

Explaining Partisan Polarization in Vaccine Attitudes: Misinformation, Elite Cues, and Opinion Updating¹

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Abstract

Partisan differences in vaccine attitudes in the United States increased substantially during the 2010s, but the mechanisms underlying this divergence remain contested. One possibility is that Democrats and Republicans differ because they possess systematically different predispositions toward processing vaccine information, making some partisan groups more susceptible to misinformation or less responsive to corrective information. An alternative explanation is that partisan differences arise primarily through elite cueing, with corrective information exerting greater influence when delivered by trusted copartisan sources. This paper tests these competing explanations using a preregistered survey experiment administered to a quota sample of U.S. adults recruited through Prolific. Respondents were randomly assigned to receive baseline information about a novel vaccine, misinformation about the vaccine, or misinformation followed by corrective information attributed to either Democratic or Republican leaders. Results show that exposure to misinformation increases perceived vaccine harm, but this effect does not differ significantly across partisan groups. In contrast, corrective information reduces perceived vaccine harm only when delivered by a copartisan source, and this copartisan advantage is similar for Democratic and Republican identifiers. Together, these findings provide little support for the view that contemporary partisan differences in vaccine attitudes primarily reflect stable differences in how partisan groups process vaccine information—whether by accepting misinformation or responding to corrective information. Instead, they suggest that historical asymmetries in elite messaging may produce asymmetric baseline beliefs while leaving the underlying process through which individuals update their beliefs in response to new information largely symmetric. More broadly, the findings highlight how well-established processes of partisan cue-taking may help explain the emergence of partisan polarization in vaccine attitudes.

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¹ This paper is a revised version of a manuscript originally submitted to ISPP under the title “Party Cues and the Limits of Persuasion: Experimental Evidence on Vaccine Messengers in a Polarized Public.” The current version focuses more narrowly on the role of partisan source cues and opinion updating in explaining partisan differences in vaccine attitudes.

Introduction

Partisan differences in attitudes toward vaccines have become an increasingly prominent feature of American public opinion. By the end of the 2010s, Democrats were substantially less skeptical of vaccines than were Republicans, with Independents generally falling between the two groups. Although this pattern of polarization has been widely documented (e.g. Jones 2024; Jones and McDermott 2022a; Jones and McDermott 2022b), considerably less is known about the mechanisms that produced it. What accounts for the asymmetric evolution of vaccine attitudes across partisan groups?

Prior panel evidence suggests that the growing partisan divide primarily reflects changes in opinion among stable partisans rather than changes in the composition of the parties themselves (Jones 2025). In the language of Carsey and Layman (2006), polarization appears to have resulted more from *changing minds* than from *changing sides*. Moreover, the pattern of opinion change was itself asymmetric. Democrats remained comparatively resistant to increasing vaccine skepticism during this period, whereas Republicans and Independents exhibited substantially greater movement toward skepticism. Explaining why these groups responded differently to the same historical period is the central objective of the present paper.

These changes occurred during a period in which vaccine-related information—and particularly vaccine misinformation—became substantially more prevalent (e.g., Alcott, Gentzkow, and Yu 2018; Broniatowski et al 2018; Gunaratne et al 2019). As vaccine controversies became increasingly salient and online information environments expanded, Americans encountered a growing volume of competing claims about vaccine safety and effectiveness. The key question, however, is not simply whether the informational environment changed, but why that changing environment produced markedly different patterns of opinion change across partisan groups.

One possible explanation for this asymmetric pattern is that as vaccine misinformation became increasingly widespread, members of all partisan groups were exposed to more skeptical claims. The crucial difference, however, may have been how partisan elites responded. Democratic elites increasingly and consistently rejected vaccine misinformation and linked trust in science to Democratic identity, whereas Republican elites offered weaker or less consistent counter-signals (Oreskes and Conway 2021). If citizens rely on trusted copartisan elites to evaluate contested political and scientific information, Democratic identifiers would have been more likely to reject emerging misinformation, whereas Republicans and Independents would have received weaker cues encouraging such rejection. Repeated exposure to these asymmetric cue environments could gradually produce the asymmetric opinion changes seen in the case of vaccines.

An alternative possibility is that the observed divergence in vaccine opinions reflects *stable compositional differences* across partisan groups. Democrats, Republicans, and Independents differ in other traits that may independently influence how they evaluate vaccine information. These stable differences may include education, trust in science, conspiratorial predispositions, and cognitive style (e.g., Krause et al 2019; Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016; Pennycook and Rand 2019; Zingher 2019), or other unobserved traits.

