

Trust in congruent sources, absolutely: The moderating effects of ideological and epistemological beliefs on the relationship between perceived source congruency and news credibility

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Abstract

This study explores the moderating effects that ideological and epistemological beliefs have on the relationship between perceived news source congruency and ratings of news credibility. Findings from an online experiment with a US sample ($N=429$) show that news from a perceived ideologically congruent source is seen as being more credible than news from an ideologically incongruent source. Stronger ideological beliefs exacerbate this effect. Epistemological beliefs also moderate this effect. The more that individuals view the nature of knowledge and knowing in certain, black-and-white terms, the more likely they are to rate political news from an ideologically congruent source as credible. On the other hand, the more evaluative that individuals' views on the nature of knowledge and knowing are, the more likely they are to rate political news from a neutral source as credible. Findings raise normative concerns regarding the ready acceptance of agreeable information yet also point to a potential path toward mitigating this problem: fostering critical, evaluative thinking.

Introduction

Research has shown people are biased toward congenial information from congruent sources (e.g. Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998). People with stronger ideological beliefs show favorability toward information from sources with which they agree (Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017; Kim, 2016) and this tendency to process information – including news – in a biased fashion has been cited as a major ongoing problem, contributing to political polarization and the lack of agreement over basic facts (Flynn et al., 2017). The political biases of audiences also have impacts on news credibility, with politically-incongruent news outlets being seen as untrustworthy (Metzger, Hartsell, & Flanagin, 2020).

At present, these biased tendencies operate in a news environment that is increasingly fragmented along partisan lines and where interest-based content is targeted to different constituencies with divergent views (Baum & Gussin, 2007). One issue is that news sources

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pushing different points of view may be contributing to an increased “fragmentation of news epistemologies” (Waisbord, 2019, p. 14). Moreover, divergent audience epistemologies appear to be emerging, with different groups of people seeming to adopt alternative ways of knowing (Kreiss, 2017, 2018). In this context, the common standards by which the credibility of news accounts can be judged by the public have been thrown into doubt (Waisbord, 2018, 2019) and epistemological questions are drawn sharply into focus.

Against this backdrop, what this study explores are the roles that ideological and epistemological beliefs play in either mitigating or exacerbating biased assessments of information. Specifically, in the context of news, it looks at the moderating effects that individuals’ epistemological beliefs have on perceptions of news credibility from sources which are seen as ideologically congruent or incongruent. Epistemological beliefs are focused on because of their centrality to people’s interactions with information (Hofer, 2004) and because of the divergences in epistemic beliefs which may be emerging in our contemporary political context (Kreiss, 2017, 2018). Drawing on media psychology literature, as well as work on individual-level epistemological beliefs, it is posited that individual biases toward news from sources which are seen as ideologically congruent may be exacerbated by strong ideological and absolutist epistemological beliefs. On the other hand, more evaluative epistemological beliefs may mitigate such biases.

Findings from an online experiment with a US sample ($N=429$) show that news from a perceived ideologically congruent source is seen as being more credible than news from an incongruent source. Moreover, strength of ideological and epistemological beliefs moderate this effect, increasing the credibility of news from congruent and neutral sources. News from a perceived incongruent source remains unaffected, being rated as less credible overall. Results

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show how biases toward news from congruent sources can be compounded by individuals' ideological beliefs and their beliefs about knowledge and knowing.

Literature review

Biased processing, news sources, and credibility

The focus of this study is political news credibility and the effects that perceived source congruency and 1) strength of ideological beliefs, and 2) epistemological beliefs have on ratings of news credibility. Following Flanagin and Metzger (2008), credibility in this study is viewed as an overarching concept which is defined by several sub-dimensions, namely the trustworthiness and believability of information.

Regarding the effects of political attitudes on individuals' processing of information, research in media psychology has shown that individuals have biases toward attitude-consistent information and that they discount or argue against attitude-inconsistent information (e.g. Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998). Partisanship, ideological beliefs, and prior issue opinions tend to play key roles, influencing how political information is processed, with stronger effects seen among individuals with firmer beliefs or convictions (Flynn et al., 2017; Kim, 2016). Moreover, research on the hostile media effect has shown that individuals, particularly those with strong ideological beliefs, are prone to processing neutral political information in a biased fashion (Feldman, 2017; Oh, Park, and Wanta 2011). Here, partisans have been found to view ostensibly neutral/balanced news reports as biased against them (Kim, 2016; Reid, 2012).

Biased assessments of information can be exacerbated when source cues are attached (Flynn et al., 2017). In the context of news, many sources have ideological or partisan associations attached to them – for instance, Fox News as conservative or The Washington Post

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and CNN as liberal (Jamieson & Capella, 2010) – and these perceived political associations can bias how news stories are processed. Here, scholars have argued that people often look to identity-relevant cues when assessing news, paying attention to whether a source supports or goes against their partisan identity or ideological beliefs when considering the credibility of information (Baum & Gussin, 2007; Kreiss, 2018; Metzger et al., 2020).

Supporting this, Baum and Gussin (2007) found, for instance, that news outlet brand names operated as heuristic cues, creating the perception that otherwise neutral news content was biased. Individuals rated identical news content differently based on its source attribution, seeing CNN-attributed content as biased toward liberals and Fox-attributed content as biased toward conservatives. Similar studies have found that individuals view political and religious news as less (more) biased when attributed to a perceived congruent (or incongruent) source, particularly when they have stronger views (Ariyanto, Hornsey, & Gallois, 2007; Kim, 2016; Perloff, 2015), and that sports news attributed to a rival team's local paper is viewed as biased in favor of that team (Arpan & Raney, 2003). In the realm of credibility research, Metzger et al. (2020) have found that news from a perceived ideologically congruent source (e.g. a Republican seeing news from Fox) is viewed as being more credible than news from a perceived ideologically incongruent source (see also Kim, 2016).

Because credibility is a perceptual variable – “a subjective perception on the part of the information receiver” (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008, p. 8) – the key consideration here is how individuals perceive the source they are receiving information from; that is, whether they see the source as biased against their attitudes or beliefs, supportive, or neutral. Different perceptions likely have different outcomes when it comes to assessments of news credibility. Notably, bias is sometimes considered a dimension of the broader concept of credibility (e.g. Flanagin &

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Metzger, 2000), which encompasses a number of sub-dimensions (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008).

