

Questioning More: RT, Outward Facing Propaganda, and the Post-West World Order*

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Abstract

Can propaganda produced by foreign adversaries shape public opinion in a target country? We develop a theoretical framework to understand outward facing propaganda, employed by many autocrats to shape public opinion abroad. We argue that beliefs about foreign affairs are more susceptible to outward facing propaganda than beliefs about domestic conditions. Empirically, we focus on RT (formerly Russia Today), a media platform founded by the Russian government in 2005. After characterizing its content, we ask whether exposure to RT influences the beliefs of American consumers. Exposure to RT, we find, induces respondents to support withdrawing from America's role as a cooperative global leader by 10 to 20 percentage points. This effect is robust across measures, obtains across party lines, and persists even when we disclose that RT is financed by the Russian government. RT has no effect on Americans' views of domestic politics or the Russian government.

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1 Introduction

Can propaganda produced by foreign adversaries shape public opinion in a target country? Many autocrats apparently think so. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) operates the *China Daily*, which circulates widely in Washington, and maintains the CGTN news network, which reaches 30 million American households and presents the CCP’s forced labor camps for ethnic Uyghurs as “successful vocational training centers” (Mozur 2019). The Russian government operates Sputnik and RT (formerly Russia Today), which, in 2013, became the first news platform to surpass one billion views on YouTube (Wakabayashi and Confessore 2017). The Saudi government sponsors Al Arabiya. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan launched TRT World in 2015; it broadcasts, in English, 24 hours a day from bureaus in Istanbul, Washington, London, and Singapore. The North Korean government maintains the *Pyongyang Times*. Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez launched Telesur in 2015. “A Latin socialist answer to CNN,” Telesur is also funded by the governments of Cuba, Nicaragua, Uruguay, and Bolivia. We refer to these as *outward facing* propaganda apparatuses, and the financial commitments required to sustain them are non-trivial. The Russian government spends more than \$300 million on RT annually (Maczka 2012).

This paper has two objectives. We first provide a theoretical framework for understanding outward facing propaganda in autocracies. We identify two reasons that autocrats may attempt to manipulate the beliefs of foreign citizens. First, autocrats may attempt to shape how their governments are viewed by foreign citizens or foreign governments. We refer to this as “image laundering,” and it may serve several purposes. By cultivating soft power, outward facing propaganda may build a foreign constituency for the sponsor’s global leadership or economic investment. By casting the autocrat as a democrat, outward facing propaganda may reduce foreign pressure to undertake democratic reforms. Second, autocrats may use outward facing propaganda to change the target population’s beliefs about itself. This too may serve several purposes. Outward facing propaganda may seek specific electoral outcomes or to build popular support for policies that advance the sponsor’s interests. By undermining trust in democratic institutions at home, outward facing propaganda may weaken support for promoting democracy abroad.

Our core theoretical argument is that outward facing propaganda should have a stronger effect on opinions about foreign affairs than opinions about domestic politics. We identify two reasons for this. First, individuals tend to have stronger, more persistent opinions about issues of personal importance (Krosnick and Schuman 1988; Chong and Druckman 2010; Druckman and Leeper 2012). Because foreign policy is generally less salient to Americans than domestic politics (Busby and Monten 2012), opinions about foreign affairs should be relatively more fluid. Second, individuals also tend to have stronger, more persistent views about issues that exhibit partisan polarization (Guisinger and Saunders 2017). In the decades since World War II, America’s foreign policy has exhibited far less partisan polarization than its domestic politics, which again renders opinions about foreign affairs more malleable than those about domestic politics.

To probe the effects of outward facing propaganda by issue area, we focus on one uniquely important outward facing propaganda apparatus: RT, which was founded by the Russian government in 2005 and, as of 2017, enjoyed a weekly viewership of 11 million Americans and a total potential audience of 85 million Americans (RT 2018). We show that three topics constitute 60% of all articles disseminated by RT’s Twitter account: coverage of America’s democratic allies, US foreign policy, and US domestic conditions. These articles are overwhelmingly critical. Just 5% of RT content focuses on Russia.

We then employ a survey experiment on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk platform to measure RT’s effects on Americans. We provide the first evidence that propaganda produced by foreign adversaries can influence public opinion in democracies. Exposure to RT, we find, induces Americans to prefer the United States withdraw from its global leadership position. These effects are substantively meaningful, obtain across party lines, and persist even when we disclose that RT is financed by the Russian government. On average, exposing American consumers to RT makes them between 10 and 20 percentage points less likely to support an active foreign policy, 20 percentage points more likely to believe the US is doing too much to solve world problems, and 10 percentage points more likely to value national interests over the interests of US allies. These effects are substantively meaningful: approximately half the size of going from a strong Democrat to a strong Republican. By contrast, exposure to RT has no effect on respondents’ views about American politics or trust in democratic institutions. Exposure to RT has no effect on respondents’ views of Russia.

The Russian government has acknowledged its objective to build a “post-West world order,” as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov put it (Gehrke 2018). This order is multipolar, with the emergence of “other powerhouses” putting an end to “five or so centuries of domination of the collective West.” Our results are strikingly consistent with the possibility that the Russian government deliberately uses RT to make Americans more comfortable with this. In 2010, RT hired a Western advertising agency to craft its marketing strategy in Western capitals (Rutenberg 2017). It should be unsurprising that RT calibrates its content to achieve geopolitical ends.

This paper advances three literatures. First, scholars have long sought to understand how citizens form opinions about foreign policy. Scholars recognize the relevance of an individual’s values (Kertzer et al. 2014; Baker 2015; Rathbun et al. 2016) political ideology (Snyder, Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2009; Chaudoin, Smith and Urpelainen 2014), economic interests (Herrmann, Tetlock and Diascro 2001; Bearce and Tuxhorn 2017), peers (Kertzer and Zeitsoff 2017), and cognitive misunderstandings (Rho and Tomz 2017). Individuals also look to the leaders of trusted allies (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2009; Schatz and Levine 2010; Dragojlovic 2011, 2013, 2015; Hayes and Guardino 2013; Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Wood 2014) and international institutions (Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler 2009; Grieco et al. 2011; Linos 2011; Tingley and Tomz 2014; Guardino and Hayes 2017). This paper is the first to show that propaganda produced by foreign adversaries can shape citizens’ foreign policy views, and in ways that are strategically meaningful.

Second, this paper illuminates the Russian government’s ongoing informational campaign against the United States. Driven by the 2016 election, scholars have sought to understand the covert activities undertaken by the Russian government to influence American politics. Scholars have attempted to identify Russian bots (Sanovich 2017), understand their objectives (Ferrara 2020; Golovchenko et al. 2020), and measure their effects (Tucker et al. 2018). We show that one component of this campaign – both overt and longstanding – may be equally critical. Exposure to RT compels Americans to favor a retreat from its position of global leadership, and to privilege the national interest over the interests of America’s democratic allies. Contrary to much speculation, we find no evidence that RT undermines trust in democratic institutions or changes domestic political opinions.

Finally, this paper advances our understanding of autocratic politics. Scholars regard propaganda as central to autocratic survival. Scholars have sought to measure its effects (Enikolopov, Petrova and Zhuravskaya 2011; Adena et al. 2015; Huang 2015; Carter and Carter 2020*a,c*) understand the mechanisms through which it operates (Little 2017), and explain cross-country variation in propaganda strategies (Carter and Carter 2020*b*). This literature focuses on *inward facing* propaganda, designed to manipulate the beliefs of an autocrat’s citizens. Yet despite its ubiquity, outward facing propaganda remains poorly understood. It is unclear which autocrats employ it, why, who they target, or to what effect. Our theoretical framework addresses these questions. Our empirical results suggest these efforts are fundamental to autocratic politics.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents our theoretical framework. We survey the objectives of outward facing propaganda, the mechanisms whereby changes in public opinion yield changes in policy, and our hypotheses about which issue areas are most susceptible. Section 3 provides an overview of RT. Section 4 characterizes RT’s content and introduces our survey experiment. Section 5 presents our results. Section 6 concludes with suggestions for future research.

