CueAnon: What QAnon Signals about Congressional Candidates and What it Costs Them *

Benjamin S. Noble† Taylor N. Carlson‡

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Abstract

Most research investigates why the public embraces conspiracy theories, but few studies empirically examine how Americans evaluate the politicians who do. We argued that politicians portrayed as supporting QAnon would garner negative mainstream media attention, but this coverage could increase their name recognition and signal positive attributes to voters with low trust in media who would feel warmer toward those candidates. Although we confirm that candidates friendly toward QAnon receive more negative media coverage, our nationally-representative vignette experiment reveals that QAnon support decreases favorability toward candidates, even among seemingly sympathetic sub-populations. A follow-up conjoint experiment, varying whether candidates support QAnon, replicates these findings. This paper is one of the first to highlight the potential costs of elite conspiracy theory support and complicates popular narratives about QAnon.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, trust in media, QAnon, candidate evaluation, media bias, text analysis

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†Assistant Professor, University of California, San Diego, Department of Political Science, 9500 Gilman Drive 0521, La Jolla CA 92093; b2noble@ucsd.edu, benjaminnoble.org.

‡Associate Professor, Washington University in Saint Louis, Department of Political Science, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis, MO 63130; tncarlson@wustl.edu, sites.wustl.edu/tncarlson.

Political conspiracy theories have long played a role in American political behavior, but they have recently attracted increased attention due, in part, to promotion from within American government. For example, in 2020, President Trump spoke approvingly of the QAnon conspiracy theory (Miller, Colvin and Seitz 2020), and Media Matters, a left-leaning media watchdog, identified 97 QAnon supporters running for Congress (Kaplan 2020). This marriage of political power and conspiracy theory promotion has not ended. President Trump continues to allude to the "deep state" (Allen 2023), a core tenet of the QAnon philosophy. Seventy-three QAnon supporters ran for Congress in 2022, and Jacob Chansley, the "QAnon Shaman," known for his role in the January 6 riots, filed paperwork to run for Congress in 2024 (Concepcion 2023). But how do Americans evaluate candidates who support conspiracy theories like QAnon? Does support cue positive attributes about the candidate to a subset of voters? Or do these candidates win *despite* their controversial positions?

Although many worry that candidates can use conspiracy theories to appeal to anti-establishment voters to increase support for themselves (Douglas et al. 2019; Uscinski et al. 2021), research has predominantly focused on the underlying predispositions and beliefs that lead some in the mass public to embrace conspiracy theories (e.g., Enders et al. 2022; Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016; Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski 2018). Yet, we know little about how Americans evaluate politicians when they publicly embrace conspiracy theories (but see Arceneaux and Truex 2022; Wu et al. 2022)—a question of increasing importance in the wake of the 2020 and 2022 elections.

We address this gap in our understanding by investigating how Americans evaluate candidates who support conspiracy theories—QAnon in particular—through a series of pre-registered experiments and observational studies.[1] We chose QAnon given its conceptualization as a "big tent conspiracy theory" or movement that is rooted in a web of other conspiracy theories like the "deep state," election fraud, and anti-elite sentiment

[1]We pre-registered our pre-analysis plans at `https://osf.io/6e8az/?view_only=5b20d3be656f47d8922d9e38f6c31684`. Studies involving human subjects were IRB-approved.

(Roose 2021) as well as the large number of congressional candidates who supported it in the 2020 election when we began our research.[2] That so many candidates openly supported a conspiracy theory as controversial as QAnon is puzzling. Candidates could be promoting their true, underlying beliefs in QAnon, or they could be acting strategically, taking a position for electoral benefit, commercial gain, or (social) media attention. Disentangling why politicians take a position on any issue, let alone a conspiracy theory, is a challenging if not impossible empirical task. We focus here on how individuals evaluate candidates who are portrayed as supporting QAnon.

Given that public support for QAnon is low (Enders et al. 2022), we began with a theory about indirect electoral benefits of QAnon support that operate through mainstream media coverage. Labeling a candidate as a "QAnon supporter" could have important consequences for how that candidate is evaluated. We hypothesized that supporting QAnon attracts mainstream media attention (Amsalem et al. 2020; Helfer and Aelst 2016; Uscinski 2022) and increases a candidate's name recognition (Kam and Zechmeister 2013). While we expected this media attention to be negative (Uscinski and Parent 2014), it could counter-intuitively increase candidate evaluations among voters with low trust in media through a backfire effect (Christenson, Kreps and Kriner 2020; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Thorson 2016).

To test this argument, we collected local and national newspaper coverage of 2020 congressional candidates who supported QAnon and compared them to a matched sample of candidates who did not. Counter to our expectations, we found no evidence that QAnon supporters earned more mainstream newspaper coverage. However, coverage was more negative on average. Using these news stories as a template, we conducted two waves of a pre-registered, nationally-representative vignette experiment in which we randomly assigned respondents to read a mock news story about a hypothetical candidate described

[2]Mainstream media regularly refers to QAnon as a conspiracy theory, but others, such as the Anti-Defamation League refer to it as a movement. Some point out the QAnon is a "super conspiracy theory" that includes many conspiracy theories under its umbrella. At the time of our data collection, QAnon was often covered as a conspiracy theory. We refer to it as such here.

as supporting QAnon (or not). We also varied the tone of these stories to isolate the effect of negative coverage distinct from coverage of QAnon support. Again, inconsistent with our original hypotheses and related studies, we found no evidence that QAnon support increased candidate favorability or name recognition, even among Republicans or those with low trust in media.

Following Ryan and Krupnikov (2021), we reconsidered our theory and conducted a follow-up, pre-registered conjoint experiment. Here, we investigated the direct effects of QAnon support. Given the results from our first study, we concluded that QAnon support might be more bug than feature. And indeed, we find respondents—including Republicans, those with low trust in media, those with anti-establishment worldviews (Uscinski et al. 2021), and those who consume alt-right media—were no more likely to vote for a candidate who supported QAnon. We also find that QAnon is a signal of ideological conservatism, but more so among *Democrats* than Republicans.