In this study, the perceived bias of a news source plays a key role in defining whether that source is perceived as ideologically congruent or not, so bias is excluded from the measure of credibility employed – a measure which instead hews closer to the key trustworthiness and believability components of the concept of credibility (see Measures and Flanagin & Metzger, 2008).

In light of the above research, it is posited that the credibility of political news will be impacted by the perceived congruency between an individual's ideological beliefs and the political leaning of a news source:

H1: Political news from a perceived congruent source will be seen as more credible than news from a perceived incongruent source.

Without news brand source cues, however, it is likely that individuals will engage in forms of biased assimilation and motivated reasoning, interpreting news in a way that is consistent with their attitudes, thereby resulting in higher ratings of credibility (Kunda, 1990; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Metzger et al., 2020). While hostile media research would typically predict partisans rating neutral news as biased against them, the dependent variable here is credibility, which is broader than bias and closer to measures used in biased assimilation studies where the overall quality and convincingness of evidence is being considered (e.g. Lord et al. 1979). As noted, the definition of credibility employed in this study speaks to the trustworthiness and believability of news. As such, it is hypothesized:

H2: Political news from a perceived neutral source will be seen as more credible than news from a perceived incongruent source, but not more credible than news from a perceived congruent source.

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Moreover, as noted above, given the role that ideological beliefs play in biasing the processing of information, it can also be expected that strength of ideological beliefs will moderate the relationship between perceived source congruency and news credibility (Feldman, 2017; Kim, 2016; Oh et al., 2011; Perloff, 2015; Reid, 2012):

H3: Strength of ideology will moderate the relationship between perceived source congruency and political news credibility, such that individuals with stronger ideological beliefs will view political news from a perceived congruent source as more credible and news from a perceived incongruent source as less credible.

The moderating role of epistemological beliefs

As detailed above, research has pointed to the role that political attitudes play in biasing individuals' assessments of information. But what this study explores, beyond the role of political attitudes, is the role that epistemological beliefs may play in either exacerbating or mitigating the effects of such biases when it comes to assessments of news credibility. Epistemological beliefs are the beliefs that individuals hold about the nature of valid knowledge and knowing (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Muis, Bendixen, & Haerle, 2006). They have been generally conceptualized as individuals' beliefs about "how knowing occurs, what counts as knowledge and where it resides, and how knowledge is constructed and evaluated" (Hofer, 2004, p. 1). They include beliefs about what true knowledge is and what it looks like, how valid knowledge is sourced and justified, as well as what the limits of knowledge are.

Attention is drawn to epistemological beliefs because, as Hofer (2004) argues, epistemology is at the heart of people's interactions with information, including assessments of credibility. Indeed, to assess the credibility of information is to raise epistemological questions about its construction, such as whether it is trustworthy, believable, reliable, expert, or

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authoritative (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008). Thus, the argument in this study is whether an individual thinks news is credible is likely to be influenced, at least in part, by their beliefs about the nature of valid knowledge and knowing. Specifically, individuals' epistemological beliefs may interact with the biased processing of politicized information (Kardash & Scholes, 1996).

While the journalism studies literature does deal with epistemological questions, it focuses largely on the epistemology of journalism itself. When it comes to the individual-level epistemological beliefs of audience members, research from other fields becomes useful to draw from – particularly educational psychology literature. In this field, the concern is with “how individuals come to know, the theories and beliefs they hold about knowing, and the manner in which such epistemological premises are a part of and an influence on the cognitive processes of thinking and reasoning” (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997, p. 88).

Several models exist in the educational psychology literature to classify different forms of individual-level epistemological beliefs (see Hofer, 2008). Many of these models have been reviewed by Hofer and Pintrich (1997) who argue that epistemological beliefs should be measured and classified along four dimensions: perspectives on 1) the certainty of knowledge (whether absolute truths exist or whether truth is more fluid and uncertain, evolving over time), 2) the simplicity of knowledge (whether knowledge consists of discrete and concrete facts or whether it is made up of interrelated, contextualized concepts), 3) the source(s) of knowledge (where knowledge comes from, such as from one's own perceptions or from external authorities), and 4) the justification(s) for knowledge (how claims to knowledge are justified, including what are viewed as proper procedures or processes for grounding truth claims). These dimensions, related to individuals' beliefs about the nature of knowledge (1 and 2) and the

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processes of knowing (3 and 4), cover common elements in epistemological theories (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997, pp. 118–199).

These elements of epistemological beliefs can be organized in a model which is generally structured in a linear fashion, proceeding from less ‘advanced’ to more ‘advanced’ epistemological thinking (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). At one end of the spectrum are individuals who are absolutist in their thinking (*absolute knowing*), seeing knowledge as certain, simple, external to oneself, and justified by reference to authority (Baxter Magolda, 1992; King & Kitchener, 1994; Perry, 1970). In the middle are individuals who think more relatively (*relative knowing*), seeing knowledge as uncertain, contextual, subjective, and idiosyncratic (King & Kitchener, 1994; Perry, 1970). And at the other end of the spectrum are individuals who think more evaluatively (*evaluative knowing*), seeing knowledge as contingent, complex, multiperspectival, and coming from an assessment of what is “most reasonable or probable according to the current evidence” (King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 15). Here, knowledge is “limited and situational” and its value is judged by using “critical inquiry” (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997, p. 101).

Importantly, these forms of epistemological beliefs have been used in studies touching on assessments of credibility. For example, Whitmire (2004, p. 109) found that college students with more advanced epistemological beliefs were in a better position to assess credibility than students who approached questions of knowing in more simplistic ways because they considered more credibility cues and were better able to recognize reliable sources. The former students were also more open to information which conflicted with their own views than the latter who rejected incongruent information. Porsch and Bromme (2011), meanwhile, found that priming more sophisticated epistemological beliefs aided in student assessments of the value of different

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sources for answering factual questions because such beliefs led to more critical and reasoned inquiry. Finally, Strømsø, Bråten, and Britt (2011, p. 197) found that students who viewed “personal judgments and interpretations to be main sources of knowledge” (e.g. relative knowers) trusted texts about climate change less because they viewed claims as relative and uncertain, placing more trust in their own views. Meanwhile, those who placed emphasis on the word of authorities (e.g. absolute knowers) trusted the texts more because of a tendency to accept external information at face value, while students with more advanced epistemological thinking – those who saw the necessity of critically evaluating information in context according to particular scientific rules and logics (e.g. evaluative knowers) – also tended to view the texts as more trustworthy because they could better assess the texts’ scientific quality.

