

**Partisan Blocking: Biased Responses to Shared Misinformation Contribute to  
Network Polarization on Social Media**

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Abstract

Researchers know little about how people respond to misinformation shared by their social media “friends.” Do responses scale up to distort the structure of online networks? We focus on an important yet under-researched response to misinformation—blocking or unfollowing a friend who shares it—and assess whether this is influenced by political similarity between friends. Using a representative sample of social media users ( $n = 968$ ), we conducted two 2x2 between-subjects experiments focusing on two political issues and individuals’ political ideology as a quasi-factor. The first factor manipulated who shared the misinformation (politically similar vs. dissimilar friend); the second manipulated the misinformation’s plausibility (implausible vs. moderately plausible). Our findings, which replicated across political issues and levels of plausibility, reveal that social media users, particularly left-wing users, are more likely to block and unfollow politically dissimilar than similar friends who share misinformation. Partisan blocking contributes to network polarization on social media.

*Keywords:* misinformation, social media, news sharing, blocking, unfriending, network polarization, political polarization, political ideology, online civic culture

There are now serious concerns about the state of political discourse online (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Chadwick et al., 2018; Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020). After an optimistic first wave of research that focused on whether digital and social media enhance deliberation among citizens, today many scholars and policymakers increasingly see digital media as a problem for liberal democracy. Amid the context of broader systemic changes that increase citizens' media choice and their levels of selective exposure (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Holbert et al., 2010), a key concern is the extent to which online behavior contributes to political polarization (cf. Barberà, 2020), reduces the space for mutual understanding among citizens with different interests and views, and undermines democratic governance (Sunstein, 2018). Empirical evidence is mounting that significant numbers of people engage in behavior that violates important democratic norms (e.g., Chadwick, 2019). Online hate speech, trolling, intimidation, deception, and the sharing of misinformation and hyper-partisan news have rightly become major foci of research.

In this study, we shed light on how ordinary citizens' reactions to a particularly important norm-violating behavior—the sharing of misinformation—may contribute to network polarization on social media. Substantial minorities of social media users routinely share false and misleading information (e.g., Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019). Some prior research has explored why individuals share norm-violating content (e.g., Rossini et al., 2020). However, knowledge of how shared misinformation affects those exposed to it is still rudimentary (cf. Weeks & Gil de Zuñiga, 2019).

Over the last decade, social media companies, as part of their attempts to create safer experiences, have tried to generate affordances for cutting online ties with others. The ability to block or unfollow someone who shares misinformation may be a desirable means of empowering users to avoid the negative effects of exposure to harmful content and to open up space for civil political discourse (Zhu & Skoric, 2021). However, there are good reasons to

assume that users activate these tie-cutting affordances differently depending on their political affinity with misinformation sharers—an outcome we term *partisan blocking*.

Based on our findings, we argue that partisan blocking of users who share misinformation can have important and hitherto neglected implications for network polarization (Kearney, 2019). If social media users are more likely to block or unfollow misinformation sharers they perceive to be politically dissimilar and less likely to cut ties with politically similar people who do the same, these behaviors are likely to contribute over time to the network polarization of social media along partisan lines. Over time, partisan blocking may reduce users' exposure to politically dissimilar people and information of all kinds, not just misinformation. Blocking or unfollowing online friends who violate norms may superficially reduce the spread of harmful content on social media. But this may come at the significant cost of a more fragmented online public sphere, where both patterns of exposure to people, information, and epistemic norms begin to diverge along ideological lines (Neuman, 2016). As we explain below, partisan blocking is arguably a strong driver of network polarization because it entails *persistent selective avoidance*, not selective exposure: it removes entire people—their histories, lived experiences, and in-group norms—from the interactive contexts online that matter for developing consensus across ideological divides.

### **Social influences on the spread of misinformation on social media**

Scholarly attention is increasingly moving toward richer understandings of misinformation's influence on citizenship norms and broader political culture. At stake is whether exposure to misinformation systematically biases citizens' political attitudes and behavior in ways that contribute to institutional distrust, distorted preferences, political polarization, and dysfunctional policy outcomes. Research has explained, for example, who is more likely to believe misinformation (e.g., Pennycook & Rand, 2019), who is more likely to re-distribute it online (e.g., Rossini et al., 2020), whether fact-checks prevent the negative

effects of misinformation (e.g., Thorson, 2016), and how belief in misinformation can affect voting behavior (e.g., Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020).

Yet surprisingly little is known about what happens in attitudinal and behavioral terms when people are exposed to misinformation shared by their social media friends (cf. Weeks & Gil de Zuñiga, 2019). This gap is puzzling, given that earlier research revealed the influence of personal recommendations on people's perceptions of, and subsequent behavior around, professionally produced news (e.g., Turcotte et al., 2015). The characteristics of the person who shares news influences the receiver's trust in the media source of the shared item (Kaiser et al., 2021) and can stimulate further information seeking (Turcotte et al., 2015) and re-sharing of news (Johannesson & Knudsen, 2020). This underscores the need to understand how exposure on social media is shaped by social recommendations.

While prior research on the effects of exposure to misinformation has mainly focused on the perceived credibility and "shareability" of news (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Weeks, 2015), largely neglected are the downstream behaviors that result from exposure to shared misinformation. Many social media users are not passive consumers of news but engage actively in the curation of their newsfeeds (e.g., Bode, 2016; Thorson and Wells, 2016). Active curation involves more than simply following specific media outlets, politicians, or politically interested friends. It also includes acts of selective avoidance, such as unfollowing or blocking (e.g., John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Zhu et al., 2017). One recent study based on survey data from 36 countries shows that about a fifth of social media users unfollowed or blocked users' or organizations' accounts because of what these accounts had posted (Merten, 2020). Blocking or unfollowing friends is likely an important and recurring outcome of exposure to shared misinformation because most social media users worldwide are concerned about the spread of misinformation (Newman et al., 2020) and perceive the sharing of falsehood as a violation of norms that may justify blocking reactions.

**Blocking friends who share misinformation: the role of political (dis-)similarity**

Still, research on blocking and unfollowing has shown that not all friends are equally likely to be blocked or unfollowed. Users' responses are often structured by perceived political similarity with the friend, in-group favoritism, and out-group exclusion. Users are more likely to block and unfollow politically dissimilar than similar social media friends (e.g., Bode, 2016; Zhu et al., 2017). These studies, however, do not focus on misinformation.

We advance this line of research by assessing whether users' reactions to misinformation shared by their friends on social media follows a similarly distinct pattern. (We use the term misinformation to cover both disinformation and misinformation, because, in the scenarios we investigate, whether friends share false information with the intention to deceive or without being aware of its inaccuracy is not material.) We expect that not everyone who shares misinformation will be treated equally: politically dissimilar friends may be more likely to be blocked or unfollowed. Prior research has shown that partisan sources online, such as politicians, can increase the perceived credibility of misinformation if the partisanship of the source aligns with that of the receiver (Weeks, 2015). The partisanship of a friend who shares misinformation may function as a heuristic that shapes how a receiver interprets the shared misinformation. Eventually, such heuristics may bias users' credibility judgments and reinforce their tendency to engage in motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) when appraising misinformation. As a result, the same misinformation may be evaluated differently by a different receiver, based, among other things, on the receiver's assessment of the political differences between themselves and the sharer. Misinformation shared by a politically similar friend may be perceived as more credible than misinformation shared by a politically dissimilar friend. In turn, a receiver may believe they have fewer reasons to block or unfollow a politically similar friend, even if the friend shares misinformation. Thus, our first hypothesis states:

*H1: Social media users are more likely to block or unfollow politically dissimilar friends who share misinformation than politically similar friends who share misinformation.*

We also test a second hypothesis expecting, in line with Weeks (2015), that the underlying mediation mechanism of this effect is a change in the perceived credibility of the misinformation depending on who shared it:

*H2: Politically similar friends who share misinformation will be blocked less often than politically dissimilar friends who share misinformation because the misinformation shared by politically similar friends will be perceived as more credible.*

### **Blocking and the plausibility of shared misinformation**

Those who block and unfollow may also be influenced by the specific misinformation shared. Some prior research has tested variations in the partisan targets of misinformation (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), but the field has largely neglected important differences in the characteristics of misinformation, such as how it is displayed in a technological interface, the actors and issues it mentions, and, most crucially, its level of plausibility (for the importance of the latter, see Pennycook & Rand, 2019). We advance research by assessing explicitly whether the degree of plausibility of misinformation shared online makes a difference to the extent to which a user will block or unfollow the friend who does the sharing.

We define plausibility as the extent to which described new events or claims correlate with prior, assured knowledge (cf. Lombardi et al., 2016). Misinformation is, by definition, false or misleading, but its plausibility can vary depending on context. Much online misinformation is not purely false but contains distortions and half-truths spliced with fragments of authoritative reports of real events (Rojecki & Meraz, 2016). Thus, it is important to address empirically whether different levels of plausibility affect user responses to misinformation and shape network polarization.

False and misleading claims vary in the extent to which they deviate from past events that actually happened. Misinformation describing a new event similar to events that happened in the past is more plausible than misinformation describing an event that deviates greatly from what came before. Consider an example. While it is incorrect to state that, yesterday, 81 women were murdered by Boko Haram in Nigeria, this claim, though false, is moderately plausible: over recent years there have been days when that terrorist organization in that country committed similar numbers of murders. However, a false statement claiming that, yesterday, two million women were killed by Boko Haram in Nigeria is implausible.

Variations in the actors described in a false or misleading statement can also shape perceptions of plausibility. For instance, it is actually false, but moderately plausible, that, on November 3, 2020, Russia secretly sent troops to intervene in the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia has previously taken similar action in nearby regions. In contrast, it is less plausible that Finland secretly sent troops to Armenia, because Finland has no recent history of such military interventions.

Some misinformation claims are implausible because they portray extremely unlikely events, such as the QAnon conspiracy theory that U.S. Democratic politicians run a child sex-trafficking ring. Such implausible “big lies” are prevalent on social media (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) and they are an obvious violation of norms of fact-based discourse. Yet moderately plausible “small lies”—for example, the false claim that in 2020 German chancellor Angela Merkel did not wear a face mask while negotiating COVID-19 mitigation measures in close contact with other leaders—also circulate widely online (DPA Fact-check, 2020). The prevalence of moderately plausible misinformation is troubling, because such misinformation is seen as more credible (Berinsky, 2017). It is more likely to be believed by larger numbers of people and is presumably less often flagged by social media algorithms, scrutinized by fact-checkers, or contested by users. Eventually, such small lies could be



damaging because they may shape attitudes in small steps and add up to larger attitudinal distortions.

We reason that, when it is shared on social media, moderately plausible misinformation is more likely to be perceived as credible. As a result, those exposed to it are less likely to block the sharer. In contrast, users should be more likely to detect implausible misinformation. This experience might motivate them to avoid such content in the future, by blocking or unfollowing the friend who shared it. In addition, users might perceive that friends who share implausible misinformation have a questionable political reputation (Altay et al., 2020) or poor knowledge of politics, which might motivate users to avoid exposure to information shared by such friends (Kaiser et al., 2021). Thus, our third hypothesis states:

*H3: Friends who share implausible misinformation are more likely to be blocked and unfollowed than friends who share moderately plausible misinformation.*

### **Differential effects on blocking politically dissimilar friends: the roles of message plausibility and user ideology**

However, the influence of political similarity on blocking and unfollowing may also vary based on the plausibility of the misinformation shared. Sharing moderately plausible misinformation is likely to be perceived as a minor norm violation. As a result, users may be reluctant to penalize politically similar friends for what they see as minor transgressions. However, users may be more likely to sanction their politically dissimilar friends even when the misinformation shared is only a “small lie.” In contrast, blocking may be less partisan when implausible misinformation is shared. Most users are likely to perceive the sharing of implausible misinformation as a severe violation of norms. Thus, they may be less likely to differentiate between politically similar and dissimilar friends who blatantly violate norms. However, it is also possible that users have a general tendency for partisan blocking, regardless of the misinformation’s plausibility. Hence, we ask a research question:

*RQ1: Does the extent to which users block and unfollow politically dissimilar friends more than similar friends differ depending on the plausibility of the misinformation shared?*

Finally, it is important to consider whether the influence of political similarity on blocking and unfollowing behavior differs according to users' political ideology. On this previously unexplored issue, prior research suggests three potential scenarios. First, some studies suggest that people on the left and right are equally susceptible to political motivated reasoning (e.g., Ditto et al., 2019). Thus, left-wing and right-wing receivers may be equally likely to block and unfollow politically dissimilar misinformation sharers more than similar ones. Second, some literature suggests that, at least in the United States, conservatives are more prone to motivated reasoning than liberals (e.g., Baron & Jost, 2019). Hence, right-wingers may be more likely than left-wingers to block and unfollow politically dissimilar friends who share misinformation. Third, it could be the case that right-wingers share misinformation more frequently than left-wingers (e.g., Guess et al., 2019). This may indicate that those on the right are less devoted to norms of fact-based discourse and less worried about misinformation. If so, they may be less likely than left-wingers to block and unfollow friends who share misinformation and may treat politically similar and dissimilar friends the same way because they do not interpret misinformation to be problematic enough to penalize those who share it, regardless of political leaning. In addition, because right-wingers share more misinformation than left-wingers, left-wingers may have developed partisan blocking as a habit to protect themselves against a frequent and jarring experience mostly caused by their politically dissimilar right-wing friends. As a result, those on the left may be more willing than those on the right to block and unfollow politically dissimilar friends who share misinformation.

