

WHO'S TO SAY:  
HOW PARTISAN POLITICS SHAPE OUR BELIEFS

HONORS THESIS

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by

Daniel Fernandez

San Marcos, Texas  
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by  
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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine how information sources influence people's attitudes toward a particular topic. Research has shown that it is incredibly difficult to correct beliefs based on misinformation, even in the face of evidence. Rather than attempt to change preexisting beliefs, we will examine how changing the source of the information alters people's attitudes. The hypothesis of this study is that people will be more inclined to believe in a source that is aligned with their own political identities. Furthermore, people will be less likely to believe someone from an opposing political position, even if the person agrees with their opponent's stated claim.

An experimental study was conducted where participants were presented with an article that outlines the benefits of not denying people healthcare due to preexisting conditions. This subject was deliberately chosen because polling data suggests that this is an issue that the majority of Americans agree with, regardless of political affiliation. Three articles were presented to the participants at random; one from a liberal source, one from a conservative source, and one from a neutral source. The participants were then given a survey which measured their attitude toward the article, as well as demographic information. The participants were 134 Texas State students using the SONA pool of participants.

The results of the experiment did not support our hypothesis. However, using several two-way ANOVA, there were several significances found at the .05 level. There was a statistically significant interaction between the condition (the random article) and the level of agreement. Specifically, the neutral article was the most agreeable across all groups. Another two-way ANOVA found that there was a statistically significant interaction between political affiliation and level of agreement. The interaction found that Democrats agreed with the article more than Republicans and those who identified as having "no affiliation". We also found that the participants agreed with the article overall, regardless of the condition. The data we collected reinforces the idea that the majority of Americans agree with covering all individuals regardless of medical conditions, suggests that neutral sources lead to higher levels of agreeableness, and Democrats have a high level of agreeableness in regard to this particular issue.

## Introduction

Truth, politics, and the media have always had a tumultuous relationship. However, ever since the 2016 presidential election it seems that the relationship is more turbulent than it has been in a generation. When leaders in key executive positions call news organizations “enemies of the people” and blatantly lie on a regularly basis, it creates an atmosphere of confusion that makes it difficult to navigate your way to the truth. Some people have called this new political environment “post-truth politics”, as debates are now mostly concerned with the emotional appeal of the argument rather than policy details. Many political experts have pointed out that this is a potentially dangerous trend, as these political environments can lead to the rise of brutal right-wing authoritarianism. When we lose truth in our public discourse, we can no longer have meaningful discussions on policy, legislation, or the world around us. It is essential to our nation that we have well informed public. But in the post-truth world, who are we to believe?

The first thing that we will examine is what kinds of sources do people trust. A study by Andrea Miller in 2010 examined citizen perceptions of news sources, specifically in terms of their credibility. Miller took 240 participants and showed them various news stories. She varied the race of the reporter of the story, the affiliation of the source (private citizen vs expert), and the type of story. After the participant viewed the story, they would rate the credibility of the reporter via a survey. What Miller found was that there is a significant gap in a participant’s distinction between expert and citizen sources. Additionally, she found that race was not a significant factor when it came to credibility.

The credibility of the individual making a claim is certainly important, but can the same be said for the medium in which the claim is made? In 2016 Thomas Johnson conducted a study that explored the credibility of 15 sources of political information. The study wanted to find if there was a relationship between interactivity of a news medium and the level of credibility. After collecting over 1200 survey responses, Johnson found that interactivity was not a significant factor in credibility. Rather, he discovered that the reliability of the source was a much more important predictor of credibility. According to his results the most credible mediums of information are newspapers, broadcast TV, CNN, news radio, and MSNBC (in that order). It's important to note that these are all older and more established institutions of journalism.

When it comes to news stories is important to remember that they are themselves *stories*. It stands to reason that the way in which you tell a news story will impact the perceived credibility. A study conducted by Nicole Martins in 2018 examined perceived credibility of journalists and a featured expert. Two of the things they wanted to find were whether sources in a news story would lend support to the featured expert and if an individual's pre-existing beliefs toward the topic had an influence on the source's credibility. The researchers presented an article to the participants that would vary between the outside source, the study finding, the medium, and the journalist gender. Each condition was assigned randomly to the participant. In terms of our study, one of the most notable findings was when the expert showed outside sources of information to the participants. The researchers found that it leads to greater levels of belief in the participants, even when the participant didn't necessarily hold that belief.