These studies point to the relationship between epistemological beliefs and assessments of the credibility of information from different sources. The underlying mechanisms shaping assessments of information credibility are the level and type of epistemic thinking involved. For absolute knowers, there is a tendency to accept the word of authorities, hence credibility ratings can be higher because information is received with less questioning/at face value. For relative knowers, there can be a tendency to treat knowledge as uncertain and idiosyncratic, hence factual claims are seen as dubious and unreliable. And for evaluative knowers, there can be a tendency to engage in fair and reasoned evaluation, leading to higher credibility ratings for information that is in fact reliable and lower credibility ratings for information that is not reliable (Strømsø et al., 2011; Whitmire, 2004).

In the present study, it is posited that epistemological beliefs may have a moderating effect on the relationship between perceived source congruency and assessments of news credibility. For instance, research has tied belief in the certainty of knowledge to a higher

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likelihood of interpreting tentative information about a controversial issue as certain and in an attitude-consistent fashion (Kardash & Scholes, 1996). Individuals with absolutist beliefs may see news from a perceived congruent source as even *more* credible and see news from a perceived incongruent source as even *less* credible because of a desire for certainty (sticking with what you know) and discomfort with uncertainty (rejecting what you do not know) (Whitmire, 2004).

Moreover, research has found that individuals who have epistemological beliefs which place emphasis on personal intuition or which frame truth as a political construct are more likely to believe falsehoods and conspiracy theories (Garrett & Weeks, 2017), with these individuals seeing facts as relative and choosing to go with their own beliefs and instincts (Strømsø et al., 2011). Individuals with such subjective or relativistic beliefs may be less likely to find perceived neutral or incongruent news credible because they see it as coming from sources which further do not align with their personal beliefs.

And finally, individuals with more evaluative beliefs may view neutral or incongruent news as more credible because they are more open to critical thinking and reasoning, as well as open to conflicting views (Whitmire, 2004). In this vein, research has found that teaching media literacy skills (e.g. priming individuals for evaluative thinking) can, in some instances, improve perceptions of a neutral source (Vraga & Tully, 2015) and improve overall news credibility ratings (Vraga et al. 2012) because people are more open and thinking deeply about the news they are reading.

In light of this research, it is possible that epistemological beliefs may either mitigate or amplify the effects of perceived source congruency on ratings of news credibility. The following research question is asked:

RQ1: In what ways do epistemological beliefs moderate the relationship between perceived source congruency and political news credibility?

Method

Sample

Data for this study were collected in February 2020 using an experimental design embedded in an online survey. The survey company, Qualtrics, provided a sample of US adults ($N=429$) that was representative of the population by gender and education (research on epistemological beliefs tends to show differences by gender and education; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). The final sample represents those individuals who passed an attention check embedded in the survey.

The sample was 50.8% female (American Community Survey 2013-2017 [ACS 2013-2017] estimate: 50.8% female). Participants ranged from 18 to 84, with a median age of 49 ($M=47.97$, $SD=13.12$; ACS 2013-2017 estimate: 37.8 median) and 30.3% had a bachelor's degree or higher (1=*less than high school* to 6=*postgraduate or professional degree*; $M=3.35$ [*some college*], $SD=1.50$; ACS 2013-2017 estimate: 30.9% bachelor's degree or higher). Politically, 28% of participants identified as liberal or liberal-leaning, 39.6% identified as moderate, and 32.4% identified as conservative or conservative-leaning (1=*very liberal*, 4=*moderate*, 7=*very conservative*; $M=4.1$ [*moderate*], $SD=1.71$; Pew Research Center 2017 weighted estimates: 26% liberal, 36.4% moderate, 34.5% conservative).

Experimental design and procedure

The present study employed a single-factor (news brand: Fox News, CNN, no brand) between-subjects experimental design. In terms of experimental procedure, participants were

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first asked a set of qualifying demographic questions (age, gender, education). After this, participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions where they viewed a political news story attributed to different news outlets that would theoretically generate different credibility perceptions. News brand was manipulated by including logos at the top of stories identifying who produced it. Stories also included author tags indicating who wrote the story (e.g. “by Staff Reporter, Fox News”).

The story participants read was about President Donald Trump’s support for voter ID laws and included the perspectives of individuals who both supported and opposed such laws (see supplementary materials). The text of the story was a composite based on a collection of real news reports from different outlets and remained the same across conditions. The composite story was used because it was about a controversial political issue relevant to a large proportion of the American public during an election year (issue involvement or relevance has been shown to be important in these types of studies; e.g. Feldman, 2017; Kim, 2016) and because there have been arguments on both sides of the political divide for and against such laws (meaning a balanced story, absent of source cues, could be written). Following the approach prior research (Ariyanto et al., 2007; Arpan & Raney, 2003; Baum & Gussin, 2007; Metzger et al., 2020), the story was written to give a balanced presentation of liberal and conservative perspectives.

To check the balance of the article and perceptions of sources, prior to the experiment, the story, absent of any source cues (i.e. just the story text), was pre-tested for perceived neutrality using a separate sample of students from a large Midwestern university ($N=255$). Pre-test participants¹ were asked whether they thought the story leaned liberal/conservative and

¹ Pre-test participants were 62% independent or independent leaning Democrat/Republican and 66% moderate or moderate leaning liberal/conservative.

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whether they thought it favored Democrats/Republicans (1=*very liberal/strongly favors Democrats*, 4=*middle of the road/neutral*, 7=*very conservative/strongly favors Republicans*). The story was viewed as neutral/middle of the road in this pre-test (Party support: $M=4.12$, $SD=1.45$; Ideological support: $M=4.11$, $SD=1.30$). News sources were also pre-tested for their perceived bias on a scale of 0–100% where 0=*not biased* and 100=*completely biased*. Journalists were perceived as a little biased and Fox News/CNN as quite biased in this pre-test (journalists: $M=64.39$, $SD=23.48$; Fox News: $M=79.02$, $SD=26.07$; CNN: $M=77.15$, $SD=26.54$). Based on these pre-test results, it was determined that the news story was perceived as being neutral, alongside ‘journalists’, and that the news brands (Fox News/CNN) were not. Other research has found audiences view Fox News and CNN as biased toward conservatives and liberals, respectively (Knight Foundation, 2018). These baselines were necessary to establish so that experimental results could be linked to brand manipulations with more confidence (given that the story, absent of source cues, was viewed neutrally).