In sum, in understanding the role of ideological differences in partisan blocking, there are reasonable arguments for all three potential scenarios we outline. Assessing these

alternatives can provide knowledge of how ideology shapes users' reactions to misinformation and, in turn, how this matters for network polarization. Thus, our final research question asks:

*RQ2: Does the extent to which users block and unfollow politically dissimilar friends more than similar friends who share misinformation differ depending on the receiver's political ideology?*

## Method

### Design and manipulation

After receiving approval from the Ethics Committee of Loughborough University, we conducted two online experiments in Germany in October 2020. The experiments were identical except for the political issues to which the misinformation referred. This design allowed us to directly replicate the findings across two issue contexts. One experiment focused on deregulation of the housing market, the other on equal access to higher education. Each experiment used a randomized, 2x2 between-subjects design with an additional quasi-factor. Each involved 484 representatively sampled social media users (overall  $n = 968$ ). In both experiments, participants were exposed to an excerpt of a professionally designed, mocked-up, social media newsfeed. The feed included a post containing political misinformation originating from a fictitious media outlet and was shown to each respondent as if it had been shared by one of the respondent's friends. The first factor manipulated the *political similarity between sharer and receiver*: it varied whether it was a politically similar or dissimilar friend who shared the post. The second factor manipulated the *plausibility of the misinformation* and varied whether the post was implausible or moderately plausible. As a non-manipulated, pre-treatment quasi-factor, we measured participants' *political ideology*.

To experimentally manipulate the level of similarity between sharer and receiver, we randomly assigned participants to think about either a left-wing or right-wing friend from

their own online social networks (see Supplementary Material SM1). A manipulation check using an 11-point left-right scale revealed this procedure was effective. Respondents who had to name a left-wing friend reported that the friend had a significantly ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.29$ ) more left-leaning ideology ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ) than those who had to name a politically right-wing friend ( $M = 7.93$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ). This was the case in about the same magnitude for left-wing and right-wing participants (see SM4 for details). In addition, 82.6% of the participants who had to select a left-wing friend named a left-wing political party as the preferred party of the friend, while 84.9% of the participants who had to choose a right-wing friend attributed a right-wing party preference to the friend. In both experimental groups, most participants selected friends who preferred the ideologically most extreme party represented in the German parliament (i.e., *Die Linke* when selecting a left-wing friend and the *AfD* when choosing a right-wing friend; see SM4). Again, left-wing and right-wing participants perceived the party preference of the selected friend approximately equally in each experimental group (see SM4).

Following the procedure previously employed by Kaiser et al. (2021), we also asked participants to write down the first name of the friend they imagined. To maintain the privacy of participants' friends, the name was not stored in the dataset but retained temporarily during the online session. It was shown in participants' browsers when the name was automatically displayed in the stimulus as the friend who had shared the misinformation (see SM1). When they saw the stimulus showing the friend's name, participants were asked to imagine the profile picture of this friend instead of the pixelated profile the stimulus displayed (see SM2). Respondents found it easy to imagine their friend as the person who had shared the misinformation. On a 5-point scale from 1 = "not at all easy" to 5 = "very easy," the average response was  $M = 3.51$ —significantly ( $p < .001$ ) higher than the mid-point of the scale. The same was the case when we asked participants how easy it was for them to imagine the

experimental situation as real ( $M = 3.90, p < .001$ ). In addition, a pretest with a representative sample of 163 social media users revealed that imagining a profile picture yielded no difference in the perceived realism of the experimental situation when compared with seeing the actual profile picture of a person who shared misinformation ( $M_{\text{displayed}} = 4.01, SD_{\text{displayed}} = 1.08, M_{\text{imagined}} = 3.99, SD_{\text{imagined}} = 1.18, p = .890$ ; see SM3).

The factor of political similarity was based on respondents' pre-stimulus answer to a question about their own political ideology. All respondents who said they were left-wing and were exposed to misinformation shared by a left-wing friend or who said they were right wing and were exposed to misinformation shared by a right-wing friend were coded as being in the "politically similar" category. All other combinations were coded as being in the "politically dissimilar" category. Neither the perceived realism of the experimental situation nor the ease of imagining the friend sharing misinformation differed according to the receiver's political similarity with the sharer ( $p = .545$  and  $p = .269$ , respectively).

To test the influence of the misinformation's plausibility, the stimuli manipulated the extent to which the false statements deviated from previous political events that had actually occurred. Major deviations were categorized as implausible; minor deviations as moderately plausible. To have full control over the stimuli, we deliberately employed misinformation we had invented. This allowed us to keep the content of each social media post constant and only vary the plausibility of the claims, thereby minimizing potential confounding factors. This design choice also meant we could devise misinformation posts that were politically broad enough that they could have been shared by left-wing or right-wing friends (see SM2). Here is an illustration for the issue of deregulating the housing market. We report the implausible version with the moderately plausible version in square parentheses: "The government [an expert committee of a ministry] planned [proposed] a massive [slight] easing of the rent control act, allowing landlords to increase the rent for new tenants by up to 50% [12%]."

To maximize external and internal validity we chose to present the original source of the misinformation as a fictitious media outlet. In terms of external validity, much misinformation on social media originates from the accounts of inauthentic news websites that present themselves as legitimate news organizations (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Thus, our stimuli realistically reproduced a real-world situation, as they feature the same kind of pseudo-journalistic source that is common in problematic online news. In terms of internal validity, using stimuli featuring a fictitious news organization ensured that the outlet was unknown to the participants and could not serve as a “source credibility” cue for the content shared (Kaiser et al., 2021). We considered this particularly important because our experiment manipulated the plausibility of the shared misinformation. For the same reason, in this study we avoided showing popularity cues such as “likes” and shares on the social media newsfeed, as they also tend to affect credibility assessments beyond the content level (Luo et al., 2020).

For purposes unrelated to this study, both experiments contained additional control groups of 508 users. The control groups saw the misinformation in the form of an article directly posted by the same fictitious media outlet but not shared by a friend, so we did not measure our dependent variable of blocking or unfollowing among the control groups. However, we *did* measure the misinformation’s perceived credibility in the control groups. This provided us with a robust manipulation check because the plausibility of the misinformation could not possibly have been influenced by a user’s perception of a friend who shared it. Results confirmed that the implausible misinformation was perceived to be significantly less credible than the moderately plausible misinformation ( $M_{\text{implausible}} = 2.16$ ,  $SD_{\text{implausible}} = 1.25$ ,  $M_{\text{moderately plausible}} = 3.61$ ,  $SD_{\text{moderately plausible}} = 1.25$ ,  $d = -1.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### **Sample and measures**

Using Respondi’s online access panel, we recruited an interlocked quota sample of

social media users ( $n = 968$ ) in Germany. The sample was representative for gender (women = 49.1%, men = 50.9%) and age groups between 18 and 69 years ( $M = 43.93$ ,  $SD = 14.35$ ). While quotas were not used for ideology, the sample closely resembled the ideological profile of the German population (see SM4). Social media users were defined as those who had a personal profile that they used at least once a month on at least one of the ten most popular social media platforms. We defined seven *a priori* criteria for adequate participation in this study (see SM4). Those who did not meet one or more of the criteria were automatically screened out during the survey and not included in the data analysis (completion rate was 39.5%; attrition at random with  $p = .251$ ). This procedure enabled us to reach the planned minimum statistical power of  $1 - \beta = .85$  for small effects ( $d = .3$ ) when analyzing the effects across both experiments in a four-factorial design (see SM5). We allocated the remaining participants randomly to one condition in one of the two experiments. The full questionnaire is available at <https://osf.io/2gdxt>. Randomization checks confirm there were no significant differences among the experimental groups with respect to age, gender, education, and ideology (see SM4).

*Dependent variable: intention to block or unfollow the sharer of the misinformation.*

After respondents were exposed to the stimulus, we asked participants to express agreement or disagreement with two statements on a six-point scale: “I would block posts from [name] in the future, so that his/her posts won’t be displayed to me” and “I would continue following/friending [name] on social media.” After inverting the scale of the second item, the two items correlated strongly ( $r = .52$ ,  $p < .001$ ) so we combined them into an index of intention to block or unfollow the sharer of the misinformation ( $M = 2.09$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ , see SM7 for further descriptive statistics). We assume that the decision to block or unfollow is likely to be the result of cumulative change in attitudes toward the sharer. Blocking or unfollowing a friend terminates a digital connection and is a unique and potentially

irreversible change in an online relationship. It is unlikely to be performed as casually as other social media behaviors such as liking, commenting, or sharing. Nevertheless, in the real world each single exposure to problematic information may strengthen a user's intention to block or unfollow a friend, and these small changes in intention may ultimately coalesce into action. Considering that our experiment exposed participants once to a single piece of misinformation shared by a specific friend, we used a Likert-scale to more realistically capture the cumulative process of intention change that, over time, results in action. Measuring behavioral intentions with Likert-scales also reduces measurement errors when compared with (binary) forced-choice questions about respondents' intentions (Flannelly et al., 2000).

*Quasi-factor: ideology.* Prior to the selection of the sharer, participants' political ideology was measured on an 11-point, left-right scale (1 = "left" and 11 = "right";  $M = 5.24$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ). Participants at the mid-point of the scale were asked a follow-up question about whether they saw themselves as "rather to the left" or "rather to the right" ( $n_{\text{rather left}} = 152$ ,  $n_{\text{rather right}} = 158$ ). Next, these responses were combined to create two new measures. First, we created a new measure by integrating the answer on the follow-up item into the continuous scale. This resulted in 12 scale points, which we subsequently reduced to a 6-point scale from 1 = "left" to 6 = "right" ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ). Secondly, we recoded this scale into a dichotomous measure by categorizing each respondent as either left or right ( $n_{\text{left}} = 618$ ,  $n_{\text{right}} = 350$ ; this right-skewed distribution matches the distribution in the German population—see SM4 for the distributions of participants' dichotomous and continuous political ideology, their party preferences, and how their ideology resembles the German population). As we explain above, we combined the dichotomous measure with the experimentally manipulated political leaning of the sharer to construct the factor of political similarity between sharer and receiver. However, for the statistical test of the hypotheses we used the more robust



continuous measure of receivers' political ideology as a quasi-factor.

*Mediator: perceptions of the misinformation's credibility.* Participants were asked five items on 6-point scales (1 = "does not at all apply" to 6 = "fully applies"): "To the best of my knowledge the media post is... a: correct, b: trustworthy, c: accurate, d: right, e: credible." Answers were combined into a single index ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ,  $\alpha = .96$ ).

*Manipulation check measures.* The sharer's political ideology was measured on a left-right scale from 1 = "left" to 11 = "right" ( $M = 5.75$ ,  $SD = 2.88$ ). The ease of imagining the friend portrayed in the stimulus as the person who shared the misinformation was measured with a single item on a 5-point scale from 1 = "not at all easy" to 5 = "very easy" ("How easy was it for you to imagine that the pixelated profile was [name] who shared the media post?";  $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ). A further single item with the same scale measured the perceived realism of the experimental situation ("How easy was it for you to imagine the situation with the social media newsfeed as a real situation?";  $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ).

## Results

To analyze the data, we constructed a customized ANOVA that only considered our interactions of interest and estimated the effects across issues, i.e., in both experiments combined. This was possible because a preliminary saturated ANOVA revealed no significant higher-order interactions, for example, with the political issue of the stimuli. The preliminary saturated ANOVA, descriptive statistics, and successful robustness checks for the final ANOVA are provided in SM6-SM9, along with the data file and our commented R script at <https://osf.io/2gdxt>.

Table 1 displays the results of the final ANOVA. The model is significant ( $p < .001$ ) and explains 8.4% of the variance in the intention to block or unfollow the misinformation sharer. Political (dis-)similarity between the sharer and the receiver of the misinformation (H1) has a main effect on blocking or unfollowing the sharer ( $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .039$ ). Moreover,

this effect does not differ depending on the political issue, as shown by the non-statistically significant interaction between similarity and issue ( $p = .632$ ).

--- TABLE 1 HERE ---

To test if participants were more likely to block or unfollow politically dissimilar than similar friends who shared misinformation, Figure 1 displays the results of a simple effects analysis. When results on both issues were combined, participants were significantly more likely to say that they would block or unfollow politically dissimilar than similar friends ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = .42$ ), even when the same misinformation had been shared. This effect was also observed when considering separately the issue of the housing market ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = .47$ ) and access to education ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = .37$ ). Moreover, we tested for heterogeneous treatment effects of political similarity by eleven demographic and political characteristics measured pre-treatment (e.g., political interest and media cynicism, see SM8 for details). None of these variables conditioned the effect of political similarity. From this we can infer that political similarity exerts a uniform effect on blocking or unfollowing a sharer of misinformation (but see the results by receivers' political ideology below). Thus, H1 is supported.

--- FIGURE 1 HERE ---

H2 proposed that the effect of political similarity would be mediated via the perceived credibility of the misinformation shared. Figure 2 displays the results of this mediation analysis. Although higher perceived credibility significantly reduces the intention to block or unfollow the friend who shared the misinformation (b-path:  $b = -.204$ ,  $p < .001$ ), perceived credibility is not influenced in the first place by political similarity between the sharer and receiver (a-path:  $b = -.092$ ,  $p = .292$ ). Thus, although the total effect of political similarity on blocking or unfollowing is significant ( $b = .512$ ,  $p < .001$ ), H2 is not supported.

--- FIGURE 2 HERE ---

Next, we return to Table 1 to examine the influence of the misinformation's

plausibility (H3). Plausibility exerts a main effect on blocking or unfollowing the sharer ( $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .019$ ). This effect does not differ significantly across the two issues ( $p = .214$ ).

Figure 3 illustrates the results of a simple effects analysis. In comparison with receiving moderately plausible misinformation, receiving implausible misinformation significantly increases a social media user's intention to block or unfollow the sharer. This is the case when combining both issues ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = .29$ ) and when considering housing ( $p = .013$ ,  $d = .24$ ) and access to education ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = .34$ ) separately. Thus, H3 is supported.

--- FIGURE 3 HERE ---

RQ1 asked whether the main effect of political similarity on blocking is contingent on the plausibility of the misinformation. As the ANOVA in Table 1 shows, there is no significant interaction between similarity and plausibility ( $p = .909$ ), so we can infer there is no evidence of differential effects of similarity by plausibility. This result is corroborated by the simple effects shown in the left panel in Figure 4. Across different issues, dissimilar sharers are more likely to be blocked or unfollowed, irrespective of whether they share implausible ( $p = .002$ ,  $d = .42$ ) or moderately plausible ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = .45$ ) misinformation.

