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1

Introduction

Did you know that Joe Biden and the Democrats stole the 2020 US presidential election? Maybe you heard how an intricate web of domestic and foreign agents thwarted the election's real victor, Donald Trump, by using computer servers in Italy and Germany to replace his true vote totals? Perhaps you read about the absentee ballots cast for Trump that somehow ended up in a river in Wisconsin . . . or was that a ditch? This is to say nothing of the mail carriers in West Virginia who sold ballots in the weeks before the election.

If you were listening to some of the political rhetoric surrounding the 2020 election, you probably encountered at least one of these claims. But none of these allegations are true. Absentee ballots were never found in any river or ditch. And there was no foreign hacking of vote counts. The evidence against claims that the 2020 election was stolen is overwhelming and clear. For example, on November 12, 2020, in the immediate wake of the election, a national coalition of election security officials announced that "there is no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes, or was in any way compromised."[1] In June 2021, an official Michigan State Senate Committee of three Republicans and one Democrat published a report that systematically debunked voter fraud claims in that state. No information has emerged since to challenge the conclusions of the fact-finding committees and the intelligence community in any serious—or even semi-serious—way.[2]

But the rumors and intimations have only continued. For example, more than eight months after the election, at the July 2021 meeting of the

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Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), Donald Trump still publicly declared that the 2020 election was "rigged"—a claim that many other CPAC speakers and participants repeated. And into the fall and winter of 2021, Trump continued to issue statements seeking to rally citizens and politicians to his cause of overturning the results of the 2020 election. On October 13, 2021, Trump released a statement claiming, "If we don't solve the Presidential Election Fraud of 2020 (which we have thoroughly and conclusively documented), Republicans will not be voting in '22 or '24. It is the single most important thing for Republicans to do."[3]

And as the 2022 midterm elections approached, it was not just Trump who was touting claims of voting fraud. Doug Mastriano, the Republican candidate for governor in Pennsylvania—who as a state legislator led his state's "Stop the Steal" campaign and had previously helped commission an off-the-books audit of voting machines in a rural Pennsylvania county—continued his election-denying rhetoric throughout his campaign.[4] In Arizona, Kari Lake won the Republican gubernatorial nomination after declaring in a June debate that she would not have certified Biden's victory in Arizona had she been governor, citing unfounded claims that 34,000 ballots "were counted two, three, and four times" in Arizona and that 200,000 ballots were trafficked by mules.[5] These candidates reflected a larger trend in the 2022 electoral landscape: a report by the States United Democracy Center concluded that election deniers were on the ballot in half of the races for governor, as well as more than one-third of races for secretary of state and attorney general.[6]

The persistence of false information like this is troubling for the prospects of our political system. If lies continue to crowd out the truth, how can Americans—citizens and politicians alike—maintain a meaningful dialogue about the pressing political issues of our time? If citizens believe that their leaders are capable of terrible actions—even going so far as to allow catastrophes to occur on American soil, an actual claim made by the "truthers" from across the ideological spectrum who believe that the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York and the attack on the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, were the result of an inside government job—how can they trust their government with any authority? Rumors consisting of lies, false narratives, and "alternative facts" can undermine the factual foundations of good public policies, taint faith in the political system, and even motivate violent political action. A democracy where falsehoods run rampant can only result in dysfunction.

This book takes up a critical question on the mass politics side of the equation: why do political rumors and misperceptions persist in the public

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consciousness, even when media organizations, political leaders, and experts across the ideological spectrum discredit those stories? We do need not go far to find examples of such rumors in the modern day. The hubbub surrounding the 2020 election is simply the tip of the iceberg on the political right. Consider these other dubious stories on the political stage: the innuendo that officials are planning government-run panels to decide whether or not individuals should be given access to life-saving health care; the notion that former president Barack Obama held office illegitimately because he was born in Kenya and not Hawaii; and even the disturbing fantasies of QAnon followers who claim that the world is run by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles, comprising top Democratic politicians, among others. Moreover, such rumors are not limited to the Right. For instance, though Russian efforts in spreading misinformation may have played a role in shaping the conversation about and opinions on the 2016 election, some on the political Left have gone even further by claiming that Russia directly tampered with vote tallies to get Donald Trump elected as president.

Of course, political rumors are nothing new. Over fifty years ago, John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas sparked an industry of conspiracy theories about his death—and the subsequent report by the Warren Commission, which found that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone shooter involved in JFK's murder on November 22, 1963. In the wake of the US entry into World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor, stories circulated that Franklin Delano Roosevelt had goaded the Japanese military into offensive action, even going so far as allowing the attack to proceed when he knew it was imminent.[7] And as far back as the American Revolution in the eighteenth century, false stories of British-instigated brutalities by Native Americans against the colonial population were spread to incite support for the revolutionary cause.[8] In short, fringe beliefs and people who believe them have always existed, not just in the United States but around the world.

