
Motivated Misperception? Party, Education, Partisan News, and Belief in “Death Panels”

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Abstract

This study drew on the literature in motivated reasoning and 2009 Pew survey data to examine the roles of partisanship, education, news exposure, and their interactions in the misperception that health care reform would create “death panels.” Radio news exposure encouraged the misperception only among Republicans, while newspaper exposure discouraged it, especially among non-Republicans. But rather than polarize perceptions along partisan lines as predicted, Fox News exposure contributed to misperception mainstreaming. Finally, this study identified a complex role for education in both inhibiting misperceptions (as a main effect) and promoting them (as an interaction with Fox News exposure).

Keywords

motivated reasoning, political knowledge, misperception, Fox News

On August 7, 2009, former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin introduced the phrase “death panel” into American political discourse by posting a note on Facebook that read, in part,

The America I know and love is not one in which my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama’s “death panel” so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a subjective judgment of their “level of

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productivity in society,” whether they are worthy of health care. Such a system is downright evil.¹

The claim that President Barack Obama’s proposed health care reform would create death panels apparently arose out of a provision that would reimburse doctors for counseling Medicare patients on end-of-life decisions. Some conservatives like Betsy McCaughey had been arguing for months that the provision would push seniors toward euthanasia, but Palin’s post, with its compelling frame and vivid depiction of liberal government overreach, put these claims on the front page. Palin’s death panel claim was debunked by the mainstream press and policy experts across the political spectrum.² PolitiFact later named it their “Lie of the Year,” and FactCheck.org listed it among their “Whoppers of the Year.”³ But some Republicans and conservative pundits took up the charge, notably Senator Charles Grassley, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh, and then Fox News hosts Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity. The provision reimbursing end-of-life counseling was removed from the bill, but the death panel misperception remained. A Pew survey released August 20, 2009, found that 86% of Americans had heard of the death panel claims, and of those who had, 30% believed them.⁴ This misperception, the report pointed out, was more pronounced among Republicans (of whom 47% believed it) and regular viewers of Fox News (45%). The latter results are not surprising in either case. Members of one party are prone to misperceptions of the other party because party-serving misperceptions serve their directional processing goals,⁵ and Lodge and Taber contend directional goals in politics trump accuracy goals for most people most of the time.⁶ Motivated reasoning encompasses selective exposure to congenial information, as well as biased processing of the information one does encounter.⁷ The trend toward “niche news” means that it has become easier for partisans to find news that suits their predispositions.⁸ Fox News, which has a track record of contributing to partisan misperceptions,⁹ was an innovator in carving out a partisan niche audience.¹⁰

This study examines the roles of partisanship and news exposure (both traditional and partisan) in the death panel misperception, particularly in light of evidence that partisanship and news exposure can interact to polarize attitudes and beliefs.¹¹ This study also investigates the potentially conflicting roles of education in this process. Political knowledge and education should help prevent misperceptions, but they are double-edged swords. Knowledgeable partisans engage in more selective exposure, and higher levels of knowledge may enable partisans and consumers of partisan news to better defend mistaken beliefs.¹²

Motivated Reasoning

Dual-process models of persuasion, such as the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) and the heuristic-systematic model (HSM), suggest a continuum of message processing from peripheral or heuristic processing, which attends mostly to heuristic cues in the message, to central or systematic processing, which focuses and elaborates on the

message's arguments.¹³ Because the latter mode is more effortful and because humans are assumed to be cognitive misers, central/systematic processing requires both ability (knowledge, lack of distraction) and motivation (involvement). However, motivation to process can take different forms. These models assume that the desire to hold accurate attitudes is the primary processing motive, but both the revised ELM and the HSM recognize that there may be directional goals in processing, such as ego defense or impression management.¹⁴ Most relevant to the current discussion is ego defense, which would include preserving or enhancing one's self-esteem or defending attitudes that are central to the self-concept (one's idea of one's self), while impression management is about attempting to present a favorable image of one's self to others.