Our article is one of the first to move beyond questions of why some in the mass public embrace conspiracy theories to instead examine how Americans evaluate politicians who do (see also Arceneaux and Truex 2022; Wu et al. 2022). Across a series of pre-registered studies, we show that Americans do not evaluate QAnon-supporting candidates favorably, and those who we might expect to be attracted to these candidates are not. These results are at odds with our original hypotheses and claims in related research—but our pre-registered analyses allow scholars to trace the evolution of our theories and build on our work. In our discussion section, we consider how our findings may generalize and provide directions for future research. In short, we do not believe there are negative consequences for supporting all conspiracy theories at all times (e.g., Arceneaux and Truex 2022). However, we speculate that, generally, conspiracy theory support is not a winning electoral strategy.

This article raises important questions regarding candidate position-taking, conspiracy theories, and misinformation broadly. Our research indicates that QAnon-endorsing

candidates win elections despite, rather than because of, their support. Yet that begs the question: *why* would politicians do so? Although we cannot answer this question empirically, we encourage scholars to consider the "externalities" of conspiracy theory support. That is, rather than viewing the position as instrumentally useful, support may allow voters to make additional inferences about the candidate. First, our observational results indicate that QAnon-supporting candidates lacked political experience (97%). As such, QAnon support may have been a strategic choice to signal outsider status, a feature that is increasingly attractive to Republican voters (Porter and Treul 2024). Second, we assume politicians want to win elections. However, these individuals may have other motivations, like publicity or alt-right employment. These signals could be targeting elites, not voters. Third, our results show that these candidates were able to use QAnon to signal conservative bona fides. Their support may have been a scorched-earth tactic to run to the right of incumbents. Although we focus on evaluations and electoral implications, future work should consider these alternative motivations.

How do Americans evaluate candidates who support QAnon?

We focus on QAnon, a web of conspiracy theories grounded in the unsupported claim that satanic pedophiles infiltrated the U.S. government and other elite institutions—a group President Trump would bring to justice. QAnon began on 4Chan, a fringe social media platform, in 2017, when an anonymous poster called "Q" claimed to be a government official with access to classified information. Q posted cryptic messages over the next several years alluding to the satanic cabal conspiring against Donald Trump and foreshadowing its downfall. The theory gained traction, expanded, and moved offline, with people showing support for Q at rallies throughout 2018 and onward. In 2019, the FBI designated QAnon a domestic terrorist threat, and it has been linked to political vio-

lence, most notably the events of January 6, 2021 (Rubin, Bruggeman and Steakin 2021).[3] Due to the large number of candidates supporting the conspiracy theory in the 2020 elections, we are able to better understand media coverage and evaluations of conspiracy theory-supporting candidates in a novel and salient context.

Although recent scholarship has also focused narrowly on QAnon (Enders et al. 2022), it is important to highlight the ways in which it might be unique. First, QAnon is not a single conspiracy theory, but rather, has many distinct conspiracy theories under its umbrella (Uscinski 2022). It is possible that people accept tenets of QAnon without necessarily supporting the broader theory (PRRI 2021), just as people sometimes support a policy while opposing its individual components. Findings from this paper may not generalize to situations in which candidates endorse *specific* conspiracy theories (e.g., Arceneaux and Truex 2022).

Second, elite-level QAnon support is concentrated among Republicans. It is possible that people evaluate Democratic candidates who endorse conspiracy theories differently. And, given debates over the extent to which conservatives are more likely to believe conspiracy theories than liberals (Garrett and Bond 2021), there could be further variation. Third, QAnon is explicitly political—yet despite its idolization of Donald Trump, the underlying beliefs in the existence of an elite satanic cabal and generalized anti-elite sentiment appeal to partisan and ideological extremists of both sides (Enders et al. 2022). This anti-mainstream sentiment is perhaps part of the reason mainstream media discusses QAnon with alarm. Mainstream media's concern about QAnon and its elite supporters could backfire (Arceneaux, Johnson and Murphy 2012), serving as a signal of candidate quality to those who are already skeptical of the mainstream. For these reasons, we anticipate that trust in *media* is a key mechanism explaining support for candidates who endorse it, rather than other attributes like partisanship or institutional trust.[4]

[3]For more on QAnon, see Uscinski (2022).

[4]For example, COVID-19 (birther) conspiracy theories might be more related to trust in science (partisanship).

Direct and Indirect Effects of Conspiracy Theory Support

The benefits of QAnon support could be direct or indirect. The direct benefits are straightforward: just as candidates can garner support for policy positions, candidates could benefit from supporting QAnon. However, taking a position on a conspiracy theory differs from standard ideological position taking, activating a non-left-right dimension of political identity grounded in anti-establishment beliefs (Uscinski et al. 2021). However, when we conducted our research in 2020 and 2021, most Americans were not familiar with QAnon. Those who were viewed it negatively (Pew Research Center 2020), which made a direct benefits story seem implausible. We considered whether QAnon support indirectly affects candidate evaluations via other mechanisms. We focused our attention on mainstream media coverage, which is a key pathway through which people learn about candidates, and the media plays a central role in shaping how candidates are portrayed.

Of course, in an increasingly fractionalized media environment, people can consume media consistent with their worldview (e.g., Stroud 2011; Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). Individuals who are predisposed toward conspiracy theory belief can interact with media that may cover QAnon-supporting candidates favorably—even though mainstream media likely covers QAnon and its adherents negatively. This tension, in which mainstream and fringe media take different stances toward QAnon, provides another potential pathway through which media coverage and selective exposure may shape attitudes toward conspiracy-supporting candidates. Although people have the option to retreat to echo chambers, most Americans consume a moderate, balanced media diet (Guess 2021). Even those who are friendlier toward conspiracy theories likely encounter counter-attitudinal coverage of them in mainstream media—possibly even as cited by fringe media itself. For these individuals, negative mainstream coverage may reinforce their pre-existing attitudes (Arceneaux, Johnson and Murphy 2012). Although some may only interact with fringe media, this group is small and unlikely to swing an election. Here, we focus on the

effects of mainstream media coverage of QAnon.

Our theory (described in detail in our pre-analysis plan) suggests that respondents with low trust in media will feel warmer toward the candidate in the *Negative* condition as compared to the *Neutral* condition (**Hypothesis 1a**). We suspect 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 the candidate in the *QAnon* condition relative to the other two conditions (**Hypothesis 1b, 1c**). We have opposite expectations for those with high trust in media. Given QAnon's partisan valence, we have analogous expectations for Republicans as compared to Democrats (**Hypothesis 2a-c**), which we discuss in Appendix B.2. We also expect negative coverage and conspiracy theory support will increase candidate name recognition (**Hypothesis 3**). Finally, we hypothesize that negative coverage and QAnon support will increase perceptions of ideological conservatism (**Hypothesis 4**).

