

THE RAMIFICATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA: DIFFERENTIATING TRUTHS FROM  
FALSITIES AND FACTS FROM OPINIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The usage of social media platforms like Facebook is more common than ever. A potential concern with social media is that they impact people's abilities to know if political information found on these platforms is accurate. Social media creates the perfect atmosphere for users to obtain false information while also failing to see the other viewpoints regarding a given issue. Take into account the role that political party cues can play in how well people pay attention, and the increased usage of Facebook can appear troublesome. To determine whether these concerns are valid, I use a survey experiment that analyzes how well respondents can differentiate true statements from false statements and factual statements from opinion statements. The survey experiment also incorporates political party cues because about half of the respondents are told whether the statements are said by a Republican or a Democrat. Through the analysis of the responses across each treatment group, the survey experiment shows that the source of a statement- Facebook, traditional news, or no disclosed source- does not affect how well users differentiated the statements. The political party cue, however, did make an impact, for respondents are more likely to think a statement that aligns with their political views is true and factual relative to a statement that does not align with their political views.

*Keywords:* [Social Media, Political Party Cues, Facebook]

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## **Introduction**

Social media have proven to be a pervasive force in the lives of Americans. As the number of Americans using social media platforms increases, a question that needs to be answered is what effects social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, have on the political sphere. As information sources, social media potentially bring both advantages and disadvantages. The sheer volume and accessibility of information can be valuable. However, weighed against this positive consequence is the relative absence of quality control and the challenges that brings for the information consumer. Careful, critical consumption of information from social media may be essential, but it is not certain whether the standard is being achieved. Two specific possible repercussions of interest for this study are whether people reading statements on social media can distinguish facts from opinions and truths from falsities at the same level of accuracy as statements from traditional news or statements that do not have a specified source.

The rise of social media in recent years has made communication with others easier than ever and has also made it so an endless amount of information is accessible for everyone worldwide. A potential negative implication of social media, however, is the consequence it has had on Americans' ability to think critically. This ability is further hindered depending on whether the information fits into a person's ideological viewpoint. Differentiating facts from opinions is a skill one would have learned in elementary school, but it is possible that this skill is not utilized on social media platforms. If people do not take the time to evaluate the sources of information, it becomes difficult to know what statements are grounded in facts and which are merely opinions or even downright lies.

Existing research describes the effects media in general has on its users. For example, the Pew Research Center conducted a study evaluating how well Americans could differentiate factual statements from opinions in the news. The study showed that while many participants characterized the statements mostly correctly, there was a large number of participants who got a majority of them wrong (Mitchell et al. 2018). Potential causes for this lack of awareness in regards to social media specifically include users only seeing political views they agree with because of either people unfriending or unfollowing people on the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, or the algorithms used by social media sites that put content the user is more likely to like at the top of his or her timeline. Findings have shown that confirmation bias, when people become less likely to challenge information they see because it fits into their viewpoints, is made worse by social media (Osborn 2018). “Hug boxes,” created on social media through defriending others with different political views, platform algorithms, and concern about causing conflicts have prevented many people from engaging with others on social media (Kruse et al. 73). This, in turn, may further thwart the critical assessment of that information individuals do receive.

Although existing works highlight “fake news” in the digital world, there is a dearth of studies evaluating whether people have lost the ability to distinguish facts from opinions and the truth from lies on social media platforms. Social media are a relatively new phenomena, so it is my belief that it is time to conduct a closer evaluation of one of their effects in the political sphere.

I will test my theory that social media have negative consequences on users’ ability to differentiate facts from opinions and true statements from false statements. An experiment with college students will help to decide whether social media have any effects on these abilities.

## Literature Review

### Significance

Past literature has focused on the effects social media have on users' critical thinking skills. Gottfried and Shearer have specifically evaluated the large numbers of Americans using social media to get their news, suggesting that lack of critically analyzing political information is more widespread than it has ever been. It is now estimated that as many as 67% of Americans get their news from social media, with 20% doing so often (Gottfried and Shearer 2017). Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, Reddit, Instagram, and LinkedIn are among the most used social media sites. Fake news, which "can be classified as intentionally and verifiably false which would mislead readers," is present on social media, where its creators have the goal of getting as many clicks and shares as possible (Bharali and Goswami 118). Thus, fake news spreads quickly on social media. It is produced without "significant third party filtering, fast-checking, or editorial judgements" (Bharali and Goswami 119). Fake news' lack of accuracy does not stop its creators from having the ability to reach large masses of people. There are no significant barriers to posting on social media sites, leaving users vulnerable to false information without their users even realizing it.

The mental processes of heuristics and motivated reasoning compound the problems with analysis of political information, both in general and on social media platforms specifically. For background, heuristics are defined as, "methods for arriving at satisfactory solutions with modest amounts of computation" (Nadurak 141). To handle a large amount of information, people can utilize these mental shortcuts to organize the information quickly and easily. While people may be capable of making decisions without using shortcuts, many do not have the motivation to expend the effort in doing so (Robertson 349). Heuristics are used in politics in this manner. To

evaluate candidates or engage in campaigns, for example, Americans can use mental shortcuts that eliminate the need to pay much attention. Political decisions can be made through heuristics such as political ideology, party affiliation, and candidate appearance, since they are all readily available to constituents and can help with decision making (Kim 665). Robertson describes how the heuristic-based theory called “on-line running tally” is used for people when assessing a candidate (349). The candidate has an initial conception in the person’s mind. Then, as new information is discovered, the judgment of the candidate is updated, but the actual information that was used to make such a judgment is not remembered (Robertson 349). The way the person feels about the political candidate, however, is not forgotten.

Social media have made it so the results of cue-based processing, “the capacity to rapidly recognize and interpret complex patterns of task-relating stimuli using associations between specific features and events” can be shared to millions of people across the globe with the touch of a button (Small 482). Cue-based processing allows for someone to react to a stimulus based on what he or she has remembered from past memories. The result is a “reduction in the cognitive load imposed by the task, because the response to a cue obviates the requirement for detailed analysis” (Small 482). Consequently, people do not have to work as hard when they come across new information. It has even been found that one might be unaware of the factors “that bring those thoughts, feelings, and intentions to mind that appear to be the outcome of a self-conscious, purposive evaluation of the evidence” (Burdein et al. 360). The way people respond to information is the result of what first comes to mind. The memory accessibility varies depending on “the number of times and the context within which the concepts have been co-activated” (Lodge and Taber 10). In other words, the opinions that social media users form are most likely not the outcomes of conscious reasoning.



People who wish to acquire new knowledge use motivated reasoning and biased processing to enable the expansion based on their preconceived views. Motivated reasoning is utilized in decision making when evaluating “whether information is important, how it should be interpreted, and how it is ultimately remembered” (Robertson 349). The positive and negative feelings of the past are evoked when reading political information, causing people to want to find information that aligns with their preexisting views (Bowyer 6). Therefore, thoughts about politics, for the most part, are “either attempts to bolster supporting arguments or to denigrate and counter argue challenging arguments” (Lodge and Taber 34). Because motivated reasoning is a part of the way in which the brain processes information, it is done unconsciously. In fact, relative to conscious mental calculations, “Most thinking is unconscious, by at least six orders of magnitude” (Lodge and Taber 36). As a result, it is expected “that most citizens most of the time will be biased reasoners who find it near impossible to evaluate new, attitude-relevant information in an evenhanded way” (Lodge and Taber 8). Biased reasoners are provided with the tools to share their thoughts and “knowledge” with others on social media platforms.