But just because rumors are a longstanding political phenomenon does not mean that they do not pose a danger to the current political system. Patterns of rumors and other political misinformation can have broad-ranging consequences for the way in which ordinary citizens of all stripes interact with the political world. That is the subject of this book.

Rumors and Misinformation

What is a rumor? Questions of definition will be explored more thoroughly in the next chapter but, briefly, the term "political rumor" will be used in this book as follows. A political rumor is a type of unsupported claim, often with

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a conspiratorial edge. It is not simply the misstatement of fact or an incorrect answer to a factual question about politics. Rather a rumor is something more insidious, similar to what Weeks and Garrett refer to as "unverified stories or information statements."[9]

Here my terminology departs somewhat from the current academic conversation about unverified and unsupported political assertions. In the vast literature on misinformation and false beliefs that has emerged in the last few years, some scholars have used terms like "misperception" to represent belief in many of the same kinds of false or unsupported claims analyzed here and "misinformation" to describe the claims themselves. I recognize that the phenomenon I examine in this book largely fits these definitions, but I will use the term "rumor" throughout this book to refer to the fanciful stories at the heart of my analyses because I believe that this term more precisely describes the weaponized mistruths that circulate through the information ecosystem. That said, the lessons from this book fit well with the broader misinformation literature. Indeed, I look at the intersection of rumor and misinformation more directly in chapter 5.

Understanding Political Rumors

What does it mean when a sizable portion of the mass public endorses fanciful claims such as the contention that, despite evidence of a birth certificate proving Obama was born on August 4, 1961, in Honolulu, Hawaii, he is not a natural-born citizen and therefore ineligible to serve as president under the Constitution? Or that another group believes that political leaders instigated a crisis on September 11, 2001, that ultimately drew the United States into a war in Afghanistan? Is the widespread belief in rumors like these a reflection of a lack of knowledge or engagement by the public? Or is mass belief in these rumors a symptom of some deeper problem with how citizens relate to the political world?

In the years following the election of Obama in 2008, when rumors and misinformation began to capture the media consciousness, several commentators downplayed the societal consequences of such false information.[10] Take, for example, the various claims surrounding Obama's citizenship. Much of the discussion of these rumors focused on their implausibility and made analogy to other seemingly preposterous beliefs that many Americans cling to, such as the existence of witches and ghosts.[11] In a similar vein, other commentators, such as conservative columnist Jonah Goldberg, minimized the severity of this information crisis, arguing that conspiratorial worldviews

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exist across the ideological spectrum, 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 US government involvement in the events of 9/11.[12]

All told, arguments like Goldberg's imply that political misperceptions based on rumors are little more than random phenomena arising from widespread ignorance among the American public. In essence, these commentators suggest that one-fifth of the American public will believe just about anything, no matter how unsubstantiated and no matter its political valence.[13] While interest in rumors has increased in the second decade of the twenty-first century—especially alongside the rise of Donald Trump to prominence on the political stage after 2015—there was little systematic political evidence to turn to when the birther rumor—and other more general rumors about Barack Obama—first gained steam in 2008 and 2009.

I first became interested in learning more about the scope of the problem of political rumors during this period. Accordingly, I started collecting public opinion data in 2010 about the patterns of belief in specific rumors in the United States. That July, I conducted the first of many surveys designed to investigate the prevalence of rumor beliefs among the American mass public—starting with a set of seven rumors, six political and one nonpolitical. For each of the seven items, I asked respondents if they believed the rumor, rejected the rumor, or were not sure about its veracity.[14] These questions, listed below in table 1.1, were drawn from a combination of public opinion polls conducted by other individuals and questions about contemporary rumors that I wrote myself. Four of the six questions addressed rumors that cast liberal politicians and policies in a negative light, while two questions frame conservative politics through a negative lens.[15] For the rest of the book, I refer to the former as "Democratic-targeted rumors" and the latter as "Republican-targeted rumors" (though, strictly speaking, these questions do not explicitly refer to Republican politicians). The first category of questions can also be thought of as rumors about the political Left, while the second group can be thought of as rumors about the Right. The seventh question asked about a well-known incident of a supposed unidentified flying object (UFO) landing in Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947. This final question was designed to be explicitly nonpartisan; accepting the Roswell rumor entails endorsing the notion that the US government engaged in a cover-up that has lasted over sixty years but does not implicate either party directly. For present purposes, this rumor serves as a useful baseline for the other explicitly political and partisan rumors on the survey.

