‘Instagram Academics’, ‘TikTok Scientists’, and ‘Freethinkers’: Bystanders or Catalysts for the Erosion of Democracy?

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Introduction

Disinformation has been used as a political tool for many centuries; from the Romans to the Second World War to our modern day and age (Fallis, 2015; Strauss, 2022). However, the scale at which disinformation is used and disseminated has increased drastically, so much so, that scholars and politicians are worried it is putting democracies all over the world under pressure (Lecheler et al., 2023). With social media platforms providing the opportunity for politicians and citizens to engage with each other, it has at the same time caused plentiful disadvantages. The increase in the creation and circulation of disinformation has, possibly, been partly responsible for the increase in polarization, civic disengagement as well as the decrease in levels of political trust and tolerance, which are all detrimental to the functioning of a healthy democratic system (Humprecht, 2023; Hunter, 2023). Even though, the phenomenon has been widely researched over the past years, it is still difficult to prove whether the detrimental effects on democracy can be solely attributed to disinformation. After all, "evidence of activity is not evidence of impact" (Benkler et al., 2018).

Previous research has shown, however, that right-wing populist parties are most commonly associated with the use of political tactics such as disseminating and engaging with disinformation together with questioning the legitimacy of mainstream media outlets and journalists. (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Christner, 2023; Hameleers & Minihold, 2022). Similarly, citizens with right-wing populist (RWP) attitudes are more likely to engage with, believe, and spread disinformation (Christner, 2023). It would, therefore, be interesting to find out whether the type of party that a citizen identifies themselves with has the potential to influence how that individual perceives disinformation. Hence, the research question of this thesis is '*What is the effect of partisanship on the perception of disinformation as a threat to democratic functioning?*' Citizens' perceptions of disinformation is still under-researched, but it is worth investigating because it might give a deeper insight into whether citizens perceive

the current information disorder with being as dangerous as academics and political elite generally argue it is as well as what group of citizens is more likely to perceive it as such. Furthermore, the individuals who do perceive disinformation as dangerous to democracy and society are also more likely to support anti-disinformation measures (Lee, 2022) and individuals who do not perceive disinformation as dangerous are more likely to engage with and spread disinformation. With this broader understanding, it could help to better target disinformation and its disseminators in order to minimize and prevent the damage that it might cause to democratic systems. The regulation of disinformation is a sensitive topic and should be approached with much care, as some portion of the population holds the disinformation as their truth, causing them to argue that regulating disinformation is a violation of their right to express their ideas without fearing the interference of authorities.

I argue, based on previous literature, that citizens who identify themselves with RWP parties differ in their perception of disinformation as a threat on democratic functioning from citizens who do not identify themselves RWP parties. According to Krishnarajan (2023) individuals rationalize democracy from their own ideological perspective; undemocratic political behavior from their own party is not perceived as undemocratic, while similar undemocratic political behavior from an opposing party would be perceived as such. Additionally, citizens are biased in their perception of information due to their partisan perceptual screen, which leads them to assess new information based on their current political beliefs to defend their own political identity (Dyck & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2023a). As mentioned before, the creation and dissemination of disinformation is most prevalent in alternative RWP media, which leads me to believe that RWP supporters are more likely to get stuck in their partisan perceptual screen and rationalize the undemocratic behavior shown by the party, politicians, and other supporters that they affiliate themselves with, as a way to protect their political beliefs and identity for emotional security.

To test this statistically, I have made use of the 'Europinions: Public Opinion Survey' which is a large-N survey (23,354) that has measured European citizens from ten countries about their attitudes regarding salient topics such as mis- and disinformation, but also their attitudes toward the European Union, and satisfaction with democracy. I found – consistent with the proposed hypothesis – that individuals who identify themselves with a RWP party are, indeed, less likely to have a higher level of perception of disinformation as a danger to democratic functioning than individuals who have indicated that they identify themselves with another type of political party. However, due to several statistical limitations, these findings should be interpreted with caution.

Disinformation

The concept of disinformation has had many definitions over the years and has acquired several levels and dimensions through technological innovation and political evolution. The broadly accepted definition in recent academic articles on this topic explains political disinformation as a type of inaccurate information that is created and disseminated in pursuit of predefined political goals (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Christner, 2023; Fallis, 2015; Hameleers, 2020; Humprecht et al., 2023). It differentiates itself from misinformation in that the creator is aware of the false nature of the information and created it with malintent, with the function to deceit or manipulate (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Christner, 2023; Fallis, 2015). Disseminators may take the form of citizens, who create and spread disinformation on behalf of their political beliefs; politicians, who use disinformation to alter the opinion of citizens or to delegitimize their opponents; journalists or media, who use disinformation to promote certain ideological issue positions and to maximize publicity; as well as inauthentic online activity such as bots and trolls, who create and spread disinformation to influence and destabilize public opinion on salient issues. Hence, the concept of disinformation does not only regard the actual facticity of

certain information but also the potential use of it as a political rhetoric device of (political) actors to lower trust, delegitimize, and destabilize any opponents such as media, other politicians or even entire countries, like Russia has attempted to do numerous times; during the 2016 Brexit referendum, the 2016 US elections, and – according to France – the recent 'bedbug panic' (Almond et al., 2022; Benkler et al., 2018; Davis, 2023; Ruy, 2020).

