Received: 23 February 2024 | Accepted: 12 May 2024

DOI: 10.1002/poi3.407

RESEARCH ARTICLE

P&I Policy & Internet | PSO | WILEY

Blame and obligation: The importance of libertarianism and political orientation in the public assessment of disinformation in the United States

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Funding information

National Science and Technology Council (Taiwan), Grant/Award Number: 112-2628-H-002-002-

Abstract

Disinformation concerns have heightened the importance of regulating content and speech in digital communication environments. Perceived risks have led to widespread public support for stricter control measures, even at the expense of individual speech rights. To better understand these preferences in the US context, we investigate public attitudes regarding blame for and obligation to address digital disinformation by drawing on political ideology, libertarian values, trust in societal actors, and issue salience. A manual content analysis of open-ended survey responses in combination with an issue salience experiment shows that political orientation and trust in actors primarily drive blame attribution, while libertarianism predominantly informs whose obligation it is to stop the spread. Additionally, enhancing the salience of specific aspects of the issue can influence people's assessments of blame and obligation. Our findings reveal a range of attributions, underlining the need for careful balance in regulatory interventions. Additionally, we expose a gap in previous literature by demonstrating libertarianism's unique role vis-à-vis political orientation in the context of regulating content and speech in digital communication environments.

KEYWORDS

content analysis, democracy, discourse, disinformation, internet regulation

INTRODUCTION

Growing fears about digital disinformation[1] have raised issues with the governance of digital communication environments to new prominence. Notably, other than in earlier controversies about digital governance – as the digital copyright wars (Baldwin, 2014; Lessig, 2004), the protest against the German Access Impediment Act (Berghofer & Sell, 2015), or the international protests against Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the PROTECT IP Act (PIPA) (Benkler et al., 2015) – this time, the perceived dangers of digital disinformation have contributed internationally to broad public support for stricter control of digital communication environments by governments and companies (Skaaning & Krishnarajan, 2021) even at the cost of speech rights of individuals. For example, in the United States, a country with a strong tradition of lionizing speech rights in the face of government or corporate censors (Pasquale, 2016; Weiland, 2017), the public support for stronger speech regulation in digital communication environments by the government jumped between 2018 and 2021 from 39% to 48% (Mitchell & Walker, 2021). The public seems to perceive disinformation as a crucial problem in digital communication environments and accordingly demands for greater regulatory oversight (Skaaning & Krishnarajan, 2021). To better understand the underlying drivers and consequences of these issues, we examine who is blamed for disinformation in digital communication environments and ask who should be obligated to fix associated problems in the United States, a country arguably at the forefront of the international debate regarding the dangers of disinformation.

The perceived dangers of disinformation figure strongly in international regulatory debates and initiatives (Neo, 2021). For example, state actors regularly point to an often surprisingly thinly documented threat of disinformation to justify greater regulatory powers of the state over digital communication environments (Peukert, 2023). Disinformation is, therefore, a topic of great relevance in understanding people's preferences toward the regulation of digital communication environments and their support for solutions ranging from self-governance, external governance, and co-governance (Gorwa, 2019). This raises the question of whether people deviate from underlying preferences of the role of state control in society or whether disinformation functions as just another regulatory object, subject to the same underlying preferences.

Looking at the issue closely suggests that blame and obligation are two distinct attitude objects that should be driven by different factors: Assigning blame is clearly connected with prior research in comparable areas. We can assume that the assignment of blame is highly affective and consequently connected with previously held attitudes about societal actors. Since disinformation is a deeply politicized issue, attributions of blame for disinformation should align with deeper political fault lines (Farkas & Schou, 2018; Kozyreva et al., 2023; Li & Su, 2020; Tong et al., 2020). Accordingly, people's political orientation will matter in their assessments. Going beyond ideology, distrust in specific societal actors should also align with blame attributions.

Obligation is less obviously connected with affective judgments. Assigning an actor the obligation to fix problems of disinformation means assigning them greater means of control over information environments and speech. This makes it an attitude objective that likely is more strongly aligned with deeper attitudes about the way society should be governed, in other words, the role of the state in people's lives, especially their preferences for freedom from state interference. Thus, libertarian values (Iyer et al., 2012) and, more specifically, the dimension covering negative liberties might be a better predictor than political orientation.

Lastly, there is the question of how well these attitudes and their underlying connections are developed and how stable they are. Here, we can manipulate salience to better understand this. For well-established, and clearly developed attitudes, we should not expect increased salience to change the underlying explanatory attitudes. Conversely, if a short information

treatment manages to do so, we can conclude that attitudes on blame and obligation are not settled yet and object to the influence of public discourse and communicative interventions.

Our main research question is: What factors explain the attributions of blame and obligation in the context of disinformation in digital information environments? We adopt a measurement approach similar to Tong et al. (2020), who used open-ended answers in a survey focusing on citizens' interpretation of the term "fake news." Similarly, we measure our outcome variables, blame and obligation, through open-ended responses that we classified using manual content analysis. Additionally, we use an experiment to manipulate issue salience, introducing a treatment that underscores the dangers posed by the spread of disinformation, thereby amplifying the issue's salience.