The way our brains process information elicits special attention when considering the ease of finding information on social media sites. For example, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter influence the creation of echo chambers, which “prevent people from being exposed to information that contradicts their preexisting beliefs” (Bail 2018). Social media users can therefore avoid having to disparage information with which they disagree with greater ease than was traditionally possible. In Bail’s study, which had Republicans follow a liberal bot on Twitter and Democrats a conservative bot, Bail found that Republicans became more conservative because of the bot, while Democrats’ results were not statistically significant (Bail 2018). The concern is that social media allows its users to only see information that aligns with their

ideologies. People can follow those with whom they agree on Twitter so that they never have to see anything they disagree with. This is different than previous predications contending that social media would expose people to all kinds of different viewpoints (Bail 2018). People can still exclude views they oppose with as many sources of political news as social media sites have available. Kim provides justification for this idea, saying that people want to only see information they already approve of “because they want to reinforce their political predispositions rather than change them” (660). When social media users read information about a politician from their own political policy, they tend to trust him or her and have more positive attitudes than they would for a politician from another political party. Kim’s research found that “individuals who consume likeminded media are motivated to participate in political activities by forming ideologically biased beliefs rather than by gaining factual knowledge” (676). The acquisition of factual knowledge is further restricted because social media sites allow the limitation of competing viewpoints. Although it is true that there is so much available to view that the absence of filtering systems might make social media overwhelming, these filtering systems also severely limit diverse information, as algorithms are created according to what each user searches for and views (Kruse 66).

In Kruse’s study of political information on social media sites, she found, “Almost every participant also said they would not post or comment about politics or sensitive topics because of that real (or anticipated) absence of etiquette online” (69). Fear of aggressive or volatile discourse on social media further limits the diversity of viewpoints presented to users. Some people might be afraid to engage in political arguments online because of who could see them, while others might feel empowered to say what they think because they can hide behind a computer screen. The hug box, “driven by corporate algorithms, defriending, and fears about

interpersonal conflict, essentially shut down opportunities for discourse on social media” (Kruse 74). When social media users do not see the other side, they have no reason to consider why others might feel differently than they do about politics. Consequently, critical thinking skills on social media are not utilized. The question of how limited such skills have become remains to be answered.

### **Similar Studies**

Similar studies designed to see whether social media users can differentiate facts from opinions and true statements from false statements have been conducted. One such study considered the array of information available to constituents and how that affects knowledge in Sweden. According to Dimitrova, “While digital media have increased citizens’ opportunities to learn and participate in politics, ultimately the degree of learning and participation depends on whether citizens have the motivation and the abilities to learn and participate” (101). Social media, unfortunately, was not found to have an effect on political knowledge (Dimitrova 101). This means that people on social media sites might be consuming information, but they are not learning from it. Social media users have to have an interest, prior knowledge, and pay attention to politics to gain knowledge about politics from those platforms (Dimitrova 108). Conducting an experiment testing the analysis abilities of college students might then help answer the question of how likely it is that people are learning about politics on social media.

One possible problem with the amount of knowledge people are acquiring from social media sites is the validity of information. Mihailidis and Viotty describe how facts matter less than they have previously, with the result being that “facts and fact checkers face an increasingly futile task of attempting to distinguish truths from lies” (448). Mihailidis and Viotty claim, in a similar manner as Lodge and Taber, that when people see information that aligns with their

ideological viewpoints, they do not demand to know whether the information is true or false because they feel comfortable with how it fits into their existing prejudices (448). This process is especially true when it is friends or family members who are sharing the information. The connections cause users to have enough trust to the point where they do not feel the need to scrutinize what they are reading. Mihailidis' research "found that by focusing media literacy on critical skill attainment alone, young people were prone to be more cynical, less willing to engage in dialog, and less trustful of media and institutions" (451). Building off this idea, my study will evaluate how well people utilize critical thinking skills when reading statements attributed to social media sites and traditional news sources.

A study has already been conducted to see how well information literacy can be programmed on Facebook. Osborne's findings show, "Confirmation bias makes one less likely to challenge the information found and more accepting of information as it fits" (103). Although someone might be aware that he or she needs to verify the source of information, this process is less likely to happen if said information aligns with the person's views. As mentioned before, social media users are also influenced by friends and family members in whether they accept information as true. Osborne also observes how filter bubbles, created by Facebook users' ability to see information that aligns with their views at the top of their timelines, exacerbates the confirmation bias problem (103). Social media users can be hard pressed to critically examine information when they find a false article discovered through the filter bubble and which aligns with their confirmation bias. Osborne's study discovers that society's reliance on technology is "diminishing the rich intellectual associations that form the essence of personal knowledge and give rise to critical and conceptual thinking" (104). Thus, social media users are losing the ability to discern what is true and what is fake as technology dependence worsens. Critical thinking

skills are diminishing, leading society into a gullibility crisis where filters for accuracy are nowhere to be found, resulting in “an environment in which people are all too quick to accept lies and half-truths consumed from social media” (Osborne 104). People in society today seek instant gratification and thinking critically does not appear to fit into that mindset.

### **Conflicting Past Literature**

Despite concern that the younger generations lack interest in keeping up with current events, findings from the Media Insight Project, an initiative of the American Press Institute, suggest otherwise. Data has found that 85% of Millennials say “keeping up with news is at least somewhat important to them,” and 86% say they “usually see diverse opinions through social media” (“How Millennials Get News” 2018). Though these statistics are promising, they do not highlight whether the respondents took the time to learn from what they read or if the opinions had any validity to them. Statistics highlighting politics specifically were also not part of this study. With that being said, the American Press Institute’s study does find that contrary to the filter bubble idea mentioned in previous literature, “70 percent of Millennials say that their social media feeds are comprised of diverse viewpoints evenly mixed between those similar and different from their own” (“How Millennials Get News” 2018). This statistic is in conflict with other literature that look at the American population as a whole, making it so another study about the effects of evaluating statements that are different in ideology from one’s own is warranted.

A study conducted by Douglas found that Millennial participants usually see political information by chance, but when they do, “they tend to limit themselves to the most popular political content” (141). Instead of evaluating the validity of the content for themselves, the participants described how they tried to gauge how popular the information was among others to determine whether it was worth reading (Douglas 141). One of the purposes of my study will be

to see how well Millennials can tell whether information is truthful. It may be true that a post becomes popular because it is accurate and full of reliable information, but other literature does not appear to indicate such a possibility.

For example, research by Robertson considers how heuristic shortcuts and the influence of emotions can have effects on how people choose which political candidate to vote for. Robertson cites the view that “affect and emotion play a role in deciding about whether information is important, how it should be interpreted, and how it is ultimately remembered” (349). The problem with that process is that emotions do not seem to be the best way to distinguish true statements from false statements and facts from opinions. Reading a wide variety of sources appear to be conducive to making sound political decisions, but further research is necessary to determine if this is the case. Although findings from Robertson’s study suggest that “social media is not a trivial factor in political impression formation and decision making,” my experiment will help decide to what extent social media is a factor in elements of critical thinking (358).

## **Theory**

A Pew Research Center study has evaluated whether people can distinguish factual statements from opinion statements in the news, though not specifically on social media. The analysis found that the majority of Americans correctly guessed three of the five statements in each set, but a quarter got most or all the statements wrong (Mitchell et al. 2018). A conclusion of the Pew Research Center’s findings is, “Those with high political awareness, those who are very digitally savvy and those who place high levels of trust in the news media are better able than others to accurately identify news-related statements as factual or opinion” (Mitchell et al. 2018). The study also indicates that political party identification plays a role in determining

whether a statement is an opinion or a fact. Findings proved, “Republicans and Democrats were more likely to classify both factual *and* opinion statements as factual when they appealed most to their side” (Mitchell et al. 2018).