This pattern also holds when considering each issue separately. For the housing market issue, politically dissimilar sharers are more likely to be blocked than similar sharers when they share both implausible ( $p = .003$ ,  $d = .50$ ) and moderately plausible ( $p = .007$ ,  $d = .41$ ) misinformation. The same is descriptively the case for access to education, although similarity only exerts a significant effect for moderately plausible misinformation ( $p = .003$ ,  $d = .57$ ). Nevertheless, the general pattern of significant simple effects and the non-significant interaction provides a clear answer to RQ1: politically dissimilar friends who share misinformation are more likely to be blocked or unfollowed than politically similar friends, regardless of whether they share implausible or moderately plausible misinformation.

--- FIGURE 4 HERE ---

Finally, RQ2 asked whether the effect of political similarity on blocking varies across respondents with different political ideologies. Again, the ANOVA in Table 1 provides an initial answer by revealing a significant interaction between similarity and the continuous measure of receivers' political ideology ( $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .017$ ). Figure 4 provides further simple effects analyses to examine this interaction. To ease interpretation of the interaction effect of the ANOVA, the figure uses the dichotomous measure of political ideology instead of the continuous measure used for the ANOVA. When combining both issues, the results reveal a clear pattern. Only left-wing receivers showed a significantly ( $p < .001$ ) and substantially ( $d = .63$ ) stronger intention to block or unfollow politically dissimilar sharers of misinformation. There is no evidence of such effects for right-wing receivers ( $p = .852$ ).

This pattern holds across all combinations of issue and plausibility level. The similarity effect holds for left-wing receivers under all conditions and with a considerable effect size ( $d$  ranging between .43 and .98,  $p$  ranging between  $< .001$  and .031). In contrast, there is no similarity effect for right-wing receivers in any condition and the descriptive differences are very small or slightly reversed. That is, these differences would almost certainly not have reached statistical significance even if our sample had contained as many right-wing as left-wing participants.

However, there is also considerable variation in partisan blocking among left-wing receivers depending on their ideological extremity. Figure 5 plots the interaction effect from the ANOVA using the continuous 6-point scale for receivers' ideology. When compared with right-wing receivers, left-wing receivers, particularly those at the extreme end of the scale, had a substantially higher intention to block dissimilar than similar sharers. Thus, we can answer RQ2: only left-wing receivers show a stronger propensity toward partisan blocking, and the propensity is strongest among extreme left-wingers.

--- FIGURE 5 HERE ---

### Discussion

In this study, we have provided evidence of a previously unexplored behavior—partisan blocking—that arises when people react to upstream social media users’ violations of information sharing norms. On social media, norm violation can manifest in various ways, including hate speech, trolling, cyberbullying, harassment, and the amplification of hyper-partisan news, but, crucially, it also includes the sharing of misinformation. We focused on how users’ reactions to political misinformation shared by others may limit their future exposure to content from politically dissimilar friends. Our findings suggest that social media users’ perceptions of the political attitudes of their online friends who share misinformation significantly impact their intentions to engage in blocking. Previous research has focused on believing and sharing misinformation (e.g., Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Rossini et al., 2020). But we show that misinformation shared online can also reduce the diversity of people and opinion to which users are exposed and may therefore contribute to network polarization. Many people share misinformation on social media (Chadwick et al., 2021), but they are not treated equally by their followers and friends for the same problematic sharing behavior. Downstream responses tend to fall along partisan lines: politically dissimilar friends are more likely than politically similar friends to be blocked or unfollowed. The practice of blocking and unfollowing may help social media users reduce the spread of misinformation, but it disproportionately sanctions politically dissimilar friends. Partisanship has been shown to lead to the selective sharing of fact-checks (Shin & Thorson, 2017). We provide evidence that it also leads to selective blocking or unfollowing.

Partisan blocking is likely to have problematic long-term consequences for network polarization on social media. Friends who share misinformation, and those who block or unfollow them as a result, will find that their ties with politically dissimilar others tend to wither and their networks become more politically homophilic (Zhu et al., 2017; Skoric et al.,

2021), with ever fewer links to those in different political camps (Kearney, 2019). Given that politically dissimilar users are unlikely to spend all of their time sharing content that is false or misleading, cross-cutting exposure to good quality information from political adversaries is also likely to decline as a result of partisan blocking.

Given the importance of online network ties for political action today, a key implication of our findings is that some basic structures of citizens' collective public endeavor will increasingly be shaped by ideological homophily among the actors involved, and not solely by the similarity of information that travels through networks. Important trade-offs will result from this shift. Homophilic online networks may be useful for rapid mobilization among the like-minded, but they will make building bridges and reaching consensus progressively more difficult, as the political habituses (Bourdieu, 2005) of the people in online networks—their histories, lived experiences, and norms—polarize. Put simply, despite its popularity, partisan blocking on social media is a crude solution to a complicated problem: it takes the whole person who shared misinformation out of the interactive context. It has no obvious parallel in face-to-face interaction in political settings, where animosity and differences of opinion are of course evident but where completely negating the presence of dissimilar people is far more difficult to achieve. Partisan blocking is like using the proverbial sledgehammer to crack a nut—and it has troubling consequences.

Our results also suggest that communication researchers ought to pay greater attention to how the fine grain of technological design can matter for public life and have unintended consequences, particularly at the intersection of interpersonal and public communication that is common in social media settings. These may only be revealed when researchers move away from focusing on the policy pronouncements of social media companies—and the data those companies are willing to release—and dig deeper into people's actual behavior online.

Partisan blocking as a response to other users' sharing of misinformation comes on

top of other, more well-known, outcomes of choice affordances in online environments. Most choice affordances, however, enable forms of selective *exposure*, such as when users befriend like-minded others or selectively engage with pro-attitudinal content (Sunstein, 2018). In contrast, partisan blocking is a form of *selective avoidance of other people*. Prior research indicates that even though users tend to gravitate toward news they agree with, they do not necessarily avoid cross-cutting exposure, when it comes to professional news (Garrett, 2009). This is an important qualifier to the argument that the contemporary media environment inevitably leads to “echo chambers” and political polarization. Most individuals do not actively avoid messages they disagree with and, in any case, incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal content can balance users’ tendency to seek congruence (cf. Holbert et al. 2010; Barberà, 2020). However, while users may not selectively avoid fact-based professional news they disagree with (Garrett, 2009), our results suggest that, on social media, users tend to selectively avoid *people* with whom they disagree and who share misinformation. And such partisan blocking may have even more durable and powerful implications than the choice of news articles one reads, shares, or otherwise engages with at a given time. This is because blocking and unfollowing permanently sever ties with other users, unless a user decides to restore them. It is a form of persistent selective avoidance of politically dissimilar others and may also reduce the likelihood of incidental exposure to good quality cross-cutting information, not only to misinformation.

That being said, we caution that our study sheds light on network polarization, in the sense that more homophilic networks will reduce the likelihood of encountering politically dissimilar others. We do not directly address the subsequent attitudinal or behavioral influences that may result in increased political polarization. How the ratio of pro- and counter-attitudinal information affects interactional, ideological/positional, or affective political polarization (Yarchi et al., 2021) is disputed. Some studies have shown that exposure

to pro-attitudinal content increases affective polarization (Garrett et al., 2014; Tsfatì & Chotiner, 2016). Others indicate that counter-attitudinal messages (Bail et al., 2018) and a mix of pro- and counter-attitudinal information (Garrett et al., 2014) can drive polarization. Whether partisan blocking will affect political polarization beyond its effect on network polarization remains an open question.

Our study also shows that misinformation's relative plausibility is an important and under-researched factor in online settings. Public debate and scholarship have often focused on extreme examples of misinformation. While clearly problematic, outlandish claims are believed by few people (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Moderately plausible misinformation may have more damaging consequences because it is more likely to deceive greater numbers. We have shown that friends who share moderately plausible misinformation are less likely to be blocked than friends who share implausible misinformation. It may be easier for small lies to circulate on social media without those who shared them being sanctioned. Eventually, the proliferation of small lies online may lead to attitudinal distortion among publics. However, we also found that relative plausibility of misinformation does not play a role in partisan blocking: users are more likely to block dissimilar than similar friends who share misinformation, and the misinformation's plausibility plays no role in that context. This further reveals the overall social force of partisan blocking.

Yet partisan blocking does vary by users' political ideology: left-wing users engage in partisan blocking more than right-wing users. To be clear, this pattern cannot be explained by the fact that left-wingers are more inclined than right-wingers to sanction *any* friend who shares misinformation. Left-wingers are equally as likely as right-wingers to block politically *similar* sharers, but left-wingers are more likely to block *dissimilar* friends than are right-wingers. Moreover, whereas in survey-based studies not focused on misinformation ideological extremity has been shown to increase unfriending on political grounds among



both left-wing and right-wing users (Bode, 2016; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015), in our experiment ideological extremity only played a role in strengthening the propensity toward partisan blocking among left-wing users.

There are reasonable explanations for this ideological difference, as we discussed in presenting our rationale for RQ2. Blocking is relational and depends on past experiences of exposure. Because right-wing users share more misinformation than left-wing users (Guess et al., 2019; Chadwick et al., 2021; Osmundsen et al., 2021), all else being equal, left-wing users are more likely than right-wing users to have been exposed in the past to misinformation shared by right-wing friends. Thus, left-wing users may have had more opportunity and greater incentives to develop the habit of blocking and unfriending as ways of sanctioning their politically dissimilar friends who share misinformation. In addition, left-wingers' experiences may lead them to perceive that the misinformation they encounter in their social media feeds is predominantly shared by right-wingers. They may develop greater hostility to what they see as norm-violating behavior by their right-wing friends. Even though this may explain why left-wingers are keener to act against politically dissimilar friends to avoid exposure to misinformation in the future, left-wingers are not equally as likely to block their like-minded, left-wing, friends who share misinformation. By applying this partisan double standard, left-wingers are therefore more likely to let their politically similar friends off the hook, further adding to homophily in their online networks.

### **Limitations of this study**

Our findings come with some caveats. First, our measure of blocking or unfollowing is based on self-reports and is set in a hypothetical experimental situation. The intention to block in an experiment may not entirely transfer to everyday behavior on social media. The effect sizes of our experimental treatments also suggest the need for some caution. Compared with conventional standards for a single exposure experiment, we found strong effects of

partisan blocking among left-wing users (Cohen's  $d$  up to .98). However, these effects correspond to shifts of about one scale-point on a 6-point Likert-scale (see Figure 4), which means that participants moved, on average, from almost no intention (scale point 1) to a slight intention (scale point 2) to block or unfollow the sharer of misinformation. A single exposure to misinformation may not lead to instant blocking in real life. However, repeated exposure is more likely to increase the intention to block and unfollow and ultimately lead to blocking. When experiments mimic routine, everyday settings such as social media, it is particularly important to bear in mind that single moments of exposure can accumulate in repetitive interactions over time (Funder & Ozer, 2019).

Second, our design cannot entirely rule out that the partisan blocking we observed stemmed from a generally negative reaction to politically dissimilar friends who share political content and was not solely a reaction to the sharing of misinformation. We did not include experimental groups who saw truthful posts shared by friends. However, our finding that moderately plausible misinformation is less likely to elicit blocking or unfriending than implausible misinformation suggests that sharing content deviating more strongly from norms of fact-based discourse, rather than generally sharing political content, is what really matters here. It is likely that blocking will also occur as a reaction to other forms of norm violation we did not test in this study, such as aggression, harassment, and the sharing of hyper-partisan news. It seems much less likely to us that blocking or unfriending is a regular response to the sharing of all political news, even if the news comes from politically dissimilar users.

Third, due to reasons of privacy and data access, our stimuli were not based on information from users' real social media profiles but relied on our participants using their imagination. However, our mocked-up social media interface automatically included the imagined social media friends' names in real time. This procedure has been successfully

employed in past research (e.g., Kaiser et al., 2021). In addition, our manipulation checks and additional methods experiment, and the fact that we found a consistent pattern for the hypothesized effects of political similarity underscore that the manipulation actually worked.

Fourth, although we replicated our findings across two different issues, our experiments are still dependent on the specific political and cultural context of Germany. That being said, political polarization in Germany is comparatively low. Partisan blocking may be even more pronounced and consequential in more polarized political systems.

Fifth, our mediation model testing perceived credibility of the misinformation failed to explain why politically dissimilar friends are blocked more often than similar friends: perceived credibility of the misinformation was not a significant mediator. It could be that partisan blocking also partly derives from other perceptions of the sharer. There is some evidence that users are more likely to unfriend weak ties than strong ties (John & Dvir-Gvirman, 2015). To the extent that political disagreement is more likely with weak than strong ties (Mutz & Martin, 2001), it is possible that participants who were asked to imagine politically similar friends may have thought more about strong ties than those who were asked to imagine dissimilar friends; this may partly explain the pattern of partisan blocking. We did not measure tie strength as an additional (quasi-)factor because we wanted to avoid asking participants in detail about their personal relationship with the imagined news sharer. We wanted to avoid making tie strength more cognitively accessible than the focal characteristic we designed our experiment to test—the sharer's political ideology. Thus, priming tie strength would have undermined our experiment. More generally, it is unlikely that tie strength alone could explain partisan blocking. After all, the intention to block or unfollow the sharer differed not only by political similarity but also by receivers' political ideology: left-wingers were more likely to engage in partisan blocking than right-wingers. If tie strength had played a major, hidden role in explaining partisan blocking, it is unlikely that

we would have observed those differential effects by participants' ideology. This suggests that other, more politically charged forces such as the strength of group identity, for example, may mediate the effects of political similarity on partisan blocking. Future research should examine these and other mediators and potentially incorporate tie strength as a further moderator that may condition the effects of political similarity.

Finally, to avoid confounding the effects of our key independent variables with other factors, the misinformation displayed in our stimuli was policy-focused and not strongly emotional. More emotionally-laden content may dampen the influence of the person who shared the misinformation, because receivers may rely more strongly on the content of the message than on the recommender cue. That being said, some of the misinformation we displayed in our stimuli was implausible and attention-grabbing, yet this still did not dilute the influence of political similarity.