Crisis of Democracy

The recent successes of populist right-wing parties in Europe such as the PVV in The Netherlands, Fratelli d'Italia in Italy, and Sverigedemokraterna in Sweden have scholars worried about the future of liberal democracy in the European Union (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Conrad & Hálfdanarson, 2023) suggesting there is an 'epistemic crisis of democracy'. "The rise of social media and the parallel decline of quality journalism is consequently often highlighted as one of the contributing factors in the emergence of a post-truth style of communication—and by extension for the rise of post-truth politics" (Conrad & Hálfdanarson, 2023, p. 4). The concept of 'post-truth' is a recent phenomenon that refers to a particular political style characterized by 'fake news', 'alternative facts', conspiracy theories, as well as mis- and disinformation, with Donald Trump being a prominent example of this style, appealing to emotions rather than building on objective facts (Newman, 2023).

Although, many scholars have recently argued that there is no reason to panic as there is no actual crisis of democracy and if there is, then European citizen are not noticing it (Bartels, 2023). There are, nevertheless, signs that this post-truth political style – and in particular mis- and disinformation – is putting a strain on democracies in the United States and Europe due to its suspected role in the increase in polarization, political animosity and the decrease in political tolerance as well as undermining deliberation based on mutually accepted, science-backed facts (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Humprecht, 2023; Hunter, 2023).

Causes & Effects

Bennett & Livingston (2020) argue that the loss of confidence in liberal democratic institutions is to blame for the current 'information disorder' They explain the importance of having "independent judiciaries that adhere to rules of evidence and precedence in reaching decisions, peer-reviewed science, professional journalism that faces reputational costs for inaccurate reporting, and apolitical civil services that promulgate and enforce regulations according to best available practices and scientific evidence" (Bennett & Livingston, 2020, p. 9) to maintain a healthy information environment based on facts and trust in authority evidence. These institutions "produce information that is generally trusted and kept within the bounds of recognized social values, political norms, and conventional understandings about what is and what is not acceptable. Political debates are meant to hinge on contested interpretation of facts, or facts contextualized differently by competing values, but not on alternative facts" (Bennett & Livingston, 2020, p. 9).

Contrary to the optimistic outlook on the potential of social media at the beginning of the century, political activity on social media has damaged democracy due to the platforms' algorithms that have stimulated sensationalism, conspiracy theories, and polarization (Starr, 2020). Furthermore, journalists are forced to choose between reporting about the 'alternative truth' that populist candidates spread and with that giving the disinformation more exposure; or not writing about this alternative truth and get accused of being too biased towards the left (Bennett & Livingston, 2020). (Starr, 2020) called the decline of the quality of news and journalism 'media degradation'. This media degradation and the erosion of democratic institutions has left an information hole for citizens to fill in search of emotional security. Moreover, free and credible mainstream media platforms are important for a well-functioning democracy by encouraging political conversations based on mutually acknowledged events and facts (Bennett & Livingston, 2020).

On top of that, politicians have become more extreme in their form of discourse and rhetoric over the past decades as a way of gaining more attention and damaging their political opponents and competition (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Newman, 2023). Together with the use of disinformation as a political tool, this has eroded citizens' trust in the political elite. Not only due to violating the trust of citizens in politicians as sources of authoritative information – by omitting relevant facts that contradict their policy proposals – but also due to defamation techniques based on manipulated facts that politicians use against each other.

An example of this technique was in September 2022 (NOS Niews, 2022) when Thierry Baudet – party leader of Dutch right-wing populist party FVD – insinuated that the then-minister of Finance, Sigrid Kaag, is a spy that has been recruited by secret services. During a debate in the House of Representatives, Baudet started his plea by making populist anti-globalist statements. He warned that the ordinary man is a victim of the policies forced onto them by the globalist elite who want to limit the freedom of movement and speech for more control. The elite have, according to Baudet, started a war against the traditional European way of life, free people, and alternative opinions which the elite dismiss as disinformation. He went on by sympathizing Putin yet, in the same sentence, criticizing the Soviet Union and explaining the Dutch political elite's connection to communism. Baudet then brought St Anthony's College in Oxford as an example of a school indoctrinated by communist ideology where they, supposedly, train future spies to be recruited by Western secret services. In between, he strategically mentioned Sigrid Kaag, as she has completed her master's degree at St Anthony's College, implying that she was also one of those specially trained globalist elite who was recruited by Dutch secret services. The parliament walked out as a protest, to which Baudet replied that everything he had just said were known facts.

Not only are these types of insinuations harmful to the person they are directed at, they are also dangerous to democratic functioning; debates based on mutually recognized

facts are important for a healthy deliberative democracy in which citizens trust the political elite. This divisive type of populist rhetoric based on manipulated information fuels polarization, which in turn causes lower levels of political tolerance within society and might in some cases incite political violence, due to increased fear and loathing of the other party and a larger emphasis on political identity rather than policy opinions (Dyck & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2023b).