Cladis’ observations as a high school English teacher lead to the theory, “With digital technologies, we read with less accuracy and overall comprehension suffers” (6). Reading something on a screen is not taken to be as serious or important as reading something on paper, so there is relatively less effort in comprehending what is being read electronically (Cladis 7). It is this lack of effort that leads to a lack of thinking critically. Cladis notes, “We are often content being told what to think, how to feel, and how to act upon the feelings projected upon us” as a result of people’s abilities to access information anytime and anywhere (14). Technology allows for people to send out their thoughts and influence others freely and without consequence, eliminating the need for readers to think for themselves. In addition, the accessibility the Internet provides means that people can sift through information to find only the information that conforms to their beliefs. Cladis relays how this process means we are reading more but learning less because there is so much information out there that we can simply not acknowledge anything that fails to conform to the views we already hold. Cladis’ theory mentions how “Analytical skills are no longer being honed as they once were because easy answers are but one ‘google’ click away” (19). My speculation holds that this dearth of analytical skills holds true for people reading statements attributed to social media platforms.

The theory for how well social media users can distinguish true statements from false statements and facts from opinions rests on whether people have retained the ability to think critically when confronted with statements attributed to social media sites, statements attributed to conventional news sources, and statements with no attribution. Variation in the social media

users' capacity to tell which statements are reliable and which are not will vary depending on how well the statement is in line with the users' ideological views, as indicated by past literature. It is known that when people read something they agree with, they are more likely to think it is true and factual. Such a determination is also influenced by the source of the statement. Social media users theoretically know to be skeptical of information they read online, but the ability to correctly analyze seems to be mitigated nonetheless.

My theory generates four testable propositions. Hypothesis 1 is that people discern true statements from false statements incorrectly more often when the statements are from social media than when they are from conventional news sources or are without an attribution. As described by Lodge and Taber, when someone unexpectedly comes across a concept, more mental processing is necessary for the concept to be consciously known to the person (12). I believe that people will see a statement from social media and be thrown off, thinking that every statement is true or that every statement is false, but the same will not hold true for statements from conventional news sources, which people might expect to be fact checked, and statements where the source is not disclosed.

Hypothesis 2 is that differentiating facts from opinions does not vary among statements said to originate on social media, conventional news sources, or are without an attribute. I think that whether the statement is politically left-leaning or right-leaning has a greater effect on differentiating facts from opinions than the attribution of each statement. This is because "People are prone to interpret attitudinally congruent evidence as inherently stronger than attitudinally incongruent evidence" (Lodge and Taber 9).

Hypothesis 3A is that respondents will be more likely to say statements are false if they do not align with their ideology. Hypothesis 3B is that respondents will be more likely to say



statements are opinions if they do not align with their ideology. Someone who is a Republican would be more likely to think that a more Democratic statement is an opinion or false, and vice versa for a Democratic looking at a more Republican statement. Previous studies have shown that participants “showed significant bias in rating the arguments with which they agreed as stronger than those with which they disagreed” (Lodge and Taber 34). I believe that this concept will hold true in my experiment.

Hypothesis 4A is that respondents will be more likely to think statements are true when the statements align with their ideology. Hypothesis 4B is that respondents will be more likely to think statements are factual when the statements align with their ideology. Hypothesis 4A and 4B are based on past literature postulating that “People routinely rationalize the facts, figures, and arguments that they cannot effortlessly discount, depreciate, denigrate, or deny” (Lodge and Taber 8). People think that the ideas they agree with must be true, sometimes without even consciously realizing it.

## **Data and Methods**

The data that prove the hypotheses false or not false are obtained from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Political Science Subject Pool. Students in political science classes at the University of Illinois can respond to surveys for extra credit. My survey experiment testing social media’s effects on the capacity to differentiate true statements from false statements and facts from opinions appeared in the first wave of the Spring 2019 Subject Pool. I separated the experiment into two parts: one for true versus false statements and one for fact versus opinion statements. Once participants completed my experiment, I analyzed the results based on the participants’ responses and how well they did so that I could declare whether my hypotheses are accurate.

My independent variables are the treatment conditions utilized in the experiment and my dependent variables are the answers that every participant selected for all the questions they received. The format of my experiment allows for the comparison of social media, conventional news sources, and no known sources with and without the mention of a political party based on how the means of the dependent variables differ.

### **Survey Experiment Design**

The experiment consists of 24 statements that are split into two sections. The first section is therefore made up of twelve questions and asks participants to characterize statements as either true or false. A “true” statement is defined, “the statement can be objectively confirmed as accurate.” A “false” statement is said to mean “the statement is wrong or inaccurate.” All statements in this section are taken from PolitiFact so that their validity is verified. Three of the twelve statements are true and said by Republicans. Another three statements are also said by Republicans, but they are false. Three statements are said by Democrats and are true. The last three statements are said by Democrats but are false. All twelve statements appear in the six treatment groups.

Subject Pool respondents are randomly placed into one of six treatment groups. For Group One, the respondents are told whether each statement is said by a prominent Republican or Democrat, but the source of the statements is not disclosed. Group Two is told the political party of the person who said each statement and is also informed that each statement is taken from a televised news segment. Participants placed into Group Three are told whether the statement was said by a Republican or Democrat, but they are notified that each statement is from Facebook. I chose Facebook for the social media source because it is the most widely used social media platform. Group Four is the control group, meaning that participants are not

informed of the political party of the statement's speaker nor are they informed of where the statements came from. Respondents in Group Five are not told whether a Democrat or Republican said each statement, but they are informed that the statements came from televised news segments. The final group, Group 6, lets respondents know that Facebook is the source of the statements, but whether a Republican or Democrat said them is not disclosed.

For the second section of the survey, Subject Pool participants are again randomly placed into one of six treatment groups. This time, however, respondents are instructed to choose whether each statement is a Fact or an Opinion. A "fact" is said to mean, "something capable of being proved or disproved by objective evidence." An "opinion" is defined as "reflecting the values and beliefs of the person who expresses it." The factual statements in this section are found on PolitiFact. The opinion statements are taken from Facebook, Twitter, the Brookings Institution website, the Heritage Foundation website, and the FOX News website. Much like the first section, Group One has the political party of each statement's speaker but not the statements' source. Group Two says that each statement is from televised news segments and says whether a Republican or a Democrat is the speaker of each statement. Group Three discloses that the statements are from Facebook and tells respondents which political party the speaker is in. In Group Four, the control group, the respondents are not told the source of the statements nor the political party of the person who said them. Group Five lets respondents know that the statements are from televised news sources but the respondents are not told the political party of the person who said them. Finally, Group Six respondents are informed that the statements were taken from Facebook but does not say whether each statement was said by a Democrat or Republican.

The statements each experiment participant sees are in random order within both the true versus false section and the fact versus opinion section. This is done in the interest of mitigating bias and eliminating answers that are based on the arrangement of the questions. In other words, for the treatment groups where political party is mentioned, statements from Republicans and Democrats are in random order and hold no significance to the likelihood that a statement is true or false or factual or an opinion. By including treatment groups where political party is not disclosed, it is possible to see what effect, if any, a Republican or Democrat has on the credibility of a statement. Comparisons between the sources of the statements can then be made as well. The probability of randomly guessing a question correctly is 50%, so any percentage lower or higher shows that there are conditions at play that are affecting whether a participant decides a statement is true or false for the first section or fact or opinion for the second section. The full survey can be found in Appendix B.