### **An agenda for future research on partisan blocking**

Our study is a starting point for a new research agenda on partisan blocking as well as the role of other choice affordances on social media platforms in shaping online civic culture. In addition to tackling the limitations we outline above, we hope future research will address at least three important concerns.

First, scholars should investigate which specific features of the content shared by other users, including the context in which platforms present it, may trigger partisan blocking. Is partisan blocking limited to clear-cut forms of misinformation as those employed in this study or does it apply to other types of problematic content, such as factually accurate but hyper-partisan news? Or does partisan blocking affect any content shared by other users, including accurate and non-partisan news? Is partisan blocking more likely to occur when platforms explicitly flag misinformation as incorrect than in contexts when users rely on their own assessment of the content shared by others, as was the case in our study?

Secondly, researchers should build on this knowledge to design interventions that help reduce the prevalence of partisan blocking. If users block dissimilar friends more than similar ones only when these friends engage in norm-violating behavior, interventions would need to target people who share problematic content (e.g., by informing them that this behavior can trigger unintended blocking responses) or the content they share (e.g., by refining algorithms to limit the spread of misinformation before it reaches other users likely to engage in partisan blocking). However, if users have a general tendency for partisan blocking regardless of the content shared, interventions may need to target those who block other users on partisan grounds (e.g., by raising their awareness that their blocking behavior is often ideologically charged). Media and civic literacy programs could also be enhanced by promoting understanding among citizens of what are, at the level of individual experience, often difficult-to-grasp impacts of choice affordances on long term patterns of social interaction.

Finally, to further assess the normative implications of partisan blocking, future research should also investigate which types of politically dissimilar users are more likely to be subject to this kind of sanction. Here, researchers could assess whether partisan blocking disproportionately targets users who also engage in other forms of norm violation, such as trolling and hate speech, as well as those who belong to social, ethnic, or cultural minorities.

## **Conclusion**

By digging beneath the surface of blocking and unfriending features, we have revealed an under-researched, yet highly problematic phenomenon: partisan blocking. Partisan blocking derives from a confluence of other users' norm violations and popular social media affordances originally introduced to grant people greater control over their online experiences. Even when used by citizens to protect themselves from misinformation shared by their online friends, blocking and unfriending can end up disproportionately severing ties to politically dissimilar others. At the same time, because politically similar

friends who share inaccurate content are less likely to be blocked, partisan blocking does little to solve the problem of users who continue to push misinformation to their like-minded online friends.

These patterns augment network polarization and erode the common ground required for learning about political difference and reaching compromise. Unlike most forms of selective exposure, which mainly increase engagement with pro-attitudinal messages, partisan blocking increases avoidance of politically dissimilar others in their entirety, including their experiences and the knowledge they have gained in their ideologically-dissimilar political networks. Yet history shows that such experiences and knowledge are likely to be important in many forms of inclusive political deliberation and policy consensus (e.g., Hochschild, 2016). Selective avoidance through partisan blocking may therefore contribute to polarization that is more durable and less easily reversed than that generated by selective exposure.

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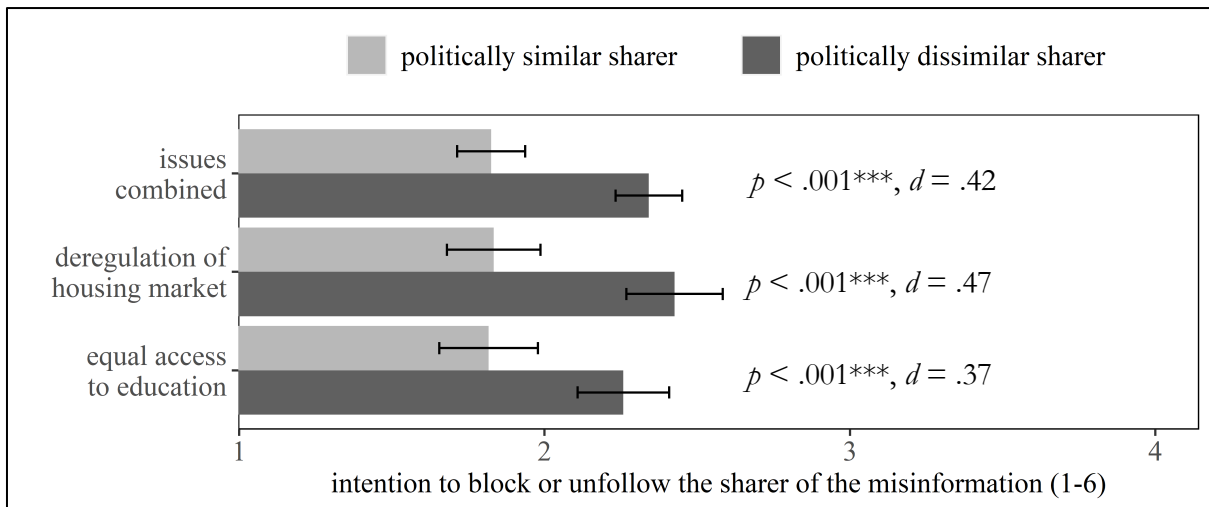
## TABLES AND FIGURES

*Table 1.* ANOVA Test of Between-Subjects Effects for Political Similarity between Sharer and Receiver of Misinformation, Plausibility of the Misinformation, Issue, Receiver's Political Ideology (continuous), and Interactions of Interest on the Intention to Block or Unfollow the Sharer

Factor	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Adjusted model	8	12.15	.092	< .001***
Political similarity between sharer and receiver	1	41.65	.039	< .001***
Plausibility of the misinformation	1	20.41	.019	< .001***
Issue of the misinformation	1	1.42	.001	.234
Receiver's political ideology (continuous)	1	6.20	.006	.013*
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X issue of the misinformation	1	0.23	< .001	.632
Plausibility of the misinformation X issue of the misinformation	1	1.55	.001	.214
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X plausibility of the misinformation	1	0.01	< .001	.909
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X receiver's political ideology (continuous)	1	18.37	.017	< .001***

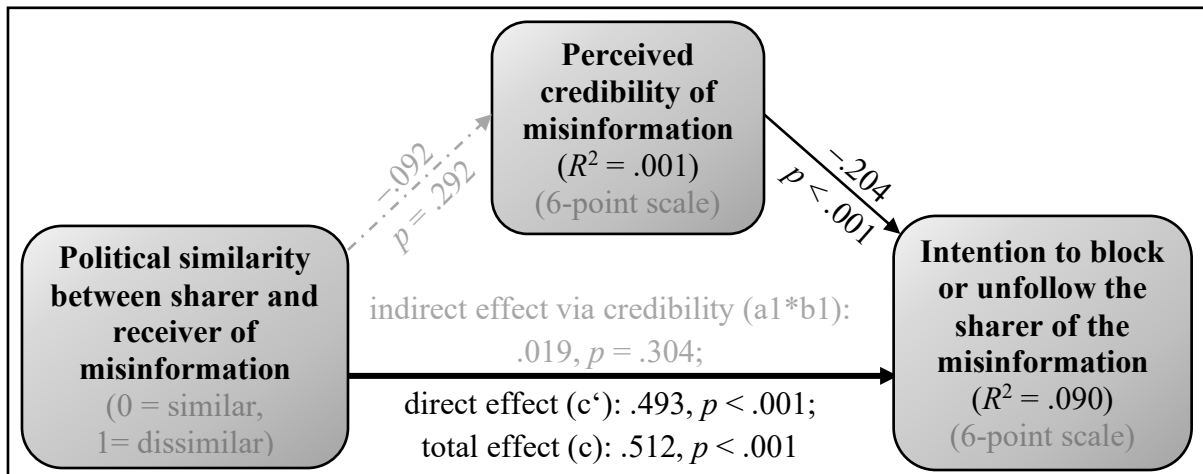
*Note.* Further possible interactions not included as irrelevant for research questions and insignificant,  $R^2 = .092$ ,  $R^2_{\text{adjusted}} = .084$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ,  $n = 968$

*Figure 1.* Effect of Political Similarity between Sharer and Receiver of Misinformation by Issue on the Intention to Block or Unfollow the Sharer



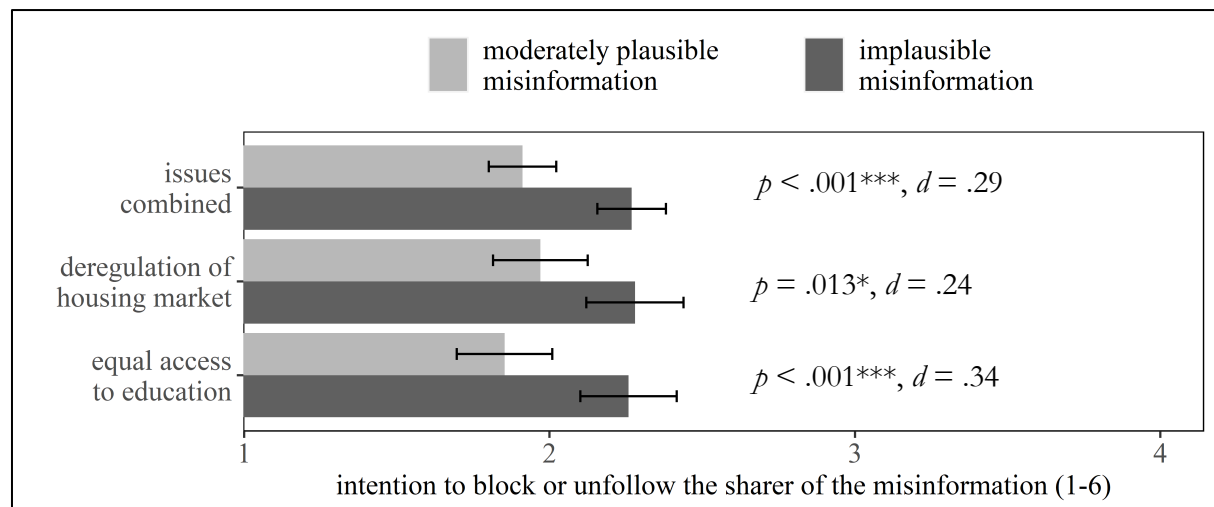
*Note.* Displayed are estimated marginal means with 95% confidence intervals based on a two-way ANOVA,  $p$ -values are adjusted for multiple comparisons using Sidak-correction,  $n = 968$

*Figure 2.* Mediation of the Effect of Political Similarity between Sharer and Receiver on the Intention to Block or Unfollow the Sharer via Perceived Credibility of the Misinformation



*Note.* Displayed are unstandardized regression coefficients based on 5,000 bootstrap samples

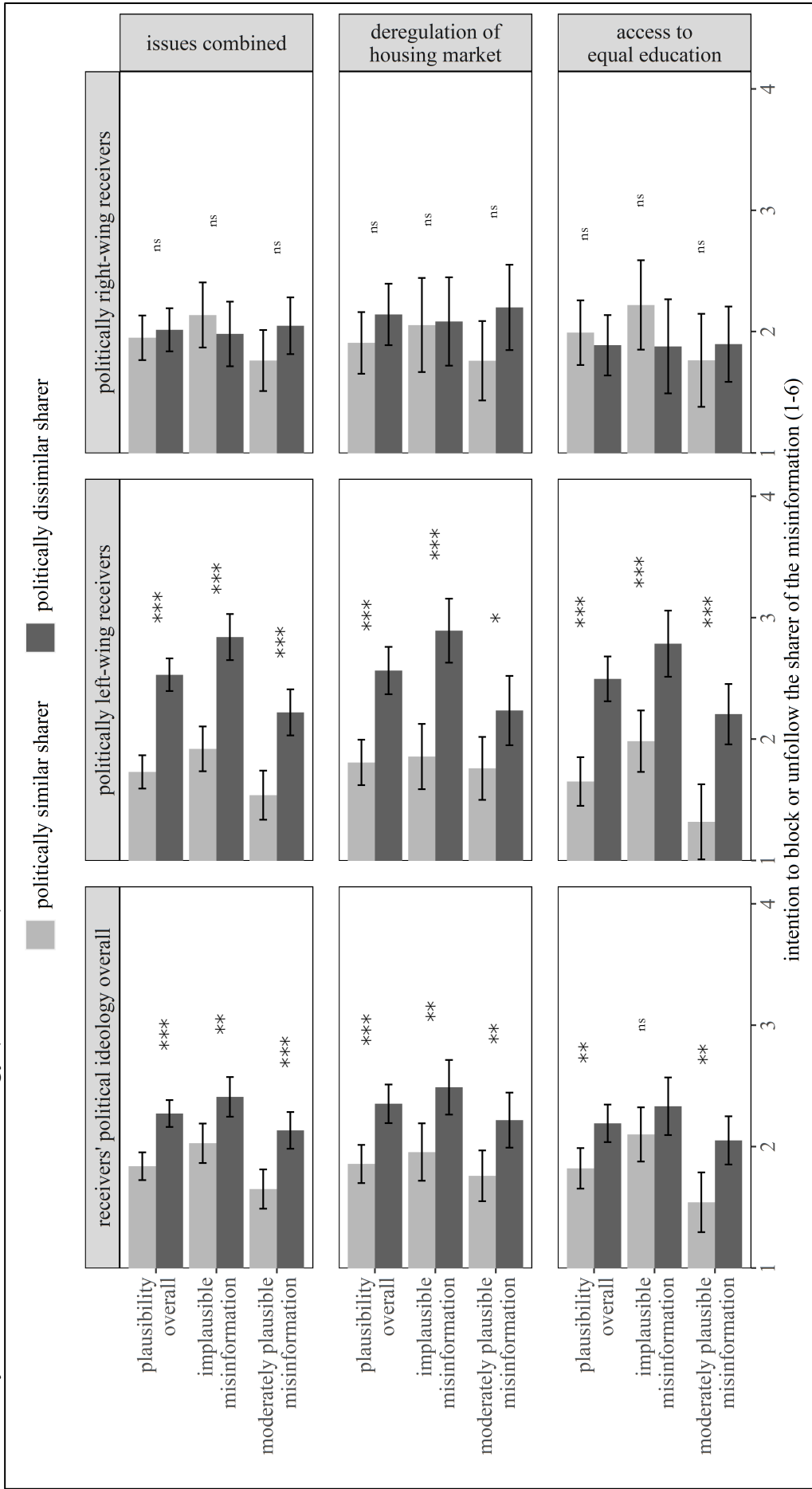
*Figure 3.* Effect of Plausibility of Misinformation by Issue on the Intention to Block or Unfollow the Sharer of the Misinformation