Indirect Effects of Conspiracy Theory Support

Before investigating how Americans evaluate QAnon-supporting candidates, we examine whether these candidates earn more media coverage and whether that media coverage is more negative on average.

Observational Evidence: Quantity and Tone of Candidate Coverage

We scraped data on 3,632 House and Senate candidates from `Ballotpedia.com` who ran in 2020 congressional primaries, and we identified those who had ever supported QAnon, as identified by Media Matters (Kaplan 2020). However, supporting and non-supporting candidates differ. Thus, we constructed a matched set of QAnon-supporters and otherwise similar candidates who did not support QAnon based on several covari-

ates (Table A1).[5] Following Darr, Hitt and Dunaway (2018), we used Genetic Matching (Diamond and Sekhon 2013), which yielded a sample with 264 unique (unweighted) candidates.

We collected all English-language news articles referencing the 264 candidates between January 1 and November 2, 2020 from Nexis Uni. These articles come from local, national, and international newspapers, published in print or online—a total of 254 sources, including the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, as well as local sources like *Alaska Dispatch News* (AK) and the *Pueblo Chiefton* (CO).[6] We find that 50 QAnon-supporting and 81 non-supporting candidates received coverage during the sample period.

To determine whether QAnon-supporting candidates received more news coverage, we regress the total number of articles each candidate received on a binary indicator for QAnon support using negative binomial regression and the genetic matching weights. We use HC3 robust standard errors (Hill and Reiter 2006). Results are presented in Table 1, column 1.

The coefficient from this model is -0.20, a decrease of 1.74 articles on average for supporting candidates—contrary to our hypothesis. However this difference is not statistically different from 0. Ultimately, we find no evidence that QAnon-supporting candidates receive more coverage than their non-supporting counterparts. Although coverage volume was the same, the tone could differ. A research assistant read a random sample of 300 articles and coded each news story as either referencing the candidate negatively or non-negatively. We trained an ensemble classifier to predict the negativity of the remaining articles. As shown in column 2 of Table 1, we find that supporting QAnon is associated with a statistically significant increase in negative news coverage—3.67 additional articles

[5]Matching covariates include candidate gender, previous officeholder, House or Senate race, whether they advanced to the general election, incumbency, and party. We also match on constituency characteristics including open seat, population density, competitiveness, median age, race, proportion attended college, and median household income.

[6]Our corpus does not include TV-first (e.g., Fox, MSNBC, CNN) or blog-style (e.g., Breitbart, Daily Beast) media. Thus, our sample is biased toward mainstream news, which may lean left. Even so, this sample restriction likely *underestimates* coverage and negative sentiment as we discuss in Appendix A.

Table 1: Effect of QAnon support on the total number of articles and negative articles.

	News Coverage	
	Total Articles	Number Negative
Estimated ATT	−0.20	2.82***
	(0.71)	(0.74)
T-Statistic	−0.28	3.82
p-value	0.78	0.00
No. Treated	96	96
No. Control (Unweighted)	168	168

Note: Estimated ATT of QAnon support. The dependent variable in column 1 is the number of news articles referencing the candidate, and in column 2, the number of negative articles referencing the candidate. Coefficients are from negative binomial models with HC3 robust standard errors.

on average. We discuss this study in more detail in Appendix A.

Experimental Evidence: Favorability, Name Recognition, and Ideological Perceptions

We have provided some evidence that when congressional candidates support QAnon, they receive more negative news coverage in mainstream newspapers. Next, we investigate whether this coverage provokes differential evaluations of candidates.

Experimental Design

Our pre-registered experiments were fielded on the November 2020 and March 2021 waves of the American Social Survey (TASS), which draws a nationally representative cross sectional sample of respondents from 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.[7] We obtained pre-treatment measures of trust in media as well as respondents' impressions of QAnon. In both waves, many respondents were unfamiliar with QAnon: 57% in the first wave and 46% in the second. Among those who provided an evaluation, just 9% expressed positive sentiments. In addition, we obtained pre-treatment de-

[7] We pool both waves but analyze each separately in Appendix B.

mographic information including importance of following the news, party identification, ideology, age, education, income, gender, and race.[8]

In addition to indicators for each condition, we conducted our analysis with a pre-treatment moderator: trust in the mainstream media.[9] We asked respondents: "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?" We found that 145 respondents (7%) had a great deal of trust in the mainstream media, 829 (42%) had a fair amount, 746 (38%) had not very much, and 238 (12%) had none at all. Trust in media was lower among Republicans, with 75% saying "not very much" or "none at all" versus 35% of Democrats and Independents.

After answering unrelated questions, respondents read a short news article about a hypothetical congressional candidate. We noted that the article could have appeared in a mainstream newspaper.[10] For ethical and design considerations, we kept the description of the candidate and newspaper hypothetical. Using a real candidate or news outlet would have introduced deception, which was not necessary to answer our research question. Consistent with similar recent work eliminating source cues (Coppock 2023), we chose to avoid using a *specific* news outlet. We did, however, want to highlight that the article could have appeared in a *mainstream* media outlet because our interest is in potential backfire effects of negative mainstream media coverage.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions with equal probability. Across all three conditions, respondents read about a fictional state representative[11] who lost[12] a House election in November 2020. In the control condition, which we call

[8]Balance statistics are provided in Table B1.

[9]We preregistered a second moderator variable, party identification. See Appendix B.2.

[10]In wave 1, respondents were asked to "Please read the following article about a hypothetical congressional candidate, which might have appeared in a mainstream newspaper." In wave 2, respondents were asked to "Please read the following article about a congressional candidate, which recently appeared in a mainstream newspaper:" In Tables B2 and B3, the effects are substantively similar when considering waves separately.

[11]In Wave 1 (2), the candidate's name was John Smith (Cunningham). Pilot tests on Mechanical Turk did not reveal variation in evaluations based on name.