Every question within the treatment group must be answered by the respondent for him or her to complete the survey. Although this could mean that someone randomly guesses whether a statement is true or false and a fact or an opinion, the “random guesses” should even out because the guess is 50% likely to be correct.

In terms of the sample sizes, 506 people completed the survey experiment, so each treatment group had anywhere from 83 to 85 respondents. Any answers from a participant who did not completely finish the survey experiment were discarded.

### **Testing Hypothesis 1 & Hypothesis 2**

When analyzing the dependent variables for Hypotheses 1 and 2, I recoded the answers so that 1=Correct and 0=Incorrect. I have hypothesized that social media sources will result in participants performing worse relative to the participants who had statements from news

segments or no disclosed source at all. I predict that the source of statements does not have an effect on how well a participant does on the false versus opinion section of the survey. To determine how well respondents characterized the statements in the experiment, I compared the means of the two treatment groups without a disclosed source to the two treatment groups with news as the source and to the two treatment groups with statements said to come from Facebook. I calculated the means for both sections of the survey experiment by running independent samples t-tests. A higher mean signifies more correct answers, while a lower mean signifies more incorrect answers and less correct answers. The t-tests provided the standard deviations and p-values for the dependent variables as well, thereby making it clear what data are significant. The analysis aims to show whether the Subject Pool participants in the treatment groups with statements from Facebook performed any better or worse than the participants in the other treatment groups.

### **Testing Hypotheses 3A, 3B, 4A, & 4B**

The purpose of only mentioning whether a statement's speaker is a Republican or Democrat in half of the treatment groups is so I can test my final four hypotheses that people will be influenced by political party cues. I can thus directly compare how well respondents did on both sections of the experiment with and without the political party condition. Although I do not ask each participant what political party they identify with or their ideology within the survey experiment itself, I will know this information because of the background survey that everyone participating in the Subject Pool must complete. Participants had to answer the question, "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a... Strong Democrat (1); Democrat (2); Independent Leaning Democrat (3); Independent (4); Independent Leaning Democrat (5); Republican (6); Strong Republican (7)." Any respondent who put numbers one, two, or three

down is recoded as 2 (Democrat), while any respondent who put numbers five, six, or seven down is recoded as 1 (Republican). Respondents who marked down Independent (4) are recoded to be “99,” and those cases are discarded because none of the statements in the survey experiment are said by an Independent. As such, I have the ability to determine if Democrats thought statements said by Democrats are more likely to be true and factual, and if statements said by Republicans are more likely to be false and opinions. The same ability holds for Republicans who participate in the experiment.

For Hypotheses 3A and 4A, I left it so 1=True, but recoded the False responses so that they equal 0. I repeated the recoding of the responses for Hypotheses 3B and 4B to have 1=Fact and 0=Opinion. The recoding of the responses allows me to see whether respondents are more likely to think a statement is true or factual versus false or an opinion based on the political party of each respondent and the political party of the person who said each statement. The higher the mean, the more often respondents chose True or Fact as the answers. I compared the means of the answers within the relevant treatment groups to determine the accuracy of Hypotheses 3A, 3B, 4A, and 4B. I calculated the means by running independent samples t-tests, with the grouping variable being the political party identification scale. Because half of the statements in treatment groups one, two, and three are disclosed as being said by a Republican and the other half of the statements in treatment groups one, two, and three are disclosed as being said by a Democrat, I can separate the answers based both on whether participants marked themselves as Democrats or Republicans and what they said when they read Democratic versus Republican statements. Further, conditions four, five, and six, in which no party cue was disclosed, allows for comparisons to be made for Republican versus Democratic respondents whilst differentiating statements without knowing the political party of the speakers.

## Results

### Hypothesis 1

Survey experiment participants who decided if they thought statements without a disclosed source were true or false have an overall mean of 0.54 (standard deviation=0.12). Participants with statements from televised news segments' mean is 0.57 (standard deviation=0.12), and participants with statements from Facebook have a mean of 0.55 (standard deviation=0.12). The answers are recoded so that the higher the mean, the more often respondents were correct in choosing whether a statement is true or false (the means and standard deviations are also included in Table 1, located below.) To determine whether any of the means have statistical significance, I ran t-tests to find the p-values. The significance level of the p-values is  $p < 0.05$ . The variance between the mean of the statements without an attribution compared to the mean of statements from traditional news sources proves to be marginally insignificant ( $p < 0.06$ ). The t-tests run for no attribution versus Facebook ( $p < 0.255$ ) and news versus Facebook ( $p < 0.182$ ) show that the differences in means are not statistically significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is false because it appears from the survey experiment that the source of statements has little to no effect on whether participants determine if statements are true or false.

**Table 1. True vs. False Accuracy by Statements' Source**

	No Attribution	News	Facebook
Mean	0.54	0.57	0.55
(Standard Deviation)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)

## Hypothesis 2

The survey experiment participants in the treatment groups where they guessed whether statements without source attributions were facts or opinions have a mean of 0.85 (standard deviation=0.12). When participants were in the treatment groups with statements from traditional news segments, the mean is 0.85 (standard deviation=0.12). For the treatment groups with statements from Facebook, the mean is 0.83 (standard deviation=0.12). The higher the mean, the more accurately survey experiment participants distinguished facts from opinions (Table 2 [below] showcases the comparisons of the means and standard deviations by the statements' source.) With a significance level at  $p < 0.05$ , the means are shown to be statistically insignificant across all treatment groups. The p-value of no attribution statements compared to news is  $p < 0.868$ , no attribution compared to Facebook is  $p < 0.504$ , and news compared to Facebook is  $p < 0.414$ . These p-values demonstrate that none of the means are different from one another. Consequently, similar to the discovery regarding Hypothesis 1, the source of statements has no bearing on whether survey experiment respondents choose Fact or Opinion.

**Table 2. Fact vs. Opinion Accuracy by Statements' Source**

	No Attribution	News	Facebook
Mean	0.85	0.85	0.83
(Standard Deviation)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)



### **Hypotheses 3A & 4A**

Hypotheses 3A and 4A are aimed at testing whether political party plays a role in analyzing statements said to come from social media, traditional news segments, or no source attribution. The answers are recoded so that the higher the mean, the more times “true” was chosen. As mentioned earlier, the political party of each respondent is known because of the background survey everyone completed. The data is recoded so the means of the Republicans and Democrats are separate, and any participant who marked him or herself as Independent is not factored in. The Independent respondents are not included in the analyses for Hypothesis 3 or Hypothesis 4 because the hypotheses only mention statements that align or do not align with ideology, and there are no Independent statements in the survey experiment. In conditions one, two, and three, 52 survey respondents are Republican and 175 are Democrats. For the survey respondents in conditions four, five, and six, 52 are Republican and 175 are Democrats. When Republican respondents read statements they knew Democrats said, the mean of their answers is 0.53 (standard deviation=0.23). Republican respondents reading statements they knew Republicans said have a mean of 0.63 (standard deviation=0.21). For Republican respondents given statements without the party cue, their mean is 0.61 (standard deviation=0.16). Democratic respondents’ mean for the treatment groups without the party cue is 0.62 (standard deviation=0.16). When Democratic respondents read statements disclosed as having been said by Republicans, their mean is 0.48 (standard deviation=0.23). Democratic respondents given statements said by Democrats have a mean of 0.73 (standard deviation=0.20). These findings are shown in Table 3 (page 26). The p-values obtained from running t-tests based on the party cues determine whether the means of Republican and Democratic survey respondents are statistically significant. The p-value for the Republican statements is  $p < 0.000$ , so at the  $p < 0.05$  significance

level, the means of Democratic and Republican participants are shown to be different. For the Democratic statements, the p-value is also  $p < 0.000$ , so again, it is clear that the means of Democratic and Republican participants are not the same. A t-test run for the statements without a party cue gives a p-value of  $p < 0.453$ . Consequently, the means of Democratic and Republican statements are not different for the treatment groups who were not explicitly told the political party of each statement's author. The means with statistical significance are denoted with an asterisk in Table 3. With the p-values in mind, it is possible to determine that in the experiment, Republican respondents have a higher mean for the statements said by Republicans than for the statements said by Democrats. Democratic respondents' mean is higher for Democratic statements than for Republican statements. It thus appears to be the case that Hypotheses 3A and 4A are not false for this survey experiment; respondents reading statements that align with their ideology are more likely to say the statements are false, yet respondents reading statements that do not align with their ideology are more likely to say the statements are true.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 3. True/False Means of Republican Versus Democratic Statements Per Political Party Identification**