*Note.* Displayed are estimated marginal means with 95% confidence intervals based on a two-way ANOVA,  $p$ -values are adjusted for multiple comparisons using Sidak-correction,  $n = 968$

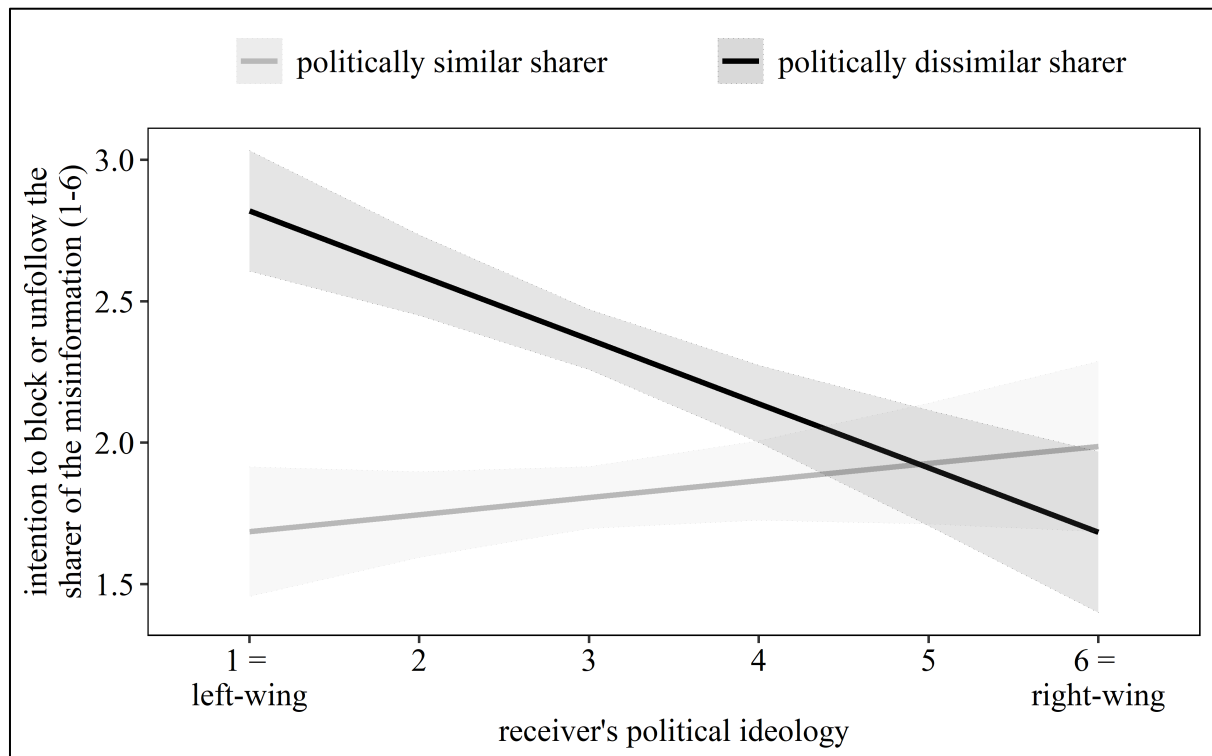


Figure 4. Effect of Political Similarity between Sharer and Receiver of Misinformation on the Intention to Block or Unfollow the Sharer by Plausibility, Receiver's Political ideology (dichotomous), and Issue



Note. Displayed are estimated marginal means with 95% confidence intervals based on a four-way ANOVA with dichotomous measure for receiver's political ideology, *p*-values adjusted for multiple comparisons using Sidak-correction, \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ , ns  $p > .05$ , significant interaction of political similarity X receiver's ideology when using dichotomous and continuous measure (each,  $p < .001$ ),  $n = 968$

Figure 5. Effect of Political Similarity between Sharer and Receiver of Misinformation by the Continuous Measure for Receiver's Political Ideology



Note. Grey areas around bold regression lines indicate 95% confidence intervals, estimates derived from a linear regression model mirroring the focal ANOVA model in Table 1,  $n = 968$

## RESPONSES TO MISINFORMATION

**SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL (SM1-9)**

for the manuscript “Partisan Blocking: Biased Responses to Shared Misinformation  
Contribute to Network Polarization on Social Media”

**CONTENTS**

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**NOTE**

In addition to the information in this document, the following files are available at  
[https://osf.io/2gdxt/?view\\_only=b7f96f0c47b14aed8051a034af2cc261](https://osf.io/2gdxt/?view_only=b7f96f0c47b14aed8051a034af2cc261):

- **Data:** “DATA.csv”
- **Commented R-script:** “UPDATED\_R-SCRIPT.R”
- **Translated English Questionnaire:**  
“QUESTIONNAIRE\_English\_translation\_BLINDED.pdf”
- **Original German Questionnaire:**  
“QUESTIONNAIRE\_original\_German\_version\_BLINDED.pdf”

**SM1a: MANIPULATION OF SHARER SELECTION (ENGLISH TRANSLATION)**

Translated manipulation for the selection of a left-wing friend:

Next, we focus on **your acquaintances on social media**. This means other normal users you are connected with via social media.

Please think of **a concrete person** you are connected with via social media and who is politically spoken clearly **left-progressive**, according to your assessment. This can be a close friend, a distant (former) colleague/neighbour/schoolmate or a person you got to know directly via social media, for example.

It is only important that **1) the person and you know each other**, **2) you are connected with the person via social media**, and **3) the person is politically spoken clearly left-progressive**.

«Left-progressive» means that the person you select should deem left issues important such as social security for people with a low income or without a job, protection of the environment, support for minorities, or European solidarity. Thus, the political views of the selected person should mirror the position of political parties such as the Linkspartei, the Grünen, or the left wing of the SPD.

Please **choose the person carefully** and **remember exactly the person** you have selected. On the following pages, we will ask some further questions on this person. Thus, it is important that you **keep exactly the same person in your mind**.

Please write down the **first (given) name** of this **left-progressive** person in the field below.

First (given) name:

Privacy information: The first name of the person will **NOT** be stored in the dataset. It will only be used temporarily during the interview. As soon as you leave the webpage of this questionnaire, the first name of the person will be automatically deleted. No one will be able to personally identify you or the person you selected.

Translated manipulation for the selection of a right-wing friend:

Next, we focus on **your acquaintances on social media**. This means other normal users you are connected with via social media.

Please think of **a concrete person** you are connected with via social media and who is politically spoken clearly **right-conservative**, according to your assessment. This can be a close friend, a distant (former) colleague/neighbour/schoolmate or a person you got to know directly via social media, for example.

It is only important that **1) the person and you know each other**, **2) you are connected with the person via social media**, and **3) the person is politically spoken clearly right-conservative**.

«Right-conservative» means that the person you select should deem conservative issues important such as a strong economy, fight against criminals, protection of traditional families, or protection of borders. Thus, the political views of the selected person should mirror the position of political parties such as the AfD, the FDP, or the right wing of the CDU/CSU.

Please **choose the person carefully** and **remember exactly the person** you have selected. On the following pages, we will ask some further questions on this person. Thus, it is important that you **keep exactly the same person in your mind**.

Please write down the **first (given) name** of this **right-conservative** person in the field below.

First (given) name:

Privacy information: The first name of the person will **NOT** be stored in the dataset. It will only be used temporarily during the interview. As soon as you leave the webpage of this questionnaire, the first name of the person will be automatically deleted. No one will be able to personally identify you or the person you selected.

**SM1b: MANIPULATION OF SHARER SELECTION (GERMAN ORIGINAL)**

Original German manipulation for the selection of a left-wing friend:

Als nächstes soll es noch etwas genauer um **Ihre Bekannten in sozialen Medien** gehen. Damit sind andere, normale Nutzer gemeint, mit denen Sie über sozialen Medien verbunden bzw. «befreundet» sind.

Denken Sie nun bitte an **eine konkrete Person** mit der Sie über soziale Medien verbunden sind und die Ihrer Einschätzung nach politisch gesehen eindeutig **links-progressiv** ist. Dies kann z.B. ein/e enge/r Freund/in sein, ein nur lose bekannter (ehemaliger) Arbeitskollege/Nachbarin/Schulkamerad oder eine Person, die Sie direkt über soziale Medien kennengelernt haben.

Wichtig ist dabei nur, dass **1)** die ausgewählte **Person und Sie sich kennen**, **2)** Sie mit der Person **über soziale Medien verbunden** sind, und **3)** die ausgewählte **Person politisch** gesehen eindeutig **links-progressiv** ist.

Mit «links-progressiv» ist gemeint, dass die von Ihnen ausgewählte Person linke Themen wichtig findet wie z.B. den Schutz der sozialen Sicherheit für Geringverdienende und Arbeitslose, Umweltschutz, die Unterstützung von Minderheiten oder europäische Solidarität. Die Person sollte in ihren politischen Überzeugungen also Parteien wie der Linkspartei, den Grünen oder dem linken Flügel SPD nahestehen.

Bitte wählen Sie die Person mit Bedacht aus und merken Sie sich genau, **welche Person Sie ausgewählt haben**. Wir werden Ihnen auf den nächsten Seiten noch einige Fragen zu der von Ihnen ausgewählten Person stellen. Dabei ist es wichtig, dass Sie **im weiteren Verlauf exakt dieselbe Person im Kopf behalten**.

Bitte schreiben Sie als Gedankenstütze den **Vornamen** dieser **links-progressiven** Person in das untenstehende Feld.

Vorname:

Datenschutzhinweis: Der Vorname der ausgewählten Person wird NICHT im Datensatz gespeichert. Dieser wird nur kurzzeitig verwendet, so lange wie Sie sich auf der Webseite dieser Befragung befinden. Sobald Sie die Befragung beenden oder vorzeitig verlassen, wird der Vorname der Person automatisch gelöscht. Niemandem wird es möglich sein, Sie oder die von Ihnen ausgewählte Person persönlich zu identifizieren.

Original German manipulation for the selection of a right-wing friend:

Als nächstes soll es noch etwas genauer um **Ihre Bekannten in sozialen Medien** gehen. Damit sind andere, normale Nutzer gemeint, mit denen Sie über sozialen Medien verbunden bzw. «befreundet» sind.

Denken Sie nun bitte an **eine konkrete Person** mit der Sie über soziale Medien verbunden sind und die Ihrer Einschätzung nach politisch gesehen eindeutig **rechts-konservativ** ist. Dies kann z.B. ein/e enge/r Freund/in sein, ein nur lose bekannter (ehemaliger) Arbeitskollege/Nachbarin/Schulkamerad oder eine Person, die Sie direkt über soziale Medien kennengelernt haben.

Wichtig ist dabei nur, dass **1)** die ausgewählte **Person und Sie sich kennen**, **2)** Sie mit der Person **über soziale Medien verbunden** sind, und **3)** die ausgewählte **Person politisch** gesehen eindeutig **rechts-konservativ** ist.

Mit «rechts-konservativ» ist gemeint, dass die von Ihnen ausgewählte Person bürgerliche Themen wichtig findet wie z.B. eine starke Wirtschaft, den Schutz vor Kriminalität, den Schutz der traditionellen Familie oder den Schutz der Grenzen. Die Person sollte in ihren politischen Überzeugungen also Parteien wie der AfD, der FDP oder dem rechten Flügel der CDU/CSU nahestehen.

Bitte wählen Sie die Person mit Bedacht aus und merken Sie sich genau, **welche Person Sie ausgewählt haben**. Wir werden Ihnen auf den nächsten Seiten noch einige Fragen zu der von Ihnen ausgewählten Person stellen. Dabei ist es wichtig, dass Sie **im weiteren Verlauf exakt dieselbe Person im Kopf behalten**.

Bitte schreiben Sie als Gedankenstütze den **Vornamen** dieser **rechts-konservativ** Person in das untenstehende Feld.


Vorname:

Datenschutzhinweis: Der Vorname der ausgewählten Person wird NICHT im Datensatz gespeichert. Dieser wird nur kurzzeitig verwendet, so lange wie Sie sich auf der Webseite dieser Befragung befinden. Sobald Sie die Befragung beenden oder vorzeitig verlassen, wird der Vorname der Person automatisch gelöscht. Niemandem wird es möglich sein, Sie oder die von Ihnen ausgewählte Person persönlich zu identifizieren.


**SM2a: STIMULI FOR SHARED MISINFORMATION (ENGLISH TRANSLATION)**

Issue: deregulated housing market // Moderate plausibility of misinformation


**Please imagine that the pixelated profile is  
%name% and has shared the post below.**

**Joachim Sauerbrey**  
1 Std. · 🧑🏻...

Who hasn't noticed it yet:

**News-direkt**  
4 Std. · 🌐

An expert committee of the ministry of construction opts for a careful relaxation of the rent control act. According to the committee's proposal, landlords would then be allowed to increase the rent for new lettings by 12% instead of the current maximum of 10%.



NEWS-DIREKT.DEi



**Slight easing of rent control act planned**

An expert committee of the ministry of construction opts for a careful relaxation of the rent control act. According to the committee's proposal, landlords would then be allowed to increase the rent for new lettings by 12% instead of the current maximum of 10%.





Issue: deregulated housing market // Low plausibility of misinformation


**Please imagine that the pixelated profile is  
%name% and has shared the post below.**


**Josephine Bauerbrei**  
1 Std. · ...

Who hasn't noticed it yet:

**News-direkt**  
4 Std. · 

The federal government plans a significant relaxation of the rent control act. According to the cabinet's minutes, landlords would then be allowed to increase the rent for new lettings by 50% instead of the current maximum of 10%.




