

Partisan Differences in the Sharing of Low-Quality News Sources by U.S Political Elites

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Abstract

How often do political elites in the U.S. share low-quality news sources? Are there differences between the parties? While past work has investigated individuals sharing low-quality news sources, there are few large-scale analyses of the quality of information shared by political elites. As individuals rely on elite cues to inform their decision-making, officials sharing low-quality sites may increase polarization while providing legitimacy to low-quality outlets. We fill this gap by collecting more than 300,000 links shared on Facebook by U.S. members of Congress and measuring how often each party shares information from known low-quality news sources. We find that members of Congress share more links to low-quality sites than the public, that Republican members share considerably more than Democrats, and that this gap has increased over time. Finally, we investigate the potential mechanisms underlying this partisan gap and find that only Republicans receive increased engagement when sharing low-quality sites, suggesting asymmetric incentives to share low-quality news sources.

Keywords: misinformation, social media, political elites, digital communication

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1 Introduction

How often do political elites in the U.S. share low-quality news sources? Does sharing low-quality news sources vary across political parties? There are well-publicized examples of elites sharing unsupported information related to the 2020 election (Lytvynenko and Silverman 2020b, 2020a; Funke et al. 2020). However, we have little systematic understanding of the scale or characteristics of political elites sharing low-quality news sources, a gap noted by Tucker et al. 2018. Given past findings on the importance of elite cues (Zaller et al. 1992; Watts et al. 1999) and evidence that elites pushing falsehoods can undermine democratic institutions and public health (Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, and Da Mata 2020; Berlinski et al. 2021), a better understanding of elites sharing low-quality news sources is important.

We fill this gap by collecting and analyzing the Facebook posts of U.S. members of Congress. Facebook is among the most popular social media sites (Auxier and Anderson 2021), is used by almost all members of Congress (Van Kessel et al. 2020) and is a news source for most Americans (Shearer and Gottfried 2018). We measure low-quality news sources by extracting the links to external sites from posts shared by members and identifying known low-quality domains, consistent with previous work (Lazer et al. 2018; Grinberg et al. 2019).¹ Our dataset contains more than 300,000 links and covers the years 2016 to 2021. To ensure our results are robust, we use six different measures of low-quality sites.

We find that sharing links to low-quality sites is overwhelmingly carried out by Republican members of Congress. In 2021, depending on the measure, 65-85% of Republican members shared a link to a low-quality domain. This is considerably higher than what was shared by Democrats (5%-23%) or by the public (9%) (Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019). Second, we find that since 2018 the amount of low-quality links shared by Republicans has increased considerably. These differences endure after controlling for other relevant political variables and are robust across six measures of low-quality domains.

1. Previous studies use several terms to describe unreliable sources of information (e.g., fake news, misinformation). We use the term low-quality to encompass sites that have been rated poorly by academic or fact-checking groups.

Finally, we investigate two potential macro-level explanations for the partisan gap in sharing low-quality domains: a larger supply of right-leaning low-quality sites, and greater demand for low-quality content from Republican supporters. One might argue that the partisan gap is a simple reflection of the difference in the supply of low-quality sites. However, our results suggest these party differences are not strictly driven by differences in the supply of low-quality sites. First, while there are roughly ten times as many right-leaning low-quality sites, Republican officials share forty times as many links to low-quality sites. Second, Republican elites and individuals are subjected to the same supply of information, yet there is a much larger gap in sharing low-quality news sites between elected Republicans and Democrats than between individuals aligned with the two parties. An alternative explanation is greater demand for low-quality outlets from Republican supporters. We find that Republican officials, but not Democratic ones, receive more engagement when sharing links to low-quality sites. These results cast doubt that a simple supply-driven effect fully explains the gap in sharing links to low-quality sites and suggests there are also demand effects, where Republican officials are incentivized to share links to low-quality sites to gain attention.

This research has several implications. First, as with political polarization (Theriault 2013; Skocpol and Williamson 2016; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016; Mann and Ornstein 2016; Fishkin and Pozen 2018), our results indicate an additional asymmetry between the two parties, sharing content from low-quality sources. Second, given the importance of elite cues (Zaller et al. 1992; Watts et al. 1999), members of Congress sharing low-quality sites may serve as a social endorsement of the site, leading individuals to ignore warnings about the quality of the domain (Messing and Westwood 2014). These social endorsements may serve to further bolster the perceived legitimacy of low-quality sites, by pulling them more into the mainstream and increasing their agenda-setting abilities (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Kaiser, Rauchfleisch, and Bourassa 2020). Third, while previous work has not found strong evidence for the formation of echo chambers (Guess 2021), we see an increasing partisan gap in the quality of domains shared by the two parties. A majority of Republican members now share at least some links to

low-quality sites. The increasingly different information sources shared by the two parties may increase the disconnect between supporters of the two parties. Fourth, by linking to low-quality outlets, members of Congress are directing their supporters to visit these sites, which drives ad revenue. In effect, members of Congress who link to low-quality sites are supporting these ventures financially, even if only indirectly. Finally, as low-quality posts shared by Republican members of Congress receive more engagement this demonstrates that low-quality news sources shared by elite-driven are permeating the public. This underscores potential incentives for officials to share links from questionable sources to gain increased attention, consistent with the findings of Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018.

2 The Sharing of Low-Quality News Sources by Political Elites

Previous work suggests that the content of low-quality sites is different from reputable media outlets and that these differences may be useful to partisans. Low-quality news sources tend to be more extreme and partisan (Acerbi 2019). NewsGuard, a media rating platform widely used in academic and industry research (e.g. Aslett et al. 2022; Edelson et al. 2021; Guess et al. 2021), rates sites as being unreliable if they publish false content, do not correct factual errors, and do not effectively separate news from opinion (NewsGuard 2021). These differences in standards allow low-quality domains to be used to promote narratives that are less likely to be supported by reputable media outlets. For example, politicians on the political right who suggest that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump, are likely to find only lukewarm support for these claims, even in conservative friendly mainstream outlets (Barr 2020). In contrast, *The Epoch Times*, a site rated “low credibility” by Media Bias/Fact Check, posted numerous stories indicating that mail-in ballots or voting irregularities cost Donald Trump the election (Stieber 2020; Natelson 2021; Vadum 2021).