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TABLE 1.1. Responses to Rumor Questions, July 2010

Question	Rumor Target	Endorse Rumor (%)	Reject Rumor (%)	Not Sure (%)
Do you believe that Barack Obama was born in the United States of America?	Democrat	27	55	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"?	Democrat	33	46	22
Do you think that Senator John Kerry lied about his actions during the Vietnam War in order to receive medals from the US Army?	Democrat	35	34	31
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?	Democrat	26	46	28
Do you think the FBI and the CIA make sure that there is a steady supply of guns and drugs in the inner city?	Republican	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?	Republican	18	64	18
Do you believe that a spacecraft from another planet crashed in Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947?	Neutral	22	45	33

Note: Percentages are rounded. For all items except for the Obama citizenship question (which was reverse-scored), "Yes" responses are coded as rumor endorsement, and "No" responses are coded as rumor rejection.

Source: YouGov, July 2010.

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Readers will probably have noticed that in my 2010 survey I asked about more rumors arising on the right than I did about rumors arising on the left. This imbalance reflects the political reality of the information ecosystem in the present day—there are simply more rumors in circulation on the right than there are on the left. For example, Allcott and Gentzkow found pro-Trump fake stories were shared 30 million times on Facebook during the 2016 election, compared with 7.6 million shares for pro-Clinton stories.[16] In a 2019 study, Garrett and Bond examined the most viral fake political news stories every two weeks for six months and found that 46 percent of the high-engagement stories benefited the political Right, while only 23 percent benefited the political Left.[17] While rumors originate and spread on both sides of the partisan divide, in the present day, they are far more prevalent on the conservative side.

What do the answers to these questions collectively say about the state of the public acceptance of political rumors? On the one hand, some of the news is good: a plurality of the public rejects six of the seven rumors. But, on the other hand, these findings unearth a troubling pattern. There are only two rumors that a majority of the respondents conclusively reject. Large swaths of the public either accept rumors as true or, by giving a "don't know" response, refuse to refute these rumors outright. In the chapters to follow, I will demonstrate that these "don't know" responses are especially consequential because, for some individuals, such responses indicate a skepticism of political facts that can, on occasion, be overcome with the provision of new information. For now, what is important is that acceptance of rumors—or at least the failure to reject them—was widespread in 2010. Numerous surveys I have conducted since then have yielded similar results (as a fuller accounting of the data in chapter 3 will show).

Moreover, the failure to reject rumors is not simply concentrated in a small, fixed portion of the citizenry. Instead, most people exhibit at least *some* belief in prevailing rumors. As figure 1.1 demonstrates, on average respondents endorsed about two rumors out of the seven and said they were "not sure" about another two. However, only 5 percent of respondents endorsed more than four rumors. These results underscore wide variation among individuals in their willingness to believe rumors. Moreover, while at least 15 percent of the respondents expressed support for each of the individual rumor statements, over 70 percent of respondents expressed support for at least one of the statements. Thus, it is not just that *some* people believe *a lot* of fanciful things. Rather, *a lot* of people believe *some* fanciful things.[18]

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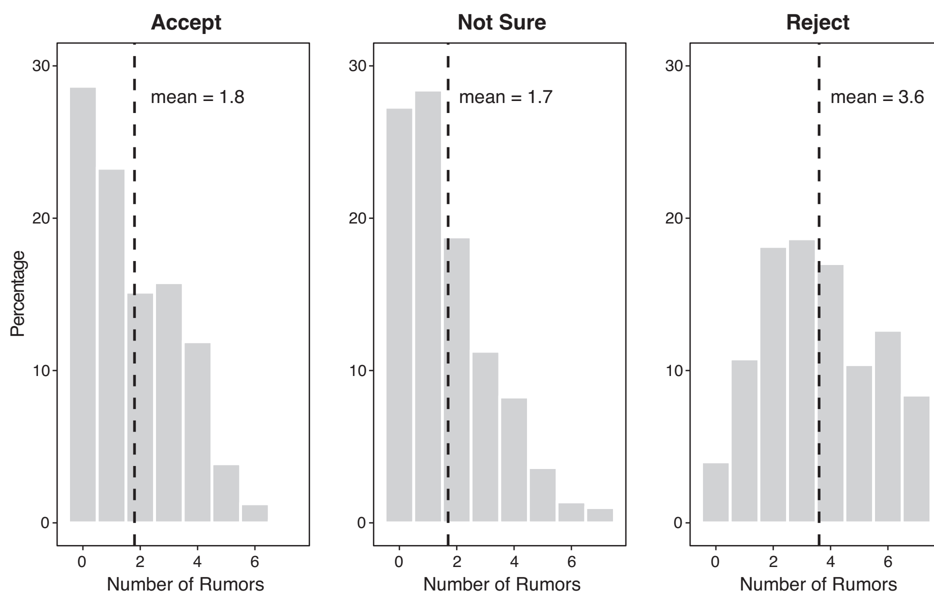
FIGURE 1.1. Distribution of Beliefs on Rumor Questions, July 2010