NEWS-DIREKT.DE

**Massive easing of rent control act planned**


The federal government plans a significant relaxation of the rent control act. According to the cabinet's minutes, landlords would then be allowed to increase the rent for new lettings by 50% instead of the current maximum of 10%.

Issue: access to education // Moderate plausibility of misinformation


**Please imagine that the pixelated profile is  
%name% and has shared the post below.**

**Joachim Sauerbrun**  
1 Std. · 👤⋮

Who hasn't noticed it yet:

**News-direkt**  
4 Std. · 🌐

The university deans' conference opts for a slight relaxation of the admission restrictions to universities. This would allow persons with vocational baccalaureate to begin studying any subject at a university and not only specific subjects.



NEWS-DIREKT.DE


### Educational opportunities to be slightly improved


The university deans' conference opts for a slight relaxation of the admission restrictions to universities. This would allow persons with vocational baccalaureate to begin studying any subject at a university and not only specific subjects.





Issue: access to education // Low plausibility of misinformation

**Please imagine that the pixelated profile is  
%name% and has shared the post below.**




**%name%**  
1 Std. · 

Who hasn't noticed it yet:

**News-direkt**  
4 Std. · 

The education secretaries of the federal states expedite the plans for a full relaxation of the admission restrictions to universities. This would allow persons with a secondary modern school qualification or without any degree to begin studying for free.



NEWS-DIREKT.DE

**Educational opportunities to be strongly improved**  
The education secretaries of the federal states expedite the plans for a full relaxation of the admission restrictions to universities. This would allow persons with a secondary modern school qualification or without any degree to begin studying for free.

**SM2b: STIMULI FOR SHARED MISINFORMATION (GERMAN ORIGINAL)**

Issue: deregulated housing market // Moderate plausibility of misinformation

**Stellen Sie sich bitte vor, dass das ausgepixelte Profil**  
**%name%** **ist und den Beitrag darunter geteilt hat.**

**Joachim Bauerbrei**  
1 Std. · ...

Wer's noch nicht mitbekommen hat:

**News-direkt**  
4 Std. · 

Ein Fachgremium des Bundesbauministeriums plädiert für eine vorsichtige Lockerung der Mietpreisbremse. Laut Entwurf des Gremiums dürften Vermieter dann bei Neuvermietungen bis zu 12% mehr Miete verlangen, statt wie bisher maximal 10%.



NEWS-DIREKT.DE

**Leichte Aufweichung der Mietpreisbremse geplant**

Ein Fachgremium des Bundesbauministeriums plädiert für eine vorsichtige Lockerung der Mietpreisbremse. Laut Entwurf des Gremiums dürften Vermieter dann bei Neuvermietungen bis zu 12% mehr Miete verlangen, statt wie bisher maximal 10%.

Issue: deregulated housing market // Low plausibility of misinformation

**Stellen Sie sich bitte vor, dass das ausgepixelte Profil %name% ist und den Beitrag darunter geteilt hat.**



**Markus Schmitt**  
1 Std. · 

Wer's noch nicht mitbekommen hat:

**News-direkt**  
4 Std. · 

Die Bundesregierung plant eine deutliche Lockerung der Mietpreisbremse. Laut Protokoll des Kabinetts dürften Vermieter dann bei Neuvermietungen bis zu 50% mehr Miete verlangen, statt wie bisher maximal 10%.



NEWS-DIREKT.DE

**Massive Aufweichung der Mietpreisbremse geplant**  
Die Bundesregierung plant eine deutliche Lockerung der Mietpreisbremse. Laut Protokoll des Kabinetts dürften Vermieter dann bei Neuvermietungen bis zu 50% mehr Miete verlangen, statt wie bisher maximal 10%.



Issue: access to education // Moderate plausibility of misinformation

**Stellen Sie sich bitte vor, dass das ausgepixelte Profil %name% ist und den Beitrag darunter geteilt hat.**

**Joachim Bauer**  
1 Std. · 

Wer's noch nicht mitbekommen hat:

**News-direct**  
4 Std. · 

Die Konferenz der Universitätsrektoren plädiert für eine leichte Aufweichung der Zugangsbeschränkungen für Universitäten. Damit soll zukünftig auch mit Fachabitur jedes Studium an Universitäten begonnen werden dürfen und nicht nur bestimmte Fächer.



NEWS-DIREKT.DE

**Bildungschancen sollen leicht verbessert werden**

Die Konferenz der Universitätsrektoren plädiert für eine leichte Aufweichung der Zugangsbeschränkungen für Universitäten. Damit soll zukünftig auch mit Fachabitur jedes Studium an Universitäten begonnen werden dürfen und nicht nur bestimmte Fächer.

Issue: access to education // Low plausibility of misinformation

**Stellen Sie sich bitte vor, dass das ausgepixelte Profil %name% ist und den Beitrag darunter geteilt hat.**



**JOHANN KLEIN**  
1 Std. · 

Wer's noch nicht mitbekommen hat:

**News-direct**  
4 Std. · 

Die Bildungsminister der Länder treiben die Pläne für eine vollständige Abschaffung der Zugangsbeschränkungen für Universitäten voran. Damit soll zukünftig auch mit Hauptschulabschluss oder ganz ohne Schulabschluss ein kostenfreies Studium begonnen werden dürfen.



NEWS-DIREKT.DE

**Bildungschancen sollen massiv verbessert werden**  
Die Bildungsminister der Länder treiben die Pläne für eine vollständige Abschaffung der Zugangsbeschränkungen für Universitäten voran. Damit soll zukünftig auch mit Hauptschulabschluss oder ganz ohne Schulabschluss ein kostenfreies Studium begonnen werden dürfen.

## SM3: ADDITIONAL METHODS EXPERIMENT

- Goal: Confirming that the perceived realism of the experimental situation does not differ depending on whether the actual profile picture of a person who shares misinformation is displayed in the stimulus or participants only see the name of the person and have to imagine the profile picture of this person. If this was confirmed, the procedure of imagining the profile picture of the person employed in the study would be as valid as if the actual profile pictures of users' friends had been displayed.
- Independent variable: Due to lack of access to real social media profiles of participants' online friends, this additional experiment used the profile picture of a well-known, right-wing politician (Björn Höcke, AfD), instead of allowing respondents to select a friend for which the profile may not have been publicly available. One group was exposed to a newsfeed in which the profile of Björn Höcke was displayed as the person who shared a media post containing misinformation ( $n = 84$ ). The other group was asked to imagine that Björn Höcke shared the same media post but a pixelated profile was displayed ( $n = 79$ , see stimuli below). The experiment contained further experimental groups not relevant to the manipulations used in the main study.
- Dependent variable: *Perceived realism of the experimental situation* was measured with one item from 1 = "not at all easy" to 5 = "very easy" ("How easy was it for you to imagine that the situation with the social media newsfeed was a real situation?").
- Sample:  $n = 163$  social media users who knew Björn Höcke and passed attention checks. The experiment was placed at the end of an unrelated study conducted in late November 2020 in Germany with representative quotas for age, gender, and education. However, only people who flew in the last 2 years or planned to fly in next 2 years were sampled.

Real profile

vs.

Imagining person instead of pixelated profile





#### SM4: SAMPLE STATISTICS, FURTHER MANIPULATION CHECKS, AND RANDOMIZATION CHECKS

*Table SM4a.* Interlocked quota sample of social media users ( $N = 968$ ) in comparison with the German population in terms of gender and age between 18 and 69 years

Gender	Age group					Sum
	18-29 years	30-39 years	40-49 years	50-59 years	60-69 years	
Women	9.9% (10%)	8.4% (9%)	8.9% (9%)	12.1% (12%)	9.8% (10%)	49.1% (50%)
Men	11.7% (11%)	10.4% (10%)	10.4% (10%)	11.2% (11%)	7.2% (8%)	50.9% (50%)
Sum	21.6% (21%)	18.8% (19%)	19.3% (19%)	23.3% (23%)	17.0% (18%)	100% (100%)

*Note.* Displayed are percentages of the sample with percentages of the German population in parentheses, source:

<https://service.destatis.de/bevoelkerungspyramide/index.html#!a=20,29&l=en&g;>

*Table SM4b.* Seven *a priori* criteria for adequate participation

Exclusion criterion	Measurement
1: Accessed the survey via smartphone	<i>Unobtrusively via html script</i>
2: Failed item attention check #1	<i>“Please cross the box with number six here to show that you read the question.”</i>
3: Failed item attention check #2	<i>“Please cross the box with number three here to show that you read the question.”</i>
4: Time spent on stimulus < 7 seconds	<i>Unobtrusively via html script</i>
5: Failed attention check stimulus	<i>Multiple choice with 4 answer options: “What was the topic of the post?”</i>
6: Failed item attention check #3	<i>“Please cross the box with number five here to show that you read the question.”</i>
7: Failed seriousness check	<i>“Can we categorize your answers in good conscience as honest and careful?”</i>

*Note.* Participants who did not meet any of these criteria were automatically screened out during the survey and not included in the data analysis (completion rate: 39.5%; attrition at random with  $p = .251$ ).

*Table SM4c.* Distribution of participants by the factors issue, political similarity between sharer and receiver of the misinformation, and plausibility of the misinformation

Issue of misinformation	<i>n</i>	Political similarity between sharer and receiver	<i>n</i>	Plausibility of misinformation	<i>n</i>
Deregulated housing market	484	Politically similar	473	Implausible	476
Equal education	484	Politically dissimilar	495	Moderately plausible	492
Overall	968	Overall	968	Overall	968

*Table SM4d.* Test of successful randomization of demographic variables and receivers' political ideology by experimental groups

Variable	<i>p<sub>a</sub></i>	<i>p<sub>b</sub></i>
Age	.936	.716
Gender	.486	.542
Education (low vs. high)	.460	.632
Receiver's political ideology	.129	.484

*Note.* *P*-values > .05 indicate no substantial difference in distribution of variable by experimental group, *p<sub>a</sub>* = initially randomized grouping with left/right-wing sharer (sharer's ideology \* issue \* plausibility), *p<sub>b</sub>* = final grouping based on constructed factor political similarity (political similarity between sharer and receiver \* issue \* plausibility).



*Table SM4e.* Political ideology of the sharer of the misinformation as perceived by participants by experimental manipulation of left-wing vs. right-wing sharer by receivers' political ideology (dichotomous)

Receivers' political ideology (dichotomous)	Experimental manipulation		<i>p</i> -value and Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Left-wing sharer	Right-wing sharer	
Total ( <i>n</i> = 968)	<i>M</i> = 3.59 <i>SD</i> = 1.96	<i>M</i> = 7.93 <i>SD</i> = 1.83	<i>p</i> < .001 <i>d</i> = 2.29
Left-wing receivers ( <i>n</i> = 618)	<i>M</i> = 3.47 <i>SD</i> = 1.86	<i>M</i> = 7.98 <i>SD</i> = 1.86	<i>p</i> < .001 <i>d</i> = 2.43
Right-wing receivers ( <i>n</i> = 350)	<i>M</i> = 3.79 <i>SD</i> = 2.10	<i>M</i> = 7.84 <i>SD</i> = 1.77	<i>p</i> < .001 <i>d</i> = 2.09

*Note.* Displayed is the political ideology of the sharer of the misinformation as perceived by participants on the 11-point scale from 1 = "left" to 11 = "right."

*Table SM4f.* Correct perception of the party preference of the sharer of the misinformation by experimental manipulation of left-wing vs. right-wing sharer

Correct vs. incorrect perception of the party preference of the sharer	Experimental manipulation	
	Left-wing sharer	Right-wing sharer
Correct	82.6% ( <i>n</i> = 399)	84.9% ( <i>n</i> = 406)
Incorrect	17.4% ( <i>n</i> = 84)	15.1% ( <i>n</i> = 72)

*Note.* Displayed are valid percentages within each experimental group with *n* in parentheses; *n* = 961 because of 7 missing values on this variable. Participants were asked to name the three parties most preferred by the selected friend, but only parties mentioned as first-choice were considered for this table. A correct perception means that a participant perceived the party preference of the selected friend as left-wing when asked to select a left-wing friend and as right-wing when asked to select a right-wing friend. A chi-square test confirmed that the experimental groups who had to select either a left-wing or right-wing friend did not differ in terms of correctly perceiving the party preference of the friend (*p* = .373).

*Table SM4g.* Party preference of the sharer of the misinformation as perceived by participants by experimental manipulation of left-wing vs. right-wing sharer (**all participants**)

Perceived party preference of the sharer	Experimental manipulation		Total
	Left-wing sharer	Right-wing sharer	
Left-wing parties (total)	41.5% ( <i>n</i> = 399)	7.5% ( <i>n</i> = 72)	49.0% ( <i>n</i> = 471)
Die Linke	20.1% ( <i>n</i> = 193)	1.4% ( <i>n</i> = 13)	21.5% ( <i>n</i> = 206)
Grüne	13.5% ( <i>n</i> = 130)	2.4% ( <i>n</i> = 23)	15.9% ( <i>n</i> = 153)
SPD	7.9% ( <i>n</i> = 76)	3.7% ( <i>n</i> = 36)	11.6% ( <i>n</i> = 112)
Right-wing parties (total)	8.8% ( <i>n</i> = 84)	42.2% ( <i>n</i> = 406)	51.0% ( <i>n</i> = 490)
CDU/CSU	5.3% ( <i>n</i> = 51)	15.3% ( <i>n</i> = 147)	20.6% ( <i>n</i> = 198)
FDP	1.0% ( <i>n</i> = 9)	3.6% ( <i>n</i> = 35)	4.6% ( <i>n</i> = 44)
AfD	2.5% ( <i>n</i> = 24)	23.3% ( <i>n</i> = 224)	25.8% ( <i>n</i> = 248)
Total	50.3% ( <i>n</i> = 483)	49.7% ( <i>n</i> = 478)	100% ( <i>n</i> = 961)

*Note.* Displayed are valid percentages with *n* in parentheses; *n* = 961 because of 7 missing values on this variable. Participants were asked to name the three parties most preferred by the selected friend, but only parties mentioned as first-choice were considered for this table. A chi-square test based on a reduced 2 (left-wing vs. right-wing perceived party preference of the sharer) x 2 (experimental manipulation of the selection of a left-wing vs. right-wing friend) cross-table confirmed that participants perceived the party preference of the sharer significantly more often as left-wing when asked to select a left-wing friend than when asked to select a right-wing friend ( $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .68$ ).

