

*RUMORS, TRUTHS, AND REALITY:
A STUDY OF POLITICAL MISINFORMATION*

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May 22, 2012

Version 3.1

**** EARLY DRAFT VERSION OF WORK IN PROGRESS**
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Note to readers: This paper will eventually be split into two papers. The first will contain the material on the nature and determinants of rumor holding. The second will present the experimental data.

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2011 Midwest Political Science Association meeting and the 2011 meeting of the Chicago Area Behavior Workshop. For valuable discussions regarding this paper, I would like to thank seminar participants at The California Institute of Technology, Columbia University, Florida State University, Harvard University, MIT, University of Michigan, the University of Virginia, The West Coast Experiments Conference, and Yale University. I thank Justin de Benedictis-Kessner, Seth Dickinson, Krista Loose, Michele Margolis, and Mike Sances for research assistance. Financial support was provided by the National Science Foundation (SES-1015335), the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, and MIT.

Rumors and innuendo have long influenced the conduct of politics. With the rise of the 24-hour news cycle and the rapid communication of specialized information via the Internet, however, the potential for the spread of false information through rumors is perhaps greater than at any time in history. This paper represents a preliminary investigation into two critical questions relating to political rumors: who believes them, and what can be done to correct false information in a democratic society?

I first explore the degree to which members of the mass public accept or reject rumors from across the political spectrum – ranging from beliefs about President Obama’s citizenship to conspiracies surrounding the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. I then examine the demographic, personality, and political correlates of rumor belief in the mass public. While there are certain factors that lead individuals to reject all rumors out of hand, regardless of their content, rumor rejection is also in large part a function of political attachments. When it comes to the veracity of political rumors, where one stands depends in large part upon where one sits.

The fact that rumor acceptance is largely a function of political attachment begs an important question; do people really believe the rumors they endorse, or is rumor acceptance simply cheap talk? Before moving on to the second section of the paper, I present a series of experiments which support the view that people are faithfully reporting their factual beliefs when answering my rumor items.

In the second half of the paper, I report the results of a series of experiments which employ strategies to counter rumors. I focus on rumors surrounding the health care reforms enacted by Congress in 2010, in particular the notion that the reforms creates “death panels” which have the authority to determine whether or not a gravely ill or injured person should receive medical treatment. I find that effectively countering rumors is a difficult task. There is no proven method to correct mistaken political beliefs. Rumors tend to be sticky and merely repeating a rumor – even in

the context of debunking that mistruth – increases its power. For instance, I find that mentioning the possibility of “death panels” increased the uncertainty in subjects’ belief in the existence of such panels even if the rumor was immediately discredited. These beliefs, in turn, decreased support for health reform. Thus, the attempt to correct a mistruth may only lead to a widespread confusion regarding its factual accuracy. Some strategies may, however, prove effective. Countering a rumor with statements from an unlikely source can, under the right circumstances, increase the willingness of all citizens to reject rumors regardless of their own political predilections. Specifically, I find that contrasting the death panel rumor with a counterargument from a Republican politician increased rates of rumor rejection for both Democrats and Republicans.

Rumors in the Political Realm

The term “rumor,” as Fine and Ellis (2010) note, is a one that has been used in a variety of ways in popular discourse. Indeed the “conceptual murkiness” surrounding the term – and its relationship to other forms of informal communication, such as gossip and urban legend – are longstanding concerns among social scientists (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007). Among scholars, however, a rough consensus regarding the meaning of “rumor” has emerged. Fine and Ellis argue that for social scientists, “rumor is an expression of belief about a specific event that is supposed to have happened or is about to happen. This claim may pique our interest, but lacks what the larger political system considers secure standards of evidence” (2010, 4). Similarly, Sunstein takes the term to refer to “claims of fact – about people, groups, events, and institutions – that have not been shown to be true, but that move from one person to another and hence have credibility not because direct evidence is known to support them, but because other people seem to believe them” (2009, 6). Finally, DiFonzo and Bordia define the content of rumors as “Instrumentally relevant information statements that are unverified” (2007, 14).

From these points of view, rumors are a particular form of misinformation characterized by two features.¹ First, rumors are statements that lack specific standards of evidence.² As a result, rumors can be told and transmitted in the absence of a clear standard of proof (Fine and Ellis 2010; see also Allport and Postman 1947).³ Under such circumstances, the line between true information and misinformation becomes blurred. Second, rumors are not mere fringe beliefs. They acquire their power through widespread social transmission and repetition.⁴

Rumors, then, are more than just frivolous statements of questionable veracity; they can have serious political consequences. Rumors often emerge during times of crisis and uncertainty and, because they can spread quickly in such times, rumors can be politically powerful forces. For instance, Allport and Postman's (1947) classic analysis of rumors grew out of an investigation of rumors concerning waste and special privilege in rationing programs during World War II (Allport and Lepkin 1945).⁵ Indeed, through the Office of War Information, the U.S. government became involved in the study of the spread of rumors among civilians during this time (Faye 2007).

While rumors have been a topic of social science research for over 100 years (Donavan 2007), in recent years, rumors have become an even more insidious political force. In the World War

¹ In this paper I do not discuss or examine the origin of rumor, though that topic is of obvious interest. In future work, I intend to more thoroughly examine this question.

² This lack of a standard of evidence does not need to arise from a deficiency of facts. As Hofstadter wrote of one particular type of political rumor, "what distinguishes the paranoid style is not, then, the absence of verifiable facts...but rather the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events." (1965, 37).

³ In addition, rumors are a particular form of misinformation that often (but not always) has conspiratorial overtones. The proponents of these theories respond to contrary evidence, "not by modifying their theory, but instead by insisting on the existence of ever-wider circles of high-level conspirators controlling most of all parts of society" (Kay 2011, 21).

⁴ There is a large literature on rumor transmission and the characteristics of rumors that make it especially likely that a given rumor will spread. In their review of the literature of rumor psychology, DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) identify five factors related to rumor transmission: uncertainty, importance, lack of control, anxiety, and belief. In addition, in their study of urban legends – a related conceptual category – Heath, Bell, and Sternberg (2001) found that subjects were more likely to pass along stories that scored high in disgust. For instance, people were more likely to repeat a story about a man drinking a soda with pieces of dead rat inside than an identical story in which the man discovered the rat before he drank the soda.

⁵ Allport and Postman (1947) explored how rumors spread and evolve over time. They described various rumors in circulation during World War II and noted that the rumors became sharper and more easily conveyed as they proliferated through the public. These findings will guide my larger study of rumors, but are not directly relevant to the present project, which concerns the structure of rumors currently in circulation and strategies to debunk those rumors.

II era, Allport and Postman (1947) noted that the main medium of transmission of rumors was word of mouth. The Internet has changed all that. Today, anyone can publish on the web, instantly acquiring a degree of credibility regardless of the quality of information they provide. This characteristic is important because the types of rumors I examine here are divorced from the real world of politics. On the continuum of politically relevant facts ranging from “certain truth” to “certain falsehood”, these rumors lie toward the “certain falsehood” end of the spectrum.⁶ Given the speed with which information can disseminate through the Web, the potential for the spread of fallacious information through rumors has increased greatly. As Sunstein argues, “In the era of the Internet it has become easy to spread false or misleading rumors about almost anyone...Material on the Internet has considerable longevity. For all practical purposes, it may even be permanent” (2009, 4). In short, in the Internet age, unsubstantiated rumors may materialize suddenly and then never disappear.

Recent history bears out the power and reach of political rumors. In the summer of 2009, a political myth circulated that Obama’s health care reform plan would include “death panels” to decide whether individual citizens should receive health care, based on a calculation of their level of productivity in society. In actuality, the plan included provisions to pay doctors to counsel patients about end-of-life options. These rumors started with statements made by former New York Lieutenant Governor Betsy McCaughey, but quickly spread to the conservative media (Nyhan 2010). A number of prominent Republican politicians added to the chorus, including Sarah Palin and Senator Charles Grassley, the ranking Republican member of the Senate Finance Committee.

⁶ To avoid a philosophic discussion of the meaning of “truth,” I use the same standard that Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) use for conspiracy theories. They say that these theories are unjustified “not in the sense of being irrationally held by those individuals who hold them, but from the standpoint of the information available in the society as a whole.” (2009, 207).

These rumors are patently false and have been discredited by media organizations from across the ideological spectrum. All the same, they have taken seed among the mass public. A poll conducted by the Pew Center in August 2009 found that 30 percent of the public thought the “death panel” rumor was true, with another 20 percent unsure of the veracity of the statement. Even after the passage of the act, the death panel rumors continue to persist. I contracted Polimetrix/YouGov to conduct a national Internet sample in July, 2010 and found that 33 percent of the public thought the “death panel” rumor was true, with another 22 percent unsure. Thus, the majority of Americans will not reject the death panel rumor outright. These rumors also have important political implications. In early 2011, the Obama administration announced that it would revise Medicare fee policies to remove those provisions that provided funding for end-of-life counseling; the persistence of the death panel rumors hung heavily over this decision.

The spread of political rumors is not limited to the realm of health policy. Even before Obama ascended to office, rumors spread about his religion and citizenship status. In many ways, Obama’s administration has been besieged by an ongoing rumor mill. These rumors have also gained traction in the public mind. If anything, the acceptance of these rumors has increased since that time. For instance, my July 2010 Polimetrix/YouGov poll found that 27 percent of the public thought that Obama was not native-born, with another 19 percent unsure. In the wake of Obama’s decision to release his birth certificate in April 2011, there seemed to be a drop in the percentage of people who believed he was not a citizen, but this change may be short-lived. Given the public’s reaction to previous information on this question, as discussed below, this decision is surely not the last word on the matter. Moreover, political rumors extend beyond those implicating Obama. The Internet has swirled with rumors from across the ideological spectrum, on topics ranging from the war record of 2004 Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry to Republican involvement in conspiracies surrounding the destruction of the World Trade Center by terrorists in 2001.

The persistence of these rumors is troubling for the prospects of democracy. As Kuklinski and his colleagues (2000) note, while much of the handwringing in the field of political behavior concerns the implications of citizens' ignorance of basic political facts, the more serious problem for the possibility of establishing effective mass participation in a democratic system is the prevalence of *misinformation* – beliefs in information that are factually incorrect. For example, members of the mass public over-estimate the size of welfare payments (Kuklinski et al. 2000) and the percentage of the budget that goes to foreign aid (Gilens 2001). Rumors are an insidious form of misinformation – one that is particularly damaging for the functioning of democracy – but they are misinformation nonetheless.

Despite the admonishment of Kuklinski and his colleagues almost 10 years ago, few researchers have studied the dynamics of political misinformation. What work has been done suggests that correcting misinformation is, if anything, a more intractable problem than Kuklinski and his colleagues thought it to be. Nyhan and Reifler (2009, 2010) ran experiments where they attempted to correct false statements about the Iraq war and rumors about Obama's religion, both with little success. In addition to these studies, work by Berinsky (2007, 2009) on opinions concerning war and Citrin and Sides (2009) on immigration attitudes has found that presenting citizens with political facts does not change their opinions on important political matters.

Political rumors, however, provide a new and interesting venue for the study of political misinformation.⁷ By focusing on patently false rumors that can be debunked with uncontested facts, we can learn something about the more general processes of political misperception. Of course, it

⁷While many political facts can be contested, the “truth” in studies of rumor is cleaner than that in most studies of political misperception. Of course it is true that there is an element of uncertainty in any statement of “fact.” Even seemingly unassailable facts, such as the national unemployment rate can – and have – been contested by motivated groups of individuals. But acceptance of rumors often involve embracing particularly far-fetched statements of contradictory beliefs. For instance, to cling to the notion that Obama is not a U.S. citizen requires an individual to accept the existence of a wide-ranging conspiracy stretching more than 40 years and involving a host of individuals who have been silenced from revealing the truth. In many ways, such a worldview is reminiscent of Hofstadter 's (1965) “paranoid style” in American politics.

could be the case that for some individuals, it is impossible to correct false political rumors. But even if no action can be taken to completely undo the consequences of political rumors, discovering the steps that can be taken to mitigate the damage from those rumors is a critically important undertaking.

The Structure and Correlates of Rumor Acceptance

The first step in understanding the power of political rumors is to examine the structure of mass beliefs regarding those rumors. Much of the media discussion of rumors regarding Obama has focused on the implausibility of the rumors and has made analogy to other seemingly absurd beliefs that many Americans cling to, such as the existence of witches and the notion that the Sun revolves around the Earth. Other commentators have made implicit claims about conspiratorial worldviews, noting that roughly equal proportions of Americans endorse the position of the “birthers” – who question Obama’s citizenship – and that of the “truthers,” who see sinister U.S. government involvement in the events of 9/11.⁸ Together these stories imply that the prevalence of rumors is essentially a random phenomenon that is a result of widespread ignorance on the part of the American public. In essence, as these commentators note, one-fifth of the American public will believe just about anything.⁹ However, just because some proportion of Americans endorse different statements that are factually inaccurate does not mean that these statements comprise evidence of a particular way of thinking about the world. After all, aggregate distributions can conceal important individual-level heterogeneity in willingness to accept or reject particular rumors.

⁸ See, for example, Jonah Goldberg’s writings on Birthers and Truters (available at <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/228219/ring-truth-ers/jonah-goldberg> and <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/199430/birthers-v-truthers-again/jonah-goldberg>).

⁹ See, for example, David A. Gordon’s essay, “America the Ignorant: Silly things we believe about Witches, Obama, and More” (available at <http://www.newsweek.com/photo/2010/08/24/dumb-things-americans-believe.html>).

It is therefore important to look at beliefs regarding rumors from across the ideological spectrum. I posit that the acceptance of rumor is essentially a two-factor model; it is a function both of the generalized propensity to adopt a conspiratorial orientation and of the content of the rumors vis-à-vis the political beliefs of a given individual.¹⁰ Put another way, while there are core believers who are likely to accept a rumor no matter its content, when it comes to rumor acceptance, where one stands also depends heavily upon where one sits.

Generalized Rumor Acceptance

Writing about “conspiracy theories,” journalist Jonathan Kay argues that “people come to their paranoias for all sorts of complicated reasons” (2011, xx). This may be true, but there are certain patterns to this type of thinking. There are some types of people who will reject incredulous information out of hand. There are other individuals who tend toward a conspiratorial mindset and would be more inclined to accept the types of beliefs that Thompson (2008) terms “counterknowledge” – among them rumors that paint government figures in a poor light. These tendencies toward conspiratorial anti-government thinking can be captured by scales developed by political scientists and psychologists to sort individuals into different personality types. In particular, general personality scales that have been the subject of work in political science could, in theory, capture general patterns of rumor acceptance. In this paper, I examine the predictive power of two such scales: dogmatic thinking and political disengagement.¹¹ The items comprising these scales are presented in Appendix A. I take up the importance of each scale in turn below.

¹⁰ To use the example from the last paragraph, people who tend towards a conspiratorial orientation would accept both the “birther” and “truther” conspiracies. However, since the birther rumor targets a Democratic politician and the truther rumor targets a Republican politician, we would expect, on average, significant differences in the partisan composition of “truthers” and “birthers.”

¹¹ I also examined the relationship between authoritarianism and rumor holding. Authoritarianism measures the degree to which individuals subscribe to a worldview characterized by obedience to authority. The authoritarianism scale I use here is drawn from a series of items relating to child-rearing asked by the National Election Study (NES). Specifically, these items ask about those attributes in children most preferred by individuals, such as respect for elders and good manners

The first of these measures, the dogmatism scale, is designed to measure absolutist thinking. While one of the items makes reference to “important public issues”, this scale is largely removed from the political realm and taps the need to take a firm stance on a variety of beliefs.¹² For example, one of the items asks respondents to choose which statement best applies to them: “When it comes to the really important questions about religion and philosophy of life: (A) it doesn’t especially bother me to leave them undecided or (B) a person must decide them, one way or the other.” I draw these items from a scale used by McClosky and Chong (1985) to explore tolerance for ambiguity among extremists of all political leanings. McClosky and Chong asked a series of questions to measure subscription to “far left” and “far right” principles. Having identified the core members of these groups in their surveys, they then examined the background correlates of these beliefs. McClosky and Chong found that members of the far left and the far right were similarly intolerant of ambiguity. My hope was that a scale drawn from these items could also discriminate individuals who would be more willing to accept rumors on the *both* the left and the right.¹³ That is, I hoped

(See Feldman and Stenner 1997 for a description). For instance, one of the items asks, “Listed below are pairs of desirable qualities. For each pair please mark which one you think is more important for a child to have...independence or respect for elders.” These items are especially attractive because they are explicitly non-political and plausibly exogenous to beliefs concerning rumors about political events and figures. Authoritarians should be less likely to question statements that have a veneer of credulity, such as rumors that come with complex back stories. Authoritarians therefore should be more likely to accept political rumors, especially those that comport with their political beliefs. However, since the authoritarian personality is associated with right-wing politics, the authoritarianism scale is probably better at discriminating among the degree to which individuals cling to rumors about policies and politicians on the left. The authoritarianism scale is therefore different than the other general concepts measured here – it is best thought of as a mixture of general and specific rumor-holding tendencies. Empirically, I find that authoritarianism does predict rumor acceptance from across the ideological spectrum, but it is more strongly associated with acceptance of rumors that implicate the left – such as concerns related to Obama’s birthplace. The inclusion or exclusion of the authoritarianism measure does not, however, change any of the multivariate results reported below. I therefore exclude this measure my analysis here. I also look at the relationship between rumor acceptance and the “Big 5” personality traits used in psychology (Gosling et al. 2003). These results are presented in the footnotes below.