2 Understanding Outward Facing Propaganda

2.1 The Objectives

Scholars have suggested two reasons that autocrats employ outward facing propaganda. First, autocrats may aim to shape the beliefs of foreign citizens about themselves: their government, their community, and even their country’s appropriate role in the world. This is how many observers understand the Russian government’s social media campaigns against Western democracies. These campaigns have sought to shape citizens’ voting preferences and ultimately elect candidates who espouse pro-Russia policies or otherwise advance the Russian government’s perceived interests: Donald Trump in the United States (Bessi and Ferrara 2016; Kollanyi, Howard and Woolley 2016; Morgan and Shaffer 2017; Howard et al. 2018; Benkler et al. 2018; Woolley and Guilbeault 2018; Badawy, Ferrara and Lerman 2018; Linvill et al. 2019; Bastos and Farkas 2019; Stewart, Arif and Starbird 2018; Golovchenko et al. 2020), Marine Le Pen in France (Ferrara 2020), Brexit in the

United Kingdom (Howard and Kollanyi 2016), and the AfD in Germany (Woolley and Guilbeault 2018). Other scholars have suggested that the Russian government aims to undermine Americans' confidence in democratic institutions (Pomerantsev 2015; Walker 2015; Ziegler 2017; Bennett and Livingston 2018; Benkler et al. 2018; Woolley and Howard 2018), a view echoed by Special Counsel Robert Mueller's 2017 indictment against the Russian government's Internet Research Agency (IRA) (Mueller 2018). This may yield a range of benefits to autocratic governments. If citizens in Western democracies can be persuaded that democracy is less worthy of promotion, autocrats abroad may confront less pressure to reform from Western governments. Alternatively, if leading democracies appear dysfunctional, autocrats may confront less pressure to reform from their own citizens, who may view democracy more skeptically (Diamond 2015).

Second, autocrats may employ outward facing propaganda to shape the beliefs of foreign citizens about the sponsor government. We refer to this as "image laundering," and it too has been widely documented. The Chinese government employs image laundering for both geopolitical and economic ends: to assuage Western concerns about its military rise and to build foreign constituencies for its investment (Brady 2015; Rawnsley 2015). For several of Africa's longest tenured autocrats, image laundering is an investment in avoiding sanctions by Western governments in response to domestic human rights abuses (Carter 2018).¹ Yablokov (2015) suggests that RT is an investment in image laundering for the Russian government, and serves a geopolitical objective. After the Cold War, when the Russian government could no longer compete with the US for global dominance, it embraced containment: "the division of the world into the 'majority' of nations led by Russia against the nations of the so-called 'New World Order' led by the US." By casting "Russia as a 'speaker' on behalf of the third-world nations excluded from the US-led 'New World Order'," RT may enable the Russian government to exert geopolitical influence beyond its military capacity.

2.2 The Mechanisms

Few accounts of outward facing propaganda are explicit about how changes in public opinion culminate in policy change. Drawing on Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo (2020), we suggest two mechanisms. First, voters may select candidates whose foreign policy positions are most consistent with their own. Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo (2020) refer to this as a selection mechanism, and it suggests that outward facing propaganda aims to shape electoral outcomes by compelling voters to back a preferred candidate, or at least to not penalize that preferred candidate for otherwise unpopular foreign policy positions. In the context of the 2016 American election, for instance, the Russian government's outward facing propaganda may have sought to make Republican voters – partisans of Cold Warrior Ronald Reagan – more comfortable with candidate Trump's embrace

¹Paul Biya and Teodoro Obiang, who have ruled Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, respectively, for a cumulative 75 years, jointly own Africa 24. Denis Sassou Nguesso, who has ruled the Republic of Congo for all but five years since 1979, lured Euronews's Africa subsidiary, Africanews, to Brazzaville with a skyscraper along the Congo River. Sassou Nguesso also financed *Forbes Afrique*, which circulates widely among Africa's financial elite.

of a foreign policy that was consistent with Russian interests: his NATO-skepticism or his view that Crimea may be rightfully Russian. The selection mechanism suggests that outward facing propaganda should exhibit clear temporal variation: in particular, that it spikes during the target country's election seasons.

After politicians take office, Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo (2020) suggest that they respond to public opinion out of concern that disappointing voters could be politically costly. This constitutes the second mechanism that links public opinion to policy change. Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo (2020) refer to this as a responsiveness mechanism. It suggests that outward facing propaganda aims to condition public opinion so that policymakers are compelled to oblige their constituents' preferences, lest they be penalized at the ballot box. Alternatively, outward facing propaganda may aim to provide cover for policymakers to pursue a foreign policy consistent with the sponsor government's interests. In the context of Trump's post-election foreign policy, the Russian government's outward facing propaganda may aim to shape American public opinion about the Syrian Civil War, giving Trump cover to withdraw American troops, as Moscow sought. This mechanism suggests that outward facing propaganda may exhibit temporal variation driven by events in third countries, in which the sponsor government has security interests. Temporal variation may also be driven by events in the sponsor country, such as flagrant human rights abuses, which the sponsor government wants foreign policymakers to ignore.

2.3 The Effects

Although many autocrats employ outward facing propaganda, there is virtually no evidence about whether it actually shapes public opinion. In turn, it remains unclear whether Western democracies should care that the world's autocrats are attempting to manipulate their citizens' beliefs. Many observers are skeptical. In 2014, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof dismissed it: "RT is a Russian propaganda arm, and I don't think it's going to matter" (Morgan 2014). In 2017, the *Washington Post* announced: "If Russia Today is Moscow's propaganda arm, it's not very good at its job" (Erickson 2017). Mickiewicz (2017)'s skepticism rests on the size of RT's audience, which is uncertain, and its credibility, which is dubious.

Not everyone agrees. The *New Yorker*'s David Remnick called RT "nastily brilliant, so much more sophisticated than Soviet propaganda" (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014). Stefan Meister, who studies Russia for the German Council on Foreign Relations, cautioned that "open societies are very vulnerable, and it's cheaper than buying a new rocket" (Erlanger 2017a). Officials in Eastern Europe, threatened by Russia's recent military aggression, are also concerned. In 2014, Lithuania's Foreign Affairs Minister said that "Russia Today's propaganda machine is no less destructive than military marching in Crimea" (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014).

There are good *ex ante* reasons to think that outward facing propaganda is persuasive, at least under some conditions. First, there is mounting evidence that inward facing propaganda

works. During the 1999 Russian parliamentary election, access to independent television decreased voting for Vladimir Putin’s United Russia (Enikolopov, Petrova and Zhuravskaya 2011). Pro-regime coverage in propaganda newspapers across the world’s autocracies appears to reduce popular protests (Carter and Carter 2020a). There is also evidence that partisan media in democracies can shape public opinion. Where broadcast, Fox News yielded an additional 0.6 percentage points for George W. Bush in the 2000 election (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007). In the 2004 and 2008 elections, Fox News generated an additional 3.59 and 6.34 percentage points, respectively, for the Republican candidate (Martin and Yurukoglu 2017). Most recently, a series of papers have documented how Fox News consumption shaped individual health decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bursztyn et al. 2020; Jamieson and Albarracin 2020; Simonov et al. 2020). Scholars have documented the effects of partisan media in other democracies: most notably, Brazil (Boas and Hidalgo 2011; Da Silveira and De Mello 2011) and Italy (Durante, Pinotti and Tesei 2019).

Second, outward facing propagandists have adopted the tactics that render inward facing propaganda and partisan media in democracies persuasive. All propagandists confront a singular challenge: Rational citizens should discount information as long as its author is its chief beneficiary. We refer to this as the “propagandist’s dilemma,” and propagandists generally employ two tactics to confront it. “Honest propaganda” occurs when propaganda apparatuses acquire credibility by mixing fact with fiction, which gives them some capacity to manipulate citizens’ beliefs (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006; Yu 2019). The *China Daily*, for instance, acknowledges China’s legitimate social problems, but also occasionally claims that the 1989 Tiananmen massacre is “a myth” (Flock 2011). “Black propaganda” occurs when authorship is concealed, the better to prevent consumers from discounting it (Jowett and O’Donnell 2012). This is why Russia’s IRA and China’s Communist Party employ bots and trolls on social media (King, Pan and Roberts 2017; Golovchenko et al. 2020), which attempt to pass as members of the target population. This makes sense: Individuals are more likely to update their beliefs based on peer effects from their in-group (Bond et al. 2012; Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017).