Processing with an end goal in mind or to defend attitudes or beliefs that are closely related with one's self-concept is called motivated reasoning or motivated (or hot) cognition.¹⁵ Contrary to the assumptions of the ELM and HSM, the literature on motivated reasoning in political contexts suggests that "most people, most of the time act as partisan reasoners."¹⁶ In Lodge and Taber's typology, partisan reasoners have strong directional goals and weak accuracy goals as they search and process information.¹⁷ They prefer information that is consistent with their existing beliefs and attitudes,¹⁸ and they engage in biased processing of the information they encounter, countering information that is not congenial to their predispositions.¹⁹ Let us examine these two mechanisms of motivated reasoning in more detail.

Selective exposure. Since the concept of selective exposure was introduced,²⁰ its robustness and even existence have been debated.²¹ A recent meta-analysis suggests people have a moderate preference for congenial information.²² The analysis examined several moderators and found that six of the seven defensive motivation moderators were significant, including commitment to one's predisposition and the relevance of the topic to one's enduring values. This is important in light of the fact that selective exposure research has included a wide variety of topics, many of which were not politically relevant.²³

Selective exposure has proven to be quite robust in a political context. In her aptly titled book, *Niche News*, Stroud demonstrates that when audiences have a choice, they tend to seek out news sources that are perceived as matching their political predispositions.²⁴ For instance, conservatives and Republicans are three times as likely as liberals and Democrats to watch Fox News, while liberals and Democrats are twice as likely as conservatives and Republicans to watch MSNBC or CNN. The disparity is even more pronounced online (a medium with lots of choice) for liberal and conservative websites. Other recent work on political selective exposure bears this out, including a survey in which liberals were less likely to watch Fox News and more likely to watch CNN²⁵ and a survey experiment where identical stories that varied only in their branding nevertheless attracted partisan audiences.²⁶

Biased processing. There is ample evidence that partisanship contributes to biased processing of information. Motivated reasoners may give relatively little scrutiny to messages that are consonant with their existing attitudes, but they may expend considerable cognitive resources to marshal counterarguments against messages that run

counter to their attitudes. In studies where people are confronted with both congruent and counterattitudinal information about salient political issues, they view the congruent material as being of higher quality than the discrepant material, and they counter-argue the discrepant information to such an extent that their original attitudes or beliefs are strengthened.²⁷ They may dismiss noncongenial information as biased, as in the hostile media phenomenon, in which partisans on both sides of a divide may look at the same media message and both perceive media bias against themselves, but those with no affiliation perceive no bias at all.²⁸

Specifically regarding political misperceptions, researchers have consistently found a role for political values,²⁹ especially party identification.³⁰ For instance, in 1988 half of strong Democrats said inflation had gotten worse since 1980, when Republican Ronald Reagan was elected, even though the inflation rate had decreased from 13.5% to 4.1%. In 2000, Republicans, on average, believed that the crime rate had increased since 1992, during Democrat Bill Clinton's tenure, when in fact it had decreased by 27%.³¹ Nyhan noted that while Republicans were seven times more likely than Democrats to believe Obama was not born in the United States, Democrats were five times more likely than Republicans to believe the federal government (then headed by the Bush administration) was involved in a conspiracy that allowed the September 11 attacks to happen.³² Republicans were more likely to hold misperceptions of Iraq that favored the Bush administration.³³ In the 2010 election, Republicans were especially likely to incorrectly believe that income taxes had gone up under Obama and that the Affordable Care Act was projected to increase the deficit.³⁴ And Nyhan found Republicans were more likely to believe in death panels.³⁵ A similar finding is expected here.

H1: Party identification will be related to death panel misperception, such that the misperception is more likely for Republicans.