*Table SM4h.* Party preference of the sharer of the misinformation as perceived by participants by experimental manipulation of left-wing vs. right-wing sharer (**only left-wing participants**)

Perceived party preference of the sharer	Experimental manipulation		Total
	Left-wing sharer	Right-wing sharer	
Left-wing parties (total)	42.4% ( <i>n</i> = 260)	7.7% ( <i>n</i> = 47)	50.1% ( <i>n</i> = 307)
Die Linke	20.9% ( <i>n</i> = 128)	1.6% ( <i>n</i> = 10)	22.5% ( <i>n</i> = 138)
Grüne	13.5% ( <i>n</i> = 83)	1.8% ( <i>n</i> = 11)	15.3% ( <i>n</i> = 94)
SPD	8.0% ( <i>n</i> = 49)	4.3% ( <i>n</i> = 26)	12.3% ( <i>n</i> = 75)
Right-wing parties (total)	6.9% ( <i>n</i> = 42)	43.0% ( <i>n</i> = 264)	49.9% ( <i>n</i> = 306)
CDU/CSU	4.6% ( <i>n</i> = 28)	14.3% ( <i>n</i> = 88)	18.9% ( <i>n</i> = 116)
FDP	0.8% ( <i>n</i> = 5)	3.9% ( <i>n</i> = 24)	4.7% ( <i>n</i> = 29)
AfD	1.5% ( <i>n</i> = 9)	24.8% ( <i>n</i> = 152)	26.3% ( <i>n</i> = 161)
Total	49.3% ( <i>n</i> = 302)	50.7% ( <i>n</i> = 311)	100% ( <i>n</i> = 613)

*Note.* Displayed are valid percentages with *n* in parentheses; *n* = 613 because only left-wing participants were analyzed for this table. Participants were asked to name the three parties most preferred by the selected friend, but only parties mentioned as first-choice were considered for this table. A chi-square test based on a reduced 2 (left-wing vs. right-wing perceived party preference of the sharer) x 2 (experimental manipulation of the selection of a left-wing vs. right-wing friend) cross-table confirmed that left-wing participants perceived the party preference of the sharer significantly more often as left-wing when asked to select a left-wing friend than when asked to select a right-wing friend ( $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .71$ ).

*Table SM4i.* Party preference of the sharer of the misinformation as perceived by participants by experimental manipulation of left-wing vs. right-wing sharer (**only right-wing participants**)

Perceived party preference of the sharer	Experimental manipulation		Total
	Left-wing sharer	Right-wing sharer	
Left-wing parties (total)	40.0% ( <i>n</i> = 139)	7.2% ( <i>n</i> = 25)	47.2% ( <i>n</i> = 164)
Die Linke	18.7% ( <i>n</i> = 65)	0.9% ( <i>n</i> = 3)	19.6% ( <i>n</i> = 68)
Grüne	13.5% ( <i>n</i> = 47)	3.5% ( <i>n</i> = 12)	17.0% ( <i>n</i> = 59)
SPD	7.8% ( <i>n</i> = 27)	2.8% ( <i>n</i> = 10)	10.6% ( <i>n</i> = 37)
Right-wing parties (total)	12.0% ( <i>n</i> = 42)	40.8% ( <i>n</i> = 142)	52.8% ( <i>n</i> = 184)
CDU/CSU	6.6% ( <i>n</i> = 23)	16.9% ( <i>n</i> = 59)	23.5% ( <i>n</i> = 82)
FDP	1.1% ( <i>n</i> = 4)	3.2% ( <i>n</i> = 11)	4.3% ( <i>n</i> = 15)
AfD	4.3% ( <i>n</i> = 15)	20.7% ( <i>n</i> = 72)	25.0% ( <i>n</i> = 87)
Total	52.0% ( <i>n</i> = 181)	48.0% ( <i>n</i> = 167)	100% ( <i>n</i> = 348)

*Note.* Displayed are valid percentages with *n* in parentheses; *n* = 348 because only right-wing participants were analyzed for this table. Participants were asked to name the three parties most preferred by the selected friend, but only parties mentioned as first-choice were considered for this table. A chi-square test based on a reduced 2 (left-wing vs. right-wing perceived party preference of the sharer) x 2 (experimental manipulation of the selection of a left-wing vs. right-wing friend) cross-table confirmed that right-wing participants perceived the party preference of the sharer significantly more often as left-wing when asked to select a left-wing friend than when asked to select a right-wing friend ( $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .62$ ).

*Table SM4j.* Distribution of the continuous measures for participants' political ideology in the sample and the German population

Scale point	German population (10-point scale, WVS 7)	Sample (11-point scale)	Sample (12-point scale)	Sample (6-point scale)
1	2.9% ( <i>n</i> = 55)	3.5% ( <i>n</i> = 34)	3.5% ( <i>n</i> = 34)	8.7% ( <i>n</i> = 84)
2	4.5% ( <i>n</i> = 86)	5.2% ( <i>n</i> = 50)	5.2% ( <i>n</i> = 50)	24.0% ( <i>n</i> = 232)
3	13.8% ( <i>n</i> = 266)	12.0% ( <i>n</i> = 116)	12.0% ( <i>n</i> = 116)	31.2% ( <i>n</i> = 302)
4	15.0% ( <i>n</i> = 289)	12.0% ( <i>n</i> = 116)	12.0% ( <i>n</i> = 116)	25.1% ( <i>n</i> = 243)
5	33.6% ( <i>n</i> = 647)	15.5% ( <i>n</i> = 150)	15.5% ( <i>n</i> = 150)	9.6% ( <i>n</i> = 93)
6	14.4% ( <i>n</i> = 278)	32.0% ( <i>n</i> = 310)	15.7% ( <i>n</i> = 152)	1.4% ( <i>n</i> = 14)
7	8.9% ( <i>n</i> = 171)	8.8% ( <i>n</i> = 85)	16.3% ( <i>n</i> = 158)	/
8	4.4% ( <i>n</i> = 85)	6.4% ( <i>n</i> = 62)	8.8% ( <i>n</i> = 85)	/
9	0.7% ( <i>n</i> = 14)	3.2% ( <i>n</i> = 31)	6.4% ( <i>n</i> = 62)	/
10	1.8% ( <i>n</i> = 34)	0.6% ( <i>n</i> = 6)	3.2% ( <i>n</i> = 31)	/
11	/	0.8% ( <i>n</i> = 8)	0.6% ( <i>n</i> = 6)	/
12	/	/	0.8% ( <i>n</i> = 8)	/

*Note.* Displayed are valid percentages with *n* in parentheses. Distribution in German population according to the probability sample (valid *n* = 1925) of the World Value Survey (WVS) Wave 7 (2017-2020), which measured political ideology on a 10-point scale without a mid-point from 1 = “left” to 10 = “right.” In the sample, political ideology was first measured with an 11-point scale from 1 = “left” to 11 = “right.” Participants who located themselves at the midpoint of the scale were asked a follow-up question requesting that they state they were either “rather left” or “rather right” (*n*<sub>rather left</sub> = 152, *n*<sub>rather right</sub> = 158), and these responses were combined to create a 12-point scale by integrating the answer on the forced-choice item in the continuous 11-point scale. To avoid too-small group sizes for the analyses, the 12-point scale was later transformed into a 6-point scale for statistical modelling. In addition, the final scale without a midpoint allowed us to categorize each of our respondents as being either left-wing or right-wing. In turn, each respondent could be given an unambiguous value when constructing the variable of political similarity based on receiver's ideology and the manipulation of left-wing vs. right-wing sharer.

*Table SM4k.* Distribution of participants' political ideology in the sample and the German population when dichotomized as politically left-wing or right-wing

Dichotomized political ideology	Sample	German population (WVS 7)
Left-wing	63.8% ( <i>n</i> = 618)	69.8% ( <i>n</i> = 1343)
Right-wing	36.2% ( <i>n</i> = 350)	30.2% ( <i>n</i> = 582)
Total	100% ( <i>n</i> = 968)	100% ( <i>n</i> = 1925)

*Note.* Displayed are valid percentages with *n* in parentheses. Distribution in German population according to the probability sample (valid *n* = 1925) of the World Value Survey (WVS) Wave 7 (2017-2020), which measured political ideology on a 10-point scale without a mid-point from 1 = "left" to 10 = "right." For this table values from the WVS are dichotomized (1-5 = "left," 6-10 = "right"). Source:

<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>

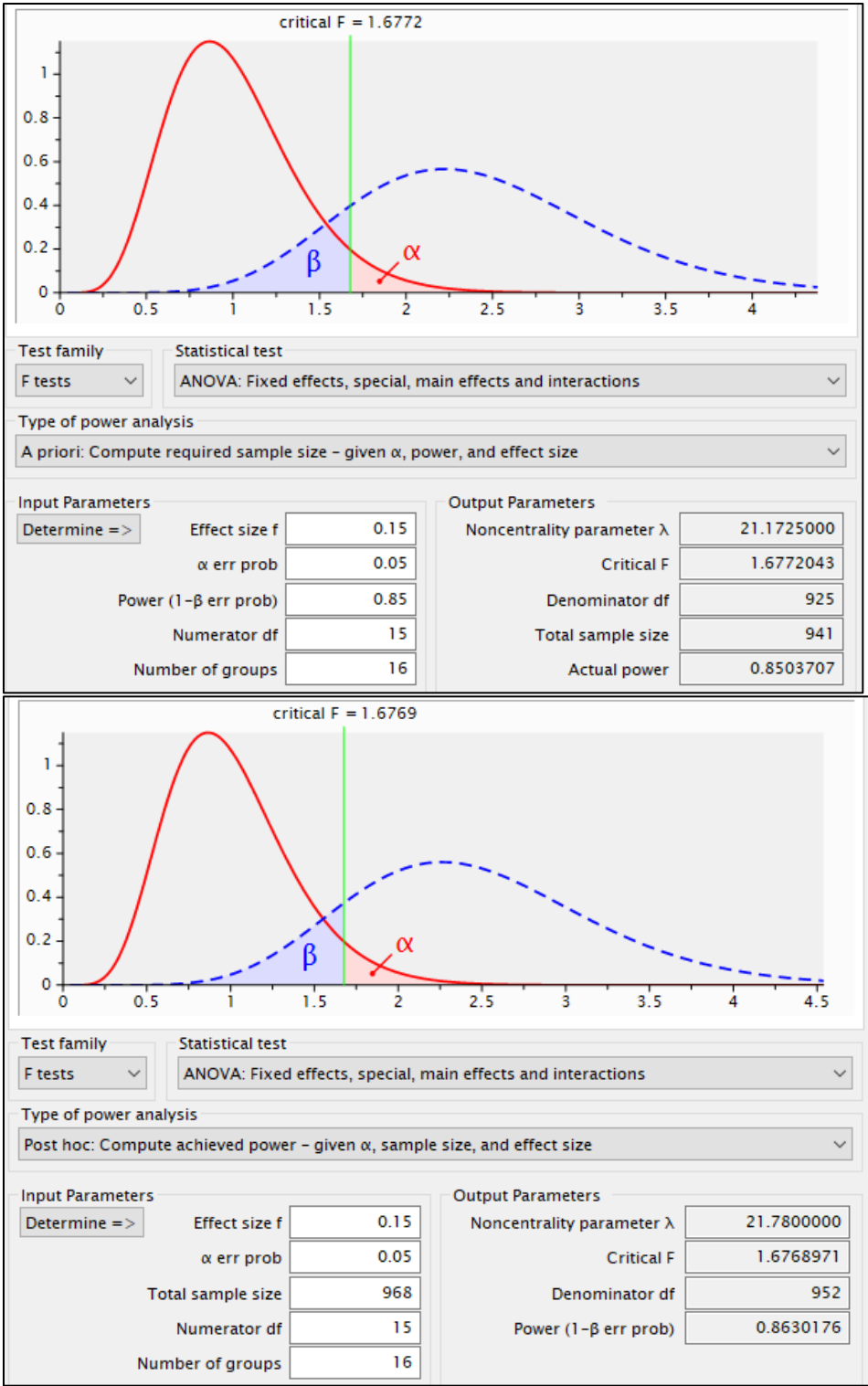
*Table SM4l.* Distribution of participants' party preference

Party	<i>N</i>	%
Left-wing parties (total)	567	58.9
Die Linke	145	15.1
Grüne	270	28.0
SPD	152	15.8
Right-wing parties (total)	396	41.1
CDU/CSU	238	24.7
FDP	66	6.9
AfD	92	9.6
Total	963	100

*Note.* Displayed are frequencies with valid percentages; *n* = 963 because of 5 missing values. Participants were asked to name their three most preferred parties but only parties mentioned as first-choice were considered for this table.

SM5: STATISTICAL POWER

Figure SM5. Statistical Power Analysis



Note. Power for  $d = .3$  ( $f = .15$ ) a-priori estimated for a 2x2x2-ANOVA; actual power of the analysis in Figure 4 in the paper is slightly higher ( $1-\beta = .863$ ) than planned ( $1-\beta = .85$ ), as the final sample is slightly bigger ( $n = 968$ ) than the minimum sample size of  $n = 941$ ; power calculated with software GPower 3.1.