Further, different journalistic standards mean that low-quality sites may be better able to use selective reporting and falsehoods to attack the opposing party. Past work has found that one of

the primary motivations for sharing low-quality sites is to attack political rivals (Osmundsen et al. 2021). As affective partisanship has increased over the years (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012), the political usefulness of attacking political rivals has only increased. Conventional media outlets do offer numerous opportunities to critique political rivals. For instance, attacks on Hillary Clinton were readily available from mainstream outlets. However, extreme conspiracy theories have often been limited to low-quality outlets. Coverage of the Pizza Gate conspiracy theory illustrates the differences in journalistic standards across mainstream and low-quality media. The conspiracy claimed without evidence that the Clinton campaign was involved in a child sex ring in a DC pizza restaurant and resulted in a shooting at the restaurant (Lopez 2016). The conspiracy was heavily promoted on low-quality sites (Kang 2016). However, more mainstream right-wing media platforms called Pizza Gate false and a conspiracy theory (News 2017).

Another branch of research has pointed to the negative impacts of individual leaders spreading falsehoods. Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, and Da Mata 2020 focus on speeches delivered by the Brazilian president during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, President Bolsonaro frequently downplayed the severity of the pandemic and encouraged individuals to ignore social distancing guidelines (Economist 2020; McCoy and Traiano 2020). Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, and Da Mata 2020 find that these speeches are associated with a decrease in social distancing. Another study of Brazilian behavior during the pandemic found little change for pro-government partisans but did find that opposition members increased their perceptions of risks after Bolsonaro's speeches (Calvo and Ventura 2021). Berlinski et al. 2021 assess the impact of unfounded claims of voter fraud on the public's confidence in elections. They find that when exposed to claims of voter fraud by prominent Republican officials, individuals' confidence in the election decreased significantly. In sum, this work has demonstrated the impact of elites spreading false or misleading information but has largely focused on individual leaders.

A growing body of literature has begun to investigate the sharing of untrustworthy information across political elites. Lasser et al. 2022 find that Republicans share more untrustworthy information on Twitter and that the amount shared has increased in recent years. However, we currently do

not know if these results hold only for Twitter, a relatively small platform (Auxier and Anderson 2021), used by more ideologically extreme elites (Blum, Cormack, and Shoub 2022) or also extend to other platforms. Second, we do not know if other political factors might explain the association between party and sharing low-quality news sources. Past work has found that being in the opposition (Messing and Weisel 2017; Van Kessel, Hughes, and Messing 2018; Russell 2021) or more competitive races (Russell 2018) is associated with more partisan rhetoric, the same may be true for sharing low-quality news sources.

3 The Characteristics and Impact of Political Elites Sharing Low-Quality News Sources

Building on previous work, we aim to clarify important unanswered questions regarding the characteristics and impact of political elites sharing low-quality news sources. Past work analyzing the sharing of “fake news” by non-elites finds that a small number of individuals are responsible for sharing most of this content. Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019 find that only 9% of individuals share any fake news sources at all. While there have been well-documented cases of political elites sharing misleading content related to the January 6th insurrection (Lytvynenko and Silverman 2020b, 2020a; Funke et al. 2020) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Shabad 2021; Madani 2022), we currently have little information about the scale of content shared by political elites. It might be that specific instances of elites making unsubstantiated claims have received considerable media attention, but overall, the practice is relatively rare. However, as elite preferences are likely to be more polarized than the general public (Bafumi and Herron 2010; Lee et al. 2021) and there may be political benefits to sharing low-quality news sources (Fritz, Keefer, and Nyhan 2004; Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017; Van Duyn and Collier 2019; Farhall et al. 2019; Osmundsen et al. 2021), we might expect elites to share more low-quality news sources than the public. This leads to our first research question: *How often do political elites share low-quality news sources? (RQ1)*

Second, there are few analyses of party differences in the sharing of low-quality news sources

by elites. Related work has found that polarization in the United States has largely been asymmetric, and driven by the Republican party (Mann and Ornstein 2016; Fishkin and Pozen 2018). There is anecdotal evidence of Republican members of Congress issuing misleading statements. Several members of Congress have been banned or suspended from online platforms for publishing unsupported statements related to COVID-19 (Shabad 2021; Madani 2022). Similarly, in the aftermath of the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol, Florida Representative Matt Gaetz shared a link to a *Washington Times* article, which was later retracted, that claimed that the violence had been carried out by Antifa (Reuters 2021). In another case, Texas Senator Ted Cruz shared a link to *The Federalist* which claimed that there had been large-scale voter fraud in the 2020 election (Davidson 2021), despite numerous fact checks indicating otherwise (Lytvynenko and Silverman 2020b, 2020a; Funke et al. 2020). However, again we do not know if these prominent examples are representative of the overall information shared by political parties. This leads to our second research question: *Are there partisan differences in the amount of low-quality news sources shared by political elites? (RQ2)*

Third, there are few analyses of the temporal dynamics of elites sharing low-quality news sources. Previous work has found that polarizing rhetoric has increased in the content of Congressional members' social media posts (Ballard et al. 2022). Others have pointed out that the Republican party has changed drastically over the last few years (Mann and Ornstein 2016; Fishkin and Pozen 2018), especially since the election of Donald Trump (Harwood 2021). However, Democrats may have also increased the amount of low-quality news sources they share. Before 2020, the Democratic party did not control the White House or have a majority in the Senate. Past work finds that being in the minority party is associated with sharing more partisan rhetoric (Messing and Weisel 2017; Van Kessel, Hughes, and Messing 2018; Russell 2021). This leads to our third research question: *Are there changes in the sharing of low-quality news sources by elites over time? (RQ3)*