Partisan and Traditional News

What Iyengar and Hahn called "the revival of selective exposure"³⁶ reflects a news media environment that seems tailor-made for partisan selection, given the emergence of the Internet as a news medium and a trend in which "cable news networks and programs have increasingly defined themselves in relation to particular political perspectives."³⁷ Mullainathan and Shleifer argued that if we assume an audience that is politically polarized and that prefers news that confirms its beliefs, greater competition should lead profit-maximizing news organizations to segment the market by slanting the news in different directions.³⁸ This appears to be what has happened in cable news. News Corp's creation of Fox News filled an underserved market niche—conservatives who consider the mainstream media to have a liberal bias.³⁹ Apparently seeking a similar niche, MSNBC's more recent shift to the left coincided with a surge in its own ratings.⁴⁰ Journalism review articles have discussed the partisanship on display on Fox News on the right and MSNBC on the left.⁴¹

Academic content analyses generally have found that Fox News was more supportive of the Bush administration and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan than CNN or the broadcast networks.⁴² Fox News was more dismissive of climate change than CNN and MSNBC, and it was the only channel on which guests who doubted climate change outnumbered those who did not.⁴³ In domestic politics, Fox News's website was more likely to feature news embarrassing to Democrats than news embarrassing to Republicans, and its coverage of the 2004 debates and national party conventions was more critical of John Kerry than of Bush and was less evenhanded than CNN's coverage.⁴⁴ A counterpoint to these findings came from a study that looked at news attention rather than tone, arguing that content analyses that measure tone may reflect the observer's political leanings rather than that of the content. This study concluded that Fox News favored Kerry over Bush in 2004 more than any other cable news channel or broadcast network.⁴⁵

So while content analyses are important, perhaps more telling is evidence of effects. Surveys demonstrate significant pro-Republican effects on voting behavior⁴⁶ and on change in attitudes toward candidates from exposure to Fox News.⁴⁷ The latter study found no effects from exposure to CNN or MSNBC. Similarly, an experiment found that while CNN commentary had little effect on who its viewers thought won a 2004 presidential debate, the Fox News commentary had a significant effect on those who saw it, changing a thirty-point postdebate margin for Kerry into a four-point margin for Bush.⁴⁸

More relevant to the current research is evidence that Fox News also has been identified as contributing to political misperceptions promoted by conservatives. Those who primarily watched Fox News were twice as likely as those relying on other news sources to hold at least one misperception about the war in Iraq, such as that Saddam Hussein was positively and closely linked to al-Qaeda and that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq.⁴⁹ Specifically regarding death panels, Nyhan concluded that Fox News exposure was positively related to misperceptions.⁵⁰ A similar finding is expected here.

H2: Those who regularly view Fox News will be more likely to believe the death panel misperception than those who do not.

RQ1: Will regular use of other news sources affect death panel misperception?

The Interaction of Partisanship and News Exposure

The motivated reasoning literature demonstrates that partisans from two sides who are exposed to both congenial and uncongenial information end up further apart than when they began.⁵¹ That is with evenhanded information. Since partisans tend to seek congenial information *and* engage in biased processing, an interaction between partisanship and exposure to news that results in polarization would be consistent with the motivated reasoning literature. Kull and colleagues found that among those with the lowest levels of news exposure, Bush supporters were twice as likely as supporters of

a Democrat to hold misperceptions about the Iraq War. But among those with the highest levels of news exposure, Bush supporters were *five times* as likely to hold misperceptions as supporters of a Democrat.⁵²

For partisan news sources, the motivated reasoning literature would again predict an interaction, although this would be based exclusively on biased processing and dismissing incongruent information.⁵³ The empirical findings are not as clear here. Certainly it seems that effects of partisanship and congenial news exposure compound, such that partisans who use congenial sources diverge the most in their beliefs.⁵⁴ But it is not clear that they interact. There appears to be a persuasion effect for partisans who are exposed to a noncongenial news source either by choice⁵⁵ or random assignment.⁵⁶

H3: Party identification will interact with (1) exposure to death panel news and (2) Fox News viewership such that exposure and Fox News viewership will amplify party differences in belief in death panels.

RQ2: How will party identification interact with other news sources?