**SM6: SATURATED ANOVA***Table SM6.* Saturated ANOVA test of between-subjects effects for political similarity, plausibility, issue, and receiver's ideology (continuous) on blocking or unfollowing

Factor	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Adjusted model	15	6.87	.098	< .001***
Political similarity between sharer and receiver	1	42.52	.040	< .001***
Plausibility of the misinformation	1	8.44	.008	.004**
Issue of the misinformation	1	0.97	< .001	.325
Receiver's political ideology (continuous)	1	6.16	.006	.013*
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X Plausibility of the misinformation	1	1.02	< .001	.313
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X Issue of the misinformation	1	0.02	< .001	.903
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X Receiver's political ideology (continuous)	1	19.43	.018	< .001***
Plausibility of the misinformation X Issue of the misinformation	1	0.44	< .001	.509
Plausibility of the misinformation X Receiver's political ideology (continuous)	1	1.92	.002	.166
Issue of the misinformation X Receiver's political ideology (continuous)	1	0.33	< .001	.565
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X Plausibility of the misinformation X Issue of the misinformation	1	1.02	< .001	.314
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X Plausibility of the misinformation X Receiver's political ideology (continuous)	1	1.29	.001	.256
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X Issue of the misinformation X Receiver's political ideology (continuous)	1	0.09	< .001	.760
Plausibility of the misinformation X Issue of the misinformation X Receiver's political ideology (continuous)	1	0.05	< .001	.830
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X Plausibility of the misinformation X Issue of the misinformation X Receiver's political ideology (continuous)	1	0.33	< .001	.566

*Note.*  $R^2 = .098$ ,  $R^2_{\text{adjusted}} = .083$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ,  $n = 968$



**SM7: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS***Table SM7a.* Distribution of index for dependent variable “blocking or unfollowing the sharer of the misinformation”

Scale point	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	3.5	4	4.5	5	5.5	6
Frequency	380	121	126	76	66	113	24	19	12	8	23
Percentages	39.3	12.5	13.0	7.9	6.8	11.7	2.5	2.0	1.2	0.8	2.4

*Note.* Displayed are frequencies with percentages, scale ranging from 1 = “does not at all apply” to 6 = “does fully apply,”  $M = 2.09$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ,  $n = 968$

*Table SM7b.* Distribution of single items “blocking” and “unfollowing” used for computing the index of blocking or unfollowing the sharer of the misinformation

Scale point	1	2	3	4	5	6
Item “blocking”	580 (59.9)	148 (15.3)	113 (11.7)	54 (5.6)	37 (3.8)	36 (3.7)
Item “unfollowing”	410 (42.4)	237 (24.5)	135 (13.9)	75 (7.7)	46 (4.8)	65 (6.7)

*Note.* Displayed are frequencies with percentages in parentheses. The item “unfollowing” is the inverted item of the measured item “following,” scales ranging from 1 = “does not at all apply” to 6 = “does fully apply,”  $r = .52$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $n = 968$

*Table SM7c.* Descriptive statistics for blocking or unfollowing the sharer of the misinformation by political similarity between sharer and receiver, plausibility of the misinformation, and issue of the misinformation

Issue	Plausibility	Political similarity	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Combined	Overall	Overall	968	2.09	1.26
	Overall	Similar	473	1.83	1.10
	Overall	Dissimilar	495	2.34	1.35
	Implausible	Overall	476	2.27	1.37
	Implausible	Similar	242	1.99	1.23
	Implausible	Dissimilar	234	2.55	1.44
	Moderate	Overall	492	1.91	1.12
	Moderate	Similar	231	1.65	0.91
	Moderate	Dissimilar	261	2.14	1.23
Deregulated housing market	Overall	Overall	484	2.12	1.31
	Overall	Similar	249	1.83	1.06
	Overall	Dissimilar	235	2.43	1.47
	Implausible	Overall	236	2.28	1.43
	Implausible	Similar	114	1.92	1.18
	Implausible	Dissimilar	122	2.61	1.56
	Moderate	Overall	248	1.97	1.16
	Moderate	Similar	135	1.76	0.93
	Moderate	Dissimilar	113	2.22	1.35
Access to equal education	Overall	Overall	484	2.05	1.21
	Overall	Similar	224	1.82	1.15
	Overall	Dissimilar	260	2.26	1.22
	Implausible	Overall	240	2.26	1.30
	Implausible	Similar	128	2.06	1.28
	Implausible	Dissimilar	112	2.49	1.30
	Moderate	Overall	244	1.85	1.07
	Moderate	Similar	96	1.49	0.86
	Moderate	Dissimilar	148	2.08	1.13

*Table SM7d.* Estimated marginal means for effect of political similarity on blocking or unfollowing the sharer of the misinformation (values form the basis of Figure 4 in paper)

Receivers' political ideology	Issue	Plausibility	Political similarity	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
Overall	Combined	Overall	Similar	473	1.84	.058
	Combined	Overall	Dissimilar	495	2.27	.057
	Combined	Implausible	Similar	242	2.03	.083
	Combined	Implausible	Dissimilar	234	2.41	0.83
	Combined	Moderate	Similar	231	1.65	.082
	Combined	Moderate	Dissimilar	261	2.13	.077
	Housing	Overall	Similar	249	1.86	.080
	Housing	Overall	Dissimilar	235	2.35	.081
	Housing	Implausible	Similar	114	1.96	.120
	Housing	Implausible	Dissimilar	122	2.49	.115
	Housing	Moderate	Similar	135	1.76	.106
	Housing	Moderate	Dissimilar	113	2.22	.116
	Education	Overall	Similar	224	1.82	0.85
	Education	Overall	Dissimilar	260	2.19	0.79
	Education	Implausible	Similar	128	2.10	.114
	Education	Implausible	Dissimilar	112	2.33	.121
	Education	Moderate	Similar	96	1.54	.125
	Education	Moderate	Dissimilar	148	2.05	.101
Left	Combined	Overall	Similar	305	1.73	.070
	Combined	Overall	Dissimilar	313	2.53	.068
	Combined	Implausible	Similar	164	1.92	.094
	Combined	Implausible	Dissimilar	155	2.84	0.97
	Combined	Moderate	Similar	141	1.54	.103
	Combined	Moderate	Dissimilar	158	2.22	.097
	Housing	Overall	Similar	160	1.81	.095
	Housing	Overall	Dissimilar	148	2.56	0.99
	Housing	Implausible	Similar	77	1.86	.137
	Housing	Implausible	Dissimilar	80	2.89	1.34
	Housing	Moderate	Similar	83	1.76	.132
	Housing	Moderate	Dissimilar	68	2.24	.146
	Education	Overall	Similar	145	1.65	.102
	Education	Overall	Dissimilar	165	2.50	.094
	Education	Low	Similar	87	1.98	.129
	Education	Low	Dissimilar	75	2.79	.139
	Education	Moderate	Similar	58	1.32	.158
	Education	Moderate	Dissimilar	90	2.21	.127
Right	Combined	Overall	Similar	168	1.95	.094
	Combined	Overall	Dissimilar	182	2.01	0.90
	Combined	Implausible	Similar	78	2.14	.136
	Combined	Implausible	Dissimilar	79	1.98	.126
	Combined	Moderate	Similar	90	1.76	.128
	Combined	Moderate	Dissimilar	103	2.05	.119
	Housing	Overall	Similar	89	1.91	.129
	Housing	Overall	Dissimilar	87	2.14	.129
	Housing	Implausible	Similar	37	2.05	.198
	Housing	Implausible	Dissimilar	42	2.08	.186
	Housing	Moderate	Similar	52	1.76	.167
	Housing	Moderate	Dissimilar	45	2.20	.179
	Education	Overall	Similar	79	1.99	.135
	Education	Overall	Dissimilar	95	1.89	.127
	Education	Implausible	Similar	41	2.22	.188
	Education	Implausible	Dissimilar	37	1.88	.198
	Education	Moderate	Similar	38	1.76	.195
	Education	Moderate	Dissimilar	58	1.90	.158

**SM8: TEST OF HETEROGENOUS TREATMENT EFFECTS**

The table below summarizes several tests of potential heterogenous treatment effects for the effect of political similarity. Each test uses a different pre-treatment covariate and interacts it with the factor of political similarity. All models were specified in the same way as the focal model in Table 1 in the main article but replaced the term of receiver's political ideology (as main effect and interaction effect with political similarity) with the respective covariate. In all models, the treatment effect of political similarity remained significant as it is in Table 1 in the main article, while none of the interactions between political similarity and the covariates reached statistical significance. Thus, there is no evidence that the effect of political similarity on blocking or unfollowing differs by any of the covariates considered in these analyses. Rather, political similarity exerts a uniform effect across these covariates. For the exact measurement of these covariates, see the questionnaire in the repository.

*Table SM8.* Test of heterogenous treatment effects of political similarity on the intention to block or unfollow the sharer

Covariate	<i>p</i> -value of interaction between political similarity and respective covariate
Age	.666
Gender	.487
Education (low vs. high)	.561
Political interest	.409
Frequency of political social media use	.706
Trust in political news on social media ( $\alpha = .98$ )	.990
Trust in political news from friends on social media ( $\alpha = .99$ )	.540
Cynicism towards established news media ( $\alpha = .97$ )	.449
Internal political efficacy ( $r = .70$ )	.632
External political efficacy ( $r = .77$ )	.951
Perceived government efficacy ( $r = .80$ )	.469

*Note.* *P*-values > .05 indicate no substantial difference in the effect of political similarity by the levels of the respective covariate, *n* between *n* = 968 and *n* = 937 due to missing values on some covariates. The significant main effect of political similarity persisted in all models.

**SM9: ROBUSTNESS CHECKS**

The ANOVA below replicates the focal model presented in Table 1 in the main article but uses the dichotomous measure for the receiver's political ideology instead of the continuous measure.

*Table SM9a.* ANOVA test of between-subjects effects for political similarity between sharer and receiver of the misinformation, plausibility of the misinformation, issue, receiver's political ideology (**dichotomous**), and interactions of interest on the intention to block or unfollow the sharer

Factor	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Adjusted model	8	11.62	.088	< .001***
Political similarity between sharer and receiver	1	30.19	.029	< .001***
Plausibility of the misinformation	1	22.12	.021	< .001***
Issue of the misinformation	1	1.53	.001	.216
Receiver's political ideology (dichotomous)	1	3.28	.003	.070
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X issue of the misinformation	1	0.22	< .001	.643
Plausibility of the misinformation X issue of the misinformation	1	1.64	.002	.201
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X plausibility of the misinformation	1	0.01	< .001	.974
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X receiver's political ideology (dichotomous)	1	18.43	.018	< .001***

*Note.* Further possible interactions not included as irrelevant for research questions and insignificant,  $R^2 = .088$ ,  $R^2_{\text{adjusted}} = .081$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ,  $n = 968$

The ANOVA below replicates the focal model presented in Table 1 in the main article but uses a dichotomous measure for the receiver's political party preference instead of the continuous measure for the receiver's political ideology on the left-right scale. This dichotomous measure was constructed as follows: Participants who selected one of the three left-wing parties in the German parliament (either "Die Linke," "Grüne," or "SPD") as their most preferred party were coded as having a left-wing party preference. Respondents who selected one of the three right-wing parties in the German parliament (either "CDU," "FDP" or "AfD") as their most preferred party were coded as having a right-wing party preference.

*Table SM9b.* ANOVA test of between-subjects effects for political similarity between sharer and receiver of the misinformation, plausibility of the misinformation, issue, **receiver's political party preference** (dichotomous), and interactions of interest on the intention to block or unfollow the sharer

Factor	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Adjusted model	8	10.24	.079	< .001***
Political similarity between sharer and receiver	1	39.06	.038	< .001***
Plausibility of the misinformation	1	22.05	.021	< .001***
Issue of the misinformation	1	1.25	.001	.264
Receiver's political party preference (dichotomous)	1	2.96	.003	.086
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X issue of the misinformation	1	0.15	< .001	.698
Plausibility of the misinformation X issue of the misinformation	1	1.43	.001	.233
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X plausibility of the misinformation	1	0.01	< .001	.927
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X receiver's political party preference (dichotomous)	1	9.17	.009	.003**

*Note.* Further possible interactions not included as irrelevant for research questions and insignificant,  $R^2 = .079$ ,  $R^2_{\text{adjusted}} = .071$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ,  $n = 963$  due to 5 missing values on respondents' party preference

The ANOVA below replicates the focal model presented in the main article in Table 1 but only considers the intention to block the sharer as the dependent variables instead of the index of blocking or unfollowing.

*Table SM9c.* ANOVA test of between-subjects effects for political similarity between sharer and receiver of the misinformation, plausibility of the misinformation, issue, receiver's political ideology (continuous), and interactions of interest on the intention to **block** the sharer

Factor	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Adjusted model	8	9.19	.071	< .001***
Political similarity between sharer and receiver	1	28.91	.028	< .001***
Plausibility of the misinformation	1	25.34	.025	< .001***
Issue of the misinformation	1	1.87	.002	.172
Receiver's political ideology (continuous)	1	1.17	.002	.280
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X issue of the misinformation	1	1.72	.002	.190
Plausibility of the misinformation X issue of the misinformation	1	0.29	< .001	.590
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X plausibility of the misinformation	1	0.73	< .001	.392
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X receiver's political ideology (continuous)	1	14.20	.014	< .001***

*Note.* Only item "blocking" employed as dependent variable,  $R^2 = .071$ ,  $R^2_{\text{adjusted}} = .063$ ,  
\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ,  $n = 968$

The ANOVA below replicates the focal model presented in the main article in Table 1 but only considers the intention to unfollow the sharer as the dependent variables instead of the index of blocking or unfollowing.

*Table SM9d.* ANOVA test of between-subjects effects for political similarity between sharer and receiver of the misinformation, plausibility of the misinformation, issue, receiver's political ideology (continuous), and interactions of interest on the intention to **unfollow** the sharer

Factor	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Adjusted model	8	10.02	.078	< .001***
Political similarity between sharer and receiver	1	33.21	.032	< .001***
Plausibility of the misinformation	1	8.32	.008	.004**
Issue of the misinformation	1	0.53	< .001	.468
Receiver's political ideology (continuous)	1	9.74	.009	.002**
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X issue of the misinformation	1	0.16	< .001	.692
Plausibility of the misinformation X issue of the misinformation	1	2.44	.002	.119
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X plausibility of the misinformation	1	0.34	< .001	.559
Political similarity between sharer and receiver X receiver's political ideology (continuous)	1	13.31	.013	< .001***

*Note.* Only item “unfollowing” (i.e., the inverted version of “following”) employed as dependent variable,  $R^2 = .078$ ,  $R^2_{\text{adjusted}} = .069$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ,  $n = 968$