Finally, political bots – which are algorithms intended for social media and designed to imitate the behavior of actual individuals – are constantly attempting to manipulate public opinion across a diverse range of social media networks. They may do so by boosting a user's number of followers, retweeting political tweets, attacking political opponents, drowning out opposing political online activism, and carrying out mass disinformation campaigns (Jaskiernia, 2021). Even though bot-accounts are generally short-lived, their impact on salient issues can be significant due to the use of 'bot armies' and 'bot nets'. This is when bots create new accounts in large bulks, then proceed to tweet and post messages for them to be received, engaged with, and shared by other bots. These bots are either used by individuals seeking to promote certain political (usually extremist) beliefs, by organizations, or by governments such as Russia and China to destabilize other countries. Another way states might intervene in another country's domestic politics is through state-backed trolling accounts, which are accounts run by humans with the purpose to induce anger and division on already polarizing topics (Burkhardt, 2022; Mazza et al., 2022).

Imperva releases a Bad Bot Report every year with an overview of 'bad bot' activity online. Bad bots are "software applications that run automated tasks with malicious intent" (*Bad Bot Report*, 2023, p. 4) and they accounted for 30.2% of all website traffic in 2022 compared to 24.1% in 2019 (with also a 18.1% increase from 2018). This is another example of how our online information environment has recently changed in these past years; making

it more difficult for users not only to distinguish actual facts from false information, but also to distinguish between real human users and inauthentic malicious accounts that are out to induce polarization and animosity by provoking users' most powerful emotion: anger (Burkhardt, 2022).

Citizen Perception

"Public opinion matters"(Druckman & Jacobs, 2012, p. 430). As explained by Shapiro (2011), the public has the power to shape policy decisions and the views of politicians that they have elected. One of the key features of a liberal (deliberative) democracy is this right of citizens to have a say in how their society is governed and to believe that their vote or opinion has the ability to initiate change (Soroka & Wlezien, 2009).

The concept of electoral accountability expects that political leaders will stay close to the opinions of their voters until, at least, the next elections in the hope to be re-elected. Several factors contribute to the attentiveness of politicians to their citizens such as issue salience, size of opinion majorities, degree of change in opinions, electoral competition (Shapiro, 2011). It is, therefore, important to research the public's opinion in general, and with regards to this thesis, the public's opinion on the potential danger that disinformation poses to democratic functioning, as their opinion has the power to shape the political elite's approach to this problem.

There is little research on citizens' perception of disinformation as a threat. Lee (2022), however, has carried out a case study in Hong Kong to learn more about individuals' judgements of what they define as disinformation and what implications that has for legislation. They find that people differ in their understanding of what constitutes disinformation. Consistent with previous literature, Lee explains that individuals are more likely to regard a certain piece of information as disinformation when it is provided by an outgroup or opposite

party and it is “unfavorable toward one’s own side” (Lee, 2022, p. 15). Furthermore, “people who consider a wide range of materials as disinformation are more likely to see disinformation as a severe problem and as having significant impact on the society. They are also more likely to support anti-disinformation legislation” (Lee, 2022, p. 15).

Egelhofer et al. (2022) explain that populist party supporters might perceive the mainstream media as deceiving and believe that it is spreading disinformation. This is due to the rhetoric of populist politicians claiming that the media is biased to the left and the news stories are ‘fake news’. Previous research has shown that “increased media coverage of politicians’ bias accusations led to increased bias perceptions among audiences” (Egelhofer et al., 2022, p. 620). It, therefore, matters which politicians are regarded as credible by individuals, to understand what those individuals’ perceptions about certain political issues are. This would, however, invert the effect I expect to observe because RWP supporters would view mainstream media as a creator and disseminator of disinformation and ‘fake news’ which might possibly cause for them to perceive quality journalism as a threat to democratic functioning.

Finding out whether individuals regard disinformation as a threat to democracy and, specifically, what group of individuals do so is, thus, important as it might have implications for policymakers and the regulation of disinformation. Because, if more citizens are worried about disinformation’s effects on democracy, policymakers might be more inclined to take action and would also be aware of what group of citizens would have positive attitudes regarding those disinformation regulations. Citizens who do not evaluate disinformation as dangerous, might cause complications for the development and implementation of disinformation regulation as they can argue that the regulations are an infringement on their right to freedom of expression.

Differences in Perception

As mentioned before, due to the erosion of trust in mainstream media outlets and politicians, a group of citizens has turned to alternative media and politicians in search of emotional security . Jost et al., (2018) explain how right-wing ideology generally caters to those citizens who want to cope with uncertainty, external threats, and those who desire a sense of social belonging. Previous research has shown that citizens who identify themselves with right-wing populism are more likely to believe, engage with, and spread disinformation. Particularly disinformation that "derogates outgroups as a way of signaling their own political identity" (Christner, 2023, p. 8).

Right-wing populist ideology is characterized by its highly divisive rhetoric drawing an image of society being divided into the 'pure people' and the 'evil and corrupt political elite' who are out to control the 'ordinary man' and his traditional way of life. They believe that politicians should primarily be guided by the '*volonté genèrale'* which is the general will of the people (Rydgren, 2017) and they generally hold xenophobic, anti-immigrant, anti-globalist, anti-Islamist ideas (Stockemer, 2017).