4 Materials and Methods

4.1 Shared Links on Social Media by Members of Congress

To address these research questions, we identified each member of Congress who served between 2016 and 2021. This provides a period that is sufficiently long as well as one where most members actively use Facebook. For years before 2016, there was considerably less data on members' Facebook activity. We then identify the Facebook account of each member. Facebook was selected because it is among the most popular social media site, is used by almost all members of Congress (Van Kessel et al. 2020), and most Americans report that they get some of their news from the site (Shearer and Gottfried 2018). In total, we have Facebook account information for more than 95% of the members that served over this period. We then used CrowdTangle to collect all the Facebook posts shared by members during their terms in office. CrowdTangle is a social analytics platform owned by Facebook, which tracks the public posts issued by influential accounts and pages. As we measure low-quality news at the domain level, consistent with past work (Lazer et al. 2018; Grinberg et al. 2019), we keep only posts that contain links to external sites. We also remove posts linking to sites ending in .gov as these are frequently links to a member's own statements, possibly for self-promotion (Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers 2010), or may simply reflect the party currently in power (i.e., Republicans linking to the whitehouse.com in 2017 and Democrats in 2021). In total, we have more than 300,000 posts with links to external sites.

While many previous studies have focused on the content of statements released by political elites (Grimmer 2013; Russell 2018; Panda, Siddarth, and Pal 2020; Gelman and Wilson 2021; Russell 2021), few have measured the differences in the sources shared by elected officials even though most members actively use social media (Van Kessel et al. 2020) and they appear to care about their social media presence (Jones 2022).

4.2 Measuring Low-Quality Domains

To measure low-quality news shared by members of Congress we rely on existing lists of low-quality domains. Consistent with past efforts, we measure the credibility of information at the publisher level, rather than at the story level (Lazer et al. 2018; Grinberg et al. 2019). To ensure that our results are not driven by any specific criteria of low-quality sites, we use six measures of the quality of information. The first set of measures is drawn from the academic literature. They include sets of domains compiled by Pennycook and Rand 2019; Hounsel et al. 2020; Chen et al. 2021. We also include an additional measure from outside of academia. This measure from Media Bias/Fact Check (MBFC) identifies sites that are unreliable or promote conspiracy theories.² Finally, we create two additional measures using overlaps between the previous four sources. First, we consider a site to be low-quality if it has been identified by any of the previous studies or fact-checkers. Second, we consider a site to be low-quality if it has been identified by more than one of the previous studies or fact-checkers.

5 Results

5.1 Sharing Low-Quality Sites Across Political Parties

To address Research Question 1, we first take all the links shared by members of Congress between April and November 2016 and calculate the proportion of members that shared at least one link to a low-quality domain. This time frame is selected for a more direct comparison to the results presented in Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019. For Republican members, depending on the measure, 43%-70% shared a link to a low-quality domain during the 2016 election period. This is higher than the 18% of Republican individuals that shared low-quality information in Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019's study.³ Turning to Democratic members, depending on the measure,

2. While the other lists of domains are static, MBFC is frequently updated. The data used in this paper was collected in January 2022.

3. These results should be interpreted with the appropriate caution. While we expect elite preferences to be more polarized than the general public (Bafumi and Herron 2010; Lee et al. 2021) creating potential political benefits to

between 6% and 13% shared a link to a low-quality domain during the same period. This is higher than the 3.5% of Democratic individuals that shared low-quality information in Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019’s study. We also present the same results for 2021, the last year in our data. In 2021 between 64% and 83% of Republican members linked to a low-quality domain. For Democratic members, this range was between 5% and 13%. Overall, we see a large partisan gap in sharing links to low-quality domains. In fact, in 2021 a Republican member of Congress that did not link to a low-quality domain (e.g., Mitt Romney, Lisa Murkowski) would be in the minority. These results are summarized in Table 1. We also find that it is not simply a few links being shared by Republican members. We observe Republicans sharing over 7000 unique links to over 100 low-quality sites. In the Supplemental Materials, we include a Lorenz curve to show the distribution of shared low-quality links across members.

Year	Party	Penn	Chen	MBFC	Houn	Multi	Any
2016	Republican	0.43	0.47	0.46	0.64	0.57	0.70
2016	Democrat	0.06	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.08	0.13
2021	Republican	0.64	0.66	0.72	0.80	0.73	0.83
2021	Democrat	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.13

Table 1: The proportion of members of Congress sharing at least one link to a low-quality domain in 2016 and 2021. The six columns after Party represent a different measure of low-quality domains.

To further investigate the relationship between ideology and sharing low-quality domains (Research Question 2), we use the DW-NOMINATE scores (Poole and Rosenthal 1985; Poole 2005). For each member of Congress, we have an ideology score ranging from -1 (liberal) to 1 (conservative). For each member of Congress, we also calculate the proportion of their posts that contain links to low-quality domains. Due to space constraints, we present only the results where we consider a site to be low-quality if it is included in multiple lists of low-quality domains. The results for each of the individual lists can be found in the Supplemental Materials (2.3). Figure 1 presents sharing low-quality news sources (Fritz, Keefer, and Nyhan 2004; Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017; Van Duyn and Collier 2019; Farhall et al. 2019; Osmundsen et al. 2021), elected officials are also likely to be more active on social media and share more news links of any kind. These results do, however, provide a useful baseline to compare elite and individual information sharing.

a scatterplot of the relationship between ideology and sharing low-quality domains. The portion of the plot less than 0 on the x-axis represents more liberal members of Congress. In general, more liberal members share few links to low-quality domains. A partial exception is Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. He is represented by the largest point on the left side of the plot. Around 4% of his total links led to low-quality domains. While this is higher than other Democrats, more than 100 Republicans shared a higher proportion of low-quality domains. In contrast, more conservative members appear more likely to share low-quality domains. We see a clear partisan gap in the sharing of links to low-quality sources. This pattern is observed across each distinct measure of low-quality domains. These results are included in the Supplemental Materials (2.3).