Education: Main Effects and Interactions in Predicting Misperceptions

Education is often used as a proxy for political knowledge in secondary research based on surveys where knowledge was not directly assessed,⁵⁷ because education is the strongest correlate of political knowledge, with a typical zero-order correlation of about .55.⁵⁸ Education performs about as well as political knowledge in predicting political decisions, and both have been used, either alone or together, as operationalizations for political sophistication.⁵⁹ Because they are more likely to hold factual beliefs, not surprisingly, people with more education are less susceptible to misperceptions.⁶⁰

H4: Education will be negatively related to believing in death panels.

However, this main effect of education may be qualified by an interaction with partisanship. Cognitive elaboration (both support arguments and counterarguments) depends not only on motivation (here, partisanship), but also ability to process, so cognitive ability (as evidenced by political knowledge or education) may interact with party identification in acceptance or rejection of messages regarding political beliefs. Motivated reasoning tends to be strongest among strong partisans who are highly knowledgeable.⁶¹ We can see this with both selective exposure and biased reasoning. Stroud shows that people with higher levels of political knowledge also tend to be knowledgeable about the partisan leanings of different media outlets.⁶² Consequently, partisanship and political knowledge interact such that selective exposure is amplified among those with high political knowledge. Taber, Cann, and Kucsova showed that political sophistication's interaction with attitude strength made people with strong attitudes and high sophistication particularly likely to judge congenial information as more persuasive.⁶³

Nyhan found that while political knowledge in general reduced the likelihood of holding a death panel misperception, political knowledge interacted with Republican identification such that higher-knowledge Republicans were more likely to hold the misperception.⁶⁴ However, Nyhan and Reifler did not observe this knowledge/party identification interaction, albeit in an experiment with a student sample.⁶⁵ Although the interaction of partisanship and education (as opposed to knowledge) has not been tested, the literature on party and knowledge is heuristic.

H5: Party identification and education will interact such that education will amplify party differences in belief in death panels.

Education and news exposure might interact as well. In most cases, we would expect high education and greater news exposure to additively (or perhaps multiplicatively) reduce misperceptions. However, Johansen and Joslyn found that education and Fox News viewership interacted such that among Fox News viewers, those high in education were no less likely to hold misperceptions about the Iraq War than those low in education.⁶⁶ The explanation they offered was that those high in education have in place cognitive structures that make it relatively easy for them to store and retrieve information.⁶⁷ Thus they can draw on this information to question or resist messages.⁶⁸ But if the information environment is unbalanced or contains a high level of misinformation, then the highly educated are less likely to have alternative information or to challenge frequently encountered messages. However, in light of the fact that knowledgeable news consumers also engage in more partisan selective exposure,⁶⁹ the more likely explanation is that partisan news exposure actually gives these knowledgeable consumers more ammunition with which to defend any closely held but mistaken beliefs.

H6: Education and Fox News viewership will interact such that Fox News viewership is associated with misperceptions especially among those higher in education.

RQ3: How will education interact with exposure to death panel news and other news sources?

Method

The data for this study come from the weekly News Interest Index Survey conducted for the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, August 14-17, 2009. This was a national random-digit-dial survey that included cell phones as well as land lines.⁷⁰

Sample

The sample ($N = 1,003$) was evenly divided between males (49.9%) and females (50.1%). The median age category was fifty-five to fifty-nine, higher than the median for adults of forty-five to forty-nine in the 2010 census. Politically, 38% of the sample

identified as Republican or leaning that way, with 12.3% Independents and the rest, almost 50%, leaning or identifying as Democratic, similar to a 37/15/48 split in a 2008 Gallup poll.⁷¹ Almost 70% had some education beyond high school, higher than the 55% in the census. Non-Hispanic whites made up 77.7% of the sample, with 9% of the sample identifying as African American and 7.3% as Hispanic. The 2010 census allowed multiple responses and asked a separate question on Hispanic ethnicity, but 77% identified as white, 13.3% as African American, and 15.8% as Hispanic.