Our findings suggest that regulatory interventions to stop disinformation should take care to align more closely with deeper discussions and public preferences for the governance of society than momentary attributions of blame. Reacting to the affective assignment of blame might, in the short run, leave people satisfied, but in the long run, interventions running counter to deeper normative ideas about the way society should be run will prove counterproductive and will not improve the satisfaction with contemporary communication environments and political speech.

BLAME AND OBLIGATION: POLITICAL ORIENTATION, LIBERTARIANISM, TRUST, AND SALIENCE

Digital communication environments come with an inherent loss of gatekeeper control over content and information quality (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2022). This has raised the dangers of accidental misinformation or intentional disinformation becoming prominent in political discourse and misleading people (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Associated dangers feature prominently in public, regulatory, and academic debate (Camargo & Simon, 2022; Simon & Camargo, 2021) and made the governance of digital platforms and communication spaces an important topic (Gorwa, 2019). Related public views and attitudes have become more pronounced and start to feature in the academic debate, as with attitudes on content moderation (Kozyreva et al., 2023; Pradel et al., 2024) or the origin of disinformation (Mitchell & Walker, 2021; Skaaning & Krishnarajan, 2021). This turn to the public brings new opportunities in the study of disinformation and governance of communication environments. One promising perspective is examining who people blame for the spread of disinformation and who they see as obligated to fix the problem.

The discourse around disinformation is motivated by far more than exclusive concerns about information quality (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Farkas & Schou, 2018; Jungherr & Rauchfleisch, 2024; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021; Tong et al., 2020). Disinformation discourse has become a routine element in political competition, and associated concerns are connected to deeper attitudes about the role of the state in people's lives or people's relationship with democratic institutions and the media. These different aspects make it a multifaceted issue with sometimes contradicting diagnoses or proposals. Untangling this set of influences is crucial to better understand people's relationship with the term and the underlying societal problem. Accordingly, we need to account for these aspects if we want to explain people's attribution of *blame* and *obligation*. Who do people blame for the spread of disinformation, and who do they see as obligated to solve associated problems?

The role of blame has been widely studied in political science. This includes scenarios where politicians blame their opponents for issues such as a poor economy (Bisgaard, 2015) and situations where citizens assign blame when policies fail (Lyons & Jaeger, 2014). The analysis of who citizens blame and how politicians use blame as a strategy, especially in different crisis events, has been a focus of several studies

(Bisgaard, 2015; Malhotra & Kuo, 2008). However, the attribution of blame in the context of disinformation is more complex. Prior research finds that people hold politicians as primarily responsible for the spread of disinformation. However, it also shows that ordinary people, social media companies, journalists, and the media are frequently viewed as sources of the problem (Blanco-Herrero & Sánchez-Holgado, 2021; Newman et al., 2021). Here, political orientation has a strong influence on blame attribution (Bisgaard, 2015; Farkas & Schou, 2018; Li & Su, 2020; Lyons & Jaeger, 2014; Malhotra & Kuo, 2008). The literature largely attributes this to motivated reasoning, specifically the filtering and assessing of information in accordance with existing preferences (Lyons & Jaeger, 2014). We assume this mechanism to also matter when people evaluate who is responsible for spreading disinformation (Farkas & Schou, 2018; Li & Su, 2020; Tong et al., 2020).

While the question of who is to blame for the spread of disinformation has already received considerable attention, the question about the obligation of actors to stop the spread of disinformation is still undercovered. The question is most prominently discussed on a conceptual level in the field of platform governance as well as in the content moderation literature, with a stronger focus on citizens' attitudes.

Scholars often distinguish between private sector interventions (Cheng & Chen, 2020; Neo, 2021), government regulation (Riedl et al., 2022), and civil society's responsibility (Riedl et al., 2021). This distinction is also reflected in the approaches discussed in the platform regulation literature, which primarily differentiates between self-governance, external governance, and co-governance (Gorwa, 2019). This underscores the importance of adopting a multistakeholder governance approach (Helberger et al., 2018). While support for different responsibility attribution varies within countries (Riedl et al., 2021), Neo (2021) identifies specific national discourses about the regulation of disinformation. For example, the US discourse focuses more on the self-governance of tech companies as government regulations would potentially threaten freedom of speech, whereas, in the EU and Australia, the state plays a more critical role by collaborating with companies and overseeing their actions (Neo, 2021). While several studies have specifically analyzed citizens' attitudes toward moderating specific content on social media platforms (Kozyreva et al., 2023; Pradel et al., 2024), few studies have analyzed responsibility attribution. A most relevant exception is Riedl et al.'s (2021) survey study, which explicitly asks who should be responsible for content moderation interventions on Facebook. In both the United States and Germany, citizens mostly assign Meta as a company the responsibility followed by media companies with Facebook pages, law enforcement, and oneself as a user.

This paper focuses on four potential factors that can explain blame attribution and who is seen as responsible for stopping the spread of disinformation. These include political orientation as well as trust in specific actors as primary factors for blame attribution. Libertarianism, as a fundamental view of how society should be governed, should be a crucial factor in assigning responsibility to stop the spread of disinformation. Lastly, we examine the role of issue salience.

Political orientation

The assignment of blame and obligation in the context of disinformation corresponds with deeper political fault lines. Accordingly, people's political orientation will matter in their assessments.