Our central theoretical argument is that beliefs about foreign affairs are more susceptible to outward facing propaganda than beliefs about domestic politics. We identify two reasons for this. First, there is substantial evidence that most American citizens know relatively little about the world beyond their borders (Holsti 2004). In 2017, the Pew Research Center found that just 60% of Americans knew that the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union and 37% knew that Emmanuel Macron was president of France.² In 2011, Marist found that nearly 25% of Americans were unaware that the United States claimed independence from Great Britain. *Forbes* called the American public “indifferent” about foreign affairs (Friedman 2014); the Cato Institute described Americans as having an “attention deficit” (Thrall 2018). Reflecting this, Busby and Monten (2012) find that foreign policy is far less salient to Americans than domestic policy. This has key

²Pew Research Center (2015).

implications for the relative fluidity of foreign policy beliefs. Since issues of personal importance are subject to more deliberation, individuals tend to have stronger, more persistent opinions about them. These opinions, in turn, tend to be stable over time (Krosnick and Schuman 1988; Chong and Druckman 2010; Druckman and Leeper 2012). Because American citizens are less engaged in foreign policy debates, we should expect their foreign policy beliefs to be more fluid.

Second, America’s foreign policy has historically been far less polarized than its domestic politics. Since World War II, the American government has pursued a relatively liberal internationalist foreign policy, which has enjoyed bipartisan support (Holsti 2004; Chaudoin, Milner and Tingley 2010). Ikenberry (2009, 71) characterized the agenda: “open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic community, . . . and the rule of law.” This bipartisan consensus was challenged in the early 2000s, when President George W. Bush initiated costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Klinkner 2006; Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2007; Fiorina and Abrams 2008).³ Still, Chaudoin, Milner and Tingley (2010) marshal a range of evidence that suggests the bipartisan consensus remains intact. Again, this has important implications for the fluidity of foreign policy beliefs. Guisinger and Saunders (2017, 426) find that “the degree to which public attitudes are malleable . . . depends on . . . the degree to which the issue already exhibits partisan polarization.” Where polarization is limited, Guisinger and Saunders (2017) show, the content of political messaging itself determines its persuasiveness, and many opinion leaders can be persuasive. This creates space for well-crafted outward facing propaganda.⁴

This yields our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Since opinions about foreign affairs are more fluid, outward facing propaganda should have stronger effects.

Though outside the empirical scope of this paper, Hypothesis 1 has an important corollary: Image laundering campaigns should be more effective when they focus on countries about which the target population knows relatively little. This may be why Rwandan President Paul Kagame has persuaded many international observers of his commitment to “good governance,” despite his poor human rights record (Thomson 2018). Conversely, when the target population has stronger views about the sponsor government, image laundering campaigns should be less effective.

By contrast, our theoretical framework suggests that beliefs about domestic politics should be more robust to outward facing propaganda. Relative to foreign affairs, Americans are better informed about domestic politics, their beliefs tend to be more deeply held, and the issue space is highly polarized (Iyengar et al. 2019; Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro 2020). Accordingly, Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder Jr. (2008) show that Americans’ views about economic policy and

³Klinkner (2006) concludes that polarization about President Bush himself drove polarization about foreign policy, rather than divergent beliefs about foreign policy.

⁴It is possible that US foreign policy will become more polarized in the future (Schultz 2018). If so, the scope for outward facing propaganda to shape foreign policy views may decline or be driven exclusively by the first mechanism.

moral issues are strikingly stable over time. We thus expect outward facing propaganda to have relatively minimal effects on a target population’s opinions about its domestic conditions.

This constitutes our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Since opinions about domestic politics are generally stable, outward facing propaganda should have weaker effects.

Hypothesis 2 has important implications for how we understand the Russian government’s informational campaigns against Western democracies: about whether these campaigns undermine public faith in democratic institutions or foster polarization. Our theoretical framework suggests these concerns are overstated. Outward facing propaganda that aims to manipulate these beliefs confronts the fact that individuals hold strong prior opinions about them.

Put simply, our theoretical framework suggests that observers are concerned about the wrong set of opinions. Outward facing propaganda is far more likely to condition a target population’s views about foreign policy – about its government’s rightful place in the world or about sponsor governments with which a target population is relatively unfamiliar – than about a target population’s views about its domestic conditions.

2.4 The Possibility (and Implications) of Decay

Even if outward facing propaganda works, its effects may be shortlived. Social psychologists recognize that the effects of persuasive communication are strongest immediately after consumption and decay quickly (Cook and Flay 1978). Accordingly, campaign advertisements can have measurable effects on American voters, but for relatively short periods (Hill et al. 2013; Gerber et al. 2011). Casualty reports have similarly short-lived effects on whether Americans support ongoing military interventions (Althaus, Bramlett and Gimpel 2012; Sides and Vavreck 2013). Across autocracies, the effects of inward facing propaganda on popular protest exhibit a similar decay (Carter and Carter 2020a).

Perhaps this is cause for optimism. If outward facing propaganda induces an opinion shift, the argument might go, the effect should fade before being transmitted through the political system and culminating in policy change. We are less optimistic. Rather, since sponsor governments are strategic, we should expect them to plan accordingly. The possibility of decay suggests not that we should be unconcerned about outward facing propaganda, but that we should observe temporal variation in its execution. We should expect the world’s autocrats to increase the rate – and perhaps vary the substance – of outward facing propaganda when public opinion is most important.

This, we believe, is why outward facing propaganda appears to intensify around the target country’s elections. Russian bot activity spikes during American and European elections (Kollanyi, Howard and Woolley 2016; Howard and Kollanyi 2016; Badawy, Ferrara and Lerman 2018;

Zhdanova and Orlova 2019; Ferrara 2020), just as the Chinese government launches massive on-line campaigns to undermine pro-Independence candidates around Taiwanese elections (Chen 2019; Monaco 2019). Outward facing propaganda around other moments of political import is less well documented, though it appears to spike too. Russian outward facing propaganda in Turkey spiked during the Crimea invasion in 2014, after the Turkish military downed a Russian fighter jet that violated Turkish airspace in 2015, and after the 2016 coup against Erdogan (Devlen 2018). In Brazil, Russian propaganda spiked during the 2014 presidential election and Dilma Rousseff’s 2016 impeachment (Arnaudo 2019). Russian outward facing propaganda has spiked during other political crises across Europe as well (Kyiak 2018; Ferrara 2020).

Like campaign advertisements in democracies, outward facing propaganda routinely aims to manipulate beliefs at precise moments. What matters is whether it induces a change then, not whether that change persists.

3 A Brief Overview of RT

To probe whether outward facing propaganda can shape citizens’ beliefs – and, if so, about which issues – we focus on a single outward facing propaganda apparatus: RT, founded in 2005 with \$15 million from the Russian government and \$15 million from “private” banks. RT was conceived by Mikhail Lesin, Putin’s former media minister, and Aleksei Gromov, his former spokesman. RT markets itself as like the BBC: government funded but editorially independent. Putin has been more candid. In 2013, he observed that, given its funding source, RT “cannot help but reflect the Russian government’s official position” (Fisher 2013). Founded as Russia Today, RT rechristened itself in 2009 to emphasize its global coverage and expand its reach. Shortly thereafter, RT launched its satellite channel, RT America, which broadcasts from Washington and New York. Since 2005, RT’s budget has increased tenfold, to roughly \$323 million in 2017 (Erlanger 2017*b*). For reference, the 2014 budget of the BBC World Service – the world’s largest broadcast news operation – amounted to \$376 million. When RT’s operating budget reached \$380 million in 2011, the Duma reduced funding to \$300 million in 2012. Putin promptly prohibited any future reductions (Fazletdinova 2012). In 2008, the Russian government designated RT as an organization of strategic national importance.

In 2010, RT paired its bid for global reach with a new advertising campaign, crafted by agency McCann Erickson. Entitled “Question More,” the campaign gave RT its current slogan. The campaign also yielded an advertisement that featured President Barack Obama morphing into Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, asking: “Who poses the greatest nuclear threat?” This effort to compel viewers to “question more” is emphasized by RT executives. In one 2017 interview with the *New York Times*, Anna Belkina, RT’s head of communications in Moscow, said: “This is why we exist. It’s important to watch RT to hear alternative voices. You might not agree with them, but it’s important to try to understand where they’re coming from” (Erlanger 2017*a*).

RT claims to reach over 600 million people in 100 countries and five continents. In 2017, it boasted a weekly US viewership of 11 million people and a total potential audience of 85 million Americans.⁵ Its YouTube channel is the most-viewed news channel in the world, which it displays on its banner (Shuster 2015). With over 2.5 million subscribers to its flagship channel and 5 billion total views, YouTube has been one of RT’s most successful mediums.