Benkler (2020) found that, in the United States, conspiracy theories and fake news travel further and live longer in right-wing media ecosystems than in the rest of the media environments. In these right-wing media ecosystems, there are no correction measures like there are in the rest of the media, neither do right-wing reporters or media outlets fear reputational losses as they are not evaluated for their accuracy but for their ideological loyalty. This isolation of the right online and the likelihood of RWP supporters to believe and spread disinformation against the perceived outgroups can lead to more polarization and less political tolerance within society, which is detrimental to the health of a democratic system (Humprecht, 2023; Hunter, 2023).

Identity & Biases

Social identity theory helps understand group and identity formation in society as it explains that people generally want to belong to the 'winning' and 'better' group as well as improve their position and positive image compared to the outgroup (Magnus, 2022). Congruently, the realistic conflict theory explains that the presence of a zero-sum game in a nation might result in animosity between the groups, which may express itself through prejudice and discrimination towards the out-group. This zero-sum game leads to greater awareness of the group's existence by a person as well as consciousness of one's group identity and the group's boundaries, together with greater in-group solidarity and cohesion, and negative stereotyping of the out-group (de Figudeiro Jr. & Elkins, 2023).

Partisanship is a type of identity and is defined as a person's closeness and loyalty to a political party. It can influence that person's "issue preferences […], vote choices […], evaluations of the economy […], perceived competence of political parties […] and the blame attributed to them […]" (Klar, 2014, pp. 687–688). Dyck & Pearson-Merkowitz (2023b) explained that "partisanship provides a quick and easy way to arrive at a conclusion that will be cognitively satisfying because it has been endorsed by opinion leaders as correct and reasonable" (p. 17).

The concept of partisanship is relevant in the context of disinformation due to its relation to the partisan motivated reasoning theory – or partisan perceptual screen – because, as described by Dyck & Pearson-Merkowitz (2023b), it is more difficult for individuals with higher levels of partisanship to find and accept new political information through their social networks or fact-based news as they are "driven by an inescapable motivation to defend their partisan identity" (Bisgaard & Slothuus, 2018, p. 456). This leads those individuals to "process information selectively and actively find ways to bring real-world conditions in line with what they want to believe" (Bisgaard & Slothuus, 2018, p. 456).

Moreover, Krishnarajan (2023) argues that individuals are willing to accept undemocratic behavior from the party and supporters that they identify themselves with whenever they can benefit from it politically. As mentioned before, the creation, dissemination and engagement with disinformation is more common in RWP (media) environments, causing RWP supporters to encounter it more frequently. This leads me to believe that RWP supporters are more likely to rationalize this undemocratic behavior whenever it benefits them politically as well as disregard the negative effects of disinformation to maintain a positive view of their political identity, the party and the people they associate themselves with.

I, therefore, propose the following hypothesis, H1: *Citizens who identify themselves with right-wing populist parties are less likely to view disinformation as a threat to democratic functioning than citizens who do not identify themselves with right-wing populist parties.*

Research Design

Data

For this study, I have made use of the 'Europinions: Public Opinion Survey' which has asked citizens from ten European countries (Czechia, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands) from 2017 until 2019 about their attitudes regrading topics such as the European Union, domestic politics, and multiple other salient issues. It is a unique survey as there is little data of the subject of citizen perception of disinformation

The ten countries in the dataset have been divided into three subprojects, all differing in the number of waves and questions asked. The first subproject solely contains respondents from The Netherlands which is the only country that has completed all seven waves; the second subproject covers Denmark, Germany, Hungary, and Spain and consists of four waves; the third subproject includes Czechia, Greece, France, and Sweden with three waves. The last three waves were performed parallelly in all ten countries from July 1st until July 12th in 2019.

Because there are differences in content between the waves, I have made use of the most recent waves available for that particular variable. Though there is a difference in content between the different waves, the wording of the questions is the same to ensure that the questions were interpreted equally by the participants (Halperin & Heath, 2020).

The surveys were conducted through a web interviewing system and the interviewees were either recruited face-to-face, online, or by telephone. Because the interviews were conducted through a web interviewing system, instead of face-to-face, respondents were more likely to answer honestly instead of providing socially desirable answers. The number of completed interviews vary per wave ranging from 2,236 (wave 3) to 17,027 (wave 5) with a total N of 23,354 respondents included in this research. The data collectors ensured quotas – on age, gender, region, and education – to achieve data that is representative and generalizable.

Dependent Variable

As mentioned above, the widespread reach of disinformation may have negative effects on democratic functioning and whether, not only academic and elite, but also citizens perceive it as a danger to the democracy in their country is important to know, in order to increase understanding and a greater capability to control this phenomenon. The perception of disinformation as a threat to democratic functioning is operationalized through question 240d: "To what extent do you think that [...] ([s]o-called) "fake news" is a threat to the functioning of democracy?" (Goldberg et al., 2021). This question asks about 'fake news' which is defined as a type of disinformation that tries to mimic the format of actual news (Lee, 2022). One issue is, as mentioned before, that the term fake news has been used by politicians such as Donald Trump to delegitimize mainstream news channels, which might cause his supporters to perceive channels of quality journalism as disinformation and dangerous to their idea of

democracy. However, a similar trend has yet to be observed in European countries, more on that in the discussion below.

Participants could choose from seven answers ranging from (1) “Not at all” to (7) “Very much”. Respondents answered they are generally a bit worried about the effect of fake news on democratic functioning because the mean is 5.12 with a standard deviation of 1.45. As this variable has seven categories, it will be regarded as a continuous variable instead of an ordinal variable. The dependent variable was, unlike other variables, only measured once; in the seventh wave.