With the experimental participants proper, after reading the story, they were asked to rate its credibility. They were also asked about their own political ideology and were provided with a series of questions designed to measure their epistemological beliefs. Measures were also included to see how participants rated the biases of sources included in the study. Participants were asked whether they thought the sources were biased in favor of liberals (0=*strongly disagree* to 10=*strongly agree*), with Fox News being viewed as conservative-leaning, CNN as liberal-leaning, and journalists as center-liberal (Fox News: $M=4.23$, $SD=3.38$; CNN: $M=6.23$, $SD=3.04$; Journalists: $M=5.98$, $SD=2.87$). Ratings reflect expectations, confirming that Fox

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News and CNN are viewed as conservative- and liberal-leaning, respectively, while journalists are viewed in more moderate terms.²

A manipulation check asking participants to identify their randomly assigned source was included, with 62% of participants passing this check. Analyses were performed both with the full sample and without those individuals who did not correctly identify their randomly-assigned source. Results remain the same in both instances. The reported results are based on the full sample ($N=429$) because a more precise measure of manipulation is embedded in the perceived source congruency variable (see below) used in analyses. Specifically, participants were asked to rate the political leaning of the source they were assigned to and their response reflects their cognitive processing of the source.³

Measures

News story credibility. Drawing on prior literature and conceptualizations (e.g. Flanagin & Metzger, 2000, 2008), a measure of news story credibility was constructed by asking participants whether they thought the news story they read was believable, factual, trustworthy, reliable, and neutral (0=*strongly disagree* to 10=*strongly agree*). Items were averaged to create an overall measure of news story credibility (Cronbach's $\alpha=.91$, $M=6.05$, $SD=2.48$). Bias was not included as part of the measure of credibility because it formed part of the independent variable (perceived source congruency).

² See supplementary materials for additional notes on measures of attitudes toward journalists and how these were used in additional analyses.

³ Supplementary materials contain the results of analyses performed without those individuals who incorrectly identified their randomly-assigned, with results being consistent. They also contain analyses where individuals who incorrectly identified their randomly-assigned source are coded as having seen a neutral source – an approach which takes into consideration a possible *lack* of cognitive awareness of the source. This approach also yields consistent results.

Perceived source congruency. Following the approach taken in prior research (e.g. Edgerly, Mourão, Thorson, & Tham, 2020; Metzger et al., 2020) a variable for perceived source congruency was constructed by matching participants' ideological beliefs with their perception of the ideological bias of the news brand they saw. This approach is arguably more reliable than an 'assigned source congruency' approach where the researcher defines whether a participant saw an ideologically (in)congruent source – such as by automatically labelling conservatives reading Fox News as having seen a congruent source – because it takes actual participant perceptions into consideration (see Edgerly et al., 2020). It is possible that some individuals have differing views about the ideological leanings of particular news sources (some liberals, for instance, may view CNN as center-right) and, therefore, this approach is more sensitive to that possibility.

Participants were asked about their political views (1=*very liberal*, 4=*moderate*, 7=*very conservative*) and, as noted above, whether they thought Fox News/CNN were biased in favor of liberals (0=*strongly disagree* to 10=*strongly agree*). Again, focus was placed on perceptions of Fox News and CNN given that they are viewed as biased in conservative/liberal directions (Knight Foundation, 2018).

To construct the congruency variable, participants' responses to the question about their political views were first recoded into liberal (1-3), moderate (4), and conservative (5-7). Participant ideology was then compared to their perception of the news brand they saw. For example, if a liberal participant who saw a story from CNN said CNN favored liberals (responses 6-10), they were coded as congruent. Meanwhile, if a liberal participant who saw a story from Fox News said Fox News did not favor liberals (responses 0-5), they were coded as incongruent. The same logic was applied for conservatives. Moderates who saw a story from Fox News or

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CNN were coded as congruent if they saw the source as neutral (response 5). Otherwise, they were coded as incongruent. All participants who did not see a story from either Fox News or CNN (i.e. those in the journalist-only condition) were coded as having seen a neutral source (both because they viewed a neutral story without brand cues and because participants rated ‘journalists’ as a moderate source). This procedure result in 22% of participants being coded as having seen a congruent source, 33% as having seen a neutral source, and 45% as having seen an incongruent source.

Strength of ideology. Participants were asked to place themselves on a 7-point scale from very liberal to very conservative, with moderate as the midpoint. To create a strength of ideology variable, the scale was recoded (folded) such that participants identifying as very liberal/conservative were numbered 4 and moderates numbered 1 (1=*neutral/moderate beliefs* to 4=*strong beliefs*).

Epistemological beliefs. Drawing on theoretical and empirical literature on epistemological beliefs (Garrett & Weeks, 2017; Hofer, 2000; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Schommer, 1990; Schraw, Bendixen, & Dunkle, 2004), dimensions of epistemological beliefs were measured by asking participants a battery of 18 questions about their perspectives on the nature of knowledge and knowing. Items were designed such that they would measure three theoretical dimensions of epistemological beliefs: absolute knowing, relative knowing, and evaluative knowing (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; King & Kitchener, 1994). Sample items included “There are multiple truths in every situation” and “The truth is black and white.” Responses were all measured on a scale from 1=*strongly disagree* to 7=*strongly agree*.

An exploratory factor analysis (principal components analysis, varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization) identified three factors among the 18 items. Items which cross-loaded or

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which were not loaded strongly enough on a particular factor were trimmed and a second factor analysis (maximum likelihood, varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization) was run to observe the loading of items. This process resulted in the identification of the three theoretical dimensions of epistemological beliefs sought: absolute knowing, relative knowing, and evaluative knowing (see Table A in supplementary materials for items and loadings). Relevant items were combined and averaged to create measures of absolute knowing (3 items; Cronbach's $\alpha=.75$, $M=3.46$, $SD=1.39$), relative knowing (6 items; Cronbach's $\alpha=.81$, $M=3.25$, $SD=1.23$), and evaluative knowing (5 items; Cronbach's $\alpha=.77$, $M=4.25$, $SD=1.01$). Factor loadings, measure reliabilities and total sample variation explained are good when compared to other survey measures of epistemic beliefs (see Schraw et al., 2004).