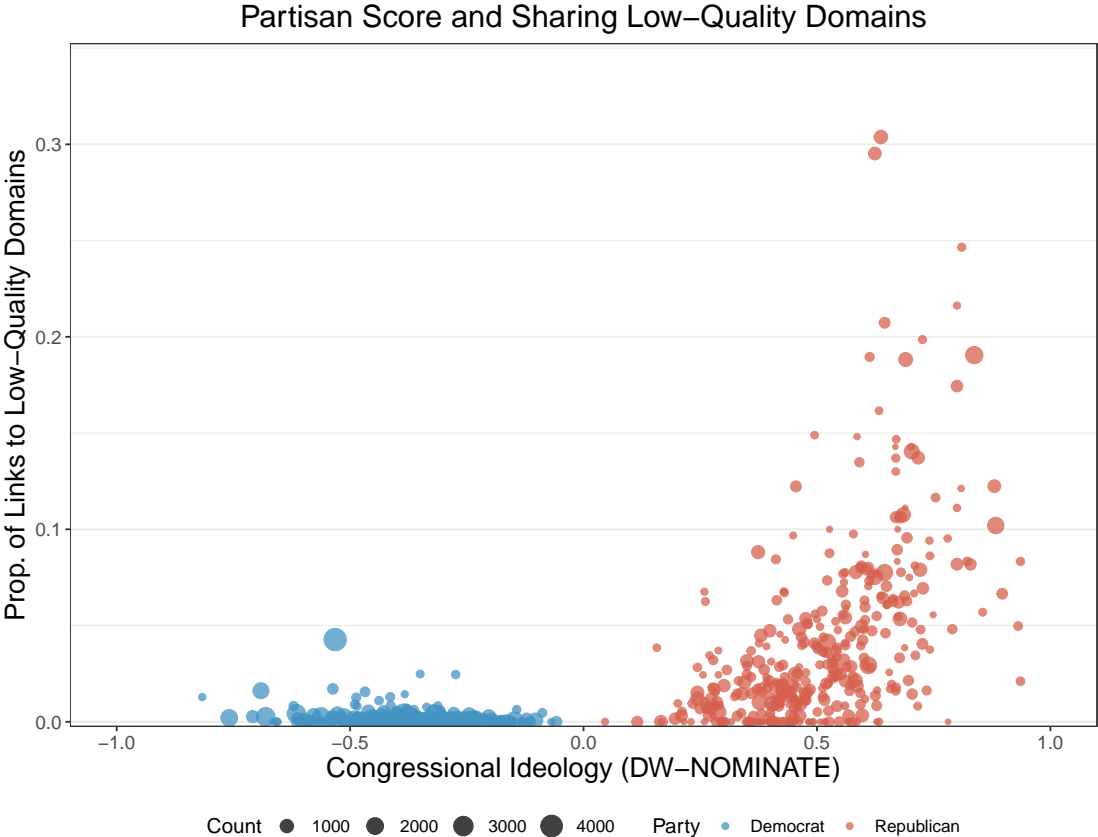


Figure 1: The relationship between ideology and low-quality site sharing. Each point represents a member of Congress. Their position on the y-axis is based on the proportion of their links in Facebook posts that lead to low-quality domains. The x-axis is the member’s ideological position based on the first dimension of DW-NOMINATE. The size of the points represents the total amount of links shared.

5.2 Sharing Low-Quality Sites by Political Parties Over Time

To evaluate Research Question 3, we present the yearly proportion of links that lead to low-quality sites for each party. For space considerations, we present only the results for domains that appear in at least two of the lists of low-quality domains. The results using each of the lists produce consistent results and are presented in the Supplemental Materials (2.3).

Figure 2 presents the over time levels of low-quality domains shared across the two parties. We again see a clear distinction in the amount of low-quality domains shared by the two parties. For each year in our analysis, Republican members of Congress share a considerably higher proportion of links to low-quality sites. While these numbers are small in absolute terms, they indicate that in 2021 roughly 1 in 15 links shared by Republican members of Congress led to a low-quality domain. Second, we find that after 2018 the amount of low-quality domains shared by Republicans increased considerably. This upward trend is particularly notable from 2020 to 2021. While an increase in partisan content might be expected in the lead-up to and aftermath of the 2020 election, there is not a corresponding uptick in sharing links to low-quality sites for Democratic members of Congress.