*Standard Deviations are in parentheses;  $p < 0.05$  is denoted by an \**

	Republican Statements	Democratic Statements	No Political Party Cue
Republican Participants	0.63* (0.21)	0.53* (0.23)	0.61 (0.16)
Democrat Participants	0.48* (0.23)	0.73* (0.20)	0.62 (0.16)

<sup>1</sup> The Appendix features a table with the means and standard deviations of every condition included in this survey experiment for the true versus false section, separated by political party cues and the political party of the respondents

### **Hypotheses 3B & 4B**

Analyzing the fact versus opinion section of the survey experiment based on political party cues is done in much the same way as the true versus false section. Using the political party scale from the Background Survey again, it is evident that 53 respondents are Republican and 170 respondents are Democrat in conditions four, five and six. In conditions one, two, and three, 45 respondents are Republican and 179 are Democrat. The data is recoded so the higher the mean, the more often the survey respondents guess that a statement is factual as opposed to opinionated. Republican participants who read statements said to be by Democrats have a mean of 0.49 (standard deviation= 0.13). When Republican participants from treatment groups four, five, and six read the statements without knowing the political party of the speakers, their mean is 0.51 (standard deviation=0.12). Democratic participants reading statements by Republicans have a mean of 0.37 (standard deviation= 0.19) and Democratic participants who did not have the party cue's mean is 0.45 (standard deviation= 0.11). For Democratic participants given statements said to be by Democrats, their mean is 0.55 (standard deviation= 0.14). Table 4 (found on page 28) illustrates these findings. To determine the statistical significance of the various means, p-values are found, with  $p < 0.05$  the level of significance. The p-value for the Republican statements is  $p < 0.000$ , meaning that the means of the Democratic participants and Republican participants are different. Evaluating the Democratic statements,  $p < 0.012$ , so the means of the Democratic and Republican participants are different as well. Finally, the p-value for the statements without a political party cue is  $p < 0.005$ , demonstrating that the means of Republican and Democratic participants are different there too. It can thus be concluded that all the means found for these hypotheses are statistically significant. Republican participants are more likely to say a statement is a fact when reading statements from Republicans, whether the

political party of the speaker is disclosed or not. The mean is highest for Republican statements and lowest for Democratic statements, with the statements missing the political party cue in between. Democratic participants, on the other hand, are more likely to think that statements are facts when the statements are disclosed as being said by Democrats, and more likely to think statements are opinions when they are said by Republicans. Again, the mean of the Democratic participants' answers for statements without a political party cue are in the middle. Hypotheses 3B and 4B can therefore not be rejected.

**Table 4. Fact/Opinion Means of Republican Versus Democratic Statements Per Political Party Identification**

*Standard Deviations are in parentheses;  $p < 0.05$  is denoted by an \**

	Republican Statements	Democratic Statements	No Political Party Cue
Republican Participants	0.52* (0.20)	0.49* (0.13)	0.51* (0.12)
Democratic Participants	0.37* (0.19)	0.55* (0.14)	0.45* (0.11)

### Conclusion

In this paper, I sought an answer to the question of whether social media inhibits the ability to differentiate true statements from false statements and facts from opinions. A comparison of statements from the news, Facebook, and statements without a disclosed source demonstrates that the statements' source does not have an effect on the ability for survey experiment participants to correctly decide if a statement is true or false and a fact or an opinion. The political party of the person responsible for speaking each statement is shown to have an

effect when differentiating true statements from false statements and facts versus opinions. Thus, the Republican survey participants are more likely to think a statement is true or a fact when the statement is disclosed as having been said by a Republican. Republican survey participants are least likely to think Democratic statements are true or factual, with the means of statements without a disclosed political party in between the Republican and Democratic statements. The same can be said for Democratic survey participants; the means for this group are much higher for the Democratic statements than for the Republican statements, with the means of the statements without the political party cue falling in the middle of the two other means of interest.

As with any experiment, this survey experiment has a couple notable limitations. One limitation is that the respondents for the Political Science Subject Pool are relatively homogenous compared to the entire population. Every participant has completed at least one semester of college, so education levels are similar. The ages of the participants are close as well, due to one needing to be a university student in order to complete the experiment. With that being said, the similar nature of the subject pool participants results in the amplification of differences in regard to how well one performs on the experiment. Disparities in correct answer choices are thereby likely the result of one of the conditions, not because of differing education level or age. The ages of the experiment respondents, between 18 and 22 years old for the most part, is among the range of Americans who use social media the most regularly. Consequently, they are presumably familiar with news on social media platforms such as Facebook.

A second limitation of my experiment is that it is artificial, meaning that its adherence to the real world is finite. Experiments by their nature are artificial, nonetheless, and it is not feasible to compare the same statement across different sources in the real world. In addition, no conclusions can be made about the general population because the experiment was distributed to

one group of university students as opposed to conducting it nationally. The process that is at work when evaluating statements from social media versus statements from conventional news sources and statements without an attribution can still be evaluated based on the results, however.

A final limitation of the survey experiment is the sample size. With unlimited resources, it would have been possible to make it so this survey could be distributed nationwide. The sample sizes would then drastically increase. This is especially important when considering the relatively small number of Republican participants when compared to the number of Democratic participants. There is the possibility that the results of the survey experiment could change if more Republicans are involved and if more people respond in general. Still, treatment groups consisting of at least 83 survey participants is a large enough sample to adequately test the hypotheses detailed here.

Speculating beyond what this survey experiment found, it is likely that people in the general population are more influenced by political party cues than the source of political statements they come across. It therefore may not be that people are inherently inclined to misinterpret information on social media platforms such as Facebook. Instead, as has been concluded by past literature, people seem to be prone to believing information that aligns with their ideologies and discounting information that does not. The survey experiment demonstrates that this tendency is true regardless of where the information is found.

Future studies could be conducted with the same survey experiment but with a different pool of respondents. Should a survey experiment be distributed nationwide, there would be a variety of participants and education levels that could possibly yield different results than those concluded with the homogenous pool created by the Political Science Subject Pool. It might be

that people who have grown up with social media, such as college students, evaluate political information from various sources differently than people who are older and did not always have access to social media platforms.