[12]We framed the candidate as losing because (1) our surveys were fielded *after* elections; we felt describ-

Neutral, we described John Smith as having run a well-organized but unsuccessful campaign. The full text of each treatment is in Table 2.[13]

To analyze the effects of negative coverage both unrelated to, and as a consequence of, QAnon support, we created two treatment conditions. 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; we replaced a positive constituent quote with a negative one. The *QAnon* condition was identical to the *Negative* condition except we noted in the headline and body that John Smith was a QAnon supporter.

Then, we asked respondents to tell us how they felt about John Smith on a 101-point feeling thermometer.[14] In Wave 2, we also asked for respondents' perceptions of the candidate's ideology on a 7-point scale ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Later in the survey, we presented a text box and asked if they could remember the candidate's name. To measure recall, we subtracted 1 from the Jaro-Winkler string distance between the response and the candidate's name. This dependent variable ranges from 0 (no match) to 1 (perfect match).

ing the candidate as running for Congress would detract from any realism in our study, and (2) we tried to mirror the reality that many QAnon-supporting candidates lost their elections. In Appendix B.5, we discuss results of a follow-up study in which we describe the same candidate as having won the election. The results are similar, and there is no evidence to suggest that QAnon-supporting *winners* are viewed more favorably.

[13]To ensure our articles were perceived as neutral and negative, we conducted a pilot study on Mechanical Turk on September 24, 2020.

[14]We asked: "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." We use a feeling thermometer, rather than vote choice, given a concern about ceiling effects among those with low trust in media—who would potentially vote for candidates in either treatment condition, even if intensity of those preferences differed.

Table 2: News Article Treatments

Treatment	Text
Neutral	**Statehouse Representative Loses Congressional Bid** 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.
Negative	**Statehouse Representative Loses Congressional Bid** 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.
QAnon	**Statehouse Representative, QAnon Supporter, Loses Congressional Bid** 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.

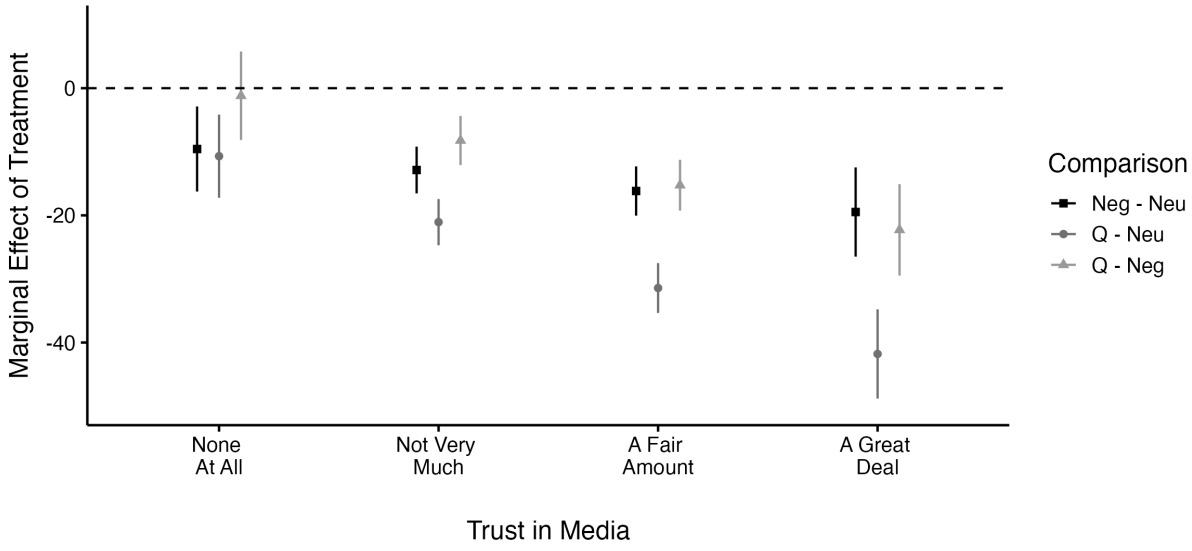

Figure 1: Average marginal effects of treatment comparisons for levels of trust in media. Consistent with expectations, those with higher trust in media feel cooler toward the *Negative* candidate and cooler toward the *QAnon* candidate. In contrast to expectations, those with low trust in media feel cooler toward the candidate in both treatments as compared to the *Neutral* candidate. Confidence intervals are at the 0.966-level.

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

We expect respondents with low trust in media to feel warmer toward the candidate in the *Negative* condition as compared to the *Neutral* condition. We also expect low trust respondents to feel warmer toward the candidate in the *QAnon* condition relative to the other two conditions. We expect the opposite results for those with high trust in media. We estimate all effects at the individual level using ordinary least squares, pooling respondents and including an indicator for wave. In Figure 1, we present the average marginal effects of treatment comparisons for each level of trust in media. We include the regression table and additional analyses in Appendix B.1.

In Figure 1, black squares represent the difference in candidate evaluations for respondents assigned to the *Negative* condition as compared to the *Neutral* condition. The

general trend as one becomes more trusting in media is negative, as expected. The difference between those with the highest and lowest trust are statistically distinguishable.[15] The marginal effect of the treatment for those with higher levels of trust is negative as expected—a decrease in favorability of 19 points on a 101-point scale. However, the effect is also a statistically significant 10 point decrease for those with lower levels of trust in media, counter expectations. We fail to support Hypothesis 1a.

The results are similar across the remaining comparisons. Dark gray circles represent the difference in evaluations between the *QAnon* and *Neutral* conditions. Consistent with our expectations, the highest trust respondents feel 42 points cooler toward a candidate portrayed as supporting QAnon. In contrast to our expectations in Hypothesis 1b, those with low trust feel more negatively toward the QAnon-supporting candidate—a decrease in favorability of 11 points. These difference are statistically distinguishable.

Light gray triangles examine differences in candidate evaluations between those in the *Negative* condition as compared to the *QAnon* condition. Here, we find evidence that those with high trust in media feel roughly 22 points cooler toward the QAnon supporting candidate. In contrast to our expectations in Hypothesis 1c, those with low trust in media are no more approving of a candidate who supports QAnon versus one who only garners negative coverage.