Existing observational evidence cannot cleanly distinguish between these competing explanations. Even panel analyses with extensive demographic and attitudinal controls (e.g., Jones 2025) cannot fully separate stable individual trait predispositions from differences in elite messaging and the informational environments in which opinions develop. Consequently, although prior work establishes that the growth of partisan polarization in vaccine attitudes primarily reflects changing minds rather than changing sides, it cannot determine whether those changing minds are better explained by stable compositional differences or by cue-dependent acceptance of information.

Although the historical sequence sketched above cannot be recreated experimentally, one of its central behavioral implications can be tested directly. By randomly assigning respondents to receive identical vaccine misinformation and experimentally varying the presence and partisan source of corrective information, we hold informational exposure constant while isolating the role of partisan cues in information acceptance. In doing so, our design provides a direct test of whether contemporary partisan differences in vaccine attitudes might be better understood as the product of stable compositional differences or cue-dependent acceptance of identical information.

Theory

A useful framework for approaching this question is provided by Zaller's (1992) Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model of opinion formation. Although originally developed to explain political attitudes more broadly, the model provides a straightforward way of thinking about how individuals respond to changing information environments.

According to the RAS model, opinions are constructed from considerations that are accessible in memory at the time a judgment is made. Before information can influence an opinion, however, it must first be received and then accepted. Reception depends largely on whether an individual encounters information about a topic, while acceptance depends on whether that information is judged credible and incorporated into one's existing set of considerations. Individuals subsequently sample from these accepted considerations when expressing an opinion.

The RAS framework suggests that partisan differences could arise at either stage of the opinion formation process. Individuals may differ in the information they encounter (reception), or they may differ in whether they accept information once exposed to it. Although differential exposure to vaccine misinformation remains a possible contributor to partisan divergence, existing research indicates that vaccine misinformation circulated widely online and that many Americans encountered anti-vaccine information (e.g., Neely et al 2022). If misinformation became broadly available to citizens across the political spectrum, then the central question is not simply who encountered it, but why it appears to have altered the opinions of some partisan groups more or differently than others. The present paper therefore isolates this question by examining how partisan differences might emerge at the *acceptance* stage of opinion formation.

One possibility is that partisan groups differ in stable characteristics that shape acceptance of vaccine information, including trust in science, conspiratorial predispositions, cognitive reflection, and education (e.g., Krause et al 2019; Uscinski, Klobstad, and Atkinson 2016;

Pennycook and Rand 2019; Zingher 2019). If so, Democrats, Republicans, and Independents should respond differently even when exposed to identical information.

This paper's alternative perspective locates partisan differences not primarily in stable predispositions but in the political context surrounding information acceptance. Within the RAS framework, acceptance depends not only on individual predispositions but also on the cues accompanying political information. Research on motivated reasoning suggests that people do not simply process information in an unbiased manner. Instead, they selectively and unconsciously accept or reject information in a way that protects deeply held identities (Taber & Lodge 2006). Research on elite cueing argues that political leaders help citizens determine which information is consistent with their partisan identities. As elite discourse increasingly associates particular issue positions with partisan identities, citizens become more likely to accept information reinforced by trusted partisan elites—namely, copartisans—and to discount information that conflicts with those cues.

In this account, acceptance remains conditional on predispositions, consistent with Zaller's framework, but partisan elites shape which predispositions become politically relevant by signaling how new information should be interpreted. The key mechanism is therefore not differential exposure to information, nor fundamentally different cognitive capacities across partisan groups, but differences in the partisan cues that accompany otherwise similar information environments.

These two perspectives generate distinct expectations about partisan responses to vaccine-related information. The stable compositional perspective predicts that Democrats, Republicans, and Independents should differ in their responses to identical misinformation because they possess systematically different predispositions toward accepting or rejecting such information. The cue-dependent perspective predicts more limited partisan differences in responses to misinformation itself. Instead, partisan differences should emerge primarily when information is accompanied by cues that signal whether accepting or rejecting that information is consistent with one's partisan identity. In particular, corrective information should be expected to exert greater influence when it is attributed to a trusted copartisan source than when it originates from an out-partisan source.

The following section develops these theoretical expectations into specific hypotheses.