Additionally, it could be useful for future studies to recreate a similar survey experiment to the one described here, but with a format that more closely resembles the Facebook timeline of the average user. All the statements looked exactly the same, regardless of their source. Facebook timelines also show the number of “likes” and “retweets” that a post has. Users might be more inclined to believe a post if it has more likes and retweets over a post that is not as popular. Perhaps the lack of placing the statements within a visual that looks like a Facebook timeline caused survey participants to not respond to the statements from social media in the same way that they do in real life. It could be that participants did acknowledge the source of the statements but decided it had no effect on their answers because that is how they feel in the real world, or it could be that the statements did not look authentic enough to produce the difference in means that was expected of the true versus false section.

In terms of future research, it would be interesting to compare Facebook to other social media sources such as Twitter and Snapchat. The number of users on all three platforms is growing, making it so more people than ever have access to political information without needing to intentionally search for it. The survey experiment described in this paper shows that political statements from Facebook are taken as seriously as statements from televised news segments and statements without a disclosed source, but it is possible that Facebook is the social media platform viewed as the most reliable relative to other social media platforms.

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**APPENDIX A: ACCURACY OF TRUE VERSUS FALSE SECTION ACCORDING TO  
CONDITION AND POLITICAL PARTY CUE**

*Mean listed first; Standard Deviation in parentheses*

*p < 0.05 marked with an \**

	GOP Statement  No Source	GOP Statement  News	GOP Statement  Facebook	DEM Statement  No Source	DEM Statement  News	DEM Statement  Facebook	No Party Cue  No Source	No Party Cue  News	No Party Cue  Facebook
GOP Participant	0.59 (0.11)	0.53 (0.17)	0.56 (0.17)	0.60 (0.25)	0.60 (0.14)	0.57 (0.20)	0.52 (0.11)	0.54 (0.12)	0.58 (0.14)
DEM Participant	0.55 (0.17)	0.58 (0.18)	0.55 (0.17)	0.55 (0.19)	0.57 (0.17)	0.57 (0.16)	0.53 (0.13)	0.56 (0.12)	0.55 (0.12)

## APPEDIX B: SURVEY INSTRUMENT

### True vs. False Section

#### Treatment Group 1 (No Source Attribution, Political Party Cue)

*12 statements of various sources are in quotation marks and bold font below. Make your best guess and judge whether each statement is likely:*

*True (the statement can be objectively confirmed as accurate)*

*OR*

*False (the statement is wrong or inaccurate).*

According to a prominent Republican in March 2017,

**"Under the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, one third of the counties in the United States have only one insurance company offering coverage."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican in December 2017,

**"Home ownership among African Americans has just hit the highest level it has ever been in U.S. history."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat in July 2018,

**"The three wealthiest Americans hold greater combined wealth than the bottom half of the American people."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat in August 2017,

**"It costs California about \$75,000 per inmate per year to lock up prisoners."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat in January 2018,

**"Reauthorizing the Children's Health Insurance Program for ten years saves the government \$6 billion."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat in February 2018,

**"40% of the guns in this country are sold without any background checks."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican in May 2018,

**"The 2018 defense authorization bill included pay raises for the military for the first time in ten years."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican in April 2017,

**"Since China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, the United States has lost many more than 60,000 factories."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat in October 2017,

**"In the past year, there had been more than 270 mass shootings in the United States in which four or more persons were killed."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican in February 2018,

**"Along the southern border of the United States, the government apprehends seven individuals a day who are either known or suspected terrorists."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True

- False

According to a prominent Democrat in May 2018,

**"Two-thirds of the people who use Medicaid are poor children."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican in November 2018,

**"Household income among Hispanic Americans just set a new record high."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

### **Treatment Group 2 (News, Political Party Cue)**

***12 statements from television news segments are in quotation marks and bold font below. Make your best guess and judge whether each statement is likely:***

***True (the statement can be objectively confirmed as accurate)***

***OR***

***False (the statement is wrong or inaccurate).***

According to a prominent Republican on a television news segment in March 2017,

**"Under the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, one third of the counties in the United States have only one insurance company offering coverage."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat on a television news segment in October 2017,

**"In the past year, there had been more than 270 mass shootings in the United States in which four or more persons were killed."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat on a television news segment in July 2018,

**"The three wealthiest Americans hold greater combined wealth than the bottom half of the American people."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican on a television news segment in December 2017,

**"Home ownership among African Americans had just hit the highest level it had ever been in U.S. history."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican on a television news segment in May 2018,

**"The 2018 defense authorization bill included pay raises for the military for the first time in ten years."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat on a television news segment in January 2018,

**"Reauthorizing the Children's Health Insurance Program for ten years saves the government \$6 billion."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican on a television news segment in February 2018,

**"Along the southern border of the United States, the government apprehends seven individuals a day who are either known or suspected terrorists."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican on a television news segment in April 2017,

**"Since China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, the United States has lost many more than 60,000 factories."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False



According to a prominent Democrat on a television news segment in August 2017,

**"It costs California about \$75,000 per inmate per year to lock up prisoners."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat on a television news segment in February 2018,

**"40% of the guns in this country are sold without any background checks."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican on a television news segment in November 2018,

**"Household income among Hispanic Americans just set a new record high."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat on a television news segment in May 2018,

**"Two-thirds of the people who use Medicaid are poor children."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

### **Treatment group 3 (Facebook, Political Party Cue)**

***12 statements from Facebook are in quotation marks and bold font below. Make your best guess and judge whether each statement is likely:***

***True (the statement can be objectively confirmed as accurate)***

***OR***

***False (the statement is wrong or inaccurate).***

According to a prominent Republican on Facebook in March 2017,

**"Under the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, one third of the counties in the United States have only one insurance company offering coverage."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican on Facebook in April 2017,

**"Since China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, the United States has lost many more than 60,000 factories."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican on Facebook in November 2018,

**"Household income among Hispanic Americans just set a new record high."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat on Facebook in August 2017,

**"It costs California about \$75,000 per inmate per year to lock up prisoners."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican on Facebook in May 2018,

**"The 2018 defense authorization bill included pay raises for the military for the first time in ten years."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat on Facebook in February 2018,

**"40% of the guns in this country are sold without any background checks."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican on Facebook in February 2018,

**"Along the southern border of the United States, the government apprehends seven individuals a day who are either known or suspected terrorists."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat on Facebook in October 2017,

**"In the past year, there had been more than 270 mass shootings in the United States in which four or more persons were killed."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat on Facebook in January 2018,

**"Reauthorizing the Children's Health Insurance Program for ten years saves the government \$6 billion."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Republican on Facebook in December 2017,

**"Home ownership among African Americans had just hit the highest level it had ever been in U.S. history."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat on Facebook in July 2018,

**"The three wealthiest Americans hold greater combined wealth than the bottom half of the American people."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

According to a prominent Democrat on Facebook in May 2018,

**"Two-thirds of the people who use Medicaid are poor children."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

#### **Treatment Group 4 (No Source Attribution, No Political Party Cue)**

***12 statements from various sources are in quotation marks and bold font below. Make your best guess and judge whether each statement is likely:***

***True (the statement can be objectively confirmed as accurate)***

***OR***

**False (the statement is wrong or inaccurate).**

In February 2018, it was claimed that,

**"40% of the guns in this country are sold without any background checks."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In January 2018, it was claimed that,

**"Reauthorizing the Children's Health Insurance Program for ten years saves the government \$6 billion."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In March 2017, it was claimed that,

**"Under the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, one third of the counties in the United States have only one insurance company offering coverage."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In July 2018, it was claimed that,

**"The three wealthiest Americans hold greater combined wealth than the bottom half of the American people."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In May 2018, it was claimed that,

**"Two-thirds of the people who use Medicaid are poor children."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In December 2017, it was claimed that,

