

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF DISINFORMATION ON DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

Disinformation is the intentional spread of false or misleading information and has been used today and in the past as a tool for manipulation and seizing power and control. The report briefly mentions the history and important definitions before delving deeper into the impacts of disinformation on American politics. The 2024 election in November has been a subject of concern when it comes to the increase in the spread of disinformation, due to the technological and media driven society that we live in. Results and surveys have been consulted and conducted to investigate the impact of disinformation on the American public and the ways in which it has impacted their trust and belief in democracy, specifically their participation and engagement with the process. Overall, this report will examine how disinformation affects citizens' psychological engagement in democratic processes

Introduction

Defining Misinformation and Disinformation:

Misinformation is described as any information that is false or inaccurate. This phenomenon has experienced a significant increase and has posed a major issue in the twenty-first century specifically, due to its correlation with decision making, trust and credibility, social interaction, etc, all of which play major roles in the success and continuation of the democratic process in an effective manner. Misinformation is currently being spread at a faster and more potent rate than ever before, due to technological advancements such as social media, and the internet, which is the ideal method for the spread of inaccurate information without consequence. Misinformation has been found to have a direct impact on events and procedures such as political campaigns and elections, religious and ethnic persecution, protests and riots, and a more recent example being various responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. (*Ecker, 2022*)

Several types of misinformation are prevalent in today's modern world, some being more effective than others. One of these forms is fake news, in which false information is broadcasted under the guise of legitimate news. Additionally, content generated through the use of Artificial Intelligence such as deepfakes, can be classified as misinformation, and can be used to impersonate public figures or fabricate events. Clickbait, which is the use of shocking, sensationalized headlines aimed at attraction readers with the goal of gaining more views or "clicks," is also utilized in the spread of misinformation. Lastly, burner accounts, which are secondary and false social media accounts often made by celebrities or political figures, are used to create conflict or false support by posing as a regular citizen. However, there are also less influential forms of misinformation including simple rumours and gossip. (*Colomina, Margalef, Youngs and Parliament, 2021*).

Another similar concept which will be discussed in this report is disinformation, a form of misinformation which refers to the distribution of false information with the intent to deceive or mislead, a common example being political propaganda spread by a government or

organisation. The active intention to profit, harm and manipulate distinguishes disinformation from its more unpremeditated and accidental counterparts. Some of the aforementioned examples can be classified as disinformation, such as AI deepfakes or burner accounts and false social media posts.

Overall, misinformation refers to the spread of inaccurate facts and information, while disinformation refers specifically to the intentional spread of false information. In political settings specifically, however, the two may be difficult to distinguish as it may be difficult to identify whether a piece of information has been spread as a part of a political campaign, or if it was simply a mistake, therefore, this report will consider both.

In relation to democracy and the democratic process, the prevalence of misinformation can have severe implications as disinformation is often utilized specifically to disrupt and undermine the democratic process. Democracy relies heavily on freedom of thought, expression, speech, and active participation and engagement. Misinformation and disinformation threaten and have a significant impact on these fundamental rights by distorting public perception and discouraging trust and belief in democratic and governmental institutions, which can have several far-reaching effects. False information can also be used to trigger violence and impulsivity, rather than the discussion, debate, and unity that the democratic process aims to encourage.

History of Disinformation and Democracy

Disinformation and propaganda have been weaponized to influence and manipulate public perception for centuries, and it has had a large historical significance. A few previous examples of the use and effectiveness of misinformation include uses such as bringing Roman emperors into power, serving as Nazi propaganda, the confusion surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to riots in the UK, as well as several previous US elections, which will be a focus of this report.

One of the most memorable and long-lasting uses of misinformation was the way in which it was used to bring Octavian, also known as Augustus Caesar, the first Emperor of Rome, to power. Following a century of civil unrest and political assassinations, in which dictator Julius Caesar was brutally murdered, two of his most influential supporters engaged in a fierce power struggle for Rome. Mark Anthony, a military general, and Octavian, Caesar's adoptive son, began an information and propaganda war, using slander and false information to discredit one another. Octavian spread the idea that Mark Anthony had become influenced and corrupted by his lover, Cleopatra, and painted his opponent to be a disloyal, philanderer, and a drunk that would not be able to successfully and effectively lead Rome. Cleopatra was a foreigner, and Octavian used this to his advantage, implanting the idea that Mark Anthony was faithless to Rome and held foreign ideals and beliefs. Although this was not the only reason for his success, Octavian's disinformation campaign assisted heavily in solidifying support and a position as Rome's first Emperor. (*Kaminska, 2017*).

Nazi political propaganda was also an integral part of the history of misinformation, and was incredibly successful, influencing public opinion, fostering strong bias, and creating division between the citizens of Germany. Through the isolation and vilification of the Jewish community, Hitler was able to blame several of Germany's military losses on this group, as well as effectively fuelling active discrimination and adding to anti-Semitic sentiment that were already existing in German society. While Augustus Caesar placed emphasis on poetry, rhetoric, and short slogans to amplify the spread of disinformation, Hitler utilized emotive messaging, emphasized stereotypes, and indoctrinated the youth. However they both used repetitive nationalistic themes to incite pride and unity in their citizens, a concept which is often used in political propaganda, even today. The Nazi propaganda campaign had enduring impacts on Germany and triggered an immense societal transformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic was met with substantial amounts of false information, and triggered a great decline in the public's trust in their governments, as well as democratic institutions as a whole. Several countries had varying initial approaches in their responses to the outbreak. Some greatly underestimated the threat, some sought to cover it up, and some were completely ineffective in limiting and preventing its spread. The large-scale panic and fear that the disease incited within citizens, as well as the conflicting and varying information being circulated, had significant detrimental effects on several nations. Additionally, social medias platforms became a huge contributor to the spread of disinformation during this time, WhatsApp being one of the leading propagators of conspiracy theories and inaccurate information. Overall, the COVID crisis was a time of deep confusion and panic, and the spread of misinformation perpetuated this significantly (*Pomerantsev, 2021*).

An extremely recent example of the negative implications of misinformation would be the most severe riots in years in Britain taking place due to false information being spread regarding the stabbing of three young girls and a Taylor Swift dance class, as well as the religious background and nationality of the perpetrator (*Copland, 2024*). Following the attack, several right-wing leaders claimed that the attacker had been a Muslim migrant, spreading rumours regarding his arrival to the UK on a "small boat" as well as the claim that he had been on an "MI6 watch list". The actual attacker, who has now been found to be born and raised in England, initially remained nameless, which contributed to the vast and effective spread of this disinformation (*News Desk, 2024*). Several influential figures, including Elon Musk, played roles in the spread of these rumours that triggered widespread violent racial and anti-immigration riots across the nation. Between 30 July and 7 August 2024, around 29 anti-immigration demonstrations occurred across 27 towns and cities in the UK, in which protester attacked religious buildings such as mosques as well as buildings housing asylum seekers and refugees (*Simon, 2024*).