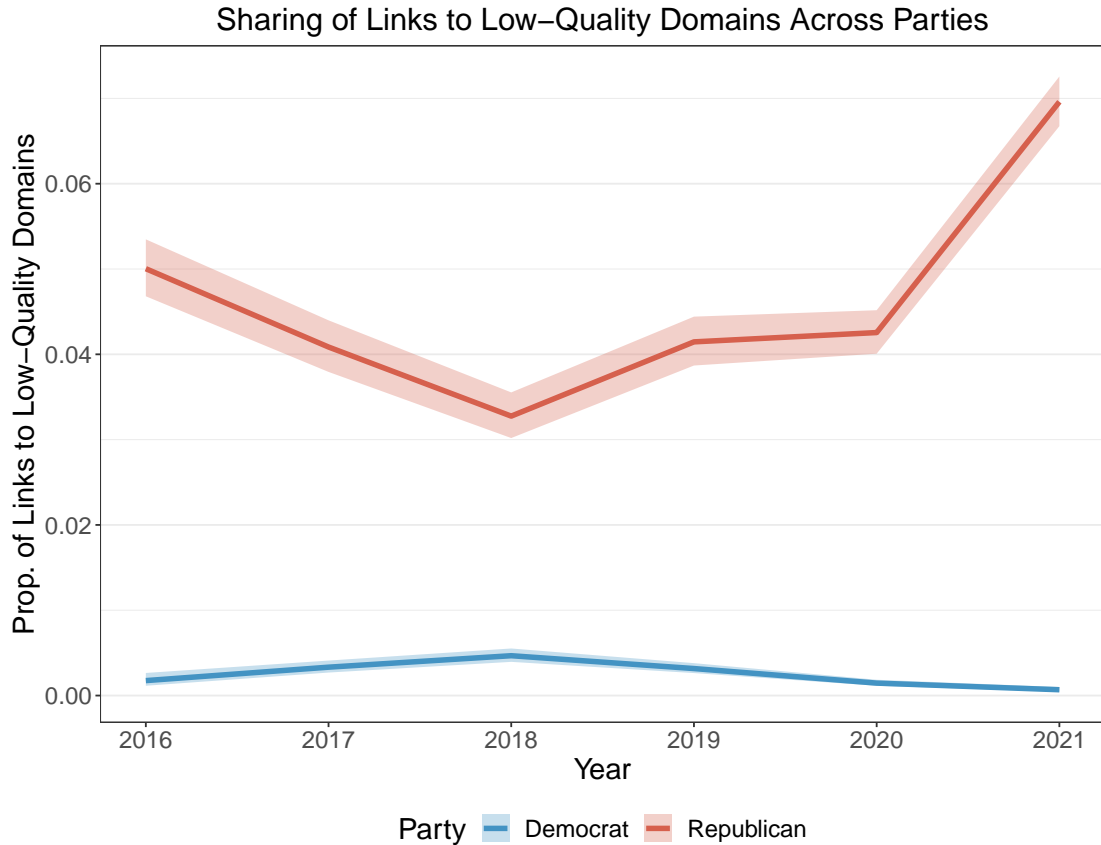


Figure 2: The proportion of links to low-quality domains across parties over time. Each estimate includes the corresponding 95% confidence interval.

To provide additional information about the increase in sharing low-quality news sites, we group members by their election year cohort. One explanation for the increasing volume of low-quality links is that the type of official being elected has changed over the last decade. Recently, more moderate Republican members have opted not to run for reelection (Kelly 2019), or have been replaced by more conservative candidates (Enten 2018).⁴ Further, previous work has also identified cohort effects in other Congressional behavior (Ragusa 2016). To identify potential cohort effects in the likelihood of sharing links to low-quality domains we calculate the proportion of links to low-quality domains for each election year cohort dating back to 2010. For example, New Jersey Representative Andy Kim assumed office in 2019 and would be included in the Democratic 2019 cohort.

4. However, this analysis does not allow us to directly evaluate if the same group of representatives have changed their sharing habits, or if more moderate officials no longer hold office.

Figure 2 presents the over time trends in sharing low-quality news sources across election cohorts. The first notable observation is that every Republican cohort shares a higher proportion of low-quality domains in 2021 than in 2018. The increase in sharing links to low-quality links is present across election years. However, there are distinctions in the amount of low-quality links shared in 2021. In particular, members elected in 2012, 2016, and 2018 link to more low-quality information than those elected in other periods. The groups most likely to link to low-quality domains in 2021 are not only the Republican members elected most recently, but also those elected during the Tea Party wave in 2012. This suggests that the increase in linking to low-quality domains is both due to an influx of new members in 2016 and 2018 and also to existing members shifting to lower-quality sites.

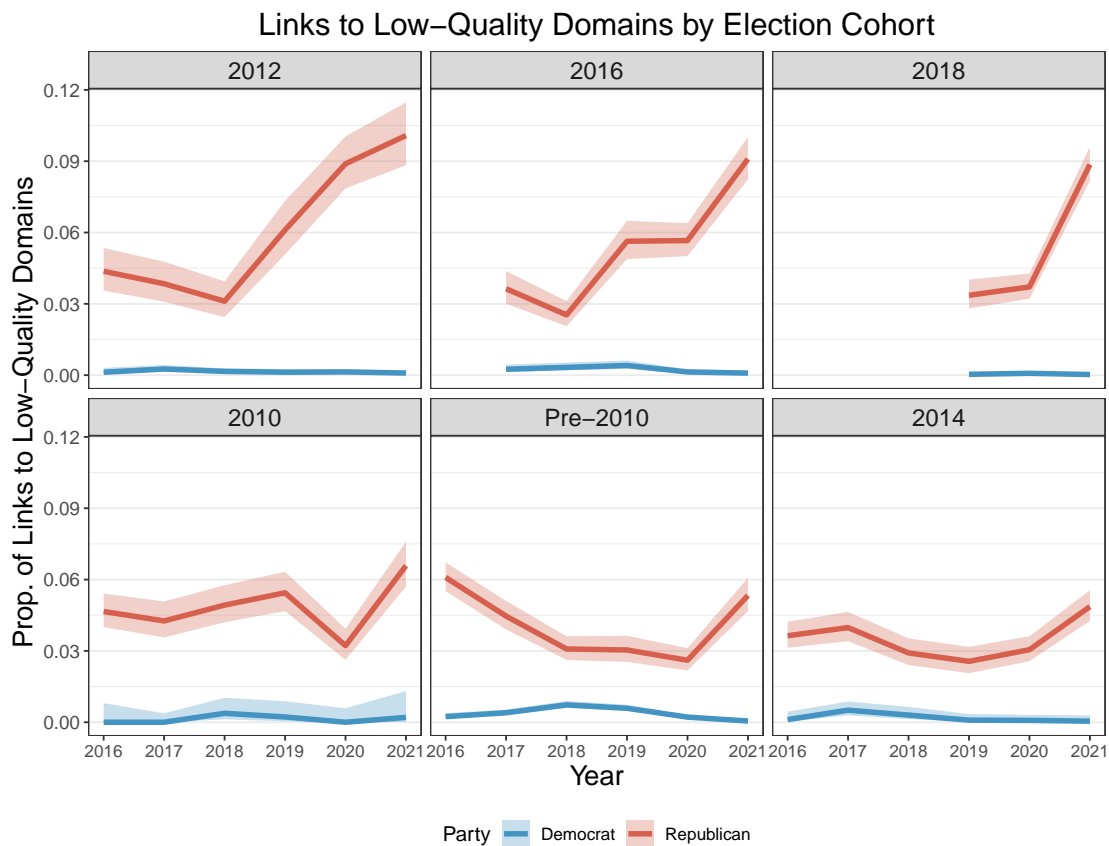


Figure 3: The proportion of links to low-quality domains across parties and election cohorts over time. Each estimate includes the corresponding 95% confidence interval. The subplots are ordered by the proportion of links to low-quality sites shared in 2021.