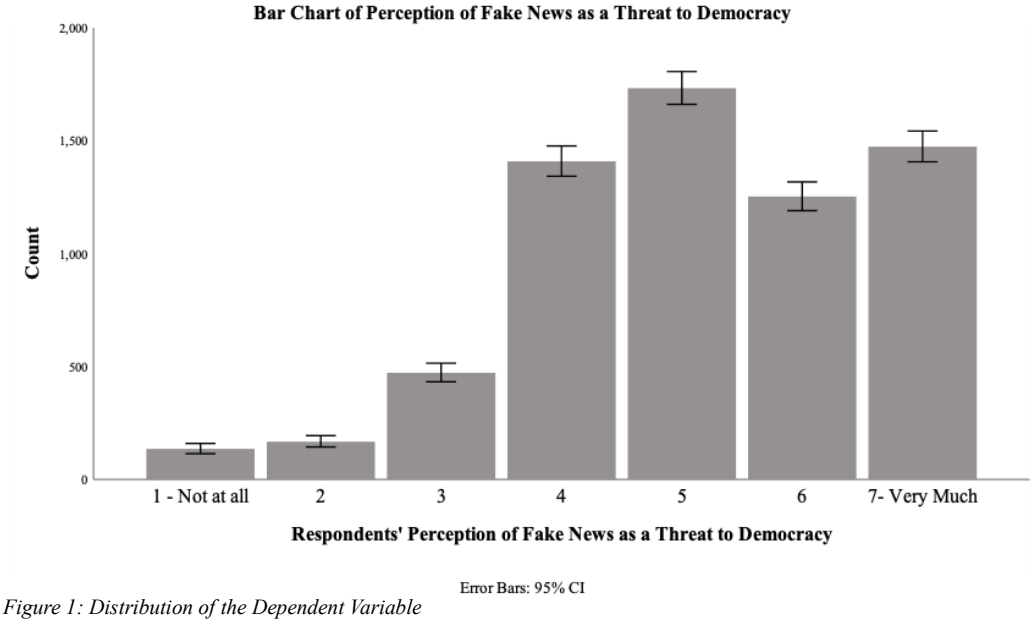

Figure 1: Distribution of the Dependent Variable

Independent Variable

Individuals like to evaluate themselves and the groups they belong to positively. Moreover, according to partisan motivated reasoning, individuals also like to have their opinions and ideas positively confirmed, causing them to actively search for information that endorses their beliefs. As disinformation and fake news is prevalent in ideologically right-wing (populist)

environments, it would, therefore, be interesting to find out whether citizens who support RWPPs would rationalize disinformation to maintain a positive evaluation of their partisan identity.

Partisan identity, or partisanship, is operationalized by the question: 31a. “Do you consider yourself to be close to any particular political party? If so, which party do you feel close to?” (Europinions, 2021). The respondents could choose from a list of parties that was specific to their country for that year. Respondents who answered they feel close to the parties that are classified as RWP are considered RWP partisans and are coded with 1, those who answered that they feel close to another party than (one of) the RWP party(/ies) of their country, are coded with 0, resulting in a binary independent variable. The following parties are classified as RWP parties: NL: PVV (2), FvD (13); DK: Dansk Folkeparti (102), Nye Borgerlige (112); DE: AfD (204); HU: Fidesz (301), Jobbik (302); ES: VOX (419); CZ: SPD (604); FR: RN/FN (704), DLF (712); GR: AS (803), ANEL (809); PL: PiS (901), K’15 (903); SE: Sverigedemokraterna (1003)). For the categorization of the parties from The Netherlands, Germany, Hungary, Spain, France, Greece, Poland, and Sweden I used the classification provided by the Pew Research Center (2022). They have published a list in which they classified all populist parties in those countries as well as whether they are left- or right-wing parties. For the remaining countries – Denmark and Czechia – I used the website ‘Parties and Elections in Europe’ (Nordsieck, n.d.) which has categorized all the parties of European countries according to the party’s ideology; the SPD in Czechia was classified as right-wing populist as well as the Dansk Folkeparti in Denmark. For Denmark and Sweden I made use of an additional article by (Widfeldt, 2023), who has analyzed and classified all RWP parties in the Nordic countries.

This independent variable was also measured once, but in different waves. For the first and second subprojects I used party identification that was measured in wave 4, while for

subproject 3 I made use of the variable in wave 5. As the dependent variable was measured in wave 7, the independent variable was, therefore, measured before the dependent variable. This is an advantage because, due to this temporal separation, it decreases the chance that the perception of fake news as a threat to democratic functioning causes an individual to support a certain party, instead of the other way around like I am intending to measure. Among the respondents, 20005 are not RWP supporters; and 2265 are RWP supporters.

Model

To test whether there is a relationship between the type of party a respondent identifies themselves with and the respondent's perception of fake news as a threat to democratic functioning, I made use of a Hierarchical Linear Regression Model Analysis like is customary with a binary independent variable and continuous dependent variable (Field, 2018). Because the data was collected within ten different countries, the data violated one of the assumptions of a linear regression, which requires the data to have residuals that are unrelated to each other; the error should be random instead of systematic (Field, 2018). The data suffers from geographic clustering and failing to take this into account results in biased statistical significance tests because the standard errors are too small. One way to solve this, is to recode the countries into dummy variables, exclude one of them, and add the others in a separate layer.