The United States of America

Presidential elections have optimal conditions for the active spread of propaganda and false information, and this strategy has already been utilized in several instances. This report aims to focus on the psychological impact of disinformation specifically in the context of American

politics, and therefore, a brief overview of its prior and current usage will be necessary for conclusions made later in this report.

Firstly, disinformation is often used in this context to manipulate vulnerable voters, often those part of marginalized communities to gather increased support. There is increasing concern regarding misleading information that is currently flooding media platforms in preparation for the 2024 US election, targeted specifically towards people of colour, which could greatly impact voting patterns and outcomes. This has often been the case, in which information about and directed at this demographic become less and less credible as an election approaches (*Walk and Jain, 2024*).

For example, prior to the 2020 presidential election, several ads that connected Joe Biden to the oppressive Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro were targeted towards Latin voter specifically in order to discourage them from voting in favour of Biden. Additionally, false information targeted at foreigners or immigrants are often victims of mistranslation, creating further confusion surrounding the topic.

Content generated through the use of artificial intelligence has also been used to appeal to vulnerable communities, an example being the fabricated images featuring former President Donald Trump with Black voters, which were shared across a variety of social media platforms by conservative organisation and right-wing individuals to influence Black voters. False social media accounts are also often used to perpetuate this disinformation.

Disinformation with the aim of discrediting and falsifying the democratic process has also been prevalent within elections in the US, such as the uproar following the results of to 2020 election due to the belief that Donald Trump had been robbed of a victory and the firm insistence that the election had been fraudulent, referring to it as a “stolen” election. The rumours spread rapidly and had a widespread effect on the country, being a significant threat to the election system and the public’s trust in democratic institutions, which will be further investigated in this report. Although it was confirmed by sixty-one courts and Trump’s own Justice Department that the election was legitimate, and federal cybersecurity and election officials had declared the 2020 election “the most secure in U.S. history.”, this did not suppress the false information that was being spread, an issue that came to its peak by triggering the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6th 2021 by Trump supporters, a protest that resulted in mass destruction and even the death of crowd members. These false claims are still believed by many citizens even today.

“Trump and his party have convinced a dauntingly large number of Americans that the essential workings of democracy are corrupt, that made-up claims of fraud are true, that only cheating can thwart their victory at the polls, that tyranny has usurped their government, and that violence is a legitimate response.” Barton Gellman. *The Atlantic*

A variety of forms of disinformation have been used in these types of political contexts, but one of the primary motives for political figures and parties as to create the illusion of there being only two sides or only two opposing beliefs systems, this is often referred to as the “either-or fallacy”, and has been an effective mode of psychological manipulation. Due to this,

citizens are often firmly on one particular side and are willing to believe anything and coincides with this limited worldview, this is also known as confirmation bias, when you see information that confirms previously held opinions, it is much easier to trust. This also plays a significant role in democracy and the election process, for example, after Trump was indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of illegally retaining classified national defence documents, his supporters insisted that he was being personally attacked for political reasons.

As stated previously, this intense prevalence of disinformation has distorted the public's perception and increased confusion and distrust regarding the democratic process. Additionally, as can be seen in several given examples, this confusion can often lead to an increase in violence. Distrust in the government has also led to distrust in criminal justice systems. For example, Trump's claims that he has been personally targeted legally as well as the concept of unwarranted criminal investigations have caused the public to suspect corruption and deception in their police and forms of justice, this may have far reaching implications as jurors tend to be suspicious of the testimonies made by police officers and federal agents due to the misinformation that has been spread regarding their credibility.

Overall, the U.S. has been significantly impacted by disinformation, specifically through politics and in the face of presidential elections, and this has impacted the country beyond simple confusion and unsurety. These impacts are the focus of this report.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this report is to explore and investigate the impacts of misinformation and disinformation, specifically regarding its psychological impact on those which it reaches, and the way these effects their view on democracy and how they choose to engage with it. The goal of this report is also to provide easy access to information reading disinformation so that readers can be aware of and prepared for it, as it is becoming increasingly present in the modern world, due to technological and societal changes. This research will also be accessible to younger people as it does not use overcomplicated phrasing and attempts to explain every unfamiliar term thoroughly. Generally, the intention is to effectively inform citizens, voters, and the youth, of how their personal perceptions and beliefs can be distorted and manipulated through the use of disinformation and the ways in which it has been used before. The report aims to encourage active participation in the democratic process while also acknowledging the challenges, dangers and negative implications that may arise. With the intention of contributing to a more educated and understanding community, the goal of the report is to strengthen the effectiveness of democracy and encourage discussion regarding the topic of disinformation and its impact on society.

Problem

The problem that this report aims to discuss is that the proliferation of disinformation as a political weapon has had several long-term and far-reaching implications on various nations and communities, and either the impact or the prevalence of false information, must be reduced.

The aforementioned examples of disinformation and its use clearly portray the ways in which can encourage violence, in the case of the storming of the Capitol, as well as violent hate crimes against specific communities, as can be seen in the UK anti-immigration riots. Disinformation breeds division and distrust, which can hinder participation in the community and well as in democratic processes, which can be a threat to democracy, unity, and global peace as a whole. Effective organisation and leadership will become increasingly difficult and can hinder the individual decision making that is necessary within the democratic process. False news and misinformation are currently increasing significantly due to factors such as social media and artificial intelligence, and it is of the utmost importance that it is controlled and regulated so that it does not create more discord, suspicion, and division within communities.

Impact

As stated in the problem sector, disinformation has had and is continuing to have several detrimental effects on society and specifically the democratic process. This report aims to mitigate these impacts through active and effective education and ensuring that the public is able to distinguish between legitimate and misleading information and recognize signs that they are being deceived. The impact that this report hopes to have is that it may contribute to the education and training of all citizens, specifically the youth, to assist in dealing with disinformation and political propaganda and to make sure that it does not discourage voters from that part in the democratic process and attempting to preserve its integrity. The reports impact will also be related to its accessibility as it will be easy to comprehend and therefore will be able to educate variety of reader or different ages, and in this, preparing the next generation for the voting process and that ways in which they are able to influence its outcome

Research Questions

The main research question that this report aims to answer can be easily inferred from the title. The primary research question states:

What are the psychological impacts of disinformation on democratic engagement in the US in 2024?