We have examined what makes an individual trust a particular news source, but what are some things that make someone be *distrustful* of a source? Let's revisit the Martins study and examine another one of their findings. They gave effort to give equal time to the opposing point of view (known in journalism as the balance norm). The study found that when they gave equal time to the opposing side, it leads to significantly lower levels of credibility of the expert and even the journalist in some cases. This is a rather interesting phenomenon, because in journalism the balance norm is utilized for the purposes of objective investigation and the appearance of credibility.

The purpose of this study is to examine how information sources influence people's attitudes toward a particular topic. The hypothesis of this study is that people will be more inclined to believe in a source that is aligned with their own political identities. Furthermore, people will be less likely to believe someone from an opposing political position, even if the person agrees with their opponent's stated claim. To test this hypothesis, I will conduct an experimental study where participants will be presented with an article that outlines the benefits of not denying people healthcare due to preexisting conditions. This topic was intentionally chosen because significant polling data shows that it is an issue that most American voters agree on, regardless of political party (Kirzinger, 2018).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants will include 300 Texas State University students from the psychology SONA pool of participants. The survey will be given through the data collection website *Qualtrics*, so we will not have to worry about transportation of participants. Participants will not receive compensation for participating in the study, however they will receive research credit that can go toward filling their Research Experience Requirement for Texas State psychology students.

### **Measures**

There will be two inventories administered to the participants. Both surveys will be given after the participants read their randomly assigned article. The first survey will measure the participants attitudes toward the article. This includes their level of agreement with the argument put forward in the article, their opinion on the authority figure quoted in the article, and their level of trust in traditional news outlets. The questions in this survey will be on a seven-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The second survey will examine some key demographic factors of the participants.

In the first survey there will a series of nine questions. Of these nine questions four will be questions about their opinion on the authority figure quoted in the article, three of them will pertain to the participants’ attitude toward pre-existing conditions, one question will ask about their trust in the news, and one question will ask how often they keep up with current events. The questions regarding the authority figure are essential to

testing our hypothesis, as we want to see the level of trust in the authority figure in relation to the participants' political identity. The other five questions in the survey are to measure suspected confounding variables. If a person does not agree with the article's position, then that individual may be distrusting of the news source regardless of political affiliation. The question regarding trust in the news will be used to help identifying a potential lurking variable (general trust in news).

The demographic survey will obtain information from the participants such as age, gender, race, etc. Political party affiliation will be recorded, as this will be used to test our hypothesis. In addition, participants will be asked to place themselves on a political orientation scale from zero to one-hundred, with zero being very conservative and one-hundred being very liberal. Both demographic questions will reinforce observations made during data analysis.

### **Procedure**

Participants will voluntarily sign up via the SONA pool of participants at Texas State University. There will be no compensation for participating in the study, however individuals who complete the survey will receive credit toward fulfilling their Research Experience Credit requirement for Texas State psychology students. When a participant selects to participate in the study, they will be taken to the *Qualtrics* website, where the survey will be conducted. The first thing that participants will do is read an informed consent form that will outline the nature and potential risks of the study. If the participant agrees to the terms of the informed consent form, they will move onto the survey, otherwise they will be taken back to the SONA website.



The first portion of the study consists of reading one of three randomly assigned news articles. All the news articles are about the provision in the Affordable Healthcare Act that forbids insurance companies from denying people medical coverage due to pre-existing medical conditions. The articles are nearly identical to one another, but they differ in the source of the information. The information source for all three articles is a fictional authority figure named Andrew White. In one article Andrew White is from the conservative think-tank *The Heritage Foundation*, the second article has him from the liberal think-tank *Progressive Policy Institute*, and the last article has him from a think-tank named the *Independent Institute*.

Once the participant reads the article, they will be taken to the first survey. The first survey will measure the participants' attitude toward the authority figure, their attitude toward pre-existing conditions, their attitude toward the news, and how often they keep up with current events. The second survey will record relevant demographic data such as political party affiliation and the extent they rate themselves conservative or liberal. After these surveys are complete the participants will be taken back to the SONA website.

## Analysis

The study was conducted from March 12<sup>th</sup> to April 25<sup>th</sup>, with the goal of getting 300 participants. We obtained 133 participants, of which 126 responded. The 7 individuals that did not respond either did not provide consent or did not respond to the questions. There were 5 main analyses ran: 2 two-factor ANOVAs, 2 regression analyses, and 1 correlational analysis. After running the data through SPSS, we discovered several significant relationships where the p-value was at or well below the .05 level.