In Table B4, we do not find any evidence of treatment on candidate name recall. Finally, in Figure 2, we plot the marginal effects of the treatments on perceptions that the candidate is ideologically conservative. In the first region, we use ordinary least squares to regress perceived seven-point ideology on treatment among all respondents. We find that the *Negative* treatment does not have a detectable effect. However, we find that a candidate who supports QAnon is seen as a full point more ideologically conservative. This effect could be driven primarily by Democrats, who were more likely to know about QAnon (Pew Research Center 2020). Therefore, we estimate the same model interact-

[15]To determine within-treatment differences, we conduct 1000 bootstraps and calculate the 0.996 quantile.

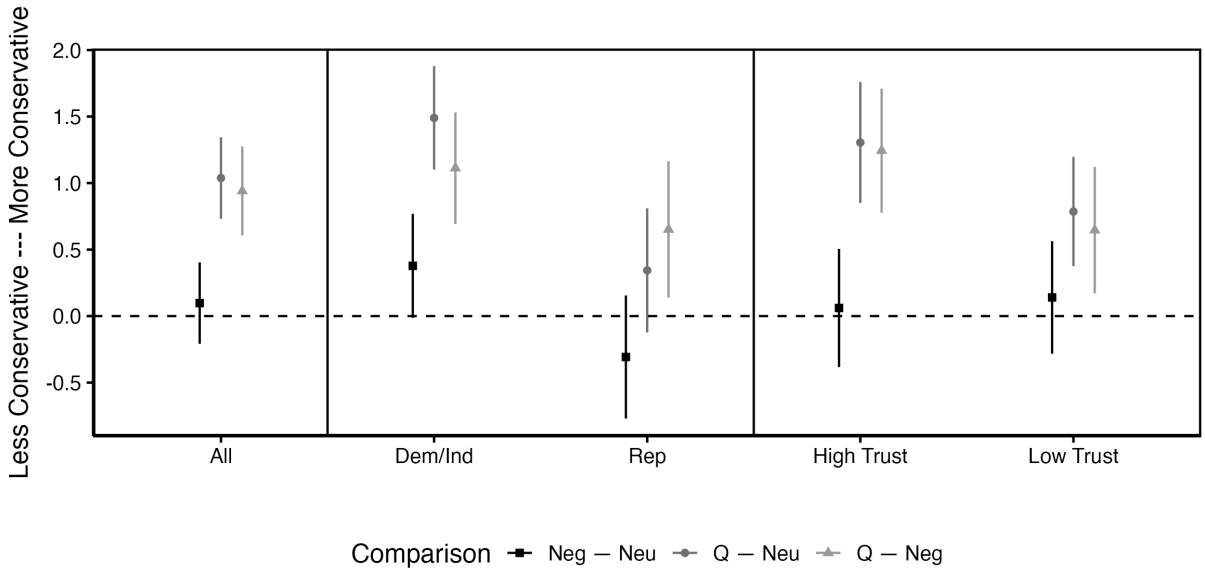

Figure 2: Average marginal effects of the negative (black circle) and QAnon (gray triangle) treatments on perceptions of candidate conservatism (7 point scale) as compared to the neutral treatment. Only panel 1 was pre-registered. Confidence intervals are at the 0.997-level. Models are in Table B5.

ing our negative treatments with party ID (Democrat or Independent, Republican) and trust in media (low if respondents said "none at all" or "not very much"). We find that the negative treatment (black square) has inconsistent effects. However, we find that QAnon-support (dark gray circle) does cause the candidate to been seen as more ideologically conservative—however, the effect sizes are attenuated among the most relevant sub-populations. Democrats and those with high trust in media view the candidate as more conservative (1.5 and 1.3 points respectively) than Republicans and those with low trust in media (0.34 not statistically significant and 0.79 points respectively), raising questions about the value of the cue.

To summarize: those with high trust in media feel cooler toward a candidate receiving negative coverage and even cooler toward a candidate who is described as supporting QAnon. We do not find evidence that those with lower trust in media feel *warmer* toward negatively covered candidates or negatively covered QAnon-supporters, relative to neu-

trally covered candidates.[16] Further, we find no evidence that either negative coverage or coverage of QAnon support increases name recall. However, we find that coverage of QAnon-support causes respondents to believe the candidate is more ideologically conservative. These effects are smaller among subgroups that should theoretically find this candidate appealing.

We considered possible issues with the vignettes in Appendix B.5. First, we frame the candidate as winning the election and remove constituent quotes to indicate that negativity is coming from the reporter. In Figures B2 and B3, we observe consistent results. Winning does not cause those with low trust in media to support the candidate.

Given that many QAnon candidates ran for the House, we considered effect heterogeneity between rural and urban respondents (Gimpel et al. 2020). In Figure B4, we do not find evidence that rural respondents are more favorable toward QAnon-supporting candidates than urban respondents. Finally, as in any experiment, results could be driven by demand effects. In particular,those with little knowledge of QAnon may express disapproval for the QAnon-supporting candidate in an effort to satisfy the researchers. We present evidence against this possibility in Figure B7. Those with less knowledge of QAnon are ambivalent about the QAnon-supporting candidate.

Direct Effects of QAnon Support

Our results do not suggest candidates indirectly benefit from supporting QAnon. Although trust in media moderates the effect of media coverage of QAnon support on favorability as expected, respondents with low media trust never *increased* their evaluations of the candidate. These results seemed more consistent with a theory in which there are no electoral benefits to supporting QAnon and people vote for candidates *despite* this feature. For many, it is possible that QAnon support has either no effect on vote choice, or as

[16] In Appendix B, we present results of these regressions controlling for seven-point party identification and seven-point ideology (and other covariates). These effects are not driven by the correlation between trust in media, ideology, and party identification.

suggested by our experimental results, a negative effect.

We pre-registered three additional hypotheses: first, that a candidate's support for QAnon will not cause respondents to increase their likelihood of voting for that candidate **(Hypothesis 5)**. Relatedly, a candidate's support for QAnon will not cause respondents to increase their favorability toward the candidate **(Hypothesis 6)**. 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), we suspect that QAnon support leads voters to see the candidate as more conservative—even if they view the support itself negatively **(Hypothesis 7)**.

Data and Methods

We conducted a pre-registered conjoint experiment (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014) in November 2021. 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 compared to other candidate characteristics, such as policy positions and political experience.