5.3 Sharing Low-Quality Sites by Political Parties: Regression Results

To further evaluate our findings of partisan differences in sharing low-quality news sources we estimate a linear regression of the proportion of a member's posts that lead to low-quality domains on the member's political party, controlling for other candidate and political factors. The unit of analysis is the Representative year. To account for unobserved between unit heterogeneity we use state and year fixed effects. The substantive results are similar without using fixed effects, this analysis is presented in the Supplemental Materials (2.8).

The dependent variable for our analyses is the proportion of a representative's shared links that lead to low-quality domains. We use the proportion because there may be differences in the total number of links shared across the two parties. However, in the Supplemental Materials (2.1), we conduct analyses using a count of the number of low-quality links and find consistent results. As mentioned previously, we use six different measures of low-quality outlets. Each column in Table 2 uses a different measure of low-quality domains.

The primary independent variable is a binary indicator that equals 1 if a Representative is a member of the Republican party and 0 otherwise. We also control for other relevant characteristics of the Representatives. Previous work finds that the gender of candidates influences the likelihood they engage in negative messaging (Evans and Clark 2016). As low-quality sites tend to be more partisan, this is a relevant control. Similarly, previous work finds that the year members of Congress were elected also correlates with their partisanship (Ragusa 2016).

An additional set of variables accounts for other political characteristics. First, previous work has found that incumbents tend to be especially partisan (Evans, Cordova, and Sipole 2014). We include a binary measure equal to 1 if a member is an incumbent and 0 otherwise. Others note that being in the minority also leads to more partisan rhetoric (Messing and Weisel 2017; Van Kessel, Hughes, and Messing 2018; Russell 2021). We include an indicator equal to 1 if a member is in the same party as the President and 0 otherwise. Consistent with Russell 2018 we also include an indicator for how secure a member's seat is. This variable measures the margin of victory for a representative's previous election. Members in safer seats may share more low-quality informa-

tion as they are less concerned with potential reputational costs. Finally, others have found high polarization in the House of Representatives (Andris et al. 2015). We include a binary indicator equal to 1 if a member is in the House of Representatives and 0 otherwise.

We use OLS regression to estimate our models and present our results in Table 2. Across all six measures of low-quality domains, we see evidence that Republican members of Congress are associated with sharing a higher proportion of links to low-quality domains, even after controlling for other relevant factors. In four out of six models being in the opposition is negativity associated with sharing low-quality domains. In three out of the six models, we find female elected officials are associated with sharing a smaller proportion of links to low-quality domains. While previous work has found that female elected officials engage in more “attack tweets” (Evans and Clark 2016; Gervais, Evans, and Russell 2020), they appear to be less likely to link to low-quality information. In two out of six models, the Representative’s vote share in the previous election is positively associated with how often they share links to low-quality domains. Suggesting that low-quality links are being shared more often by members in safer seats. The remaining variables are not consistently associated with the amount of low-quality links shared by members of Congress.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	PC	Chen	Houn	MBFC	Multi	Any
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Republican	0.018*** (0.002)	0.019*** (0.002)	0.046*** (0.004)	0.023*** (0.003)	0.031*** (0.003)	0.062*** (0.005)
Female	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.005 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.006* (0.003)
Elect Year	0.0002* (0.0001)	0.0001* (0.0001)	0.0002 (0.0001)	0.0001 (0.0001)	0.0002 (0.0001)	0.0003 (0.0002)
House	0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.004)	0.001 (0.002)	0.002 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.005)
Incumbent	-0.0002 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.001)	0.003 (0.004)	0.003 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)	0.001 (0.005)
Vote Share	0.012 (0.007)	0.016** (0.006)	0.012 (0.015)	0.012 (0.008)	0.021* (0.010)	0.026 (0.017)
Oppo.	-0.004** (0.001)	-0.006*** (0.001)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.006*** (0.002)	-0.007* (0.003)
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
State FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2,084	2,084	2,084	2,084	2,084	2,084

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Standard errors clustered on the member of Congress

Table 2: Political Party and Links to Low-Quality Sites, Regression Estimates

6 Assessing Mechanisms for the Partisan Gap in Sharing Low-Quality Outlets: Supply and Demand

The present study has demonstrated that Republican members of Congress share more links to low-quality outlets than Democrats. However, the underlying mechanism for this difference remains uncertain. To shed light on this issue, we evaluate the evidence for two potential macro-level explanations. First, we examine the possibility that the results are driven by there being more right-leaning low-quality sites, relative to left-leaning sites. Second, we evaluate if there is greater demand for links to low-quality sites among Republican supporters, incentivizing Repub-

lican leaders to share low-quality information. While we do not presume these patterns are driven exclusively by supply or demand, it is useful to evaluate the evidence for and against these potential explanations.

One explanation for the gap in sharing low-quality sources is that there is simply a much larger supply of right-leaning low-quality sites relative to left-leaning low-quality sites (Grinberg et al. 2019). We utilize Media Bias/Fact Check’s measure of the credibility of sites and their political orientation. We focus on sites that were rated as having low credibility. The political orientation of low-quality sites serves as a proxy for the supply of partisan low-quality sites available to each party. There are roughly ten times as many right-leaning low-quality outlets as left-leaning low-quality outlets (Table 3). As noted by Grinberg et al. 2019, there is a larger supply of low-quality right-leaning outlets.

However, there are reasons to doubt that the results presented in the paper are driven strictly by differences in supply. For instance, we observe that Republicans share roughly forty-six times as many links to unreliable sites (Table 4). There may be additional differences not tested here, for instance right-leaning low-quality sites might produce more content, providing more opportunities for members to link to low-quality sites. However, because Republican elites and Republican individuals are subjected to the same supply of information, additional differences in supply do not explain why there is a much larger gap in sharing low-quality news sites between elected Republicans and Democrats and partisan individuals. Republican individuals share roughly five times as many links as Democratic individuals (Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019), while Republican officials share forty times more than Democratic officials.

Leaning	LQ Sites
Other	897
Right	665
Left	67

Table 3: The Number of Low-Quality Sites by Political Leaning.