Note: The graph shows the distribution of rumor endorsement (acceptance, uncertainty, and rejection) across the seven rumor items (refer to table 1.1). The mean number of rumors accepted is equal to 1.8, uncertain is 1.7, and rejected is 3.6. *Source*: YouGov, July 2010.

Why Do Some People Accept Rumors?

Just because many Americans believe many different political rumors does not mean there is no rhyme or reason to their beliefs. There is, in fact, a structure to individuals' willingness to accept or reject the rumors in circulation in the political world. First, as psychologists have long known and political scientists have recently observed, individuals systematically vary in their willingness to embrace the kind of conspiratorial thinking at the heart of political rumors. Consider, for example, the kinds of people who are unwilling to lend credibility to conspiracy theories of any kind. These people lie at one end of a continuum. At the other end of this continuum are those individuals who embrace conspiracy theories of all sorts no matter how ridiculous they sound—the kinds of people you may try to avoid at family events because they always have a new outlandish story to share. And of course many individuals lie at points in between. Such tendencies do not necessarily reflect pathologies of reasoning. After all, at times, authoritative voices in government have not been truthful to the American public. Moreover, certain groups

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in society have been subject to more damaging misinformation than others—as the experience of Black citizens during the Tuskegee Syphilis Study in the 1930s and 1940s demonstrates. Thus, it might make sense for some people not to accept all official information unconditionally. But such tendencies are adaptive only to a point. There is a line between the scrutiny of government that is critical for active engagement by citizens and a problematic move to instead substitute claims based on flimsy standards of evidence for official voices. A healthy democracy requires a citizenry that, while appropriately skeptical of authority, does not cross this line.

Social scientists have measured individuals' placement along this continuum of conspiracism in various ways, ranging from a search for general factors that lead individuals to accept political rumors—such as a sense of alienation from a group or society—to the measurement of degrees of endorsement of specific conspiracy theories. But at the core, all these scholars are working toward capturing variation in some general tendency to accept conspiracies and rumors as truth—the tendency to embrace misinformation.

In this book, I focus on politically grounded rumors and misinformation. I use measures of individuals' general propensity to believe in conspiracies and rumors of all types, because some people are more susceptible than others to conspiratorial thinking, regardless of the topic area. I also use measures of belief in specific rumors because these rumors have distinctive *political* roots, especially related to people's partisan attachments. When it comes to belief in the veracity of political rumors that target a particular party or leader, where you stand depends in large part upon where you sit. The problem is widespread, and it affects citizens who sit on both the political Left and the political Right.

Jointly these factors—the tendency toward conspiratorial thinking on the one hand and partisan attachments on the other—shape patterns of rumor belief. The interaction of conspiratorial dispositions and partisan motivation predict who accepts rumors, who rejects them, and who is uncertain. Political partisans who are prone to conspiratorial thinking are also the least likely to question the veracity of rumors impugning their political adversaries. The refusal to reject political rumors therefore arises from the combination of political beliefs and conspiratorial orientation.

Rumors in a Democratic Society

Simply because unsubstantiated beliefs are widespread and structured in meaningful ways does not mean such beliefs are politically consequential. Perhaps rumors are akin to celebrity gossip—something to keep people

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entertained but of little import to politics and governance. When I began writing this book, many media commenters could and did make such a case. For instance, Matthew Yglesias in 2010 likened the belief that Obama was a Muslim to other fringe beliefs, including the belief in the existence of extra-sensory perception.[19] In the resulting decade, it has become much harder to dismiss political rumors as frivolous entertainment.

On the contrary, rumors can have serious political consequences and carry tangible costs for society. Granted, rumors have been a persistent part of American politics, even stretching back to the early days of the republic. But just because rumors have always been with us does not mean that we should simply shrug our shoulders and accept them as facts of political life. Misinformation and rumors are dangerous for the functioning of democracy because they can pervade the political environment, shaping the beliefs not only of the hard-core believers but also of the more casual observers of politics.