This research question is extremely relevant, considering current global events, particularly the upcoming 2024 presidential election in the US. Additionally, although the report and the research question place focus and emphasis on the impact of disinformation in the U.S., other countries will also be mentioned and referred to, as well as the impact of false information on a global scale. The research question has become increasingly applicable to society due to the significant rise in disinformation, due to easier methods of spreading false narratives. The question also emphasizes psychological impacts such as the confusion and anxiety that disinformation can induce in voter, as well as scepticism towards the democratic process, which has the potential to undermine democracy as a whole. The United States is currently in a state of heightened confusion regarding disinformation, mainly due to the election, and due to the nations global impact, the results of this election may have a universal global effect. The question aims to discuss the implications of disinformation considering political stability and the future of democratic governance.

As the research question could be considered broad, and will have several factors to discuss, sub questions have been comprised in order to organise research and further restrict the subject matter:

How has the increase in disinformation impacted citizens trust in democratic institutions?

Is there a link between the rise of disinformation and democratic engagement?

How many people are actually affected and manipulated by disinformation? What percentage of the population have been effectively deceived by political disinformation?

These sub-questions aim to further understand the impact of disinformation on voting patterns and false beliefs, which will be investigated into by finding quantitative data and evidence as well as looking for possible reasons and causes for these patterns. Overall, the research questions and sub questions are aimed at structuring the research in an effective and understandable manner.

Methodology

The mode of finding information and the manner of research for the creation of this report was focused on collecting both qualitative and quantitative data that will serve to answer the research questions stated above. Information from several surveys, research centres and websites has been compiled to form a structured and organised summary of the findings, through verbal explanations as well as visual representation.

Data Collection

The data collected was separated into two distinct sections, primary research, and secondary research. The main form of collection however was secondary research, due to its increased accessibility. Forms of secondary research included information from survey centres, news articles, and other research papers, while primary research was conducted through an original survey aimed at those affected by disinformation in the U.S.

Primary Research

Materials

The materials and software used to conduct this primary research include:

Microsoft Forms – which was used to create the survey and then distribute it so that it could be filled out on any device

Thirty participants – All of whom are U.S citizens, and are affected by American politics, and are above 18 years of age, so that they fit the voting age requirements. However, the participants were also of varying cultural, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds, to ensure that these factors did not contribute to biased data.

Microsoft Excel – which was used to create a graph and visual displays of the data

Other previously conducted social surveys – which were used to gather ideas and inspiration for the questions asked. These can be found on the Reference List

Method

1. Firstly, various different existing surveys were consulted and observed to gather information and examples of how surveys can be used effectively
2. This information was then combined to create original questions that pertained specifically to the research question and sub-questions. The questions made were reviewed by peers to ensure that they were appropriately formulated and of understandable wording.
3. A question was added at the beginning of the front asking for consent and permission to use the participants answers in this report
4. The form was created and organized and was also made to be anonymous to protect the identities of the participants and to prevent dishonestly when answering.

Here is a link to the form and the questions asked:

<https://forms.office.com/e/HwmcDkxRJy>.

A brief description of the survey was written informing the participants that their assistance in filling out the form was voluntary and could be rescinded at any time.

Here is an image of the description provided:

Thank you for your participation in this survey and your significant contribution to my research. Note that your participation is entirely voluntary and your consent may be rescinded at any time. Please try to answer these questions to the best of your ability and as honestly as possible. Your answers will remain anonymous and will not be used for any alternative purposes other than research.

5. The participants were located through various personal connections and contacts in the U.S. and were asked specifically for their consent to participate in the survey as well as permission for the answers to be used in the report through a question at the beginning of the survey.
6. The answers were then collected through Microsoft Forms
7. The quantitative results were then changed into graph form through the use of Microsoft Excel and the qualitative results were referred to and used as evidence throughout the report.

Secondary Research

Materials

The materials, equipment and types of software that were used to collect and analyse secondary information include:

Existing research papers – Research papers, theses, and reports were consulted as sources to gather background information before beginning to find information regarding the research questions and the sub-questions. These sources can be found in the Reference List

Existing surveys and research centres - In order to find raw statistical data that can be used to answer the research question, existing surveys were analysed from credible sources that can be found in the Reference List

Coursera.org – In order to understand how to effectively analyse and organise that raw data gathered; Coursera allowed for the effective learning of how this can be done. The specific course can be found in the Reference List

JupyterLite – This software app was used to analyse the data through the use of the coding language Python, in order to organise the information and create effective and clear visual representations, which were then peer reviewed to ensure clarity and comprehensibility. The software can be found in the Reference List

Method

1. Existing research papers were located through Google to find relevant and appropriate information regarding the subject matter in order to provide substantial background knowledge of disinformation patterns throughout the years as well as information about voting patterns and recent voting trends so that some prior knowledge could be utilized when analysing and interpreting the results
2. Next, data was located through, again, research on Google, to find relevant raw data about disinformation, voting patterns, trust in democratic institutions, etc. Although various research centres and websites were consulted, ANES (American National Election Survey), was used to create all of the graphs and charts for secondary research results. The raw data was downloaded to then be analysed through the use of Python
3. The source was then checked for credibility using the OPVL method to ensure that the data was accurate and legitimate
4. Coursera was then used to learn how to turn the raw, unorganized data into an understandable and visually appealing form that was clear and understandable.
5. Following the completion of the course, the software JupyterLite was then used to create visual displays of the data collected, through the use of Python, which was a previously acquired skill.
6. Lastly, the graphs and charts were reviewed to ensure that they had fulfilled the aim of being a clearer and more accessible version of the original data

Data Analysis

This sector aims to delve deeper into the process of analysing the data, and the ways in which it was accomplished. As mentioned previously, the software Python had been used to change the form and organization of the data. This is a small snippet of the way that the dataset looked before the reorganization and analysis of the data collected:

Version	VCF0004	VCF0006	VCF0006a	VCF0009x	VCF0010x	VCF0011x	VCF0009y	VCF0010y	VCF0011y	VCF0009z	VCF0010z	VCF0011z	VCF9999	VCF0012	VCF0013	VCF0014	VCF0015a	VCF0015b	VCF0016	VCF0017	VCF0017
ANES_CDF	1948	1001	19481001	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1002	19481002	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1003	19481003	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1004	19481004	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1005	19481005	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1006	19481006	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1007	19481007	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1008	19481008	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1009	19481009	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1010	19481010	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1011	19481011	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1012	19481012	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1013	19481013	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1014	19481014	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1015	19481015	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1016	19481016	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1017	19481017	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1018	19481018	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1019	19481019	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1020	19481020	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1021	19481021	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1022	19481022	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	
ANES_CDF	1948	1023	19481023	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	0	0	0	0	

(ANES, 2024)

Several individual steps were then taken to restructure the data after it was imported to JupyterLite:

1. The columns that were unnecessary or irrelevant to the research questions were removed so that the dataset was condensed, and the necessary information could be found more easily
2. The columns and rows were renamed so that they were more comprehensible and descriptive of what they contained
3. The appropriate data was then selected and plotted as either a bar chart or a line graph depending on the intended result.