Party	% Low-Quality
Democrat	.09%
Republican	4.18%

Table 4: The Percent of Shared Links Leading to Low-Quality Outlets for Each Party.

Another supply-side explanation is that Republicans may share more low-quality outlets because they have few other outlets that align with their political agenda. However, the sharing

patterns of Republicans are not consistent with this explanation. Figure 4 presents the over time sharing proportion for the ten sites most shared by each party. First, the most highly cited outlet by Republicans is *Fox News*,⁵ and it currently makes up a larger proportion of the Republican party's total shares than at any point since 2016. Further, it is not the case that Republicans have moved away from legacy media, leading to sharing more links to low-quality sites. Popular media sites such as *CNN*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* were not highly shared sources by members of the Republican party going back to 2016 (Figure 4). The increased sharing of *Fox News* and consistent sharing of other mainstream outlets fail to explain the increase in sharing links to low-quality sites, particularly since 2018. Further, it does not appear that the difference between the parties is due to an increase in the supply of right-leaning low-quality sites (or the shuttering of left-leaning low-quality sites). In additional analyses, we re-estimate our main results using only low-quality sites active in 2016, finding consistent results. While these are preliminary analyses, they cast doubts that the difference in sharing links to low-quality sites is driven solely by the supply of available information.

5. Across the sources used in the paper *Fox News* was not rated as a low-quality news source.

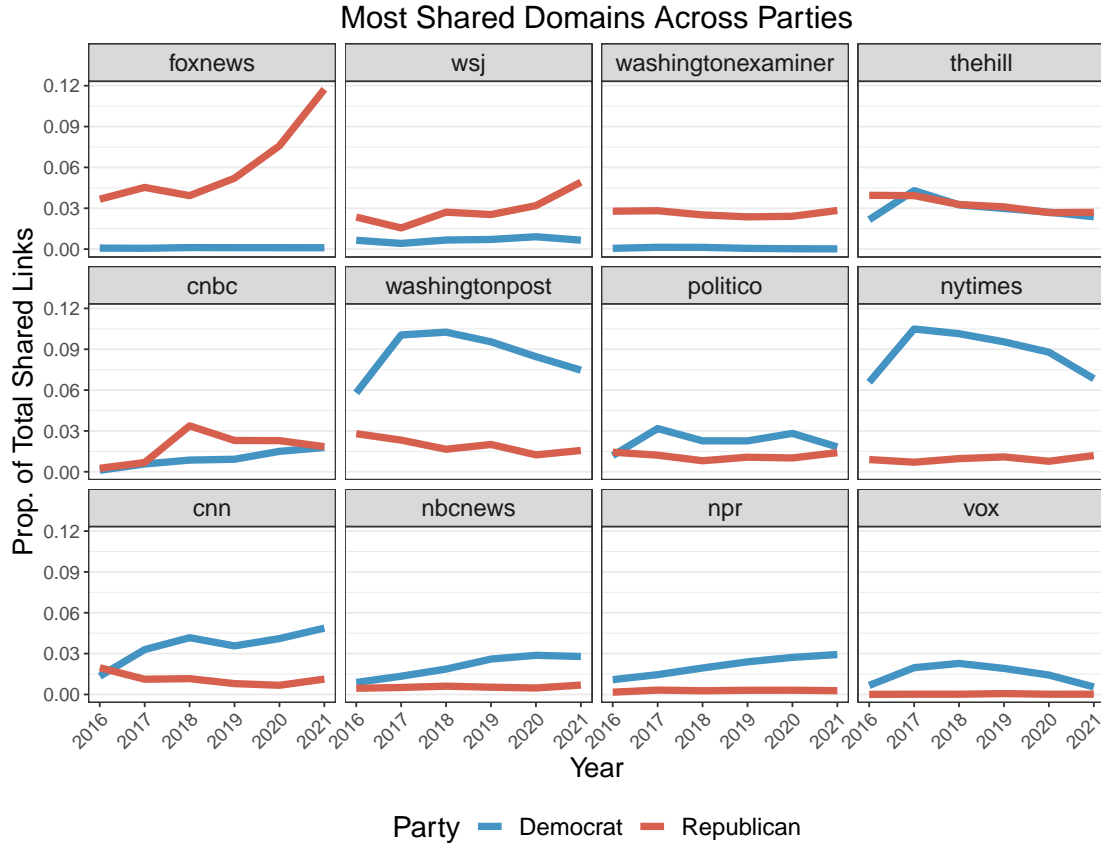


Figure 4: Over time proportion of shares for the ten most shared domains for each party. The subplots are ordered by the proportion of shares by Republicans in 2021.

Another explanation is that there is different demand for information from low-quality sources for Republican supporters relative to Democratic supporters. Past work has consistently found that Republicans consume (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2018; Mosleh and Rand 2021) and share (Grinberg et al. 2019; Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019; Osmundsen et al. 2021) more links to low-quality outlets. Past work has also pointed to the potential for increased demand for right-leaning low-quality content. Garrett and Bond 2021 find that the most highly shared false narratives align with right-wing positions. Similarly, Pennycook and Rand 2021 find that Republicans are more likely to hold misconceptions, such as there being large-scale fraud in the 2020 US election. Osmundsen, Petersen, and Bor 2021 suggests that because the views of Republican elites are increasingly out of step with the mainstream media they more frequently rely on fake-news outlets to support their positions. Increased demand could help explain the large difference in linking to low-quality outlets,

as Republican officials share the content that is more popular with their audience. One means of testing this proposition is to measure engagement with content shared by members of Congress. If there is greater demand for low-quality information among the Republican base, we would expect that when Republican officials share links to low-quality outlets, they receive more engagement.