We recruited 350 Republicans and 350 Democrats who live in the United States from Prolific. Our sample is not nationally representative. Participants chose to take surveys on Prolific and opted in to our specific survey, conditional on our screening criteria (US residents, Republicans, Democrats, balance on gender).[17] We present available sample demographics in Table C1. We included a pre-treatment attention check and removed failing participants.[18] Our final sample included 686 respondents, 336 Republicans and 350 Democrats.

We presented participants with two side-by-side profiles of hypothetical congressional

[17]We balanced on gender to account for a viral TikTok trend that increased female sign ups on Prolific beginning in summer 2021.

[18]We exclude four independents who took our survey.

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

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 ten times. Then, half of the respondents were randomly assigned to rate each candidate's favorability or 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. We randomized the order of the four policy attributes (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 fixed across a respondent's survey.

We present eight attributes in an effort to obfuscate the key covariate of interest: QAnon support.[19] Consistent with our vignette experiments, we focus broadly on QAnon

[19]We chose to present candidates as either supporting or not supporting (rather than actively opposing)

support instead of the conspiracy theories associated with QAnon.

Our primary dependent variable (i.e. Hypothesis 5) is binary vote choice. We analyze our data at the candidate-profile level. For each candidate profile, the dependent variable takes the value of 1 if the respondent selects that candidate and 0 otherwise. For Hypothesis 6, we measure 7-point favorability, where 1 indicates a respondent "definitely would NOT want this type of candidate to represent [me] in the U.S. Congress" and 7 is "definitely would..." For Hypothesis 7, the dependent variable ranges from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative). We compute the Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) by regressing each dependent variable on all attributes using ordinary least squares with standard errors clustered on respondents (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014).[20]

Results: Once Again, Nobody Likes QAnon Supporters

In Figure 3, we plot the AMCEs of each attribute on candidate choice for the full sample in black triangles. Supporting QAnon, holding other attributes fixed, causes a 20 percentage point decline in the probability of choosing that candidate in a hypothetical election. However, this analysis could mask heterogeneous treatment effects by party, so we plot the AMCEs for partisan sub-groups separately—Democrats in light gray circles and Republicans in dark gray squares. Democrats impose a large, negative penalty on supporters, reducing their probability of voting for those candidates by 28 percentage points. Republicans also exact a smaller, but statistically significant, penalty on these candidates—12 percentage points. The marginal mean estimates in Figure C1 also demonstrate that QAnon-supporters (non-supporters) are less (more) likely to be chosen by both partisan subgroups—assuaging concerns that non-support is being interpreted

for methodological and substantive reasons that we detail in Appendix C.

[20]Comparisons between subgroup AMCEs are sensitive to the reference category (Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley 2020), however, with the exception of prior experience, our attributes are dichotomous. The AMCEs should not be susceptible to baseline effects (Carey et al. 2022). We present the same plots using marginal means in Appendix C. Marginal mean plots are exploratory as they were not pre-reigstered.

as tacit approval.

A second potential concern could be that by randomizing candidate attributes uniformly, we introduce bias by generating unrealistic profiles in which Democrats supported QAnon (de la Cuesta, Egami and Imai 2021). In Figure C2, we present an AMCE plot restricting 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. If Republicans are voting for the most extreme candidate in the race, this is where we would expect to find positive effects of QAnon-support (e.g., Hall 2015). Yet we find that supporting QAnon is associated with a statistically significant 14 percentage-point decline in vote choice probability. In Figure C3, we also present results among other sub-groups. Even for those with the lowest trust in media, strongest anti-establishment attitudes (Uscinski et al. 2021), individuals who use Fox News, and those who use alt-right media (Gab, 4Chan, Parler), the AMCE of QAnon-support is negative. Those who report believing in QAnon are more likely to select a supporting candidate, but these AMCEs are not statistically significant. Even if this group is more likely to vote for the supporting candidate, targeting true believers while alienating larger subgroups is likely not electorally beneficial.

Figure C4 shows both AMCE and marginal mean estimates for 7-point favorability. Among Democrats, QAnon support decreases favorability by 1.13 points, whereas among Republicans, support for QAnon causes favorability to decrease by 0.49 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 Hypothesis 9 that QAnon support increases perceptions that the candidate is conservative in Figure 4. Among Democrats, QAnon-supporting candidates are perceived to be 0.63 points more conservative—similar to identifying as a Republican or supporting a border wall. Among Republicans, the effect is positive and statistically significant, but smaller: QAnon-supporting candidates