Hypotheses

The competing accounts yield two sets of observable implications. First, they differ in expectations about responses to vaccine misinformation itself. The compositional account predicts systematic differences across partisan groups in responses to identical information, whereas the cue-dependent account predicts similar baseline responses to misinformation across groups. Second, the accounts differ in expectations about corrective information. If acceptance is shaped by partisan cueing, corrective information should be more effective when it is delivered by a copartisan source, and this difference should be similar across partisan groups. The hypotheses below formalize these expectations.

H1a: Exposure to misinformation increases perceived vaccine harm relative to baseline information.

H1b: The effect of misinformation on perceived vaccine harm is similar across partisan groups.

H2a: Among partisan identifiers, corrective information is more effective when delivered by a copartisan source than by an out-partisan source.

H2b: Among partisan identifiers, the advantage of copartisan over out-partisan corrective information is similar for Democratic and Republican identifiers.

Data & Methods

Sample

The study uses a survey experiment administered to a U.S. adult sample recruited through Prolific. Recruitment was restricted to respondents located in the United States, with a minimum 95% approval rate and self-reported English fluency.

To ensure sufficient statistical power for partisan comparisons, the study employed quotas based on pre-screened partisan identification. Prolific's demographic screening variables were used to classify respondents into five categories: Democrat, Republican, Independent, Other, and "Prefer not to say." Respondents who selected "Prefer not to say" were excluded from participation. Quotas were set to approximately balance the sample across three analytic groups: Democrats, Republicans, and nonpartisans (including Independents, Other, and "None" responses).

The sample of respondents who completed the full survey and did not withdraw consent for data use amount to 1,468. The final analytic sample includes 1,467 respondents with valid responses on the primary outcome measure. One respondent who completed the survey is excluded from analyses involving the primary dependent variable due to missing outcome data.

Design

The experiment employs a between-subjects design with random assignment to one of four informational conditions. All respondents received a standardized vignette describing a newly developed vaccine for a tick-borne infectious disease in the United States, emphasizing that infection can cause severe illness and that the vaccine has been approved by federal health authorities. The baseline condition provided only this neutral informational vignette. The remaining conditions added either misinformation exposure alone or misinformation exposure followed by a partisan corrective message.

The standardized misinformation statement said that claims are circulating widely on social media and online forums that the vaccine may weaken the immune system and increase susceptibility to illness over time.

In the two correction conditions, respondents additionally received a statement—attributed either to Democratic public health officials and Democratic leaders, or to Republican public health officials and Republican leaders—stating that the misinformation claims are not supported by scientific evidence and that the vaccine is considered safe and effective by medical experts. Importantly, the informational content of the correction is held constant across conditions; only the partisan source attribution varies.

Overall, then, there were four possible conditions, summarized below:

1. *Baseline condition*: neutral informational vignette only
2. *Misinformation condition*: baseline vignette plus exposure to vaccine-related misinformation
3. *Democratic correction condition*: misinformation followed by corrective information attributed to Democratic public health officials and Democratic Party leaders
4. *Republican correction condition*: misinformation followed by corrective information attributed to Republican public health officials and Republican Party leaders

This design isolates the effects of misinformation, and also allows for direct comparison of corrective information delivered by copartisan versus out-partisan sources.

Outcome measure

The primary outcome is perceived vaccine harm, measured on a seven-point scale ranging from “extremely unlikely” to “extremely likely” that the vaccine could cause harm. Positive values indicate higher perceived harm from the vaccine.

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive characteristics of the sample and the distribution of respondents across experimental conditions. Random assignment produced similarly sized experimental groups, with comparable distributions of demographic characteristics and partisan identification across conditions. Next, we turn to the experimental contrasts specified in the hypotheses.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Variable	Total	Baseline info	Misinfo	Misinfo + Dem correction	Misinfo + Rep correction
N	1468	367	370	365	366
Age (mean)	41	41	41	41	41
Sex: woman (%)	53%	53%	53%	53%	54%
Race: nonwhite (%)	27%	27%	27%	28%	25%
PID: Democrat (%)	33%	31%	32%	33%	36%
PID: Republican (%)	33%	34%	32%	30%	35%
PID: non-partisan (%)	34%	35%	36%	37%	29%

Effects of Misinformation Exposure

To test H1a, we first examine whether exposure to vaccine misinformation increases perceived vaccine harm relative to the baseline information condition. This analysis is limited to respondents assigned to either the baseline condition or the misinformation-only condition, allowing the effect of misinformation exposure to be isolated from any subsequent corrective information. The dependent variable is respondents' assessment of how likely the vaccine is to cause harm.