The entire code for each of the graphs can be seen here:

```

[59]: import pandas as pd

[60]: import matplotlib.pyplot as plt

df = pd.read_csv('anes_timeseries_cdf_csv_20220916.csv')

columns_to_keep = ['VCF0004', 'VCF0604'] # List columns you need
df = pd.read_csv('anes_timeseries_cdf_csv_20220916.csv', usecols=columns_to_keep)

[63]: df['VCF0604'] = pd.to_numeric(df['VCF0604'], errors='coerce')

[64]: df = df.dropna(subset=['VCF0604'])

[65]: df = df[df['VCF0604'] != 9]

[66]: df = df[df['VCF0604'] != 0]

[67]: df_grouped = df.groupby('VCF0004')['VCF0604'].mean().reset_index()

[68]: df_grouped = df_grouped[df_grouped['VCF0604'] != 0]

[69]: plt.figure(figsize=(10, 6))
plt.plot(df_grouped['VCF0004'], df_grouped['VCF0604'], marker='o')
plt.title("Trust in the Federal Government")
plt.xlabel('Year')
plt.ylabel('Average of Answers')
plt.grid(True)
plt.xticks(rotation=45)
plt.tight_layout()
plt.show()

```

The code for a line graph displaying the patterns of public trust in the government over time. (ANES, 2024)

```

import pandas as pd

import matplotlib.pyplot as plt

df = pd.read_csv('anes_timeseries_cdf_csv_20220916.csv')

columns_to_keep = ['VCF0004', 'VCF0614'] # List columns you need
df = pd.read_csv('anes_timeseries_cdf_csv_20220916.csv', usecols=columns_to_keep)

df.columns = ['Year', 'Response']

df['Response'] = pd.to_numeric(df['Response'], errors='coerce')

df = df.dropna(subset=['Response'])

df['Agree'] = df['Response'].apply(lambda x: 1 if x == 1 else 0)

df_grouped = df.groupby('Year').agg({'Agree': 'sum', 'Response': 'count'}).reset_index()
df_grouped.rename(columns={'Response': 'Total'}, inplace=True)

df_grouped['Agree_Percentage'] = (df_grouped['Agree'] / df_grouped['Total']) * 100

plt.figure(figsize=(10, 6))
plt.plot(df_grouped['Year'], df_grouped['Agree_Percentage'], marker='o', linestyle='-')
plt.title("Politics and Government Seem Too Complicated")
plt.xlabel('Year')
plt.ylabel('Percentage Agree (%)')
plt.grid(True)
plt.xticks(rotation=45)
plt.tight_layout()
plt.show()

```

The code for a line graph displaying the number of citizens that believe that politics is too complicated to understand. (ANES, 2024)

```

import pandas as pd

[2]: import matplotlib.pyplot as plt

[3]: df = pd.read_csv('anes_pilot_2024_20240319.csv')

[4]: columns_to_keep1 = ['misinfo_bidendoc', 'misinfo_trump16', 'misinfo_jansix', 'misinfo_win20str', 'misinfo_win20', 'votereg', 'presvote20post', 'turnout20']
df_selected1 = df[columns_to_keep1]

[5]: df_selected1

[7]: value_counts = df['misinfo_trump16'].value_counts()

[8]: values_to_exclude = ["inapplicable", "legitimate skip"]

[9]: filtered_value_counts = value_counts[~value_counts.index.isin(values_to_exclude)]

[10]: label_mapping = {
    "Donald Trump's campaign colluded with the Russian government in 2016": "True",
    "Donald Trump's campaign did not collude with the Russian government in 2016": "False",
    "No Answer": "Uncertain"
}

[11]: filtered_value_counts.index = filtered_value_counts.index.map(label_mapping.get)

ax = filtered_value_counts.plot(kind='bar')
ax.set_xlabel('Answers')
ax.set_ylabel('Number of People')
ax.set_title("Donald Trump's campaign colluded with the Russian government in 2016")
plt.show()

[ ]: value_counts = df['misinfo_bidendoc'].value_counts()

[13]: values_to_exclude = ["inapplicable", "legitimate skip"]

[14]: filtered_value_counts = value_counts[~value_counts.index.isin(values_to_exclude)]

[15]: label_mapping = {
    "Several classified documents were found in Joe Biden's garage": "True",
    "No classified documents were found in Joe Biden's garage": "False",
    "No Answer": "Uncertain"
}

[16]: filtered_value_counts.index = filtered_value_counts.index.map(label_mapping.get)

ax = filtered_value_counts.plot(kind='bar')
ax.set_xlabel('Answers')
ax.set_ylabel('Number of People')
ax.set_title("Several classified documents were found in Joe Biden's garage")
plt.show()

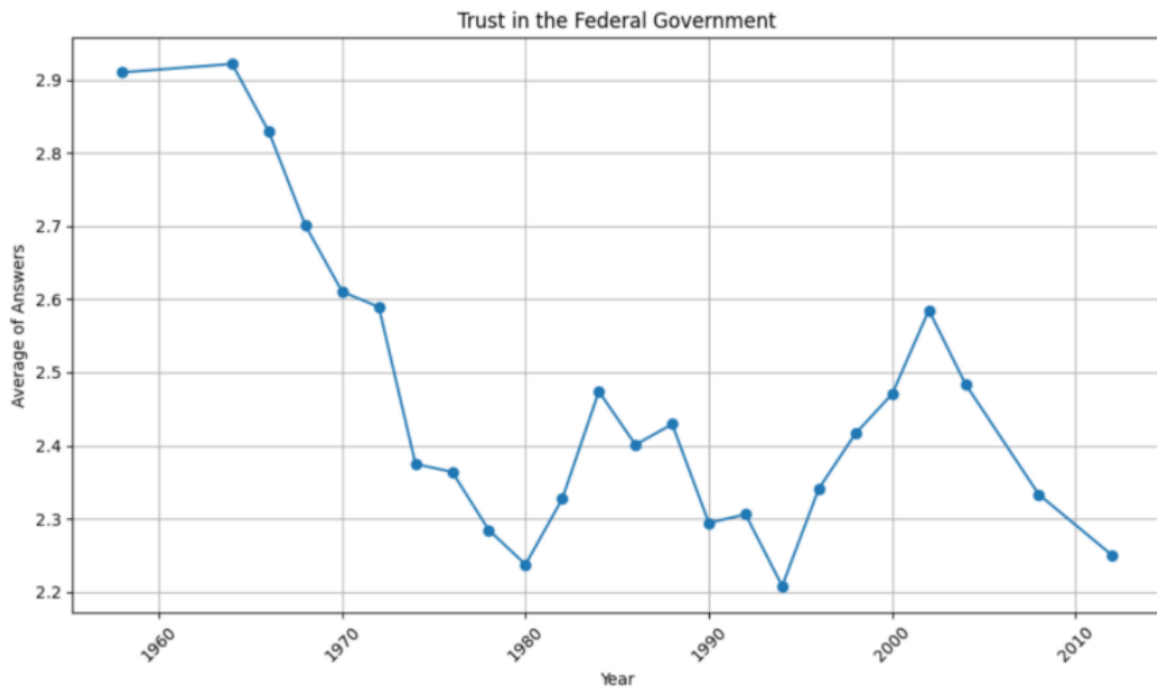
```

