)		
Age (4 Point)		-0.41 (0.44)		
Education (5 Point)		-0.59 (0.42)		
Income (20 Point)		-0.51*** (0.12)		
White		1.72 (2.31)		
Black		4.45 (2.63)		
Latin		2.38 (2.48)		
Asian		9.28** (3.15)		
Baseline	56.32*** (1.66)	61.23*** (4.07)	58.94*** (2.34)	52.90*** (2.33)
R ²	0.24	0.27	0.25	0.25
Adj. R ²	0.24	0.26	0.24	0.24
Num. obs.	1944	1931	969	975

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Note: Coefficients are all from ordinary least squares regressions where the dependent variable is a 101-point thermometer rating of the candidate.

B.3 Results for Name Recognition, H5

In Table B4, we present the results from two regressions where we regress a respondent's entry when asked to recall the candidate's name on the treatment indicators. Coefficients in column 1 are from an ordinary least squares regression and results in column 2 are from a logit regression. In column 1, the dependent variable is the Jaro Winkler string similarity score between the respondent's name recall answer and the candidate's name. In column 2, the dependent variable is a binary measure that takes on the value of 1 if the respondent entered the candidate's first or last name anywhere in their response, and 0 otherwise. We find no evidence that either treatment increased name recall, so we fail to support H5a-H5c.

Table B4: Regression results for candidate name recognition.

	Name Recognition	
	Jaro Winkler Score	Binary Measure
Negative	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.11)
Conspiracy	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.12 (0.11)
Constant	0.63*** (0.01)	0.06 (0.08)
R ²	0.00	
Adj. R ²	0.00	
Num. obs.	1960	1962

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Note: Coefficients in column 1 are from an ordinary least squares regression and results in column 2 are from a logit regression. In column 1, the dependent variable is the Jaro Winkler string similarity score between the respondent's name recall and the candidate's name. In column 2, the dependent variable is a binary measure that takes on the value of 1 if the respondent entered the candidate's first or last name anywhere in their response, and 0 otherwise.