Analysis and results

To test H1 and H2, a one-way ANOVA was run with perceived source congruency as the independent variable and news story credibility as the dependent. An analysis of variance showed that the effect of perceived source congruency on story credibility was significant, $F(2,426)=3.71$, $p=.025$, partial $\eta^2=.017$. Post hoc analyses (Tukey HSD) indicated that the credibility mean score for those seeing news from a congruent source ($M=6.50$, $SD=2.22$) was significantly different ($p=.030$) than the credibility mean score for those seeing news from an incongruent source ($M=5.72$, $SD=2.68$) but not significantly different from the credibility mean score for those seeing news from a neutral source ($M=6.22$, $SD=2.33$). The credibility of news

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from a neutral source was not significantly higher than the credibility of news from an incongruent source. Results, therefore, support H1 and partially support H2.⁴

To test whether strength of ideology moderates the relationship between perceived source congruency and political news credibility (H3), a hierarchical regression model was constructed with perceived source congruency variables (dummy coded) and strength of ideology entered in the first block and interaction terms entered as predictors in the second block. Results in Table 1 show that the interaction terms account for a significant increase in variance explained, $\Delta R^2 = .025$, $F(5, 423) = 3.79$, $p < .01$. Specifically, there are significant interactions between the effects of strength of ideology and both congruent ($B = .83$, $p < .01$) and neutral sources ($B = .52$, $p < .05$) on news credibility. These moderation effects are depicted in Figure 1: as strength of ideology increases, story credibility for individuals seeing congruent and neutral sources increases. On the other hand, as strength of ideology increases, story credibility decreases among participants seeing an incongruent source. Results support H3.⁵

Table 1. Effect of interaction between perceived source congruency and strength of ideology on story credibility.

	Block 1		Block 2	
	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	5.725***	.179	5.654***	.179
Congruent source ¹	.755*	.317	.621	.322
Neutral source ¹	.495	.274	.570*	.273
Strength of ideology (centered)	.052	.104	-.312*	.155
R ²	.018			
Ideology x congruent			.832**	.264
Ideology x neutral			.523*	.236
ΔR^2	.025**			
Total R ²	.043			

⁴ Results also hold when those incorrectly identifying their randomly-assigned source are removed from analyses (see supplementary materials).

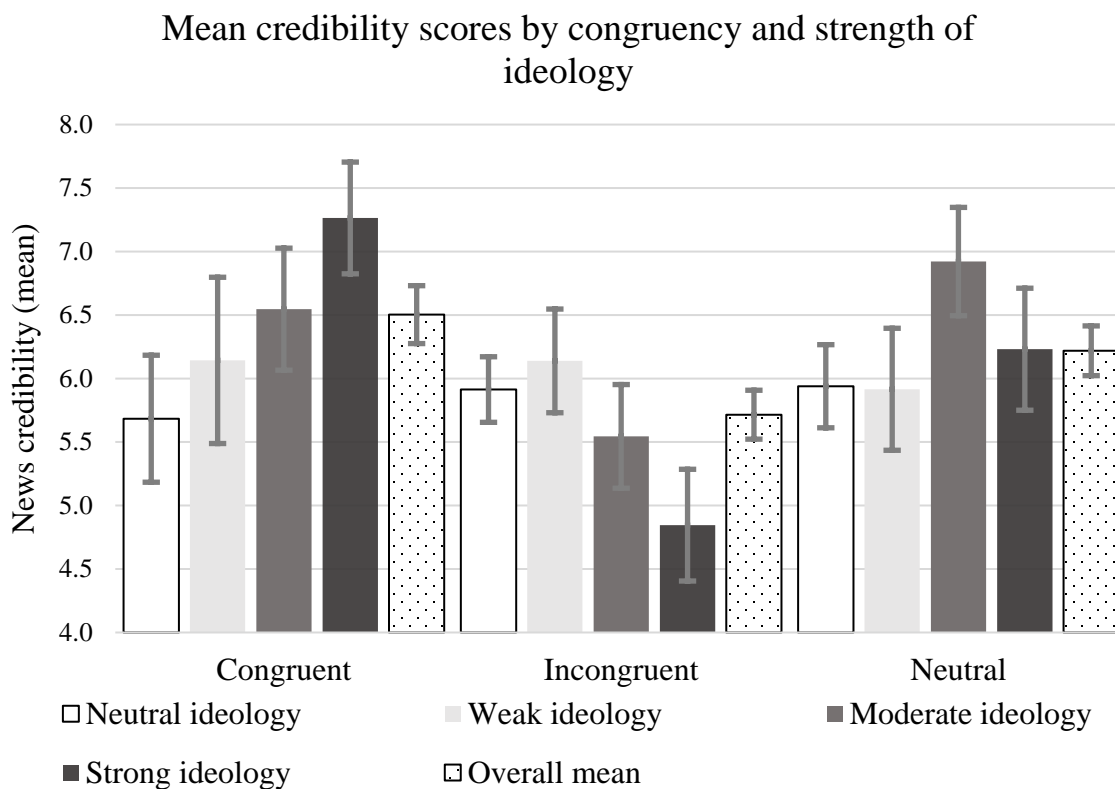
⁵ Results also hold for the ideology x congruent interaction when those incorrectly identifying their randomly-assigned source are removed from analyses (see supplementary materials).

N= 429

*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001

¹reference category is 'incongruent source'

Unstandardized coefficients. See supplementary materials for additional notes.

Figure 1. Interaction between perceived source congruency and strength of ideology.

Overall group means included for comparison. Vertical lines indicate standard errors.

Regarding RQ1, to explore whether and in what ways epistemological beliefs moderate the relationship between source congruency and news credibility, three hierarchical regression models were constructed with perceived source congruency variables (dummy coded) and epistemological beliefs entered in the first block and interaction terms entered as predictors in the second block. First, results in Table 2 show significant interactions between the effects of

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absolutist epistemological beliefs and perceived source congruency on news credibility. The interaction terms account for a significant increase in variance explained, $\Delta R^2=.020$, $F(5, 423)=5.45$, $p<.05$. Specifically, there are significant interactions between the effects of absolutist beliefs and both congruent ($B=.52$, $p<.05$) and neutral sources ($B=.51$, $p<.01$) on news credibility. These moderation effects are depicted in Figure 2: as absolutist beliefs increase, story credibility for individuals seeing news from congruent and neutral sources increases. On the other hand, as absolutist beliefs increase, story credibility does not increase among participants seeing an incongruent source. Thus, the moderating effect of absolutist epistemological beliefs is such that they boost the credibility of news from congruent and neutral sources.⁶

Table 2. Effect of interaction between perceived source congruency and absolutist epistemological beliefs on story credibility.