**"Home ownership among African Americans had just hit the highest level it had ever been in U.S. history."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In August 2017, it was claimed that,

**"It costs California about \$75,000 per inmate per year to lock up prisoners."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In February 2018, it was claimed that,

**"Along the southern border of the United States, the government apprehends seven individuals a day who are either known or suspected terrorists."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In October 2017, it was claimed that,

**"In the past year, there had been more than 270 mass shootings in the United States in which four or more persons were killed."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In May 2018, it was claimed that,

**"The 2018 defense authorization bill included pay raises for the military for the first time in ten years."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In April 2017, it was claimed that,

**"Since China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, the United States has lost many more than 60,000 factories."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In November 2018, it was claimed that,

**"Household income among Hispanic Americans just set a new record high."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

### Treatment group 5 (News, No Political Party Cue)

**12 statements from television news segments are in quotation marks and bold font below. Make your best guess and judge whether each statement is likely:**

**True (the statement can be objectively confirmed as accurate)**

**OR**

**False (the statement is wrong or inaccurate).**

In December 2017, it was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"Home ownership among African Americans had just hit the highest level it had ever been in U.S. history."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In August 2017, it was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"It costs California about \$75,000 per inmate per year to lock up prisoners."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In January 2018, it was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"Reauthorizing the Children's Health Insurance Program for ten years saves the government \$6 billion."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In November 2018, it was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"Household income among Hispanic Americans just set a new record high."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In April 2017, it was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"Since China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, the United States has lost many more than 60,000 factories."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In July 2018, it was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"The three wealthiest Americans hold greater combined wealth than the bottom half of the American people."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In February 2018, it was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"40% of the guns in this country are sold without any background checks."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In May 2018, it was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"Two-thirds of the people who use Medicaid are poor children."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In February 2018, it was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"Along the southern border of the United States, the government apprehends seven individuals a day who are either known or suspected terrorists."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In May 2018, it was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"The 2018 defense authorization bill included pay raises for the military for the first time in ten years."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In March 2017, it was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"Under the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, one third of the counties in the United States have only one insurance company offering coverage."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In October 2017, it was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"In the past year, there had been more than 270 mass shootings in the United States in which four or more persons were killed."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

### **Treatment Group 6 (Facebook, No Political Party Cue)**

***12 statements from Facebook are in quotation marks and bold font below. Make your best guess and judge whether each statement is likely:***

***True (the statement can be objectively confirmed as accurate)***

***OR***

***False (the statement is wrong or inaccurate).***

In March 2017, it was claimed on Facebook that,

**"Under the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, one third of the counties in the United States have only one insurance company offering coverage."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In February 2018, it was claimed on Facebook that,

**"40% of the guns in this country are sold without any background checks."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In February 2018, it was claimed on Facebook that,

**"Along the southern border of the United States, the government apprehends seven individuals a day who are either known or suspected terrorists."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True



- False

In May 2018, it was claimed on Facebook that,

**"Two-thirds of the people who use Medicaid are poor children."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In August 2017, it was claimed on Facebook that,

**"It costs California about \$75,000 per inmate per year to lock up prisoners."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In December 2017, it was claimed on Facebook that,

**"Home ownership among African Americans had just hit the highest level it had ever been in U.S. history."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In May 2018, it was claimed on Facebook that,

**"The 2018 defense authorization bill included pay raises for the military for the first time in ten years."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In April 2017, it was claimed on Facebook that,

**"Since China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, the United States has lost many more than 60,000 factories."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In January 2018, it was claimed on Facebook that,

**"Reauthorizing the Children's Health Insurance Program for ten years saves the government \$6 billion."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In November 2018, it was claimed on Facebook that,

**"Household income among Hispanic Americans just set a new record high."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In July 2018, it was claimed on Facebook that,

**"The three wealthiest Americans hold greater combined wealth than the bottom half of the American people."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

In October 2017, it was claimed on Facebook that,

**"In the past year, there had been more than 270 mass shootings in the United States in which four or more persons were killed."**

Do you think this statement is likely True or False? Choose the best answer below.

- True
- False

### **Fact vs. Opinion Section**

#### **Treatment group 1 (No Source Attribution, Political Party Cue)**

*12 more statements from various sources are in bold font and quotation marks below. For each statement, make your best guess as to whether it is a:*

***Factual statement (something capable of being proved or disproved by objective evidence)***

***OR***

***an Opinion statement (reflecting the values and beliefs of the person who expresses it)***

According to a prominent Republican,

**"A successful Brexit, based upon a truly sovereign Britain, will be great for Britain, for Europe and for the United States."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat,

**"There are few issues more important to the security of the US than the potential spread of nuclear weapons or the potential for even more destructive war in the Middle East."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican,

**"Planned Parenthood is the biggest abortion provider in the country."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican,

**"It's called change, and unlike Obama, who talked endlessly about change, President Trump is actually delivering it."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat,

**"The only border crisis we're facing is the inhumane detention of kids that has already led to the deaths of two children."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat,

**"A wall may well prove to be a \$5 billion waste of money, but it is a small price to pay to finally expose the real threat to our country's security that currently inhabits the oval Office."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican,

**"Hopefully, Democrat lawmakers will step forward to do what is RIGHT for our country- and what is right is border security at the STRONGEST level."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact

- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat,

**"Adjusting for inflation, West Virginia's median household income has not grown in a decade."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican,

**"The National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2019 'includes the largest pay raise in nearly 10 years.'"**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat,

**"At General Motors, CEO Mary Barra 'took home almost 22 MILLION DOLLARS last year alone (295x your company's average employee)."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat,

**"The Trump administration transferred \$10 million from FEMA to ICE."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican in 2015,

**"'Illegal' immigrants accounted for 75 percent of federal drug possession convictions and 5 percent to 30 percent of convictions for murder and kidnapping plus two other crimes."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

### **Treatment group 2 (News, Political Party Cue)**

***12 more statements from television news segments are in bold font and quotation marks below.***

***For each statement, make your best guess as to whether it is a:***

***Factual statement (something capable of being proved or disproved by objective evidence)***

**OR**

***an Opinion statement (reflecting the values and beliefs of the person who expresses it).***

According to a prominent Republican on a television news segment in 2015,

**"'Illegal' immigrants accounted for 75 percent of federal drug possession convictions and 5 percent to 30 percent of convictions for murder and kidnapping plus two other crimes."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican on a television news segment,

**"The National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2019 'includes the largest pay raise in nearly 10 years.'"**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat on a television news segment,

**"The only border crisis we're facing is the inhumane detention of kids that has already led to the deaths of two children."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat on a television news segment,

**"A wall may well prove to be a \$5 billion waste of money, but it is a small price to pay to finally expose the real threat to our country's security that currently inhabits the Oval Office."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat on a television news segment,

**"The Trump administration transferred \$10 million from FEMA to ICE."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat on a television news segment,

**"Adjusting for inflation, West Virginia's median household income has not grown in a decade."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican on a television news segment,

**"It's called change, and unlike Obama, who talked endlessly about change, President Trump is actually delivering it."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican on a television news segment,

**"A successful Brexit, based upon a truly sovereign Britain, will be great for Britain, for Europe and for the United States."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat on a television news segment,

**"At General Motors, CEO Mary Barra 'took home almost 22 MILLION DOLLARS last year alone (295x your company's average employee)."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican on a television news segment,

**"Hopefully, Democrat lawmakers will step forward to do what is RIGHT for our country- and what is right is border security at the STRONGEST level."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat on a television news segment,

**"There are few issues more important to the security of the US than the potential spread of nuclear weapons or the potential for even more destructive war in the Middle East."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican on a television news segment,