Most concerningly, rumors might motivate some people to engage in political violence. As Cass Sunstein has observed, "Even if only a small fraction of adherents to a particular conspiracy theory act on the basis of their beliefs, that small fraction may be enough to cause serious harm."[20] The wider a rumor spreads, perhaps the greater the chance that harm will result. And such events are no longer mere hypotheticals. In December 2016, Edgar Maddison Welch came armed with a rifle to the Comet Ping Pong restaurant in Washington, DC, to investigate for himself the "Pizzagate" rumors that linked the restaurant to a nonexistent child sex trafficking ring allegedly run by Hillary Clinton and her political associates.[21] The insurrection on January 6, 2021—when hundreds of protesters stormed the US Capitol in a violent attempt to stop the counting of the electoral vote—demonstrated how belief in rumors might spiral into large-scale violence for some individuals.

All this being said, establishing a causal connection between political rumors and political action—or establishing a direct relation between misinformation and harm, more generally—constitutes an extremely difficult task. We know that rumors and real-world outcomes are almost certainly associated, but few scholars have established a direct causal link between the two.[22] But even if we cannot easily quantify the direct harms of misinformation by putting a monetary cost on its effects or by directly tying the existence of particular forms of misinformation to real-world outcomes, rumors can be important and powerful.

Especially troubling is the damage that political rumors can do to the shape of the larger information environment. Much political research has documented citizens' ignorance of basic political knowledge and facts,

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a problem that plagues even highly educated citizens of both conservative and liberal persuasions. However, Kuklinski and his colleagues note that the more serious problem for democracy is the prevalence of beliefs in *misinformation*—factually incorrect information.[23] In other words, a *mis*informed public may be even worse than an *un*informed one when it comes to democratic outcomes. Political science research has effectively demonstrated that such misperceptions are widespread among citizens in the United States. For example, Americans overestimate the size of welfare payments, the percentage of the budget that goes to foreign aid, and the details of the provisions of the 2010 Affordable Care Act.[24] Unsubstantiated political rumors are an insidious form of misinformation that can be particularly damaging for the functioning of democracy in several ways.

One of these ways is how the kinds of extreme beliefs encapsulated in false rumors—such as the belief that the government is creating "death panels," or that millions of illegal immigrants have voted in presidential elections—can weaken trust in government. For instance, McKay and Tenove argue that, by promoting false claims, online disinformation campaigns purposefully offer opposing information that competes with established facts, encouraging debates over the "truth" in a context rife with conflicting claims.[25] Echoing these concerns, Rosenblum and Muirhead warn of the dangers of subscribing to a worldview embodying "new conspiracism" that codifies conspiracy without the theory. Such a belief system seeks to delegitimize *all* authority.[26] As they argue, "The new conspiracists seek not to correct those they accuse, but to deny their standing in the political world to argue, explain, persuade, and decide. And from attacking malevolent individuals, conspiracists move on to assaulting institutions. Conspiracism corrodes the foundations of democracy."[27] Such a strategy is especially pernicious because it does not require individuals to actually accept political rumors; the mere questioning of political reality can have serious downstream consequences because sowing doubt about political policies and claims is much easier than resolving such doubt. In this view, purveyors of misinformation do not need the public to accept one view of political reality; they just need ordinary citizens to doubt and mistrust authoritative voices in the government—to say they are "not sure" if rumors are true or not. As I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, such expression of uncertainty among the less engaged portion of the public can be dangerous for the functioning of democracy. An unwillingness to unconditionally accept facts as truth fosters an environment of mistrust around the politicians and policies that those facts implicate.

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Finally, rumors may directly affect policy. If people rely on faulty information, they might oppose policies they would otherwise support or support policies they would otherwise oppose. As Hochschild and Einstein argue, "Developing public policies in response to pressures linked to misinformation risks making bad decisions and implementing them poorly."[28] One such example occurred in the summer of 2009 when a myth circulated that Obama's health care reform plan included "death panels" that would 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. This rumor started with statements made by the former lieutenant governor of New York, Betsy McCaughey, a Republican, and quickly spread across conservative media. 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.[29]

This rumor was patently false and had been widely discredited by media organizations from across the ideological spectrum. All the same, it took root among the American mass public. An August Pew Center poll found that 30 percent of the public thought the death panel rumor was true, and another 20 percent were unsure of the veracity of the statement. Even after the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the rumor persisted. In the July 2010 survey I described earlier, 33 percent of the public thought the death panel rumor was true, and 22 percent were unsure. This rumor also had 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 rumor hung heavily over this decision.

What Can Be Done?

To this point, I have painted a fairly grim, if realistic, picture of the modern political landscape. But that was not my goal. I began this project during the early days of the first Obama administration with the hope that by understanding how and why seemingly unbelievable stories about political figures and policies grab hold of the public mind, I could then offer strategies to effectively counter rumors. Demonstrating which types of people believe rumors to be true is important, but the more pressing task involves establishing a method to correct false information.