	Block 1		Block 2	
	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	5.757***	.176	5.713***	.175
Congruent source ¹	.676*	.308	.662*	.308
Neutral source ¹	.452	.271	.489	.269
Absolute knowing (centered)	.275**	.085	-.016	.128
ΔR^2	.041**			
Absolute x congruent			.516*	.221
Absolute x neutral			.510**	.193
ΔR^2	.020*			
Total R^2	.061			
N=	429			

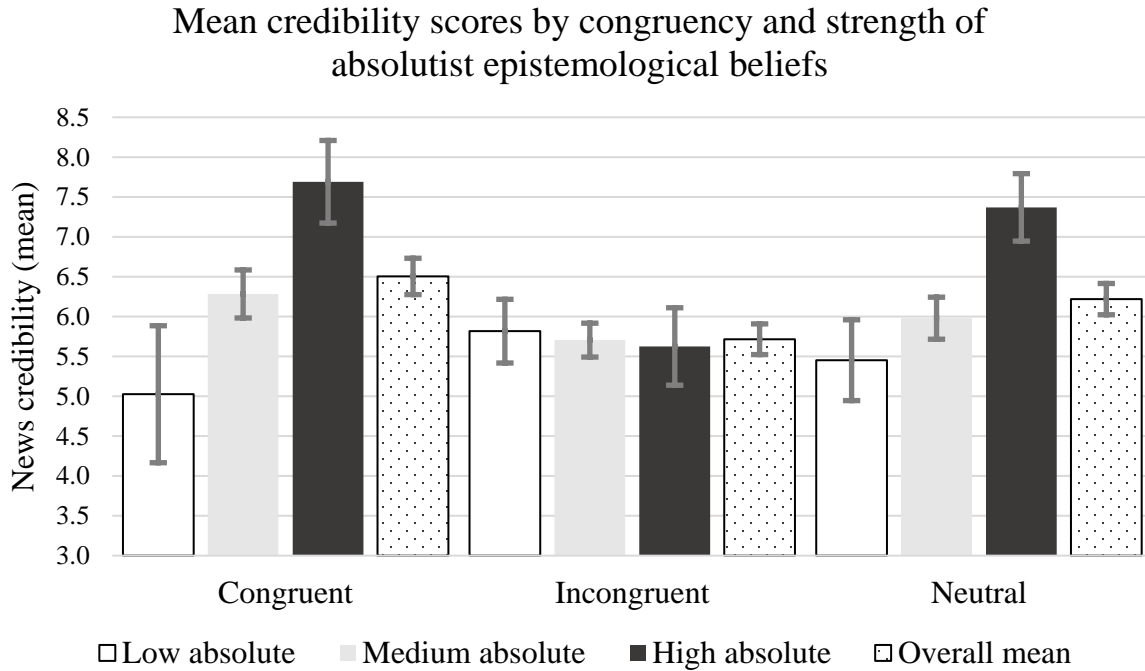
* $p<.05$. ** $p<.01$. *** $p<.001$

¹reference category is 'incongruent source'

Unstandardized coefficients. See supplementary materials for additional notes.

⁶ Results also hold when those incorrectly identifying their randomly-assigned source are removed from analyses (see supplementary materials).

Figure 2. Interaction between perceived source congruency and absolutist epistemological beliefs.



Overall group means included for comparison. Vertical lines indicate standard errors. Low, medium, and high absolutist beliefs were determined by coding those greater than 1 standard deviation above the mean ($M3.46+SD1.39$) as high and coding those less than 1 standard deviation below the mean ($M3.46-SD1.39$) as low.

Second, no significant interactions were found between the effects of relative epistemological beliefs and perceived source congruency on news credibility, $\Delta R^2=.001$, $F(5, 423)=3.64$, $p=.816$. However, thirdly, results in Table 3 show a statistically significant interaction between the effects of evaluative epistemological beliefs and perceived source congruency on news credibility. The interaction terms account for a significant increase in variance explained, $\Delta R^2=.025$, $F(5, 423)=5.96$, $p<.01$. Specifically, there is a significant interaction between the effects of evaluative beliefs and exposure to a neutral source on news credibility ($B=.85$, $p<.01$). This moderation effect is depicted in Figure 3: as evaluative beliefs

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increase in strength, story credibility increases for individuals seeing a neutral source. Moreover, there is some evidence that as evaluative beliefs increase, story credibility increases among participants seeing a congruent source (while there are no effects among participants seeing an incongruent source). Overall, the moderating effect of evaluative epistemological beliefs is such that they boost the credibility of news from a neutral source (with some evidence also for news from a congruent source). In other words, results indicate that when news brand source cues are absent, individuals with more evaluative epistemological beliefs see political news as more credible.⁷

Table 3. Effect of interaction between perceived source congruency and evaluative epistemological beliefs on story credibility.

	Block 1		Block 2	
	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	5.741***	.176	5.713***	.174
Congruent source ¹	.754*	.306	.782*	.303
Neutral source ¹	.447	.271	.434	.268
Evaluative knowing (centered)	.351**	.108	-.031	.167
ΔR^2	.041***			
Evaluative x congruent			.427	.261
Evaluative x neutral			.850**	.254
ΔR^2	.025**			
Total R^2	.066			
N=	429			