Its bid for influence has frustrated policymakers. In 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry called it a “propaganda bullhorn” for Moscow (LoGiurato 2014). In 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron called it “lying propaganda” (Wildman 2017). British regulators called it “materially misleading” (Plunkett 2014). These criticisms culminated in November 2017, when the US Justice Department required RT America to register as a Russian government agent. The DOJ ruling was condemned by other outward facing propaganda outlets. The *China Daily*, also registered as a foreign agent, proclaimed that “foreign media outlets in [the] US merit bouquets, not brickbats.” RT, the *China Daily* contended, was “far better” than CNN.⁶

4 Survey Experiment

4.1 Identifying Treatment Conditions

To probe whether RT works, we first had to identify a set of treatment articles. We did so by first characterizing RT’s content.

Twitter is key to RT’s distribution strategy. The Russian government uses bots to drive traffic to RT articles on Twitter, particularly during election seasons in democracies (Howard and Kollanyi 2016; Kollanyi, Howard and Woolley 2016; Badawy, Ferrara and Lerman 2018; Spangher et al. 2018). Using the Python computer programming language, we scraped articles that were disseminated by RT’s Twitter account on a sample of 31 days in 2018. RT disseminates roughly 100 tweets per day, so our corpus counts 3,249 tweets. These tweets generally contain links to articles, but sometimes feature pictures and videos. After reading a day’s worth of tweets and the articles to which they linked, we developed a set of nine labels that capture the primary topic of each article. We then had research assistants apply topic labels to the balance of RT tweets.

The results appear in Figure 1. For each of nine topics along the x -axis, the y -axis displays the number of articles that RT disseminated. Some 30% of all RT coverage focuses on the United States. Of total US coverage, about 51% focuses on US foreign policy and 49% focuses on domestic issues. This coverage is strikingly critical. Headlines about US foreign policy include: “Democracy being degraded as US seeks global hegemony by any means”; “US sanctions violate international law & WTO norms, will not be left unanswered”; and “US congressman proposes gold-backed dollar, but does America have enough bullion?” One article about US domestic politics announced: “David

⁵RT (2018) reports viewership statistics from a 2017 Ipsos poll.

⁶“Foreign media outlets in US merit bouquets, not brickbats,” *China Daily*, November 24, 2017.

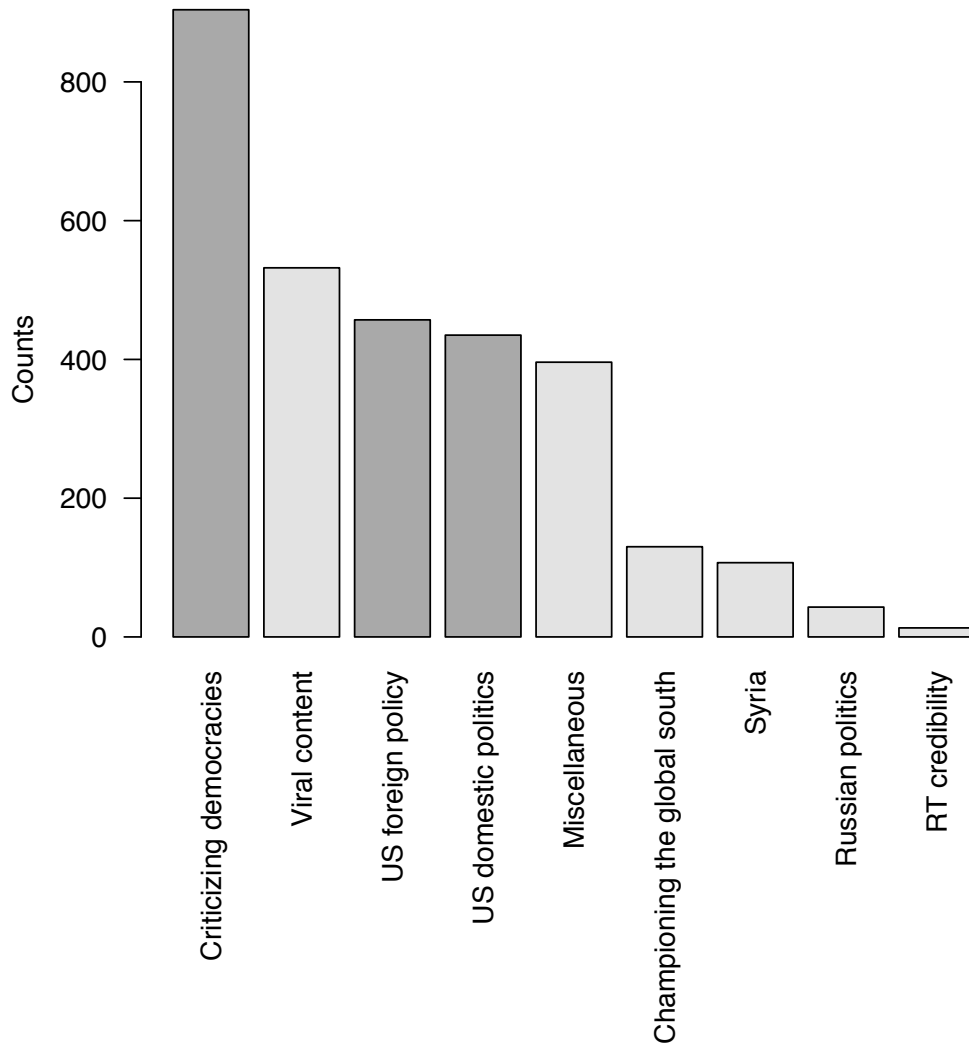


Figure 1: RT content from April 2018. We draw treatment articles from the three most common topic areas, shaded in dark grey.

and Goliath situation: How New York City poop became a rural Alabama town’s problem.” The article details the frustration of citizens in Parrish, Alabama, whose air was contaminated when a 42-car train filled with NYC waste parked in their town for over two months. RT used the issue to highlight America’s north-south, liberal-conservative divide. The article includes several tweets from individuals who claimed that Alabamans “deserved” the “poop trucks” for supporting Donald Trump.

Apart from American foreign policy and domestic conditions, RT focuses overwhelmingly on coverage of America’s democratic allies: countries like the United Kingdom, France, Israel, and South Korea. This topic accounts for 26% of RT coverage. Also strikingly critical, this coverage

typically focuses on terrorism, crime, and corruption. One article covered UK politician Nigel Farage’s accusation that London mayor Sadiq Khan was not doing enough to stem a “crime epidemic.”

RT devotes substantial coverage to viral content. These tweets are “clickbait”: about animals, crime, or bizarre events like comets or accidents. This content may drive traffic to RT’s political content.

Other topics account for a relatively small share of RT coverage. Approximately 4% of coverage “champions the global south”: amplifying voices in countries like Venezuela and Iran to present an alternative to the US-led global liberal order. RT devotes approximately 3% of content to the crisis in Syria. RT’s efforts to cultivate Russia’s soft power are modest. Roughly 2% of coverage focuses on Russian politics – in a generally neutral way – and another 1% emphasizes RT’s journalistic credentials, presumably to foster credibility with readers.

4.2 Visualizing Russian Propaganda Narratives

RT focuses primarily on America’s domestic conditions, foreign policy, and democratic allies. To explore this content in more detail, we analyze our corpus of 3,249 RT tweets by adopting a tool from computational linguistics.⁷ The basic idea is that, across two corpora of documents, words common to both are generally uninformative. These common words are pronouns, conjugations of the verb “to be,” question words like “who” and “where,” and generic words associated with a given topic (like “sports” for sports). Words uncommon to both corpora are also uninformative. These are peculiar, low frequency words. By contrast, words common in one corpus but uncommon in another are *distinctive*. They convey something meaningful about content in one corpus relative to another.

To measure semantic distinctiveness, we use Benoit et al. (2018)’s keyness statistic.⁸ We define as corpus A all tweets that are not about US domestic policy, US foreign policy, and America’s traditional Western allies. Then, we define tweets from these three topic areas, respectively, as corpus B^1 , B^2 , and B^3 . For each word in corpus B^1 , B^2 , and B^3 , we compute its keyness statistic relative to the baseline corpus A . The results appear in Figure 2. The top left panel presents words that are distinctive to coverage of US domestic politics (corpus B^1) relative to RT’s other content (corpus A). The top right panel presents words that are distinctive to coverage of US foreign policy (corpus B^2) relative to RT’s other content (corpus A). The bottom panel presents words that are distinctive to coverage of America’s democratic allies (corpus B^3) relative to RT’s other content (corpus A). The x -axes record the χ^2 statistic for each word along the y -axes. This χ^2 statistic measures how much more often the x -axis words were used in corpus B than would have been

⁷We employed standard pre-processing methods: lowercasing words and removing numbers, symbols, emoticons, links, and stop words. We did not stem words, since doing so obscured important details in RT’s content.