¹² Removing the item relating to “important public issues” from the dogmatism scale does not change the regression results reported below.

¹³ I created a scale using items that had majority agreement from both the “far left” and “far right” subsamples examined by McClosky and Chong (1985). I also tried to find items that had roughly equal levels of agreement between the two groups (many of the items examined by McClosky and Chong were quite skewed, with extremists of the left rejecting items that were widely embraced on the right, and vice-versa). All three items were drawn from a battery of questions grouped under the header, “Intolerance of Ambiguity.” Empirically, the items seemed to scale on a single dimension,

that people who scored high on the dogmatic thinking scale would tend to view the world in stark degrees of black and white and, therefore, would be more likely to accept fanciful accusations about political figures and events, no matter the nature of their political attachments.¹⁴

Finally, the political disengagement scale is designed to measure the degree to which individuals are distrusting of politicians and the political system in general. The content of these items is different – and far more cynical – than the “trust in government” items contained in the National Elections Study. As way of example, one of the questions asks whether respondents agree or disagree with the statement, “politicians do not care much about that they say, so long as they get elected.” I also draw these items from those used by McClosky and Chong (1985).¹⁵ McClosky and Chong found that members of the far left and the far right had similarly low levels of trust in the political system. Again, I hoped that this scale might enable me to identify those respondents who would be more willing to accept rumors on both the left and the right. After all, distrust of the political system breeds a willingness to believe negative information about the people and institutions that comprise that system, regardless of the ideological affiliation of the target of the rumors.¹⁶

Finally, I consider other factors that might lead individuals to reject rumors regardless of the content of those items. Most notably, I examine the power of education and political awareness, here measured by political information levels (Zaller 1992). If political rumors are a form of

but the relationship was not particularly strong. An exploratory factor analysis yields a single-factor solution, though the Eigenvalue of the first dimension was below one and a scale formed from the three items had a reliability of only .46.

¹⁴ Of course it could be the case that people who tend to think about the world in dogmatic ways are more likely to either accept or reject rumors, shying away from the undecided response. Empirically, this does not appear to be the case.

¹⁵ As with the dogmatism items, I created a scale using items that had majority agreement from both the “far left” and “far right” subsamples examined by McClosky and Chong (1985). The first two of these items were drawn from a battery of questions that they termed “estrangement from politics.” The third was from a battery termed “paranoid tendencies,” but fit well conceptually with the other two items. Empirically, the items scale well. An exploratory factor analysis yields a single-factor solution and a scale formed from the three items has a reliability of .65.

¹⁶ This scale essentially taps a core concept at the heart of conspiracy theory acceptance. As Sunstein and Vermeule note, to embrace conspiracy theories, “those who accept them must also accept a kind of spreading distrust of all knowledge-producing institutions, in a way that makes it difficult to believe anything at all.” (2009, 209).

misinformation, perhaps the solution for reducing their acceptance is more information. Later in this paper, I consider experimental treatments designed to directly test the effect of new information on rumor acceptance. But here I posit that those better informed about the political world are, on average, less likely to accept political rumors. However, to the extent that political information taps engagement with political rhetoric (Zaller 1992), it could be the case that the relationship between information levels and rumor rejection is conditional on the political predilections of the respondent – a possibility I explore in greater detail below.

Rumor-Specific Factors

In addition to general processes of rumor acceptance and rejection, I expect that the specific content of rumors will affect whether individuals will believe a given statement. Specifically, the particular political beliefs of the respondent – such as their partisanship or other markers of self-interest – should make a great difference in whether an individual will cling to fanciful beliefs. The introduction of political concerns, after all, changes the nature of information processing in important ways. Most importantly, adding concerns such as partisanship to the mix exacerbates the tendency for citizens to engage in motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990). As Taber and Lodge (2006) note, ordinary citizens are goal-directed information processors; they perceive new information in light of their preexisting views. Thus, when presented with a balanced set of arguments, respondents evaluate attitudinally congruent arguments as stronger than attitudinally incongruent arguments. Democrats tend to discount information that supports Republican positions (and vice-versa). Put another way, some citizens may be more likely to believe particular rumors because they are motivated to cling to beliefs that are compatible with their partisan or political outlook.¹⁷ In the

¹⁷ Similarly, Bullock (2006) finds that false information about political candidates can influence outparty candidate assessments, even after that information is revealed to be false. For instance, Republicans who hear negative stories

present context, a Republican who is suspicious of Obama might hold to the death panel rumor because she wants to have reasons for her opposition to his policy. While partisanship is the most obvious factor leading to rumor acceptance or rejection, there are other markers of a political stake in a given controversy. Thus, I also look at the correlation between rumor acceptance and political ideology.

Distribution of Responses

I examine the results of two surveys here, one conducted In July 2010 and a panel study that ran from October to November 2010. I primarily draw upon the first survey. In July, 2010, I conducted an 800-person Internet sample survey through Polimetrix/YouGov to measure acceptance of seven rumors. These questions are listed in Table 1.¹⁸ Six of these questions were explicitly political. Four of the six questions addressed rumors that implicated Democratic politicians and policies and two implicated the politics of the right.¹⁹ For the sake of convenience, I refer to the former as “Democratic-based rumors” and the later as “Republican-based rumors” (though, strictly speaking, the latter rumors do not explicitly refer to Republican politicians). The seventh rumor question was designed to be non-political and asked about a well-known incident of a supposed UFO landing in Roswell, New Mexico in 1947.²⁰

about Democratic candidates lower their evaluation of that candidate. If that information is revealed to be false, her opinion of the candidate will rebound somewhat, but will not return to its initial state.

¹⁸ I chose these particular questions because they had all been asked by other survey organizations.

¹⁹ This group of rumors is obviously not balanced, in large part because it was extremely difficult to find rumors that were endorsed by the political left. In the analysis that follows, I check the robustness of the results by including only a subset of two of the Democratic-based rumors in place of the four-item scale. The results to not change appreciably, indicating that any difference in the Republican-based and Democratic-based analysis is not a function of the unequal number of items in the scales.

²⁰ While the Roswell rumor is non-partisan, it is not exclusively non-political. Accepting the Roswell rumor entails endorsing the notion that the U.S. government engaged in a cover-up that has lasted over 60 years. For present purposes, however, the Roswell rumor serves as a useful baseline for the other explicitly political and partisan rumors on the survey. I also asked whether respondents thought that vaccines were safe as a general measure of inclination for conspiratorial thinking. I found that those respondents who were suspicious of vaccines were more likely to accept rumors about *both* Democrats and Republicans.

In the last quarter of 2010, I conducted a survey as part of module on the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). I asked many of the same rumor questions, but modified some of the items – for instance, making reference to the Bush administration in the question about 9/11 – and added items relating to immigration (Fine and Ellis 2010).²¹ These items are listed in Table 2. For most of this section, I will draw on the July data, but I will, at times, also refer to the CCES data.

The rumor questions were asked in a branching format; respondents were first asked if they accepted the rumor, rejected the rumor, or were not sure about the validity of the rumor. I then probed the strength with which they held their belief. Respondents who initially said they were not sure of their stance were asked what they would say if forced to choose (they were again given the “not sure” option in the probe). Table 1 presents the responses for the initial branch. For every question except the one about Obama’s citizenship, the “no” response signals the rejection of a rumor. The seven-point scales created from the follow-up questions are presented in Figure 1. In that figure, high scores indicate greater levels of rumor acceptance. Respondents who strongly accept the rumor are placed at “1”, those who strongly reject the rumor are at “7”, individuals who indicate that they are “not sure” in both the initial branch and the follow-up are put at “4”, and other patterns of responses comprise the intermediate points. For example, respondents who initially say that they are not sure about the veracity of a rumor, but then say they would accept that rumor if forced to choose are scored as a “3.”

²¹ These rumor questions were asked after an experiment involving health care policy rumors (described below as experiment 3). There is, therefore the worry that all rumor questions would be affected by the health care rumor treatment. I examined the data and the response distribution to each of the rumor questions – excepting those pertaining to health policy – were unaffected by the treatment. Specifically, a chi-square test of the distribution of rumor responses by condition fails to reach significance by a wide margin. It is therefore reasonable to treat these questions as standard survey data. At the same time, since the respondents to the July survey were not exposed to any information related to the political rumors, I prefer to use that data, when possible, to avoid any unexpected and unmeasured contamination of the question responses by the health care treatment.

As Table 1 demonstrates, the questions vary in the degree of rumor acceptance, from 15 percent on the guns and drugs question to 35 percent on the question about Kerry’s war conduct. While the Kerry question is the only rumor endorsed by a plurality of respondents, the relatively high don’t know rates across the questions indicates that respondents are not prepared to reject the rumors out of hand – only the Obama citizenship and the two Republican-based rumors are rejected by a majority of respondents. I am most interested in the incidence of rumor rejection because outright denunciation of the rumor is the clearest indication of the absence of misinformation. A “not sure” response, after all, indicates that the respondent is not prepared to disavow a given rumor. Figure 1 demonstrates that the rumor questions also vary in the distribution of this uncertainty. Responses to the Obama citizenship question are clearly bifurcated – respondents either strongly accept or strongly reject the rumors. Other questions, such as Kerry’s war record and the health care rumors show a more dispersed distribution of responses.

Over time, these beliefs about political rumors are quite stable. I repeated three questions across the two waves of the CCES – two “Democratic-based” rumors and the other a “Republican-based” rumor.²² Specifically, the first question concerns Obama’s citizenship, the second addressed beliefs about illegal immigrants, and the third questions whether the Republicans stole the 2004 presidential election through voter fraud in Ohio. The aggregate distribution of the questions was extremely stable for each question in both waves (see Table 2). More importantly, this aggregate stability extended to the individual level. In Table 3, I show the cross-tabulation of responses in wave 1 (September 2010) and wave 2 (November 2010) for the initial branch of the questions.²³ As Table 3 demonstrates, these responses are highly stable. Though the immigration items are

²² I also asked two questions relating to health care rumors in both waves. Since these questions served as dependent variables for the study reported in experiment 3 below, I did not expect them to exhibit the same levels of stability as the questions that were unrelated to the experimental treatment.

²³ These tables were generated using the weights provided by YouGov. The results show even greater stability if I use the unweighted data.

somewhat less stable, about 80 percent of respondents gave the same answer to the rumor items in both waves, even though the surveys were conducted, on average, one month apart. Using the follow up questions to compute seven-point scales yields a similar picture regarding belief stability between waves; the Obama items are correlated at .90, the voter fraud questions are correlated at .84, and the immigration item – though somewhat less stable – is correlated at .74.

I next examined the structure of the relationship among the questions. There is a large range of rumor acceptance across individuals; it is not the case that the same respondents accept or reject all the rumors. As Figure 2 demonstrates, on average respondents accepted 1.8 rumors and said they were “not sure” about 1.7 rumors, but only five percent of respondents accepted four or more rumors. These results underscore the fact that there is a great deal of heterogeneity among individuals in their willingness to accept rumors. It is also important to note that while it is indeed true that, in the aggregate, at least 15 percent of the respondents expressed support for each of the rumors, over 70 percent of respondents expressed support for at least one of the statements. Thus, contrary to the assumption of some commentators in the media, it is not the case that there is a core group of Americans who will express support for any statement. Instead a large majority of the citizenry says that they believe at least one of the rumors. Put another way, while some people hold mostly crazy beliefs, most people hold at least some crazy beliefs.

To further investigate the relationships among the rumor items, Table 4 presents the pairwise correlations among the seven-point scales constructed from the items.²⁴ There seems to be a clear structure to the items. As expected, the Democrat-based rumors and the Republican-based

²⁴ In the discussion that follows, I will rely on the seven-point scales, but all the conclusions remain the same if I focus only on the initial branch.

rumors seem to form separate clusters that are negatively correlated (albeit weakly) with one another.²⁵ This same basic structure emerges among the items asked on the CCES.

Determinants of Rumor Rejection

I next moved to explore the determinants of rumor rejection.²⁶ Based on my expectations regarding patterns of rumor holding, I created separate additive scales of rumor rejection for the Democrat-based rumors and the Republican-based rumors.²⁷ These scales are created by averaging the seven-point rumor items described above.²⁸ The scales run from zero (where a respondent strongly *accepts* every rumor comprising the scale) to one (where the respondent strongly *rejects* every rumor in the scale).²⁹ Figure 3 plots the regression coefficients and 95 percent confidence intervals from a regression analysis of the correlates of rumor rejection. I plot a dotted line at zero to facilitate interpretation of standard tests of statistical significance. As expected, there are some factors, such as high levels of political information and low levels of political disengagement, that are associated

²⁵ It could be that the weak negative correlation is partially a result of a response set. Six of the seven items are asked in a format such that a “yes” response indicates rumor acceptance. Thus, the items could be partially contaminated by acquiesce bias. However, the Obama item is coded in the opposite way and appears to be related to the other rumor items in the expected manner, indicating that this problem may not be serious. To more rigorously test the possibility of response set, I ran a survey in April 2011, where I asked a small subset of rumor questions in one of two formats. Respondents were randomly assigned to question form. One-half the respondents were asked the questions in the yes/no/not sure format employed here. The other half were given similar questions, but the item response choices were statements that indicated acceptance or rejection of the rumor. For instance, the question about John Kerry’s war service read, “Which statement best describes your belief: (1) Senator John Kerry lied about his actions during the Vietnam War in order to receive medals from the U.S. Navy, (2) Senator John Kerry accurately reported his actions during the Vietnam War, (3) Not sure.” I also asked follow-up probes comparable to those used for the yes/no/not sure response options. I found that the response distributions and the inter-item correlations were very similar across the two forms, indicating that the items were not contaminated by a response set.

²⁶ The results reported here were largely replicated in the April 2011 Polimetrix/YouGov survey discussed above. The one exception was that the relationship between dogmatism and acceptance of Republican-based rumors was not statistically significant in the 2011 survey (though the relationship was positive).

²⁷ The Democratic-based rumor scale consists of the Obama citizenship, Kerry, and two death panel rumors. The Republican rumor scale consists of the FBI/CIA and 9/11 rumor questions.

²⁸ These items are constructed from both the initial branch and the follow-up probes, as described above.

²⁹ I do not normalize these scales; I adjust only the minimum and maximum levels of the scale; I do not in any way alter the variance of the individual scales.

with rejection of political rumors across the ideological spectrum.³⁰ The same is true of dogmatism, though the relationship between this scale and rumor acceptance is considerably stronger for the Democratic-based rumors. At the same time, a person's political beliefs – placement on the ideological scale and attachment to political parties – interact with the content of the rumor to shape patterns of acceptance and rejection. Republicans and conservatives accept Democratic-based rumors and reject Republican-based rumors.³¹ The reverse is true for Democrats and liberals (though this relationship is somewhat weaker, especially for Republican-based rumors).

Finally, interacting general dispositions and political leaning leads to some interesting results. While the relationship between political information and rumor rejection appears straightforward, upon closer examination, that relationship is heavily conditioned by the partisan predilections of the

³⁰ In addition to these batteries, I also examined in the 2010 CCES the power of those subscales of the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI) – a five-dimension characterization of individual differences in personality – that do not have political overtones (for a description of the TIPI, see Gosling et al. 2003; for political science applications, see Gerber et al. 2010 and Mondak et al. 2010). I separately regressed the Democratic-based and the Republican-based rumor scales on the five TIPI subscales. Some of the TIPI subscales have political connotations (for discussion, see Gerber et al. 2010). I therefore controlled for the ideology of the respondent. However because the single-item ideology scale is an imperfect measure of ideological orientation (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008), I expected that the political overtones of the TIPI items would still shine through the regressions, albeit in an attenuated form. Some of the subscales – most notably agreeableness – are unrelated to either the Democratic-based or the Republican-based rumor scale. The effect of other scales, in particular Openness and Conscientiousness, are related to the rumor scales in ways that we would expect, even controlling for self-reported ideology. As Gerber et al (2010) note, Openness as a trait corresponds with positive reactions to new or unconventional stimuli and is therefore associated with a liberal disposition. Conversely, Conscientious people adhere to standing norms and values and therefore tend to be more conservative. Similarly, Gerber et al find that those who are extraverted are slightly more conservative, though they do not advance a theoretic explanation for this relationship. I find that these scales work as expected in predicting score of the Democratic-based rumors (those rumors that contain information critical of Democratic politicians and policies) and Republican-based rumors (those rumors critical of Republicans). In my analysis, extraversion is related to acceptance of Democratic-based rumors and rejection of Republican-based rumors, though not in a statically reliable sense. Thus, these subscales seem to work through the political consequences of personality traits to differentially influence rumors based on their content. That is, these personality subscales are tied to political orientations, which in turn influence rumor acceptance. However, it appears that one of the scales, Emotional Stability, is strongly associated with rejection of rumors across the board. Those people who are worrisome and tense are most likely to accept rumors, regardless of their topic content. Consistent with this conclusion, respondents who score high on the Emotional Stability scale are also more likely to reject the non-partisan Roswell rumor than those who score low on the scale. In sum, in line with the other analysis presented in this paper, there does appear to be a personality component to the willingness to accept rumors in general.