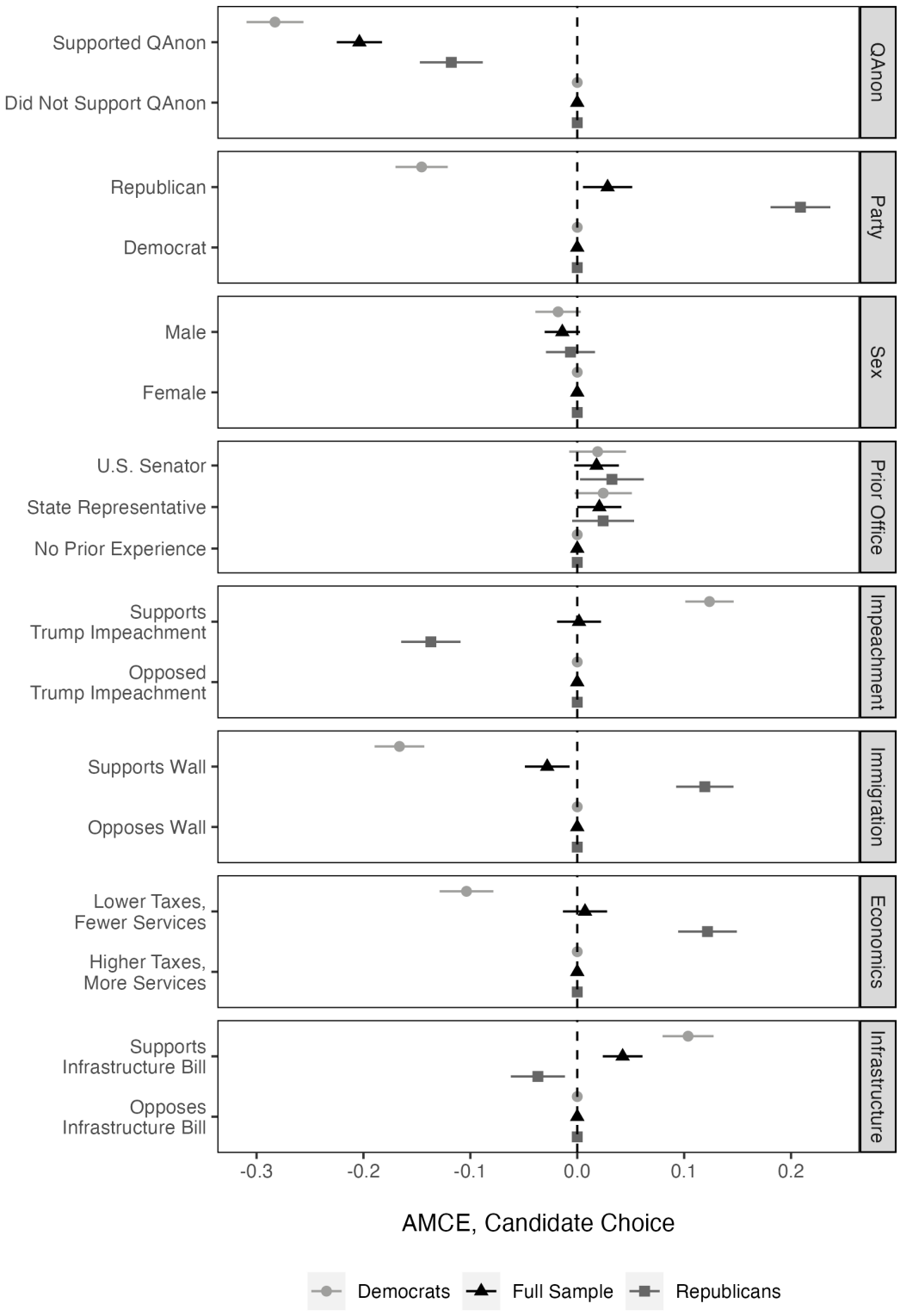

Figure 3: AMCE of each attribute on candidate choice. QAnon support decreases the probability of vote choice among Democrats and Republicans.

were perceived to be 0.14 points more conservative, about a third the size of the effect of knowing the candidate was a Republican. Although QAnon support can signal ideological conservatism among both Republicans and Democrats, it is noteworthy that the signal is stronger among Democrats. This finding is consistent with research highlighting the exaggerated misperceptions partisans hold about the other side (Ahler and Sood 2018), which carries with it important implications for perceived polarization (Enders and Armaly 2019). Even if Republicans disfavor QAnon-supporting candidates and view QAnon support as only a weak signal of conservatism, that Democrats view it as a strong predictor may drive increasingly negative, but biased, attitudes towards the opposition party.

These results provide support for Hypotheses 5-7. QAnon support causes respondents of both parties to reduce their likelihood of voting for, and their favorability toward, a candidate. Although QAnon support consistently increases perceptions of conservatism, this effect is smaller among Republican identifiers—the group most QAnon-supporting candidates are allegedly targeting.

Discussion

How do voters evaluate candidates who are portrayed as supporting QAnon? Not favorably. We test two mechanisms through which QAnon support could translate into candidate favorability: indirectly through media coverage and directly through position-taking. We analyzed news coverage about QAnon-supporting candidates and a matched sample of non-supporters. We find that supporters earn the same volume of coverage, but that coverage is more negative on average. Our vignette experiments revealed that even those with low trust in media disapprove of candidates who supported QAnon and received negative coverage. These findings contrasted with our expectations and popular narratives surrounding QAnon. In our second experiment, we find that supporting

