Trump's Big Lie: A Rare Confirmed Case of Widespread Belief in Misinformation

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Key Points

- On most issues, polls exaggerate the extent to which Americans believe misinformation.
- There are two senses in which respondents may not believe their answers to poll questions. First, expressive responding. Respondents may misrepresent their beliefs in order to convey a partisan sentiment. Second, guessing. Survey respondents often pick their responses based on very little information. Many people endorse misinformation in surveys because it sounds plausible, not because they actively believe it.
- The techniques that researchers use to identify these tendencies suggest that people who endorse the big lie in polls really do believe it. The large majority of Republicans who endorse the big lie are being sincere. About half of those have confidently accepted it. The other half genuinely think it is plausible but aren't completely sure.

Introduction: The Challenge of Generalizing about Belief in Misinformation

Accounts of the misinformation problem are filled with examples of "true believers" who have been exposed to, and accept, false claims. Many people really do believe the wild, unsupported lies that emanate from the QAnon movement or vaccine conspiracy theorists. But how many people? How representative are anecdotes about true believers?

Figuring out how many people believe in misinformation is a difficult because the prevailing method of measuring public opinion --- multiple choice survey questions --- is poorly suited to the task. In a survey, people can endorse false claims that they have never heard before. They may be ignorant of the truth and be making a bad guess. They may know little about the topic and merely find the falsehood plausible. Or, they may be misrepresenting their beliefs, choosing partisan answers because it is more fun than revealing what they actually believe to be true. Simply put, the fact that someone picks an answer in a survey is not evidence that they believe it.

Unscrupulous pollsters and academic researchers often ignore the challenges involved with measuring genuine belief in misinformation. Sensational stories about how millions of people believe in falsehoods attract attention, attracting clicks and attention from journalists. By comparison, survey researchers have little incentive to highlight the potential problems with their measures. This makes things difficult for busy professionals who need a simple answer. There is always going to be someone waving around some crosstabs that suggest that belief in misinformation is widespread, but the poll itself might be a form of misinformation.

Some have reacted to this state of affairs by becoming skeptical of all measures of belief in misinformation. Without direct evidence, scholars and journalists have prominently speculated that individuals who endorse the big lie in polls may not really believe it.

My view is that the sensationalists and the skeptics are both wrong. Evaluating whether survey respondents really believe their answers requires careful evaluation of individual survey questions. Throughout my research on the measurement properties of poll questions about beliefs, I have consistently found wide variation between survey items. The same techniques that debunk one question can be used to validate another.

Using the same techniques that have been used to debunk other measures of belief in misinformation, my research suggests that the belief that the 2020 election was decided by voter fraud --- for short, belief in Trump's big lie ---- is unique in terms of the veracity with which respondents believe it. The large majority of respondents who endorse the big lie are being sincere. Moreover, about half of those who endorse the big lie have confidently accepted it, as opposed to merely finding it plausible.

Reasons to be Skeptical of Measured Belief in Misinformation

Public opinion polls are often used to suggest that tens or hundreds of millions of Americans believe false claims about a wide range of topics. However, studies of Americans' media diets finds that untrustworthy websites constitute a very small share of the total news consumed online. Moreover, Americans who encounter misinformation online tend to be skeptical of it. This apparent contradiction emerges due to exaggeration on the polling side. Polls that attempt to measure belief in misinformation generally capture a mixture of blind guesses and "miseducated" guesses based on considerations that may be quite tangential to the matter at hand. Few people confidently accept the false claims that they endorse in surveys.

Studies that measure real-world[1] media exposure typically find that misinformation and disinformation make up a small minority of the information that Americans consume online. In 2016, untrustworthy websites constituted about 6 percent of Americans' online news diet (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2020). A working paper by Stanford researchers finds that exposure to untrustworthy websites was even less common in 2020 (Moore, Dahlke, and Hancock 2022). Other studies echo these conclusions, generally finding that exposure to and sharing of misinformation online amounts to "less than you think" (Guess et al. 2019, title).[2]

Individuals who are exposed to misinformation also tend to be skeptical of it. Using a sample of contemporaneous news headlines prominently social media, Pennycook et al. (2021) find that about 15 percent of respondents rate false stories as accurate. Even when the story is congenial to the respondent's political views, the share is less than 20 percent. Not only is exposure to misinformation and disinformation relatively rare, but those who encounter it tend to find it lacking in credibility.