³¹ I also measured support for the Tea Party on the survey. Not surprisingly, endorsement of the Tea Party was strongly related to the acceptance of Democratic-based rumors and the rejection of Republican-based rumors. In multiple regressions, the coefficient on support for the Tea Party was larger than either Republican partisanship or conservative ideology (borrowing explanatory power from both variables). In effect, support for the Tea Party functioned as a measure of subscription to views on the extreme right.

respondents. Figure 4 presents the relationship between information and rumor rejection levels for a scale created from all seven rumor items. In the aggregate, those respondents who are highly engaged with the political world are more likely to reject all rumors. This relationship holds for both Democratic based rumors and Republican based rumors (see Figure 5). But accounting for the political predilections of the respondents complicates the relationship between information and rumor acceptance. Figure 6 replicates the analysis in Figure 5, but does so separately for self-identified Democrats and Republicans. Democrats follow the pattern observed to this point – respondents with higher levels of information are more likely to reject both Republican-based and Democratic-based rumors. However, while high information Republicans are more likely than low information Republicans to reject Republican-based rumors, high information Republicans are *less* likely to reject Democratic-based rumors. That is, Republicans who are more engaged with politics are more likely to accept negative rumors about Democrats. The pattern of Republican responses in Figure 6, in fact, looks very much like the pattern of opinion polarization described by Zaller (1992). The conditional effect of partisanship therefore illustrates the larger point that on political rumors, where you stand depends in large part where you sit. Clearly, *both* one’s general worldview and a person’s political orientation critically affect whether people accept or reject political rumors.

Telling the Truth about Believing the Lies?

The stark difference in the patterns of rumor acceptance between Democrats and Republicans begs a more basic question: when people tell pollsters they believe a given rumor, are they being honest about the facts they believe? People may endorse a rumor because they truly believe it, or they may do so because they understand the signals they are sending about political figures by endorsing that rumor. Put another way, people may be answering these questions honestly, or they could instead use surveys instrumentally as a vehicle to express more basic political judgments about politicians and policies they oppose. As Gary Langer, former chief pollster for

ABC News, argues, “Some people who strongly oppose a person or proposition will take virtually any opportunity to express that antipathy ... not to express their ‘belief,’ in its conventional meaning, but rather to throw verbal stones.”³² In this view, the expression of support for the rumors surrounding Obama is a purely instrumental response, representing nothing more than “cheap talk.”³³

These two pathways to rumor acceptance have very different implications for democracy and it is important to distinguish them empirically. To measure the prevalence of misinformation in the mass public, we would like to know what portion of the public truly believes, for example, that Obama is not a citizen. We would, in short, like to strip out expressive responses from the survey results to arrive at a measure of the public’s true beliefs. Achieving this goal requires altering the structure of the survey in one of two ways. First, we could *increase the costs* of giving an expressive response by providing incentives for honest responses. Second, we could design a survey instrument to *decrease the benefits* of that expressive response.

Bullock, Gerber, and Huber (2010) have pursued the first strategy by manipulating the costs of giving an expressive response, randomly assigning some respondents to get a monetary bonus if they correctly answered factual questions about politics that had a partisan bent. A respondent who knew the correct answer to a factual question but chose to engage in expressive responding was penalized for her behavior because she did not receive the financial award for a correct answer (see also Prior 2007). It might be possible to adapt this framework to the rumor questions, incentivizing questions about rumor belief by paying subjects for giving a “correct” response.³⁴ However, it may

³² <http://blogs.abcnews.com/thenumbers/2010/08/this-i-believe.html>.

³³ It could also be the case that people answer rumor questions in the affirmative because they want to effect the news by creating “interesting” stories. However this kind of behavior seems less plausible and is less discussed by political commentators.

³⁴ It should be noted that Bullock et al. found that the pattern of responses did not differ significantly between the control and payment conditions.

be that the rumor questions are less well-suited to this design. After all, if people are savvy enough to answer the rumor questions in an instrumental manner, they are almost certainly savvy enough to tailor their answer to get the monetary reward by rejecting a rumor, no matter what they truly believe.³⁵

I therefore designed a series of experiments which used different methods to reduce expressive responding by altering the calculus on the *benefit* side of the equation. I first employed a list experiment to minimize the gains respondents would get from expressive answering. Second, I varied the response options offered to respondents to see how support for rumors changed if respondents were forced to take a position on the rumor questions. I also ran a third experiment, which sought to reduce expressive responding in another way. Rather than altering the benefits of expressive responding, I varied the instructions I gave to respondents in an attempt to get some respondents to set aside their personal preferences and instead focus on their factual beliefs. Finally, I report the results of a study of latent and direct responses to a question about Obama's religion conducted by Hartman and Newmark (2012), which also casts doubt on the pervasiveness of expressive responding.

List Experiment

List experiments have typically been used in social science to unobtrusively measure support or opposition towards socially sensitive policies or candidate choices. The list experiment works by cloaking the sensitive "treatment" item among a list of other non-sensitive items. Respondents are

³⁵ I have additional evidence that the majority of people who endorse rumors, in fact, know that they hold views not shared by their fellow citizens. For instance, in a survey conducted by YouGov from April 25 to May 2, 2011, I asked respondents, "Do you think that people in the federal government, such as George Bush and Dick Cheney, either assisted in the 9/11 attacks or took no action to stop the attacks because they wanted the United States to go to war in the Middle East?" I then followed up by asking, "What proportion of the American public do you think shares your view on this matter? Nearly everyone, most people, about half, some people, a few people, or almost no one?" Among people who endorsed the rumor, 39% said that "nearly everyone" or "most people" shared their views. By contrast, among people who rejected the rumor, 71% said that "nearly everyone" or "most people" shared their views.

given a list of items and are asked only HOW MANY items they endorse or reject. One group of respondents receives four innocuous items. The treatment group receives the same items plus the sensitive item. For example, Streb et al. (2008), sought to measure opposition to a woman serving as president. If we were to directly ask respondents whether they endorsed a woman serving as president, we might worry that some respondents would not honestly report their opinion because it is socially undesirable. The list experiment is designed to ameliorate this problem because a respondent in the treatment group is provided a level of privacy – they could claim, after all, that they did not oppose a woman serving as president. By taking the difference in the mean number of items endorsed across the two lists, the analyst can construct a “list estimate” of the true proportion of the population that would support or oppose the treatment item.

List experiments might also be helpful for a different purpose. By cloaking the “treatment” item in a list of unrelated items, the list experiment design reduces the possibility of expressive responding. Just as a list experiment reduces the respondent’s concern about giving socially desirable answers and allows them to respond more honestly, the use of the list should reduce the benefits of expressive behavior and induce respondents to give answers in line with their genuine beliefs. Consider the Obama citizenship question. Even in the unlikely event that a respondent could intuit the logic of the list experiment, the respondent would not accrue the expressive benefits of directly expressing sentiment that paints Obama in a bad light.

To see how the pattern of responses changes when the benefit side of the equation is modified, we can compare the list estimate of the prevalence of rumor acceptance to the proportion of respondents reporting acceptance of the rumor via a traditional survey question. If the list estimate of rumor acceptance is lower than the estimate we get when we ask the rumor question directly, the data provides evidence of expressive responding. On the other hand, if the estimates supplied by the two formats are equal, the analysis would indicate that the endorsement of rumors

reflected the genuine beliefs of the respondents.³⁶ We can also look at the response behavior of key subgroups. For example, in the case of Obama’s religion, we could compare the list estimate to the direct estimate to see if the gap between the two forms of the question is larger for those groups that should derive expressive benefits from affirming the rumor – notably Republicans and conservatives.

From December 2011 to January 2012, I fielded a large scale list experiment through Knowledge Networks.³⁷ A total of 6,355 respondents took the survey. Respondents were assigned to one of four conditions.³⁸ The first two conditions comprised the list experiment. Some respondents were given the four-item base list (base list condition), while others were given the same list with the additional treatment item (treatment list condition), “I believe Barack Obama is a Muslim.” To construct this list, I used the negative correlation within list design described by Glynn (2010; see also Berinsky and Glynn 2010)³⁹. The second two conditions were two different versions of the “direct ask” question. All of the respondents in these two conditions were asked, “We now want to know if the following statement is true for you: I believe Barack Obama is a Muslim.” Some respondents were given only “true” and “false” response options (direct ask condition), while others were also given a “not sure” response option (direct ask with uncertainty condition). I discuss the results of the list experiment conditions and the direct ask condition, saving analysis of the direct ask

³⁶ Of course, it could be the case that the list estimate is higher than the directly asked version, indicating the presence of social desirability bias in the traditional sense.

³⁷ The exact field dates of the study were from 12/22/2011-1/4/2012. This data collection was funded through the Time Sharing Experiments in the Social Sciences (TESS) project.

³⁸ The initial design had a target of one-third of the respondents assigned to the base list, one-third assigned to the treatment list, one-sixth assigned to the direct question with the not sure response, and one-sixth assigned to the direct question without a not sure response. However in the initial allocation of cases, Knowledge Networks applied an equal probability of being in each of the four conditions. Once they realized this error, they fielded additional sample in the list conditions to get as close to the original splits as possible. I analyzed the data from the list oversample separately from the initial allocation and found no differences in the results. I therefore combined the two samples for the purposes of this paper. Overall, 1,799 respondents were assigned to the base list condition, 1,759 were assigned to the treatment list condition, 1,360 were assigned to the direct ask condition, and 1,417 were assigned to the direct ask with uncertainty condition.

³⁹ The base list consisted of the following four items: I enjoy listening to music, I think it should be legal for two men to marry, I support allowing prayer in public schools, and I like getting phone calls from telemarketers.

with uncertainty condition for the next section.

In Table 5, I present the mean number of items asked in the baseline list and the mean number endorsed in the treatment list (with corresponding standard errors). I computed the list estimate of the percent of the public who believe that Obama is a Muslim by taking the difference in the mean number of items endorsed across the two lists. The quantity is typically interpreted as the percentage of people who endorse the treatment statement. The list estimate indicates that 19 percent of the public endorses the notion that Obama is a Muslim. This compares to 27 percent of the public who endorse the statement when directly asked the question (without a “no sure” option; see column five of the table). This pattern reverses the typical list experiment result, as expected, indicating that *fewer* people actually believe that Obama is a Muslim when afforded the privacy of the list experiment. At first glance, then, it appears that one-third of the responses to rumor question could be expressive responses.

However, the subgroup analysis complicates the story somewhat. If, indeed, the list estimate of rumor endorsement is lower than the direct form estimate because people are answering in an instrumental manner, we would think that members of those groups who derive benefits from besmirching Obama would show the greatest difference between the direct form and list estimate measure. As Table 6 shows, this is not the case. The differences between the list estimate of rumor acceptance and the direct form estimate for opponents of Obama – whether measured through previous vote, current partisanship, or ideology – are comparable to the differences for the *supporters* of Obama. For instance, among Republicans, the incidence of rumor endorsement is seven percent higher for the direct form estimate than it is in the list estimate. However, the incidence of rumor endorsement among Democrats is eight points higher in the direct form estimate than in the list estimate, a nearly identical difference. Similar patterns emerge along the lines of 2008 vote choice. Finally, if we stratify the results by ideology, we see that the difference between the direct form

estimate and the list estimate is *higher* for liberals than conservatives.

While it is not clear what drives the overall difference between the list estimate and the direct ask estimate, these results are highly inconsistent with the notion that rumor endorsements are simply another means of expressing anti-Obama sentiment. Overall, at the very most one-third of rumor endorsements are not expressions of true belief and – more important for present purposes – these false positives are not concentrated among those individuals who would have a stock in denigrating Obama. In short, the data is simply not consistent with a pattern of expressive responding.

Accounting for Uncertainty

The Knowledge Network data collection effort offers another opportunity to explore whether respondents answer rumor questions in an expressive manner. Recall that I asked the question about Obama’s religion directly in one of two ways: some respondents were asked whether the statement was “true” or “false,” while others were also offered a “not sure” response.⁴⁰ Because respondents are randomly assigned to the different question forms, I can compare the response distributions across the conditions to assess the effect of introducing the “not sure” response option on the pattern of rumor acceptance.

If indeed respondents answer the rumor question instrumentally to express anti-Obama sentiment, we would expect that respondents who oppose Obama would, as Langer put it, “take virtually any opportunity to express that antipathy.” Thus we should see no difference in expressed levels of support for the rumor when the not sure response is offered for these people.

As Table 7 demonstrates, the introduction of the “not sure” response does not appreciably change the ratio of rumor acceptance to rumor rejection for the full sample. However, adding the

⁴⁰ It should be noted that the later form is the more common measure of rumor support – my surveys as well as media polls almost always offer a “not sure” response option.

not sure response changes the pattern of responses for Republicans – just not in the way predicted by Langer. Republicans are actually significantly *more* likely to agree that Obama is a Muslim when the “not sure” response is offered than when it is not. When given a simple choice, the majority of Republicans do not endorse the rumor. This behavior is inconsistent with expressive responding. Respondents who simply want to say negative things about Obama should be unaffected by the inclusion of the “not sure” response. Regardless of the presence of an uncertain response option, expressive respondents should endorse rumors. But instead, I find that if the design of the question forces Republicans to take a side, the ratio of rumor endorsement to rejection decreases (relative to the case where they are allowed to abstain from the question).

Inducing Exclusion

The third experiment I ran also sought to change the pattern of rumor acceptance by altering the basis of the response experience in such a way as to minimize purely expressive responses. The central concern with expressive responding on rumor questions is that while we would like our respondents to answer rumor questions purely on the basis of their factual beliefs, these respondents may also draw upon their political evaluations. If people derive expressive benefits from saying negative things about people and policies they do not like, we would like them to acknowledge these evaluations, but separate those evaluations from the factual responses to the rumor question

One way to induce this separation is to draw on work by Schwarz and Bless (1992). These authors argue that when answering a particular survey question respondents typically include all the information that comes to mind when that question is asked. However, respondents can be cued to *exclude* some information by salient features of the question-answering process. For present purposes, what is important is that by telling respondents to set aside certain characteristics of a decision task, a researcher can induce what Schwarz and Bless call a subtraction effect. In essence,

we can ask respondents to remove potentially significant, but irrelevant information from the base of information that they use to form their judgment.

We can take advantage of this subtraction effect by explicitly restricting the scope of acceptable judgments for the rumor questions. In particular, we can word the question introduction so that respondents are asked to set aside their feelings toward particular people and policies and instead focus on their factual beliefs. Of course, people could ignore the instructions, but the work of Schwarz and Bless suggests that the subtraction effect can be surprisingly large. If indeed people use their judgments to color reports of their beliefs, a strongly worded introduction to the rumor battery should reduce the incidence of rumor acceptance.⁴¹

To gauge the effect of such an introduction on expressive responding, I asked 1,000 respondents on a January 2012 YouGov survey a series of rumor questions which included the items described above relating to: a 9/11 conspiracy, vote fraud in the 2004 election, Obama's religion, and Roswell. The respondents also were also asked about either Obama's place of birth or Palin's place of birth.⁴²

Respondents were randomly assigned to read one of two introductory statements to the task. The first version (Version A) was a standard introduction to the rumor battery and read, "In the grid below, you will see a series of statements. Please tell us what you believe to be true." The second version (Version B) attempted to induce a subtraction effect and thus read, "In the grid below, you will see a series of statements. Regardless of how you feel about the people and policies mentioned in these statements, we want you to tell us what you believe to be true. Again, we ask that you try and ignore your personal feelings"

⁴¹ Of course, rejection of the null here – as elsewhere in this section – is not clear evidence against the incidence of expressive questions responding on the part of the subjects, but such evidence is highly suggestive.

⁴² Half the respondents were asked about Obama's birthplace; the other half were asked about Palin's birthplace.

Table 8 presents the results of this survey. Contrary to the expectations arising from the subtraction effect, there are no significant differences in response distributions across the question forms.⁴³ The distribution of the Ohio voting question is the one item where the responses appear somewhat different across the question forms, but even that difference falls far short of conventional levels of statistical significance. Thus on this test, as with the others presented in this section, there is no support for the existence of significant levels of expressive responding on the rumor questions.

Latent and Direct Responses

Additional recent work by Hartman and Newmark (2012) also casts doubt on the prevalence of expressive responding. Hartman and Newmark conducted an Implicit Association Test (IAT) to gauge the association between Obama and Islam using reaction times. The IAT is designed to measure the strength of the relationship between different concepts in the memory of individuals. Subjects were presented with stimuli representing Christianity (the words: Jesus, Christian, Gospel, and Church) and Islam (the words: Muhammad, Muslim, Koran, and Mosque), as well as black-and-white images of Barack Obama and John McCain. Subjects were instructed to quickly sort each word or image into paired categories consisting of a candidate and religion. In this case, the groupings were: (1) “Obama” and “Islam” (2) “McCain” & “Christianity” (3) “Obama” and “Christianity” (4) “McCain” and “Islam.” It is possible to construct a measure of association by comparing a subject’s reaction time to the stimuli across the different groupings. For instance, a subject with a strong association between “Obama” and “Islam” will react faster to the stimulus

⁴³ I also sought to induce explicit exclusion effects through a second manipulation, where half the respondents were asked about Obama’s job performance *before* they answered the rumor questions, while the other half were asked the Obama approval item *after* the rumor questions. The expectation was that allowing people to first express negative sentiment about Obama, then instructing those respondents to set their feeling aside would heighten the exclusion effect. However, I found that this treatment had no effect on the distributions of the rumor items. I therefore do not present these results in this paper.

when the category is “Obama” and “Islam” then when the same stimulus is presented under a different grouping.