C Experimental Evidence: Conjoint

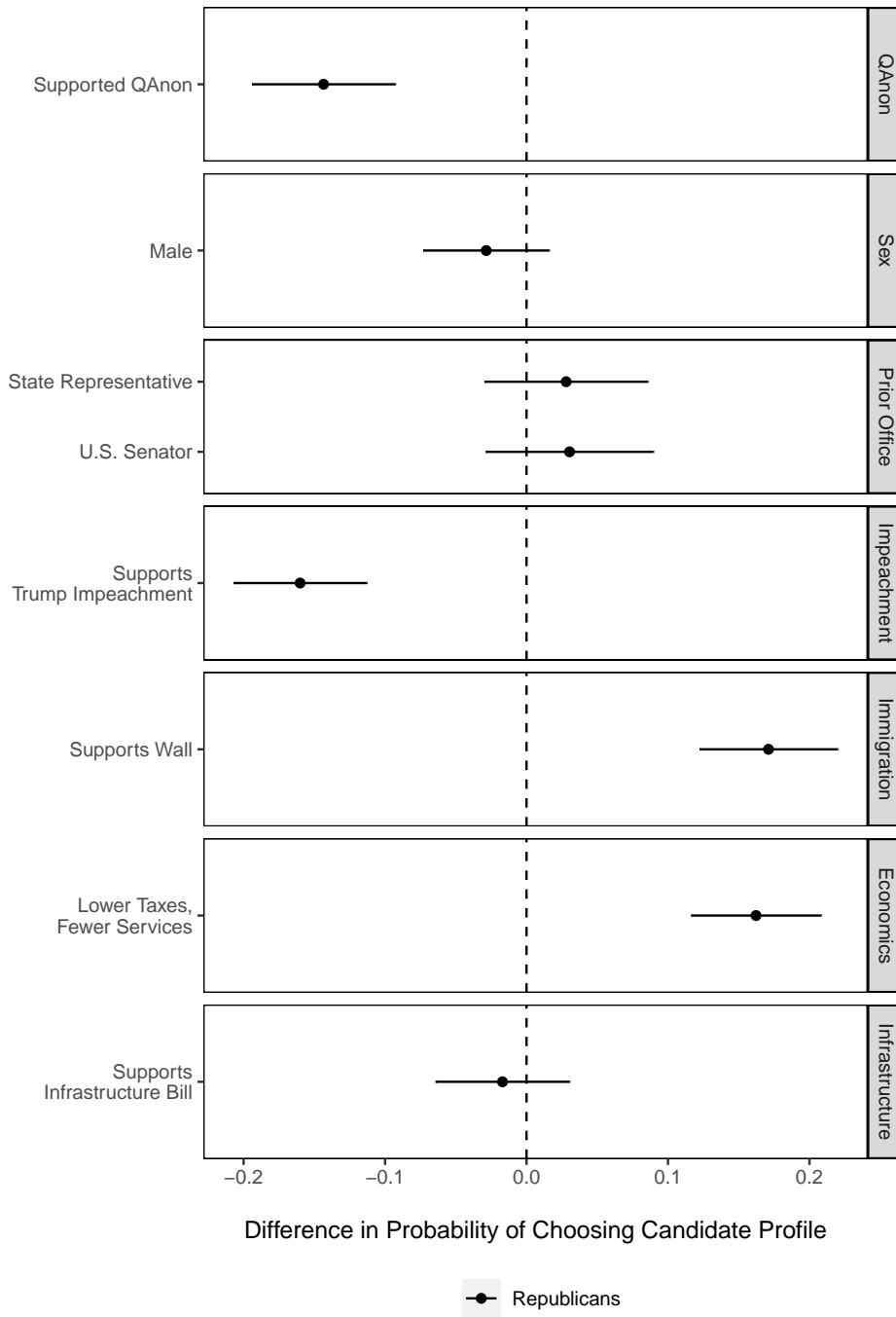


Figure C1: AMCE of each attribute on candidate choice in a Republican primary context. QAnon endorsement causes a decline in vote choice. We include only choices between two Republican candidates and subset to just Republican respondents to estimate this model.

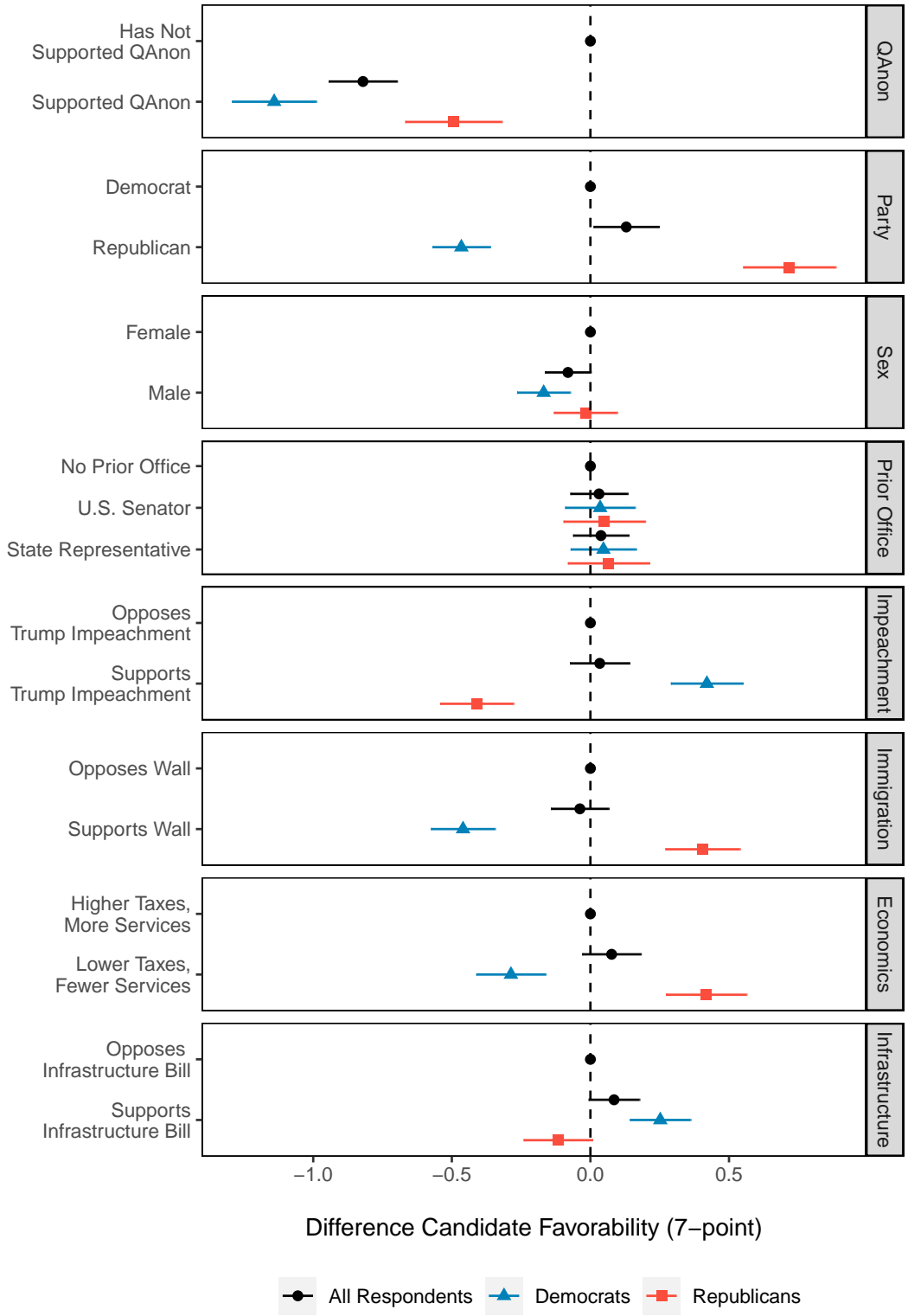


Figure C2: AMCE of each attribute on 7-point favorability. QAnon endorsement causes a decline in favorability, however, this effect is larger among Democrats than Republicans.