To evaluate demand effects, we again turn to our Facebook data which records the links shared by members of Congress. While CrowdTangle does not provide information on the number of views for a particular post, it does provide other post-level engagement information. First, we measure demand as the number of times a post was shared on Facebook. This captures instances where individuals are broadcasting an elected official's post to their social network, increasing its reach. Second, we measure demand as the number of shares and likes a post receives. This captures the overall engagement with an official's posts. Each of our dependent variables is logged. To evaluate the difference in demand for low-quality outlets across parties, we interact an indicator recording if a post links to a low-quality domain with another that measures if a post was shared by a Republican member of Congress. We control for several factors such as an official's year of election, gender, chamber of Congress, and number of Facebook followers.

We use OLS regression to estimate our models and present our results in Table 5.⁶ We see in columns 1 and 2 that after controlling for other relevant factors when Republicans share domains from low-quality sources, they are associated with increased shares. In the Supplemental Materials (2.4) we use DW-NOMINATE's measure of partisanship instead of a binary party measure and find comparable results.

However, resharing may not necessarily indicate endorsement, rather engagement might be driven by members of the opposing party criticizing the post. We address this first by using an alternative dependent variable that captures total engagements (shares and likes). As this dependent variable captures favorable engagement with posts (likes) it is less likely to be driven by out-party attacks. Using this alternative dependent variable (columns 3 and 4), we observe similar results; when Republicans share links to low-quality outlets, the posts are associated with increased

6. We find consistent results when using Poisson regression.

engagement. To further address the potential for out-party influence on our results, in the Supplemental Materials (2.5), we evaluate if engagement is driven by posts that are being “ratioed”. Ratioing occurs when a social media post has considerably more comments than likes or shares, often indicating the post is being criticized (O’Neil 2017; Merriam-Webster 2017). Our analyses find that links to low-quality outlets shared by Republicans are no more likely to be ratioed and do not have a higher ratio of comments to shares and likes.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	FB Shares		FB Interactions	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Rep	0.019** (0.007)	0.076*** (0.008)	0.014* (0.006)	0.079*** (0.007)
Rep X LQ	1.089*** (0.083)	0.822*** (0.079)	0.996*** (0.073)	0.655*** (0.070)
LQ Site	-0.048 (0.080)	0.145 (0.076)	-0.140* (0.070)	0.102 (0.067)
Elect Year	-0.018*** (0.0004)	-0.013*** (0.0004)	-0.006*** (0.0003)	-0.004*** (0.0003)
Female	-0.174*** (0.007)	-0.075*** (0.007)	-0.142*** (0.006)	-0.100*** (0.006)
House	-0.827*** (0.008)	-0.916*** (0.008)	-1.014*** (0.007)	-1.065*** (0.007)
# Followers	0.064*** (0.0003)	0.099*** (0.001)	0.054*** (0.0003)	0.092*** (0.001)
State FE		✓		✓
Year FE		✓		✓
Observations	245,218	245,218	245,218	245,218

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 5: Low-Quality Sites and Engagement on Facebook, Regression Estimates

To be clear, we are not able to identify that this increased sharing is caused by sharing links to low-quality outlets, only that increased sharing is associated with posts that contain links to low-quality outlets. However, this does provide support for the notion that there is increased demand for this type of content from Republicans. These results may also suggest the possibility of feedback

loops where members of Congress who share more extreme content get more attention, leading other members to follow suit. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018 documented a similar effect in the right-wing media ecosystem in the lead-up to the 2016 election.

7 Discussion

How often do political elites in the U.S. share low-quality news sources? Are there differences between the parties? This study uses external links shared on Facebook by members of Congress and multiple measures of low-quality domains to address these questions. We find clear evidence that the sharing of low-quality sites is overwhelmingly carried out by Republicans. Further, the amount of links to low-quality sites by Republicans has increased since 2018. In 2021 between 64% and 84% of Republican members linked to a low-quality domain. Finally, we find that posts shared by Republicans that contain links to low-quality sites receive more engagement and are shared more widely, possibly incentivizing sharing this type of content. Overall, these results have important implications for how we understand political communication in the United States. We find clear evidence that sharing low-quality news sources is not a “both sides” issue but rather is carried out overwhelmingly by Republicans. This appears to be an additional asymmetry between the two parties (Theriault 2013; Skocpol and Williamson 2016; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016).

Political leaders sharing information from suspect sources have broader implications. Past work has found that individuals rely on elite cues to inform their decision-making (Zaller et al. 1992; Watts et al. 1999). Members of Congress sharing low-quality sites may serve as a social endorsement of the site. These social endorsements may serve to further bolster the perceived legitimacy of low-quality sites, by pulling them more into the mainstream and increasing their agenda-setting abilities (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Kaiser, Rauchfleisch, and Bourassa 2020). The proliferation of these sites may increase polarization and out-party animus. Further, other work has found that political leaders publicly supporting falsehoods can impact the behavior

of supporters (Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, and Da Mata 2020; Berlinski et al. 2021; Calvo and Ventura 2021; Pink et al. 2021). While more direct testing is needed, links shared by political leaders may operate similarly.

This research also suggests several potential steps for future efforts. First, the data on the sites shared by members of Congress could allow for additional means of clustering members of Congress. The types of domains shared by members may reveal distinct clusters that might not be apparent from DW-NOMINATE scores. Second, CrowdTangle can also be used to collect the text of the posts sent along with the shared article link. This information can be used to better understand the issues on which elected officials deploy low-quality sources to support their positions. We find evidence of both a larger supply of right-leaning low-quality sites and increased engagement with this content (demand). However, additional analyses are needed to better contextualize and evaluate the relative contribution of the larger supply of right-leaning low-quality content and the larger demand for this content among supporters. One potential avenue is to measure the number of articles produced by a large sample of high- and low-quality outlets in the lead-up to the 2020 election as well as engagement with the content shared by members of Congress to better untangle these temporal dynamics.⁷ Finally, this work should be extended to other platforms and other groups of political elites. One particularly interesting area would be comparing the links shared by political leaders on Facebook/Twitter and other alt-social platforms. Further, work on low-quality content has overwhelmingly focused on the United States, however, the challenges associated with low-quality content are global (Calvo and Ventura 2021; Pereira and Nunes 2021) and the work here should be extended to include political elites in locations outside the West.

8 Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

7. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

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10 Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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