Hartman and Newmark found a positive correlation between explicit and implicit measures of association between Obama and the Muslim faith. More importantly for present purposes, the implicit association between Obama and Islam was stronger for Republicans than it was for Democrats (and stronger for conservatives than liberals), mirroring the differences found when the Obama religion question is asked directly. These results are consistent with the notion that people reveal their actual associations when answering direct questions about Obama’s faith, and do not simply take the opportunity to speak negatively about the president. After all, if subjects who dislike Obama were willfully altering the reports of their implicit reactions in order to speak ill of the President, we would not see the stronger correspondence between latent and direct attitudes among Republicans than Democrats that we observe.⁴⁴

An analogy can be drawn here to psychological studies of racism. Some individuals have a strong motivation to control seemingly prejudiced reactions. For instance, they will agree with statements such as “In today's society it’s important that one not be perceived as prejudiced in any manner” or “If I have a prejudiced thought or feeling, I keep it to myself.” Fazio et al. (1995) found that these individuals demonstrated weak correspondence between the racial IAT scores and explicit measures of negative evaluations of African Americans. On the other hand, people who scored low on the motivation to control prejudice scale freely reported negative evaluation. Thus, as motivation to control prejudice decreased, the relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes strengthened.

⁴⁴ Of course it could be the case that the IAT simply reflects a practiced association rather than a true underlying belief. In other words, a person could have the association between Obama and Islam if she is exposed repeatedly to the rumor, but does not actually believe the rumor. However, Hartman and Newmark have a placebo test of sorts. They find that levels of political information— which proxy exposure to political talk – are unrelated to the IAT reaction time scores. On the other hand, information levels are related to the explicit measure. The divergence in results between the political and information measures provides additional indirect evidence that expressive responding is not endemic, at least in the case of rumors about Obama’s religion.

Taking these findings to the present context, it appears that there is no corresponding “motivation to slander Obama” that would moderate the relationship between implicit and explicit judgments of Obama’s religion. When it comes to Obama’s religion, both supporters and opponents of the president report beliefs that are consistent with the associations in their memory.⁴⁵

How to Debunk Rumors?

Showing what types of people believe certain rumors to be true – and validating the veracity of those statements of belief – are important tasks, but equally important is establishing a method to effectively correct false information. Take, for example, the citizenship and death panel rumors plaguing Barack Obama. The Obama administration has taken different strategies at different times to counter the birther and death panel rumors. For instance, during the 2008 presidential contest, Obama released a computer copy of his birth certificate on a campaign website, but this did not quell the controversy. In April 2011, he released his long form birth certificate. Still, the Internet swirled with charges that the long form document was forged.⁴⁶ Obama also directly contradicted the death panel rumors at town hall meetings in New Hampshire in August 2009. But, as the polls discussed above demonstrate, these strategies did not shift the tides of public opinion. Clearly, a deeper understanding of the dynamics of misinformation is needed.

Consistent with the failures by practitioners of politics, the existing political science work on misinformation paints a grim picture. Kuklinski and his colleagues had some success in correcting false beliefs about welfare spending in the United States, but they also presented evidence that such

⁴⁵ Hartman and Newmark (personal correspondence) collected additional data on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk in February 2012 which supports the notion that people are not simply saying that Obama is a Muslim to besmirch him. They first asked respondents, “How likely do you think it is that Barack Obama is a Muslim?” Of their 319 participants, 24% stated “Very Likely” or “Somewhat Likely.” They then followed that question with a statement to try to tease out whether people actually believed Obama is a Muslim or were simply stating what they thought would be a negative thing about him: “Which statement comes closer to your own views? (A) I don’t really believe that Barack Obama is a Muslim, but I say that he is because I dislike him. (B) I truly believe that Barack Obama is a Muslim.” Of the respondents who said that Obama was a Muslim, 79% chose option B.

⁴⁶ See, for example, <http://market-ticker.org/akcs-www?post=185094>.

learning is short-lived. More recently, Nyhan and Reifler (2009, 2010), ran experiments in which they immediately corrected false statements about the Iraq war and a rumor about Obama's religion, among other topics. Their results are not particularly comforting for the practice of democracy either. Nyhan and Reifler find that confronting false information with facts does not always correct misperceptions held by members of the mass public. In fact, confronting citizens with the truth can sometimes backfire and reinforce existing misperceptions.⁴⁷ For instance, liberals were already likely to believe that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction before the U.S. invasion in 2003. Thus, providing them with the correct information did not change their beliefs. However, conservatives who received information telling them that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction were *more likely* to believe that Iraq had those weapons than were respondents who did not receive the correct information.⁴⁸ Nyhan and Reifler found similar patterns of response when they tried to correct a rumor that Obama is a Muslim.⁴⁹

These results are surely counterintuitive; they suggest that attempts to correct the misperceptions of ordinary citizens may *exacerbate* the stickiness of mistaken beliefs. Moreover, these findings run against much of the advice in psychology on how best to address rumors. While, as Allport and Postman note, the U.S. government's Office of War Information believed during World War II that it was a mistake to repeat a rumor – even if to refute it – today many of the leading texts

⁴⁷ They claim that this backlash occurs because individuals will internally counterargue information that does not fit with their pre-existing beliefs, thereby strengthening that existing belief.

⁴⁸ The inability to correct false impressions concerning Iraq's intentions was not simply a function of the short information treatment used by Nyhan and Reifler. Prasad et al (2009) conducted in-depth interviews of subjects who supported George Bush and believed that Iraq was involved in the 9/11 attacks in an attempt to provide contrary information. These interviews lasted for between 30 minutes and two hours. Only one of the 49 respondents changed his mind about the existence of a link between the 9/11 attack and Saddam Hussein.

⁴⁹ These findings are consistent with accounts of other counter-rumor strategies. Donovan, for example, reports that though government and civic agencies engaged in a large-scale campaign to debunk rumors in the 1960s that young women were disappearing from New Orleans boutiques to be sold into slavery, many residents admitted to researchers that they continued to believe that "where there's smoke, there's fire" (Donovan 2007). It should also be noted that in the case of Obama's religion, Nyhan and Reifler (2009) explored the possibility that providing correct information to their subjects failed to correct misperceptions about Obama's religion because linguistic negations (e.g. Obama is *not* a Muslim) unintentionally activates associations between the target (Obama) and the descriptor (Muslim). However, Nyhan and Reifler found no support for this proposition.

on rumor and rumor control advocate a strategy of direct rumor confrontation (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007, Kimmel 2004).⁵⁰ Indeed, in a comprehensive review of the rumor-quelling strategy literature, DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) find that the most frequent recommendation aimed at reducing belief in a rumor is the use of rebuttal.⁵¹ Thus, if we are interested in correcting misperceptions and misinformation about political controversies, we need to think about rumors in new ways.⁵²

The Fluency of Information

In general, rumors have been in decline as a topic of study in psychology since the immediate postwar years.⁵³ Even with the small resurgence of work on this topic in the last 20 years, there is much we do not know about the dynamics of rumors. However, we can draw on basic mechanisms that have been worked on by psychologists outside of the direct study of rumors to learn about effective counter-rumor strategies.

The seemingly counter-intuitive results of Nyhan and Reifler can be explained, in part, by drawing on recent work in social psychology. The key is to consider what Schwarz et al. (2007) call

⁵⁰ Specifically, the Office of War Information argued that “to smother a rumor with facts is better than to single it out for disproof, lest in the process it become unduly advertised” (1947, 15). This advice, as I will demonstrate below, is consistent with recent work in psychology outside of the realm of rumors.

⁵¹ Specifically, DiFonzo and Bordia review 22 articles and books drawn from the fields of psychology and business (see pages 207-209). In their review of their own work, they argue that while rebutting a rumor is better than simply ignoring the rumor, not all rebuttals will dispel rumors. Specifically they note that while “belief in rumors weakens when they are rebutted, some cherished beliefs endure and the negative impressions created by the rumor persist. Rebuttals that convincingly deny the rumor and associate the target with positive characteristics seem more likely to restore positive attitudes toward the rumor target” (2007, 243).

⁵² Journalist Jonathan Kay (2011) suggests that conspiracy theories – a term that he uses to mean the same set of fanciful stories that I classify as “rumors” – can be refuted en masse by educating students about the links that bind all conspiratorial ideologies. In particular he suggests using the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as the centerpiece of an anticonspiracist curriculum. In essence, he suggests teaching students to recognize and debunk novel conspiracies through reference to widely discredited theories from the past. However, given the deep roots of conspiratorial thinking in personality traits such as dogmatism and authoritarianism, it is questionable whether such a curriculum could ever be successfully designed. Moreover, such a strategy ignores the fact that while there is a central element that links all rumors, processes of motivated reasoning ensures that it is difficult to design strategies that will minimize the appeal of *all* rumors (though, as I find in my experiments, certain strategies are more generally effective than others).

⁵³ Much of the work on rumors since the 1970s has been conducted by Ralph Rosnow and his students (see for example, DiFonzo and Bordia 2007, Rosnow 1991, Kimmel 2004).

the “processing fluency” of information. In a series of studies, Schwarz and his colleagues find that the difficulty with which information is processed affects individuals’ assessment of its accuracy. Specifically, he finds that people use their metacognitive experience – how easy it is to recall or process new information – as a signal concerning the veracity of that information. For instance, people are more likely to accept statements like “Osorno is a city in Chile” as true when the statements are presented in colors that made them easy to read rather than difficult to read. For present purposes, the important finding from Schwarz’s research is that information that has been presented frequently will be more familiar to citizens and, as a result, is more likely to be accepted as the truth, regardless of the content of that information (see also Gilbert, Tafarodi, and Malone 1993).⁵⁴ These findings have a darker flip side that can explain the Nyhan and Reifler findings; any attempt to explicitly discredit falsehoods may make things worse, because directly countering rumors increases the fluency of the initial rumor through repetition. In effect, the attempt to correct a mistruth may only lead to a widespread acceptance of this factual inaccuracy or – at the very least – may lead people to question whether or not they should definitively reject that false information..

Skurnick, Yoon, and Schwarz (2007) demonstrate the importance of these processes using an informational flyer created by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to educate patients about the flu vaccine. This flyer confronts “myths” about the vaccination – erroneous beliefs such as “the side effects are worse than the flu” – with the proper “facts.” Schwarz and his associates conducted an experiment in which some subjects were shown the CDC flyer. Half of these subjects were immediately given a test which repeated the “facts and myths” information. These participants were asked to mark which statements were true. The other half of the participants were given the same test after a 30 minute delay.

⁵⁴ Difonzo and Bordia (2007) note that repeated rumors are more likely to be accepted by subjects. Similarly, Alport and Lepkin (1945) argued that people are more likely to believe rumors they heard before. However, neither set of authors provide a theoretic rationale for this finding.

Immediately after reading the flyer, participants were able to recall the information from the flyer almost perfectly – they misclassified “myths” as “facts” at very low rates (and vice-versa). However, after the 30 minute delay – once the memory for the substantive details of the information presented in the poster faded – the subjects’ judgments began to show a systematic error pattern. These respondents were significantly more likely to misidentify the “myths” as “truth” than vice versa, and were less likely to say they would get a shot (relative to the participants who were asked their opinions immediately). In essence, the attempt to debunk myths about the flu shot had the effect of further spreading that rumor and increasing its power.

Extensions to the Political World: The Power of Motivated Reasoning

Schwarz’s work provides important insights into the dynamics of rumors and the design of effective counter strategies. However, to shed light into the types of rumors that concern political scientists, the theory of processing fluency needs to be expanded to account for the partisan context of political rumors.

Information about flu shots is different from statements about political figures and policies. The survey data presented in the last section demonstrate that Democrats and Republicans (and liberals and conservatives) approach the same rumor in very different ways. The theories of motivated reasoning discussed above present a compelling explanation for this pattern. Partisans tend to evaluate new information in light of their existing views. Thus, even the most “difficult” information may be accepted by partisans of one stripe and the most “fluid” information might be rejected by citizens who identify with the opposing party. Political rumors, then, may exacerbate the stickiness of rumors more generally because certain individuals will be motivated to reject countering claims (as evidenced by the high acceptance rates for the citizenship and death panel rumors among Republicans). As Sunstein (2009) notes, political rumors are distinct from other types of rumors

because the same rumor will have radically different receptions in different partisan audiences.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the emotional charge of the current political environment may further enhance the stickiness of rumors. Heath, Bell, and Sternberg (2001) found that people are more likely to pass along fanciful information contained in urban legends when they have strong emotional content. This finding is consistent with rumor research that has found that anxiety tends to exacerbate the spread and acceptance of rumors (Anthony 1973, Rosnow 1980; 1991).

Still, while partisanship may color the processing of new information, it does not always control it. Research has shown that even the strongest partisans can change their beliefs in response to new information. For instance, while Republicans tended to rate the economy as “excellent” or “good” at higher rates than Democrats during the Bush Presidency, the economic evaluations of the two groups moved in similar ways over time.⁵⁶ It is not clear if the countering strategy dictated by Schwarz’s theory of processing fluency is effective enough to outweigh the pull of partisanship and the grip of emotion. This remains an open question.

Summary and Synthesis

Together these seemingly disparate bodies of work explain the enduring power of political rumors. Political rumors are powerful because partisans are motivated to believe falsehoods about politicians and policies of the other party. Moreover, the strategy most often employed to counter rumors – directly confronting the rumor by repeating it, then debunking it – may serve to augment the fluency of the rumor, thereby decreasing the likelihood that citizens will definitely reject that rumor out of hand. Citizens may accept “fluid” rumors, or they may say they are unsure about the veracity of those rumors, but they will be less likely to definitively reject them. Political rumors, then,

⁵⁵ More generally, research has found that people are more likely to accept rumors that are consistent with their pre-existing attitudes. DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) give over 20 examples from academic studies of cases where rumor-consistent attitudes increased beliefs in particular rumors.

⁵⁶ Source: <http://people-press.org/report/268/economy-now-seen-through-partisan-prism>.

have the capacity to be extremely sticky. To debunk these rumors and correct the misinformation they generate, it is necessary to adopt a new strategy.⁵⁷ I will see if I can break the vicious cycle of rumors with different presentational strategies, conditioning on the factors I cannot control, namely the partisanship of ordinary citizens.⁵⁸

Experiments

In 2010, I conducted three separate studies to test the effects of different corrections on the beliefs regarding rumors concerning health policy. These studies varied the presentation of the rumor-related information across three dimensions: (1) The pairing of rumor and correction in different combinations; (2) the partisanship of the source of the correction of the rumor, and (3) the degree to which the respondent was induced to rehearse the rumor. These experiments also explored the effect of time on the power of the treatments, recording responses not only immediately following the treatment, but also at a later point in time. In all the experiments, I was most concerned with patterns of rumor rejection – the rate at which my subjects would definitively reject false information. Given the high salience of the health care debate, it could be that “fluent” information about the death panel rumors could push respondents to a higher degree of uncertainty in their beliefs regarding the rumors surrounding Obama’s proposed reforms, even if they were not prepared to fully accept the veracity of those rumors.

⁵⁷ Another possible strategy to combat rumors is to counter rumor with ridicule or humor. Ellis (2005) advocates this strategy as a way to underscore the absurdity of many of the stories that lie at the heart of rumors.

⁵⁸ To use the language of the persuasion literature, I will vary the message characteristics (which I can control through random assignment of treatment), while holding constant the receiver characteristics (which I cannot control).

Study 1

In May 2010, I ran a between-subjects design experiment on an Internet panel which was designed to test the efficacy of various corrective strategies.⁵⁹ The primary purpose of this experiment was to examine the impact of varying the partisan identity of the provider of the rumor correction, but I also took advantage of a delayed follow-up questionnaire to examine some of Schwarz's expectations regarding the fluency of information.

The subject of these experiments was the rumors concerning Obama's health plan, described above. Specifically, I randomized the presentation of different constructed news stories about health care reform to subjects in four different experimental conditions (along with a control condition, where the subjects received no news story). The stories all dealt with the 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA), but presented different details about the debate surrounding that plan. Though I altered the presentation of information across the different treatments, the stories were constructed using only facts and quotes drawn from published news stories. The full text of the treatments is presented in Appendix B.

In the first "rumor" condition, subjects were presented with rumor, in the form of quotes by opponents of the act, who warned of the possibility of death panels. In the second "rumor and correction" condition, respondents were presented both the rumor information from the first condition and a non-partisan correction of that rumor, in the form of a description of the end-of-life provisions of the ACA and supporting quotes from the American Medical Association and the American Association of Retired Persons. The third and fourth conditions introduced explicitly partisan information. In the third "rumor and Republican correction" condition, the text from the

⁵⁹ The survey was administered online to a large national sample of 1,701 American adults between May 17 and May 19, 2010. The second wave of the survey was administered to 699 of the initial respondents from May 25 to May 29, 2010. The study was conducted by Survey Sampling International (SSI) of Shelton, CT. I did not employ quotas but asked SSI to construct a target population that matched the (18 and over) census population on education, gender, age, geography, and income. The resulting sample is not a probability sample, but is a diverse national sample.