The perceived threat of disinformation and its attributions to others is a deeply political phenomenon. While the perception of disinformation as an important societal problem is increasingly widespread (Mitchell & Walker, 2021; Skaaning & Krishnarajan, 2021), the political leaning of people is likely to play a specific role.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): *How does political orientation explain who is blamed for creating and spreading made-up news and false information and who is obligated to solve associated problems?*

Among political factions, blaming the political opponent as a spreader of disinformation is used as a label in political competition, as has been shown for the use of the term *fake news* (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Farkas & Schou, 2018; Li & Su, 2020; Tong et al., 2020). This should lead people leaning toward political belief systems associated with specific political parties to be more likely to identify politicians as culprits for the spread of disinformation since they follow signals of their respective parties and spokespersons in the media blaming the respective other side.

Going further, in any given country, specific parties and associated political factions – including party supporters and partisan media outlets – can, over time, become associated with the spread of disinformation – be it through their own active dissemination of disinformation or by their opponents' extensive labeling efforts (Egelhofer et al., 2022; Farkas & Schou, 2018). The United States provides such a case in which former US President Donald Trump, his followers, and associates stuck out in their readiness to invent and disseminate false information (Benkler et al., 2018; Jacobson, 2021). More generally, Li and Su (2020) have shown that using the term "fake news" can serve as a marker of group identity, marking the borders between in- and out-groups. Furthermore, prior research shows that people often blame their political opponents for spreading disinformation (Lima et al., 2022) or mention them when asked about "fake news" (Tong et al., 2020). Accordingly, supporters of political factions in the focus of disinformation accusations will likely differ in their assessments of blame and obligation than those of their opponents.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). The more partisan a person, the more likely politicians and political institutions are mentioned as mainly responsible for creating and spreading made-up news and false information.[2]

Libertarianism

The attribution of blame and obligation regarding disinformation is also likely to follow people's deeper attitudes about the role of the state in their lives, especially their preferences for freedom from state interference. States vary with regard to the preferences of their people regarding individual liberties, communitarian values, or the role of the state.

These varying attitudes also matter with regard to the public discussion of disinformation. For example, Neo (2021) shows that in the US discourse typically frames "fake news" as a minor societal issue and highlights the private sector's autonomy. In contrast, he finds for the EU that discourse frames fake news as a political problem and highlights political guidance as a response to the problem is most prevalent. The diagnosis and proposed responses to disinformation as a societal problem appear to vary according to deeper cultural conceptions of the role of the state in general (Riedl et al., 2021). While prior research has already examined attitudes toward censorship (Riedl et al., 2021, 2022), the impact of broader political ideologies beyond partisanship on perceptions of blame and obligation has yet to be studied.

The concept of *libertarianism* encompasses related attitudes. Psychological studies have demonstrated that libertarians exhibit, among other characteristics, a "stronger endorsement of individual liberty as their foremost guiding principle, and weaker endorsement of all other moral principles" and "lower interdependence and social relatedness" (Iyer et al., 2012, p. 1). Particularly in the United States, libertarian values have become increasingly prevalent and

pronounced over time. Importantly, these values are found across the political spectrum and are not confined to the two major parties. Furthermore, attitudes toward digital technologies have often been strongly associated with libertarian ideas, as evidenced by the concept of cyber-libertarianism (Jordan, 2001). As such, attitudes within the libertarianism cluster (Zwolinski & Tomasi, 2023) should also be connected with assigning blame and obligation regarding disinformation. We specifically focus on preferences for negative freedoms – the freedom from state interventions – that feature prominently in the libertarian discourse (Weiland, 2017).

Research Question 2 (RQ2): *How does libertarianism explain who is mainly blamed for creating and spreading made-up news and false information and who is found as obligated to fixing associated problems?*

Specifically, libertarian attitudes should matter for the assigned obligation of actors to stop the spread of misinformation. Given the strong emphasis of individual liberties, libertarian respondents should be less likely to see central authorities – like governments, news media, or social media companies – as actors obligated to solve the societal problems of disinformation.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). The more libertarian a person, the more likely that the public/individual and market are mentioned as having the obligation to stop the spread of made-up news and false information.[3]

Trust

Moving from the general to the specific, attitudes toward various societal actors are also likely to matter in the assignment of blame and obligation in the context of disinformation. This includes trust in actors central to the access, spread, and quality of information in the public arena – such as government regulators, politicians, and the news media. It is important to recognize the different dimensions of trust. Trust is often conceptualized to consist of at least two dimensions: competence and trustworthiness (Hovland et al., 1953) others add to this the question of benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995; Schoorman et al., 2007). This category should be of special importance in the context of disinformation, where some respondents feel themselves and their representatives unjustly persecuted by opponents or the media.

Research Question 3 (RQ3): *How does trust in specific actors explain whether they are blamed for creating and spreading made-up news and false information and whether they are found as obligated to fixing associated problems?*

More specifically, distrust in specific actors might raise the likelihood among respondents to attribute blame for disinformation. Conversely, positive expressions of trust should be connected with the assignment of obligation to solve problems associated with disinformation.

Hypothesis 3 (H3). The higher the trust in journalists/regulators/politicians/social media companies, the more likely that they are mentioned as having the obligation to stop the spread of made-up news and false information.[4]

Salience

The degree to which situational factors impact the assignment of blame and obligation regarding disinformation tells us something about attitude stability. The more well-developed an attitude is, the less salience of the issue and specific aspects should matter.