⁸In the Online Appendix, we use an alternative statistic by Kessler (2017). The results are substantively unchanged.

expected based on corpus *A*. This constitutes our measure of distinctiveness.

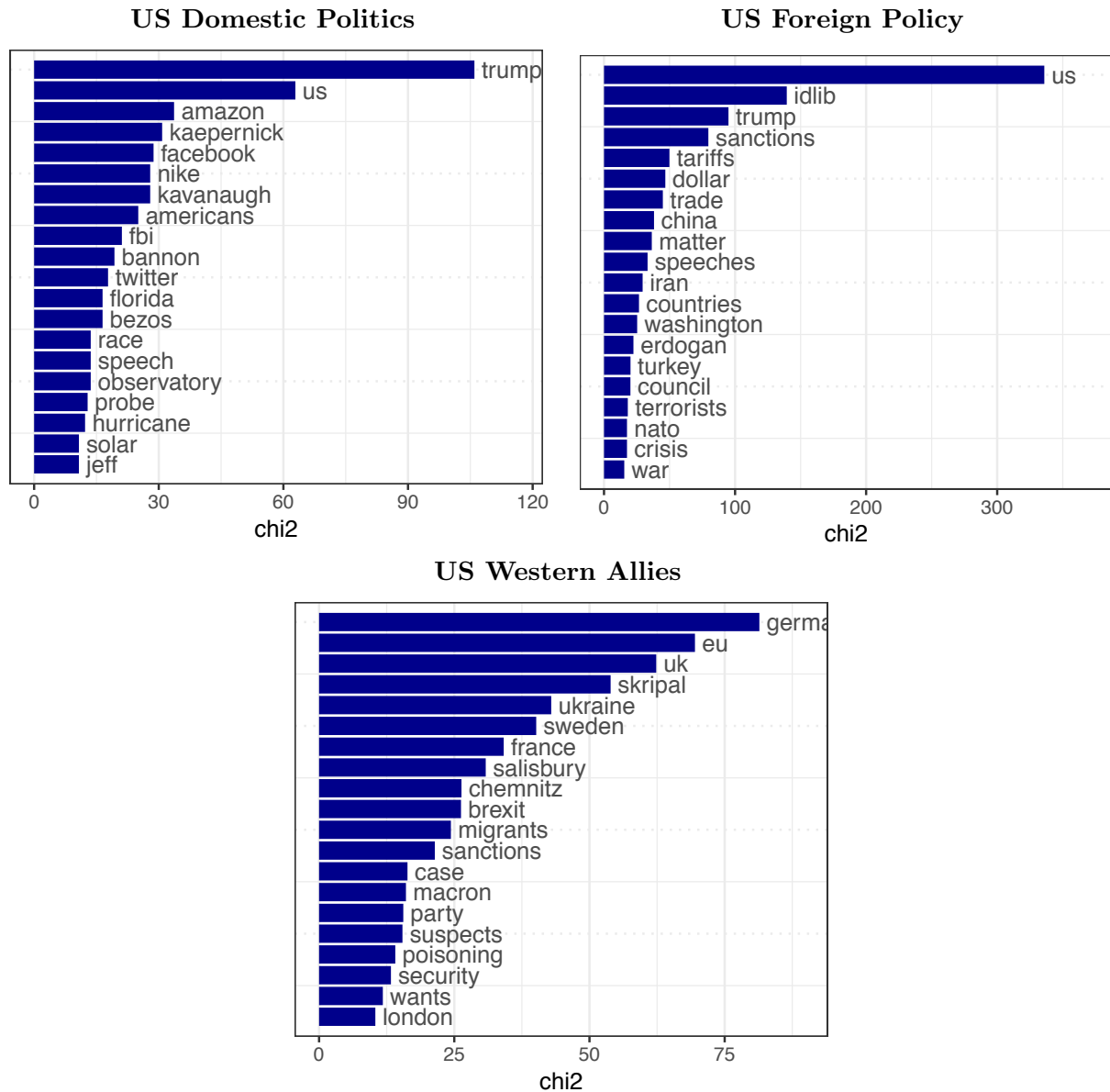


Figure 2: RT Propaganda Narratives

From the top left panel, coverage of US domestic politics during the sample period underscored America’s moral decay. Colin Kaepernick, whose national anthem protests left him excluded from the NFL, was routinely cited as evidence of American racism. “Nike” is among the most distinctive terms; RT cited Kaepernick’s Nike endorsement as evidence of his widespread popularity among African Americans, reiterating America’s racial divide. RT covered Brett Kavanaugh’s Senate confirmation battle, and especially the sexual assault allegations against him: “Kavanaugh nomination vote set for Monday, unless accuser testifies on sex abuse claims.” Amazon’s Jeff Bezos

figured prominently as well, evidence of America’s massive inequality.

From the top right panel, coverage of US foreign policy was dominated by crises that underscored America’s foreign policy failures. The military campaign in Syria was, by far, the most common topic; “Idlib,” the most distinctive term behind “US,” is a Syrian city that was devastated by the war. One representative tweet linked to an article with this headline: “The Iranian president repeatedly stressed that foreign influence was a major factor in escalating the war in Syria, and called on the US to withdraw the troops that it has illegally deployed.” Other foreign policy coverage focused on US sanctions on Iran and Russia, as well as the tariffs levied by Washington as the opening salvo in a trade war.

Coverage of America’s democratic allies focused on the crises tearing Europe apart: “Brexit,” the “migrant” crisis in “Germany” and elsewhere, and the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment. This, too, was implicitly associated with racism, underscoring Europe’s moral decay. One tweet linked to this headline: “Italian doc slammed for saying migrants ‘should be drowned’ as they have ‘no human rights’.” RT routinely criticized London’s investigation into the “poisoning” of Sergei Skripal, a Russian military officer who served as a double agent for the United Kingdom. Announced one tweet: “With every new twist surrounding #Skripal’s poisoning in #Salisbury, an element of farce is not far behind.” The implication was clear: NATO members were biased against Russia, despite its efforts to play a constructive role in global governance. RT spun Western sanctions against Russia for its activities in Ukraine as suggesting the same bias.

4.3 Survey Design

Since RT’s substantive content focuses primarily on America’s domestic conditions, foreign policy, and democratic allies, so do we. Our survey design appears in Figure 3. We specify three sets of treatment articles: **US Domestic Politics**, **US Foreign Policy**, and **Criticizing Democracy**. We select the articles for each treatment condition by randomly selecting four articles from each of the three topic categories. By selecting four articles from each category – rather than a single article from each category – we minimize the possibility that the treatment articles are unrepresentative of the broader population. The Online Appendix includes all 12 treatment articles.

We assign each survey respondent a single treatment condition. The article to which she is ultimately exposed is selected randomly from the set of four articles for each treatment condition. Our survey design thus incorporates three sources of randomness. Respondents are randomly assigned to a treatment condition (or the control group); the set of four articles for each treatment condition are randomly selected from all articles published on one day, April 6, 2018; and the specific article to which treated respondents are exposed is randomly selected from among the set of four for each treatment condition.

After exposure to a treatment article, respondents were asked a series of questions. These questions, many of which were drawn Pew’s “America in the World” survey, solicit respondents’

opinions about a range of topics: whether they favor US global engagement, view its democratic allies as worthy of support, view Russia as an adversary, approve of the president’s job performance, and trust the national government and news media, among others. These questions are deliberately broad. We seek to identify the range of political views that RT shapes and those it does not.

Respondents in the **Control Group** progressed directly to our set of political and demographic questions without reading any article. They represent baseline views about US domestic politics and foreign policy in our respondent pool.

4.4 Foreign Agent (FA) Disclosure

We also ask whether explicitly disclosing RT’s affiliation with the Russian government mitigates its influence on consumers. To do so, we created three additional treatment conditions, which are identical to our three baseline conditions but included the following disclosure immediately above the treatment article: “RT (Russia Today) is financed by the Russian government.” This yields six total treatment conditions and one control group.