The code for two bar charts, the first being the number of participants that believe that Donald Trump’s campaign colluded with the Russian government in 2016, and the second being the number of participants that believe that several classified documents were found in Joe Biden’s garage. (ANES, 2024)

Results

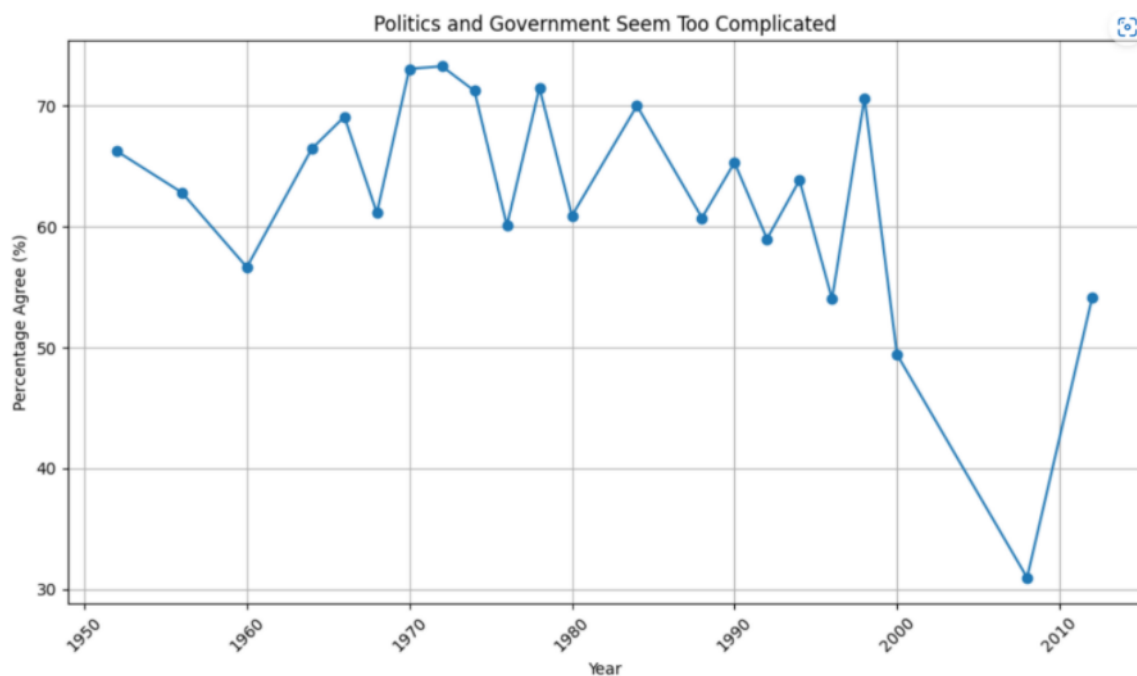
The results of my secondary research can be seen in the figures below:

Figure 1: Trust in the Federal Government



Overall, the trust in the federal government appears to have a negative correlation with time. As the year increases, the trust in the government decreases, albeit with a few significant fluctuations between 1980 and 1990, as well as between 1994 and 2012.

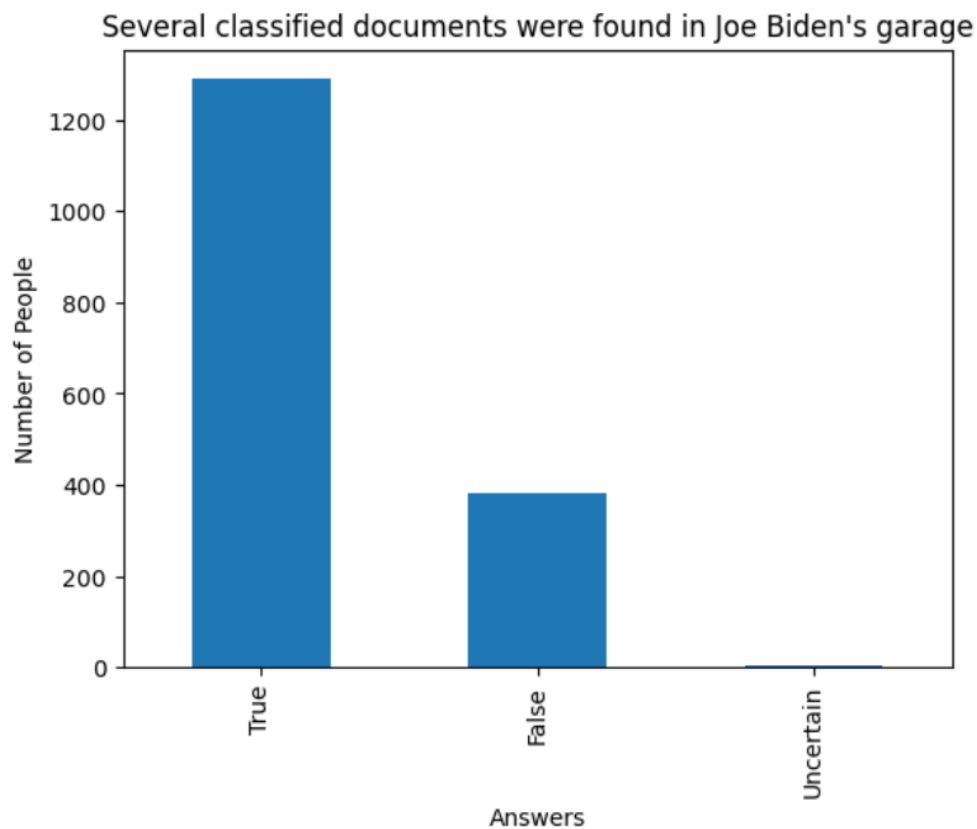
Figure 2: Politics Seems Too Complicated



In general, the trend seems to be that the percentage of participants that agree with the statement are decreasing as time goes by. The percentage fluctuates and decreases slowly between 1950