> **Research Question 4 (RQ4):** *How does increased salience of the spread of disinformation and associated societal problems influence the assignment of blame of obligation regarding disinformation?*

Specifically, we anticipate that salience will be significant in the assignment of blame and obligation as we do not expect underlying attitudes to be well-developed and stable. Rather than turning to general categories of blame or obligation, we predict respondents to be more aware of certain actors' roles in spreading and ceasing disinformation (Weaver, 1991). For instance, Riedl et al. (2021) demonstrated that people who perceived user comments on the internet as a threat also tended to assign a specific actor – namely, social media companies – responsible for rectifying the associated problems. Thus, we surmise that increased salience will raise the likelihood of specific actors being blamed for spreading disinformation and lower the likelihood that a general category – like "the people" – will be mentioned as obligated to solve associated problems.

> **Hypothesis 4 (H4).** Increased salience of the spread and problems of disinformation will increase the likelihood that politicians are blamed for the spread of made-up news and false information.[5]

> **Hypothesis 5 (H5).** Increased salience of the spread and problems of disinformation will lower the likelihood that people are mentioned as mainly obligated for stopping the spread of made-up news and false information.[6]

> **Hypothesis 6 (H6).** Increased salience of the spread and problems of disinformation will increase the likelihood that social media companies are mentioned as mainly obligated for stopping the spread of made-up news and false information.[7]

DATA AND METHODS

The IRBs at the host institutions of all authors approved the study. The data was collected in a more extensive survey experiment focused on disinformation discourse.

We primarily focus on open-ended responses to survey questions, resulting in an exploratory research design. Nevertheless, we did have certain expectations and pre-registered several hypotheses and the overall research design.[8] All hypotheses reported in this manuscript were explicitly pre-registered. Furthermore, in our preregistration, we transparently acknowledge the study's exploratory analysis design, reinforcing our decision to include the additional RQs (see Supporting Information: Appendix D.2 for a complete analysis of the preregistration).[9]

We recruited 1200 participants from the survey research company *Prolific*, ensuring sufficient power to detect small effects (see Supporting Information: Appendix A.1 for details). The data were collected within a single day on May 9, 2022. Individuals based in the United States who were 18 years or older were eligible to participate and were compensated £1 for their participation as we used *Prolific*'s European platform (equivalent to an hourly rate of £8.57, paid in US dollars). Participants were randomly allocated to

either a pure control group ($n = 604$) or a treatment group ($n = 596$), where respondents were exposed to a treatment mimicking a typical journalistic article on the dangers of disinformation in online communication environments. The treatment served to increase the salience of the issue. The treatment presents findings from scholarly works frequently referred to when explaining the hazards of disinformation and discusses real assessments and reactions by governments. These findings were based on studies by Vosoughi et al. (2018), Mitchell et al. (2020), and Thorson (2016). The treatment mirrors actual contributions to disinformation discourse and contains no misleading information or deception of respondents (for a replica of the treatment, see Supporting Information: Appendix B.1). We asked two multiple-choice knowledge questions with three answer options and a "I don't know" option (correct answer for the topic of treatment: 99.8%; correct answer for institution mentioned in treatment: 73.5%). Respondents in the pure control group were not exposed to any information but were just surveyed for their attitudes toward disinformation. Furthermore, Welch Two Sample *t*-test ($t(1188.7) = -2.535$, $p = 0.011$) indicated that the treatment significantly increased the perceived salience of made-up news and information ("How much of a problem do you think made-up news and information are in the country today?" 1 – No problem at all to 7 – Extremely big problem), with the treatment group reporting a higher mean score ($M = 5.79$, $SD = 1.27$) compared to the control group ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.41$).

The questionnaire started with questions about political orientation and libertarian values. Then, participants were asked about their opinion about disinformation before they finished the questionnaire with a section with questions about sociodemographics. After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed and redirected back to *Prolific* to finish the study. As we used an online panel, our sample represents an internet population. 49.4% of the sample was male, the median age was 35 ($M = 38.62$, $SD = 13.47$), 22.8% reported an income of more than 100,000 USD, 74.8% identified as White, and 17.9% indicated a Master's degree or higher. This means the sample is, on average, younger, has a lower income, and is slightly less White than all Americans (see Supporting Information: Appendix A.2).

All independent and dependent variables used in our study are summarized in Table 1 (for a complete mapping of concepts to items and question wordings as well as the complete questionnaire, see Supporting Information: Appendix C.1). Political orientation was measured on a 7-point scale (1 – liberal; 7 – conservative). The strength of ideological alignment was measured as the absolute value after we subtracted 4 from the score of the liberal-conservative scale (1–7), giving us an index ranging from 0 to 3. For libertarianism, we used two items from prior research (Kahan et al., 2009); "The government interferes far too much in our everyday lives." and "The government should stop telling people how to live their lives." ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.59$, Spearman–Brown = 0.89). Regarding trust, we follow Bromme and Rothmund (2021) and use three items from the Dispositional Trust in Politicians scale.