Findings that exposure to misinformation is uncommon, and that people who are exposed to it tend to be skeptical of it, are inconsistent with the narrative of widespread belief in misinformation that is often pushed by pollsters and journalists.

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[1] As opposed to self-report measures of media exposure, which are notoriously unreliable (Jerit).

[2] Some further estimates of exposure to and sharing of information from untrustworthy websites: In 2018, 89 percent of the news viewed on Facebook was from credible domains (Guess et al. 2021). Over the 2016-19 period, vaccine-skeptical content made up 7.5 percent of Americans' page views online (Guess et al. 2020).In 2016, less than 10 percent of Facebook users shared a story from a fake news domain; the average Republican shared 0.5 such stories while the average Democrat shared 0.1 (Guess, Nagler, & Tucker 2019).

This stems from a tendency to take survey measures at face value, without examining alternative explanations as to why one could endorse a false claim in a survey. Research that looks beneath the surface finds that endorsements of misinformation in surveys often do not represent "belief" in that claim in the sense that an ordinary person would use this term.

One measurement problem that inflates measured belief in false claims is guessing. Respondents who endorse false claims generally fall into one of two categories: (1) "blind guesses" by people who know nothing about the topic and (2) "miseducated guesses" based on very little information (Graham 2022). These respondents would never have articulated the false belief in question in the real world; their endorsement of it is an artifact of respondents' well-known willingness to make up responses on the spot based on very little information (Zaller 1992; Tourangeau et al. 2000). Very few of those who the typical survey researcher labels as "misinformed" actually heard and accepted the false claim in the real world.

A second measurement problem is the reality that people do not always respond sincerely to surveys about politics. Instead, they engage in "expressive responding," exaggerate the degree to which their beliefs favor their party. For example, Bullock et al. (2015) and Prior et al. (2015) find that paying respondents for correct answers to factual questions about the economy, the Iraq war, and other topics in the news reduces partisan differences in survey responses by 40 to 60 percent. Using a series of politically salient controversies, Peterson and Iyengar (2020) estimate that about 25 percent of partisan differences are due to expressive responding.

To be sure, some people really do believe false things. At present, however, survey researchers do not adequately test the veracity of apparent belief in misinformation. Consequently, observers of politics should be skeptical of claims that belief in any particular falsehood is widespread. Exceptions to this rule should be based on hard evidence.

The Big Lie is Different

Although many survey measures of belief in misinformation are unreliable, the same tools that have been developed to identify this problem can also be deployed in service of solving it. In collaboration with my colleague Omer Yair, I recently completed a series of studies designed to probe the veracity of measured belief in Trump's big lie. We recently posted our findings in a working paper titled "Expressive Responding and Trump's Big Lie," available at https://m-graham.com/papers/GrahamYair_BigLie.pdf. As of this writing, our findings are undergoing peer review. They have not been accepted for publication.

Our working paper suggests that survey respondents who endorse the big lie believe it more strongly than the typical measure of belief in misinformation. This conclusion rests on two key findings that correspond to the two measurement challenges described in the previous section. First, Republicans who endorse the big lie in surveys are by and large being sincere. Second, about half of those who endorse the big lie have confidently accepted it as being true, while the other half find it plausible but are not deeply convinced.

To measure belief in the big lie, we developed the following survey question:

- Do you think that Joe Biden only won the 2020 presidential election due to voter fraud, or would he have won either way?
- [Definitely due to fraud] [Probably due to fraud] [Not sure] [Probably would have won either way] [Definitely would have won either way]

This question is designed to avoid the ambiguity associated with some questions that are commonly analyzed in the public sphere, e.g. questions that ask whether Biden's victory was legitimate. Our decision to include a "not sure" response option was motivated by research that suggests that individuals who use options know very little about the subject matter at hand (Luskin and Bullock 2011). When forced to answer the question, individuals who select "don't know" tend to have very low confidence in their answer (Graham 2021).

Finding 1: Republicans who endorse the big lie are being sincere.