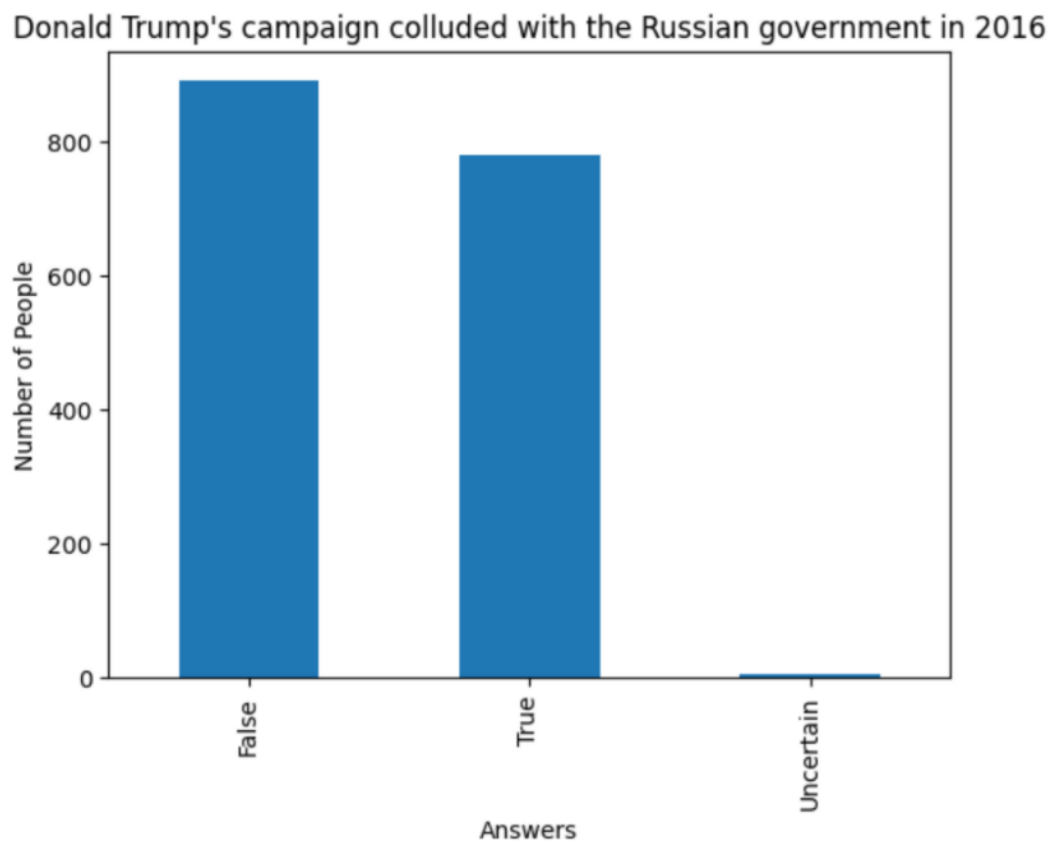
and the late 1990s, after which there is a sharp decrease followed by an increase in the late 2000s.

Figure 3: Several classified documents were found in Joe Biden's garage



The figure shows the number of participants that believed that the statement was True, False, and those that were Uncertain. Significantly more people believed that the statement was true than false, and only a very small percentage were uncertain.

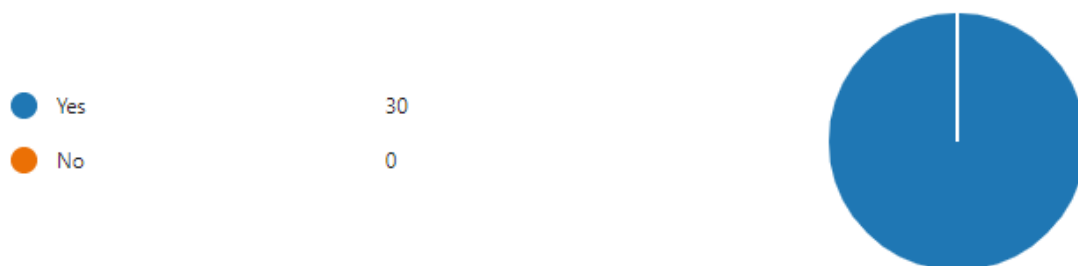
Figure 4: Donald Trump's campaign colluded with the Russian government in 2016



The amount of people that did not believe in the statement was over 900, while the amount of people that assumed it was true was almost 800. Again, only a very small percentage were uncertain.

The results of my primary research can be seen below:

Figure 5: Question 1 - Do you give formal consent to answering this survey as well as permission to use your responses anonymously in a research report?



All respondents gave their full consent to their answers being used in this report.

Figure 6: Question 2 - Do you believe that disinformation rates have increased in the US in recent months?



80% of the participants agreed that disinformation rates had increased in the U.S. while the remaining 20% believed that they had not.

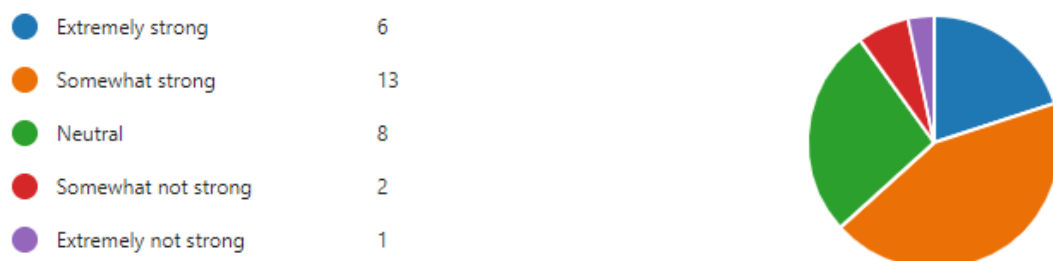
Figure 7: Question 3 - What do you think has triggered or caused this change (in disinformation rates)?

7 respondents (29%) answered **Social Media** for this question.



Social media was the most common answer given, with other popular answers including Tump, media, and politics. As can be seen at the top of the image 29% of respondents answered, “Social Media”.