Table 2 presents the results of linear regression analyses testing the hypothesis. The first specification shown includes controls for partisan identification, allowing the estimated misinformation effect to be separated from baseline differences in vaccine perceptions across partisan groups. The coefficient for the misinformation condition is positive and statistically significant ($B = 0.352$, $p = .002$), indicating that exposure to the misinformation vignette increased perceived vaccine harm relative to the baseline condition. Consistent with H1a, respondents exposed to misinformation expressed greater concern about potential vaccine harm, even after accounting for partisan differences.

Table 2: Effects of Misinformation Exposure

	Model 1		Model 2	
	estimate	p-value	estimate	p-value
Misinformation	0.352	0.002	0.189	0.333
Democrat	-0.911	0.000	-0.934	0.000
Republican	0.572	0.000	0.348	0.079
Misinformation x Democrat			0.044	0.877
Misinformation x Republican			0.451	0.107
Intercept	3.424	0.000	3.508	0.000
N	735		735	
Adj. R ²	0.134		0.136	

Note: DV= Perceived harm from the vaccine. Estimates are OLS regression coefficients.

The second specification tests H1b by allowing the effect of misinformation exposure to vary across partisan groups. Specifically, the model includes interactions between the misinformation condition and Democratic and Republican identification. The interaction terms are not statistically significant, indicating that the effect of misinformation exposure did not differ significantly across partisan groups. The estimated interaction for Democrats is substantively small and close to zero ($B = 0.044$, $p = .877$), while the interaction for Republicans is positive but also fails to reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($B = 0.451$, $p = .107$). Additional contrasts confirm that the estimated misinformation effect does not differ significantly between Republicans and Democrats. Thus, the results provide no evidence that partisan identification conditioned the effect of misinformation exposure. Instead,

misinformation increased perceived vaccine harm at similar rates among Democrats, Republicans, and nonpartisans, consistent with H1b.

These findings provide little support for the argument that partisan differences in vaccine attitudes primarily reflect stable differences in susceptibility to misinformation. Instead, the misinformation effect appears similar across partisan groups.

Partisan Source Cues and Corrective Information

To test H2a and H2b, we restrict the analysis to respondents who identified with a political party and who received the misinformation vignette, either alone or followed by a corrective message. This restriction allows the analysis to focus on whether the effectiveness of corrective information depends on the relationship between the respondent and the partisan source delivering the correction.

Table 3 presents the results. The model includes separate indicators for whether the corrective message was delivered by a respondent's copartisan or by an out-partisan source, with the misinformation-only condition serving as the reference category. Thus, the coefficients estimate whether corrective information reduces perceived vaccine harm relative to exposure to misinformation alone.

Table 3: Effects of Partisan Corrective Information

	Model 1		Model 2	
	estimate	p-value	estimate	p-value
Copartisan correction	-0.428	0.003	-0.452	0.018
Out-partisan correction	-0.115	0.432	-0.114	0.436
Democrat	-1.506	0.000	-1.523	0.000
Copartisan correction x Democrat			0.050	0.843
Intercept	4.404	0.000	4.413	0.000
N	727		727	
Adj. R ²	0.185		0.184	

Note: DV= Perceived harm from the vaccine. Estimates are OLS regression coefficients.

The results provide support for H2a. In the model controlling for partisan identification, the coefficient for copartisan correction is negative and statistically significant ($B = -0.428$, $p = .003$), indicating that corrective information attributed to a copartisan source reduced perceived vaccine harm relative to misinformation alone. In contrast, the coefficient for out-partisan correction is not statistically significant ($B = -0.115$, $p = .432$). Moreover, the magnitude of the copartisan correction effect is substantially larger than the out-partisan correction effect, suggesting that corrective information was effective primarily when delivered by a source aligned with respondents' partisan identity.

Model 2 tests whether this copartisan advantage differs between Democratic and Republican identifiers. The interaction between Democratic identification and copartisan correction is not statistically significant ($B = 0.050$, $p = .843$). Thus, there is no evidence that the effectiveness of copartisan corrections differs between Democrats and Republicans. Although the estimated copartisan correction effect is negative for both groups, the advantage of copartisan over out-partisan corrective information appears broadly similar across partisan groups, consistent with H2b.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the partisan divergence in vaccine attitudes is not primarily attributable to differences in susceptibility to misinformation itself.