Furthermore, the socio-demographic variables that are available in the dataset – such as gender, education, subjective income, country, ideology on a left-right scale, and type of area where the respondent lives; a big city, suburbs, town, village, or countryside – were also included in the model. As well as a confounder that asked respondents how interested they are in politics ranging from (1) "Not at all" to (7) "Very much". The confounder – political interest – is important to include in the model because whether an individual is interested in politics

might influence how much they know about politics in general, as well as about disinformation and its potential threat, and whether they would identify themselves with a political party.

Three separate model have been created with Model 1 containing only the dependent variable and the independent; Model 2 includes the dependent variable, the independent variable together with the control variables; the last model contains all variables used in the regression.

Results

Analysis

The hypothesis expected that individuals who identify themselves with right-wing populist parties are less likely to perceive disinformation – or more specifically, fake news – as a threat to democratic functioning. In order to test this, a hierarchical linear regression model has been used of which the results are shown in Table 1 below. A one-point increase in the level of partisanship represents higher support for RWPPs, while a decrease in the values of threat perception mean a lower perception of fake news as a threat to democracy. Model 1 shows the results for the type of partisanship and the level of threat perception; it indicates that an increase of one point in type of partisanship results in a decrease of 0.218 points in the level of threat perceived regarding fake news when not controlling for socio-demographic variables ($p < 0.001$). When controlling for socio-demographics in Model 2, the level of threat perception decreases by 0.191 units whenever there is a one-point increase in partisanship. This would mean that if two respondents had the same education, gender, income, ideology, political interest, and would live in the same area, the respondent with a higher feeling of identification with a right-wing populist party, would perceive fake news as 0.261 points less threatening than the respondent who indicated they identify themselves *less* with a right-wing populist party ($p < 0.001$). Model 3 shows the same but with the additional variable of country being

held constant which results in a 0.315 decrease in threat perception whenever the respondent indicated to identify themselves with a RWPP.

Table 1. Linear Regression Models of Perceived Threat of Disinformation

	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
(Constant)	5.145	4.633	4.491
	(0.019)	(0.094)	(0.101)
Party Identification	-0.218***	-0.261***	-0.315***
	(0.057)	(0.057)	(0.057)
Political Interest		0.137***	0.129***
		(0.011)	(0.11)
Gender		-0.005	-0.005
		(0.036)	(0.035)
Education Level		0.036***	0.007*
		(0.010)	(0.010)
Area		-0.021	0.002
		(0.015)	(0.015)
Subjective Income		-0.059***	-0.045*
		(0.015)	(0.015)
Country (Ref = The Netherlands)			
Denmark			0.298***
			(0.074)
Germany			-0.175
			(0.077)
Hungary			0.672***
			(0.075)
Spain			0.211**
			(0.076)
Czechia			-0.122
			(0.069)
France			0.125**
			(0.068)
Greece			0.487***
			(0.082)
Poland			0.281***
			(0.067)
Sweden			0.537***
			(0.077)
R^2	0.002	0.033	0.061
Adj. R^2	0.002	0.032	0.059
N	6643	6643	6643

Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in brackets
***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05

To assess the relationship more concretely, I have calculated the predicted values of a RWPP supporter and of a supporter of another party from the outcomes of Model 2, while holding the categorical control variables constant at their modal level: gender (1), area (1); and the continuous variables at their mean level: education (4.42), income (3.93), political interest (4.68), ideology (6.10). The predicted value for the level of threat perception regarding fake news is 3.63 – on a scale from (1) not at all to (7) very much – when the respondent's party identification value is 1, which means that the respondent is a RWPP supporter; when the respondent's party identification value is 0 – and thus not a RWPP supporter – the predicted value of the level of threat perception is 3.89. This shows a small increase of threat perception by 0.26 points between the type of party identification.

Discussion

Even though, there is a difference between the types of partisanship and the difference is also in the expected direction; it is still relatively small, contrary to what was expected prior to the analysis. There could be several reasons for this.

The first – and most straightforward – reason, is the inaccuracy of the statistical analysis. As mentioned in the research design, failing to properly account for geographic clustering results in a biased statistical outcome. While having recoded the variable containing the data for the country that the respondent is in, other approaches would have been more appropriate to deal with the violated assumptions. But due to being limited in the knowledge and experience in statistical analysis, I have failed to properly deal with the violations. Future research should account for the geographic clustering through utilizing either a Mixed Model Analysis or another model that is able to deal with the violation. Furthermore, I was unable to control for age and media exposure as the raw states of the variables were difficult to work with. Lastly, the 'Europinions' survey contained an additional answer to question 31a: "Do you

consider yourself to be close to any particular political party? If so, which party do you feel close to?". Which has been used to conceptualize the independent variable: type of partisanship. For question 31a, respondents had to choose an answer from a list consisting of the active parties in their country for that year, the additional option was to answer: "other party, namely". This provided respondents with the opportunity to fill in a party they identified themselves with that was not included on the provided list of parties. However, some respondents chose the "other" as an answer and filled in a party that *was* on the initial list of parties. I have excluded these answers due to the respondents answering the question in the language of the country they resided in, making it challenging to interpret the string values statistically within the limited timeframe provided for the research. Furthermore, the model has an R-squared value of 0.002 as seen in Table 1, indicating the models are most likely not trustworthy.