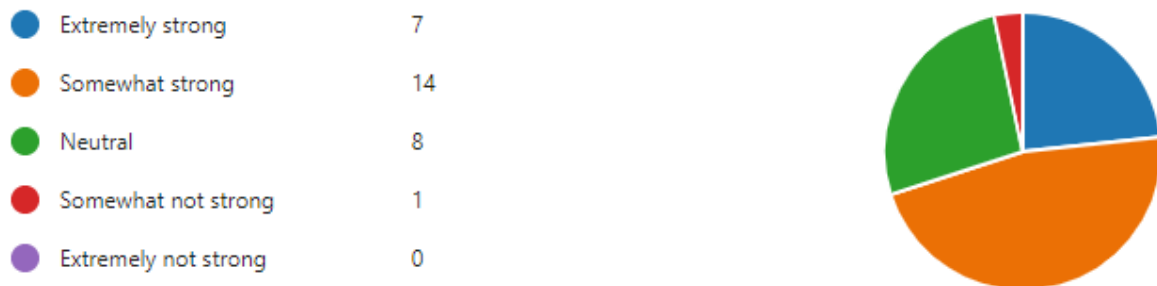
Figure 8: Question 4 - How strong is your trust and belief in the US government?



The largest proportion of respondents answered that their trust in the government was somewhat strong (43%). The second most common answer was “neutral,” which 27% of

participants identified with, followed by “extremely strong”, at 20%. The least common answers were “somewhat not strong,” at 7%, and “extremely not strong”, at 3%.

Figure 9: Question 5 - How strong is your trust in the US criminal justice system?



The most common answer was, once again, “somewhat strong” (47%), followed, in the same order as the previous question, by “neutral” (27%), “extremely strong” (23%), “somewhat not strong” (3%), and “extremely not strong”, for which no one identified with.

Figure 10: Question 6 - How strong is your trust in the democratic process, specifically in the US?



The most common answer to this question was once again “Somewhat strong” (47%), then “extremely strong” (33%), “somewhat not strong” (13%), and lastly “neutral” and “extremely not strong”, both at 3%.

Figure 11: Question 7 - Have you heard any false rumours or misleading narratives regarding the upcoming election?



18 participants, 60%, reported that they had heard false information regarding the election while the remaining 12 (40%) claimed that they had not.

Figure 12: Question 8 - Please provide an example (of false rumours/misleading narratives)

5 respondents (28%) answered **immigrants** for this question.

...



The most popular answers for this question were related to misinformation surrounding immigrants, other answers including an alleged assassination attempt on Trump, as well as misinformation surrounding the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Discussion & Interpretation

Validity of the Method

When considering the primary research and the survey conducted, the method can be considered fairly valid, due to several factors. Firstly, the respondents were intentionally a random sample, including participants from different areas of the country, different religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, and various occupations and socioeconomic background. Although the participants were located through personal connections, a conscious effort was

made to vary these factors in respondents to ensure that the sample used was not biased and was sufficiently representative of the American population. Additionally, several factors were controlled when choosing participants, as only U.S. citizens were able to complete the survey. This was maintained to ensure that the respondents were all actively effected by the outcome of the upcoming election and the American democratic process, so that they all had various genuine incentives and interest in the election and their nations government.

Furthermore, 30 people were polled throughout the survey, which provides a sufficient amount of answer and results to be able to notice trends and patterns in the collective answers. Although the method could have been made increasingly valid through the addition of more responses, 30 was an adequate and informative amount of answers this experiment. All participants also provided their answers and viewpoints entirely willingly and were informed of the way in which their responses would be used, so as to maintain the ethical integrity of the survey and to encourage honesty and transparency when answering. Another method of encouraging honesty was ensuring that the survey was anonymous, which was a choice intended to make respondents feel comfortable in providing their genuine beliefs and opinions without fear of consequence or judgement.

Although the method was sufficiently valid, the validity could also be increased through varying the age range of respondents, as most were middle aged from 30 – 40 years old. However, incorporating both younger and older generations would have allowed for a more representative and unbiased sample and well as more accurate results that would be a representation of the entire U.S. population, as the youth would also be impacted by changes made to the governments and democratic institutions, arguably to a greater degree as it may have a more significant impact on their future.

Overall, the method was fairly valid, and measures were taken to prevent biased results and dishonesty when answering. However, more variety could have been used in the age range of the respondents as well as the fact that the overall number of participants could have been increased

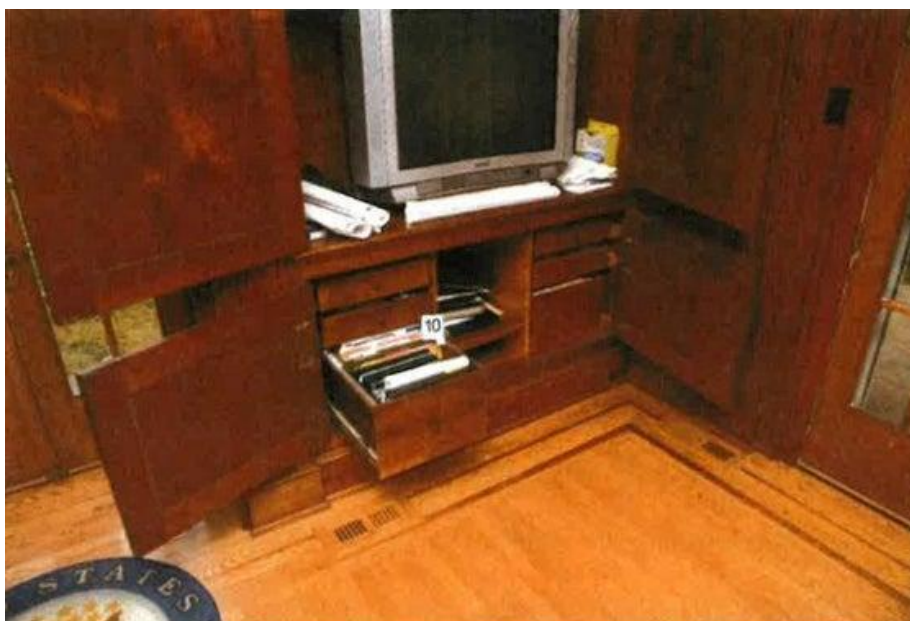
Interpretation of the Results

Figure 1: Considering Figure 1, trust in the federal government in the US began decreasing significantly from the mid-1960s, which can be attributed to several contributing factors including civil unrest, political scandals, the controversy, and confusion surrounding the Vietnam War as well as the notable economic decline and struggles that defined the era. Disinformation has a significant impact on the Vietnam War and the American population's trust in their government during this time, due to the government and military attempting to emphasize American success and victory throughout the war, while several reporters and the media as a whole reported mainly that the war effort was failing, and that the strength of the U.S. military was being extrapolated. This confusion and contradiction triggered and fed opposition to the war in the U.S. as well as an overall decline in institutional trust among citizens (Bowden, 2017). Trust then surged and increased in the late 1990s, presumably to the

economy boom at this time, however, it then experiences another notable decline triggered by the 9/11 terrorist attack in 2001, which again caused the American public to falter in their belief in their government. The war in Iraq may have also contributed to this decrease in trust.