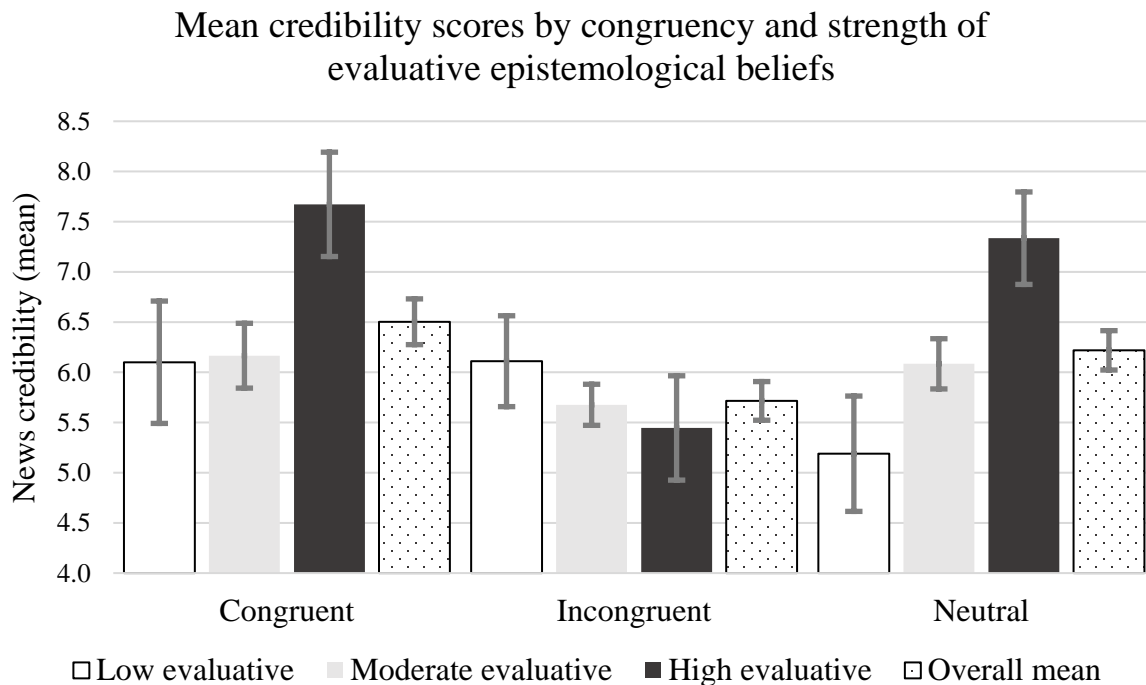
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

¹ reference category is 'incongruent source'

Unstandardized coefficients. See supplementary materials for additional analytical notes.

⁷ Results also hold when those incorrectly identifying their randomly-assigned source are removed from analyses (see supplementary materials). Moreover, supplementary materials contain a hierarchical regression models where individuals' epistemological beliefs control for one another.

Figure 3. Interaction between perceived source congruency and evaluative epistemological beliefs.



Overall group means included for comparison. Vertical lines indicate standard errors. Low, medium, and high evaluative beliefs were determined by coding those greater than 1 standard deviation above the mean ($M4.25+SD1.10$) as high and coding those less than 1 standard deviation below the mean ($M4.25-SD1.10$) as low.

As part of additional analyses, given the significant interactions found between strength of ideology, absolutist epistemological beliefs, and source congruency, a three-way interaction was tested. A hierarchical regression model was constructed with source congruency variables (dummy coded), strength of ideology, and absolutist epistemological beliefs entered in the first block and interaction terms entered as predictors in the second block (see supplementary materials, Table C). The interaction terms account for a significant increase in variance explained, $\Delta R^2=.052$, $F(11, 417)=3.86$, $p<.001$. Specifically, there is a significant three-way interaction between the effects of strength of ideology, absolutist beliefs, and perceived

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congruent source on news credibility ($B=.46, p<.05$). The results of this analysis, however, did not hold when individuals who incorrectly identified their randomly-assigned source were excluded. Supplementary materials contain both sets of analyses (Tables C and H).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the effect of perceived source congruency on political news credibility, as well as the moderating effects of ideological and epistemological beliefs. Findings point to the important role that source congruency plays in increasing political news credibility: when individuals see neutral political content from a news brand they view as congruent with their ideological beliefs, this content is rated as more credible than content from an ideologically incongruent source (which is viewed as less credible). This finding is consistent with prior research (Kim, 2016; Metzger et al., 2020), again showing that individuals downplay information from sources they perceive as going against their attitudes or beliefs, instead preferring information from sources with which they agree.

Consistent with this research (Ariyanto et al., 2007; Kim, 2016; Oh et al., 2011; Perloff, 2015) is also the moderating effect of strength of ideology: the stronger an individual's liberal/conservative political beliefs, the higher they rate the credibility of neutral political news from an ideologically congruent source and the lower they rate the credibility of political news from an ideologically incongruent source. Interestingly, strength of ideology also moderates the effect of a neutral source on news credibility: individuals with stronger ideological beliefs view political news from a neutral source (i.e. absent any news brand source cues) as more credible. This finding is in line with Metzger et al. (2020) and is consistent with research on selective attention/processing and biased assimilation. In that work, absent source cues, partisan

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individuals tend to selectively pay attention to and process arguments which align with their beliefs or point of view, interpreting information as being consistent with those views (Lord et al., 1979), resulting in higher ratings of credibility.

Beyond ideological beliefs, what this study specifically adds is insight into the role that epistemological beliefs play in increasing perceptions of political news credibility. In particular, absolutist epistemological beliefs moderate the relationship between source congruency and political news credibility: individuals who have stronger absolutist beliefs rate news from both neutral and congruent sources as more credible. The reason why absolutist epistemological beliefs serve to amplify credibility may be that these beliefs are characterized by certain, black-and-white thinking. Individuals with such beliefs may be more likely to accept information at face value.

When reading news from an ideologically congruent source, or one without any news brand attached, individuals may be predisposed toward belief since the source cues provided pose no threat to attitudes or beliefs (Sherman & Cohen, 2002). In such instances, a lack of threat may mean pre-existing attitudes are able to interact with tendencies toward the acceptance of information at face value. In other words, since individuals already have a bias toward information from congruent sources (Kim, 2016; Metzger et al., 2020), absolutist beliefs only work to amplify this bias: if an ideological individual thinks in black-and-white terms, believing that their attitudes and beliefs are correct (Perloff, 2015), and they see information from an agreeable source, then having epistemological beliefs which are biased toward certainty and absolute right/wrong answers means the effect of congruency will only be compounded.