For our outcome variables, we used two open questions in this study, an approach that has been used in prior studies (Lima et al., 2022; Tong et al., 2020). In the first question, we ask who is mainly responsible for the spread of false information ("In your opinion, who is mainly responsible for creating and spreading made-up news and false information?"). In the following question, we asked respondents who they think is mainly responsible for stopping the spread of false information ("In your opinion, who is responsible for stopping the spread of made-up news and false information?"). To disincentivize just clicking through this part of the survey but still allowing them not to answer these questions, we asked respondents to type "I don't know" in case they do not have a specific opinion ("Write 'I don't know' if you don't have a specific opinion").

We developed a codebook with eight broad categories (see Supporting Information: Appendix C.2 for the complete codebook with more specific subcategories and how they

TABLE 1 Overview of variables used for analysis.

Variable	*M* (SD)	*n*
RQ1: Political orientation	3.07 (1.79)	1200
H1: Partisanship	1.7 (1.09)	1200
RQ2/H2: Libertarianism (2 items, $\alpha = 0.89$, Spearman–Brown = 0.89)	4.61 (1.59)	1200
RQ3/H3: Trust in politicians (3 items, $\alpha = 0.82$)	2.70 (1.27)	1200
RQ3/H3: Trust in journalists (3 items, $\alpha = 0.85$)	3.71 (1.48)	1200
RQ3/H3: Trust in social media companies (3 items, $\alpha = 0.72$)	3.09 (1.35)	1199[a]
RQ3/H3: Trust in regulators (3 items, $\alpha = 0.82$)	3.15 (1.34)	1200
Obligation Media	17.2%	1200
Obligation Social Media	26.7%	1200
Obligation Politicians	3.4%	1200
Obligation Regulators and Government	16.3%	1200
Obligation People	27.1%	1200
Blame Media	25%	1200
Blame Social Media	8.3%	1200
Blame Politicians	17.3%	1200
Blame Regulators and Government	3%	1200
Blame People	16%	1200
Blame Republicans	15.9%	1200
Blame Democrats	4.3%	1200
Gender (1 = male)	49%	1200
Education (1 = Master's degree or higher)	18%	1200

[a]For one respondent, we have missing data for at least one of the measured items used for this index.

were combined to form our variables). The codebook is roughly based on the categories described in the preregistration and was developed by the authors after a close reading of responses to the two questions. The outcome variables used for blame and obligation (see Table 1) were created by checking if at least one of the relevant subcategories was mentioned. For some of the outcome variables, the same subcategories were used (e.g., the subcategory "Politicians Republicans" for the variables "Politicians" and "Republicans and far-right"). However, during the coding process, the specific subcategories were coded individually. We used the same codebook for both questions. Coders could code more than a single subcategory per answer, as many respondents mentioned several different actors in the same response (e.g., "anyone from politicians to Big Pharma to government agencies, to large conglomerates"). Interestingly, Lima et al. (2022), whose study we were unaware of when developing our codebook and conducting the coding, independently arrived at similar categories in their small-scale study about blame. Two coders first coded a random sample of 50 answers for each question to evaluate the intercoder reliability. While the first test was already promising (single categories Krippendorff's α between 0.56 and 0.89), we still discussed the cases with disagreement and clarified some of the categories. We then used

a new sample of 50 answers for each question. In the second test, the coders achieved a good intercoder reliability score overall as well as for each variable used in our analysis (single categories Krippendorff's α between 0.74 and 1; see Supporting Information: Appendix C.2 for details about the categories and variables used in our manuscript). The answers from the first pretest were coded again in the final coding. Each coder coded half of the responses of our complete sample. We ran a binary logistic regression for each hypothesis. All models include political orientation, education, and gender as pre-registered covariates. We decided to run Bayesian logistic regression as these models have several advantages. While frequentist confidence intervals and *p*-values are difficult to understand and often misinterpreted (Morey et al., 2016), Bayesian credible intervals can be directly interpreted. All models were estimated with the R package *brms* and used the default priors in the package. For all our models, we used 4000 iterations with 2000 iterations for burn-in. All chains converged, and the Rhat scores were all 1. The outcome of the Bayesian model is also the same in our case as the outcome of frequentist Binary logistic regressions (see also Supporting Information: Appendices D.2 and D.3). Furthermore, to test the robustness of our findings, we used a specification curve analysis (SCA; Simonsohn et al., 2020), which we report in Supporting Information: Appendix D.3, where we examined all possible model specifications related to our predictors and covariates to evaluate the stability of the estimates for each main predictor.

RESULTS: BLAME AND OBLIGATION

We start with descriptive results. Here, we depend on the pure control group ($n = 604$), as respondents were not potentially influenced by the treatment. Asking people who, in their view, is to blame for the spread of disinformation and who should be obligated to fix this problem, we find that most respondents have a clear view (for a complete table with all subcategories, see Supporting Information: Appendix C.2). Only 15.56% of respondents state no opinion on who is to blame, while 19.21% state no opinion on whose obligation it is to fix it.

Respondents blame the media (27.65%), politicians (19.37%), and people (15.73%) for the spread of disinformation. Foreign actors, in contrast, are only mentioned by 6%. Furthermore, only 8.77% blame social media companies for the spread of disinformation.

In contrast, people hold the following actors responsible for fixing the problem of disinformation: people (29.97%), social media companies (22.02%), news media and journalists (18.21%), and government and regulators (15.73%). Politicians, whether in general or from a specific party (3.97%), are almost never mentioned as actors whose obligation is to stop the spread of disinformation.