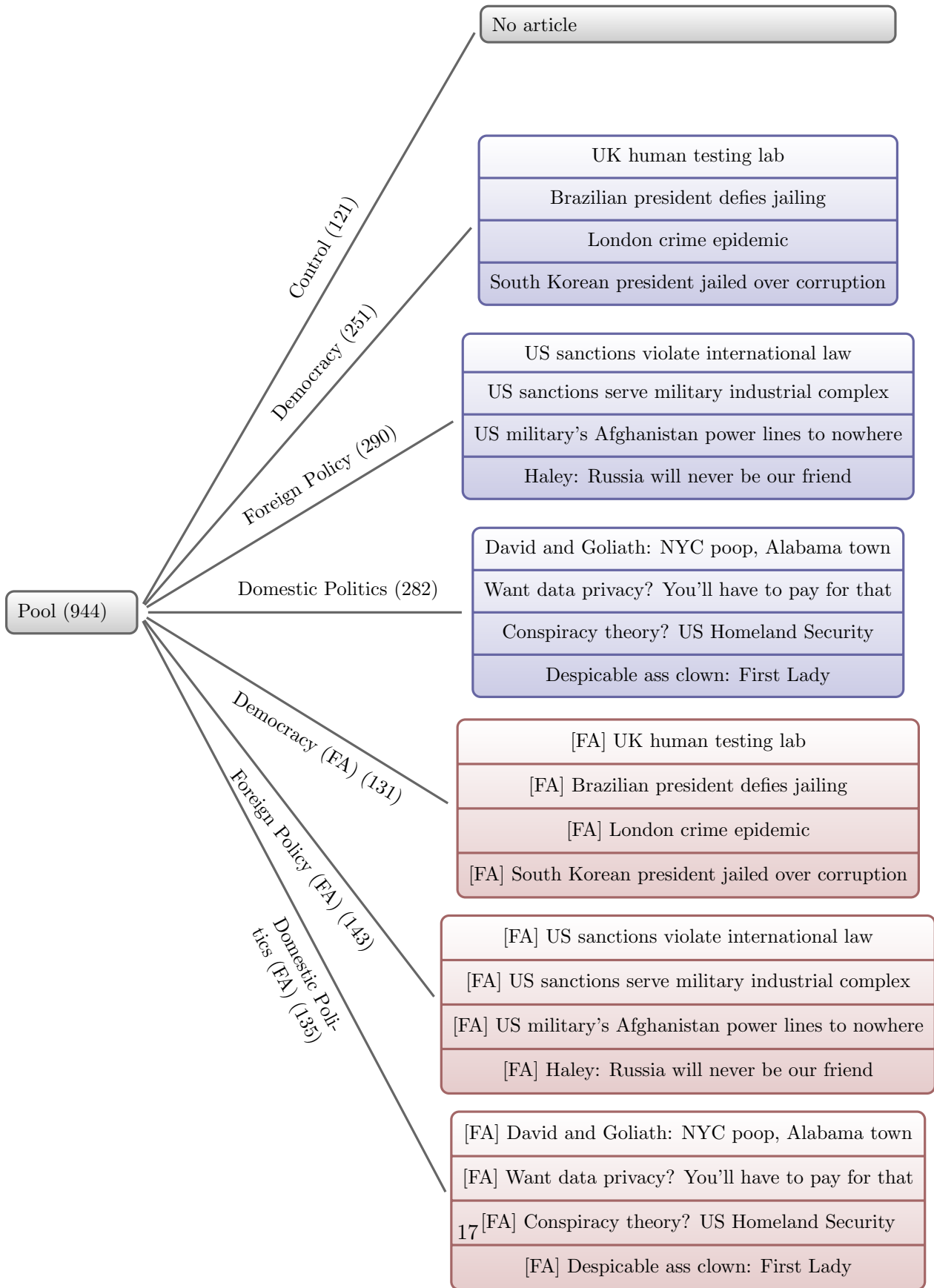
4.5 Survey Population

We fielded the survey experiment on April 7, 2018, via Amazon Mechanical Turk, a popular platform for social science research. Validation studies have shown that surveys fielded on this platform have generated the same findings as surveys fielded on nationally representative samples (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012). We received 1,007 responses. After omitting respondents who completed the survey in an unrealistically short amount of time, we were left with a sample size of 944.⁹ Our sample’s demographic characteristics appear in the Online Appendix. The sample is reasonably well balanced: 54% female, 82% white, and averaged 41 years old. The youngest participant is 19; the oldest 82. The sample is well-educated, with over 50% reporting a bachelor’s degree or higher. Politically, the sample skews left, with 51% identifying as Democrat, 25% as Republican, and 22% as Independent. The Online Appendix reports covariate balance across partisan subgroups.

Russian Twitter bots appear to target partisan echo chambers (Spangher et al. 2018; Badawy, Ferrara and Lerman 2018). Therefore, we asked respondents to select the news sources they regularly consume from a list of several dozen. We then constructed a variable, *Low Quality News Share*, which measures the fraction of a respondent’s news consumption that comes from extremely partisan, conspiratorial news websites. These include Breitbart, Drudge Report, Infowars, Intercept, Alternet, Red State, World Truth, and Patriotics. Roughly 9% of respondents consult at least one of these websites; 2% of respondents get more than a quarter of their news from these websites.

⁹Because respondents in the treatment group were administered an article to read and respondents in the control group were not, we adopted differential thresholds of 4 minutes for treatment group respondents and 3 minutes for control group respondents. Our results are robust to different thresholds, as discussed below.

Figure 3: Experimental Design



5 Do Americans “Question More”?

5.1 Estimating Equations

Our survey questions generally asked respondents to identify the extent to which they agree or disagree with an assertion. Therefore, our outcome variables take the form of ordered outcomes with ranked levels: a Likert scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” We employ a proportional odds logistic model. Our baseline estimating equation is

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta T_i + \gamma X_i + \epsilon \tag{1}$$

where i indexes respondent, T_i is respondent i ’s treatment status, and X_i is a vector of controls.

5.2 Results: What Opinions Are Unchanged

Many observers suggest that the Russian government’s outward facing propaganda aims to undermine public faith in democratic institutions. We find no evidence of this, as the results in Table 1 reveal. For ease of interpretation, we collapse our treatment conditions into disclosure and non-disclosure arms, which indicate whether respondents were or were not informed that RT is financed by the Russian government. The Online Appendix reports disaggregated results.

Exposure to RT has no effect on presidential approval ratings or beliefs about the trajectory of the American economy. Exposure to RT has no effect on Americans’ trust in government or their beliefs about whether the truth is difficult to discern. This finding is consistent with evidence that domestic political views are more calcified than foreign policy views. America’s 45th president may also be so polarizing that it is particularly difficult to change domestic political opinions at this point in American history.

Other observers suggest that RT aims to shape Americans’ views of Russia. We treat our results here with caution, as our treatment conditions – like RT itself – focus on coverage of America’s domestic and foreign policy, as well as America’s democratic allies. Still, from Table 1, we find no evidence that exposure to RT’s core content changes Americans’ views about Russia. It makes them no more favorably disposed towards Russia, nor less likely to view Russia as an adversary. Given how little of RT’s content focuses on Russia, this is unsurprising.

5.3 Results: What Americans Question

By contrast, exposure to RT has striking effects on Americans’ foreign policy views, as our theoretical framework suggests. These results appear in Table 2. To aid in interpretation, we reproduce these questions in Table 3.