The second reason is a theoretical explanation for the effect of the relationship being smaller than expected. As mentioned in the discussion of the literature, respondents' understanding of fake news might not be identical for every individual. Egelhofer et al. (2022) researched this, finding that RWPP supporters might perceive credible mainstream media channels as fake news or untrustworthy sources, due to RWP politicians using the label of 'fake news' as a way to delegitimize news stories that contradict their political views or the image of themselves they want to uphold to their supporters.

Finally, the theory laid out in the literature might have overestimated the effect that the type of partisanship has on the level of perceived threat of disinformation and the effect is, indeed, small like the statistical outcomes suggest.

Conclusion

The topic of the *perceived* threat of disinformation of individuals is under-researched in the academic works and debates concerning disinformation. This is while citizens' perceptions of disinformation could have implications for policymakers as well as scholars trying to understand the concept of disinformation. Citizens who are more worried about the detrimental effects that disinformation can have on democratic functioning and society as a whole are also more likely to support regulations directed at combating disinformation (Lee, 2022); expressing their worries can have an agenda-setting effect on policymakers and legislators. Understanding who is more likely to dismiss the potential threats can also help to identify who is more likely to create and disseminate the disinformation. More research on this topic of threat perception regarding disinformation and democracy might help scholars better understand how citizens can influence policy and agenda-setting from the angle of modern issues such as disinformation or even Artificial Intelligence, which are both developing quicker than policymakers can keep up with (Stacey & Milmo, 2023). Researching topics in which citizens are divided in their opinion can give more insight on how politicians react to polarizing topics and how they proceed in terms of policy.

This thesis had some limitations of which some were already mentioned in the discussion about the results. As mentioned there, future research should make use of an alternative statistical model in order to better account for the geographic clusters and other difficulties with the data[1]

Another limitation was that the data is relatively 'old'. Disinformation is a quickly developing phenomenon and as the last available data in the Europionions survey was from 2019, it has missed some crucial political events that might have had some impact on the perception of disinformation's threat. Around half a year after the last wave was completed,

[1] See Appendix B

the worldwide covid pandemic started. During the two years that the crisis lasted, a large amount of disinformation was circulating online regarding how to best cure covid-19 whenever infected, as well as conspiracy theories claiming that the political elite had made up the virus in order to control citizens and keep track of them through micro-chips that were injected into citizens' bodies under the disguise of a vaccination that protects people from getting ill (Booth, 2023). This has increased levels of polarization, societal unrest, and even (the normalization of) political violence during portests.

Future research could make use of more recent data to see how events like this global health crisis, but also the rejection of election results by Donald Trump and the consequent attack on Capitol Hill in the United States ("Capitol Riots Timeline: What Happened on 6 January 2023?," 2023), or the hybrid wars that combine traditional warfare techniques with disinformation campaigns and fake news in an attempt to sway international public opinion for support – such as the Russo-Ukrainian War and the Israel-Hamas conflict – (Brooking & Singer, 2023; Landay, 2023) influence individuals' perception of disinformation.

A final limitation of this thesis is that some literature that has been used is based on observations and research from the United States. This is a limitation because the United States is an outlier in terms of political polarization and the post-truth political discourse style. Although I have tried to use as many articles based on European countries as possible, the use of theories based on American politics might have led to an overestimation of the results due to the distinct divide between the political parties in that country. Further research is needed about this topic to better estimate the relationship between partisanship and perception of disinformation's threat to democratic functioning.

In this thesis, I argued that individuals who support RWP parties are more likely to dismiss the dangers of disinformation regarding the health of democracy than individuals who support other types of parties. I did so based on previous literature, stating that it is more

difficult for people who have a strong partisanship to accept new information, especially when it is inconsistent with their previously held beliefs and when the politicians of that party have validated the information. Citizens do so to protect their political identity in search of emotional security and the feeling of belonging to a group (Bisgaard & Slothuus, 2018). Furthermore, Krishnarajan (2023) has argued that individuals are willing to rationalize undemocratic behavior from the party, politicians, and supporters they identify themselves with, while perceiving that same behavior displayed by the opposite party as (more) undemocratic. In combination with the research that has found that disinformation is more prevalent in RWP environments, where it travels farther than in other media environments and that RWP supporters are also more likely to engage with and spread disinformation as right-wing ideology generally caters to the need for emotional security (Christner, 2023; Jost et al., 2018).

While this thesis has its limitations, this topic deserves further research that would make use of more recent data and rely more on sources and theories based on politics in European countries, but also separate research on this topic beyond western countries as the findings for the perception of disinformation can have implications for policy makers, legislators, and scholars all around the world.

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Appendix A: Coding and Descriptive Details of the Control Variables

Political Interest

Question 50a in the Europinions survey: "How interested would you say you are in politics?" Respondents could choose an answer ranging from (1) "Not at all interested" to (7) "Very interested". I kept the original coding (mean = 4.68, SD = 1.69).