Measures

Exposure to death panel news. To assess how much people had been exposed to the death panel claim, the survey asked, "Critics of health care reform legislation say it includes creation of so-called 'death panels' or government organizations that will make decisions about who will and will not receive health services. How much have you heard about this?" Response options were *a lot*, *a little*, and *nothing at all*. (Those responding *nothing at all* were not asked if they thought the claim was true, the dependent measure, so effectively this was a dichotomous measure for the purposes of this study.)

Belief in death panel misperception. Respondents were asked, "From what you know, do you think it is true or not true that the health care legislation will create these so-called 'death panels'?" Responses were recoded such that those indicating they thought the death panel claim was true were assigned a score of 1 and others were given a score of 0.

News source exposure. Respondents were asked whether or not they got news regularly from each of the following sources: Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, nightly network news, local TV news, newspapers, radio, and the Internet. The question was phrased, "Now I'd like to ask you about where you get most of your news these days. For each item that I read, please tell me if it is something you do regularly, or not." Each item was coded 1 (*yes*) or 0 (*no*).

Issue attention. As a control measure, respondents were asked, "Did you follow the debate over health care reform very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely?"

Perceived press slant. Because Fox News sets itself apart from the mainstream media, we included as a control a measure of respondents' perceptions of the media's treatment of Obama. It was worded, "Do you think the press has been too critical, not critical enough, or fair in the way it has covered Barack Obama?" Responses were coded such that the highest score indicated a perceived pro-Obama press slant, middle scores indicated perceived press fairness, and the lowest scores indicated perceived press hostility toward Obama.

Party identification. Respondents were asked, "In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or an independent." Independents were then asked if they lean more toward the Democratic or Republican Party. Combining these two items created a 5-point scale from Republican (1) to Democrat (5), with Independent as a midpoint (3).

Education. Respondents were asked to indicate the highest level of schooling they had completed. Responses were grouped in seven categories, from eighth grade or less to a postgraduate degree.

Race. In the survey, respondents were asked whether or not they were Hispanic and could select as many racial categories as they felt applied to them. For this analysis, race was coded dichotomously as 1 for non-Hispanic Caucasian and 0 for minority, Hispanic, or mixed race.

Demographics. The analysis also included gender, age (thirteen categories ranging from “18 to 20” to “75 and older”), and income (above or below \$50,000 a year).⁷²

Results

Given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, logistic regression was used in the analyses. Variables involved in interactions were centered around zero to avoid collinearity with the interaction terms. To shed some additional light on the education and party identification interactions, the analysis was rerun with subgroups on those two variables. The low education subgroup consisted of those with less than a four-year college degree, while the high education group had that level of schooling or higher. The party subgroups had Republican and Republican leaners in one category and others (Independents, Democrats, and those leaning that way) in another.

The results are reported in Table 1. In the interests of space, results for race, sex, age, and income were not reported in the table, but significant coefficients are noted here. Being Caucasian had a negative relationship with death panel misperception ($b = -.58$, $SE = .26$, $p < .05$). Sex ($b = .03$, $SE = .21$, ns), age ($b = -.01$, $SE = .03$, ns), and income ($b = -.33$, $SE = .22$, ns) were unrelated to belief in death panels among the overall sample. However, in the low education subgroup, income was negatively related with the misperception ($b = -.55$, $SE = .28$, $p < .05$), and age had a negative relationship with the misperception that approached significance among non-Republicans ($b = -.09$, $SE = .05$, $p < .10$). Of the other control variables, how closely one followed health care news was negatively related with the death panel misperception in the overall sample as well as among Republicans and respondents low in education. Perception of a pro-Obama slant in news coverage was positively related with the misperception in the overall sample and every subgroup.

H1 predicted that party identification would be related to death panel misperception. The significant negative coefficient ($b = -.56$, $SE = .12$, $p < .001$) shows that belief in death panels is less likely for Democrats and more likely for Republicans. **H1** is supported.