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This is easier said than done. As we will see in the chapters that follow, I—and other scholars in the fields of political science, psychology, and communication—have made far more progress on identifying which types of people believe rumors than on convincing them that those rumors are false. That said, in the second half of the book, I explore ways to correct the rampant falsehoods afloat in society. A word of warning, though: rather than offering a "silver bullet" solution to fixing the problem of misinformation, I largely discuss the bounds on the effectiveness of such strategies and the limits of the various types of people that can be convinced to unconditionally reject political rumors.

THE STICKINESS OF MISINFORMATION

In 2000, Kuklinski and his colleagues called upon scholars to focus the field of political behavior on the implications of widespread misinformation, in addition to the well-established findings of the dearth of information among the public. Despite this admonition, academic interest in the dynamics of political misinformation was limited. What work was done suggested that correcting misinformation is, if anything, a more intractable problem than Kuklinski and his colleagues thought it to be. Nyhan and Reifler ran experiments where they attempted to correct false statements about the Iraq War and rumors about Obama's religion, both with little success.[30] In addition to these studies, my own work on opinions concerning war and that of Hopkins, Sides, and Citrin on immigration attitudes found that presenting citizens with political facts does not change their opinions on important political matters.[31]

In recent years, though, there has been an increased focus on misinformation, leading to a flood of work on the topic across the social sciences. The findings are too numerous to list here (though for a review of the literature circa 2019, see Wittenberg and Berinsky).[32] In some ways, this work has been promising. For example, Wood and Porter find that, across a variety of issues, it is possible to reduce misperceptions by providing citizens with factual information.[33] But even this explosion of scholarship has shown that there is still a long way to go. While there are some promising results, the search for a *solution* to the problem of misinformation remains elusive.

This is not surprising. Rumors are very hard to correct from a psychological standpoint. Political misinformation is especially pernicious because once misinformation takes seed, its effects extend even after it has been discredited—a phenomenon called belief perseverance.[34] For example, in her study of the evaluation of hypothetical political candidates, Thorson found

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that misinformation can generate "belief echoes"—persistent effects on attitudes even after false information has been corrected and the truth has been internalized.[35] Perhaps scholars of misinformation have not found workable solutions because such solutions are impossible.

THINKING ABOUT CORRECTIONS: WHOM TO TARGET AND HOW

But we need not throw up our hands in defeat. First, while there may not be a single magic solution that can eliminate the scourge of misinformation, there are some corrective strategies that can help reduce misinformation's grip on the collective public mind. In chapter 4 I show that *who* debunks a rumor is just as important as *how* it is debunked. People who speak out against their apparent political interests—for example, Republican politicians countering the death panel rumors—can be even more effective than seemingly neutral "authoritative" sources. But my solution is just one approach. That strategy may not work, or even represent the best course of action, in every case. We need to focus on an inclusive toolkit—a collection of solutions.

A number of scholars have advanced a variety of solutions, and the scope of this work will surely only grow. These proposed solutions seek to tackle misinformation at all points in the process—through both ex ante interventions (advocated by other scholars) that preemptively inoculate against misinformation before individuals first encounter it and ex post interventions like mine that are deployed after exposure to try to correct misinformation. No one solution need take priority over another. Instead we should use *all* available solutions that are each imperfect in one way or another, yet offer a greater probability of success when combined. To combat the spread of COVID-19, some virologists advocate a "Swiss cheese model" of pandemic defense. This model entails the use of multiple layers of protections, such as masks, social distancing, ventilation, and testing and tracing. Individually each method is a slice of "cheese" with holes in it. But by stacking each of these layers, each with a different set of "holes," we can create a more effective barrier to the spread of the virus. The same is true for combatting misinformation. By combining different strategies, we may be able to create a collective response that works—a "Swiss cheese model" of information defense.

In addition to expanding the scope of solutions and interventions to consider, we can also change the kinds of people we target with those strategies. When I began my work, I focused on correcting the beliefs of individuals who fully embraced political rumors—a group I refer to as the "believers"

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of rumors. Over time, it has become clear just how hard it is to change their beliefs. In focusing solely on the believers, we may be overlooking people we can actually help. While some people, like the believers, are engaged with the political world, for the vast majority of Americans, politics is a secondary concern. Most of the public, most of the time, does not care about politics. People certainly do not care enough to deeply consider a particular issue, much less to go down a rabbit hole of misinformation. But all citizens live in a system of social interactions, both online and offline, and their casual attention can be weaponized.