The bulk of our results focus a series of survey experiments (i.e., A/B tests, randomized controlled trials) to examine whether individuals who claim to believe in the big lie are being sincere. We tested four total methods of detecting insincere responding.

First, we tested two versions of an honesty encouragement treatment. These asked respondents to answer with their true beliefs, regardless of their feelings. Respondents who were randomly assigned to the honesty encouragement treatment were no less likely to endorse the big lie. In another working paper, a researcher at the University of Florida found the same result using a similar approach (Fahey 2022).

Second, we used a list experiment, which is also known as the item count technique. Rather than asking respondents about their beliefs directly, list experiments show respondents a list of several statements and ask them how many they agree with. This allows us to infer the percentage who agree with the big lie without asking them directly. This reduces insincere responding by reducing pressure to give responses that conform to one's self-image or the norms of one's social groups (Blair et al. 2020). We compared our list experiment estimate to a direct question about belief in the big lie. The percentages were almost exactly the same. This suggests that polls that ask directly about the big lie are yielding a good estimate. Two researchers at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst conducted a similar list experiment. In a blog post for the Washington Post, they report similar results (Cuthbert and Theodoris 2022).

Third, we tested for response substitution. Survey respondents sometimes use survey questions to express a related sentiment that was not asked about. For example, if a restaurant has great service and terrible food, you might say that the service was bad on a customer feedback card even though the problem was actually with the food. This phenomenon also affects political surveys (Yair and Huber 2020; Graham and Coppock 2021).

In the case of the big lie, we suspected that people who endorse the big lie might actually be trying to convey one of two sentiments: that Trump would have been a better choice, or that election fraud occurred (but not enough to swing the election). We find that allowing respondents to express one of these sentiments does not change the percentage who endorse the big lie. Using the same technique, another researcher has found similar results (Fahey 2022).

Our final test for sincerity used financial incentives. We allowed respondents to bet on whether prominent predictions inspired by the big lie would come true. In late November 2020, we allowed respondents to place bets on whether Trump would succeed in overturning the election results. In July 2021, we allowed respondents to bet on whether Trump would be reinstated in August. Both times, large majorities of Republican respondents were willing to put their money where their mouth was.

Finding 2: About half of Republicans who endorse the big lie have accepted it confidently. The other half are making a "miseducated" guess.

Even if survey respondents are being sincere, they still might not be deeply convinced of their answer. More specifically, a survey respondent who endorses the big lie might be deeply convinced that it is true, but they could also be unsure about whether it is true and endorse it because it is their best guess. The typical approach to capturing respondent uncertainty, "don't know" or "not sure" responses, is not sufficient to weed out everyone who is unsure of their answer (Graham 2021).

To examine whether people who endorse the big lie are deeply convinced or merely find it plausible, we asked respondents our survey question at two different points in time. As noted above, for many prominent measures of belief in misinformation, respondents who at first appear to be confident in their answer display a tendency to back off when asked the same question at a later date (Graham 2022). This indicates that one-shot surveys often create an illusion of confident acceptance.

Unlike other measures of belief in misinformation, we find that Republicans who claim to confidently believe the big lie stick with their answer when asked again at a later point in time. However, only about half of Republicans who endorse the big lie claim to be confident about it. The other half, who indicate that the big lie is "probably" true, continue to indicate uncertainty when asked the question again at a later date. This suggests that although many Republicans who endorse the big lie in surveys have confidently accepted it, many others think that it is plausible but are not deeply convinced that it is true.

As a point of comparison, we conducted the same test using ANES data on belief in Trump's claim that millions of illegal votes were cast in the 2016 election. Respondents who endorse that lie display a much weaker commitment to their answer when asked about it again at a later point in time. Even relative to Trump's previous claims about election fraud, the big lie is unique in terms of the veracity with which people who endorse it in surveys actually believe it.

Conclusion

Claims of widespread belief in misinformation are generally untrustworthy. This is because pollsters are too quick to take their measures at face value, selling sensationalist stories rather than grappling with the vagaries of survey measurement. Using the same techniques that support these claims, my latest research shows that the big lie is different. Survey respondents who endorse it are generally being sincere and are often deeply convinced of it.

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