H2 predicted that those who regularly view Fox News would be more likely to believe the death panel misperception than those who do not. This was the case ($b = .48$, $SE = .11$, $p < .001$). **H2** is supported. In answer to **RQ1**, the only other specific media source that had a main effect on death panel misperception was newspapers: Regular readers were less likely to believe in death panels in the overall sample, as well as the education and party subgroups. Exposure to death panel news was positively related to belief in death panels.

Table 1. Predictors of Death Panel Misperception

	All	Low education	High education	Republican	Not Republican
Education	-.31* (.13)			-.45* (.20)	-.21 (.18)
Party ID (Democrat)	-.56*** (.12)	-.72*** (.16)	-.36† (.22)		
Follow health reform news	-.25* (.12)	-.33* (.15)	.04 (.23)	-.68** (.21)	.14 (.16)
Perceived news slant (pro-Obama)	.77*** (.16)	.73*** (.19)	.79** (.29)	.68** (.22)	.83*** (.24)
Exposure to death panel news	.47*** (.13)	.62*** (.17)	.19 (.23)	.25 (.19)	.72*** (.20)
Fox News	.48*** (.11)	.21 (.13)	.92*** (.19)	.26† (.15)	.57*** (.15)
MSNBC	.03 (.12)	.09 (.14)	-.11 (.20)	.18 (.16)	-.11 (.16)
CNN	-.08 (.11)	.03 (.14)	-.26 (.21)	-.13 (.16)	-.03 (.16)
Network news	-.10 (.12)	.06 (.15)	-.42* (.20)	-.01 (.16)	-.18 (.17)
Local TV news	.01 (.12)	-.13 (.16)	.32 (.20)	.28† (.17)	-.12 (.17)
Newspaper	-.45*** (.11)	-.41** (.14)	-.57** (.20)	-.31* (.16)	-.50*** (.16)
Radio	.14 (.11)	.18 (.14)	.06 (.19)	.37* (.15)	.04 (.16)
Internet	-.10 (.12)	-.16 (.15)	.05 (.19)	.05 (.16)	-.25 (.17)
Party × education	.08 (.12)				
Party × exposure	.02 (.12)	-.04 (.15)	.11 (.22)		
Party × Fox News	.15 (.10)	.11 (.13)	.12 (.19)		
Party × MSNBC	-.06 (.11)	.00 (.13)	-.23 (.20)		
Party × CNN	.00 (.11)	-.02 (.13)	.08 (.20)		
Party × network news	-.05 (.11)	.09 (.14)	-.30 (.20)		
Party × newspaper	-.23* (.11)	-.29** (.13)	-.17 (.19)		
Party × radio	-.21* (.11)	-.08 (.13)	-.47* (.19)		
Party × Internet	-.11 (.11)	-.17 (.13)	-.02 (.19)		
Party × local TV	-.20 (.12)	-.20 (.15)	-.06 (.20)		
Education × exposure	-.33* (.12)			-.40* (.19)	-.41* (.19)
Education × Fox News	.35** (.11)			.49** (.17)	.25 (.15)
Pseudo-R ²	.395	.381	.445	.363	.307
N	751	432	317	293	456

Coefficients are unstandardized logistic regression weights. Values in parentheses are standard errors. Control variables not shown but included in the model: race, sex, age, and income. Also not shown are nonsignificant interactions between education and other media use variables.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

H3 concerned party identification interactions with Fox News and with exposure to death panel news that were expected to amplify party differences in misperceptions. However, neither of these interactions was significant. Moreover, the sign for the interactions was the opposite of what was predicted. Looking at the party subgroups, it appears that Fox News viewership significantly increased misperceptions for non-Republicans ($b = .57, SE = .15, p < .001$), while the relationship between Fox News and death panel belief only approached significance for Republicans ($b = .26, SE = .15, p < .10$). Exposure to death panel news was significant only for non-Republicans ($b = .72, SE = .20, p < .001$). **H3** is not supported.

In answer to **RQ2**, party identification had significant interactions with newspaper and radio use in the overall sample. Specifically, regular use of newspapers had a significant negative relationship with misperception for both Republicans and non-Republicans, although the latter was stronger. Regular radio and news use was associated with greater likelihood of misperception among Republicans, but not non-Republicans.