“rumor and correction” condition was reproduced, but a quote debunking the rumor from Senator John Isakson (a Republican who helped draft the end-of-life provisions) was added to the end of the story. In the fourth “rumor and Democratic correction” condition, a separate quote containing the same information added to the end of the story was instead from Representative Earl Blumenauer (a Democrat who helped draft the provision).⁶⁰

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of five conditions (the four experimental treatments and the control). They were then asked a series of questions concerning the veracity of the death panel rumors (the “death panel” and “euthanasia” questions presented in Table 1, as well as their support for the health care plan.⁶¹

In addition, on the survey, I asked two questions that were designed to measure, in a general sense, how closely the respondents were attending to the instructions on the survey. Specifically I designed items to capture what Oppenheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko (2009) term an instructional manipulation check (IMC). IMC questions indirectly capture whether or not respondents are satisficing (Krosnick 1991) – simply hurrying through the questionnaire as fast as possible. An IMC is presented as a standard question but the instructions tell the respondent to ignore the question and instead perform a separate task in order to demonstrate that the respondent successfully read the instructions.⁶² Those who do not read the instructions carefully will simply answer the survey question that is asked. These items are described in greater detail in Berinsky, Margolis, and Sances (2011). Approximately two-thirds of respondents passed each of the screener questions and 55

⁶⁰ The treatment contained a typo, identifying Blumenauer’s home state as Georgia. Follow-up studies indicate that this typo did not change the basic pattern of the results of the experiment.

⁶¹ Specifically, they were asked, “Overall, given what you know about them, would you say you support or oppose the changes to the health care system that have been enacted by Congress and the Obama administration?”

⁶² For instance, one of the questions read, “We are interested in learning about your preferences on a variety of topics, including colors. To demonstrate that you’ve read this much, just go ahead and select both red and green among the alternatives below, no matter what your favorite color is. Yes, ignore the question below and select both of those options.” Then, on a new line, respondents were asked “What is your favorite color?” and given six response options. Only respondents who checked both “red” and “green” are scored as successes.

percent of the sample passed both questions. In the analyses that follow, I focus on this “attentive sample” (though I also present general results for the full sample).

Approximately one week after the initial survey I conducted a second wave of the experiment.⁶³ I recontacted only those respondents who passed both of the screener questions and interviewed 699 subjects – 41 percent of the initial sample. This reinterview sample was essentially identical to the initial attentive sample on measures of gender, education, party identification and political information. During the second wave, I asked again two types of items in an attempt to gauge how the experimental effects changed over time: (1) the rumor questions and (2) support for the health care plan.

In Table 9, I present the answers to the death panel and euthanasia rumors questions, by experimental condition. As the table demonstrates, the treatments had the intended effect. The differences among the conditions are highly significant in a statistical sense. Interestingly, for the death panel question, the control and rumor only conditions are very similar. This result might be an indication that the media and political environment in May 2010 essentially served to transmit the rumor – thus, the “rumor only condition” did not add any information to the respondents’ knowledge base. However, this is merely speculative, and the difference between those two conditions does not carry over to the euthanasia question. Conversely, the correction conditions all seem to be effective, increasing the rates of rumor rejection by 10 points over the control condition, largely by reducing the levels of “not sure” responses. Thus, the corrections seem to work by

⁶³ The reinterviews took place between six and 12 days after the initial interview. In the analyses that follow, I checked to see if the delay between the first and second wave had any effect on the size of the effect of the experimental treatments. I found no meaningful differences by interview date.

increasing rumor rejection rates through reducing the level of uncertainty surrounding the rumor.⁶⁴ However, there do not seem to be differences among the three correction conditions.

A very different picture emerges when we move to an examination of the attentive sample. As Table 10 demonstrates, the quote from the Democratic congressman (“rumor and Democratic correction” condition) produced the same level of rumor rejection as the nonpartisan correction (“rumor and correction” condition). However, among those respondents who paid close attention to question wordings, the Republican correction is by far the most effective treatment in increasing rates of rumor rejection. This result, it should be noted, is true for both Republican and Democratic identifiers, as Table 11 demonstrates.⁶⁵ Thus, information from an unexpected source – a Republican senator – was the most effective of any rhetorical strategy in increasing the rejection of this particular rumor about a policy proposed by a Democratic administration by the experimental subjects.⁶⁶ A simple elite cueing story alone cannot explain these results. After all, Democratic identifiers are more influenced by the Republican correction than by the Democratic correction.

⁶⁴ This finding that introducing new information increases rumor rejection rates by decreasing uncertainty rather than by reducing rumor acceptance rates finds parallels in a natural experiment from the political world. In April, 2011 Polimetrix/YouGov twice asked respondents if a series of statements about Obama were true or false. One of these statements was “Barack Obama was born in the United States.” On April 23, 55% said that statement was true, 15% said it was false, and 30% were not sure. On April 27, Obama released a paper copy of his Hawaii birth certificate. After this “treatment” of new information, aggregate beliefs about the Obama’s place of birth shifted significantly. In a poll conducted on April 30, 67% of respondents thought the place of birth statement was true, 13% thought it was false, and 20% were unsure. This effect does not appear to be a function of a change in the sample. The design of the survey allowed for several placebo tests. Most notably, the rejection of another false rumor about Obama that was unrelated to the new information – in particular “Barack Obama is a Muslim” – did not change over this time (see Appendix C). In addition, respondent evaluations of other characteristics of Obama did not change. Though this data did not come from a panel study and it is therefore impossible to trace individual-level beliefs over time, the results are highly suggestive. As in the lab, it appears that new information increased rejection rates by decreasing the pool of “not sure” respondents, not by converting the believers. This convergence in the pattern of the experimental and survey data therefore increases confidence in the overall results presented here.

⁶⁵ It should be noted that the patterns of rumor acceptance are somewhat different than this characterization but here, as elsewhere in this paper, I focus on patterns of rumor *rejection*.

⁶⁶ This finding is consistent with DiFonzo and Bordia’s review of rumor research which finds that rumor rebuttals are more effective when sources are perceived to be honest (see also Petrova et al. 2008). In thinking about a rumor correction as a persuasive message, the rebuttal by the Republican senator is the most credible, given the highly partisan nature of the debate surrounding health care reform. Additional work by Lewandowsky et al. (2009) finds that skepticism makes people less likely to disregard false information. Perhaps the Republican cue works best here because it most effectively reduces skepticism.

Rather, it is the informational content of the correction that matters; given the proper contextual information, even those people who are most prone to accept a rumor will come to reject it.⁶⁷

These effects extend from rejection of the rumor to support for health care (see Table 12). Though the effects are modest in size, presenting the rumor by itself decreases support for the plan relative to the control condition. Presenting the rumor in combination with a non-partisan correction or the Republican correction causes support to rebound, albeit modestly. But interestingly, introducing the Democratic correction creates a backlash, reducing support for the plan to its lowest level across any condition.⁶⁸

The direction and nature of the effects of the different experimental conditions is clear. However, these effects were all produced on items asked immediately after the treatments. In general, we know that over time, the effects of treatments may fade, especially in experiments dealing with ongoing controversies in the political world, as respondents encounter new information. In this case, however, we expect over-time changes of a different sort. Based on Schwarz's work concerning the fluency of information, we would expect that respondents who were presented both the rumor and the correction would be less likely to outright reject the rumor than were people who were given no information.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ This effect extends beyond health care. I ran a study in May 2010 using subjects on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (see Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2011 for a discussion of this platform and its advantages and disadvantages) where I extended a study conducted by Nyhan and Reifler (2010) on beliefs concerning WMD in Iraq. Specifically, I added a control group and a new partisan correction condition to Nyhan and Reifler's design (the original design had only a misinformation and a non-partisan correction condition). The partisan correction was similar to the health care Republican correction in that I supplemented the Nyhan and Reifler correction condition text with a quote from a Republican politician casting doubt on the notion that Iraq had WMD before the U.S. invaded in 2003. I found that this condition was effective in reducing misperceptions regarding WMD and also greatly attenuated the ideological backlash effect found by Nyhan and Reifler.

⁶⁸ Interestingly, this backlash effect does not occur among Republicans – probably because support for the reform plan is so low across all conditions. The backlash occurs among Democrats but is strongest among respondents who do not identify with either party.

⁶⁹ There is here the additional concern that respondents will encounter additional information about the rumors outside of the experimental setting between the waves. Because respondents are randomly assigned to experimental condition, this information, on average, should pose no threat to the internal validity of the experiment. However, if the same

As Table 13 shows, there is some evidence of a backlash effect. Here I compare the responses on the on the euthanasia rumor question across the two waves for that subset of respondents who were interviewed in both waves (the results for the death panel question are very similar). As expected, the respondents in the “rumor only” condition held steady in their beliefs. However, the effectiveness of the corrections faded across the board during the week between the waves of the survey, largely because the rates of “not sure” responses increased.. The differences among the experimental conditions were no longer significant. The Republican correction remained the most effective treatment, but the rates of rumor rejection decreased by about 10 percent relative to the first wave. Furthermore, the rates of rumor rejection for both the “rumor and nonpartisan correction” and “rumor and Democratic correction” conditions were now lower than the control condition (though still above the “rumor only” condition). Finally, these effects extended beyond simple rumor rejection to support for health care. As Table 14 shows, respondents who were exposed to the rumor, either alone or in combination with the nonpartisan correction, remained less supportive than people who received no information. In addition, though the differences are quite small, and the evidence is suggestive at best, the levels of support for health care reform in the control and rumor only conditions increased in the second wave, while support in all three correction conditions decreased.

Study 2

The next two studies held the partisan content of the rumor correction constant at its most effective level – the Republican correction of the rumor – in an attempt to more directly explore the effect of information fluency. In July 2010, I ran a second study attached to the Polimetrix/YouGov study discussed above. The primary purpose of this experiment was to directly test the expectations

information about the veracity of death panels has a different effect for subjects in different conditions, such information could threaten the inferences I would like to make about the effectiveness of my treatments.

regarding the effectiveness of different corrective strategies in light of the theories regarding the fluency of rumors.⁷⁰

The subject of these experiments was again rumors concerning Obama’s health plan. I again randomized the presentation of treatments that consisted of (constructed) news stories about health care reform. I had three different experimental conditions (along with a control condition, where the subjects received no news story). The stories in these treatments were modeled on the stories used in the May 2010 experiment and are presented in Appendix C. The first “rumor” condition was identical to the rumor condition in the May study. The second “correction only” condition did not mention the rumors concerning the death panel, but only described the actual provisions in the 2010 ACA and contained the Republican correction in the form of the Issacson quote from the May study explaining the end of life provisions.⁷¹ The third “rumor and correction” was identical to the “rumor and Republican correction” condition from the May study and presented both the rumor information from the first condition and the correction from the second condition. Unlike Study 1, I did not employ the screener IMC items.

In addition to the corrective strategy treatment, I had a two condition timing treatment that varied when the rumor and policy support questions were asked. Excluding the control condition (where respondents were asked the questions as part of the initial survey), half the respondents answered the questions immediately following the experimental treatments, and the other half were not asked the questions during the first survey, but were recontacted several days after the

⁷⁰ As part of this study, I ran a second set of experiments involving questions of Obama’s citizenship. The experimental treatments were similar in nature to the health care treatments discussed here and the experimental design was the same. However, the overall effect of the treatments was quite small, perhaps because the Obama citizenship rumors have been widely discussed in the media. I did, however, run a study on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk in early 2010 where I find strong treatment effects to those in the death panel experiment reported here. For the purposes of space, I do not present these results in this paper.

⁷¹ The correction only condition was not entirely clean because it did mention the death panel rumor in passing. Specifically, the Issacson quote stated, “someone said Sarah Palin's web site had talked about the House bill having death panels on it where people would be euthanized. How someone could take an end of life directive or a living will as that is nuts.” The Fall 2010 study, described below, is a cleaner implementation of the “correction only” design.

experiment and given the rumor and policy items. I introduced the timing condition to directly test the expectations regarding fluency from the Schwarz work; my hypothesis was that respondents in the rumor and correction condition would be less likely than respondents in the correction only condition to reject the rumor and this gap would grow over time.

In Table 15, I present the mean euthanasia rumor rejection scores, by experimental condition.⁷² I use the seven-point rumor scales described above, but obtain similar results if I use only the first branch of the question (agree/disagree/not sure). As with Experiment 1, the treatment had the expected effect, though the differences among the conditions are not statistically significant. As expected, the “correction only” condition yielded the highest level of rumor rejection. Moreover, the “rumor only” and “rumor and correction” conditions yield very similar levels of rumor rejection. Replicating Schwarz’s counterintuitive findings, directly contradicting the rumor head-on is a less effective strategy than simply stating the truth. However, contrary to my expectations, the rates of rumor rejection in the “rumor and correction” condition did not fall over time (at least not for the full sample).

As was the case with Experiment 1, there is suggestive evidence that the effects of the treatment extended from rejection of the rumor to support for health care (see Table 16). Though the effects are modest in size and statistically insignificant, presenting the rumor only decreases support for the plan relative to the control condition. Presenting the correction alone yields the highest level of support for the plan, and these effects persist over time. The performance of the “rumor and correction” treatment is, however, a bit puzzling. In the immediate post-test condition, support is the lowest. In the delayed post-test, support for the proposal reaches the same level as the correction only condition. Given the substantive and statistical weakness of these results, it is

⁷² I also asked the death panel question and obtained very similar results. These results are available upon request.

important not to make too much of them, but the findings in the full sample do not meet my expectations.

The pattern looks a little clearer, however, if I disaggregate the results by partisanship. As noted above, the rates of rumor rejection differ greatly by the respondents' partisan predilections.⁷³ Research on motivated reasoning suggests that partisans' processing of new information should differ as well. In Experiment 1, I found that the differences between the treatments trended in the same direction for both parties, but were stronger for Republican identifiers. Here, the pattern appears somewhat more distinct.

In Table 17, I examine the effect of the experimental treatments on rumor rejection for Democrats and Republicans separately.⁷⁴ While there is a large gap in average rumor rejection levels for Democrats and Republicans, it appears that the treatments worked in similar ways for both groups when rumor rejection was measured immediately after the treatment; rumor rejection levels are highest in the "correction only" condition and, as expected, pairing the rumor and the correction reduces the power of the correction, bringing it closer to the value in the "rumor only" condition. However, there are some important differences between the identifiers of the two parties. The presentation of information about the rumors has little overall effect on the willingness of Democratic identifiers to reject rumors about the ACA. This result is not surprising; Democrats in general are not likely to believe rumors about President Obama and his policies. Among Republicans, however, the treatments have a large effect on rumor rejection levels. Immediately after the presentation of the treatment, the difference between the "rumor" only and the "correction

⁷³ Recent work has examined the proper way to identify causal effects in the presence of mediating variables (Imai, Keele, Tingley and Yamamoto 2011). These authors warn that it is a mistake to assess mediators in the situation where the experimenter does not have control over the values of the mediating variable. Given the power and stickiness of partisan attachments, it is implausible that the experimental treatment would alter the partisanship of my respondents. I therefore argue that it is acceptable practice to look for differential effects by partisanship.

⁷⁴ Following convention, I group partisan leaners with strong and weak partisans.

only” conditions is over a full point on the seven-point scale. These differences are even larger in the delayed post-test condition. Furthermore, though the sample is small and we should be cautious about drawing conclusions, the rates of rumor acceptance in the “rumor and correction” condition did increase over time, approaching the levels in the “rumor only” condition. The results regarding support for health care reform, however, remain ambiguous (see Table 18).

Study 3

My third experiment was fielded as a module in the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. The primary purpose of this experiment was to more directly test expectations regarding the fluency of rumors.

The subject of these experiments was again rumors concerning Obama’s health plan. I used a slightly modified version of the three experimental treatments used in Experiment 2, removing from one of the quotes a reference to statements made by Sarah Palin.⁷⁵ These stories are presented in Appendix D. Subjects were randomly assigned to a “rumor” condition, a “correction” condition, or a “rumor and correction” condition. There was no control group in this experiment. I therefore compare the effects of the different conditions to each other. However, based on the results of Study 1 and Study 2, we have a good sense of the power of the treatments relative to the baseline, so there is much we can learn from an inter-treatment comparison of rumor rejection levels.⁷⁶

In addition to the corrective strategy treatment, I designed a two condition “rehearsal treatment” to directly test the expectations regarding fluency from the Schwarz work. Respondents who received the rumor information – either alone or in combination with the correction – were

⁷⁵ Previously, the Issacson quote stated, “someone said Sarah Palin's web site had talked about the House bill having death panels on it where people would be euthanized. How someone could take an end of life directive or a living will as that is nuts.” The new quote states, “Speaking about the end of life provisions, Senator Isacson has said, “It's voluntary. Every state in America has an end of life directive or durable power of attorney provision.”