From column 1, exposure to RT compels Americans to prefer a less engaged, less active foreign policy. This effect is substantively large. The proportional odds ratio is 0.42 for the nondisclosure

Table 1: Effect of RT on Domestic Policy Views and Russia Views

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Presidential Approval <i>Ordered Logistic</i> (1)	Economic Trajectory <i>Logistic</i> (2)	News Discernment <i>Ordered Logistic</i> (3)	Trust in Government <i>Ordered Logistic</i> (4)	Russia Favorability <i>Ordered Logistic</i> (5)	Russia Adversary <i>Ordered Logistic</i> (6)
Non-Disclosure	-0.178 (0.273)	0.068 (0.270)	-0.002 (0.189)	-0.135 (0.190)	-0.016 (0.199)	-0.096 (0.218)
Disclosure	-0.189 (0.274)	-0.135 (0.269)	-0.190 (0.190)	-0.038 (0.190)	0.073 (0.200)	-0.166 (0.218)
Age	0.010 (0.007)	0.013* (0.007)	0.010** (0.005)	0.001 (0.005)	-0.014*** (0.005)	0.011** (0.005)
Education	-0.063 (0.069)	-0.089 (0.069)	0.018 (0.048)	0.012 (0.047)	0.013 (0.048)	0.069 (0.052)
Income	-0.032 (0.054)	0.241*** (0.054)	0.031 (0.037)	0.061* (0.036)	-0.081** (0.038)	0.009 (0.041)
Gender (Male)	0.166 (0.177)	0.549*** (0.173)	-0.182 (0.123)	-0.008 (0.120)	-0.158 (0.126)	0.183 (0.135)
Partisanship	-1.185*** (0.073)	-0.640*** (0.057)	0.178*** (0.036)	-0.375*** (0.037)	-0.293*** (0.038)	0.255*** (0.039)
Low Quality News Share	4.923*** (1.532)	2.128 (1.539)	2.932*** (0.900)	-1.573** (0.774)	2.768*** (0.776)	-3.112*** (0.981)
Constant		1.816*** (0.504)				
Observations	693	743	890	901	894	859

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

treatment group and 0.68 for the disclosure treatment group. To interpret this more intuitively, the first panel of Figure 4 presents the predicted probability that treatment respondents will provide a given categorical answer. For simplicity, we collapse “Strongly agree,” “Agree,” and “Somewhat agree” into a single category; we also collapse “Strongly disagree,” “Disagree,” and “Somewhat disagree” into a single category. Americans generally agree that their government should be more active abroad: this predicted probability is just less than 0.9. Exposure to RT reduces this to 0.8. This effect is somewhat stronger – a reduction to 0.7 – when we explicitly disclose to respondents that RT is financed by the Russian government.

The results in column 2 suggest the same conclusion. We asked respondents whether “the United States [does] too much, too little, or the right amount in helping solve world problems.” The proportional odds ratio is 0.62 for the nondisclosure treatment group and 0.57 for the disclosure treatment group. The second panel of Figure 4 presents a similar set of predicted probabilities. We estimate that control group respondents believe the US “does too much” with probability 0.27. Exposure to RT increases this predicted probability to around 0.4 in both treatment groups.

Exposure to RT not only makes Americans favor a less active approach to world affairs. It also renders them less supportive of a cooperative foreign policy. From column 3, we asked respondents whether “the US should follow its own national interests” or “take into account the interests of its allies.” Americans are generally cooperative. Our median respondent – a 38 year old woman, who holds a Bachelors degree, earns between \$50,000 and \$75,000, and identifies as leaning Democrat – has a 74% probability of asserting that the US should take into account the interests of its allies. Exposure to RT decreases this probability to between 61% and 69%. The third panel of Figure 4 presents these predicted probabilities.

Why might disclosing RT’s financial relationship with the Russian government have no effect? There are two possibilities. First, Americans may already know that RT is financed by the Russian government, and so the baseline (non-disclosure) results reflect this. Alternatively, respondents in the disclosure treatments may not care. They may simply trust their ability to update their beliefs based on the media content before them. Although our survey design cannot distinguish between these possibilities, we regard this as an important direction for future research. This is strikingly consistent with growing evidence that disclosures about fake news often have no effect: in Facebook warnings (Pennycook, Cannon and Rand 2017), product advertising (Skurnik et al. 2005), and news retractions (Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Berinsky 2017).

5.4 Measuring a Coherent Belief Shift: Principal Components Analysis

These results suggest a coherent belief shift: away from leadership of the global order that America constructed following World War II and towards Sergey Lavrov’s “post-West world order,” in which America no longer oversees an international community that privileges human rights norms over national sovereignty. Exposure to RT, we find, disposes Americans to withdraw from a position of

Table 2: Effect of RT on Foreign Policy Views

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Active	Solve World Problems	Interests > Allies	Engagement Index
	<i>Ordered Logistic</i>	<i>Ordered Logistic</i>	<i>Logistic</i>	<i>OLS</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Non-Disclosure	-0.331* (0.190)	-0.477** (0.213)	0.215 (0.251)	-0.047** (0.023)
Disclosure	-0.548*** (0.192)	-0.571*** (0.213)	0.561** (0.248)	-0.064*** (0.023)
Age	0.020*** (0.005)	0.004 (0.005)	-0.019*** (0.006)	0.002*** (0.001)
Education	0.117** (0.047)	0.023 (0.052)	-0.111* (0.060)	0.006 (0.006)
Income	0.040 (0.036)	-0.046 (0.040)	0.046 (0.046)	0.006 (0.004)
Gender (male)	0.060 (0.121)	-0.200 (0.136)	0.242 (0.152)	-0.001 (0.015)
Partisanship	0.120*** (0.035)	0.322*** (0.040)	-0.443*** (0.047)	0.014*** (0.004)
Low Quality News Share	-2.125*** (0.818)	-0.409 (0.838)	2.141* (1.094)	-0.164* (0.093)
Constant			1.911*** (0.461)	0.504*** (0.042)
Observations	899	799	902	798

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

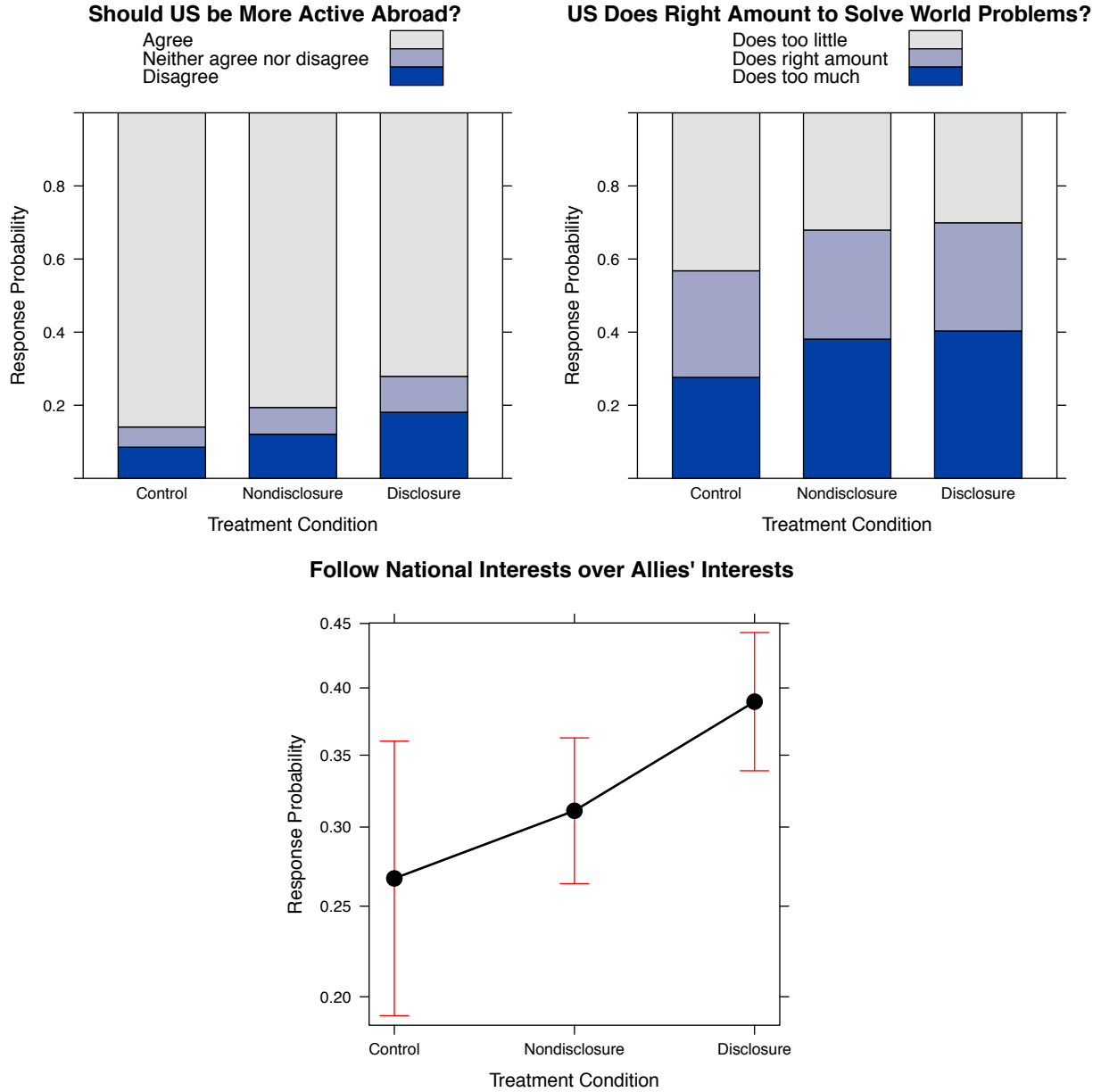


Figure 4: The effect of RT on global engagement. For simplicity, we collapse Strongly Agree, Agree, and Slightly Agree into a single Agree category. We do the same for the Disagree responses. We reproduce these figures in the Online Appendix disaggregated by response categories.

global leadership: to prefer a less active, less cooperative foreign policy.