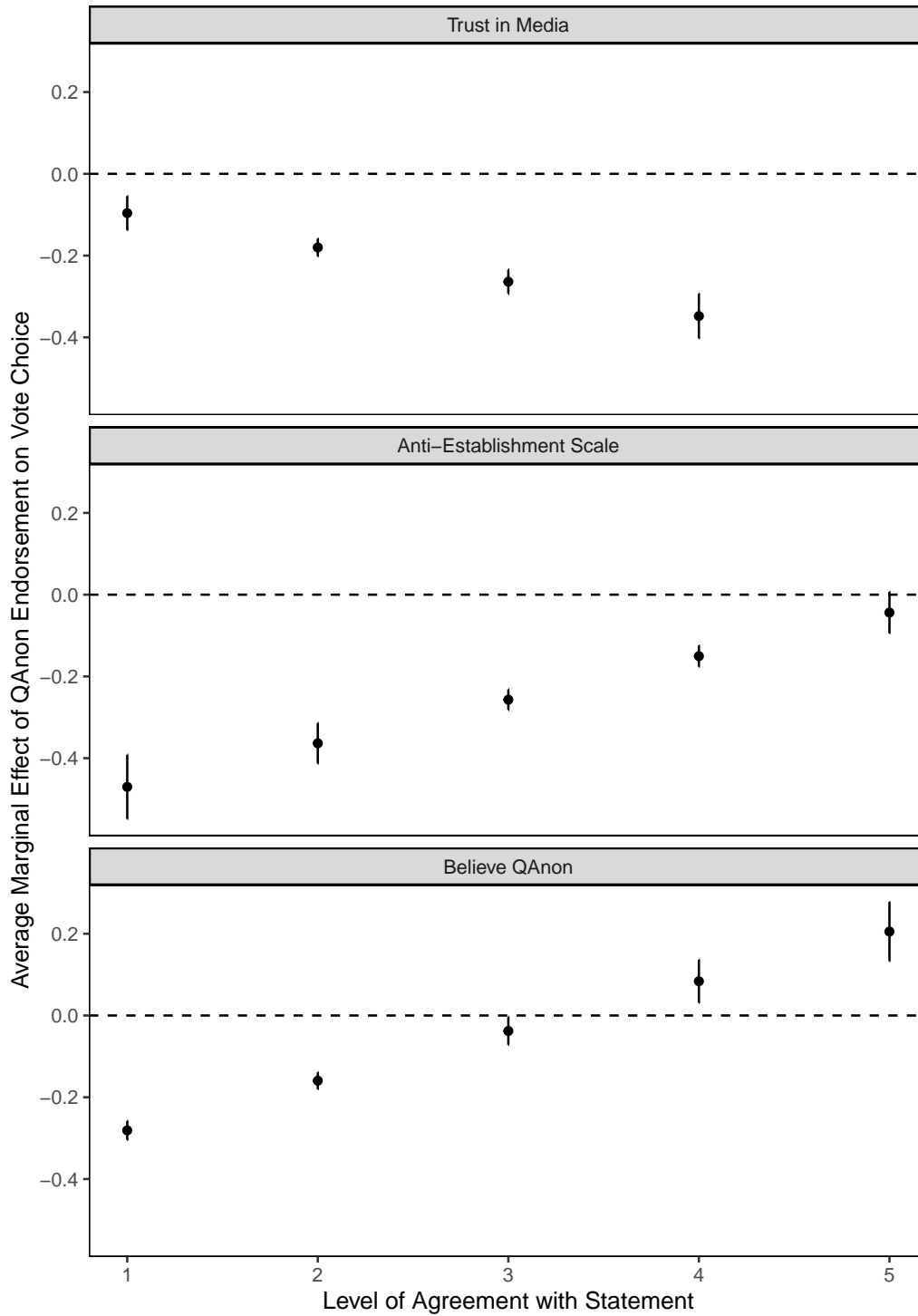


Figure C3: Average marginal effects of QAnon endorsement on candidate choice for each level of the stated moderator variable. Neither lower trust in media nor anti-establishment beliefs cause respondents to increase the probability of voting for a QAnon-endorsing candidate. However, respondents who themselves believe QAnon are more likely to vote for a candidate who endorses the conspiracy theory.