We therefore also need to pay attention to the power of rumors to grip citizens beyond the core believers. Recall the distribution of responses to the rumor questions from my surveys I presented in figure 1.1. For every rumor question, there exists a substantial set of individuals who actively endorse that rumor. But there are also people who, though they do not fully embrace rumors, do not fully reject them either. Like the "believers," this group of "uncertain" citizens is both a symptom and a cause of the dangers of misinformation. Because rumors thrive in ambiguous environments, the presence of these uncertain citizens can aid the spread of rumors and undermine the legitimacy of the democratic system. Any position short of outright rejecting a rumor—even a "don't know" or "not sure" response—may enhance a rumor's credibility by suggesting cause for ambivalence or uncertainty. As I discuss in the chapters that follow, these people are important for understanding and ultimately defusing the power of rumors. The "uncertain" often represents a significant portion of the public, and these individuals come from all walks of life. But, more importantly, I find that it is sometimes possible to induce these uncertain individuals to reject political rumors.

I therefore believe that we need to expand our efforts to combat rumors and misinformation from a focus on the believers to a focus on the "uncertain" as well. This is not to say that we can never convert believers to disbelievers. Yet we must recognize that believers' minds are extremely hard to change. Thus, I argue for putting greater energy into moving the "uncertain." By focusing on this group, the social transmission of those rumors could be short-circuited, thereby reducing the spread of misinformation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP

Fighting political misinformation must also involve a change in the way political leaders talk to ordinary citizens. As I and many others have argued, the blame for the failings of the collective public to refute misinformation

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and rumors does not lie solely in their hands.[36] We must also address misinformation at its source—the elites and opinion leaders who strategically disseminate misinformation through the information ecosystem.

Over the past several decades, American politics has been rife with rumors. As I will discuss, the rise of Donald Trump and his public embrace of misinformation and innuendo has certainly affected the information ecosystem in a sizable and enduring way. But Trump is neither the cause nor the only instantiation of the rise of rumors. Over the long term, we need to think about the shape and nature of the larger information environment and what incentives can be deployed to convince leaders to forgo tactics of misinformation and rumor.

Once again, this is easier said than done. And this task is especially difficult because political leaders benefit from spreading rumors. The problem is further compounded because, as I will show in chapter 5, politicians may not necessarily pay a cost for their lies—especially in the United States. Even when misinformation is corrected—and people accept those corrections—their overall evaluations of the politicians who spread misinformation is largely unchanged. That said, there are some hopeful findings in other countries. In Australia, for instance, correcting misinformation *does* reduce citizens' evaluations of leaders who promote mistruths. Perhaps with a more targeted strategy, politicians in the United States could be held accountable as well.

Plan of the Book

Throughout the remainder of this book, I critically examine the challenge of political rumors through a metaphor of a pebble in a pond. When a pebble is tossed into a pond, waves ripple outward, diminishing in strength as they move away from the initial point of impact. When it comes to rumors, a similar pattern arises: after creators plant the first seeds of a rumor—in essence, dropping the pebble into the pond—its effects emanate outward into the mass public, with the strength of individuals' belief in the rumor diminishing as it moves from a core circle of believers to more uncertain individuals to active disbelievers. I use this theoretic framework to explore political rumors through a series of empirical studies of mass and elite political behavior.

In the first two empirical sections of the book, I focus on the mass public, with the dual goals of understanding why citizens come to believe some political rumors but not others, and identifying effective strategies for debunking rumors after they first take hold. In the final part of the book, I turn my attention to the elite actors who create and exploit rumors for their own political

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benefit. As part of this process, I investigate whether, and under what conditions, leaders may be held accountable by the public for spreading misinformation and document distinct patterns of elite rumor discourse across party lines. In doing so, I bring to light key opportunities and challenges for combating political rumors, conspiracy theories, and misinformation and offer guidance to scholars, practitioners, and other stakeholders about how best to tackle this growing threat. Note that an appendix to the book containing tables and figures not included in the text can be found at this book's website: https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691158389/political-rumors

I begin in the next chapter by providing a historical overview and describe the anatomy of rumors and misinformation. I then discuss how such rumors can spread through the public, including the role played by social media.