Figure 2: Figure 2 portrays the overall decrease in respondents that believe that politics seemed too complicated for them to comprehend. As we have moved into an era of increased accessibility to education and information due to the digital and technology-dependent age, access to various perspectives, beliefs, ideologies, and overall information has increased significantly. Although this is a positive change as it provides more people with unrestricted access to education and information, not all information on social media is accurate, and an increase in confidence without an increase in quality knowledge and understanding can prove to be a significant issue. Social media currently can be extremely politically polarizing and can cause issues surrounding extreme political views without sufficient research or understanding of their beliefs and ideologies, due to confirmation bias. Overall, confidence in political understanding can be positive as it has the ability to encourage participation in the democratic process as well as active involvement in the future, however, it is also essential that citizens are as knowledgeable and educated as possible on these matters before they take a stance.

Figure 3: Joe Biden had, in fact, been discovered to be in possession of several classified document that were held in his garage. In January 2023, Biden admitted that his attorneys had found these documents in his home in Delaware, consisting of over 30 documents and notebooks containing classified information. The investigation triggered several complaints regarding the president's memory and mental capabilities. Figure 3 shows that the majority of respondents (more than 1200) knew that this incident had occurred and believed it to be legitimate, while less than 400 participants believed it to be false. This is a positive result that portrays that the majority of participants knew of and had an understanding of the event (*Baio, 2024*). However, it is also possible that the public were most readily willing to believe this due to a phenomenon known as “negative bias.” Neuroscientific evidence has shown that there is greater neural processing in the brain in response to negative stimuli, which could have been a contributing factor to participants being so willing to believe this information. Although overall, this is a positive result and was most likely due to the presence of evidence and the prevalence of this news across social media platforms.



File cabinet under television in Delaware home's main-floor office, containing the "Af/Pak 1" and "DAILY/MEMO" notebooks (Jan. 20, 2023)³⁷³

A filing cabinet located at the president's home containing sensitive documents. (*Independent, 2024*)

Figure 4: Figure 4 also provided a fairly positive result as although this was a significant rumour at the time, no hard evidence was provided to confirm that Donald Trump's campaign colluded with the Russian government in 2016. Although the majority of respondents were correct in that the statement was false, a significant amount believed that it was true, which can be attributed to negative bias, or just to the prevalence of this narrative on media outlets and social media at the time. As can be seen from the chart, there was a notable amount of confusion and unsurety surrounding this topic, which can be seen as the number of people that believed it to be false is very close to the number of respondents that believe it to be true, particularly when compared to the significant divide in the previous graph.

Figure 6: In Figure 6, which was acquired through primary research through a survey, it was found that the majority of participants, 80%, believed that disinformation rated had increased. This perception could be due to the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation on social media, which is common for most people to use and be active on in this age. The respondents were also able to give several examples of why they believed that disinformation rates had increased, which can be seen in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Figure six portrays the reasons that respondents believe that disinformation has increased in recent months. The most common answers including social media, the internet, the upcoming elections, Elon Musk, etc. These answers confirm that social media and media disinformation has had a significant and noticeable effect on the public, in that several of them can state confidently that these factors have impacted the rise in disinformation. Additionally, these results also imply that the 2024 election has triggered a surge in disinformation in an

attempt to gain more votes and sway voting patterns. Lastly, the figure stated that significant figures that are not politicians, such as Elon Musk, can have an impactful effect on politics due to their statements and endorsements. According to the Centre for Countering Digital Hate, Elon Musk has made at least 50 posts containing misinformation regarding the upcoming election, which have amassed over 1.2 billion views. As can be deduced from these results, the influence of wealthy and socially significant figure on political matters is immense and can contribute significantly to changes in voting patterns.

Figure 8: Figure 8 portrays the proportion of participants that believe that their trust in the U.S. government is “extremely strong”, “somewhat strong”, “neutral”, “somewhat not strong”, and “extremely not strong”. The chart shows that the majority have a somewhat strong belief in their government, showing that the participants still have a sense of belief and pride in their nation and government. However, the next most common response was “neutral,” showing the confusion and unsurety surrounding the government at this stressful time. Several citizens are concerned about the outcome of the election and the government that they will be left with and the choice to stay “neutral,” remains an attractive one. Few respondents chose to go with the extremes of “extremely strong,” or “extremely not strong,” showing once again that they are not entirely confident or sure about their government.

Figure 9: Figure 9 has similar results to Figure 8, in that the majority of respondent felt that their trust in the criminal justice system was “somewhat strong”, supported the suggested link between trust in the government and trust in the criminal justice system, as they are so deeply interconnected. Again, neutrality was also a popular option, presumably due to the same reason as the previous chart.

Figure 10: Figure 10 shows that the public’s trust and belief in the democratic process and democracy as a whole was still fairly strong, despite their trust in their government faltering slightly. Democracy is still a popular system among participants, which can be seen from the amount of people that said their trust in the democratic process was “extremely strong,” as this was a higher percentage compared to all previous questions.

Figure 11: The majority of participants reported that they had seen false information regarding the upcoming election, presumably due to social media and political propaganda. They were also able to provide examples of the misleading information that they had heard.

Figure 12: The most common answer given was related to immigrants eating pets. A rumour that stems from a groundless claim made by Donald Trump during ABC’s recent presidential debate. The candidate stated that “In Springfield, they are eating the dogs. The people that came in, they are eating the cats. They’re eating – they are eating the pets of the people that live there.,” in which he was referring to illegal Haitian immigrants. There is not credible evidence or reports of this claim being true, however, it has been spread by an influential figure and has reached several social media platforms (*Thomas, 2024*). Additionally, several rumours surrounding Trump’s ear being shot during an assassination attempt have also been circulating. These include claims that it was staged, planned by Trump, and a ploy for sympathy, among many other conspiracies, none of which have been confirmed. Overall, these rumours and conspiracies have been shared across social media and have had far reaching impacts.

Conclusion

To conclude this report, the question of “*What are the psychological impacts of disinformation on democratic engagement in the US in 2024?*”, has been answered through a series of primary and secondary investigations into the impacts of disinformation, which have been found to be long lasting and potent. Misleading information has caused significant confusion and chaos among the American population, particularly surrounding the upcoming 2024 presidential election. This rise in disinformation has also had impacts on trust in the governments and in democratic institutions as whole. The psychological impact has been a rise in scepticism and confusion regarding political information and the democratic process. However, some positive results were found showing that more often than not, people are able to discern between false and true information and that most people hold the belief that they are able to understand politics and that it is not too complicated, which encourages voting and participation in the democratic process. Overall, disinformation has always been used as a very impactful and potent weapon, however, with sufficient experience and knowledge, it is possible to recognize when it is being used to manipulate and influence.

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