Gender

Question 91: "Are you…?" Respondents could choose an answer either "male" or "female". Originally, male was 1 and female 2; I recoded it to male is 0 and female is 1 (mode = 1, SD = 0.5).

Education

Question 90: "Which is the highest degree you have finished (so far)?" Respondents could choose from a country specific list; these answers were later recoded by the collectors of the data into either ESS, ISCED or ES-ISCED codes to make it easier to use the data for cross-country comparison. I made use of the ES-ISCED variable that was coded as

1 = "ES-ISCED I, less than lower secondary"

2 = "ES-ISCED II, lower secondary"

3 = "ES-ISCED IIIb, lower tier upper secondary"

4 = "ES-ISCED IIIa, upper tier upper secondary"

5 = "ES-ISCED IV, advanced vocational, sub-degree"

6 = "ES-ISCED V1, lower tertiary education, BA level"

7 = "ES-ISCED V2, higher tertiary education >= MA level"

I kept the coding as it was (mean = 4.42; SD = 1.83)

Area

Question 93: “Which of the following best describes the area where you live?” Respondents could choose one of the following answers (1) “A big city”; (2) “The suburbs or outskirts of a big city”; (3) “A town or small village”; (4) “A country village”; (5) A farm or home in the countryside”. I kept the original coding (mode = 1; SD = 1.18).

Subjective Income

Question 97: “Taking everything into account, at about what level is your household’s standard of living? If you think of a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means a poor household, 7 a rich household, and the other numbers are for the positions in between, about where would you place your household?” I kept the original coding (mean = 3.93, SD = 1.88).

Appendix B: Assumption Checks

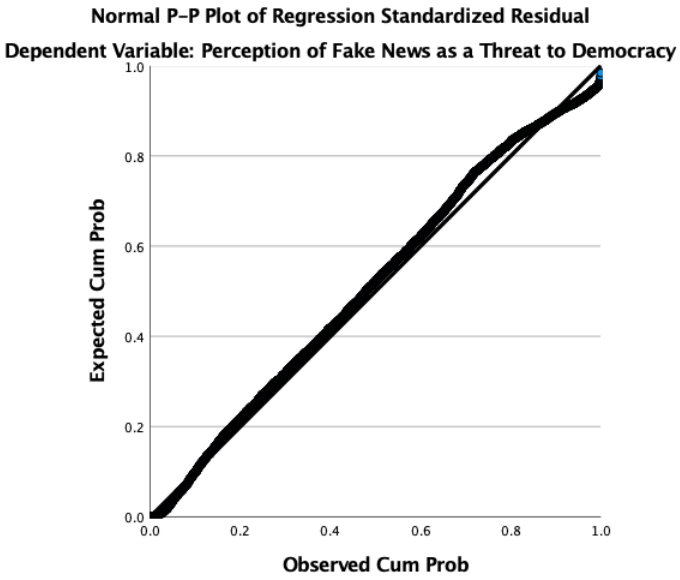

Figure 2: Normal Probability Plot of the Standardized Residual

The data has normally distributed errors with some deviations at the top, which is no reason for worry due to the sampling error and the large nature of samples of the data. The data does meet the linearity assumption.

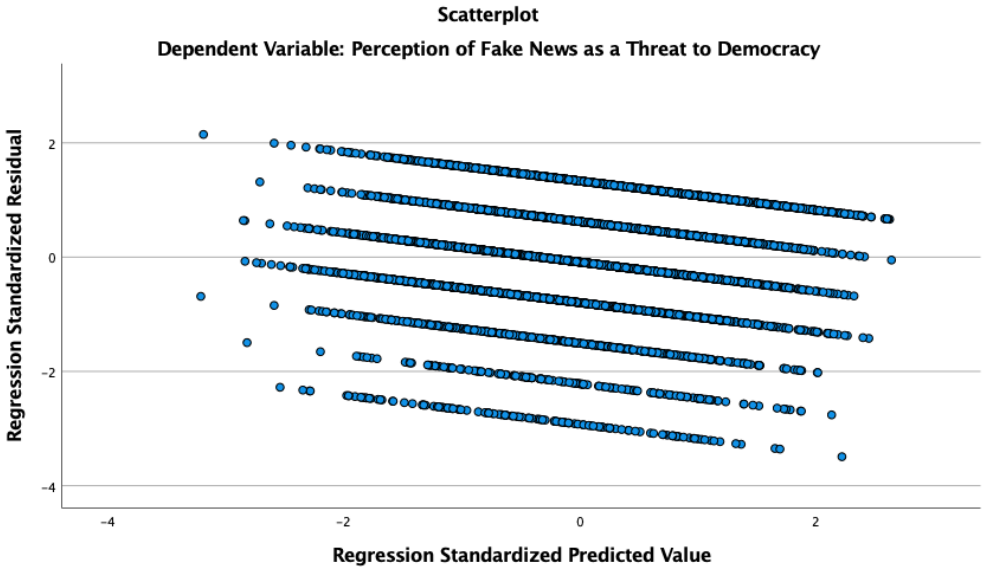

Figure 3: Scatter Plot of the Standardized Residuals vs the Standardized Model Predictions

Figure 3 suggests that the assumption of homoskedacity is violated as there is a clear pattern in the plot with a downward slope.