H4 was that education would be negatively related to the death panel misperception. This was the case ($b = -.31, SE = .13, p < .05$). **H4** is supported.

H5 predicted that party identification and education would interact such that education would amplify party differences in belief in death panels. The coefficient for this interaction was not significant. It is worth noting that party identification was a significant predictor of misperception for those low in education, but only approached significance for those high in education, contrary to the hypothesis. **H5** is not supported.

H6 predicted that Fox News viewership and education would interact such that Fox News viewership would be related with misperceptions, especially among those higher in education. The education-by-Fox interaction was positive and significant in the overall sample ($b = .35, SE = .11, p < .01$), consistent with the prediction. Looking at the education subgroups, Fox News viewership was strongly associated with misperceptions among respondents high in education ($b = .92, SE = .19, p < .001$), but not among those in the low education subgroup ($b = .21, SE = .13, ns$). Also noteworthy is that the education-by-Fox interaction was significant among the Republican group, but not the non-Republican group, suggestive of a three-way interaction. **H6** is supported. In answer to **RQ3**, education's interaction with exposure to death panel news in general was significant but negative in the overall sample ($b = -.33, SE = .12, p < .01$). It was those low in education for whom exposure to death panel news predicted misperception ($b = .62, SE = .17, p < .001$), while the high education subgroup had no such relationship ($b = .19, SE = .23, ns$). No other news source had a significant interaction with education.

Discussion

This study drew on the literature in motivated reasoning for its framework in examining the misperception that health care reform would create death panels. In this framework, we investigated the main effects and interactions of partisanship, news

exposure, and education. While there was some evidence suggestive of motivated reasoning, there were also indications that pointed to the power of news media to convey information (or misinformation) across partisan lines. Finally, this study identified a complex role for education in both inhibiting misperceptions (as a main effect) and promoting them (as an interaction).

It was expected that Republicans would be more likely to hold this misperception, and they were. The misperception was probably attractive to them; it made a bill and a president they opposed seem worse. They had relatively little motivation to closely examine the false claim. This was consistent with the motivated reasoning hypothesis. Also as expected, Fox News exposure was related to the death panel misperception, much as it was to misperceptions about the Iraq War.⁷³ If the “Fox effect” had been simply a matter of preaching to a selectively exposed Republican choir, it also would have been consistent with motivated reasoning. Indeed, we had expected party ID and Fox News exposure to interact such that Republican viewers would be especially receptive to death panel claims made on Fox News, while Democratic viewers would exert more resistance. However, there was no such interaction, and Fox News viewership was positively related to the misperception for non-Republicans, while the relationship for Republicans only approached significance. Rather than polarize perceptions as predicted, Fox News exposure contributed to a mainstreaming of (mistaken) beliefs. This is consistent with Feldman’s finding that exposure to a Glenn Beck program taking a position against expansion of the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) led to similar anti-SCHIP attitude change for conservatives, moderates, and liberals alike.⁷⁴ That said, non-Republicans who regularly watch Fox News may do so because they are more receptive to Republican messages than other non-Republicans, so a relative selective exposure effect may be at work. A post hoc test showed that among non-Republicans, regular Fox News viewers were closer to the political middle (3 on the 1-5 scale) on the partisanship item ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.87$) than those who watched it only a little ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.75$), $t(599) = 2.03$, $p < .05$.