Moreover, prior research has observed that belief in the certainty of knowledge claims is related to a higher likelihood of interpreting inconclusive information about a controversial issue

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in a biased, attitude-consistent fashion. Kardash and Scholes (1996) found evidence of selective attention to attitude-consistent information among individuals with more absolutist beliefs, resulting in interpretations of evidence which were consistent with individuals' tendency to favor certain answers. In the present study, participants were presented with a news story which contained arguments both for and against voter ID laws. When the source of this news was ideologically neutral or congruent, participants with stronger absolutist beliefs rated it as more credible, suggesting a similar form of biased processing: a bias toward supportive information, viewed in certain terms. Without measuring participants' prior issue opinions or views on the relative weight of pro- and counter-arguments, however, it is not possible to know whether individuals with more absolutist beliefs were indeed engaging in this form of biased processing of arguments. Future research should explore this possibility.

Adding to these findings, there is evidence that both strength of ideology and absolutist beliefs together moderate the relationship between source congruency and news credibility. Stronger ideological and absolutist beliefs together have a magnifying impact on the relationship between seeing political news from a congruent source and perceptions of political news credibility. Strong ideological beliefs and absolutist thinking may be related in form, for example with dogmatism. Dogmatic individuals think in black-and-white terms and place credence in the word of elites (Rokeach, 1954). Moreover, they have a strong preference for congenial information and reject uncongenial information – hence a three-way relationship between strength of ideological beliefs, absolutist thinking, and perceived source congruency. Given that

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these ways of thinking and knowing are related, when combined they may serve to amplify the effects of cognitive biases (see also Bronstein et al., 2019).⁸

Indeed, this study illustrates how, when ideological and absolutist beliefs interact with the reception of political news from an ideologically congruent source, the effect on perceived credibility is significant. The implications of this, from a normative perspective, may be concerning, especially in a polarized US political landscape where a wide range of ideologically agreeable news – including fake news – is available. If dogmatic, absolute believers see content, true or untrue, from an agreeable source, its credulity may only be amplified. Future research should explore the relationship between absolutist epistemological beliefs and perceptions of politically-agreeable yet false information. Indeed, these findings are consistent with those indicating that dogmatic thinkers and individuals with a tendency to accept weak claims at face value are more likely to believe false information because of a lack of analytical thinking (Bronstein et al., 2019; Pennycook & Rand, 2020).

Finally, it was found that evaluative epistemological beliefs were effective in increasing the credibility of political news when source cues were absent. While it may have been expected that evaluative beliefs would mitigate biases toward/against political news from congruent/incongruent sources (given that evaluative beliefs represent a more critical thinking style), this was not the case. Instead, it may be that evaluative beliefs operate most effectively when source cues are not influencing perceptions – that is, in instances where individuals are prompted to consider the information itself, rather than the information in tandem with news brand source cues. This is another avenue for future research.

⁸ Strength of ideology and absolutist epistemological beliefs were significantly correlated in this study, $r(427) = .125, p < .01$. However, this correlation did not pose any collinearity issues in models.

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Since evaluative epistemological beliefs are characterized as more ‘advanced’ (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997), individuals with such beliefs may be more likely to carefully consider the credulity of information by weighing perspectives and evaluating arguments (engaging in systematic rather than heuristic processing; Chen & Chaiken, 1999). Results here point to the benefit of teaching critical thinking. Fostering evaluative thinking through teaching critical media literacy may be one way to mitigate cognitive biases and improve ratings of news credibility (Vraga et al. 2012; Vraga & Tully, 2015) and combat belief in misinformation (Garrett & Weeks, 2017). Indeed, the findings track with those indicating that more deliberative and analytical thinking helps individuals to identify credible information and overcome their partisan biases (Bago, Rand, & Pennycook, 2020; Pennycook & Rand, 2019, 2020; Tappin, Pennycook, & Rank, 2020). Fostering evaluative epistemological beliefs may also help to combat hostile media perceptions (Pennycook & Rand, 2020), though more research would be needed to establish this.

Future research may consider epistemological beliefs in the context of dual processing models (e.g. Chen & Chaiken, 1999). Absolutist beliefs, for instance, may represent a more heuristic form of thinking, while evaluative beliefs may represent a more systematic form of thinking (see also Pennycook & Rand, 2019, 2020). Moreover, epistemological beliefs can be domain-specific (Hofer, 2000), so epistemic beliefs regarding journalism specifically should be considered in relation to news credibility. Reactions to different news topics (representing different topical domains) should also be explored, given that they may be judged on different terms.

There are several limitations to this study to be noted. First, the measures of epistemological beliefs used were exploratory and may not have captured the full range or

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distinctiveness of individuals' beliefs. However, such measures were based on existing survey measures of epistemic beliefs. Second, the measure of perceived source congruency could have been better constructed to account for the views of moderates.

Third, while the news article employed in this study was a composite of different articles, thereby not existing prior to the experiment, extant exposure to the idea of Trump's support for voter ID laws was not controlled for, meaning participants may have brought prior attitudes/feelings to the experiment. However, prior attitudes/feelings are theoretically distributed across conditions via random assignment. Moreover, it is possible that the topic of the story itself may have influenced views of its credibility, particularly given the lack of evidence for widespread voter fraud. However, this concern is mitigated by the fact that there were divergent views of the story's credibility based on its source. In other words, study participants were not all equally dismissive of the story's credibility because of its topic. Instead, they were influenced by the source of the story and its congruency with their political attitudes. Despite this, the results of this study are somewhat limited to the issue presented and the sources used – though the underlying theoretical processes are more generalizable (Coleman, 2019). Future studies should explore effects with combinations of different sources and story topics.

Fourth, the strength of the manipulation employed could have been greater. A number of participants failed to correctly identify the news source they were randomly assigned, a failure which may have resulted from the simplicity of the manipulation. And fifth, this study drew on a sample of Americans only. Future studies should explore relationships in other national contexts.

Despite these limitations, what this study finds is that the nature of individuals' epistemological beliefs may have important implications when it comes to assessments of news credibility. The more that individuals view the nature of knowledge and knowing in certain,

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black-and-white terms, the more likely they are to rate political news from an ideologically congruent source as credible. This raises normative concerns with regard to political polarization and the potential acceptance of politically-agreeable yet false, misleading, or unreliable information. On the other hand, the more evaluative that individuals' views on the nature of knowledge and knowing are, the more likely they are to rate political news from a neutral source as credible. This points to a potential benefit of teaching individuals to more critically evaluate information and consider the nature of the claims made.

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