**"Planned Parenthood is the biggest abortion provider in the country."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

### **Treatment group 3 (Facebook, Political Party Cue)**

**12 more statements from Facebook are in bold font and quotation marks below. For each statement, make your best guess as to whether it is a:**

***Factual statement (something capable of being proved or disproved by objective evidence)***

**OR**

***an Opinion statement (reflecting the values and beliefs of the person who expresses it).***

According to a prominent Republican on Facebook,

**"A successful Brexit, based upon a truly sovereign Britain, will be great for Britain, for Europe and for the United States."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat on Facebook,

**"There are few issues more important to the security of the US than the potential spread of nuclear weapons or the potential for even more destructive war in the Middle East."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican on Facebook,

**"The National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2019 'includes the largest pay raise in nearly 10 years.'"**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat on Facebook,

**"The only border crisis we're facing is the inhumane detention of kids that has already led to the deaths of two children."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact

- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican on Facebook,

**"Hopefully, Democrat lawmakers will step forward to do what is RIGHT for our country- and what is right is border security at the STRONGEST level."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat on Facebook,

**"Adjusting for inflation, West Virginia's median household income has not grown in a decade."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat on Facebook,

**"The Trump administration transferred \$10 million from FEMA to ICE."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican on Facebook in 2015,

**"'Illegal' immigrants accounted for 75 percent of federal drug possession convictions and 5 percent to 30 percent of convictions for murder and kidnapping plus two other crimes."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican on Facebook,

**"Planned Parenthood is the biggest abortion provider in the country."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Democrat on Facebook,

**"A wall may well prove to be a \$5 billion waste of money, but it is a small price to pay to finally expose the real threat to our country's security that currently inhabits the Oval Office."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion



According to a prominent Democrat on Facebook,

**"At General Motors, CEO Mary Barra 'took home almost 22 MILLION DOLLARS last year alone (295x your company's average employee)."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

According to a prominent Republican on Facebook,

**"It's called change, and unlike Obama, who talked endlessly about change, President Trump is actually delivering it."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

#### **Treatment group 4 (No Source Attribution, No Political Party Cue)**

**12 more statements from various sources are in bold font and quotation marks below. For each statement, make your best guess as to whether it is a:**

***Factual statement (something capable of being proved or disproved by objective evidence)***

**OR**

***an Opinion statement (reflecting the values and beliefs of the person who expresses it).***

It was claimed that,

**"It's called change, and unlike Obama, who talked endlessly about change, President Trump is actually delivering it."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed that,

**"Adjusting for inflation, West Virginia's median household income has not grown in a decade."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed that,

**"There are few issues more important to the security of the US than the potential spread of nuclear weapons or the potential for even more destructive war in the Middle East."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact

- Opinion

It was claimed that,

**"The only border crisis we're facing is the inhumane detention of kids that has already led to the deaths of two children."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed that,

**"Planned Parenthood is the biggest abortion provider in the country."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed in 2015 that,

**"'Illegal' immigrants accounted for 75 percent of federal drug possession convictions and 5 percent to 30 percent of convictions for murder and kidnapping plus two other crimes."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed that,

**"At General Motors, CEO Mary Barra 'took home almost 22 MILLION DOLLARS last year alone (295x your company's average employee)."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed that,

**"The Trump administration transferred \$10 million from FEMA to ICE."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed that,

**"A successful Brexit, based upon a truly sovereign Britain, will be great for Britain, for Europe and for the United States."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed that,

**"A wall may well prove to be a \$5 billion waste of money, but it is a small price to pay to finally expose the real threat to our country's security that currently inhabits the Oval Office."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed that,

**"Hopefully, Democrat lawmakers will step forward to do what is RIGHT for our country- and what is right is border security at the STRONGEST level."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed that,

**"The National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2019 'includes the largest pay raise in nearly 10 years.'"**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

### **Treatment group 5 (News, No Political Party Cue)**

*12 more statements from television news segments are in bold font and quotation marks below.*

*For each statement, make your best guess as to whether it is a:*

***Factual statement (something capable of being proved or disproved by objective evidence)***

***OR***

***an Opinion statement (reflecting the values and beliefs of the person who expresses it).***

It was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"There are few issues more important to the security of the US than the potential spread of nuclear weapons or the potential for even more destructive war in the Middle East."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"A successful Brexit, based upon a truly sovereign Britain, will be great for Britain, for Europe and for the United States."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"The Trump administration transferred \$10 million from FEMA to ICE."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"It's called change, and unlike Obama, who talked endlessly about change, President Trump is actually delivering it."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"At General Motors, CEO Mary Barra 'took home almost 22 MILLION DOLLARS last year alone (295x your company's average employee)."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"A wall may well prove to be a \$5 billion waste of money, but it is a small price to pay to finally expose the real threat to our country's security that currently inhabits the Oval Office."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed in 2015 on a television news segment that,

**"'Illegal' immigrants accounted for 75 percent of federal drug possession convictions and 5 percent to 30 percent of convictions for murder and kidnapping plus two other crimes."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact

- Opinion

It was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"The only border crisis we're facing is the inhumane detention of kids that has already led to the deaths of two children."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"Adjusting for inflation, West Virginia's median household income has not grown in a decade."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"The National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2019 'includes the largest pay raise in nearly 10 years.'"**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"Hopefully, Democrat lawmakers will step forward to do what is RIGHT for our country- and what is right is border security at the STRONGEST level."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on a television news segment that,

**"Planned Parenthood is the biggest abortion provider in the country."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

### **Treatment group 6 (Facebook, No Political Party Cue)**

***12 more statements from Facebook are in bold font and quotation marks below. For each statement, make your best guess as to whether it is a:***

***Factual statement (something capable of being proved or disproved by objective evidence)***

**OR**

***an Opinion statement (reflecting the values and beliefs of the person who expresses it).***

It was claimed on Facebook that,

**"It's called change, and unlike Obama, who talked endlessly about change, President Trump is actually delivering it."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on Facebook that,

**"The Trump administration transferred \$10 million from FEMA to ICE."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on Facebook that,

**"At General Motors, CEO Mary Barra 'took home almost 22 MILLION DOLLARS last year alone (295x your company's average employee)."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on Facebook that,

**"Hopefully, Democrat lawmakers will step forward to do what is RIGHT for our country- and what is right is border security at the STRONGEST level."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on Facebook that,

**"A successful Brexit, based upon a truly sovereign Britain, will be great for Britain, for Europe and for the United States."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on Facebook that,

**"The only border crisis we're facing is the inhumane detention of kids that has already led to the deaths of two children."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on Facebook that,

**"A wall may well prove to be a \$5 billion waste of money, but it is a small price to pay to finally expose the real threat to our country's security that currently inhabits the Oval Office."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed in 2015 on Facebook that,

**"'Illegal' immigrants accounted for 75 percent of federal drug possession convictions and 5 percent to 30 percent of convictions for murder and kidnapping plus two other crimes."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on Facebook that,

**"Adjusting for inflation, West Virginia's median household income has not grown in a decade."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on Facebook that,

**"There are few issues more important to the security of the US than the potential spread of nuclear weapons or the potential for even more destructive war in the Middle East."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on Facebook that,

**"Planned Parenthood is the biggest abortion provider in the country."**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion

It was claimed on Facebook that,

**"The National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2019 'includes the largest pay raise in nearly 10 years.'"**

Do you think this statement is a Fact or an Opinion? Choose the best answer below.

- Fact
- Opinion