

Political Disinformation and Voting Behavior: Fake News and Motivated Reasoning

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Abstract: The paper intends to focus on the influence of the disinformation passed on via social media and the web on voters, that is, on the impact of fake news on elections. On the basis of a critical reflection on research in media studies and in cognitive science, meant to assess whether, and how far, fake news can switch voting behavior, I shall argue that the effect of fake news in this respect is much less than usually assumed. The danger of fake news for democratic politics that rather lies in the increase of political polarization and hostile attitudes in the public sphere as well as the blurring of truth and falsity in public discourse that has caused a widespread mistrust of politics and of experts in general. In the first section, I shall discuss the disinformation induced by fake news. I shall set apart political fake news from other kinds of fake news, for, in the first case, the influence of social media information seems to run along partisan affiliations, either reinforcing preexistent beliefs in the case of favorable content or being dismissed as fake in the case of adverse content. In the second section, I shall examine what I take to be the main source of distorted political information, namely motivated reasoning, and more specifically that form of motivated reasoning induced by ideological beliefs and partisan affiliations. In the third section, I shall consider the variations in the susceptibility to political fake news in partisans and nonpartisans alike. I shall conclude by stating that, even if fake news does not especially affect electoral turnout, the pollution of the public sphere seems to be the most worrying effect of fake news and future research should focus on these aspects specifically.

Keywords: Fake news, Political disinformation, Automated cognitive mechanisms, Motivated reasoning, Partisan affiliations, Ideology.

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