⁷⁶ I reran a limited version of this study with a control group from May to July 2011. The effects of the treatment were similar to those found here, while the difference between the control and treatment groups was in line with those found in earlier experiments.

asked one of two types of recall questions after the story. The stated purpose of the task was to test what they could recall from the story, but the true purpose was to see whether rehearsing the rumors would increase the power of these rumors. Half of the respondents were assigned to a “short recall” condition, where they were asked a single recall question, a multiple choice question asking what office was held by Betsy McCaughey (who was quoted in the story). The other half of respondents were placed in a “long recall” condition where they received this question and two more that asked them to identify the speaker of a particular quote that repeated the content of the rumor. For instance, respondents were asked who said, “You have every right to fear... [You] should not have a government-run plan to decide when to pull the plug on Grandma.” The exact text of these questions is presented in Appendix C. It is important to note that these questions conveyed no information about the veracity of the statements in the quote; I merely asked the respondents to identify the source of the quote.

I was not interested in the answers they gave to these questions per se; the simple task of answering the recall questions ensured that they would again read the incorrect information concerning the 2010 ACA. Doing so should increase the fluency of the rumors. Based on Schwarz’s work, my expectation is that this increased level of fluency would decrease rumor rejection levels, regardless of whether the rumor was paired with the correction.

The experiment was implemented in a panel study. I was therefore able to explore the effect of my treatment on rumor rejection levels over time. Respondents were interviewed first in October, and then again in November. I asked the rumor belief questions in both waves. I also asked about support for health care reform in the first wave.

In Table 19, I present the effects of the rumor information treatment on rumor rejection levels (setting aside the recall treatments for the moment). For both the death panel and euthanasia questions, the correction conditions – whether in combination with the rumor or alone – led

respondents to reject the rumors at higher rates than in the rumor-only condition. Contrary to my expectations, and at odds with the results from Study 2, the pairing of the rumor with the correction was a more effective strategy than simply presenting the rumor on its own, though the differences between these two conditions are not statistically significant.

However Tables 20 and 21 demonstrate that, by the second wave, the gap between the “rumor only” and “rumor and correction” conditions had diminished (though, again, the differences are not statistically significant). Interestingly, and in line with the results from Study 1, with the passage of time the effectiveness of the correction relative to the rumor on the euthanasia question diminished, and the differences among all three conditions are no longer statistically significant.⁷⁷

As with my previous studies, the effect of the treatments extended from rejection of the death panel and euthanasia rumors to general support for health care (see Table 22). Specifically, the effect of the “correction only” and the “rumor and correction” conditions were the same, but support for the 2010 ACA in both of these conditions was significantly higher than in the rumor only condition – in both a statistical and a substantive sense.

I next sought to see if the rehearsal treatment had the intended effect. The results of the effect of rumor rehearsal on rumor acceptance for both the death panel and euthanasia rumors are presented in Table 23. In order to make the results as clear as possible, I describe in detail the death panel results, presented in the top panel of Table 23. This panel contains 4 columns of data. The first two columns pertain to the results among those respondents assigned to the “rumor only” story treatment. The first column presents the distribution of the death panel rumor rejection question among subjects who were assigned to the “short recall” version of the rehearsal treatment. These respondents were only presented the McCaughey office identification question. The next column presents the distribution of the death panel rumor rejection question among those who were

⁷⁷ In Study 1, though, the delay between the two waves was considerably shorter.

assigned to the “long recall” version of the rehearsal treatment. In addition to the McCaughey question, these respondents were given the two death panel quote identification questions. My expectation was that respondents in this condition would be more likely to accept the rumor because they have rehearsed the content of the rumor. The next two columns of the table repeat this presentation for respondents in the “rumor and correction” story condition. Since respondents in the “correction only” condition all received a single recall question unrelated to the rumor, the data from those respondents are omitted from the table.

Recall that the treatment was designed to decrease rumor rejection rates (by increasing the fluency of the rumor). Table 23 demonstrates that, as expected, simply rehearsing the rumor by answering the recall questions increased the power of the treatment across both questions. The increased repetition of the rumor – in the absence of any information about its veracity – was sufficient to decrease rumor rejection rates, even when the rumor was initially presented in combination with a powerful correction. The effect was larger in the long recall condition than the short recall condition for both respondents in the rumor only and the rumor and correction condition (though the differences are statistically significant only in the “rumor only” condition). Table 24 shows that the effect of the rehearsal treatment carries over from beliefs about rumor to health care reform opinion (albeit at smaller levels).

Tables 25 and 26 demonstrate that this rehearsal effect persists over time. Though the differences in the rumor rejection rates between the “short recall” and “long recall” conditions diminish over time for the death panel question, they continue to exist in the expected direction.⁷⁸ Moreover, the differences on the euthanasia question remain large. Thus, it appears that, in line with the expectations from Schwarz’s work, merely increasing the fluency of a rumor increases its

⁷⁸ It should be noted that this difference exists because the rumor rejection rates for the “short recall” condition diminish over time.

effectiveness. This result is especially important because the long recall condition represents the volume with which rumors are repeated and magnified in today's media environment.

Future Work

In future experimental work, I plan to run studies focusing on constructed rumors – rumors that I create myself. I began my study with real rumors to draw from the contemporary political landscape to demonstrate the political relevance of my project, but working with real-world rumors greatly limits my ability to manipulate information available to my subjects. In essence, I am hampered by what my subjects already bring to the table. In many ways, it is surprising that I can find any effects at all in my death panel experiments, given that I am dealing with a well-established rumor and about Obama's biggest policy initiative – one that taps into people's feelings both about Obama and about the “government's role” in the everyday affairs of its citizens. Having demonstrated the manipulability of information with even well-discussed real-world rumors relating to prominent political figures, I want to move to an arena with greater flexibility.

**TABLE 1:
RESPONSES TO RUMOR QUESTIONS, JULY 2010**

Question	Yes	No	Not Sure
Do you believe that Barack Obama was born in the United States of America? [reversed item]	55%	27%	19%
Do you think the changes to the health care system that have been enacted by Congress and the Obama administration creates “death panels” which have the authority to determine whether or not a gravely ill or injured person should receive health care based on their “level of productivity in society”?	33%	46%	22%
Do you think the changes to the health care system that have been enacted by Congress and the Obama administration require elderly patients to meet with government officials to discuss “end of life” options including euthanasia?	26%	26%	28%
Do you think that Senator John Kerry lied about his actions during the Vietnam war in order to receive medals from the U.S. Army?	35%	34%	31%
Do you think the FBI and the CIA make sure that there is a steady supply of guns and drugs in the inner city?	15%	63%	22%
Do you think that people in the federal government either assisted in the 9/11 attacks or took no action to stop the attacks because they wanted the United States to go to war in the Middle East?	18%	64%	18%
Do you believe that a spacecraft from another planet crashed in Roswell, New Mexico in 1947?	22%	45%	33%

Note: The distribution of the Obama citizenship question is different than the other questions in the table because it was asked on a reversed scale

**TABLE 2:
RESPONSES TO RUMOR QUESTIONS, OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2010**

Question	Wave1, October 2010			Wave 2, November 2010		
	Yes	No	Not Sure	Yes	No	Not Sure
Do you believe that Barack Obama was born in the United States of America? [reversed item]	53%	28%	20%	53%	27%	21%
Do you think that Senator John Kerry lied about his actions during the Vietnam war in order to receive medals from the U.S. Army?	-	-	-	25%	28%	47%
Do you think that people in the federal government, such as George Bush and Dick Cheney, either assisted in the 9/11 attacks or took no action to stop the attacks because they wanted the United States to go to war in the Middle East?	22%	59%	19%	-	-	-
Do you think the Republicans stole the 2004 presidential election through voter fraud in Ohio?	23%	44%	32%	23%	47%	30%
Do you believe that the United States government provides illegal immigrants with special benefits, such as houses, cars, or tax breaks?	50%	34%	16%	-	-	-
Do you think that illegal immigrants are the primary carriers of diseases such as AIDS, leprosy, and swine flu into the United States?	19%	62%	19%	22%	57%	21%
Do you believe that a spacecraft from another planet crashed in Roswell, New Mexico in 1947?	17%	47%	37%	-	-	-

Note: The distribution of the Obama citizenship question is different than the other questions in the table because it was asked on a reversed scale

TABLE 3:
BELIEF STABILITY IN RUMOR QUESTIONS, OCTOBER –NOVEMBER 2010

Obama Citizen?

October	November		
	Yes	No	Not Sure
Yes	48%	1%	4%
No	1	23	3
Not Sure	4	3	14

Republicans Steal Ohio in 2004?

October	November		
	Yes	No	Not Sure
Yes	18%	2%	3%
No	2	38	4
Not Sure	3	8	24

Immigrants Carry Disease?

October	November		
	Yes	No	Not Sure
Yes	16%	2%	2%
No	4	51	8
Not Sure	3	5	11

TABLE 4.
CORRELATIONS AMONG 7-POINT BELIEF SCALES

	Obama	Kerry	Death Panel	Euthanasia	War	FBI
Kerry	.52**					
Death Panel	.63**	.62**				
Euthanasia	.49**	.55**	.66**			
War	-.11**	-.13**	-.14**	-.05		
FBI	-.01	-.02	-.07*	-.02	.49**	
Roswell	.10**	.03	.07**	.07*	.21**	.18**

* = $p < .10$; ** = $p < .05$

TABLE 5:
LIST EXPERIMENT RESULTS, JANUARY 2012

	Mean Baseline List	Mean Treatment List	List Estimate	Direct Form Estimate	Difference (Direct-List)
Full Sample	2.05 (0.02) (N=1794)	2.24 (0.02) (N=1757)	18.5 (2.6)**	27.1 (0.01) (N=1345)	8.6

Numbers in parentheses are the standard errors of the estimates

** = $p < .05$

TABLE 6
LIST EXPERIMENT SUBGROUP RESULTS, JANUARY 2012

	Mean Baseline List	Mean Treatment List	List Estimate	Direct Form Estimate	Difference (Direct-List)
Democrats	2.09 (0.02) (N=930)	2.14 (0.03) (N=913)	4.2 (3.3)	12.6 (1.2) (N=720)	8.4
Independents	1.76 (0.10) (N=46)	1.90 (0.14) (N=46)	13.4 (17.0)	38.3 (8.4) (N=34)	24.9
Republicans	2.02 (0.02) (N=818)	2.40 (0.03) (N=798)	37.3 (4.0)**	44.0 (1.2) (N=591)	6.7
Voted for Obama	2.12 (0.02) (N=718)	2.12 (0.03) (N=713)	-0.1 (4.5)	8.8 (1.3) (N=511)	8.9
Voted for McCain	2.05 (0.02) (N=595)	2.46 (0.04) (N=579)	40.1 (4.5)**	47.9 (2.5) (N=413)	7.8
Did Not Vote	1.99 (0.04) (N=223)	2.24 (0.06) (N=219)	25.1 (7.1)**	33.1 (3.4) (N=198)	8.0
Liberal	2.17 (0.03) (N=485)	2.15 (0.03) (N=476)	-0.1 (4.4)	12.3 (1.8) (N=349)	12.4
Moderate	2.03 (0.03) (N=601)	2.20 (0.04) (N=602)	17.2 (4.8)**	25.6 (1.9) (N=496)	8.4
Conservative	2.00 (0.02) (N=704)	2.35 (0.03) (N=675)	35.2 (3.9)**	38.5 (2.2) (N=496)	3.3

Numbers in parentheses are the standard errors of the estimates

** = $p < .05$

**TABLE 7:
EFFECT OF INCLUSION OF “NOT SURE” OPTION ON RESPONSE DISTRIBUTION,
JANUARY 2012**

Full Sample

	Direct with Uncertainty	Direct with Uncertainty; “Not Sure”s Removed	Direct without Uncertainty
True	21	29	27
False	52	71	73
Not Sure	27	--	--

Republicans Only

	Direct with Uncertainty	Direct with Uncertainty; “Not Sure”s Removed	Direct without Uncertainty
True	37	56	44
False	29	44	56
Not Sure	35	--	--

**TABLE 8:
EXCLUSION EXPERIMENT, JANUARY 2012**

Short Introduction

	True	False	Not Sure
Ohio voter fraud	21	45	34
9/11 conspiracy	14	66	20
Palin foreign born	4	81	15
Obama Muslim	20	55	25
Obama foreign born	17	58	24
UFO	17	42	41

Subtraction Effect Version

	True	False	Not Sure
Ohio voter fraud	17	53	30
9/11 conspiracy	14	69	17
Palin foreign born	6	77	17
Obama Muslim	19	55	26
Obama foreign born	17	60	24
UFO	19	43	38

TABLE 9:
EFFECT OF TREATMENTS ON HEALTH CARE RUMOR BELIEF, MAY 2010

Death Panel

	Control	Rumor Only	Rumor+ Correction	Rumor+ Republican Correction	Rumor+ Democratic Correction
Accept Rumor	24	24	17	20	17
Reject Rumor	43	46	54	56	55
Not Sure	34	30	29	25	28

N=1,593; $\chi^2(8)=21.20$ Pr=0.01

Euthanasia

	Control	Rumor Only	Rumor+ Correction	Rumor+ Republican Correction	Rumor+ Democratic Correction
Accept Rumor	17	20	19	19	20
Reject Rumor	50	45	57	58	54
Not Sure	33	35	25	24	26

N=1,596; $\chi^2(8)=19.24$ Pr=0.01

TABLE 10:
EFFECT OF TREATMENTS ON HEALTH CARE RUMOR BELIEF, MAY 2010
(ATTENTIVE SAMPLE)

Death Panel

	Control	Rumor Only	Rumor+ Correction	Rumor+ Republican Correction	Rumor+ Democratic Correction
Accept Rumor	21	21	16	14	18
Reject Rumor	47	46	57	63	56
Not Sure	33	34	28	22	26

N=874; $\chi^2(8)=15.54$ Pr=0.05

Euthanasia

	Control	Rumor Only	Rumor+ Correction	Rumor+ Republican Correction	Rumor+ Democratic Correction
Accept Rumor	12	17	14	15	17
Reject Rumor	57	46	60	69	60
Not Sure	31	36	26	16	24

N=876; $\chi^2(8)=23.95$ Pr=0.002

TABLE 11:
EFFECT OF TREATMENTS ON EUTHANASIA RUMOR BELIEF BY PARTISANSHIP,
MAY 2010
(ATTENTIVE SAMPLE)

Democrats

	Control	Rumor Only	Rumor+ Correction	Rumor+ Republican Correction	Rumor+ Democratic Correction
Accept Rumor	5	5	7	3	10
Reject Rumor	68	67	68	85	78
Not Sure	28	28	25	13	12

N=367; $\chi^2(8)=14.42$ Pr=0.07

Republicans

	Control	Rumor Only	Rumor+ Correction	Rumor+ Republican Correction	Rumor+ Democratic Correction
Accept Rumor	22	33	28	27	19
Reject Rumor	50	25	39	61	49
Not Sure	28	42	33	12	32

N=334; $\chi^2(8)=24.32$ Pr=0.002

TABLE 12:
EFFECT OF TREATMENTS ON HEALTH CARE POLICY OPINION, MAY 2010
(ATTENTIVE SAMPLE)

	Control	Rumor Only	Rumor+ Correction	Rumor+ Republican Correction	Rumor+ Democratic Correction
Support	51	42	46	48	37
Oppose	49	58	54	52	63

N=876; $\chi^2(4)=9.00$ Pr=0.06

TABLE 13:
EFFECT OF TREATMENTS ON EUTHANASIA RUMOR BELIEF OVER TIME, MAY
2010

Wave 1

	Control	Rumor Only	Rumor+ Correction	Rumor+ Republican Correction	Rumor+ Democratic Correction
Accept Rumor	13	18	13	15	18
Reject Rumor	58	43	58	68	61
Not Sure	59	38	29	18	21

N=696; $\chi^2(8)=23.2$ Pr=0.03

Wave 2

	Control	Rumor Only	Rumor+ Correction	Rumor+ Republican Correction	Rumor+ Democratic Correction
Accept Rumor	12	18	15	16	21
Reject Rumor	57	43	51	58	53
Not Sure	31	38	34	26	25

N=696; $\chi^2(8)=12.2$ Pr=0.14

TABLE 14:
EFFECT OF TREATMENTS ON HEALTH CARE POLICY OPINION OVER TIME, MAY
2010

Wave 1

	Control	Rumor Only	Rumor+ Correction	Rumor+ Republican Correction	Rumor+ Democratic Correction
Support	52	38	43	49	39
Oppose	48	62	57	51	61

N=696; $\chi^2(4)=9.03$ Pr=0.06

Wave 1

	Control	Rumor Only	Rumor+ Correction	Rumor+ Republican Correction	Rumor+ Democratic Correction
Support	54	40	41	46	38
Oppose	46	60	59	54	62

N=696; $\chi^2(4)=9.12$ Pr=0.06

TABLE 15:
EFFECT OF TREATMENTS ON EUTHANASIA RUMOR REJECTION, JULY 2010

Immediate Post Test

	Mean	SE
Control	4.56	(0.08)
Rumor Only	4.37	(0.20)
Correction Only	5.04	(0.18)
Rumor + Correction	4.47	(0.20)

Delayed Post Test

	Mean	SE
Control	-	-
Rumor Only	4.32	(0.19)
Correction Only	5.07	(0.18)
Rumor + Correction	4.54	(0.21)

Note: Scale is from 1-7, where 1 is strong acceptance and 7 is strong rejection

TABLE 16:
EFFECT OF TREATMENTS ON HEALTH CARE POLICY OPINION, JULY 2010

Immediate Post Test

	Mean	SE
Control	0.43	(0.01)
Rumor Only	0.40	(0.03)
Correction Only	0.47	(0.03)
Rumor + Correction	0.38	(0.03)