Put differently, there appears to be an underlying coherence to the belief shift that RT generates. To identify and measure this underlying coherence, we use principal components analysis (PCA). Intuitively, for a set of variables, the first principal component represents the single line that accounts for the largest possible variance among them. This technique has been used to construct

Table 3: Core Foreign Policy Survey Questions

Label	Question	Possible Answers
Active	It’s best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs.	Strongly agree. Agree. Somewhat agree. Neither agree nor disagree. Somewhat disagree. Disagree. Strongly disagree.
Solve World Problems	In terms of helping solve world problems, does the United States do too much, too little, or the right amount in helping solve world problems?	Does too much. Does too little. Does right amount.
Interests > Allies	In world affairs, the US should follow its own national interests, OR the US should take into account the interests of its allies?	In world affairs, the US should follow its own national interests. In world affairs, the US should take into account the interests of its allies.

Note: These questions are drawn from Pew’s 2017 survey on “America’s Place in the World.”

underlying indices in a variety of settings. Baker (2015), for instance, uses it to construct an underlying index of racism from a set of survey questions. In our case, the first principal component yields an index that measures the extent to which Americans support a foreign policy of global leadership, based on their responses to our survey experiment.

To create this index, we first confirm that the three outcome variables we discussed above – *Active*, *Solve World Problems*, and *Interests > Allies* – are correlated. The correlation matrix appears in the Online Appendix. Each correlation coefficient is 0.38 or above. We then compute several additional diagnostic statistics to confirm the correlation: Cronbach’s α , Bartlett’s test of sphericity, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy. Again, we find evidence of moderate correlation, which indeed suggests an underlying dimension to these stated beliefs.¹⁰ To measure this underlying dimension, we extract the first principal component of the three outcome variables, which yields an index of the underlying belief that gave rise to the correlation among them. To facilitate interpretation, we rescale this measure along the $[0, 1]$ interval, where 1 indicates favoring a more globally engaged foreign policy and 0 indicates favoring a less active, less cooperative foreign policy. Finally, we reestimate equation (1), with the outcome variable given by this new index. Since it is continuous on the $[0, 1]$ interval, we use OLS.

The results appear in column 4 of Table 2. To interpret the substantive magnitude, we simulate the predicted value of the index for the median respondent: a 38 year old woman, who holds a Bachelors degree, earns between \$50,000 and \$75,000, and leans Democrat. This median respondent prefers a globally engaged, cooperative foreign policy, with a predicted index value of 0.65. Exposure to RT reduces this by about 10 percentage points, to 0.55, or roughly half a standard deviation. If this median respondent identifies as a Republican rather than a Democrat, her predicted index

¹⁰The Cronbach’s α value is 0.62. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy is 0.64. The Bartlett’s test of sphericity yields a χ^2 value of 325.7, indicating that the sample intercorrelation matrix did not come from a population in which the intercorrelation matrix is an identity matrix.

value would be 0.45. Our estimated RT effect is thus about half the difference between Democrats and Republicans.

5.5 Robustness Checks

The Online Appendix implements a series of robustness checks. First, we divide our sample into Democrats and Republicans, and then reestimate the equations above on these two separate samples. RT, we find, is as effective in reducing support for US engagement with the world among Democrats as among Republicans. Disclosure is irrelevant for both groups.

Second, we modify the cutoff for completion times. Above, we omitted respondents who completed the survey in less than 4 minutes in the treatment groups or in less than 3 minutes in the control group. These differential cutoff times reflect the possibility that, since the treatment groups read an RT article, it took them longer to complete the survey. We show that our results are robust to more restrictive completion time thresholds.

By casting America’s democratic allies as corrupt and America’s foreign policy as destructive, it is straightforward to imagine why RT’s coverage of America’s foreign policy and democratic allies compels Americans to favor a withdrawal from global leadership. Yet even RT’s coverage of US domestic politics compels respondents to favor a less internationalist foreign policy. Readers may wonder whether RT’s coverage of domestic politics causes Americans to look inwards: to be more concerned about domestic politics, and so prefer the US government to focus on domestic policy rather than foreign affairs. Although the null results in Section 5.2 suggest this domestic pathway is probably not salient, we employ causal mediation analysis to probe it further (Imai, Keele and Tingley 2010). The basic idea is that treatment effects can be decomposed into two components: a direct effect, which runs directly from the treatment, and a causal mediation effect, in which the treatment causes the outcome through some mediating pathway. Here, the causal mediator is Americans’ views about domestic politics. Again, we find no evidence that the effect of RT’s domestic coverage on Americans’ foreign policy views goes through the domestic anxiety channel. This suggests that RT’s domestic coverage affects Americans’ views on foreign policy through some other channel. Clarifying this channel is an important direction for future research.

6 Conclusion

RT may be “Russian propaganda,” as Nicholas Kristof put it, but we are less confident it will have no geopolitical consequences. The Russian government has acknowledged its efforts to foster a “post-West world order.” Exposure to RT, we find, makes Americans more comfortable with that.

Nearly 60% of all RT coverage focuses on three topics: criticism of America’s traditional allies, American foreign policy, and America’s domestic conditions. Exposure to RT makes US citizens roughly 15 percentage points less likely to support an active foreign policy, 20 percentage points

more likely to believe the US is doing too much to solve world problems, and 10 percentage points more likely to value national interests over the interests of allies. These effects obtain across parties and persist even when we disclose that RT is financed by the Russian government. This constitutes the first evidence that propaganda produced by a foreign adversary can shape public opinion in a target country. Contrary to much speculation, we find no evidence that RT shapes Americans' views on domestic policy or undermines trust in democratic institutions.

These findings represent an important first step in understanding how the world's autocrats employ outward facing propaganda to shape public opinion in the world's democracies. Of course, our survey experiment has limitations. Like many experiments, its external validity is uncertain; Americans do not consume RT in a lab. Our experimental approach does not measure how quickly consumers revert to their prior beliefs after exposure or whether endorsement by people within a respondent's social network conditions RT's persuasiveness. We are unable to identify the precise mechanism through which exposure to RT compels Americans to prefer withdrawing from a position of global leadership. We are also unable to probe the effects of repeated exposure to RT, which is potentially critical. During the 2016 US presidential election, Pennycook, Cannon and Rand (2017, 1865) find, fake news headlines on Facebook became more persuasive to readers with repeated exposure, "even when the stories are labeled as contested by fact checkers."¹¹

Moving to an observational setting is a vital next step. Our theoretical framework suggests critical directions for future research and several preliminary hypotheses. Which autocrats employ outward facing propaganda? Why do some autocrats employ outward facing propaganda to image launder, while others attempt to shape foreign citizens' views about their domestic conditions? How quickly do the effects of outward facing propaganda decay? Do the effects of outward facing propaganda increase with the frequency of exposure? Is there temporal variation in outward facing propaganda, either in its rate or content? Is this temporal variation driven by events in the sending country, the target country, or in some third country? Shifting to an observational setting will also let scholars study the role of networks. RT's distribution strategy partly relies on social media. Does RT content have stronger effects when disseminated by individuals within a social network?

Another avenue of research concerns citizens who consume far-right conspiratorial news, an area of growing scholarly interest (Uscinski, Klofstad and Atkinson 2016). Though few in number, these respondents hold markedly different views in our sample. They report higher presidential approval ratings, view Russia more favorably, and are more confident in their ability to discern truth in news. They report lower trust in government, are less likely to view Russia as an adversary, and favor a less engaged foreign policy. Russian bots appear to be particularly active in online echo chambers (Spangher et al. 2018), and partisan discourse disproportionately shapes broader political discourse (Druckman, Levendusky and McLain 2018). If foreign propaganda can shape the views of conspiratorial news consumers, who in turn shape the broader discourse, the scope for foreign

¹¹See also Thorson (2016).

propaganda to shape politics in democracies is more profound.

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