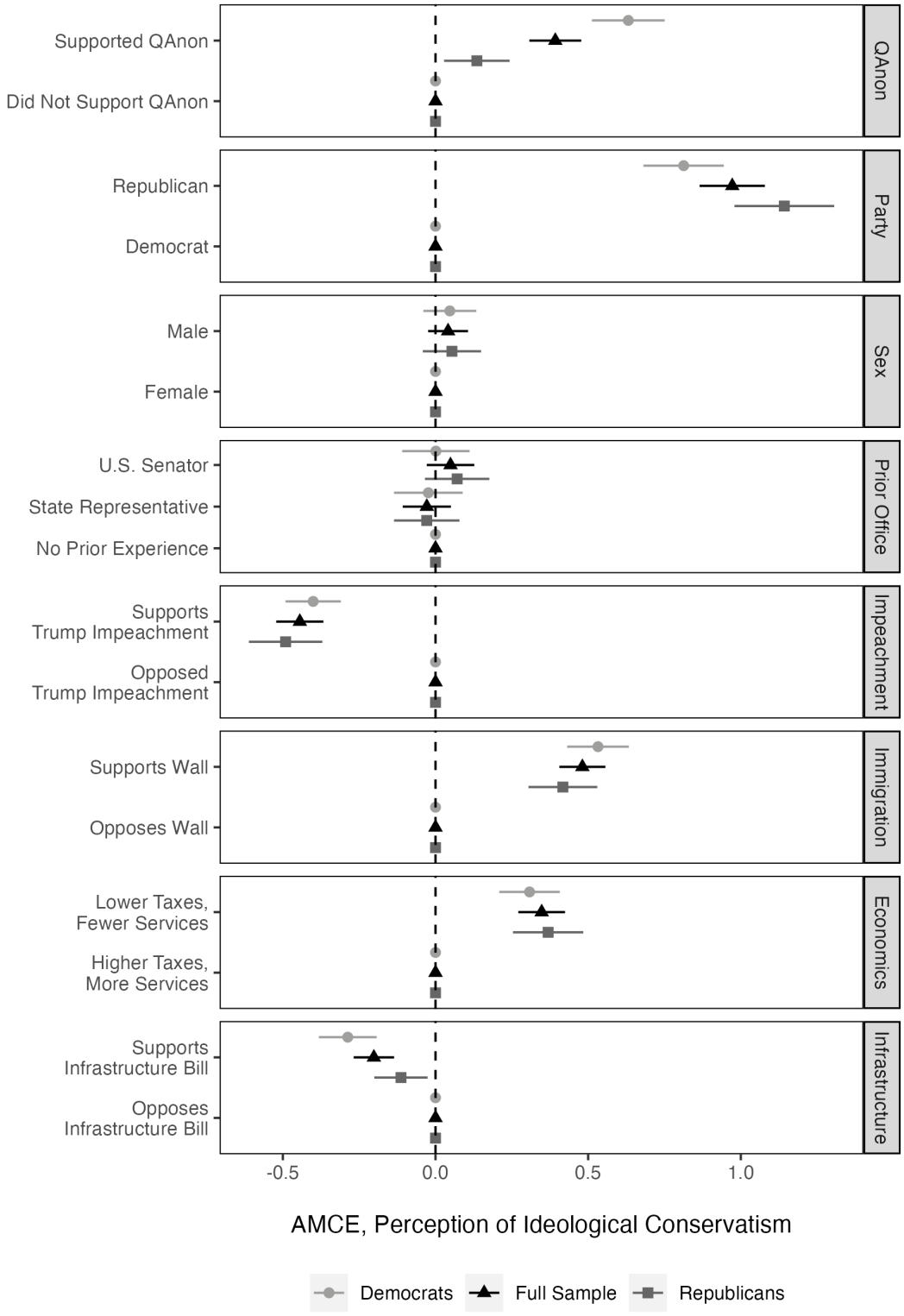

Figure 4: AMCE of each attribute on perceptions candidate is conservative. QAnon support causes respondents to think the candidate is more conservative, however, this effect is larger among Democrats than Republicans.

QAnon causes a decline in vote choice probability for those candidates, even while increasing perceptions of ideological conservatism.

Our results present a corrective to conventional wisdom that conspiracy theory support is electorally beneficial. Previous research suggests—but does not test—that politicians support conspiracy theories for electoral gain, and journalists and campaign strategists make similar claims. We cannot say there are *no* benefits to supporting QAnon, but our evidence suggests individuals do not evaluate candidates who support QAnon more favorably than those who do not. However, our studies come with limitations.

First, while QAnon is increasingly salient and important, it is unclear whether our results generalize to other conspiracy theories. As discussed, QAnon is more a web of conspiracy theories than a single idea, explicitly favors (some) Republican politicians, and appeals to anti-elite and anti-mainstream sentiment more than partisan or ideological priors. It is not clear whether our findings would generalize to other conspiracy theories that do not meet these criteria.

Second, our indirect effects analysis is limited to a hypothetical scenario, which may limit generalizability. For ethical reasons, we created vignettes about a hypothetical congressional candidate. Perhaps real-world news coverage of real candidates, about whom individuals might have other information, could contribute to evaluations in ways that were not captured here (see e.g., Wu et al. 2022). Moreover, we used a forced exposure design, but this is a context in which media choice could be crucial. Indeed, given the right-leaning and establishment-challenging nature of QAnon, it is unlikely that mainstream media would cover the theory warmly. People who distrust mainstream media might not be exposed to this negative coverage of QAnon in the first place. Future work could extend our findings to examine whether positive coverage of QAnon-supporting candidates on fringe media sources changes how respondents evaluate them, in addition to more directly incorporating choice into the design, such as through a PICA design (De Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2019; Egami et al. 2023). Future work should also consider

sample recruitment more carefully. It is likely that people who believe conspiracy theories like QAnon are hesitant to participate in surveys for academic research, so online opt-in survey panels might underestimate the overall rates of conspiracy theory support in the population and further limit generalizability.

Third, there are other moderators we could have explored. For example, QAnon is popular among Evangelical Christians and older Americans may be more susceptible to misinformation (Guess, Nagler and Tucker 2019), which could make these groups more supportive of candidates who endorse QAnon. We did not pre-register these moderators, but we explore them in Figure B6. In line with our other results, older individuals, evangelical identifiers, and regular religious attenders do not increase support for QAnon-supporting candidates.

Fourth, our conjoint experiment presented participants with a limited subset of characteristics. Although our choices were theoretically grounded, our results need to be interpreted within the context of the attributes we chose. We suspect that subtracting, not 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 support.

Conclusion

This article is among the first to investigate how Americans evaluate candidates who support conspiracy theories, and our work is an important step that complicates existing narratives. For example, Uscinski et al. (2021) suggest that the anti-establishment dimension to American political attitudes is correlated with support for conspiratorial candidates, yet our evidence suggests that even people with strong anti-establishment preferences are not likely to choose candidates who support QAnon. Our work is more consistent with Enders et al. (2022) and Wu et al. (2022), which finds limited public support

for QAnon. Further, our results were at odds with our initial hypotheses, underscoring the value of pre-registration to track our theoretical development Ryan and Krupnikov (2021).

Although some of our results contrast with our initial argument, the conclusion is, in part, normatively good: most Americans oppose candidates who support QAnon. This research reinforces, rather than solves, a puzzle: why do politicians publicly support conspiracy theories like QAnon? We view this question as central for future research, and we propose three specific ways to build upon the groundwork laid here.

First, as more politicians express support for conspiracy theories, we need to bring our understanding of "who believes" to questions of when and why those beliefs translate into electoral support. Given the relatively small proportion of the electorate that supports QAnon, at least according to nationally representative survey data, the likelihood that this constituency, even if concentrated in a single legislative district, could turn the tides of an election outcome is limited. We therefore encourage scholarship to focus on the electoral "externalities" of conspiracy theory endorsement. That is, perhaps voters do not care much about the politician endorsing QAnon, but they draw inferences about what that endorsement further signals about their outsider status Porter and Treul (2024) or ideological orientation. It would be interesting to replicate our conjoint, adding and subtracting information to determine whether lower information environments strengthen the signal sent by QAnon support.

Second, future research should consider the broader policy platforms of QAnon-endorsing candidates. While a nontrivial number of candidates running for national, and especially local, offices have been identified as endorsing QAnon, it is unlikely that QAnon is the focal point of their campaigns. It would be illustrative to measure the proportion of their campaign communication that focuses on QAnon, which could be lower than the proportion of media coverage that references their connection to QAnon. Considering how conspiracy theory endorsements stack up against other policy positions would be useful

for contextualizing the role that conspiracy theory endorsement plays in voter evaluations of the candidates overall.

Finally, future work should re-examine position-taking in a world where politicians are polarized, not only over policy, but over *facts* themselves. Constituents prioritize issue representation over other forms of service (Lapinski et al. 2016), but perhaps increasingly important is representation of their version of reality.

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