There were instances of party-by-news interactions for radio news and newspapers, offering some limited support for motivated reasoning. These are general categories of news media rather than specific outlets. Exposure to radio news was related to the misperception for Republicans, but not non-Republicans. News talk radio is dominated by conservative voices,⁷⁵ which may account for the effect on Republicans, but the Pew survey did not distinguish between news talk and less opinion-oriented radio news such as National Public Radio News. It may be that the difference in sign between Republicans and non-Republicans in this interaction reflects partisan selective exposure, with Republicans generally choosing conservative outlets within that medium. On the other hand, the interactions between party and news use for newspaper exposure resulted from the negative relationship between exposure and the misperception being stronger for non-Republicans than for Republicans, although both were significant. There is probably relatively little selective exposure with newspapers.⁷⁶ Although there are hundreds of newspapers in the United States, most areas are dominated by one local newspaper, whose national political coverage usually comes from the

Associated Press, which did fact check the death panel claim. Newspapers (aside from their editorial pages) generally abide by the traditional norm of objectivity,⁷⁷ so the smaller effect of newspaper use in discouraging misperception among Republicans may reflect biased processing and the greater degree to which Republicans discount information from the mainstream news media as biased.⁷⁸

Education did reduce the likelihood of misperception, as expected.⁷⁹ Education was a proxy for political knowledge, which has been shown to interact with partisanship to polarize beliefs via motivated reasoning. This study was perhaps the first to test the interaction of education and party identification as a predictor of misperception, but it was not significant. In fact, it appeared that party ID was more predictive of belief in death panels among those lower in education, contrary to the hypothesis. Although generally knowledge makes party ID more predictive of beliefs, attitudes, and behavior,⁸⁰ it may instead be the case that party ID was a low-information heuristic for those low in education,⁸¹ while those higher in education were guided more by elite partisan voices in the news.⁸²

And we did see education interactions with exposure to death panel news and Fox News, but with opposite signs. Exposure to death panel news in general was significantly related to greater belief in death panels among the low education group. Typically those lower in education will be less likely to be exposed to a message or recall it, but if they are exposed, they will be more likely to accept it because they lack the resistance capabilities of those with more education.⁸³ It may also be that those lower in education with high exposure did not retain much beyond the death panel claim itself and failed to gain a more balanced mix of considerations. By contrast, the education interaction with Fox News was such that exposure was significantly related to misperception among those with high education, but not those with lower education. To the extent that those higher in education engage in selective exposure, it makes sense that highly educated people who chose Fox News would be more receptive to a belief in death panels. Also indicative of motivated reasoning is the fact that the Fox-by-education interaction was significant for Republicans ($b = .49$, $SE = .17$, $p < .01$), but not non-Republicans ($b = .25$, $SE = .15$, ns). This suggests a three-way interaction under which Republicans with high knowledge who watch Fox News are more likely to believe in death panels than we might otherwise expect.

The major limitation of this study is that it relies on cross-sectional data, so strong causal claims cannot be made. That said, the death panel issue was emergent; it makes more sense to believe Fox News exposure contributed to this new misperception than the other way around, especially since party and several other variables were controlled. Still, longitudinal research could help to disentangle the effects of processing from those of (selective) news exposure. The data used fairly blunt, often dichotomous measures, which likely lost some of the richness of the phenomena under examination (especially in not distinguishing between conservative talk radio and other radio news) and certainly limited the range of statistical analyses available. Finally, this study addressed just one misperception. Further studies on a range of misperceptions, including ones toward which liberals may be predisposed, should be done. Other directions

for future research include measuring a greater range of psychological correlates of motivated reasoning, such as dogmatism.⁸⁴

In conclusion, this study suggests that while some citizens' misperceptions are likely the product of motivated reasoning, others may result from the information environment. If so, misperceptions would have greater impact on elections than if they were merely an effect of disliking a candidate or party. Instead of a static electoral playing field determined almost entirely by party identification, we would see greater flux in elections that reflected changes in the information environment. The 2010 midterm election, a third straight "change" election, seemed to give credence to the latter understanding as post-2008 talk of a permanent Democratic majority gave way to a Republican takeover of the House.⁸⁵ To the extent that beliefs arise from processing of information that is motivated by accuracy rather than directional goals, democracy should benefit—as long as the information is not misinformation. To the extent that misperceptions arise from misinformation and affect political behavior, they have the potential to undermine the democratic process. Further research should attempt to more precisely identify the causes and consequences of political misperceptions.

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