The first significant finding was when we ran a two-way ANOVA that examined the participant's political affiliation and their level of agreement with the news article. Simple main effects analysis showed that participants that were shown the neutral article had a higher level of agreement with the article than the other conditions ( $p = .042$ ). Additionally, main effects analysis show that Democrats were significantly more likely to agree with the article than Republicans and those that identified as having no affiliation ( $p = .004$ ). While we had these significant main effects, we did not have a statistically significant interaction between the condition and political affiliation on the level of agreement,  $F(6, 112) = 1.293$ ,  $p = .266$ . Interestingly, we also found that overall agreement was high among all groups with an average of 5.4 out of a score of 7.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how information sources influence people's attitudes toward a particular topic. We hypothesized that people will be more inclined to believe in a source that is aligned with their own political identities. Even though our findings did not support our hypothesis, there was much that was learned throughout the duration of the study. Using this knowledge, we can identify what we can do better in a follow-up study, as well expand this research for more in-depth studies.

The most statistically significant finding in our study was that Democrats were more likely to agree with the main point of the article than the other political affiliations, regardless of the condition. This is not particularly surprising, as universal healthcare is one of the cornerstones of the Democratic Party's platform. What is interesting about this finding is that the condition seemed to have no effect on the Democrats' level of agreement (which is counter to the hypothesis). This suggests that this issue is deeply held by Democrats and is not very susceptible to change. For a follow-up study, it would be best to find an issue that is high in general agreement but has higher suggestibility amongst all groups. This will help us better examine in potential effects among the various conditions.

Another significant finding for our study was that the neutral article yielded the highest levels of agreement amongst all groups. Contrary to the hypothesis, it appears that the political affiliation of the source in the article was unimportant. What this finding suggests is that the act of the source revealing themselves to be a partisan lead to higher levels of distrust overall. For a follow-up study, it would be interesting to measure the level of trust in a source before and after their partisan affiliation is revealed. Perhaps

keep the same study design as this study but make it a repeated measures experiment where the partisan identity of the source is revealed after the participant reads the article and takes the initial survey. Then make the participant retake the survey and measure the differences.

One last notable finding was the discovery that overall agreement with the article was high amongst all groups. This finding was not only desirable in the context of our study, but it also reinforced the findings from previous research that nearly all Americans agree with granting healthcare regardless of pre-existing conditions.

There are countless directions for future research on this topic. Maybe future researchers can conduct a longitudinal study where multiple articles are presented across a wide array of topics. Perhaps there are significant differences in participants reading a news article and seeing a video clip. Regardless of what future studies are done, it's undeniable that this kind of research will be of the utmost importance for years to come.

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## **Appendix**

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**Title:** Who's to Say: How Partisan Politics Shape Our Beliefs

**Research Question:** When it comes to news reporting, does the source of the information influence a person's belief in the story.

**IV:** The source of the information in the news story.

**DV:** Confidence in the news source

## I.

### **The Three News Articles**

#### *1- Conservative)*

Ensuring that people with pre-existing health conditions can get and keep health insurance is the most popular part of the Affordable Care Act. It has also become one of the most discussed political issues of our time. The Affordable Care Act (ACA) forbids companies from denying insurance to anyone. As a result, those with chronic illnesses qualify for health insurance, which helps them pay for the medical care they need at a much lower cost than if they had to pay for without coverage. Before the ACA, insurance companies could deny you coverage if you had a pre-existing condition. That affected 50 million people, including 17 million children. Andrew White of the conservative think-tank The Heritage Foundation states, “Of those with pre-existing conditions who sought private insurance, 47 percent didn't get it. They were either denied coverage, charged a higher premium, or had their condition excluded because of it.” Some of the most common pre-existing conditions include high blood pressure, diabetes, and asthma. Additionally, insurance companies can consider a healthy person as having a pre-existing condition. White's think-tank gathered data from the top three private insurance carriers. They found that the insurance companies denied coverage to 26 percent of those seeking private insurance. They also found that insurance companies classified non-diseases such as obesity, pregnancy, and mental health counseling as pre-existing conditions. Without health insurance, the uninsured couldn't afford treatment, which meant they wound up in the emergency room.