Delayed Post Test

	Mean	SE
Control	-	-
Rumor Only	0.41	(0.03)
Correction Only	0.47	(0.03)
Rumor + Correction	0.47	(0.03)

Note: Scale is from 0-1, where 0 is strong opposition and 1 is strong support

TABLE 17:
EFFECT OF TREATMENTS ON EUTHANASIA RUMOR REJECTION BY
PARTISANSHIP, JULY 2010

Immediate Post Test

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Mean	SE	Mean	SE
Control	5.71	(0.10)	3.40	(0.13)
Rumor Only	5.55	(0.22)	3.03	(0.30)
Correction Only	5.85	(0.23)	4.17	(0.29)
Rumor + Correction	5.77	(0.24)	3.34	(0.31)

Delayed Post Test

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Mean	SE	Mean	SE
Control	-	-	-	-
Rumor Only	5.55	(0.23)	2.81	(0.26)
Correction Only	5.98	(0.21)	4.00	(0.30)
Rumor + Correction	5.78	(0.24)	2.83	(0.32)

Note: Scale is from 1-7, where 1 is strong acceptance and 7 is strong rejection

TABLE 18:
EFFECT OF TREATMENTS ON HEALTH CARE POLICY OPINION BY PARTISANSHIP,
JULY 2010

Immediate Post Test

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Mean	SE	Mean	SE
Control	0.74	(0.01)	0.11	(0.01)
Rumor Only	0.70	(0.03)	0.09	(0.03)
Correction Only	0.77	(0.03)	0.10	(0.03)
Rumor + Correction	0.72	(0.03)	0.06	(0.03)

Delayed Post Test

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Mean	SE	Mean	SE
Control	-	-	-	-
Rumor Only	0.69	(0.04)	0.06	(0.02)
Correction Only	0.79	(0.03)	0.10	(0.03)
Rumor + Correction	0.71	(0.04)	0.13	(0.04)

Note: Scale is from 0-1, where 0 is strong opposition and 1 is strong support

TABLE 19:
EFFECT OF TREATMENTS ON RUMOR BELIEF, OCTOBER 2010

Death Panel

	Rumor Only	Correction Only	Rumor+ Correction
Accept Rumor	35	28	23
Reject Rumor	45	52	55
Not Sure	20	20	22

N=1000; $\chi^2(4)=13.56$ Pr=0.01

Euthanasia

	Rumor Only	Correction Only	Rumor+ Correction
Accept Rumor	29	23	20
Reject Rumor	48	54	60
Not Sure	23	23	20

N=1000; $\chi^2(4)=12.23$ Pr=0.02

TABLE 20:
EFFECT OF TREATMENTS ON DEATH PANEL RUMOR BELIEF OVER TIME,
OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2010

Wave 1

	Rumor Only	Correction Only	Rumor+ Correction
Accept Rumor	33	27	22
Reject Rumor	47	53	58
Not Sure	20	20	20

N=837; $\chi^2(4)=8.56$ Pr=0.07

Wave 2

	Rumor Only	Correction Only	Rumor+ Correction
Accept Rumor	35	30	27
Reject Rumor	44	54	54
Not Sure	21	17	19

N=834; $\chi^2(4)=8.52$ Pr=0.07

TABLE 21:
EFFECT OF TREATMENTS ON EUTHANASIA RUMOR BELIEF OVER TIME,
OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2010

Wave 1

	Rumor Only	Correction Only	Rumor+ Correction
Accept Rumor	27	24	19
Reject Rumor	48	55	63
Not Sure	25	21	18

N=837; $\chi^2(4)=14.22$ Pr=0.01

Wave 2

	Rumor Only	Correction Only	Rumor+ Correction
Accept Rumor	26	26	23
Reject Rumor	47	53	55
Not Sure	27	21	22

N=834; $\chi^2(4)=5.03$ Pr=0.28

TABLE 22:
EFFECT OF TREATMENTS ON HEALTH CARE REFORM OPINION, OCTOBER 2010

	Rumor Only	Correction Only	Rumor+ Correction
Support	35	48	48
Oppose	65	52	52

N=999; $\chi^2(4)=14.08$ Pr=0.00

TABLE 23:
EFFECT OF RUMOR REHEARSAL ON RUMOR BELIEF, OCTOBER 2010

Death Panel

	<i>Rumor Only</i>		<i>Rumor + Correction</i>	
	Short Recall	Long Recall	Short Recall	Long Recall
Accept Rumor	33	38	21	24
Reject Rumor	50	39	59	52
Not Sure	17	23	30	24

Euthanasia

	<i>Rumor Only</i>		<i>Rumor + Correction</i>	
	Short Recall	Long Recall	Short Recall	Long Recall
Accept Rumor	26	32	18	21
Reject Rumor	54	42	62	58
Not Sure	20	26	19	21

TABLE 24:
EFFECT OF RUMOR REHEARSAL ON HEALTH CARE REFORM OPINION, OCTOBER
2010

	<i>Rumor Only</i>		<i>Rumor + Correction</i>	
	Short Recall	Long Recall	Short Recall	Long Recall
Support	39	32	49	46
Oppose	61	68	51	54

TABLE 25:
EFFECT OF RUMOR REHEARSAL ON EUTHANASIA RUMOR BELIEF OVER TIME,
OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2010

Wave 1

	<i>Rumor Only</i>		<i>Rumor + Correction</i>	
	Short Recall	Long Recall	Short Recall	Long Recall
Accept Rumor	25	30	18	19
Reject Rumor	54	41	65	61
Not Sure	21	29	17	19

Wave 2

	<i>Rumor Only</i>		<i>Rumor + Correction</i>	
	Short Recall	Long Recall	Short Recall	Long Recall
Accept Rumor	25	28	21	24
Reject Rumor	52	41	60	50
Not Sure	23	31	19	25

TABLE 26:
EFFECT OF RUMOR REHEARSAL ON DEATH PANEL RUMOR BELIEF OVER TIME,
OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2010

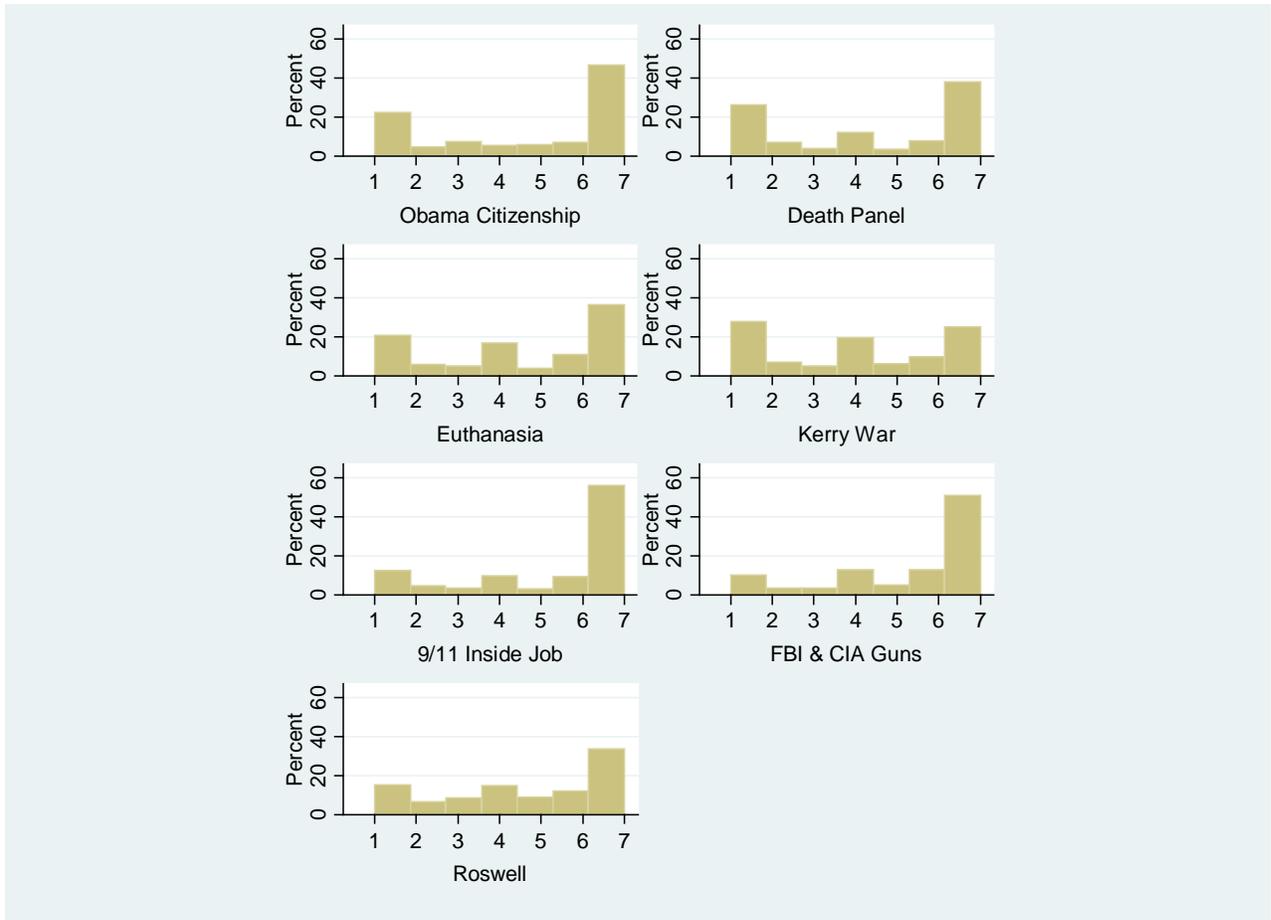
Wave 1

	<i>Rumor Only</i>		<i>Rumor + Correction</i>	
	Short Recall	Long Recall	Short Recall	Long Recall
Accept Rumor	30	36	19	26
Reject Rumor	54	41	61	54
Not Sure	17	23	19	21

Wave 2

	<i>Rumor Only</i>		<i>Rumor + Correction</i>	
	Short Recall	Long Recall	Short Recall	Long Recall
Accept Rumor	30	40	26	28
Reject Rumor	46	41	56	54
Not Sure	24	19	19	18