In chapter 3, I turn to the empirical study of rumor belief, exploring ten original surveys I collected from 2010 to the waning days of the Trump presidency. This broad span of data allows me to observe what has changed and what has stayed the same as American politics has unfolded, rather than focusing on just rumors and misinformation in the current environment. I then use a series of original experiments to demonstrate that the people who say that they believe that Obama is a Muslim or that George W. Bush allowed the 9/11 attack to occur are not simply venting anger or frustration at the president; they sincerely think these things are true. Finally, I move beyond a focus on the believers to explore the full distribution of belief in rumors—from the believers to the uncertain to the disbelievers. Although there are core believers who are likely to accept a rumor no matter its content, partisanship fundamentally shapes belief in political rumors. Republicans are more likely to reject rumors that implicate Republicans in wrongdoing, and similarly, Democrats are more likely to reject rumors about Democratic malfeasance. The failure to reject rumors therefore arises from a combination of generalized belief and specific interest. At the same time, I find a degree of partisan asymmetry in my data. The interaction of conspiratorial inclination and partisan attachments predict the degree of support for rumors among both Democrats and Republicans, but the importance of conspiratorial dispositions and partisan identity tends to be greater for rumors targeting Democrats. I return to this question of partisan asymmetry in the nature of rumor belief in later chapters. But putting this asymmetry aside for the moment, it is clear that rumors can gain traction among individuals of varied political stripes.

Showing which types of people believe certain rumors to be true is only half the story. A democracy in which lies and falsehoods run rampant cannot function properly. When citizens do not trust their leaders, disharmony

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and chaos are the result. Dispelling the rumors that plague today's political system is critical. As scholars have learned, and as the American public has repeatedly demonstrated over the past decade, this is a daunting task. We can see these processes in the experiences of two recent presidents—one who sought to combat rumors and another who tried to spread them. Take first the presidency of Barack Obama. The Obama administration repeatedly tried to dispel the rumors that plagued his term of office. During the 2008 presidential contest, Obama released a computer printout of his birth certificate on a campaign website, but this did little to quell the "birther" controversy. In April 2011, he released his long-form birth certificate. For a time, it appeared that this strategy was effective. In the week after he released the document, the public's rejection of the birther rumor increased greatly. The proportion of the public who said that Obama was born in the United States rose from just over half to two-thirds of the public. But the effect of Obama's action on public perceptions was short lived. Most of the increase in the percentage of respondents who say that Obama was born in the United States dissipated in a matter of months.

Obama also addressed the rumors surrounding the health care bill, directly refuting the death panel rumor at town hall meetings in New Hampshire in the summer of 2009. However, the administration's strategy similarly failed to stem the tide. Polls administered throughout 2010 showed that a large portion of the American public continued to believe that the government was prepared to enact death panels—a contention that still plagues discussions of health care reform to this day. The failure of the Obama administration to correct widespread mistruths and the difficulty involved in correcting these rumors demonstrate just how sticky rumors can be. However, in the second half of the book I show that by paying close attention to the types of factors that give rumors their power, we might be able to learn how to combat these rumors in a more effective manner.

In a rational society, expertise should carry weight in the public sphere in its own right. But this is not always the case. Because facts are not self-correcting, establishing facts and truth is only half the battle. In addition to the message, we need to pay attention to the messenger. Here we can potentially turn the power of partisanship on its head. In chapter 4, I use the ACA death panel rumor as a case study of one strategy that could be effective—namely using messengers who speak against their apparent interest.

But this strategy can only go so far. Targeting individual rumors and misinformation might work in the short term, but it is akin to playing Whac-A-Mole, batting down rumors as they pop up on the political landscape,

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only to have a new set appear. In chapter 5, I discuss this Whac-A-Mole strategy of political fact-checking in the context of the Trump presidency. One important point that underscores the lessons of chapter 4 is that the impact of corrections is short-lived. If this approach is similar to playing Whac-A-Mole, its effectiveness is like playing with a weak mallet.

Finally, I turn to the role played by politicians in forming misinformation. I lay much of the blame at the feet of political leaders. As citizens, we need to think about the role that politicians can play in exacerbating the diffusion of political rumors and their acceptance among the American public, and we need to take responsibility for whom we put in power. It is the job of our leaders to stand up and challenge unsubstantiated rumors and outright falsehoods, even when the targets of such rumors are their political adversaries. Politicians have tremendous power to lead and shape the information environment. Our leaders can choose to amplify conspiracy theories or to tamp them down. We have seen what happens when they take the former path; to sustain our democracy, they need to forgo short-term political calculations and take the latter road. In chapter 6, I assess how the content and tone of elite discussions about rumors affect mass opinion. This chapter provides suggestive observational evidence that elites can shape mass belief about rumor and misinformation. I then explore the dynamics of these processes using experiments wherein I vary the partisan tone and content of rumors and their corrections. Though my empirical findings are inconclusive, they do suggest that politicians—and Republican politicians in particular—have contributed to and exacerbated the problem of political rumors in modern society.

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