A study from White's think tank examined the costs at a New Jersey hospital. They found that 1 percent of the 100,000 people who used its emergency rooms contributed 30 percent of its costs. "That's just 1,000 people" White explains, "and if they were treated at a low-cost doctor's office it would reduce health care expenses for everyone." Why would insurance companies accept these higher-cost patients with pre-existing conditions? Because the ACA mandates that every individual must buy insurance. Insurance companies know that mandatory coverage sends them more healthy customers who don't submit claims. They receive enough premiums from healthy people to cover the costs of the extra sick ones. But is mandatory coverage necessary? It is, according to White. "Without it, people would just wait until they got sick before applying for insurance. That's not how insurance works. It's like allowing people to buy car insurance after they've had an accident. The mandate is a necessary component in how the ACA works." Even though the pre-existing conditions provision is widely popular, the particulars of the provision are still heavily debated in congress on both sides. Some opponents worry that the pre-existing conditions provision will raise premiums and give the government too much control over healthcare. However, to Andrew White the data is strong in support of covering pre-existing conditions, "Covering everyone regardless of pre-existing conditions will benefit us all in both economical and healthful ways."

## *2- Liberal)*

Ensuring that people with pre-existing health conditions can get and keep health insurance is the most popular part of the Affordable Care Act. It has also become one of the most discussed political issues of our time. The Affordable Care Act (ACA) forbids companies from denying insurance to anyone. As a result, those with chronic illnesses

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### *3- Neutral)*

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“Covering everyone regardless of pre-existing conditions will benefit us all in both economical and healthful ways.”

## II.

### Post Article Survey

Q1 I agree with the main point of the article: insurance coverage should be available regardless of preexisting conditions.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ☐ Disagree (2)
- ☐ Slightly Disagree (3)
- ☐ Neutral (4)
- ☐ Slightly Agree (5)
- ☐ Agree (6)
- ☐ Strongly Agree (7)

Q2 There are some valid concerns about offering medical coverage for all individuals.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ☐ Disagree (2)
- ☐ Slightly Disagree (3)
- ☐ Neutral (4)
- ☐ Slightly Agree (5)
- ☐ Agree (6)
- ☐ Strongly Agree (7)

Q3 The individual quoted in the article seems reasonable.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ☐ Disagree (2)
- ☐ Slightly Disagree (3)
- ☐ Neutral (4)
- ☐ Slightly Agree (5)
- ☐ Agree (6)
- ☐ Strongly Agree (7)

Q4 The individual quoted in the article seems knowledgeable.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ☐ Disagree (2)
- ☐ Slightly Disagree (3)
- ☐ Neutral (4)
- ☐ Slightly Agree (5)
- ☐ Agree (6)
- ☐ Strongly Agree (7)

Q5 The individual quoted in the article seems trustworthy.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ☐ Disagree (2)
- ☐ Slightly Disagree (3)
- ☐ Neutral (4)
- ☐ Slightly Agree (5)
- ☐ Agree (6)
- ☐ Strongly Agree (7)

Q6 The individual quoted in the article seems reliable.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ☐ Disagree (2)
- ☐ Slightly Disagree (3)
- ☐ Neutral (4)
- ☐ Slightly Agree (5)
- ☐ Agree (6)
- ☐ Strongly Agree (7)



Q7 Healthcare is a critical issue facing the United States right now.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ☐ Disagree (2)
- ☐ Slightly Disagree (3)
- ☐ Neutral (4)
- ☐ Slightly Agree (5)
- ☐ Agree (6)
- ☐ Strongly Agree (7)

Q8 I keep up with current events.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ☐ Disagree (2)
- ☐ Slightly Disagree (3)
- ☐ Neutral (4)
- ☐ Slightly Agree (5)
- ☐ Agree (6)
- ☐ Strongly Agree (7)

Q9 Overall, I trust major news networks (NBC, CBS, etc.) to accurately report the news.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ☐ Disagree (2)
- ☐ Slightly Disagree (3)
- ☐ Neutral (4)
- ☐ Slightly Agree (5)
- ☐ Agree (6)
- ☐ Strongly Agree (7)

### III.

#### Demographic Survey

Q1 What is your age (in years):

---

Q2 Please indicate your gender:

☐ Male (1)

☐ Female (2)

☐ Other (3) \_\_\_\_\_

Q3 What racial/ethnic background do you identify with?

☐ African American / Black (1)

☐ Asian American / Pacific Islander (2)

☐ Caucasian / White (3)

☐ Hispanic / Latino (a) (4)

☐ Native American / Alaskan Native (5)

☐ Other (6) \_\_\_\_\_

Q4 What is your political affiliation?