**FIGURE 1:
RUMOR QUESTION DISTRIBUTION**



Note: High scores are rejection of rumor

**FIGURE 2:
DISTRIBUTION OF BELIEFS ON RUMOR QUESTIONS**

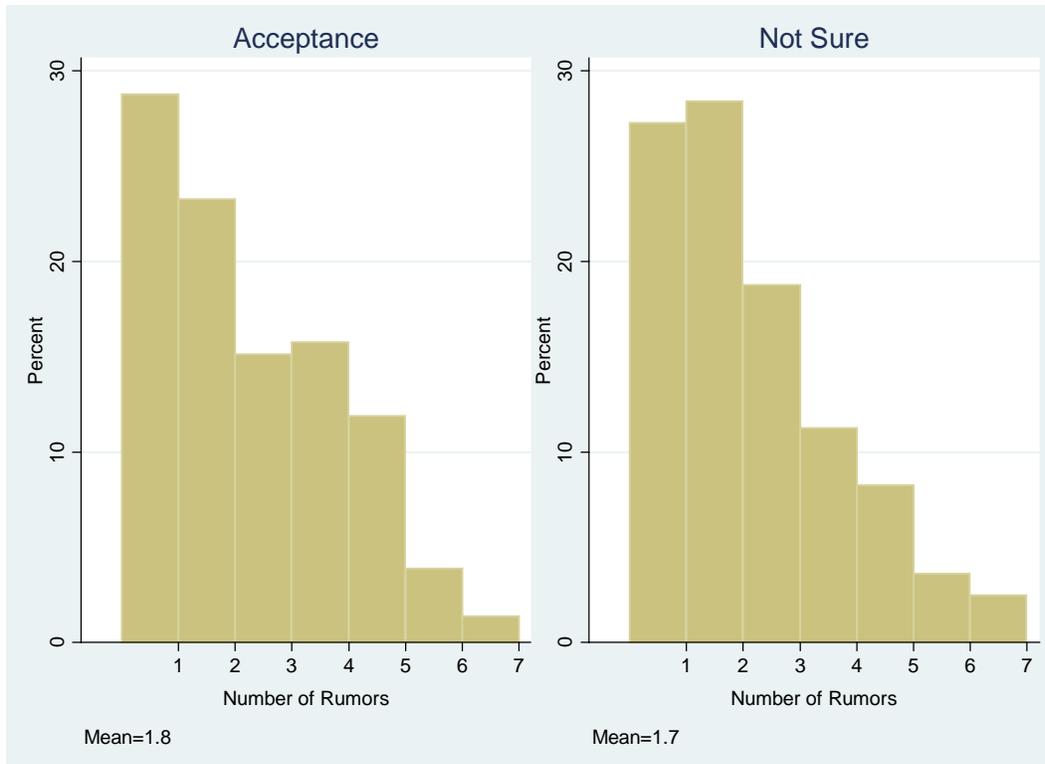


FIGURE 3: REGRESSION RESULTS

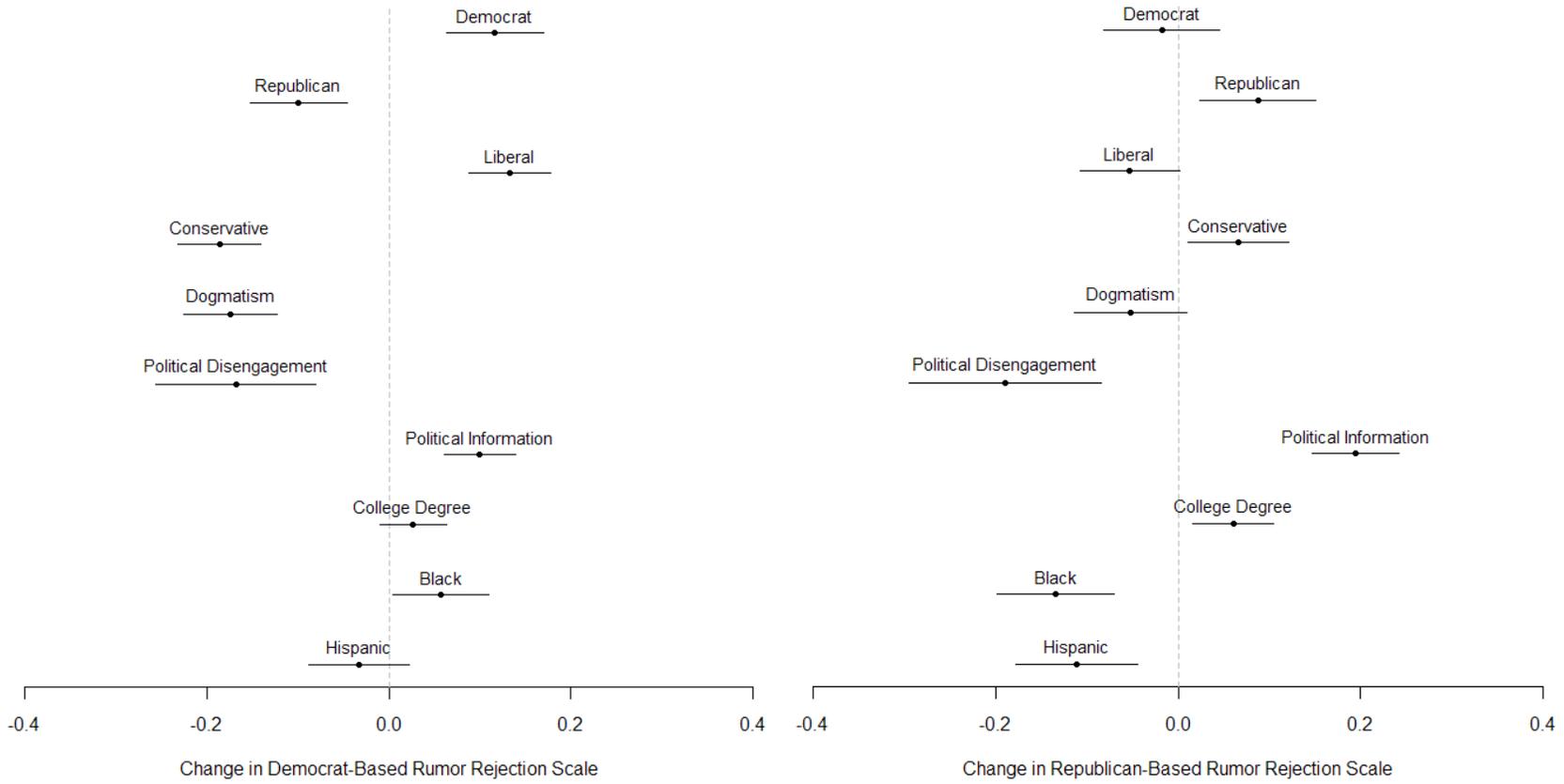
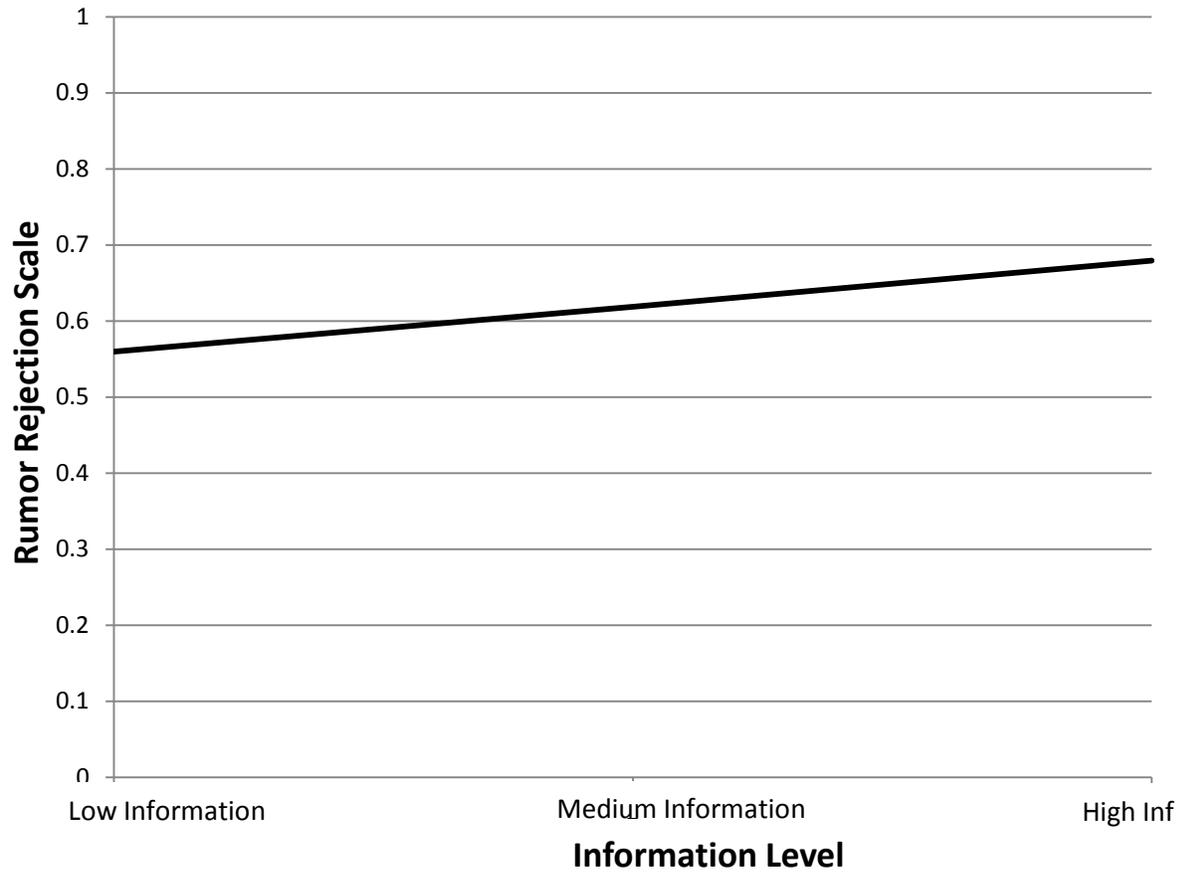
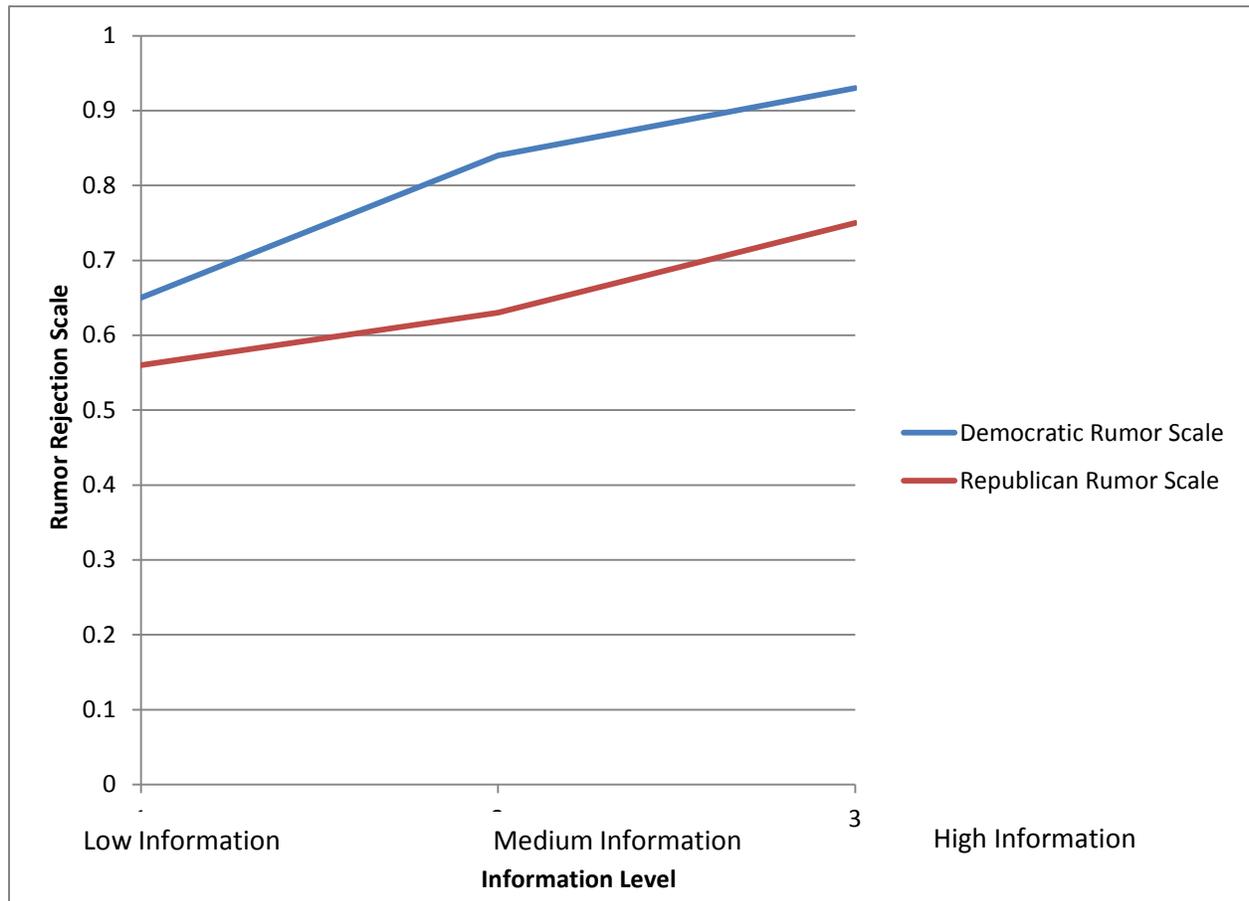


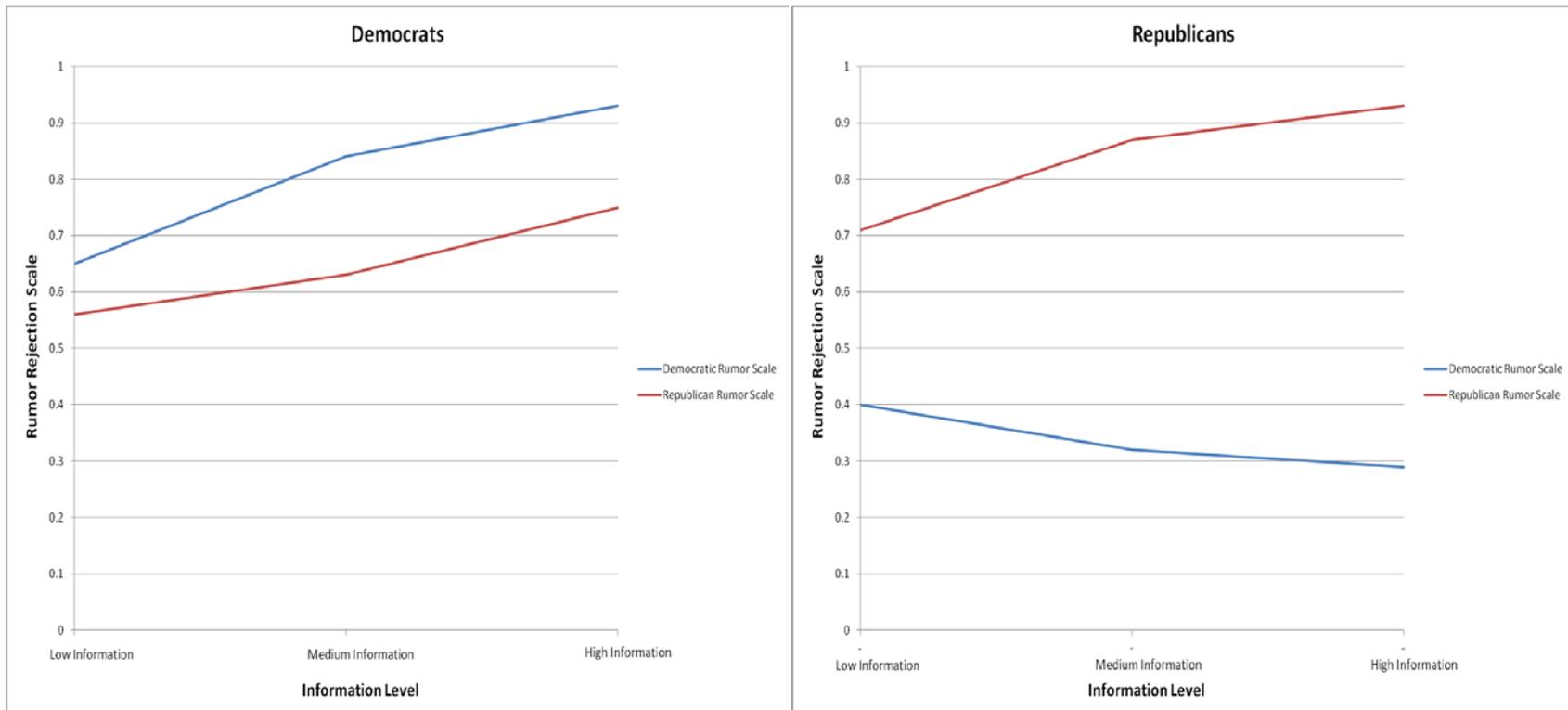
FIGURE 4:
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL INFORMATION AND RUMOR REJECTION



**FIGURE 5:
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL INFORMATION AND RUMOR REJECTION BY
RUMOR CONTENT**



**FIGURE 6:
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL INFORMATION AND RUMOR REJECTION BY RUMOR CONTENT AND
RESPONDENT PARTISANSHIP**



APPENDIX A:

QUESTION WORDING FOR SCALE ITEMS

A: Authoritarianism Scale:

[Authoritarian responses are underlined]

Although there are a number of qualities that people feel that children should have, every person thinks that some are more important than others. Listed below are pairs of desirable qualities. For each pair please mark which one you think is more important for a child to have:

1. Independence or respect for elders
2. Obedience or self-reliance
3. Curiosity or good manners

B: Dogmatic Thinking Scale:

[Dogmatic responses are underlined]

1. On important public issues, I believe you should:
 - A. Always keep in mind that there is more than one side to most issues
 - B. Either be for them or against them and not take a middle course.
2. Which is better:
 - A. To remain undecided
 - B. To take a stand on an issue even if it's wrong.
3. When it comes to the really important questions about religion and philosophy of life:
 - A. It doesn't especially bother me to leave them undecided
 - B. A person must decide them, one way or the other.

C: Political Disengagement Scale:

[Three Agree/Disagree statements; "Agree" = Disengaged Response]

1. Politicians do not care much about that they say, so long as they get elected.
2. The best way to get elected is to put on a good show.
3. The people think they govern themselves, but they really don't.

APPENDIX B:
MAY 2010 INTERNET PANEL STUDY EXPERIMENTAL TREATMENTS

CONDITION 1 DEATH PANEL RUMOR ONLY

Health Care Reform: Will There Be Death Panels?

By JONATHAN G. PRATT
Published: November 15, 2009

WASHINGTON, DC – With health care reform in full swing, politicians and citizen groups are taking a close look at the provisions in the Affordable Health Care for America Act (H.R. 3962) and the accompanying Medicare Physician Payment Reform Act (H.R. 3961).

Discussion has focused on whether Congress intends to establish “death panels” to determine whether or not seniors can get access to end-of-life medical care. Some have speculated that these panels will force the elderly and ailing into accepting minimal end-of-life care to reduce health care costs. Concerns have been raised that hospitals will be forced to withhold treatments simply because they are costly, even if they extend the life of the patient. Now talking heads and politicians are getting into the act.

Betsy McCaughey, the former Lieutenant Governor of New York State has warned that the bills contain provisions that would make it mandatory that “people in Medicare have a required counseling session that will tell them how to end their life sooner.”

Health Care Reform: Will There Be Death Panels?

(continued)

Iowa Senator Chuck Grassley, the ranking Republican member of the Senate Finance Committee, chimed into the debate as well at a town-hall meeting, telling a questioner, “You have every right to fear...[You] should not have a government-run plan to decide when to pull the plug on Grandma.”

CONDITION 2 DEATH PANEL RUMOR AND CORRECTION, NO PARTISANSHIP

Health Care Reform and Death Panels: Setting the Record Straight

By JONATHAN G. PRATT
Published: November 15, 2009

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Health Care Reform and Death Panels: Setting the Record Straight

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The American Medical Association and the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization support the provision. For years, federal laws and policies have encouraged Americans to think ahead about end-of-life decisions.

The bills allow Medicare to pay doctors to provide information about living wills, pain medication, and hospice care. John Rother, executive vice president of AARP, the seniors’ lobby, repeatedly has declared the “death panel” rumors false.

CONDITION 3 DEATH PANEL RUMOR AND CORRECTION, REPUBLICAN COUNTER

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Speaking about the end of life provisions, Senator Isakson has said, "It's voluntary. Every state in America has an end of life directive or durable power of attorney provision... someone said Sarah Palin's web site had talked about the House bill having death panels on it where people would be euthanized. How someone could take an end of life directive or a living will as that is nuts."

CONDITION 4 DEATH PANEL RUMOR AND CORRECTION, DEMOCRATIC COUNTER

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The bills allow Medicare to pay doctors to provide information about living wills, pain medication, and hospice care. John Rother, executive vice president of AARP, the seniors’ lobby, repeatedly has declared the “death panel” rumors false.

The Democratic Congressman who wrote the now-famous provision in the House health care bill has responded as well.

Speaking about the end of life provisions, Democrat Earl Blumenauer of Georgia has said the measure “would merely allow Medicare to pay doctors for voluntary counseling sessions that address end-of-life issues...[the existence of death panels is] a blatant lie, and everybody who has checked it agrees.”

APPENDIX B:
JULY 2010 POLIMETRIX/YOUGOV STUDY EXPERIMENTAL TREATMENTS

CONDITION 1 DEATH PANEL RUMOR ONLY

Health Care Reform: Will There Be Death Panels?

By JONATHAN G. PRATT
Published: November 15, 2009

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The new provision is similar to a proposal in the last Congress to cover an end-of-life planning consultation. That bill was co-sponsored by three Republicans, including John Isakson, a Republican Senator from Georgia.

Speaking about the end of life provisions, Senator Isakson has said, "It's voluntary. Every state in America has an end of life directive or durable power of attorney provision... someone said Sarah Palin's web site had talked about the House bill having death panels on it where people would be euthanized. How someone could take an end of life directive or a living will as that is nuts."

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**APPENDIX C:
APRIL 2011 POLIMETRIX/YOUGOV POLL**

April 23 – Before Announcement, N=1000

Please tell us whether you think the following statements about Barack Obama are true or false.			
	True	False	Not Sure
Barack Obama is a socialist	29%	40%	31%
Barack Obama was born in the United States	55%	15%	30%
Barack Obama is a Muslim	23%	47%	30%
Barack Obama shares my values	33%	43%	24%
Barack Obama is a Christian	44%	24%	32%
Barack Obama is a strong leader	35%	43%	21%

April 30 – After Announcement, N=1000

Please tell us whether you think the following statements about Barack Obama are true or false.			
	True	False	Not Sure
Barack Obama is a socialist	32%	40%	28%
Barack Obama was born in the United States	67%	13%	20%
Barack Obama is a Muslim	22%	48%	30%
Barack Obama shares my values	36%	45%	20%
Barack Obama is a Christian	46%	25%	29%
Barack Obama is a strong leader	39%	44%	17%

**APPENDIX D:
OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2010 CCES EXPERIMENTAL TREATMENTS**

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Betsy McCaughey, the former Lieutenant Governor of New York State has warned that “Congress would make it mandatory — absolutely require — that every five years people in Medicare have a required counseling session that will tell them how to end their life sooner.”

Health Care Reform: Will There Be Death Panels?

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Health Care Reform: Setting the Record Straight

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LONG RECALL QUESTIONS

We are interested in learning what people can remember from what they read about politics. Think back to the article you just read.

A. Can you identify who said the following quote?

"You have every right to fear...[You] should not have a government-run plan to decide when to pull the plug on Grandma."

1. Senator Chuck Grassley
2. Betsy McCaughey
3. Senator John Isakson
4. Lou Dobbs

B. Can you identify who said the following quote?

The health care reform bill requires "people in Medicare have a required counseling session that will tell them how to end their life sooner."

1. Senator Chuck Grassley
2. Betsy McCaughey
3. Senator John Isakson
4. Lou Dobbs

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