Looking at these responses shows that Americans currently think of disinformation predominantly as a problem instigated by news media and individuals (be they people in general or politicians). At the same time, they predominantly do not see it as a problem that the state or state regulators are obligated to fix. Instead, they predominantly feel people themselves should fix corresponding problems, as well as social media companies, news media, and journalists. Only a minority sees the state as obligated to fix problems associated with disinformation.

Political orientation and partisanship

In this and the following sections, we use the complete sample, including the pure control group as well as the treatment group ($n = 1200$). This correlative evidence clearly shows that both blame (see Figure 1) and obligation (see Figure 2) are politicized phenomena, with

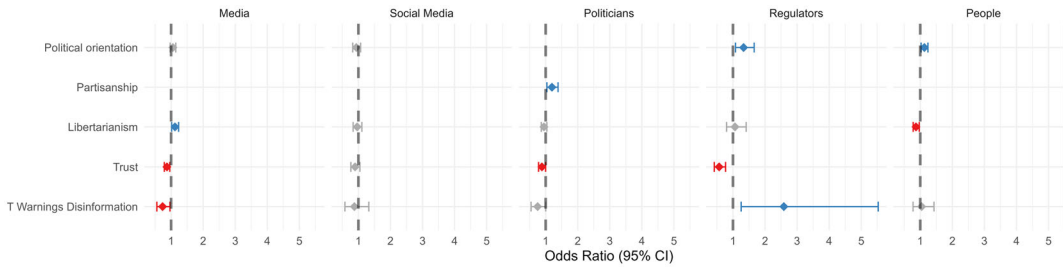

FIGURE 1 Estimates shown as OR with 95%-CI for the outcome variables for blame. A gray line indicates overlap with OR = 1. Color indicates positive (blue) or negative effect (red).

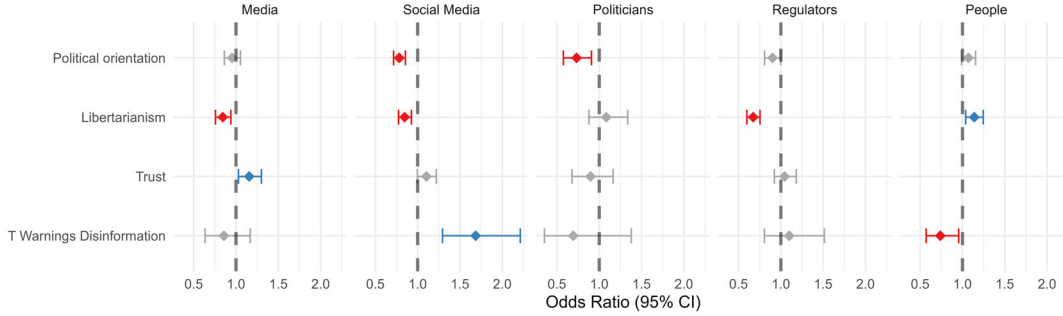

FIGURE 2 Estimates shown as OR with 95%-CI for the outcome variables for obligation. A gray line indicates overlap with OR = 1. Color indicates positive (blue) or negative effect (red).

clear differences between people with different political leanings and those politically involved and uninvolved (see Supporting Information: Appendix D.1 for the complete models). For each outcome variable, we report a single model in which we include all predictors covered by our hypotheses and research questions.

Conservatives and liberals differ in their assignment of blame and obligation. The more conservative a person is, the less likely they are to assign primary obligation for halting the spread of false information to social media companies (OR = 0.78, 95% CI [0.72, 0.85]) and politicians (OR = 0.73, 95% CI [0.58, 0.91]). In terms of blame, our analysis suggests that the more conservative a person is, the more likely they are to attribute blame to the government and regulators (OR = 1.33, 95% CI [1.08, 1.66]) as well as the general public (OR = 1.13, 95% CI [1.03, 1.24]) for the spread of false information.

Differences persist when we investigate attributions of false information dissemination specifically to Republicans or Democrats. The more conservative an individual, the more likely they are to blame the Democrats (OR = 1.53, 95% CI [1.29, 1.83]), and the more liberal an individual, the more likely they are to blame Republicans for spreading disinformation (OR = 0.63, 95% CI [0.55, 0.71]). This finding is also supported if, instead of political orientation, we use party id Republican and Democrat (see Supporting Information: Appendix D.1.3).

Blaming the other side for disinformation is clearly a bipartisan phenomenon. This translates into support for H1, suggesting that increased partisanship and stronger ideological alignment in an individual correlates with a higher likelihood of attributing the spread of false information to politicians and political institutions (OR = 1.20, 95% CI [1.04, 1.39]).

Libertarianism

As expected in H2, our data shows that a person's general attitudes toward the role of the state matters strongly here. In attributing obligation to who should fix problems associated with disinformation, libertarianism clearly matters. We find that the more libertarian a person is, the greater the likelihood they will name the general public as obligated to stop the spread of made-up news and false information (OR = 1.14, 95% CI [1.04, 1.25]). Inversely, the more libertarian an individual, the less likely they are to name social media companies (OR = 0.85, 95% CI [0.77, 0.93]), media and journalists (OR = 0.84, 95% CI [0.76, 0.94]), or the government along with regulators (OR = 0.67, 95% CI [0.60, 0.75]) as obligated to fix associated problems. In clear accordance with the underlying attitudes toward the role of the state, markets, and responsibilities of the individual, we find libertarians to declare the individual themselves as obligated to deal with disinformation, leave companies free from associated burdens, and to not empower institutional actors, such as state regulators or the media, further to rule over and interfere in communication spaces.