- ☐ Republican (1)
- ☐ Democrat (2)
- ☐ Libertarian (3)
- ☐ Green Party (4)
- ☐ No affiliation (5)
- ☐ Other (6) \_\_\_\_\_

Q5 What is your current GPA?

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Q6 What is your current classification?

- ☐ Freshman (1)
- ☐ Sophomore (2)
- ☐ Junior (3)
- ☐ Senior (4)
- ☐ Graduate / PhD student (5)

Q7 What is your religious affiliation?

- ☐ Catholic (1)
- ☐ Baptist (2)
- ☐ Methodist (3)
- ☐ Other Christian (4) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Jewish (5)
- ☐ Muslim (6)
- ☐ Atheist (7)
- ☐ Not religious (8)
- ☐ Other (9) \_\_\_\_\_

Q8 Where would you place yourself on the political orientation scale?

0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
Very Conservative					Very					
Liberal										

IV.

IRB Approval



In future correspondence please refer to 6325

March 12, 2019

Daniel Fernandez  
Texas State University  
801 University Drive  
San Marcos, TX 78668

Dear Daniel:

Your IRB application titled "Who's to Say: How Partisan Politics Shape Our Beliefs" was reviewed and approved by the Texas State University IRB. It has been determined that risks to subjects are: (1) minimized and reasonable; and that (2) research procedures are consistent with a sound research design and do not expose the subjects to unnecessary risk. Reviewers determined that: (1) benefits to subjects are considered along with the importance of the topic and that outcomes are reasonable; (2) selection of subjects is equitable; and (3) the purposes of the research and the research setting is amenable to subjects' welfare and producing desired outcomes; that indications of coercion or prejudice are absent, and that participation is clearly voluntary.

1. In addition, the IRB found that you need to orient participants as follows: (1) informed consent is required and participation implies consent; (2) Provision is made for collecting, using and storing data in a manner that protects the safety and privacy of the subjects and the confidentiality of the data; (3) Appropriate safeguards are included to protect the rights and welfare of the subjects. (4) Compensation is not provided for participation.

This project is therefore approved at the Exempt Review Level  
Category 2 Surveys, Interviews, or Public observation

2. Please note that the institution is not responsible for any actions regarding this protocol before approval. If you expand the project at a later date to use other instruments, please re-apply. Copies of your request for human subjects review, your application, and this approval, are maintained in the Office of Research Integrity and Compliance.

Report any changes to this approved protocol to this office. All unanticipated events and adverse events are to be reported to the IRB within 3 days.

Sincerely,

Monica Gonzales  
IRB Specialist  
Office of Research Integrity and Compliance

CC: Dr. Azucena Mayberry

OFFICE OF THE ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH  
801 University Drive | JCK # 489 | San Marcos, Texas 78666-4616  
Phone 512.245.2314 | fax: 512.245.3847 | WWW.TXSTATE.EDU

This letter is an electronic communication from Texas State University-San Marcos, a member of The Texas State University System

## V.

### **Consent Form**

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. If you agree to participate click on the "I consent" button below to continue. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

### **PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn more about people's beliefs about healthcare. You are being asked to participate because it is a relevant topic that impacts us all.

### **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in the following:

- Reading one brief news article out of three possible articles
- A follow-up survey about the news article
- A demographic survey

The surveys and the news article will all be presented online. The link will be provided to you upon documentation of consent.

### **RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

The survey will include a section requesting demographic information. Data will be collected anonymously and will not be shared with anyone other than the principal investigator and faculty advisor. However, if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, you may leave them blank.

In the event that some of the survey or interview questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you are always free to decline to answer or to stop your participation at any time. Should you feel discomfort after participating and you are a Texas State University student, you may contact the University Health Services for counseling services at 512-245-2161. They are located at 298 Student Center Drive, San Marcos TX, 78666.

### **BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES**

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide will further our understanding of how beliefs are formed and maintained.

### **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be collected or used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed.

### **PAYMENT/COMPENSATION**

There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

### **PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

### **QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Azucena Mayberry : [ar48@txstate.edu](mailto:ar48@txstate.edu)

This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on 03/15/19. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-716-2652 – ([dgobert@txstate.edu](mailto:dgobert@txstate.edu)) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - ([meg201@txstate.edu](mailto:meg201@txstate.edu)).

### **DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time and must be at least 18 years old to participate.

☐ I consent

☐ I do not consent