Discussion

This study sought to distinguish between two competing explanations for contemporary partisan differences in vaccine attitudes. One possibility was that Democrats and Republicans differ because they possess systematically different predispositions toward processing vaccine information—making some partisan groups either more susceptible to misinformation, less responsive to corrective information, or both. The alternative was that partisan differences arise primarily because corrective information is more readily accepted when it comes from trusted partisan elites. The experimental evidence provides considerably more support for the latter account. Exposure to misinformation increased perceived vaccine harm, but this effect was similar across partisan groups. In contrast, corrective information reduced perceived vaccine harm only when it was attributed to a respondent's own party, and this copartisan advantage was itself remarkably similar for Democrats and Republicans.

The null findings for partisan differences in misinformation effects are particularly informative. If contemporary vaccine polarization primarily reflected stable compositional differences in susceptibility to misinformation, then both misinformation and corrective information should have produced systematically different effects across parties. Instead, no statistically significant differences emerged. Although this finding does not rule out the existence of such individual-level predispositions, it suggests that they are unlikely to constitute the principal explanation for partisan divergence in vaccine attitudes.

At the same time, these findings should not be interpreted as suggesting that Democrats and Republicans now hold similar views about vaccines. Consistent with previous observational research, Democratic identifiers entered the experiment with substantially lower perceptions of vaccine harm than Republicans. The present results suggest that this difference is reflected primarily in baseline beliefs rather than in fundamentally different responses to new information. When confronted with misinformation about a novel vaccine, respondents in each partisan group increased their perceptions of vaccine harm by similar amounts. Likewise, when exposed to corrective information from a copartisan source, respondents in both parties reduced those perceptions by similar amounts.

These findings are consistent with Zaller's RAS model. Because informational exposure was experimentally held constant, the observed differences appear to arise during the acceptance

stage, where partisan source cues influence whether corrective information is incorporated into respondents' evaluations.

More generally, these findings are consistent with a large body of research demonstrating that political messages are often more persuasive when they are delivered by trusted in-group or copartisan sources (e.g., Zaller 1992; Taber and Lodge 2006). The present study extends this work by showing how it may help explain the emergence of partisan differences in vaccine attitudes. If one party's elites consistently provide corrective cues while the other party's elites do so less consistently, over time this would be expected to produce increasingly different baseline beliefs across partisan groups.

Although the experiment cannot directly establish the historical process through which partisan vaccine polarization developed, its findings are consistent with this broader account. Earlier longitudinal analyses document that Democrats remained comparatively stable in their vaccine attitudes during the 2010s, while Republicans and independents became increasingly skeptical. The present experiment suggests one plausible mechanism through which such divergence could have emerged. Rather than requiring Democrats to become inherently more resistant to misinformation, repeated exposure to corrective cues from trusted Democratic elites may have gradually reinforced existing pro-vaccine considerations, while the absence of similarly consistent counter-cues among Republicans and independents allowed misinformation to exert a greater cumulative influence over time. Under this interpretation, today's partisan differences reflect the accumulated consequences of asymmetric elite communication rather than fundamentally different capacities to process new information.

Several limitations to this study should also be acknowledged. The experiment examines responses to a hypothetical vaccine rather than an existing one, measures immediate attitudinal responses rather than long-term opinion change, and focuses on a single policy domain. Moreover, the study measures stated attitudes rather than actual vaccination behavior. At the same time, these design features strengthen internal validity by allowing the effects of misinformation and partisan corrective cues to be isolated without the confounding influence of respondents' prior knowledge or experiences with a real vaccine.

Political debates over vaccines are often portrayed as evidence that different partisan groups inhabit fundamentally different informational worlds or possess fundamentally different susceptibilities to misinformation. The present findings suggest a more nuanced conclusion. Democrats and Republicans appear to update their beliefs in remarkably similar ways when exposed to new misinformation and corrective information. The critical difference between them lies not in an inherent susceptibility to misinformation, or resistance to correction, but in whether trusted partisan elites consistently choose to reinforce or resist misinformation. Understanding the dynamics of elite cueing may therefore be at least as important as understanding individual susceptibility for explaining the emergence of partisan polarization in vaccine attitudes.

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