This pattern continues with respect to blame assignment. A stronger libertarian leaning increases the likelihood of attributing primary responsibility for the dissemination of false information to the media (OR = 1.12, 95% CI [1.02, 1.23]). Conversely, such individuals are less inclined to identify the general public (OR = 0.87, 95% CI [0.78, 0.97]) as the primary culprit for spreading false information.

Trust

After finding that both blame and obligation concerning disinformation are connected to people's political orientations and belief systems, we now turn to the role of attitudes connected to specific actors. Here, we report the role of trust.

When considering the assignment of blame for the spread of false information, our data indicates that trust in the media (OR = 0.87, 95% CI [0.79, 0.96]) and the government and regulators (OR = 0.57, 95% CI [0.42, 0.77]) plays an important role in explaining the attribution of blame. The lower the trust in media and regulators, the more likely they are blamed for the spread of false information. This correlation, however, is not observed for social media (OR = 0.90, 95% CI [0.77, 1.05]) and politicians (OR = 0.90, 95% CI [0.79, 1.02]).

Regarding trust and the obligation to stop the spread of false information, H3 is only partly supported by our data. Our data suggests that as trust in journalists increases (OR = 1.16, 95% CI [1.03, 1.30]), so does the likelihood of attributing the duty of mitigating the propagation of false information to the media and journalists. Conversely, the data fails to substantiate H4 when considering social media companies (OR = 1.10, 95% CI [0.99, 1.22]), politicians (OR = 0.90, 95% CI [0.68, 1.16]), and the government and regulators (OR = 1.04, 95% CI [0.92, 1.18]).

Salience

Finally, we examine the role of salience in the attribution of blame and obligation concerning disinformation. In general, one would expect that the stronger attitudes are held and the more developed they are, the less they should be shifted through increased salience or the accessibility of new information. Conversely, comparatively weak attitudes should react more strongly to salience.

The results we report in this section refer to our treatment that increased the salience of the issue. Regarding the salience, our data does not support H4 (OR = 0.74, 95% CI [0.55,

0.99]). Higher salience makes it less likely that politicians are blamed for the spread of disinformation, while we expected it makes this more likely. However, our data supports H5 (OR = 0.74, 95% CI [0.57, 0.96]). Higher salience makes it less likely that people are mentioned a being mainly responsible for stopping the spread of false information. Our data also supports H6 (OR = 1.69, 95% CI [1.29, 2.21]). Higher salience makes it more likely that social media companies are mentioned as mainly obligated to stop the spread of false information (OR = 1.69, 95% CI [1.29, 2.21]). Besides the hypothesized relationships, our data shows that higher salience makes it less likely that the media are blamed (OR = 0.73, 95% CI [0.56, 0.96]) and more likely that regulators and the government are blamed (OR = 2.59, 95% CI [1.26, 5,53]).

DISCUSSION

In summary, our study highlights a set of important aspects. First, opinions about who is mainly responsible for spreading false information are diverse. Still, clear patterns emerge when considering political orientation and libertarianism. Political orientation primarily shapes blame attributions, aligning with individuals' pre-existing biases and the politicized nature of disinformation, whereas views on obligation reflect deeper societal governance values, particularly regarding state interference and individual freedoms. Additionally, low trust in different actors primarily explains blame attribution.

The findings about the role of political orientation and partisanship support prior work that indicated that concerns about digital disinformation were about more than simply information quality (Farkas & Schou, 2018; Li & Su, 2020; Lima et al., 2022; Tong et al., 2020). Public attitudes clearly mirror the politicized patterns of disinformation discourse identified before.

Our findings regarding libertarianism indicate that in their assignment of blame and obligation concerning disinformation, people act in accordance with deeper attitudes and beliefs. This is interesting for two reasons. It shows that attitudes toward disinformation do not fluctuate randomly. Consequently, the discussion of disinformation and appropriate reactions is not purely about fixing associated problems. Instead, respective discourses are clearly connected with underlying worldviews. Accordingly, achieving agreement is likely to be much harder as it is no longer simply about the issue of how to improve information quality in digital communication environments.

Although our findings about the role of trust support some of our expectations, it is interesting to note that while these attitudes are more closely connected with the specific actors in question, trust helps us less in understanding patterns in the assignment of blame and obligation than the more general attitudes such as libertarianism and political orientation. This reinforces the need to contextualize attitudes toward disinformation, associated problem fixes, and the governance of speech in digital communication spaces in general with larger underlying belief systems.

As we show, the assignment of blame and obligation aligns well with deeper belief systems and political partisanship. Does that also translate into robustness toward increased salience? In short, no. Information provided in the treatment led to a shift in attitudes only for a few of our outcome variables. The treatment did not mention politicians or politics as a driver or as connected with disinformation. Instead, it clearly mentioned the role of social media companies and referred to claims that regulators and the government might be outmatched in solving associated problems. The reported attitudinal shifts clearly match the information provided by the treatment. Accordingly, although the perceived threat of disinformation is clearly prominent among Americans, questions of blame and obligation do not seem settled with most respondents, but are open to the influence of new information from discourse or communicative interventions.

Furthermore, our results concerning the increased salience and the attribution of blame to the government, regulators, and politicians need to be discussed in more detail. First, the result with politicians is not robust enough, as our SCA indicates (see Supporting Information: Appendix D.3). Thus, this finding should be discarded. In contrast, the SCA supports the findings regarding regulators and the government. This finding is best explained by participants' general answers when asked about who is mainly to blame for the spread of false information. Our rather nonspecific treatment likely triggered more general answers (e.g., "The government" or "The people who have an agenda that can profit from spreading that fake news. Specifically, that includes way too many people to even name, anyone from politicians to Big Pharma to government agencies, to large conglomerates.").

Our study, in broad terms, aligns with what Neo (2021) identifies as the typical US discourse emphasizing the self-governance of tech companies and limited state intervention, yet it also reveals a greater level of variation among individuals. Libertarian values seem to influence this variation. Consequently, it would be promising for future studies to examine whether platform regulation can become a new cleavage issue, one that can be best explained by partisanship and libertarian ideology. Libertarianism, in particular, has been absent in studies focusing on speech regulation. Nevertheless, Kozyreva et al. (2023) have at least discussed the potential role that libertarianism might play in the differences they identified between Democrats and Republicans regarding their preferences toward content moderation. However, they did not explicitly measure libertarianism. Furthermore, Riedl et al. (2021) specifically focused on content moderation but found no correlations between support for free speech and the assumed responsibility of users or social media platforms. Our study suggests that libertarianism as an ideology could also be a suitable predictor for studies explicitly focusing on content moderation.

In our descriptive analysis of blame attribution, the low occurrence of foreign actors is noteworthy. Our analysis shows that in the United States, disinformation is seen more as a result of domestic politics than foreign influence, a view that appears to be pragmatic and realistic (Wardle, 2020). However, perceptions of disinformation may change over time and in different contexts, presenting an interesting area of future research as they are likely to shift blame attribution. Foreign influence remains a clear challenge in the public arena, highlighted in situations like Chinese influence in national politics in Taiwan (Rauchfleisch et al., 2023) and Western countries supporting Ukraine in its defense against Russia's war of aggression (Treyger et al., 2022).

Our study does have several limitations. First, we only used concise answer fields. To better understand why citizens blame specific groups and assign the responsibility of curbing the spread of false information to certain institutions, qualitative interviews would be beneficial. Despite this, answers to the questions were, on average, 13.23 words long and, in many instances, quite detailed. Furthermore, Neo (2021) analysis highlights that there are different national discourses, with the United States being rather specific. Nonetheless, as most social media companies that might be affected by platform regulation are US-based, the United States remains the most critical case in this context. Lastly, future studies should aim to compare our findings with those from the European and Asian contexts. The varied national discourses on regulation identified by Neo (2021) are likely to yield different results, providing a foundation for a comparative design that underscores these differences.

In sum, our findings provide valuable insights into public perceptions about the attribution of blame and obligation regarding disinformation. In particular, our research suggests that although disinformation is a prominent topic and attitudes toward it are largely aligned with underlying belief systems and political allegiances, enhancing the salience of specific aspects of the issue can change minds and influence people's assessments of blame and

obligation. This presents a promising avenue for the design of information campaigns, as opinions on the issue do not seem to be firmly settled.

Regarding political orientation, our finding reinforces the importance of recognizing the difference between the concerns of those deeply involved or politicized and the views of the broader population. Consequently, we should be cautious not to legitimize expansive regulatory interventions based solely on this newly emergent political conflict. Striking a balance between regulation and freedom in digital information environments is complex and should consider the diverse views within the population.

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ENDNOTES

[1] While they are often considered synonyms, the terms disinformation, misinformation, and fake news represent distinct phenomena. We align with Lecheler and Egelhofer (2022) in viewing misinformation as "incorrect or misleading information" (p. 70) in a broader sense, disinformation as "incorrect or misleading information that is disseminated deliberatively" (p. 71), and fake news as both a "type of false information that is the pseudo journalistic imitation of news—it is not only false, but fake" (p. 71) and a label employed "to discredit and delegitimize journalism and news media" (p. 71). These terms are all part of the discourse focusing on the threats of deceptive and unreliable information in digital communication spaces. In this article, we use disinformation as an umbrella term, which reflects the wording we used in our survey ("made-up news and false information").

[2] This corresponds with H8 in the pre-registration.

[3] This corresponds with H4 in the pre-registration.

[4] This corresponds with H5 in the pre-registration.

[5] This corresponds with H7 in the pre-registration.

[6] This corresponds with H3 in the pre-registration.

[7] This corresponds with H3 in the pre-registration – there it is negative and the "market."

[8] The preregistration can be viewed at https://osf.io/yx5v8.

[9] The data and code that support the findings of this study are available at https://osf.io/ky63b/.

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How to cite this article: Rauchfleisch, A., Jungherr, A. (2024). Blame and obligation: The importance of libertarianism and political orientation in the public assessment of disinformation in the United States. *Policy & Internet*, *16*, 801–817. https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.407